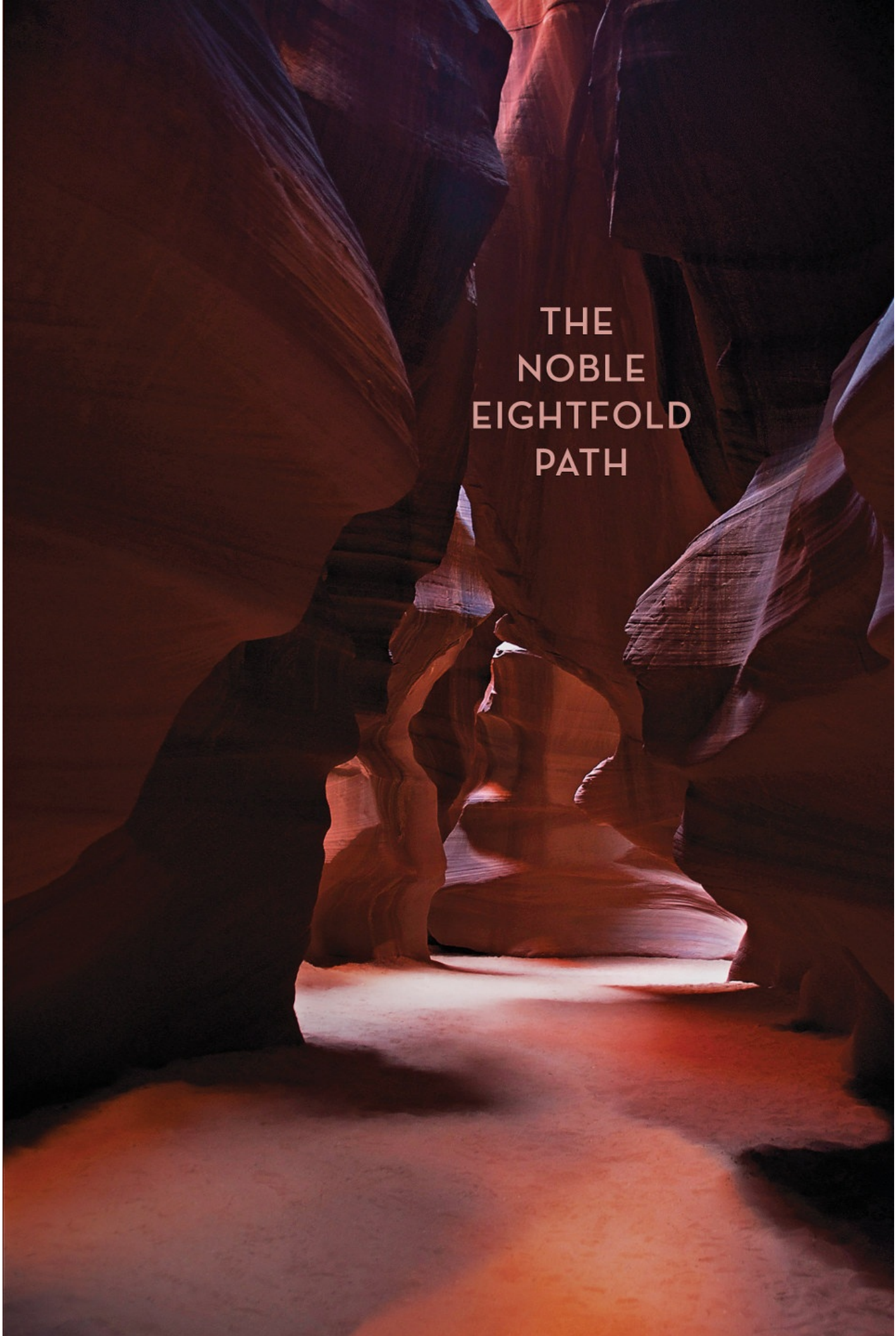

THE NOBLE EIGHTFOLD PATH

The Noble Eightfold Path

13 Meditation Talks

by

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Introduction

The daily schedule at Metta Forest Monastery includes a group interview in the late afternoon and a chanting session followed by a group meditation period later in the evening. The Dhamma talks included in this volume were given during the evening meditation sessions, and in many cases covered issues raised at the interviews—either in the questions asked or lurking behind the questions. Often these issues touched on a variety of topics on a variety of different levels in the practice. This explains the range of topics covered in individual talks.

I have edited the talks with an eye to making them readable while at the same time trying to preserve some of the flavor of the spoken word. In a few instances I have added passages or rearranged the talks to make the treatment of specific topics more coherent and complete, but for the most part I have kept the editing to a minimum. Don't expect polished essays.

The people listening to these talks were familiar with the meditation instructions included in "Method 2" in *Keeping the Breath in Mind* by Ajaan Lee Dhammadharo; and my own essay, "A Guided Meditation." If you are not familiar with these instructions, you might want to read through them before reading the talks in this book. You might also want to read the meditation instructions in *With Each & Every Breath* for further background. Additional Dhamma talks are available at www.dhammatalks.org.

Thanissaro Bhikkhu

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An Overview of the Path

July 7, 2011

The noble eightfold path forms the framework for all the Buddha's teachings. It was the first topic he mentioned in his first sermon, and the last topic he mentioned in his last.

Shortly after his awakening, when he first taught the Five Brethren, he started by telling them that the eightfold path was the true way to awakening, that it avoided the dead-end extremes of sensual indulgence and self-torment. Then he explained the first factor of the path—right view—and at the end of his explanation Kondañña, the eldest of the five, reached the first level of awakening—proof that this really was an effective path.

Shortly before the Buddha died, Subhadda the wanderer asked him: Is it only in the Buddha's teachings that there are awakened people or do other teachings have awakened people as well? At first the Buddha put the question aside. He said: "Put that aside and I'll teach you the Dhamma." But then after teaching the Dhamma, he went on to say that only in teachings where the eight factors of the noble path are taught will you find awakened people. And only in the Buddha's teaching are all eight factors taught. So when he put that question aside, it was simply a matter of etiquette. Actually, he went on to answer the question, saying that this path is The Way: not simply *an* effective path. *The* effective path.

We like to hear that there are lots of different ways, lots of different paths to the top of the mountain. That gives us the option of choosing what we like without the fear of making a wrong choice. But if you've ever been on a mountain, you know that not all the trails lead to the top. Some of them wander off someplace else—down the mountain or off the edge of a cliff. And so when the Buddha, having been to the top, comes back to say that this is the only way up there, he wants us to give his words some credence. In fact, he says that one of the signs of actually attaining the first level of awakening is that you realize there is no other path. This is it.

So look at the factors. The first two are right view and right resolve; these come under the heading of discernment. There's also right speech, right action, and right livelihood; these come under the heading of virtue. And

then right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration; these come under the heading of concentration. It's important to remember that each of these factors is a part of a path. It's meant to go someplace. Its purpose is strategic. We don't practice the path for the sake of arriving at right view or any of the other factors. We use right view as a factor in the path to take ourselves to release—or it might be better to say that we arrive at release, because a lot of "ourselves" doesn't get taken to release. It's going to get left behind as unnecessary baggage along the way.

Right view starts with conviction in the principle of action, that your actions really are important, and they do make a difference: that by acting on skillful intentions, you're going to meet with pleasant results; by acting on unskillful intentions, you're going to meet with unpleasant results. The Buddha has to start here with the principle of action because there were a lot of teachings in his time that denied the role of action. Some said that actions were illusory; they didn't really exist. Others said that actions may exist but they don't really have an effect on anything. Another school of thought said that whatever you do is already predetermined so you really have no choice.

If you're looking for a path of practice that leads to the end of suffering, you can't adopt any of those views, because they make the whole idea of a path meaningless. The whole idea that your efforts could bring about an end of suffering would become meaningless. So the Buddha never approved of the teaching that things were totally predetermined by the past. If you really want to put an effort into ending suffering, you've got to accept the principle that your efforts, your actions, really do have consequences. Some people like the idea of determinism. It lets them off the hook—as long as they're doing relatively well. But when they're suffering, if you give them the choice, "Would you like the choice not to suffer?" they would probably say Yes. At that point they would *like* to have the power of choice.

The important point is that the simple power of choice is not enough. You've got to develop skills to go along with it. That's what the next level of right view is about: seeing things in terms of four noble truths—stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation—and developing the skills appropriate to each: Stress is to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation developed. This means that all the factors of the path are skills you need to develop to bring about the goal you've set for yourself.

First, after right view, comes right resolve. You realize that unskillful actions are going to cause trouble, so you resolve not to get tied up in

thoughts of sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, because you know these thoughts, if you foster them, are going to take you down the path to suffering. Then you look at your actual actions. This is where right speech, right action, and right livelihood come in. To what extent do your words, your deeds, and your livelihood actually cause harm to other people? To what extent do they cause harm to yourself? The Buddha has you use this reflection as a way of developing honesty. For him, the prime virtue is the virtue of truthfulness. If you can't admit to yourself that the things you say or do are causing harm, or the way you gain your livelihood is causing harm, there are going to be huge blind spots in your mind.

So these factors of the path force the quality of honesty on you. If you want to follow the path, if you want to reach the end of suffering, you have to look very honestly at how you're living your life, and make changes in cases where you're causing trouble.

All these factors working together make it easier to meditate. Notice that effort, mindfulness, and concentration all come under the last heading of the path, the heading of concentration. The Buddha never talked about mindfulness as one kind of practice and concentration as something else. Recently, I was reading an author who said that because mindfulness and concentration are two different factors in the path, they must be radically different; otherwise the Buddha wouldn't have divided them into two different factors. The problem is that the author made them so different as to be antithetical: mindfulness was an open, accepting, non-reactive state of mind, whereas concentration was narrow and willful. It's hard to see how the two could go together. In fact he said that the practice of right mindfulness on the one hand and right effort and right concentration on the other hand are two separate paths—giving you a sixfold path and a sevenfold path to choose from. But that's not how the Buddha taught them. As with all the factors of the path, he distinguished between them, but also showed how they blended into each other. Just as discernment shades into virtue, and virtue shades into concentration, right mindfulness and right concentration shade into each other.

To begin with, they're both part of a single heading: concentration. And as the Buddha described the relationship between them, the four establishings of mindfulness are the themes of concentration. These establishings are not just objects; they're sets of activities. You're ardent, alert, and mindful, focused on the body in and of itself, or feelings or mind or mental qualities in and of themselves, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's the practice of right mindfulness.

Included within that practice is right effort, the quality of ardency, in which you generate desire, focus your intent, and stay persistent in trying to prevent unskillful qualities from arising or to abandon unskillful qualities that have arisen, to give rise to skillful qualities, and then to maintain skillful qualities once they've arisen: That's how right effort gets folded into right mindfulness.

Right mindfulness then gets folded into right concentration when the mind is able to stay with this set of activities until it settles down, abandoning all unskillful mental qualities, all thoughts of sensuality. Sensuality here doesn't mean the objects of your desire. It means your desire or obsession for the desires themselves. That's a problem in the mind. We really like fantasizing about sensual pleasures, and it can set the mind on fire. But if you're mindful enough to abandon that kind of obsession, the mind can calm down and settle into strong states of concentration, where you really do stay focused just on the topic of your object of mindfulness, the activity of mindfulness.

Say that you're focused on the breath, working with the breath in various ways to make it a good place to stay. You can really get absorbed in that. This takes you all the way through the four levels of *jhana*, which constitute right concentration.

Those are the factors of the path, the main frame for what we're doing here.

So when you look at your life and look at your mind, to what extent is it actually on the path and to what extent are you allowing it to wander off into the brush? What qualities need to be developed? What qualities need to be abandoned? This is part of what the Buddha calls the customs of the noble ones—which are the values of the noble ones: that you learn how to delight in abandoning whatever you have to abandon, and to delight in developing whatever needs to be developed. The path involves a fair amount of abandoning. Right resolve involves abandoning unskillful thoughts. Right speech, right action, right livelihood, and right effort all involve abandoning unskillful activities, unskillful mind states. Right mindfulness involves abandoning greed and distress with reference to the world. The things you need to develop tend to be right view and right concentration, along with whatever skillful qualities you can manage, particularly the ones that help you to see where you're causing stress and suffering, and help to stop causing them.

All too often we're thinking about other things. We have other issues. And that right there is ignorance. Ignorance isn't just a matter of not

knowing things. You know things, but you're looking at them in the wrong way, with the wrong priorities. And because your priorities are wrong, they make you do the wrong things.

You've got to develop the Buddha's sense of priorities. The big problem in life is that you're causing suffering even though you don't want to. All too often, you're causing suffering in areas that you would rather deny. That's why the quality of honesty and truthfulness is so important: so that you can look squarely at your actual actions and their actual results. That way you learn to be sensitive to whatever stress you're creating.

This is one the reasons why we need to get the mind into concentration: so that our sensitivity as to what counts as stress gets heightened. Things you used to accept as normal, you begin to realize: "This really is a burden on the mind." Sensing that burden, sensing that it's not necessary: That's how you begin to gain some freedom.

The Buddha once said that of the factors of the path, right concentration is the main one, and the others are its accessories. Right concentration is the one we have to work at the most, to get the mind to stay with its one object, to learn not only the techniques of *how* to do this, but also the sense of values to remind you of *why* this really is important. Without this skill, you miss everything else. You can know about all the other factors of the path, you can read all about right view, but you can miss the whole point. I was reading a book recently by a professor of Buddhist Studies. And it was amazing: Here was someone who had devoted his career to studying the Pali Canon, and yet the whole book was very wrongheaded. He could quote all the passages but he just totally missed the point.

So it's not just a matter of knowing about the factors. You have to give them priority and master them as skills. The Buddha talks about different levels of discernment. To begin with, there's the discernment that comes from listening or reading, and the discernment that comes from thinking things through. And although it's important to master those levels of discernment, the really important level is the discernment that comes from actually developing skillful qualities in the mind. That's when you get hands-on practice.

And as you work on the factors of the path, they do their work on your mind. The mind becomes more sensitive, more alert to what it's doing, more open to the possibility that the suffering you're experiencing in life is not something you can blame on other people, or on conditions beyond your control. The essential suffering that's weighing down the mind is something that you've been creating through your own actions, and you can learn how

to stop. That's what abandoning means. You realize that there's something you've been doing over and over again and you don't have to do it. So you stop.

The way to get yourself to stop is to see that these actions really aren't worth doing. Whatever pleasure you get out of them is nothing compared to the pain that you're causing. You have to see that fact in action, as it's happening, if you want to be able to drop that particular habit. And often the habits we have to drop are the ones we really, really, really like. Only by getting the mind a lot more sensitive will you be able to see through that liking, to see through the blindness and the ignorance that underlies it, so that you're willing to let go.

This is why we're sitting here with our eyes closed, focused on the breath. We're not off reading through the texts and trying to learn all we can about what the texts have to say. We're here looking at our own breath to see what our actions have to say—when viewed from the point of view of a mind that's centered, still, clear, stable here in the present moment. That's the point from which we can develop a more refined sense of where there's suffering and what action it's coming from, so that once we really sees where it comes from, we can let go. We can stop.

This is how you develop a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for the actions that you used to feel enchanted and impassioned about. Your enchantment and passion kept you doing those things, so when you have no more passion for them, they stop. And their results stop in the present moment as well. The things that used to weigh down the mind all go away. As the Buddha said, at that point they don't even leave a trace. They may have been weighing down your mind for who knows how long, but when they're gone, they're gone. They don't leave any scars. They don't leave any marks. It's simply that you've been doing this to yourself over and over and over again. And you suddenly realize you can stop—and you would prefer to stop. That's it. The mind is freed. That's the freedom the Buddha is aiming his teachings at. Everything else is a means in that direction.

So try to make sure that you use the teachings for their intended purpose. That way you get the most out of them and you fulfill the Buddha's intentions in teaching them to begin with. There's that passage toward the end of his life where the devas were worshiping him with flowers, incense, and song, and the Buddha explained to the monks that this is not the way to really pay respect to the Buddha. You pay respect to the Buddha by practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma, which means that you learn how to look at sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and

ideas with the purpose of giving rise to disenchantment. You look for their inconstancy. You look for the stress that's involved in trying to find happiness in them. And you learn to see them as not self. That, he said, is how you pay true respect to the Buddha.

What does that have to do with the eightfold path? What does that have to do with the four noble truths? The way that you normally take the material that comes from your senses and turn it into suffering: That's the problem. You use the eightfold path to learn how to look into those processes, to see how you fashion the raw material from the senses into suffering, and to learn how to undo those habits. Because we've been clinging to these habits, we have to learn how to see what we're actually doing so that we can develop dispassion for those habits. The factors of the path are essential for strengthening the factor of right concentration, so that the mind is steady enough and still enough and sensitive enough so it can see what's happening.

So put a lot of work into the concentration. Many people ask, "How much concentration can I get away with? How little do I have to put into it?" And the answer is, put as much into it as you can, because right concentration is what puts the mind in a position where it can really see. From that position you can continue to develop the other factors of the path so that they all come together. That's how you gain the release that the Buddha intended for you.

After all, this is why the Buddha put so much effort for many eons into his quest for awakening, not so that devas would serenade him with the songs and strew flowers and incense from the sky. He wanted to find the skill that put an end to suffering. He wanted to be able to share it with others in such a way that they would actually feel inspired to put it to use and gain the same results. That was what inspired him through all those eons.

So try to use that thought to inspire yourself as well.

Right View

November 20, 2007

The discourse we chanted just now—"Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion"—starts with the whole noble eightfold path and then goes into right view. And that's all it discusses in detail: right view, going through the four noble truths. Simply listening to this talk on right view, one of the Five Brethren had his first taste of the deathless—or, as they say in the text, he experienced "the arising of the Dhamma Eye."

So right view is important. As one analysis of the path says, three qualities circle around every factor of the path. One is right view. The second is right effort. The third is right mindfulness. So try to make sure that these three qualities are circling around your practice right now.

There are basically four truths covered by right view. First is the truth of suffering or stress; *dukkha* is the Pali term. Sometimes we're told that the first truth is that "life is suffering" or "everything is suffering," but that's not the case. The Buddha basically said that "there is suffering." It's one of four things you're going to encounter in life that you should pay attention to. You could argue with the idea that life is suffering, but you can't argue with the idea that there is suffering. You see it all around you. You see it inside you as well. The Buddha's simply asking you to take it seriously.

To take suffering seriously means that you should learn how to comprehend it. To do that, you have to put yourself in a position where you can watch it, to see how it comes, how it goes, what comes and goes along with it. The coming and going along with it: That's essentially what the word *samudaya*—usually translated as "cause" or "origination"—means. You want to see that every time there's real suffering in the mind, it's accompanied by craving—any one of three kinds of craving to be specific: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

Craving for sensuality is easy enough to explain: the desire to have sensual desires. That's one of the most interesting parts of the analysis: that sensual attachment is not so much to 'things out there'; we're more attached to our *plans* for things out there, our scheming for things out there, for pleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations. We spend a lot

more time planning and working toward these things than we do in actually tasting them.

Often the taste is very fleeting. Think of the food we eat. Exactly how long does it really taste good in your mouth? Look at that little burst of taste, and then think of how much work goes into buying the food, preparing the food, cleaning up after the meal. Of course we do it for more than just the taste; we do it to keep the body going. But, there's an awful lot of energy expended in the idea, "Let's make this taste really good"—and then it's gone.

We're actually more attached to our plans for these things, our desires for these things, than we are to the things themselves. It's easy enough to replace a desire for one sensual pleasure with a desire for another sensual pleasure. It's hard to drop our desire for sensual desire entirely. That's one of the causes of suffering.

Another cause is craving for becoming. You want to become something, to take on a particular identity, within a particular world of experience. We choose our worlds, you know: the context in which we see ourselves, the context in which we move and exert an influence. These two things are entwined: both the world in which we have a self and the sense of self that functions within that world. Sometimes the world is on the sensual level. Sometimes it's on the level of form, as when we're meditating and fully inhabiting the form of the body. Sometimes it's on the formless level—any abstraction, any formless experience, anything without a form, as when we experience space in our meditation, or a sense of formless "knowing." And again, we tend to go from one of these types of becoming to another, to another, to another. This is what the wandering on is all about. We go from one *bhava,* one state of becoming, to another. These are the locations that the mind focuses on. And we suffer from this because none of these locations can last; none of these positions can last. Whatever we latch onto as a self, it just keeps melting away. The world around us just keeps melting away.

Then there's craving for non-becoming, the desire to destroy whatever you've got, whatever you identify yourself with. Or you want to destroy the world around you. It's unpleasant. Outrageous. You don't like it. You want to get rid of it, which can either be an external destructive urge or an internal destructive urge. Paradoxically, this type of craving leads to becoming as well. Why is that? Because in taking on the identity of the Destroyer, you're assuming another identity. In taking delight in the idea of destruction, you're watering a sense of identity; you're watering a sense of

becoming.

The Buddha's image is of a seed planted in the ground. The seed is your consciousness. The ground is your kamma, past and present, as it's manifesting right now. Then there's the delight in doing something with these things, either creating something out of them or destroying them. All of that counts as a cause of suffering. It may sound pretty abstract, but as you get to know the mind, you begin to sense the movement as it's going in one of these directions or another: toward becoming or non-becoming. In one sense we're in a double bind; the desire to get rid of becoming itself is a way of creating becoming—but this is where the Buddha's genius as a strategist comes in.

He's says that you go beyond becoming not by destroying becoming but by learning how to create new forms of becoming that are more skillful, particularly the "becoming" of concentration, getting the mind to settle down and be in one spot. As long as you're going to have a location, develop a solid steady location within the form of the body, because it's a blameless way of giving rise to happiness. Then, when you can see things clearly from this location, you can simply let the processes of becoming go.

Sometimes you hear about the dangers of being stuck on concentration. But if you look through the texts, the Buddha talks about them only in very rare cases. He mentions the dangers of delighting in the state of equanimity or of not wanting to go beyond a particular state of concentration, but these are pretty harmless, pretty minor compared to the dangers of staying stuck in sensuality.

The Buddha gave long, long discourses about all the suffering and conflict that come from sensual craving. You have to work hard to gain what you crave and sometimes your efforts are fruitless. Or, even when they do bear fruit in what you want, those things don't really stay with you. As the Buddha says, sometimes fire burns them, water washes them away, thieves or kings will make off with them—I like that: pairing thieves with kings—or hateful heirs make off with them. It's because of sensual craving that there are conflicts within the family, conflicts among nations. This is why we go to war. I don't think that anyone has ever gone to war over attachment to jhana, attachment to concentration. But we kill, steal, have illicit sex, lie to one another, indulge in intoxicants, all because of sensual craving, sensual attachment—none of which happens because of our attachment to jhana. The only danger of being stuck on jhana is that as long as you're stuck, you don't gain awakening.

So jhana is a relatively blameless form of happiness. It gives us

nourishment on the path and at the same time is a very transparent form of becoming. We watch ourselves doing it because we have to do it so carefully. This is where the mindfulness comes in. That's one of the elements in the Canon's definition of mindfulness: being very meticulous. The more meticulous you are, the better you remember things. You need to be very meticulous in keeping something in mind in order to maintain your concentration. This is one of the functions of right mindfulness. Once you've entered into a skillful mental state, mindfulness enables you to keep remembering to stay there. If you're meticulous in doing this, you begin to see more clearly exactly what's involved in getting the mind to settle down. This is why jhana is a transparent form of becoming: As you watch it, you begin to understand what becoming is all about. You can begin to identify which part of the practice is based on old kamma, which part is based on new kamma, which part is based on your present consciousness and all the other things that go along with it, and which part of it is watered by the sense of delight.

So the trick here is that once you've learned how to do this, the Buddha says, you learn how to see things simply as they have come to be. In other words, you just look at what past kamma is being offered up to you right now. Our instinctive reaction is to make something out of it, to do something with it. But to watch it simply as it comes into being without trying to create something out of it, without trying to destroy it, without even taking delight in the equanimity of watching it: That's hard.

It's pretty easy to get into a state of equanimity just watching these things, but it takes a lot of insight to realize that equanimity itself is a kind of doing. It's a way of creating something out of your experience, something you can delight in. So this goes deeper than just plain equanimity. The Buddha says you have to learn how not to make anything out of anything; even out of the jhana, even out of your strong concentration. When you can do that, you can break through to the deathless.

So instead of just operating on the desire to get rid of things, we first develop a different kind of desire: the desire to learn how to create something really skillful out of them—which includes learning to develop skillful desires before you ultimately let them go. This is a basic pattern in the Buddha's path. The fourth noble truth is to abandon unskillful states and to give rise to skillful states in the mind so you can understand what's involved in giving rise to a state. Then you get more sensitive to exactly which part in the present moment is the given and which part's being added. In general, we're very ignorant of what we're adding to things. Yet

even our normal experience of space and time is something that has already been added to.

The aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness come in a potential form and then—based on which things we're interested in, which things we want to create, which things we want to destroy—we actually create our experience of the present out of these different potentials. So we need to do a lot of digging down into our experience of the present moment to see what's just the potential without anything added at all, not even equanimity. This requires that we get the mind really still, really alert, and really interested in what it's doing.

This is how right view hovers around the meditation. Right effort and right mindfulness hover along with it. You try to give rise to what's skillful no matter what the situation: That's the right effort. Right mindfulness means being mindful to give rise to what's skillful, to abandon what's unskillful and—once you've entered into what's skillful—being mindful to stay with it. It's all very proactive, but it's proactive in a transparent way.

This is why, when you begin to delve into right view, you realize that it covers the whole path. It's not just a matter of understanding something in an abstract way. It's learning how to see things in a new light and then acting on what you've seen in an appropriate way. It's not just a theory; it's a guide to action.

And while we're sitting here getting the mind to settle down and be still, Ajaan Lee's image is that it's like raising a chicken that lays eggs. The eggs stand for becoming. You eat some of the eggs to keep yourself nourished and you take the other eggs apart to see what eggs are made of, what their parts are. Or you watch how they develop. The analogy breaks down there, but ultimately you get to the point where you don't need the eggs any more, either for the nourishment or for the purpose of your investigation.

That's when you put the path aside. Even right view gets put aside. That's when you experience the noble truth of cessation: total freedom from craving, and as a result, total freedom from suffering and stress. But in the meantime, you want to make sure that right view is always there, hovering around your meditation to keep it on course and to make sure that what you're doing is transparent to you. That's how the process of becoming in concentration leads to something that goes beyond becoming, where there's no suffering at all.

And that, as the Buddha said, is the end of the problem.

Right Resolve

November 22, 2007

The more skillful you are in your search for happiness, the lighter you tread on this Earth—because you realize that happiness, to be true and lasting, has to be harmless, something that doesn't take anything away from anyone else. Which means that it has to come from within.

So that's what we're doing as we meditate: We're looking for a harmless happiness. This is a very important way of being kind to others. Sometimes meditation is denounced as a selfish activity because you seem to be just looking after yourself. But people who know how to look after themselves are less of a burden on other people. That's why these skills are an expression of kindness.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that right resolve, which is one of the factors of the path, finds its highest expression in doing right concentration. In other words, you have to reflect on the fact that your quest for happiness is going to have to depend on your own actions, and you don't want to harm anybody else in the course of the quest. Because your actions come from your resolves, you have to reflect on which resolves might be harmful. Some of them involve wanting to commit outright violence to other people, or having ill will for other people. Some of the them involve being attached to sensual desires—because, as the Buddha once said, even if it rained gold coins, we wouldn't have enough for our sensual desires. If that's where we're looking for happiness, there's no end to it. And how many showers of gold coins have you seen? And how many showers would we need to satisfy every person, every animal on earth? With no sense of satisfaction, we're bound to get into conflict with one another over what few gold coins there are. There's no way that a true happiness can be found that way.

So you try to learn how to wean yourself away from sensual desires. And the best way to do that is to find a sense of pleasure within. This is why the Buddha taught right concentration. It's not just that you focus on your mind, but you focus in a way that gives rise to a sense of ease, a sense of rapture. In this way you satisfy your immediate need for pleasure at the

same time that you're developing clarity in the mind. When our pleasure depends on harming other beings, we tend to have big blind spots around the harm we're doing. We can think of all sorts of ways to justify the harm we cause to other beings or to other people in the course of our quest for pleasure. In doing so, we built up huge areas of denial and ignorance in our mind. But when your pleasure depends on things that are causing no harm at all, you can be clearer about where there is harm in the world, where there is conflict, because your happiness doesn't depend on that harm or conflict.

So what you've got here is a happiness that's blameless and also very clear: the ideal happiness to form part of the path. So focus on the breath in a way that feels comfortable. Focusing on the breath is called directed thought. Learning how to make it comfortable is called evaluation. These are the two factors that help build concentration. The third factor is singleness: that you really focus on the breath and try to stay with the breath and nothing else.

These are the three things you focus on developing.

Notice how the breath feels in the different parts of the body. Here we're not talking just about the air coming in and out of the lungs, but also about the whole energy flow, the subtle movement of the body, as the breath comes in, the breath goes out. Try to notice: Do you tense up as your breathe in? Do you hold on to tension as you breathe out? Can you breathe in in a way that doesn't build up tension? Can you breathe out in a way that's not holding on to tension?

First you want to start out at one spot in the body where it's easy to get a sense of the breath coming in, the breath going out, or the movement of the body as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Learn how to relate to that spot so that you stay with it but are not clinching up around it, so that there's a sense of openness and fullness right there in that spot—fullness in the sense that the blood is allowed to flow naturally without being squeezed and diverted. This is a skill. For most of us, when we concentrate on some part of the body, we tense it up in order to maintain a sensation we can stick with. But here you want to maintain a sense of openness and stick with that.

Learn how to stick with that sense, so that you can keep that sense of openness and fullness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out. When you can maintain that, move to other parts of the body. You can do this systematically. You might start, say, at the navel, or the base of the throat, or the back of the neck. If you start at the navel, go up the front of the body, then down the back, out the legs. Then from the back of the neck, down the shoulders, and out the arms. Or if you start at the back

of the neck, you can go down the back first, out the legs, down the shoulders and out the arms, and then down the front of the torso, taking the body section by section, to see if there's any section where you tend to hold onto tension with the out-breath or the in-breath, and training yourself to breathe in such a way that there's no holding on, so that things are allowed to flow smoothly. The breath flows smoothly, the blood flows smoothly, and there's a sense of ease all the way through the breathing process.

Some people at this point begin to get a sense of floating, but try not to drift out. You can float and be buoyant, but stay in place. There's a sense of lightness and buoyancy, so keep that sense of lightness, but stay where you are. You've learned to breathe in such a way that the whole body feels at ease throughout the in-breath and out-breath. Try to maintain that sense of awareness of the whole body, and let the pleasure radiate out through the body. Just learn how to maintain that, to stick with it. If you find yourself losing focus when you open up your range of awareness to the whole body, go back to surveying the body spot by spot, section by section, and then try settling down with the whole body again. You may find yourself going back and forth like this for a while until you feel comfortable and stable staying with the whole body. Even though there's a sense of ease and lightness, there's also a solidity to your focus. In other words, it's steady. It doesn't get moved around easily.

At this point, you want to maintain a sense of being focused primarily on one spot in the body, but aware of the whole body. It's like looking at a painting. Your eyes may focus on one spot in the painting, but you can see the whole painting, even though you're focused on one spot.

And here you have it: right resolve, the intention to stick with the meditation. You're not harming anyone; you feel no ill will for anyone. You don't need to think about sensual pleasures. This is the embodiment of right resolve. And this sense of ease and happiness forms the path. It's your nourishment on the path. In the texts, they talk about the different aspects of the path being like different aspects of a fortress. Mindfulness is like the gatekeeper; wisdom is like the smooth walls that nobody can climb up to cause danger. And right concentration is like the food you have stored away to keep yourself nourished. This way, as you develop skill in your pursuit of happiness, you find that you need fewer things outside. There's less need to compete with others over things outside. Your hungers and addictions lose a lot of their force and their sharpness, because you've got a good alternative source of pleasure right here.

This is how we tread lightly on the Earth. We're finding our happiness

inside and a sense of buoyancy and ease inside, so we have less and less need for pleasures outside. So take the time and energy needed to develop this skill, because it will serve you well throughout life.

Right Speech

November 26, 2007

You've probably noticed that, as you sit here meditating—thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath—you're talking to yourself. You're reminding yourself, "Now stay here," commenting on how the breath is, and trying to think up ways that the breath could be better, where to focus, what you find interesting, what you find useful. This inner conversation is actually an important part of the meditation. It's called verbal fabrication: the way the mind chatters to itself. What you're trying to do as you meditate is to learn how to make this chattering, which is often a problem, actually part of the path, an element of your concentration that helps the mind to settle down with a sense of interest, a sense of comfort, a sense of wellbeing.

Then as the wellbeing gets more and more firmly established and the mind gets more centered, you can drop a lot of the chatter, because it's served its purpose. It's served a real purpose. That's when the mind can really grow still.

One of the ways you learn how to be skillful in your internal chatter is to be skillful in your external chatter. This is why right speech is a factor of the path. The way we talk to ourselves has a lot to do with the way we've heard other people talk, and the way we've been talking to others.

So if most of the recordings in the mind are of unskillful speech, you're going to find yourself engaging in unskillful speech in your meditation as well. People are exposed to a lot of negativity. You may find yourself dealing in that negativity as you meditate, so you've got to learn new habits. And you don't learn new habits simply by stopping and not talking at all. You learn new habits by actually engaging with other people with right speech.

So it's good to think about how the Buddha defines right speech. There are four types of speech that you want to avoid: lying, harsh speech, divisive speech, and idle chatter. Each of these is defined by the intention behind it. Lying is speaking with the intention to misrepresent the truth. Harsh speech is what you say with the intention of hurting someone's feelings. Divisive speech is done with the intention of breaking up or preventing friendships. And idle chatter is basically speech without any real clear intention at all,

just chattering away for the sake of having something to say. You want to learn how to avoid these forms of speech, and also learn some of the nuances of right speech, because in some cases, it's not very clear-cut.

Now what counts as lying is clear-cut. You don't want to misrepresent any truth to anybody, ever. That's why it's one of the precepts, i.e., a rule you lay down for yourself and then try to hold to in all situations. There of course will be tests of your ingenuity and your discernment in doing this, because there will be times when people ask questions and you know that answering those questions is going to give rise to problems. The Buddha himself said that he would not tell the truth in areas where it would give rise to greed, anger, and delusion. That doesn't mean he would lie, simply that he would avoid those topics.

So you've got to figure out skillful ways of avoiding issues without letting the other person know you're avoiding them. Suppose someone comes up and says, "Have you seen my husband with another woman?" And you have, but you don't want to get involved. You've got to figure out a way to change the topic. Turn the question on the woman and say, "Why? Do you suspect anything of your husband?" And get her to talk. That way you can avoid answering the question. That's a special case, but still even with special cases, you can't misrepresent the truth, which is why that principle is a precept.

One of the reasons the other forms of wrong speech are not expressed as precepts is because they're not as absolute as the case of lying.

There are times, for instance, when harsh speech is necessary. The Buddha gives an analogy: It's like having a child, a young baby who still doesn't know what to eat and what not to eat, and she's put a sharp piece of glass in her mouth. You've got to do everything you can to get the glass out, even if it means drawing blood, because if the baby swallows the glass, the damage will be even worse. In the Buddha's case, he said harsh things about Devadatta, to his face: one, in hopes that Devadatta might come to his senses, and two, to warn all the other monks around that Devadatta had really gone off course.

Someone once called him on this, asking him, "Would the Buddha ever say anything harsh to anyone?" This was meant as a trick question, the idea being that if the Buddha said No, then they'd say, "What about what you said to Devadatta? That was harsh. It hurt Devadatta's feelings." And if the Buddha said Yes, he would say harsh things to other people, then the response would be, "Well, what's the difference between you and other ordinary people?" So the Buddha's enemies put the question to the Buddha,

but he replied that the question didn't deserve a categorical answer; it deserved an analytical answer instead. There are times when, in deciding what to say, he would ask, first, is it true? If it wasn't true, he wouldn't say it. Second, is it beneficial? And if it's one of those rare cases when saying something harsh would be beneficial, then the next question is, is this the right time and place for that? Only if he could say Yes to all three questions would he say those things.

This principle applies to harsh speech, and it also applies to divisive speech, because there are times when you see one of your friends suddenly developing a friendship with someone you know is abusive, you know is corrupt, you know is going to harm your friend, and you've got to find the right way to protect your friend. So again you may end up saying something that may sound divisive, but it's with compassionate intent.

As for idle chatter, there are times when simple social-grease conversation is necessary, to get a particular situation lubricated—as at work, when you want everyone to work smoothly together. But you've got to be very clear that this is your motivation, which means that it's no longer purely idle chatter. You've got to be clear about the point at which it starts to become totally pointless, purposeless, where the grease is mucking up the works. You have to develop a sense of how much you should say to make people feel at ease, and then when to stop. This requires real discernment, which is why there's no precept with this particular type of wrong speech. It requires you to be sensitive to the needs of the situation.

Once you understand the nuances of right speech, you can start applying the same principles in your mind. One, you never lie yourself. Now, you may find yourself, as you're meditating, lying to yourself in subtle ways. You've got to catch that, throw the light of your awareness on it, highlight it to yourself. Say to yourself, "Look, this is simply not true." The mind tends to put up all sorts of walls of denial. This is one of the reasons why people find it hard to see their intentions: because they're used to lying to themselves about their intentions. Very few people would like to admit that they're operating on corrupt intentions. Or even if they know that what they're doing is not quite right, they try to justify it in one way or another. And as a meditator you can't engage in that sort of justification at all, because that's precisely the ignorance that's going to keep you suffering.

As for harsh speech, you don't want to yell at yourself in a way that gets you discouraged on the path, but there are other times you have to come down hard on yourself. You see yourself giving in to unskillful habits again and again and again, and there comes a time when you've got to say, "Hey,

look, this is foolish; this is stupid." Use whatever language you find is effective to get the message across.

The same with divisive speech: If you're becoming friends with your defilements, you've got to point out their bad qualities. Remind yourself of what greed has done for you to past; what lust has done for you in the past; anger, delusion: all the unskillful mental qualities. You want to divide yourself from them.

And as for idle chatter, you try to turn it into purposeful chatter. In other words, you have to encourage yourself, say nice things about yourself, remind yourself of all the good things you've done in the past. This turns from idle chatter to what is actually a purposeful kind of meditation. *Silanussati*, remembering all the times when you've avoided doing harmful things; *caganussati*, remembering all the times when you were generous, not only with things but also with your goodwill, your compassion, your forgiveness. In other words, there are times when you've got to learn how to put yourself in a good mood. Otherwise the meditation gets dry. It freezes up, like an engine that has run out of oil.

What this means is that you apply the same three questions to your thoughts that you do to your speech. One, is it true? If it's not true, don't think it. Two, is it beneficial? If not, don't think it. And if it is beneficial, then three, is this right time for this kind of thinking? Is this the time to come down hard on the mind, or is this the time to encourage and console the mind? Is this the time to pry it away from its friendship with greed, anger, and delusion? What's the most effective way of doing that? Because sometimes, if you do it in an ineffective way, the mind gets more defensive. There is a rule Ajaan Fuang once gave, which is that if somebody has gotten really deluded in their meditation, and you're not that person's teacher, you don't talk to them about it. Don't try to criticize them or point out the fallacies in their meditation, because that would just make them even more defensive. A lot of conceit can build up around this.

So there are those areas you just leave alone. But with yourself, you should be a lot more frank about where your friendship with your various ideas and attachments really is leading you. But learn how to do it in a way that shows that you're operating with the mind's best interest at heart.

So there's a skill to right speech, both inside and out. There are nuances. When you learn the nuances, then the verbal fabrication of your directed thought and evaluation really does become part of the concentration. As they say in the sutta on mindfulness of breathing, there are times when you need to gladden the mind. There are times when you need to release the

mind from its attachments. Learn how to breathe in such way that helps you do that. And learn how to talk to the mind in such way that helps you do that, too—to the point where you've said what needs to be said, and then you can fall silent.

In this way internal right speech and external right speech all become part of the path.

Right Action

November 28, 2007

Today I was talking to someone who said in passing that sitting and meditating when your mind is a mess all over the place is a waste of time. And of course that's not true. At the very least, meditating when the mind is messy gives you an opportunity to look at what a messy mind is like. Maybe with enough time, you'll get tired of it, and want to do something about it.

I've often found that one way of jumpstarting your practice is to make up your mind that you're going to sit for a certain amount of time every day and really stick with it. You may find in the beginning that your meditation is miserable, and you don't like it. But if you stick with that set amount of time every day, there comes a point where you have to say, "Look, as long as I'm sitting here, I might as well do this right." Sometimes you have to corner the mind that way before it will begin to shape up.

Another consideration, of course, is that while you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you're not causing anyone any harm. You're not engaging in wrong speech, you're not engaging in wrong action or wrong livelihood, and that's not a small thing. So at the very least, even when you're mind is a mess in the meditation, you're keeping yourself from causing harm.

The teachings on right action are very rarely mentioned in the talks here, because as we're sitting here nobody's killing anybody, nobody's stealing, nobody's engaging in illicit sex, unless you're doing that in your mind. But it's important every now and then to think about why right action is part of the path.

To begin with, it grows out of right view and right resolve. You realize that your actions are important, in thought, word, and deed. You don't want to do anything that's going to be harmful either to yourself or to other people. The three types of wrong action are three of the things that the Buddha singled out as always harmful. And unlike right speech, all three forms of wrong action find a place in the five precepts. In other words, they're a basic practice for everybody. You don't kill anybody, any animal that's big enough for you to see. You don't steal anything. You don't engage in illicit sex. Period.

These are vows that you take for yourself. They're "right" in the sense that they're skillful. If you don't cause harm to yourself, if you don't cause harm to other people, then they benefit, you benefit, and that makes it a lot easier to meditate. It cuts off a lot of unskillful thinking when you realize, "I just can't do that. I can't engage in that kind of action, so why even think about it?"

That helps put up a wall. Now often we think of a wall as a restriction, but here the wall is a protection. It protects you from rationalizing. Otherwise, there are lots of easy ways where the mind could justify actions of this sort.

One of the reasons the precepts are so short and clear-cut is that they're especially important to remember when you start finding reasons for breaking them—when your life is endangered, when the life of your loved ones is in danger—and you have to remind yourself, "No killing." Because it's short, it's easy to remember. Now you do what you can to stop the danger, short of killing. But no killing. And so on down the line.

These forms of wrong action are also related to the hindrances. As the Buddha pointed out, when a hindrance is particularly strong—as when there's the desire to get engaged in sensual passion, or you're feeling thoughts of ill will, restlessness, and anxiety—you don't recognize the fact that those thoughts are unskillful. That's one of the main problems with the hindrances: They blind you; they get you to see things in their way. But having the precepts reminds you that these mind states really are unskillful no matter what, no matter where. So that fact stops you short. It's a red flag: No, this kind of behavior is out of the question.

At the same time you can, as with right speech, think of right action as a set of guidelines for your meditation. On one level, as I said, it refers to the hindrances. You think, "Okay, no killing." That relates directly to the hindrance of ill will. No stealing. No illicit sex. Those, depending on your motivation for stealing, could relate to ill will or to sensual desire. You may steal simply because you really want it, but there are times when you might steal because you're angry at somebody, you want to deprive them of something: That's stealing through ill will. The same with illicit sex: That can be motivated either by sensual desire or by ill will.

This focuses you on the two big hindrances, to remind you that you don't want to go there, because if you're going to get the mind in a good solid state of concentration, then, as the texts say, you have to be secluded from sensual passion, be secluded from unskillful mental qualities. Sensual desire and ill will are the two the big unskillful qualities. They're forms of

wrong resolve.

And even further, Ajaan Lee takes the teachings on right speech and right action and makes them more symbolic of other things that go on in the mind when you're meditating as well. Killing for instance: You don't want to kill your goodness. Where does your goodness come from? It comes from being heedful. As the Buddha said, when you're heedless, it's as if you're dead. You're killing yourself; you're killing the goodness of the mind. If you say, "Well, there's nothing much I have to do; everything is perfectly fine as it is; I don't have to work at putting any effort in the path": That kills you right there, kills the practice. So you want to make sure you don't kill your practice. You don't kill your goodness. You've got to be heedful at all times. This means having a strong sense that what you're doing right now is important, and you don't know how much time you're going to have to do skillful things, so you've got to develop as many skillful habits as you can—which means you have to do them right now.

The Buddha once talked about having the monks develop mindfulness of death as a useful form of meditation. The different monks talked about how they developed it. One said, "I think every day, 'May I live at least one more day so I can practice in the Buddha's teachings; I'll be able to get a lot out of it.'" Another monk said, "I think every half day, 'May I live another half-day,'" and so on down the line, until it came to two monks. One said, "I think, 'May I live to breathe in and out once more.'" Another monk said, "'While I'm eating, may I live the amount of time it takes to eat a mouthful of food, so in that amount of time, I'll try to do as much skillful practice as I can, and I'll get good results that way." And the Buddha said, "Only these last two monks really count as being heedful." So here you are, meditating. You've got the chance at least with this breath, as it comes and goes out, to develop something skillful. And then you do the same with the next breath, and the next. That's how you avoid killing your meditation, killing your goodness.

As for stealing, as Ajaan Lee says that, on the level of concentration practice, it means stealing the affairs of other people, thinking about how this or that person is no good. He says, "You never really asked their permission to think about their bad habits, so it's like stealing their stuff." And what kind of stuff you are stealing? You're stealing their garbage. If you're going to steal things from other people, at least steal their valuables. Think about their good points in a way that gives you some energy to emulate those good points yourself. Remember the analogy the Buddha gives, of a person traveling across the desert, tired, trembling with heat,

thirsting for water, and finding little bit of water in a cow's footprint. He realizes: "Here I am, tired, thirsty, and trembling. I need that water. But if I try to scoop it up with my hand, I'll get the water all muddy." So he gets down on all fours and very carefully slurps up the water straight from the cow print.

Your need for the goodness of other people is that extreme. If all you can see is other people's bad points, you're going to lose your enthusiasm for treating them skillfully. You'll say, "Well, everybody else is cheating, I might as well cheat as well." That's a very common attitude that you see throughout society. Again that kills your goodness.

So you don't want to steal other people's bad traits. Think of their good traits. Think about the great ajaans, and think about Upasika Kee: people who gave their lives to the practice and have done so much for the world as a result. You can do that, too. There's nothing about them that's super-human. While you're thinking about their good habits, maybe you can think about how they might have solved the problems you're facing right now. That gives you energy. So as Ajaan Lee says, as long as you're going to steal something, steal their valuables. Don't steal their garbage.

But ultimately you want to get to the point where you're more of a self-starter. You can stop stealing because you can maximize your own inner resources. And what are your inner resources? You've got the four properties of the body here. You've got the breath. You can develop that. You've got good mental states. Develop those. Develop your own resources. You'll find that you've got all the inner wealth you need, so you don't need to steal anything from anybody else, good or bad.

As for the precept against illicit sensuality, this relates to sensual desires. You don't want to get anywhere near them while you're sitting here meditating. Remind yourself that every sensual passion, every sensual desire, comes with a price. The Buddha has a long list of analogies for the drawbacks of sensuality. He says, it's like a dog gnawing at a bone that has no meat: all that effort for no nourishment at all. It's like a person carrying a torch against the wind: The flame of the torch is going to burn you if you don't throw down the torch. It's like using and flaunting borrowed goods: The sensual pleasures you get from other people, they can take away at any time. Another analogy is that sensuality is like a man up in a tree, gathering fruits, and someone else comes along and says, "I want the fruits but I can't climb the tree, but I've got my ax, so I can cut down the tree." If the first man doesn't quickly get out of the tree, he's going to get hurt pretty badly. In other words, someone else may come along and very easily take the

sources of your sensual pleasures in a way that can damage you. So you're putting yourself in a dangerous position when you indulge in sensuality.

Sometimes you hear of the dangers of *jhana*, that you're going to get stuck in *jhana,* and it's going to so wonderful and enthralling that you'll never gain awakening. You can find a few passages in the Canon that make that point, but they're very, very few. The danger of getting stuck in concentration is very small compared to the dangers that come from being stuck on sensuality. As the Buddha said, this is why we have wars, this is why we have quarrels, this is why people work themselves to death. This is why they steal and cheat, in their desire for sensuality. I don't know anybody who's broken the five precepts from being attached to the pleasure of *jhana*.

So *jhana* is a safe place; sensuality is a dangerous place to be. Always keep that in mind. In this way, you take the principles of right action and bring them inside so that you have your own inner wealth to build on. There's no need to steal anything from anyone else, no need to expose yourself to the dangers of trying to find your happiness outside. And by being heedful this way, you keep your goodness alive. That's the most important possession you can have.

Right Livelihood

December 21, 2007

We're often impatient with the practice. We want to go straight to insight, straight to the solution of all our problems, so we can then go back home and get on with the rest of our lives. But you first have to put the mind in good shape before you can gain any insight, and that takes time. You have to feed it well: That's what concentration is all about. As the Buddha once said, if you don't have the pleasure and rapture that can come from at least the first jhana, you're always going to be tempted by sensuality. Even if you understand the drawbacks of sensual pleasures and sensual desires, if you don't have this alternative way of finding happiness, you're going to go back to your old ways. No matter how much Dhamma you may have read or how precise your understanding of the intricacies of the Buddha's teachings, when the time comes to feed, you're going to go back and feed on the same old roadkill you've been feeding on all your life.

It's like Ajaan Chah's simile: Westerners, he once said, are like vultures. When they fly, they fly very high, but when they eat, they eat low. That's one of those quotes you don't normally see in books about Ajaan Chah, but it hits home. We in the West tend to overlook our need for the groundwork provided by concentration. The Buddha himself compared the happiness, pleasure, and equanimity that come from concentration to food. His image was of a fortress at the edge of a frontier, with different qualities in the path corresponding to different aspects of the fortress. There's discernment, which is like a slippery wall that the enemy can't climb up. Learning is like a range of weapons to fight off the enemy. Mindfulness is like the gatekeeper who remembers who to let in and who not to let in. And jhana, he said, is like stores of food.

The first jhana is like water and grass. When you work up to the fourth jhana, you've got honey, butter, and ghee. These are ways of nourishing the mind and providing for its right livelihood. Even if you're not gaining any higher levels of insight, at least you're finding pleasure in a blameless place. This qualifies as right livelihood in the path. The greater the pleasure, the greater the sense of well-being and stability you can develop from within,

then the lighter your kammic footprint on the rest of the world, and the less harm you're causing as you search for your livelihood, both physical and mental.

So as you're practicing concentration, you're developing several factors of the path at once. There's right resolve, the resolve to renounce sensuality, to find a pleasure that's not involved with sensual passion; right mindfulness, which is the theme of right concentration; and right livelihood, looking after your needs in a skillful way.

Right livelihood is the poor stepsister of the eightfold path. It's the factor that the Buddha hardly defines at all. He simply says the disciple of the noble ones avoids wrong livelihood and makes his or her living through right livelihood—which doesn't tell you much.

Part of this may have been simply a question of etiquette. There's only one passage in the Canon where the Buddha clearly comes out with a general statement condemning certain trades as wrong livelihood. He lists five—trading in poison, trading in weapons, trading in intoxicants, trading in meat, and trading in human beings—saying that the disciple of the noble ones avoids engaging in those forms of trade. You don't set yourself up with a shop to sell alcohol, poison, weapons, meat, or slaves. But otherwise, the Buddha is very circumspect when talking about other people's occupations.

There are two cases where people of questionable professions come to him. One is an actor; the other, a professional soldier. They say pretty much the same thing. "Our teachers who taught us to be actors," the actor says, "claimed that if you spend your life entertaining people with your imitations of reality, making them laugh, you're going to attain the heaven of laughter after death. What does Master Gotama have to say about that?"

The Buddha twice refuses to answer, but the actor keeps after him, and asks him a third time. So the Buddha finally says, "Well, it looks like I can't get anywhere with you by saying I don't want to answer that. So I'll answer you." He goes on to say that if, as you're acting, your motivation is to give rise to greed, anger, and delusion in your audience, then after you die you're going to go to the hell of laughter—i.e., not the place where people laugh *with* you, but where they laugh *at* you. So the actor breaks into tears. The Buddha says, "See? That's why I didn't want to answer your question." The actor says, "No, I'm not crying because of what you said. I'm just crying because I've been deceived by my teachers for so long."

Similarly with the soldier: The soldier says, "I was taught that if you die in battle, you're going to go to the heaven of heroes. What does Master Gotama have to say about that?" Again, the Buddha twice refuses to answer.

When pushed for the third time, he finally says, "When you're in the midst of battle, giving rise to the desire for the killing of other beings—'May these other beings suffer, may they be harmed, may they be killed'—that mind state, if you die then, will take you to the hell of heroes who die in battle." Like the actor, the soldier breaks into tears and the Buddha says, "See? That's why I didn't want to answer your question." And the soldier, like the actor, says, "No, I'm not crying because of what you said. I'm just crying because I've been deceived for so long by my teachers."

The Buddha's etiquette here is interesting. He didn't set out on a crusade against actors or professional soldiers or advertising people or bankers or whatever. Only if he was pushed would he condemn a particular occupation. Otherwise, he would ask you to reflect for yourself on your means of livelihood. Is it harming other beings? Does it involve lying? Does it involve unskillful mental states? If it does, then maybe you should look for another occupation—which, of course, may take time. This may have been one of the reasons why the Buddha observed his etiquette, because a lot of people are stuck in their occupation. It's going to take a while for them to disentangle themselves if they realize that their means of livelihood is unskillful.

But there's another side to right livelihood, and that's looking at your attitude toward what you consume. This is one of the reasons why we have that chant every evening, looking back on our use of the requisites during the day. Why did you use the requisites? Actually that chant is for when you didn't reflect while you were using the requisites. Ideally, you should reflect while you're eating: Why are you eating now? When you put on your clothes: Why are you putting these clothes on? When you fix up your house or your hut: Why are you fixing it up in this way? When you take medicine: Why are you taking this particular medicine now? What's your motivation?

The chant reminds you of the ideal motivation: Wear clothing to protect yourself from the elements, to cover up the parts of body that cause shame. Take food not to put on bulk, not for the fun or the flavor of it. After all, those who provided the food that you're eating—the farmers who worked, the animals who gave up their lives—didn't provide it in fun. You take the food simply so that you can continue practicing, so that you can eliminate hunger pains and yet at the same time not overstuff yourself until there's the discomfort that comes from eating too much. You're not eating just for the flavor of the food; you're eating for the nourishment of the body, so that you can practice in ease. Your use of shelter should simply be to protect yourself from the elements and to provide a place where you can be quiet,

find some privacy, so you can practice. And as for medicine, you use it to eliminate pain and to maintain freedom from disease. That's all.

When you think about these things, it forces you to look at the ripples you send out when you choose what to eat, what to wear, where to live: What is your impact on the world? The fact that you're alive and breathing means that you have a lot of needs, and the needs can be met only by relying on others. How can you rely on them so that you're not harming them or causing them unnecessary pain?

This reflection ties in with one of the important principles of what are called the customs of the noble ones, which is contentment with your material possessions. When you think in these ways, you find that you're buying less, using less, because you're looking elsewhere for your happiness. I.e., you're looking inside. This is where the concentration comes in. This is why concentration is an important element of right livelihood. It provides you the honey, the butter, the grain, and the other foods you need for the mind's true happiness deep down inside. At the same time, this happiness provides you with a good foundation for the insights that are going to come as you start looking at the various ways in which you keep on taking birth. Because, again, the fact you're taking birth keeps placing a burden on other beings, a burden on the world.

The insights you're going to need to stop that process can be pretty harsh. As the Buddha said, when you take food, think about the story of the couple who were going across the desert with a baby, their only child. They got more than halfway across the desert and ran totally out of food. They realized that if they didn't eat anything, all three of them would die. So they decided to kill their child and make jerky out of him: baby jerky. That way at least two of them would survive and then they could start a family again when they got to the other side of the desert.

Now, the Buddha asked, what would be their attitude toward the baby jerky while they were eating it? Would they be eating it for fun? No, they'd be thinking with sorrow of what they had to do in this horrible circumstance. That, the Buddha said, is how you should regard physical food: as baby jerky, not something you eat out of joy or for the flavor, but simply to keep life going, realizing that your having to eat causes suffering, causes pain.

That's a harsh contemplation—one of many harsh contemplations in the Buddha's teachings. The only way the mind can stand up to that kind of contemplation is if you've got the strong sense of wellbeing that comes from nourishing the mind with right concentration. Otherwise, the insights that

can come from meditation, if you don't have a good solid foundation like this, can be disorienting, destabilizing.

So as the foundation for your practice, you want to keep working on these skills. Appreciate the simple quality of getting the mind still, finding a sense of ease simply through the way you breathe; gaining a sense of wellbeing, rapture, equanimity when you need them. In this way, you nourish the mind with good, harmless food. That's right livelihood in the highest sense. It puts you in a position where, while you're still alive this time around, you weigh lightly on the world around you. And you're developing the skill so you don't have to come back and weigh the world down again. This is why the Buddha's teachings are not selfish. They're not something you get through so you can then get on with your life. They're a way of living so that you cause minimal harm to others and ultimately can find the happiness that frees you from coming back and causing harm again and again. They're an act of kindness both for you and for the whole world around you.

Right Effort

June 11, 2008

The Thai idiom for meditation is making an effort*: tham khwaam phian.* And the important thing, of course, is to make the effort right. Brute force is not going to take nibbana by storm. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if you could get to nibbana simply through effort, we all would have been there by now. You have to make the effort, *right* effort. This involves an element of wisdom and discernment.

There are several ways of applying discernment to right effort. One that we're probably most familiar with is the simple question of the amount. There's that famous story about Venerable Sona, who was very delicately brought up—so delicately brought up, they say, that he even had hair on the soles of his feet. When he became monk and was doing walking meditation for many hours, his feet started to bleed. And he got discouraged: "Here I've put in so much effort," he said, "and still I haven't gained awakening. Maybe I should disrobe, go back to being a lay person, and make merit." The Buddha happened to read his mind, so he levitated and appeared right in front of Sona, and asked him, "Back when you were a lay person and were playing the lute, if you tuned the strings too tightly, what was it like?" Well, it didn't sound good. "How about if they were too loose?" That didn't sound good either. "How about if you tuned them just right?" That was when the music sounded right.

Then the Buddha said, "It's the same with your meditation. You tune your effort to the amount that you're able to do." When you tune a lute, you first tune one string and then tune all the other strings to the first. In the same way, you tune your effort, then you tune the rest of your faculties—your conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—to the amount of effort you're able to put in. And the meditation will go well.

So in this case, the discernment involves seeing how much energy you're actually able to put in, when you're pushing yourself too hard, when you're not pushing yourself hard enough. And how do you know? Well, you try to push yourself in a way that seems too hard, and see what happens over time—because we do have a tendency to be lazy. We all want to belong to

the group of easy practice and fast results. But the people with easy practice and fast results have pretty much all gone to nibbana already. We're the ones left over. So you push yourself until you find that you're pushing too hard. You can tell from your own experience: The mind gets frazzled; you have trouble focusing. So then you let up a bit. You don't go back to the other extreme and say that effort is bad. You simply fine-tune your effort.

But the amount of effort also depends on the particular problem facing you. There's another passage where the Buddha says that some defilements will go away simply by watching them. You don't have to analyze them. You don't have to put in much effort. Simply by noticing that "This is a defilement," and realizing you don't want to go there, it'll go away. Other defilements, though, require what the Buddha calls exerting a fabrication. "Fabrication" here has many aspects: verbal, mental, and physical. Physical fabrication is the breath. In other words, when you see greed or anger or delusion arising in the mind, ask yourself, "How is the breath going right now?" See if you can change the mind state by changing the way you breathe.

That, of course, will involve verbal fabrications: directed thought and evaluation. Instead of chattering on to yourself about how much you want something, how much you're angry about something, you start chattering to yourself about the breath. Ask yourself, "How is the breath right now? How does it feel? What would feel better?" Once you've got something that feels good, how about spreading it around? And how do you spread comfortable breath around the body? This is also an element of right effort. If you push too hard, you destroy the comfort you started out with. If you don't ask questions, if you don't take an interest, it just doesn't happen. So again, you've got to find the right amount of effort for dealing with the breath.

And then finally there's mental fabrication, which covers feeling and perception. In this case, once you've got a useful feeling of comfort or pleasure from the breath, you put it to use. You don't just sit there enjoying it. You see what use can be made out of it, again by spreading the breath around, letting it permeate the whole body, giving the mind something to do. Because it's very easy, when the mind gets into a pleasant place, for it to start drifting off, going into delusion concentration where everything is very pleasant but not very clear. You're still, but when you come out of it you can't quite figure out where you were. Were you with the breath? Well, no. Were you asleep? No. Awake? Not really. So in order to avoid that state, you've got to give the mind work to do with the feeling of comfort. This is

one of the more radical parts of the Buddha's teaching. Comfort is not an end in and of itself. It's something you can use as a tool.

And then use your perceptions, the labels you have for things, to figure out how to get the most out of the comfort you've got and also how to analyze the defilement that was causing so much trouble. You can use your perceptions in lots of ways. If you find that you're angry at somebody, remember the Buddha's famous image of a person who is tired and thirsty and hot, crossing a desert, needing water, and finding a little puddle in a cow footprint—and being willing to get down in his hands and knees and slurp it up, because he needs the water so much. In the same way, when you're angry with somebody, you have to realize that you yourself are tired, thirsty, hot, and trembling. In other words, the goodness of your heart is not yet strong. It needs nourishment. And focusing on the bad points of the people is not going to nourish the goodness of your heart. It's going to make you even hotter and thirstier. You need to focus on the other person's good points, even if it means getting down on your hands and knees and slurping them up out of a cow footprint. Hold that perception in mind. That's one way of using perception to put yourself in the right mind state for dealing with whatever the defilement may be.

That's called exerting a fabrication. So again you've got to use your discernment to see when the issue in the mind will go away simply by watching it and when you've got to make an effort with the three kinds of fabrication.

Discernment plays other roles in right effort as well. In the classic formula, the Buddha says that you "generate desire, arouse your persistence, and uphold your intent" for four tasks. But even before you take on the four tasks of right effort, notice the attitude you've got to bring to them. You've got to generate desire. You've got to *want* to do it. And your wanting has to be wise and discerning. It's easy to point out people who have a very strong desire for awakening, and the desire actually gets in the way of awakening, or their desires are turning neurotic. They're trying to obliterate themselves. That's where the idea that the stream-enterers wipe out their personality comes from. There are people who hate their personalities, so they want to get rid of them and think that here is the Buddha's approval of their attitude. That's a neurotic desire, which is easy to satirize, easy to make fun of. And it's really unhealthy in the practice. But satirizing at it, making fun of *all* desire, is not helpful either. You've got to realize that there is such a thing as healthy desire. Desire for awakening is a lot better than the desires most people act on, but again you've got to learn how to do it skillfully, with

wisdom.

In other words, you realize that awakening comes from causes, so you focus your desire on the causes in a way that helps give rise to them. If the practice requires more mindfulness, you work on being mindful. You want to arouse the skillful desire to be mindful. To develop concentration, arouse a skillful desire to be concentrated. The term "skillful" here is important. Look at the meditation as a skill, not as something you're just going to push yourself through with blind effort.

But notice what skills are required to get the mind to stay still. Once it's still and you get up from the meditation, how can you maintain that stillness? It's like balancing a bowl of oil on your head. You have to be very careful not to lose your balance, not to get distracted. How do you do that? Make it a game, take it as a challenge, and try to figure out what you can do to meet that challenge. This way the desire becomes a healthy desire. It takes this massive task of reaching awakening and breaks it down into manageable bits. You work at all the various skills you need as a meditator, trying to figure out how to get the mind to settle down when it's angry, how to get it to settle down when it's lazy, how to give it energy when it's depressed, how to make it more stable when it's getting too manic. These are all necessary skills to work on.

So your desire for awakening has to get focused on the steps that lead there. Realize that there are steps you can follow bit by bit by bit, and they lead to something that's more than the sum of the steps. Some people say, "Well, focusing on the path like this distracts you from the deathless, which is all around you." But it's not a distraction. The Buddha taught a path with a purpose; he didn't teach the path as a distraction. He says that this is the way to the goal. Because of the complexity of the mind, it's possible to work on a fabricated path that takes you to something unfabricated. So you generate the desire—in other words, you develop the right attitude toward the effort. This requires wisdom as well.

And then there are the four specific tasks: to abandon any unskillful qualities that have already arisen, to prevent unskillful qualities that haven't arisen from arising, to give rise to skillful mental qualities, and then, when skillful mental qualities have arisen, to maintain them. Those are four different types of effort. You've got to read the situation in your mind: What needs doing right now? Do you have to focus on getting rid of the unskillful side, or do you have to focus more on developing the skillful side? You learn how to read your mind so you can understand what type of effort will be the right effort at any one particular time.

So it's all a question of your attitude to the effort, the type of effort that has to be applied, and the right amount to apply—the amount being based, one, on the level of energy you have right now, and then two, the specific problem you're dealing with, whether it requires a lot of effort or no effort beyond simply watching.

All these qualities, when you put them together, constitute right effort. So when you're making your effort here, when you *tham khwaam phian*, realize that it's largely a matter of discernment, understanding, and the willingness, the desire to give whatever effort is needed. Because sometimes it takes a lot of effort, a lot of patience, to overcome a particular problem in the mind. Your mind gets knocked off balance. You try to go to the breath and there just doesn't seem to be any breath at all. If you immediately get worked up, then you've got a problem. But you say, "The breath's got to be here. If there were no breath, I'd be dead." Or if you can detect the breath but it's not comfortable, be willing to sit with it for a while, as you would with an irritable child, so that your patience finally helps get the breath to calm down.

So whatever effort is needed—whether it's to sit there and be very still and very patient, or to push in a particular direction—you've got be willing to give the effort that's required. You've got to develop your discernment to figure out what's needed at any particular time and to motivate yourself to do it. There's no one blanket piece of wisdom that's going to cover all situations. The word for wisdom, *pañña,* actually means discernment, the ability to detect differences. Sometimes you accept the way things are if you can't do anything about them, and other times you realize, "I've got to push." And accepting the way things are may sometimes mean realizing that you *do* have the power to make a change, the power to make a difference in the mind, and you now have the opportunity to do that. It's the right situation to really push and make a hard effort. Learn how to accept that, too.

When you've got all these factors working together, that's the kind of effort that forms part of the path. In fact it's such an important element of the path that the Buddha said that the four right exertions—which are the basic formula for right effort—can stand in for the path as a whole.

So try not to bring a simpleminded attitude toward right effort. It's a complex issue. But it's not so complex that you can't figure it out. It's simply a matter of time and using your powers of observation. The Buddha once said that if you want to know a person, really know the person's virtue, you've got to spend a lot of time with that person and be really observant.

And the same principle applies to your mind. You've got to make observing the mind and spending time with the mind your top priority, because it takes time, takes effort, to determine what's really needed—but it's time and effort well spent.

Right Mindfulness

December 25, 2007

The term "mindfulness" on its own is something neutral. It can be put to good uses or bad—because it simply means keeping something in mind. You can keep in mind the fact that you want to put an end to suffering, or you can keep in mind a decision to rob a bank. In either case, it's mindfulness. Mindfulness becomes right or wrong depending on the task to which you put it—whether, from the point of view of putting an end to suffering, you're keeping the right or the wrong things in mind.

So as we're practicing, we want to make sure our mindfulness is right mindfulness. There are two spots in the Canon where the Buddha defines right mindfulness. The best-known definition is in terms of the four *satipatthanas:* the four establishings of mindfulness. In fact there are two huge discourses on the topic. But it's also good to keep in mind that there's another definition of right mindfulness that's a lot simpler. It's simply keeping in mind the fact that you want to develop the skillful qualities of the path and to abandon their antitheses. In other words, you keep in mind the fact that you want to develop right view and abandon wrong view, to develop right resolve and abandon wrong resolve, and so on down the line. What this means is that you're not just observing without preference whatever comes up. You're keeping in mind the fact that there are skillful qualities you want to develop and unskillful ones that you want to abandon.

When you keep that fact in mind and then apply it to what you're doing, that's right mindfulness combined with right effort. And it's important to keep this context in mind. Sometimes people interpret the teachings on the establishings of mindfulness out of context, saying that right effort and right concentration are one sort of practice, whereas right mindfulness is something else entirely. But right mindfulness actually leads to right concentration, and it builds on right effort: the desire and effort to develop skillful qualities of the mind and to abandon unskillful ones. You have to keep that in mind. To keep that in mind effectively, you've got to establish mindfulness to give yourself a framework that will lead to right concentration.

So as we're practicing mindfulness, remember the context. We try to develop a skillful understanding of what's skillful in the mind and what's not, along with the desire to develop what's skillful, to abandon what's not. And now we're going to keep that in mind. The best way to remember something is to have a good solid framework or foundation, a good frame of reference, which is where the establishings of mindfulness come in.

Sometimes you see these establishings listed simply as body, feelings, mind, and mental qualities. Those—when taken in and of themselves—are the frames of reference you use when establishing mindfulness, but the actual establishing of mindfulness is much more. It's a complex process. To begin with, with the first frame of reference, you try to remain focused on body in and of itself, ardent, alert and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That whole process is the first establishing of mindfulness, and it's the process we're working on here as we focus on the breath. It's a process centered on the body, and it's good to understand each aspect of the process.

To remain focused is termed *anupassana.* You choose something to watch and then you stick with it—in this case, *the body in and of itself.* In other words, you're not looking at the body as part of the world, or however it might be measured in the context of the world: whether it's good-looking or bad-looking, whether it's strong enough to do the jobs you need to do out in the world. You're simply with the body in and of itself on its own terms.

Ardent, alert, and mindful: Ardency is what carries the process of right effort into the practice of right mindfulness. You really want to do this skillfully, for you acutely know what can happen if you don't develop these skills. *Alert* means that you're watching what you're doing, paying close attention to what you're doing and to the results you're getting. And of course you're *mindful,* remembering to stay focused on the body.

Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: This means that any time you want to switch your frame reference back to the world, you try to remind yourself, No, you don't want anything out of the world for the time being. You're not going to let the issues of the world get you worked up. You're going to stay right here with your original frame of reference—i.e., the body in and of itself—and then try to carry that frame of reference into all of your activities. Instead of jumping to other frames of reference, you stay with this one, with the sense of the body. As you're sitting here watching the breath, when you get up, when you walk around, try to keep the body in mind all the time. And be alert to how the breath energy feels within and around the body. As for anything else that may come up,

whether it's a thought, a feeling, or an interaction with someone else: Try to see how it affects the body, how it affects the breath.

This is how you strengthen your frame of reference and turn it into an object of concentration. When you're talking with someone else, notice how your body is reacting during the talking. When you're working, notice how your body is reacting, how the breath is reacting during the work. Always refer things back to the breath. That way your frame of reference becomes really established. And you start getting insights you wouldn't have seen otherwise. That's because establishing the body here as your frame of reference helps to keep the mind inside instead of flowing out. Luang Puu Dune once said that the mind flowing out to its objects is suffering. So to unlearn that habit of flowing out and causing suffering, you want to keep your awareness centered inside.

Of course, what will happen is that your awareness will keeping flowing out, but maybe after a time you'll be able to see it flow out as you're not flowing along with it. It's as if one mental state is flowing out while the observer is staying right here with the body. When you don't go out with that mental state, it stops. It goes out a little ways and just falters and dies.

That's an important insight: the realization that you can observe states of mind without getting entangled with them.

That's when you can start using other frames of reference. Ajaan Lee makes the point that when you're staying with the breath, you've got all four frames of reference right there. You've got the breath, which is an aspect of the body. Then there's the feeling associated with the breath. There's the mind state that's trying to maintain concentration. And then there are the various mental qualities: either the hindrances that are interfering with your concentration or the factors for awakening that are helping you along. You want to make use of all four frames. But the body is basic. Staying with the body helps you observe the mind, feelings, and mental qualities without getting sucked in by them.

This is why the meditation begins with the breath. This is why, when Buddha gave instructions on how to develop concentration in a way that brings to fruition all four establishings of mindfulness, he said to stay with the breath. As you stay with the breath, you focus on the breath in ways that deal with feelings, that deal with the mind, that deal with mental qualities, but you never really leave the breath. Instead, you train yourself to observe things in conjunction with the breath.

So of all the various places you can establish mindfulness, the breath is the most important, the most crucial, the one that you really want work on

the most.

There's a passage in the texts where the Buddha says you can focus on the body internally or externally or both internally and externally. This fits into a pattern we often see in the teachings: that when you look at yourself, you also want to remind yourself that whatever is true about the inner workings of your body and mind, is true about everybody else's body and mind. This helps put things into perspective. When you're having trouble with your hindrances, remind yourself that you're not the only one. Other people have trouble with the hindrances as well. When you have pain in the body, remind yourself that everybody else has pains in the body, too.

This follows the pattern on the night of the Buddha's awakening. He started with knowledge about his own past, his own stories. And if you think you're carrying around a lot of stories, think about someone who could remember back many eons, all the stories he could have carried around. But he didn't carry them around. He just watched them. He observed them and came up with some questions: Does this truth, the truth of rebirth, apply only to me or to other people? What's the principle that determines how you go from one life to the next?

So in the second watch of the night he inclined his mind to the passing away and rebirth of all beings, seeing people dying and being reborn on all the many levels of the cosmos. And seeing the larger picture in this way, he saw a larger pattern: that the nature of your actions is what determines where you get reborn. Skillful actions done under the influence of right views lead to a good rebirth. Unskillful ones done under the influence of wrong views lead to a bad rebirth. That's the general principle.

Notice that the Buddha started out with himself, then moved to other beings, before he finally arriving at the third insight, which was to focus directly on the present moment in and of itself. Looking at the larger picture before focusing on the present may seem like a detour but it's needed to put things into perspective. Otherwise, as you're sitting here meditating and facing your problems, it seems like you're the only one sitting here in pain or distraction. It's helpful to remind yourself that everybody goes through this. No matter how bad the pain, there have been people who sat through worse pain and yet came out on the other side. No matter how obsessive the distraction, there have been people who disentangled themselves from even worse distractions. So these contemplations—of your body and other people's bodies, your mind and other people's minds—seem to be designed put things into perspective, as an aid in putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world.

All of this is designed to put the mind in a position where it's ready to settle down. The mindfulness and alertness protect the mind and provide a good foundation. The quality of ardency is what helps make it skillful. And when you reflect on the universality of suffering, it gives you the right motivation for practicing. All these qualities together get you ready to settle down and stay really solidly with the breath.

That's what right mindfulness is all about. It's not simply a matter of observing what arises and passes away, and just letting it arise and pass away. Mindfulness is not so much about allowing as it's about directing the mind in a skillful direction, toward right concentration. So when you're observing things arising and passing away—whether in body or the mind—it's not just a matter of being a passive observer. There's a purpose to your attention, so it's not bare. You want to observe these things so that you understand them. You want to understand them so you can gain some mastery over them, so that you can direct the states of mind and the issues that arise in the body in the direction of right concentration.

For instance, if there are pains in the body, what can you do, how can you relate to the pains so that they don't knock the concentration off course? How do you breathe in a way that helps spread pleasure around in the body? What attitudes can you develop toward what's going on in the body and the mind to help get you over difficult patches? These are the things you want to keep in mind.

So right mindfulness is not just a matter of having the right place to focus your attention; it's also a matter of bringing the right attitude, remembering the right attitude: the attitude that comes from right effort—the desire to do things skillfully and to let go of unskillful habits. When you have that attitude in charge, your mindfulness becomes right mindfulness, the kind of mindfulness that brings all the factors of the path together.

The Second Frame of Reference

September 21, 2009

As you sit here with this bundle of feelings, there are lots of different feelings you could focus on. There are pains in some parts of your body, pleasant feelings in other parts, and nondescript neutral feelings in still other parts. It's not that you have just one feeling at any one time. It's not the case that there's nothing but pain. As Ajaan Lee once said, if your body were totally in pain with no pleasure at all, you'd die. You're alive, so there is pleasure someplace. Ferret it out. Look for it.

In the beginning, it may not seem all that impressive, but there already are pleasant feelings in different parts of the body. The mind has a tendency to focus on the pains because that's what its early warning system is for: to figure out where there's pain that you've got to do something about. But you can cut that switch and focus instead on where the pleasure is instead.

It's like that old book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain,* where the author teaches you not to draw eyes, noses, mouths, or other recognizable features of the faces you're trying to draw. Instead, you focus on drawing the space, say, between the eye and nose, the space between the nose and the mouth. And you end up with a much better likeness because you're focusing on things you don't normally focus on.

So it's the same with the pleasures and pains in the body. Instead of complaining about where there's stiffness or soreness or a sense of blockage in the body, focus on the areas where things are going well. Again Ajaan Lee: He says it's like going into a house where you know some of the floorboards are rotten, so you don't step there. You step where the floorboards are sound. Or when you're eating a mango, you don't eat the rotten spots. You eat the spots that are good. And you make the most of them. What this means is that you focus on the pleasure in a way that helps to maintain it and allow it to grow. When it feels good, you can spread it around. As the Buddha says, you want to suffuse the body with the sense of ease, the sense of fullness that grows as you focus on the breath.

All this comes under the second frame of reference: feelings in and of themselves as your frame of reference. If you read the *Mahasatipatthana*

Sutta on the topic, it's possible to understand it as telling you simply to stick with whatever feeling comes up, because there's just a list of the different types of feeling you could focus on: pleasant feelings, painful feelings, and neutral feelings; pleasure of the flesh—i.e., pleasures, physical or mental, relating to sensuality; pleasure not of the flesh—related to the practice of concentration— pain of the flesh, pain not of the flesh, and so on. The way these things are simply listed makes it sounds like you just watch these feelings as they arise and pass away, without getting involved in them, without trying to foster skillful feelings or abandon unskillful ones.

But if you read the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* in context, you realize that the Buddha is not telling you just to focus on whatever comes up willy-nilly. There's a sutta where he asks, "How do you develop the four establishings of mindfulness? You develop them by developing the eightfold path"—and that includes everything from right view on down through right effort and right concentration. Right mindfulness builds on right effort and is a natural continuation of it; it's meant to lead toward right concentration. The *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* itself talks about ardency as one of the qualities you bring to this practice. The sutta itself doesn't explain ardency—that's one of the reasons that it's not a comprehensive treatment of mindfulness practice —but other passages in the Canon show that ardency means right effort, generating the desire to do what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful. So in this context, some ways of focusing on pleasure are unskillful, and some ways of focusing on pleasure are skillful.

In some of the other suttas where the Buddha discusses feeling, he explicitly recommends ways to respond to different types of feelings. For example, with physical feelings: When pleasures of the flesh arise, you have to watch out for the tendency to get obsessed with passion around them. When pains of the flesh arise, watch out for the tendency to get obsessed with irritation around them. If you're trying to find a good basis for a solid happiness inside, you want to develop the pleasures not of the flesh, i.e., the pleasure that comes from concentration.

So learn how to gain some control over your feelings. Now this may sound strange. How can you control your feelings? Sometimes we have the sense that our feelings are who we really are, and that they're a given. But that's not how the Buddha explains them. He says that in every feeling there's an element of fabrication, i.e., an element of intention. This applies to physical feelings as well as to mental feelings. You want to learn how to see where that element of intention is, and how to engage in that element skillfully.

As he says that, for the sake of having a feeling, we fabricate these feelings. We take a potential for a feeling and, through our intention to have a feeling, turn it into an actual experience of a feeling. You wouldn't think that we would want to fabricate pain, but we're not skillful in our fabrication, so that's what we sometimes end up with. We want feelings of pleasure, but we often end up creating pain. Now there *are* certain givens: You've got a disease in your body, you've got aches and pains in your body that come from old kamma. You can't do much about that. But, as Ajaan Lee says, it's not that your body is totally pained. And you do have the choice: Where do you want to focus your attention? What do you want to maximize? Do you want to maximize the pain or maximize the pleasure?

What we're doing as we're sitting here meditating is learning how to develop the skills for maximizing skillful kinds of pleasure, skillful ways of approaching the pleasure. There are even skillful forms of distress. The Buddha talks about household distress and renunciation distress. Household distress is when you're not getting the physical feelings you want: You don't see the sights you'd like to see or hear the sounds you'd like to hear, smell the smells, taste the tastes, get the physical contacts you'd like to feel. Then you get upset. And for most of us, the way of dealing with this kind of distress is to try to find the things we want, i.e., replace household grief with household joy. That's when you get the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations and ideas you'd like.

But the Buddha says that the better course is to abandon household grief by relying on renunciate grief. Renunciate grief is when you think about the fact that you haven't gained awakening yet. You'd really like to gain the peace, you'd really like to gain the happiness and the freedom that come with awakening, and the fact disturbs you. Now this kind of grief actually goes someplace. It's like the tension when you pull back on a bow to shoot an arrow. It's what allows the arrow to fly. This kind of grief focuses you on what you really would like to do, and it focuses you on the fact that there is a path to that awakening.

So instead of just mucking around in the grief and joy that come from losing and then gaining, and losing and then gaining, and losing again the pleasures of the senses, you focus on developing the elements of the path. And notice: The Buddha says to abandon household grief by relying on renunciate grief. And then he goes on to say, abandon renunciate grief by relying on renunciate joy, i.e., when you finally do attain some of that freedom, some of that happiness, some of that peace, through the practice.

But how do you abandon a feeling? When the Buddha talks about

abandoning, or letting go, it's not that your mind has a hand that's grasping things. You're engaged in habitual activities, habitual ways of reacting, habitual ways of thinking, habitual ways of breathing, habitual ways of perceiving things, habitual ways of fashioning feelings. And as long as you keep repeating those habitual patterns, you're holding on. To let go means to stop. You realize that those old habits are not getting you what you want, so you just stop. Or you learn how to stop. It's not always automatic, but that's what you're aiming for: learning to see where your habitual ways of fabricating your experience are causing stress and pain, realizing that you can develop some alternative skills that don't produce that pain, and then focusing more and more on those skills. As I said earlier, there is an element of fabrication, an element of intention in all of our feelings, and so you want to focus on that.

There's bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you direct your thoughts to a topic, such as a feeling, and then evaluate that feeling: Is it potentially skillful? Potentially not? What are you going to do with it? And then there's mental fabrication, which consists of the feelings themselves plus the perceptions that you hold in mind. Now all those fabrications are things you can learn how to manipulate, learn how to shape. You've got the raw materials. Sometimes the raw materials are a little recalcitrant, but there are things you can do with them.

So even though there's a pain or a weakness in the body, you don't have to obsess about the pain or the weakness. You can focus on where your strengths are; you can focus on where your pleasures are. Focus on different ways of breathing: What kind of breathing would give you more strength? What kind of breathing would give you more pleasure? Experiment. Learn about these things. Which ways of thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath give more pleasure? Which perceptions of the breath give more pleasure, give you more strength? These are all things you can manipulate, things you can play with. And just knowing that you're not just a hapless victim of your pains helps get you on the right side.

Sometimes a useful perception is seeing the pain as something receding from you. Think of yourself as sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons where the back seats face back. You're sitting there watching the road recede away from you as you're actually headed in the direction behind your back. So when a pain comes, it's not that it's actually coming at you. The pain is going, going, going, going away. You're watching it go, go, go away. Another pain may come to replace it, but that's just another pain that you're going to watch go, go, go. Hold that perception in mind, that you're

not on the receiving end of a lot of this stuff, and things will be a lot easier to take. Because you do see that the individual moments of pain do go, go, go, go, go. And as you focus on that, it gives you less of a sense of being a victim, of being a target, and more of a sense of being in charge, of the choices you have.

I was involved in a psych experiment years back when I was in college. They had computers generating random numbers, and if your number came up for a particular psych experiment, you had to go. It was as if everyone in the whole college was a guinea pig for the Psych Department. And so it happened that during my four years as a student at the college, my name came up only once. But then when I returned after my time in Thailand, the fellowship that had sent me to Thailand gave me a free year back. In the course of that one year, I came up for experiments twice. And both of the experiments were related to meditation—which was useful because I had been meditating already.

The relevant experiment was this: They would have you put your hand in a bucket of ice water with lots of ice, very cold. And then you were told to imagine that the cold in your hand, in this case it was my right hand, could somehow travel over to the left hand, and the warmth in the left hand could travel back to the right hand. "Just visualize that happening," they said, "and see how long you can keep your hand in the bucket." That's what I was told. So I sat there with my hand in the bucket for five minutes. The experimenter finally said, "Okay, you can stop now. You're breaking the curve."

It turned out that I was in one of three groups. And fortunately I had been put in the group where you were given a handle on the pain. The first group was told, "Put your hand in the ice water and then take it out as soon as it gets unpleasant, as soon as you can't stand it any longer." The second group was told, "Put your hand in the bucket and just try to hold it there as long as you can." And the third group was told what I was told. They gave you something to do with the pain, using your perception, using your breath, and a sense of the breath energy. They wouldn't have explained it that way, but that's what it was. And sure enough, the people in the third group could keep their hands in the ice water a lot longer than the other two.

So simply having that perception that you have a role to play in how much pain there's going to be, and how much suffering there's going to be: That gives you the confidence to face down a lot of pains that otherwise you couldn't stand.

This is what mindfulness of feelings is all about: learning how to see the intentional element in the feeling you're focusing on, and learning how to change the intentional element so that you're not suffering so much, so that you can abandon unskillful ways of dealing with feelings and replace them with more skillful ones. Instead of jumping back and forth between household grief and household joy, or householder distress and householder joy, you jump over to renunciate grief, which, as I said, is like pulling back the bow that shoots the arrow over to renunciate joy. It's what allows you to give rise not only to physical pleasure but also to mental pleasure, mental ease. Even when there are pains that you can't change, you can still have a sense of mental ease around them. This is what that second frame of reference, feelings in and of themselves, is all about.

So always keep in mind the fact you do have some control over these things, that you want to find where the control is, and that you want to maximize it for the purpose of what's skillful. That's how you bring ardency to the practice of mindfulness.

And that's how mindfulness is part of the path, because mindfulness is not just a matter of bringing bare attention to things. It's a matter of keeping something in mind. In this case, you're keeping in mind the fact that there is an intentional element in your feelings, and you can do something about it. You don't want to forget that. You've got to keep that in mind at all times. That's what you're being mindful of. When you combine that with ardency and alertness, you get closer and closer to the point where you develop renunciate joy, seeing the results of your practice, seeing that the Buddha really did know what he was talking about: that we can find a peace, a freedom, and a happiness that are deathless. These aren't just things written in books, or words in Dhamma talks. They're things you can actually find inside.

The Third Frame of Reference

October 15, 2009

One of the important skills we need to learn how to develop as meditators is how to read our own mind. This comes in the third frame of reference, keeping track of the mind in and of itself. Keeping track here means not only watching the mind, but also figuring out what the mind needs. This is the part that tends to get left out.

In other words, when the mind feels a desire for something, when it feels angry about something, when it's deluded about things, when it feels constricted, you don't just leave it there. You ask yourself: What is it lacking? This comes from the Buddha's explanation of breath meditation. As you know, those instructions come in sixteen steps divided into four tetrads, or sets of four. The third tetrad—which corresponds to the third frame of reference, the mind in and of itself—starts out by saying that you're sensitive to the mind as you breathe in and breathe out, and then you train yourself to gladden the mind, to steady the mind, and to release the mind, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. That's the active side. That's what you do in response to reading the mind and seeing what's there.

There are lots of different ways you can work with the mind. One is to work through the body. When the mind is tired, it needs to be energized. And here the breath is very helpful. What way of breathing is energizing? What feels really satisfying as the breath comes in, the breath goes out, healing the body, and through the body, healing the mind? This is an important skill. It requires that you learn how to read your breath and to notice how the breath has an effect on the mind.

This backs up a little bit into the second frame of reference, where you're aware of the process of mental fabrication. Among the mental fabricators are feeling and perceptions. This points to the fact that feeling can have an impact on the mind. If you can produce a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing, a sense of fullness in the body, that can have a nice soothing or energizing effect on the mind.

There are topics or perceptions you can think about that are also energizing, or gladdening, as the Buddha says. You can think about the

times you've been generous or virtuous. When you remember a time you were generous of your own free will, it gladdens the mind. It feels really nourishing and good. This is why it's so important that generosity not be forced. I was reading a while back someone, a monk, saying that if Buddhism was to be a good world religion, it would have to start having some good world charities. He was criticizing people who meditate for being selfish and self concerned. There's a very strong "ought" in that statement.

It's interesting the Buddha never had people say "ought" with regard to generosity. King Pasenadi once came to the Buddha and asked him, "Where should a gift be given?" And the Buddha replied, "Wherever you feel inspired." He actually made it a rule for the monks, that if someone asks them where a gift should be given, they can't say, "Give it to me." They can't say, "Give it to that person." They can't say, "Give it to this charity." What they're allowed to say is, "Give wherever you feel inspired, or you feel it would be well used, or would last a long time." The purpose of all this is to protect the act of generosity so that it's a nourishing act. It's not by struggling under a sense of obligation that you feel good about being generous. It's when you've given of your own free will. When the mind needs a certain sense of being uplifted, that's the kind of act of generosity you can look back on, and say, "Ah, yes, of my own free will, I did that." And it's energizing.

The same with the precepts. The Buddha talks about the precepts as a gift, a gift you give to all. This is why the precepts have to be precepts without exceptions. You make up your mind that you're not going to kill anybody, anything, under any circumstances. You're not going to steal anything from anybody. You're not going to engage in illicit sex with anybody. You're not going to lie to anybody. You're not going to take intoxicants at all. When you stick with that unlimited determination, the Buddha says you're giving unlimited security to all beings. When you give unlimited security to all beings, you're going to have a share in that unlimited security yourself. And the reflection that you're not harming anybody in your actions: That's nourishing. That's uplifting for the mind.

So these are some of the tools that are useful in gladdening the mind, satisfying the mind, or uplifting the mind, when you feel that it needs that kind of nourishment.

Another step in breath meditation is to steady the mind. This is for times when the mind is really scattered all over the place. What can bring it into the present moment? What can give it some ballast to keep it here? Again, the way you breathe can do this. If you find the sense of fullness in the

breath, try to maximize that. How do you breathe in a way that maintains that sense of fullness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out? Sometimes there's a tendency to squeeze the breath out, and you have to pull it back in, which depletes the sense of fullness. So instead, how about maintaining a sense of fullness all way through the in breath, fullness all way through the out, and in-between the breaths as well? If you notice any sense of squeezing, just stop. See how long you can maintain that sense of fullness. And that gets pretty riveting.

But if the mind can't help but go out thinking about this or that, if it's always making excuses for thinking about things, you can tell yourself, "Hey, what if I die tonight?" And you realize that all those plans, all those things you worry about, would have no meaning at all. So why bother with them? Or even if you don't die tonight, there's going to come a time when these things don't mean anything at all. Imagine yourself already dead and looking back at this lifetime, to see: "Am I happy that I am worried about *x* for two hours that night when I could've been meditating?" Thinking like this helps give you a sense of distance from the thoughts that disturb you.

One of Ajaan Fuang's students—an old woman who had started meditating late in life but was a very dedicated meditator—told me once that she had been sitting in meditation one night, and a voice came into her head, saying, "You're going to die tonight." And she had the presence of mind to say, "Well, if I'm going to die, let me die meditating." So she sat there with the feeling that her body was falling apart, that all the different processes were working at cross-purposes. She looked to find where she could get a sense of comfort in the breath, but there was no place in the breath, no place anywhere in the body, where she could get a sense of ease. She said it was like a house on fire: There was no place where she could stay.

But then she thought of the space element. Space wasn't affected by the turmoil in the other elements. So she focused on just thinking space, space, space and she developed a sense of space. One way to do this is to think of the different atoms in your body. They all have a lot of space in them and between them. So focus on that space and think of it spreading throughout the body, out beyond the body. She maintained that perception. Then later, as she withdrew from that, she found that everything in her body was back to normal. She didn't die. But she learned something important: When things get really bad in the body, you can go to space and just stay there with that sense of equanimity and ease.

So when you notice the mind popping around like popcorn, or even when it just has a loose fit with its meditation object, ask yourself: What's

needed here? How can you plug-in to the meditation object so that everything is nice and secure and snug? Again, this requires not only reading your mind but also figuring what you can do to bring it back into balance.

Which is also connected with the third technique that the Buddha recommends, which is to release the mind. "Release" here has many meanings. It can mean releasing the mind from unskillful mental qualities so that you can bring it into basic concentration. In other words, you release it from hindrances, from whatever worries or concerns it may have. Then as you get into concentration, how do you release it from the grosser levels of concentration to bring it to more refined ones?

This is where you begin to gain skill in using your discernment in the meditation, to sense, "Where is there any unnecessary stress in the state of mind I've got here? What can I do to drop what's causing that stress?" If the mind is filled with defilements, filled with hindrances, you can use death contemplation to bring things back into focus. Or whatever technique you've found to work with sensual desire, ill will, all the other hindrances: That's one way of releasing it.

Or when you're sitting here contemplating the breath, evaluating the breath, there comes a point where, as Ajaan Fuang says, it's like putting water into a jar: There comes a point where the jar is full, and no matter how much more water you put into it, it's not going to get any more full than that. In other words, when you realize that you've been evaluating the breath, making it nice and comfortable, there comes a point where it's not getting any more comfortable than that. There's a sense of fullness, a sense of ease, and it's not going to get any better by evaluating it. So you just allow yourself to enter into that sense of fullness to be one with the breath. You don't have to evaluate it at all. Just stay with the breath sensation as it is. As you let go of the thinking and the evaluating, you become much more snug with the breath, one with the breath. So in releasing the mind, you're also making it more steady.

There will still be a sense of rapture, but after a while the rapture becomes tiresome. So you try to focus on a more refined level of breath energy to get past the rapture. But don't be in too great a hurry to get rid of the rapture. After all, it serves its purpose, which is to energize you, to give your nourishment when you need it. But when it begins to feel tiresome, that's the time to focus on the more refined level of the breath, so that you're no longer involved in the rapture. This is another level of release.

Then as you connect all the different currents of breath energy in the

body so that they feed one another, nourish one another, you finally get to the point where you don't really need to do any in-and-out breathing at all. This is another level of release.

It's in doing these things that the Buddha says you're developing the third establishing of mindfulness based on the third frame of preference.

So this is not just a matter of noting whatever is there and then just being with whatever's there. You train yourself to figure out: "What does the mind need here? How can I bring it into a better balance? How can I provide for its needs?" Because, after all, the Buddha said the way you develop the establishing of mindfulness is through developing the noble path, and that includes all the factors of the path: right view all way through right concentration.

So this is not just a passive watching, or observing, or bare awareness. You're trying to develop every factor of the path and, in so doing, your mindfulness gets stronger. Because after all, what are you mindful of? You're mindful of the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves, but you're also mindful of the tasks that go along with the path, particularly the path of abandoning whatever is unskillful and developing whatever is skillful. You keep that in mind as well.

This means learning how to draw on whatever tools you have as a meditator. You've got to have a wide range of tools. If you were a carpenter with only a hammer, you'd never get anywhere in trying to build anything. If you were a cook who knew only how to fry things, but didn't know how to boil, didn't know how to roast, didn't know how to do any of the other techniques, you'd be a very limited cook. And the same as a meditator: You've got to have lots of techniques, lots of approaches to deal with the mind because the mind has many, many conditions, many symptoms. You gain release from them not by just sitting there watching them, but by developing the factors of the path, including right concentration, learning how to read your mind and then providing whatever it lacks.

So remember that there are lots of skills you can develop. And when you've developed them, don't forget them. It's not the case that you go from one level of concentration and then when you hit the next one, you're never going to go back to the early ones. If, when you've learned how to bring the mind to equanimity, you just stay in equanimity, you're missing out on a lot of things that you need. Things begin to run out. The mind can get depleted; the body can get malnourished in terms of breath energy. So you go back and pick up a little bit of rapture, a little bit of ease, a little bit of pleasure to give yourself encouragement.

The same old woman, the first time I met her, came out to Wat Dhammasathit the first time I ordained. One night, as she was sitting there meditating in the group, Ajaan Fuang—who would often speak up to meditators as they were meditating—said, "Hey, you're focusing too long on cool, subtle breathing. If you do that all the time, it's not going to be good for you." Here she'd been happy that she'd be able to get to that subtle level of breathing, but he said, "Look, you need to go back sometimes and give the body stronger breathing, because the body needs that. It needs to be nourished in different ways at different times." This is an important part of using your discernment in your meditation: not just sticking with whatever you think is the highest stage you can reach, but realizing that the different stages have their uses, the different levels of concentration have their uses.

So keep in mind the fact that you've got a full toolbox. Try not to forget you tools when you need them.

The Fourth Frame of Reference

March 29, 2009

Ajaan Lee often made the point that when you're focused on the breath, you don't have just the first frame of reference. You have all four right there. The breath is the body in and of itself. That's the first frame of reference. The feelings of pleasure or pain that you're encountering as you attend to the breath count as feelings in and of themselves. That's the second. As for the mind state you're trying to develop, you find that it's either defiled or not. Or as you get further into this third frame of reference, you start noticing when the mind is concentrated or when it's not; when it's expanded or enlarged, or when it's not; whether it's released or not; whether it's ever been excelled or not.

And then there's the fourth frame of reference, the dhammas. Often we don't have a real handle on how to make use of that fourth frame of reference, because it looks like little more than a list of Dhamma teachings. But it's much more than that. It's a list of different frameworks to keep in mind for dealing with problems that come up in the course of your practice. You can look at things in terms of the five hindrances, the five clinging-aggregates, the six sense media, the seven factors for awakening, or the four noble truths. Each list provides a useful framework for looking at what's actually going on in different aspects of the practice. And not just looking: They also give you guidance in what to do. These are not exercises in bare awareness, because each member of each list carries a specific duty. Once you've figured out what's happening in terms of that particular framework, you know what to do in response. You know what to do proactively.

For instance, as we're going through daily life, one of the main issues in practice is restraint of the senses. This is an area where it's good to use the framework of the six sense media. As the Buddha said in this context, when you're looking, try to notice: Where is the fetter in the looking? If you're listening, where is the fetter in the listening? And the "fetter" here is defined as a sense of passion and delight for what you're looking at, or for why you're looking. It's not always the case that a sense of delight comes up only after you've noticed something delightful. Sometimes you have a very clear

idea ahead of time of what you want to look for: You want to get riled up about something, you want to get attracted by something, so you go looking for trouble.

This is especially true with thoughts. Notice, when a thought comes up, "What's the appeal of this thought? Why do I go for this particular kind of thinking?" Once you've looked at the appeal, then look for the drawbacks. What are the drawbacks of going along with that kind of thinking? If you gave that particular kind of thinking free rein in your mind, where would it lead you? If you notice a fetter—in other words, you really are delighting in something to the point where it pulls you away from your center—don't just sit there and say, "Oh, I'm fettered," and leave it at that. You've got to do something to cut the fetter—because those fetters are the cause of suffering, which means that your duty with regard to them is to abandon them as soon as you notice them. Of course, the big problem here is that we often enjoy our fetters. We actually create them for the purpose of enjoying them. So we have to do something we usually don't like to do: to look squarely at our enjoyment and see where it's causing problems. The delight may seem pleasant and entertaining right now, but where is it going to take you down the line?

That's a framework you can use as you go through the day. And you can use it during your meditation as well. You're sitting here focusing on the breath, and all of a sudden your mind is off on something you saw last week, something you read yesterday, or something you're anticipating tomorrow. Look for the fetter. Where is the sense of passion? Where is the sense of delight in that particular thinking? What can you do to see through it to pry yourself away from that enjoyment? As the Buddha noted, the best thing is to pull yourself away from these unskillful ways of thinking and to encourage harmless ways of thinking instead. From there you direct the mind into concentration.

This is where the two frameworks of the hindrances and the factors for awakening become useful. When you sit down and try to get the mind concentrated, it's useful to figure out exactly, "What's going on here? Which hindrance is bedeviling me right now?" Once you're able to classify a disturbance as sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty, then you know what to do with it. And sometimes just recognizing it as a problem gets you over the hump.

This is because one of the characteristics of the hindrances is that they deceive you. When desire arises, your mind is usually already on the side of the desire. You don't see it as a problem. The thing you desire *really is*

something desirable. When you have ill will for somebody, that person *really is* awful. When the mind is torpid, well, it *really is* time to get some rest. It's time to sleep. The mind is getting too tired. And so on down the line. You have to learn to see these attitudes as genuine hindrances, as real obstacles on your path, and not be fooled into siding with them. Ask yourself, "What is this hindering me from?" Well, for one thing, it's hindering you from learning about the potentials of concentration. You sit here rehashing your old ways of thinking and will never get out of your old ruts.

We read about the ajaans, about the people in the Canon who gained strong states of concentration. We read about the descriptions of concentration. But what's the reality of concentration? Exactly what do those words correspond to? If you spend all your time playing around with the hindrances, you never get to know. The only way to gain direct knowledge of these things is to bring some appropriate attention to the hindrance, seeing that it's a cause of suffering. Try to look for where the stress is, look where the limitation is, to see how that hindrance is squandering your energy. And then look for ways to abandon it.

When you do this, you're developing the first three factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence. Mindfulness is what helps you remember to look for what's skillful and unskillful; analysis of qualities—which is nurtured by appropriate attention—is what enables you to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities as they arise; and persistence is what carries through with the desire to develop the skillful and abandon the unskillful ones. Analysis of qualities actually helps you in many ways. It not only recognizes what's skillful and not, but also helps you figure out how to undercut an unskillful state of mind, like a hindrance, and how to develop the remaining factors for awakening in its place. As a set, these seven factors for awakening are a good framework for figuring out how to use discernment to get the mind to settle down. In particular, you look to see that these factors are balanced. If they're not, how do you bring them into balance?

There's a sutta that compares this balancing act to getting a fire to burn at just the right level of intensity. In other words, you're trying to develop the fire of concentration, the fire of jhana, a steady flame of centered awareness. Sometimes it looks like it's about to go out because the level of energy is too low. In cases like that, you don't want to emphasize qualities like serenity, concentration, or equanimity. You want to emphasize more active qualities. Get the mind moving again. Analyze things as to what's

skillful and unskillful, and then put in whatever effort is needed to get rid of the unskillful qualities and develop the skillful ones. In taking this more active role, you can develop a strong sense of rapture, refreshment, as the skillful qualities get strengthened. This further energizes the mind. If, on the other hand, your mind is too active and antsy, that's when you try to calm it down. Go for serenity. Get the mind to focus on easing the breath, calming the breath down, working through tension in the body, until the mind gets more solid in concentration and can come to a state of equanimity and equipoise.

So, again, these frameworks of the five hindrances and the seven factors for awakening are not just guidelines for bare awareness. They're frameworks telling you what to do if you find yourself facing a particular type of mind state as you're trying to bring the mind to strong concentration. They help you get a sense of what your duty is, where you can find the path out of that particular unbalanced or unskillful state. Or if you find that you're balanced and the mind is doing fine, then your duty is to maintain it. You don't just say, "Oh, that's what concentration is like," and just let it drop from fear of being attached to it. You try to keep it going. You try to understand what causes it so that you can maintain it. This is where you try to bring in an element of willpower.

A couple of years back, I was talking to a group of people in training to become vipassana teachers. I was mentioning just this element of trying to keep the mind steady, and one of them said, "Well, it sounds like you're talking about using willpower, but I know that that can't be what you mean." And I said, "That's precisely what I mean." The element of intention is willpower, and it's something you've got to use in the practice. But you can't use just strength of will to get things done. You also have to use your understanding of cause and effect so that your use of your willpower is skillful. This is what the categories of the fourth frame of reference are for. They're there to help give you guidance, once a particular state comes up in the mind, as to what you've got to do if you really want to find true happiness. In other words, they're not just instructions in how to respond to situations. They're also instructions in how to take a proactive role in giving rise to the path.

This is even clearer in the categories of the four noble truths. You analyze things first in terms of the first noble truth—the five clinging-aggregates—to understand where's the stress here, where's the suffering here, where and how you're clinging to these things. In particular, you want to learn how to identify each of the clinging-aggregates—form, feeling,

perception, fabrication, and consciousness—as events, activities, to see what spurs them into action and how they stop. Then you try to notice how you're clinging to them, how you keep compulsively repeating them. Then you take your clinging apart. If something's disturbing your concentration, take it apart in terms of the four types of clinging: Where's the clinging? What kind of clinging is it? Is it sensual clinging? Is it clinging in terms of habits and practices? Views? Ideas of what you are or what belongs to you? Try to comprehend it—which, after all, is the duty with regard to the first noble truth.

Once you've comprehended the suffering or stress, you should be able to see where its cause is. What's causing you to cling? Where's the craving? Try to catch it happening. When you can catch it happening, the duty there is to abandon it, to stop doing it. As for whichever aspects of the path that can help you see these things, you develop them, all eight factors of the path, and particularly right concentration. This is where you get proactive.

When you've mastered concentration, the framework of the five clinging-aggregates comes in handy again. When all the factors of the path are in a good state of balance, you start analyzing the concentration in terms of the five aggregates to see where it, too, is stressful. Even the equanimity of the fourth jhana has its element of stress. You've got to look for that so you can develop dispassion all around.

This is why, when you've mastered concentration, it's useful to take these states of concentration apart in these ways. Where is feeling playing a role there? Where's the perception? Where are the thought fabrications? Where's the consciousness of this? Which aspect are you clinging to? Can you see the drawbacks of that clinging? It's helpful here to look in terms of the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, or not-self—or of any of the perceptions that help to develop a sense of dispassion. You look for the inconstancy. Once you've perceived the inconstancy, you look to see that that's stressful. When you see the stress, you realize that it can't possibly be a happiness you'd like to claim as your own. Or you learn to perceive the aggregates that make up your concentration as empty, a disease, a wound. There must be something better.

This line of perceiving, this approach, is what finally gets you past all your attachments and brings you to something really solid, something unfabricated. At that point, you can put even these strategic perceptions down, for they've done their work. You've been carrying out these skillful duties to arrive at something that doesn't carry a duty. As Ajaan Mun once said, nibbana carries no duty for the mind at all. Each of the four noble

truths entails a duty, but nibbana is something beyond the four noble truths, something outside of the framework of the four frames of reference and their attendant duties. It's not an activity in any way.

So it's helpful to look at this fourth frame of reference as a series of guidelines for action, as guidelines for your ardency. When a problem comes up, figure out which framework is useful for analyzing where you are in the practice and for pointing the practice in the direction you want to go. Learn to see what's going on in your mind in terms of these frameworks, so you can figure out what to do, what's the duty here. This helps you to step back from just being in your thought worlds and allows you to take them apart in terms of their elements: the events and activities that put them together. This in turn gives you a much better idea of what to do with them—instead of what you have been doing, which has been to cling to them and suffer.

This is how you take apart this big mass of suffering in the mind. If you learn how to take it apart, you really see it's not a solid mountain of rock. It's just a pile of gravel. And each little piece of gravel is not all that heavy. You can deal with it much more easily as a piece of gravel than as part of a solid mass of rock.

So try to familiarize yourself with these different frameworks and you'll get a much better handle on how to deal with the problems of the mind.

Right Concentration

December 27, 2007

I don't know if you've noticed when we chant the sutta, "The Analysis of the Path," as we did last night, that the longest section is the one describing right concentration. It's the only section that talks about stages in the practice. And it gives a fairly detailed map of the different elements in each stage. The question is, how do we relate to the map? It's tempting to say, well, there's this ingredient, there's that ingredient, and so you pull the different ingredients together and hope that what you've got is a state of jhana.

But it doesn't really work that way. It's like being told that durian tastes a little bit like garlic, a little bit like onions, a little bit like custard. It has a little bit of cyanide, a little bit of vitamin E. So you throw all those things together, thinking that you're going to get durian, but what you get is an inedible mess. If you want to get durian, you have to plant the seed. Here the seed is the topic of the meditation. The topic, as the Buddha said, is the four establishings of mindfulness. For example, staying focused on the body in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world: That's the process you focus on. Once you've planted the seed and keep watering the seed, the tree will grow. When it's mature, the tree will start giving fruit. If you've planted the right seed, you're going to get the right fruit. So you don't have to go designing the fruit. You just have to be very careful to plant the right seed and care for it well.

So focus on the breath in and of itself. As you're focusing on the breath, put aside any sensual passions. There's the phrase in the description of jhana, "secluded from sensuality." Some people interpret that as meaning totally cut off from any input from the physical senses. Some interpret it as meaning secluded from sensual pleasures, so that you have to meditate in a place that's unpleasant or a place that's very boring. But neither of those interpretations is what the Buddha means. Sensuality, in his sense of the word, is your passion for your sensual thoughts and plans: the extent to which you love to obsess about those things. So in being secluded from sensuality, you're not trying to close off any contact with outside senses and

you're not trying to put yourself in a dull, boring place. You're trying to develop a more internal seclusion: If you see any sensual passion coming up, you sidestep it. You put it aside.

Right here is where the analysis of the body into different parts comes in handy. If there's anything in the body that's got you lusting for it, you can think about all the other disgusting things right next to it in the body. If you're feeling some greed for food, think about the whole process of getting and eating food: exactly how much work goes into preparing the food, how short a time it actually tastes good in the mouth, and then what it's like as it goes through the digestive system and comes out the other end. In other words, you're using some thinking here to protect yourself, to pull you away from unskillful thoughts, and in particular from sensual passion.

Another way of gaining seclusion from sensuality is to fully inhabit your sense of the body. This is what *rupa*, or form, means when you're in jhana: the sense of the body as felt from within. You feel the inside of your hands, the inside of your feet, the inside of everything. The mind isn't living out in the world with its thoughts about sights or sounds or smells or tastes or things that come and touch the body. You want to be on the level of form: the body in and of itself as it's present to you right here from the inside right now. And as you're alert and mindful, you're ardent: You want to use your alertness and mindfulness in a skillful way.

In other words, notice how the breath feels and ask yourself: Is this the kind of breath sensation you could settle down and spend lots of time with? If it's not, what can you do to change it? This is where evaluation comes in. The classic image for the first jhana is of a bathman working water through his lump of bath powder and turning it into a kind of dough. Of the different images used for the jhanas, this is the only one with a conscious agent deliberately doing something and evaluating the results. You're finding a sense of pleasure and fullness with the breath, and then you deliberately work it through the body as a whole, evaluating the results as you go along.

In doing so, you learn an awful lot about this sense of the form of the body and how the energy moves through it and around it: how the energy can move in a comfortable way and how, if you force it in the wrong way, it can get very uncomfortable. You have to observe and learn what works and what doesn't. In this way you're not only developing a nice place to be in the present moment, but also learning about how the different aggregates—such as the aggregate of feeling and the aggregate of form—interact; how your perception has an effect on these things. You'll see how you come to

the meditation with specific perceptions in mind, a particular idea of how the mind focuses itself, of how the breath works, of how the energy in one part of the body relates to the energy in another part of the body. As you meditate, you get a chance to test those perceptions. If they're not working, try out other perceptions.

All of this is evaluation. When you've got the right focal point, you're evaluating it properly, and you're keeping a specific topic in mind as continually as you can, you've got all the causal factors needed to get you into right concentration. Then you don't have to think about anything else. You don't have to ask yourself, "Do I need to add a little bit more rapture, a little bit more pleasure?" If you've got the causes right, the results will come on their own. The rapture and pleasure are results. If you aren't getting the right results, focus back on the causes, which are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. When these are right, the pleasure will come as a sense of ease, whereas the rapture can come in many different forms. In some cases it's simply a sense of refreshment, of lightness or fullness in the body. Other times it's more intense: a sense of thrill running through the body, or your hair standing on end. Again, your main concern is to stick with the causes. You don't want to go out redesigning the fruit, painting the fruit, squeezing the fruit, or pulling on it. Focus on the causes, and the fruit will mature on its own.

Then there's always the question: How do you know you've hit the first jhana? You can't really know at first. It doesn't come with a sign that says, "Now entering jhana, Population One." When you find the mind in a state that feels really good, really comfortable, with a sense of coming home, then when you leave it, put a post-it note on it: This might be something important. In other words, you apply a label to it, but at the same time you realize you're not yet really familiar with the territory, so you don't want to be too quick to incise the label in marble.

The only level of jhana with a really definite signpost is the fourth, which is where the in-and-out breathing stops. There's a sense of awareness filling the body and it's all very still. The mind is still, the body is still, and everything's perfectly balanced. All the breath-energy channels in the body are connected, so they nourish one another. There's no need to breathe in and out, so there's no in-and-out breathing at all. At that point you know you've hit the fourth jhana and you can put a more confident note there. Then you can look back at the various stages you've been through, and you might have to rearrange the notes a little bit. Or you find that you've taken more than four steps coming in. There are passages in the Canon that talk

about five stages in jhana practice, others that talk about three. So it's possible that your path into the fourth jhana might not have the same number of steps as somebody else's.

I noticed that when Ajaan Fuang was teaching his students, different people would have all sorts of different experiences in the meditation until they got to the point where everything was very still in the body. The in-and-out breathing finally stopped. Breath energy was filling the body, awareness was filling the body, everything felt very connected, balanced, and very bright: not necessarily with a light, but with a sense of real clarity. Then from that point on everyone seemed to go through the same stages.

But the process of getting into that point is going to be a very individual thing. The important factor is that you find a meditation topic you really like. There's got to be an element of delight here because you're trying to develop a state of becoming, a healthy state of becoming, an alternative to the unhealthy and unskillful states of becoming you've been engaged in before. And an important component in becoming is delight. With right concentration, you have to develop a strong sense of ease and wellbeing. That's the only way to pull yourself away from the temptation to keep falling back to the sensual delight that feeds your old sensual indulgences.

The Buddha once said that even though you may have a right understanding about the drawbacks of sensuality, if you don't have access to the kind of pleasure and rapture that jhana can provide, you're always going to be tempted to go back. So mere insight on its own isn't enough to pull you away from those temptations. You need something else—something stronger and more visceral—to provide the mind with a sense of wellbeing. This is what right concentration provides.

There's a nice sutta in which the Buddha talks about a bull elephant who wants to go down to the river and bathe alone. When he lives with an elephant herd and goes down to the river, the she elephants and baby elephants bump into him. He wants to drink clear water and of course they've muddied up the river. So he decides to go off on his own. Then, as he's living alone, when he goes down to the river, the water is clear. Nobody is bumping into him as he bathes. He comes out, breaks a twig off the tree, and scratches himself with the twig. He finds satisfaction. He allays his itch.

The Buddha said that it's the same when you practice right concentration. You gain a sense of seclusion, and then the pleasure, the rapture, and the sense of equanimity are like scratching yourself with the twig. It feels good. It allays your itch. And that's an important part of the practice. Without that sense of ease and wellbeing, everything gets very dry.

At the same time, once the mind is satisfied in this way, you get to see the activities of the mind really clearly, you get to see the body really clearly, because you're right here. Very consistently here. Alert. Mindful.

Then you begin to see your body and mind in terms of the aggregates in action. You see form, i.e., the form you're inhabiting. You see feelings, the feelings that come from the different ways the breath energy moves through the body. You see your perceptions in action, your fabrications in action. For instance, when you move from the first to the second jhana, you let go of verbal fabrication, and your relationship to the breath changes. Singleness of preoccupation is a factor of all the levels of jhana, but when you get into the second jhana, the Buddha uses a new term: unification. In unification, it feels as if your awareness and the breath become one. You no longer feel like you're sitting outside of the breath kneading it through the body; you're immersed in a lake with the cool water of a spring welling up inside. You're actually one with the breath. You don't have to adjust it anymore; you don't have to evaluate it anymore. Things begin to meld together, merge together, with a sense of oneness. That oneness remains as a factor of your concentration all the way up through the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. This is what happens when you let go of the verbal fabrications of directed thought and evaluation. When you get to the third jhana, you let go of one aspect of mental fabrication—the sense of rapture—because it starts feeling gross. When you get to the fourth jhana, you let go of bodily fabrication. In other words, the in-and-out breath actually stops.

There are two ways you can observe the mind in the course of practicing jhana. One is as it's in a particular state of jhana. In fact, all the way up through the dimension of nothingness, you can observe each state while you're in it. It's like having your hand in a glove. It can be fully in the glove, partly in the glove, or totally removed. When you're fully in the higher jhanas you can't observe them, but when you're partly in them, you can. You pull the mind slightly above its full absorption—but not totally out—so that you can observe what's going on in that particular state. Another way to observe it is, as you move from one level to the next, to see different fabrications, different perceptions, just peeling away.

So you're beginning to see exactly what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about the five aggregates. You see them in action—for they *are* actions. You see the distinctions among them.

You also see how they interact, which means that you're not only in a really nice shady place with a branch that you can use to scratch yourself

anywhere you itch. You're also in an ideal place to watch what's going on right here in the present moment in terms of the aggregates. This allows you to start looking at things in and of themselves as they come into being right here, right now.

This is why right concentration is the heart of the path. It's the first element of the path that the Buddha discovered. You probably know the story. He'd gone to the extreme end of self-affliction through the various austerities he had forced himself to undergo, and after six years he realized that this wasn't working. In spite of all his investment in that particular path, he had the good sense and the humility to realize that there must be another way. So at that point he hearkened back to the time when he was a child and had entered the first jhana while sitting under a tree. The question arose in his mind: "Could this be the path?" And he said, "Yes, this is the path." So right concentration is the factor that he first realized was part of the path. From that point on, as he worked with it, he began to realize that other factors had to support it as well. But right concentration is the central one, the one you can't do without. And the time spent on developing right concentration is very well spent: both because it's a good place to stay and because it's an ideal place to start seeing the process of becoming in terms of the five aggregates.

So you keep it in the back of your mind that this is what you want in the practice, this is where you're headed as an interim goal on the path. But as with every aspect of the path, you have to combine your desire for a particular goal with an understanding of the steps that will take you there. As the Canon says, desire for awakening is a good thing. But it's a good thing only when it gets you to focus on the actual steps that will take you to awakening. And the same principle applies to jhana. You know in the back of your mind that this is where you're headed but you can't be obsessed with what's written on the map. You have to be more obsessed with the causes that will get you there. You seclude the mind from sensuality. And where do you do that? By focusing on the four establishings of mindfulness.

The Buddha says that this is your territory as a meditator. If you wander off your territory, it's like the quail who wandered away from the plowed field where he could hide from the hawk. He suddenly finds himself out in an open meadow where a hawk swoops down and catches him. As the hawk carries him off, he laments his bad fate, "Ah, I shouldn't have left my safe field. If I hadn't, this hawk would have been no match for me!" The hawk says, "Okay, I'll let you go there, but even there you won't escape me." He lets the quail go. The quail goes and stands on top of a stone turned up by

the plow and shouts to the hawk, "Okay, come and get me, you hawk. Come and get me, you hawk." And the hawk, without bragging, just folds his wings and dives down. The quail sees that the hawk is coming at him full speed and so jumps behind the stone. The hawk crashes into the stone and dies.

This is the analogy for when you wander off into sensual passions: You're out where the hawk can get you. But when you're here in the body—ardent, alert, and mindful—you're in your safe territory. Just keep inhabiting the body as you go through the day. Whether you're in jhana or not doesn't matter. As long as you have this sense of fully inhabiting the body, being in touch with the breath energy in the body, you're in the right location, you're in the proper territory. As for the map of the different stages, keep that in the back of your mind. If you look at the map while you're driving, you'll drive off the road. Use the map after you've come out of meditation to reflect on what you experienced, what happened in the course of the meditation. Over time you'll arrive at your own more complete map of the different stages the mind goes through, the different ways it settles down, the different types of concentration you can get into. But all this comes from having a proper sense of cause and effect.

This is why the Buddha put right view at the very beginning of the path: seeing the practice of meditation as a type of kamma, something you *do* to get the results that you want, with the realization that the results have to come from causes. If you focus on the causes, with the sense of where you want to go kept in the back of the mind, the causes will take you there. In this case, it's not done by focusing on your memory of what was stated in the texts about jhana. It's done by focusing on the breath, getting to know the breath by evaluating it, adjusting it, settling in. That's where you'll see right concentration.

The Uses of Right Concentration

December 2, 2014

It takes a fair amount of effort to get the mind into right concentration —so much so, that many of us don't want to hear that there's still more to be done. We'd rather stop right here and rest. But while it may be true that right concentration is the last factor of the path, that doesn't mean that right concentration by itself finishes the job. You have to bring the other factors of the path to bear on it again to carry things all the way through.

When the Buddha talks about right concentration and its seven requisites, part of the meaning of "requisite" is that you have to develop the first seven factors of the path, such as right view and right resolve, in order to get the mind into right concentration to begin with. But it also means that, once you've attained right concentration, you continue applying all seven factors to it: in particular, to further develop mindfulness and alertness, along with the right view that puts an end to all your defilements and actually gets you to the goal.

Remember that when the Buddha gave his first Dhamma talk, all he talked about in detail was right view. He mentioned the eight factors of the path but then focused just on the first factor, right view about suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. That was enough for Ven. Añña Kondañña to experience the Dhamma eye, the first level of awakening. We can assume that Añña Kondañña followed through from right view to develop the other factors of the path, too—because, after all, the Buddha said that you can't attain the first level of awakening without developing all eight factors. But Añña Kondañña's case shows how crucial right view can be.

Ven. Sariputta's was a similar one. He heard a very short verse that boiled right view down to its most basic terms—that whatever has a cause will end when the cause ends—and there he was: He experienced the deathless. We're not as sharp and as quick-witted as either of these two, so we have to put a lot more work into getting the mind into right concentration and then applying the other factors to that concentration to get the same kinds of results. That's why we have to learn about how to *use*

concentration to complete the work.

The Buddha talks about the four proper uses of concentration, or in his terms, the four developments of concentration. Some people interpret this as meaning that you have to develop four different kinds of concentration, with jhana as only one of the four, but when you look at the passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about working beyond concentration, in every case it's a matter of getting the mind into any one of the four jhanas and then working from there.

The first use for concentration is as a pleasant abiding. In other words, you get into jhana and you just stay there. You settle in. All too often at this point, when we know that there are steps beyond concentration, we get antsy and say: "Well, now that we've got the mind to settle down, what's next?" Here it's important to tell yourself, "This is what's next. Just keep on doing what you are doing so you get really familiar with it."

One of the reasons for just staying here is that you can nourish the mind in this way. The mind often comes to the practice in a very frazzled state and needs to be soothed. It needs to be strengthened. Remember that concentration, as the Buddha said, is like food. So feed your mind well because you need this nourishment to help you stick with the practice as a whole. Your ability to tap into a sense of wellbeing inside is what makes it easier to follow the precepts, easier to pull yourself out of sensual attachments, easier to do whatever is required.

So, as the Buddha often says: Settle in and *indulge* in the pleasure or the equanimity of that particular state of concentration. Learn to enjoy it. You'll find that this is something that you can really delight in. And you should try to notice that feeling of delight, because it's going to play an important role later when you use concentration to develop discernment. In the meantime, you use the delight to get good at your concentration. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, you have to be really crazy about the meditation in order to do it well. You have to be intrigued by the intricacies. Whatever gets in your way, tell yourself: "I want to figure out some way around this obstacle." Treat it as your sport, and be like someone who's really devoted to a sport, who wants to figure out and master all of the little problems and challenges, and finds that they are really engaging. You want to develop that same kind of engagement with your concentration.

The second use for concentration is for developing psychic powers. Now this, of the four uses, is the optional one—and you can't determine ahead of time that you're going to develop this power or that. These things may come, or they may not. As the Buddha says, they come when, after you've

gotten the mind into concentration, there's an *opening* onto that particular power. It might be the ability to remember your previous lives, or to read other people's minds. Or the opening may never come. A number of the forest ajaans are famous for these abilities, whereas some of them seem to have had very few. As Ajaan Fuang says, Ajaan Lee had all of them except for the ability to levitate. This had a lot to do with his kamma: The kamma was what determined whether the opening came or not. The important thing is that if the opening comes for you, you have to ask yourself: What's the best use of this? Are you going to use the power to develop unskillful states of mind such as pride and conceit, or are you going to use it to develop dispassion?

This is where the other two uses for concentration come in. The first is to use the concentration to develop mindfulness and alertness, to see how physical and mental phenomena arise and pass away. The concentrated mind is a really good place to see the arising and passing away as it's happening. Sometimes this happens while you're staying in place. Sometimes it comes from simply moving from one level of concentration to another. You notice: "Oh, something changed here." The breath changed. Your perception changed. A feeling changed, from rapture to a more easeful pleasure, or from pleasure to equanimity.

As you get the mind in and out of concentration, try to notice these changes, because this skill enables you to notice how perceptions and feelings have an impact on your sense of your body and mind. They determine how you experience the breath, how you experience your body, how you experience yourself in the context of the world. So you want to be able to notice when these perceptions and feelings come, when they go, which particular perception or feeling has replaced an earlier one. Then you begin to notice other things about perceptions and feelings as well: When a particular perception is in your mind, what level of stress or disturbance accompanies it in the mind? Or in the body? When a particular feeling of pleasure comes, is it good for the mind or not?

When the Buddha talks about what he calls the entry into emptiness, you start out with a very normal state of mind: the mind that has left the village, has gone into the wilderness, and settles into a perception of "wilderness"—like what we're doing right now. We're sitting out here, surrounded by the chaparral, surrounded by quiet. You can think back to when you were home, with your family and friends. The mind was a lot more disturbed then. Now you're here, away from them. What's the difference? If you wanted to, you could dig up the issues you've had with

your family, you could still chew them over like a dog with a bone, but you don't. You can hold another perception in mind: that you're here, away from those things. They don't loom so large any more, and the mind is a lot lighter as a result. Right there you see the difference between the perception that tells you that you're among these people and that their issues are important, and the perception that you're away from them and the issues are not so important at all. These perceptions have a different impact on the level of disturbance in your mind.

So the perceptions don't just come and vanish like lines drawn in the water. They have an impact. You want to see that, so that you get a sense of which perceptions are skillful and which perceptions are not, by watching their coming and going, along with the rise and fall in stress that results from their coming and going. This, the Buddha said, is what helps foster mindfulness and alertness.

The final use of concentration goes deeper than that: You use the concentration to put an end to the mental effluents of sensuality, becoming, and ignorance. To do that, you want to see the origination and the passing away of the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness. On the surface this may sound like the same sort of thing as developing mindfulness and alertness, but the word "origination" here signals something different. It points not to the fact that things come and go, but to the fact that they come *because of a reason.* That's the meaning of "origination," and the origination of the aggregates is the delight you take in them. It's because we delight in form, for example—we want form, we want to have this experience of the body—that we take the potentials for form, coming from our past kamma, and turn them into an actual experience of form. Whatever potential there is to augment that experience and to verify it, we go for it. We turn it into an actual experience. The same with feelings: We want feelings. And perceptions: We want to have perceptions. We want to be able to label and identify things. And there's a certain delight in all of this. The delight is what drives us to fabricate these things again and again. This applies to all of the aggregates. We fashion them into real experiences because we delight in them and in the process of fashioning and fabrication that we use to make them into something.

Where do you see this most clearly? In your own state of concentration. It's the same concentration, the same jhana you've been practicing, but now you're looking at it from a different angle and with a different purpose. You're trying to figure out how you fabricate it so that you can find something that's even better than the jhana, something that provides a

happiness that doesn't have to be fabricated. So you apply perceptions—such as the perception of inconstancy, stress, or not-self—that dig out the delight that you find in the various aggregates as they make up the concentration: the form of the body; the feeling of pleasure or equanimity; the perceptions that hold you with the breath, or with space, or whatever the object may be; whatever verbal fabrications there may be around that, commenting on the concentration; and the consciousness of all these things. You apply the perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to question the delight that you take in these aggregates that you're fabricating into jhana. Are they really worth it?

Now if your concentration isn't strong enough, then when you use this analysis, your concentration will fall apart and you'll be back in an ordinary mind state. Or you may slip into another level of concentration. But if your concentration *is* strong enough, things fall apart in a different way. You realize: There must be something other than these fabricated states. The mind then turns toward not creating anything new. You don't want to stay where you are, but you don't want to go anywhere else, either, because that would be fabricated, too. You see that whatever activity or place you're going to create for the mind to stay just ends up with more of these aggregates. So how about something that's not created? Is that possible? And if things come together right, if the opening happens, you find that, Yes, it is possible. Everything fabricated falls apart and fades away. The Buddha was right. There really is an unfabricated, unconditioned happiness.

Of the different uses for concentration, this last is the most important, because it's what actually takes this last factor of the path and moves it on to the goal. That was the Buddha's whole purpose in using this image of a "path": It leads to something beyond the path. It has a goal that's different from the path. Don't believe people who say that the path is the goal, or that the path leads to right view. When they say that, it's a sign that they haven't experienced the goal. We don't practice for the sake of right view, or for the sake of right concentration, or for no sake at all. We fabricate and use these things as steps toward a goal that lies beyond them: the deathless, total freedom from fabrication, from suffering and stress. This is what makes everything else in the path, all the effort that goes into fabricating and mastering all the factors, worthwhile.

The Buddha doesn't talk much about the goal. After all, it's not something you can create, so there's no point in describing it too much, for otherwise you might try to take the description and clone it, which doesn't work. He talks about the goal just enough to make you understand that it's

worth pursuing: the ultimate happiness, the ultimate freedom, totally outside of any physical or mental location in space or time. As he says, if you hold to a perception that the goal might be accompanied by any kind of suffering or regret, drop that perception. Don't listen to it. The deathless is totally satisfying and ends all your hungers. Once your hungers are satisfied, that solves all your other problems as well.

That's where this path is going. And it's the right path. Right view is right view; right resolve is right resolve; all the factors are right all the way down the line. They're right, not because the Buddha said they were right, but because they actually work, in the same way that, if you want milk, squeezing a cow's udder is the right way to get milk out of the cow. It gives you the results you want. If you try to get milk by squeezing the cow's horn, it's wrong—because it doesn't work. Right and wrong are really two different things because they give different results.

And the path is really noble—because it takes you to a goal that's noble: something not touched by aging, illness, or death. As the Buddha said, there are two kinds of search. There's the search for happiness in things that can age, or grow ill, and die. That's the ignoble search. And then there's the noble search for the things that lie beyond aging, illness, and death. Because the goal is noble, it makes the search noble. The path that succeeds in taking you there is noble as well.

When you put all the factors together properly, you become a noble person. But at that point you don't really care whether you're a noble person or not, because you've found something that's even more valuable than trying to figure out who you are, or what you are, or how you rank with regard to other people. Ajaan Suwat had a nice comment about this. He said that the whole issue of self and not-self becomes totally irrelevant when the goal is reached. You use the perception of self skillfully to fabricate the path to find happiness. You use the perception of not-self to develop the dispassion needed to remove any desire to keep on fabricating experiences, so that there can be an opening to the unfabricated. But once there's an opening to that deathless dimension, you drop all perceptions, and there's the ultimate happiness. At that point, you don't worry about whether or not there's a self experiencing it or no self experiencing it, because the experience is there. And that's all you need.

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Bhava: Becoming. The act of taking on an identity in a particular world of experience. Becoming can occur on a macro level—as when one takes on a new physical and mental identity after death—or on a micro level, within the mind. There are three levels of becoming, on the levels of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action. (2) A phenomenon in and of itself. (3) Mental quality. (4) Doctrine, teaching. (5) Nibbana (although there are passages in the Pali Canon describing nibbana as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *dharma.*

Jhana: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion. Sanskrit form: *dhyana.*

Kamma: Intentional act. Sanskrit form: *karma.*

Khandha: Aggregate; heap; pile. The aggregates are the basic building blocks of describable experience, as well as the building blocks from which one's sense of "self" is constructed. There are five in all: physical form, feeling, perception, thought-fabrications, and consciousness. Sanskrit form: *skandha*.

Luang Puu (Thai): Venerable Grandfather; a title for an elderly and very respected monk.

Nibbana: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *nirvana.*

Pali: The name of the earliest extant canon of the Buddha's teachings and, by extension, of the language in which it was composed.

Sutta: Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra.*

Upasika: Lay female disciple.

Vipassana: Insight.

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