

Putting out the Flame

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The Thai ajaans will often say that when you meditate, you're getting practice in dying well. What does that mean, *dying well*? Think of the Buddha's image of what happens when you die. He says that just as a fire, as it goes from one house to the next, clings to the wind, feeds off the wind, in the same way, a being, when it leaves its body, clings to craving as it goes to another body.

So what are the skills you're going to need at that point? At the very least, you want to make sure that you go to a good place, which means that, in addition to meditating, you've been creating good karma so that the houses next door will be good houses. After all, the wind can go in lots of different directions.

But ideally, you want to get to the point where you don't have to go to a house. The fire can go out. That requires that you look at what the Buddha said about who's going: He calls it "a being." Elsewhere, he defines a being by saying that wherever there's attachment, there's a being. Attachment to form, feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness: Wherever there's attachment, there's going to be a being.

You've taken on the identity of being a being through your attachments. But by taking those attachments apart, you go beyond being a being. When you're a being, you have to feed. Just as a fire feeds off the wind, you're going to be feeding off of craving, looking for a new place to land. As long as there's that narrative of you as a person, remember that *being* is related to *becoming*: You've got an identity in a world of experience, and if you have to leave this world you're going to go looking for another world—as long as there's the narrative of *you*.

You and your friends, you and your relatives, you and your enemies: As long as you're thinking in those terms, you've got your sights set on another house. The way you make sure that you're *not* going to another house is to take those concepts apart: the world, your identity. The Buddha says you do that not by trying to destroy the identity that you have now, but simply by looking at the processes by which you create it, and seeing that the raw material is really not worth holding on to.

It's like seeing the house that you're living in is built out of frozen meat, and it's going to melt someday. It's not going to be a good place to live. So, take apart the sense of being a being. Take apart the sense of being in a world.

This is why the Buddha says, when you're meditating, that right concentration starts with right mindfulness—staying focused on the body in and of itself—ardent, alert, and mindful—putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The same with feelings in and of themselves, mind states in and of themselves, and mental qualities in and of themselves.

These things, in and of themselves, don't have narratives. The body's just a body. Made out of what? Made out of elements or properties. And as the Buddha said, it's subject to abrasion, subject to dispersion. The body you're in and the body you would go to—they're all going to fall apart. So will anything there in the next like that you might want to hold on to.

The same with feelings: The Buddha says to see feelings as like bubbles on the water when the rain falls, say, on a river, and little bubbles form on the surface of the water. They disappear almost as soon as they're formed. The same goes for all the other aggregates. They're basically without essence, without substance. And you're going to create something solid out of these things that have no essence or substance? Mirages, banana trees, magic shows? It's impossible.

As for the world, when you have this frame of reference: It's just body, feelings, mind, mental qualities in and of themselves. Anything that would pull you back to the world, any greed, any distress around the world—greed for what you'd like out of the world, distress out of what's happening in the world—the Buddha says *you put that aside*. As long as you're thinking in terms of the world, then there's going to be an identity that forms in the world to change the world to fit with your desires, to take advantage of the world, whatever, and that creates a new becoming.

So, as we focus here, the idea of *world* passes away. In fact, as you really get focused on arising and passing away here in the present moment, the Buddha says that when you see things arising, the idea of the non-existence of the world doesn't even occur to you. When you see them passing away, the idea of the existence of the world doesn't occur to you. You're just there with stress arising and passing away. That has no narrative, no worldview. With no narrative, no worldview, there's no need for any identity as a being, or as a self. That's the mind state you want to maintain.

Now, as you can imagine, when you're leaving this body, there'll be a strong sense of *you* leaving the body, *you* leaving this world. The narrative will be a very sad narrative: "So-and-so came to an untimely end." Even if you live to 120, they say, "untimely end." That's a recipe for creating another being that's going to ride craving to another house.

So you've got to get good at just seeing things arising and passing away, looking at things in terms of these frameworks: the four frames of reference, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. That's the recipe for getting the mind into right concentration, but it's also the recipe for learning how to see things in a way that goes beyond concentration.

We're trying to take apart this craving for further becoming, so we look at these events in the mind, events in the body, that we would ordinarily use to create our narratives, create our world views—and just see them as events. Try to get really good at fashioning events that give rise to a sense of well-being, so that you have a positive attitude towards these things.

If you try to do this without concentration, it gets really dry, really fast, and can be *very* disorienting. I once knew a vipassana teacher who asked me, "What do you do with people who attain stream entry and find it disorienting?" I said, "To begin with, I tell that that it's not

a stream entry, because at stream entry you see the deathless, and that's as grounding as you can get."

In order that just simply watching things arising and passing away doesn't get disorienting, you want to learn first how to steer this arising and passing away into a good state of concentration. Learn how to get *at home* with the concentration, doing enough work so that it gives rise to a sense of well-being, and focusing on the work enough so that you can keep at it: not so much that you don't appreciate the sense of well-being, but you don't want to focus so much on the sense of well-being that you forget your work.

After all, mindfulness as a governing principle is not just watching things arising and passing away. If something is skillful and it's not there yet, you're mindful to try to give rise to it. If it already is skillful, you're mindful to try to maintain it. This is your work. It's in the course of doing the work that you see things on the level of having no narrative and no world view. That's a level you want to get used to.

That way, you won't have a "being" that latches on to craving. You see the craving go out, but you don't go out with it. This is how the meditation prepares you, helps you develop the skills you're going to need at the point where you don't want a narrative and you don't want a world view—so that the mind can gain unbinding, can really be released.

Now, the idea of not being a being may sound like self-annihilation, but there is something that doesn't end. The texts describe the passing away of an arahant as, "All that is experienced or felt, not being relished, grows cold right here." That "all" refers to the six sense spheres, but the "consciousness without surface" is not known through the six sense spheres—it's something apart—and that doesn't end. To experience that is the greatest happiness.

This goes against a lot of our attitudes: in particular, the attitude that in order to find happiness, we have to create a sense of self in a particular world where the object that we want is going to be found. That attitude is why we cling so hard to this idea of being a being and whatever raw materials we need to keep that idea going.

So you've got to learn how to think in other ways. It's by *not* taking on the identity of a being that you actually will find true happiness. It's by *not* feeding that you find true happiness. These principles go against our normal orientation; which is one of the reasons why the practice of the Dharma begins with generosity. Instead of taking in, you give out. You reverse the direction.

The texts say that, in the final stages of breath meditation, you focus on inconstancy, you focus on dispassion, you focus on cessation. You would think it all stops there, but no, there's one more step—you focus on relinquishment.

The word for relinquishment actually means giving back. All these things you've laid claim to—all these narratives, the raw material, the aggregates, and the sense spheres that you've commandeered for you or yours—you give it back. In doing so, you find something a lot better, something that doesn't require that you cling or take at all.

This may be what Luang Pu Dune meant when he said that the things of the world come in pairs, but Dhamma practice is one thing clear through: giving back, all the way.