The Contemplative's Craft

Internalizing the Teachings of the Buddha

Ajahn Viradhammo

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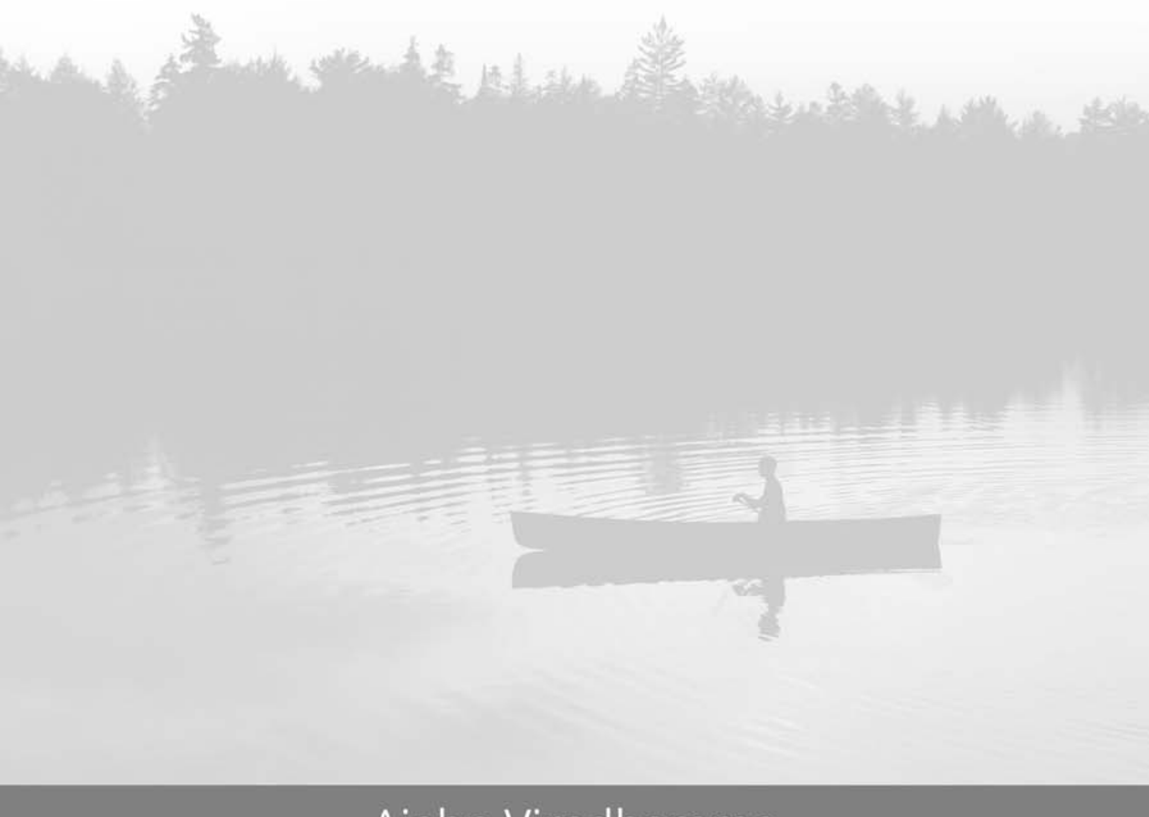

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Tisarana Buddhist Monastery

The Contemplative's Craft: Internalizing the Teachings of the Buddha
by Ajahn Viradhammo

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Dedication

This collection of teachings is dedicated
with deep gratitude to my parents and to my teachers,
Venerable Ajahn Chah and Venerable Ajahn Sumedho.

In Commemoration

This electronic edition of *The Contemplative's Craft*
is offered in commemoration of
Ajahn Viradhammo's seventieth birthday
on April 27th, 2017.

Bāhusaccañca sippañca,
Vinayo ca susikkhito;
Subhāsitā ca yā vācā,
Etaṃ maṅgalam-uttamaṃ.

Accomplished in learning and skillful in craft,
With discipline highly trained,
And speech that is true and pleasant to hear:
Great indeed are these blessings.

From the Mangala Sutta [Sutta-Nipāta 2.4 {Snp 263}]

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Preface

In the succeeding pages, we're invited to read some reflections from Ajahn Viradhammo on the practice of Dhamma. For myself, and I hope for you, there will also be the experience of hearing his voice, and even being in his presence. It's a warm voice, and a presence that supports the Way out of suffering, or *dukkha.* Perhaps when these teachings are carefully considered and put into practice, that Way becomes clear and the heart can be guided into openness and peace.

I think there's a good chance of that, mostly because what is presented here are some of the cardinal teachings of the awakened Buddha, a person who is widely acknowledged for his deep wisdom and compassion. But also it's because this particular presentation comes from Ajahn Viradhammo, a man of this age who has given himself fully to the Buddha's Path for over forty years. More than reading or lecturing on it, he has lived in the Buddha's Way—the Dhamma-Vinaya. And his voice is of this age, easily understandable, down-to-earth, and rich with humor and anecdotes.

Ajahn Viradhammo is a Canadian, currently abbot of Tisarana Monastery near Perth, Ontario. He went forth as a bhikkhu in Thailand, but has spent over thirty-five years working to establish monasteries in Britain, New Zealand, and Canada, as well as teaching retreats for the general public. His initial training was under Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho—the former a Thai, the latter an American—who are both renowned as outstanding Dhamma Masters in the contemporary Theravada Buddhist world. And his ongoing learning is through living the life of a bhikkhu in the West and dealing mindfully with what comes up. To live in that way for decades takes resolution and skill.

For my long-lasting welfare, I have lived alongside Ajahn Viradhammo and benefited from his example during the time we spent together in Britain. I hear his voice quite clearly in the following pages, and it gathers me into the presence of a living tradition of good and noble people. What a blessing! As when you are invited to sit alongside a potter, a carpenter, or a calligrapher and watch what they do, and how they do it, you gain something from being in the presence of such skillful contemplatives that you won't get from study.

Although what we are holding in our hands is a collection of words, this is not an academic book. It's a book to spend time with, and even read out loud and listen to. It contains the words of a craftsman. In our monastic fellowship, Ajahn Viradhammo is known as such. He has intelligent and careful hands. Craftsmanship, in terms of sewing robes, weaving rattan, and fashioning wood into monastic accouterments, is a respected aspect of the training of a bhikkhu in our lineage. It lessens the tendency to self-obsess and theorize—pitfalls for a meditator. And it supports the expression of a beauty that is both calming and sensible. Recently, Ajahn took to weaving and I am currently in possession of a rug that he wove for me. The colors are quiet, the pattern subtle and simple; it is a solid piece of work, crafted with care and attention, and then given away.

This is the way that Ajahn Viradhammo works, lives, and teaches. This book is a further example of that. Herein you are given the fibers of the Buddha's teachings and guided on how to weave them step-by-step into a raft heading for liberation. That journey can take you deep and reveal places in the heart that are anguished or numb, but on it you are offered the know-how, companionship, and compassion that you need. So although no one can take you to liberation, craftsmen like Ajahn Viradhammo can show you how to build your raft—and give you the confidence to sail it. May your journey be under clear skies!

Ajahn Sucitto

Cittaviveka Monastery, 2014

Acknowledgments

Transcribing the spoken word into written text and then refining those words into a book format involves a range of skills and surprisingly many hours of dedicated work. So it is with these fourteen talks that have been so diligently crafted into book form. As is often the case with any effort that involves many people, something is created that is greater than the sum of its individual parts. In this communal effort, we are rewarded both by the deepening of friendships and by a result that is greater than the vision of one person. My sincere thanks go out to many people for their enthusiasm and interest in bringing forth this book of Dhamma reflections.

First, I wish to express my gratitude to Ven. Atulo, Adrienne Jordan, and Philip Jurgens for painstakingly transcribing the talks that make up this book. I also wish to thank Lisa Gorecki, Philip Jurgens, and Richard Smith for their skill and patience in editing the transcribed manuscript. My appreciation also goes to Ajahn Sucitto, Ajahn Pavaro, and Jim Bedard, who carefully reviewed the book's Dhamma content, as well as to Marko Kezele, who graciously gave of his time in designing the book's cover. And my thanks to Curtis Breslin, Rachna Gilmore, and Andre Vellino for their scrupulous proofreading work, and to Tāvaro for his artful layout design for this collection of talks. Finally, I would like to extend my gratitude to the Kataññuta group of Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia, which has generously funded this book for free distribution.

1

Connection and Alienation

Based on an evening talk given at Tisarana Monastery in February 2008.

An essay by a friend entitled “The Face of Wonder,” had me contemplating wonder and its significance in life. I started to reflect on the time when I was walking near my mother’s home in Ottawa and suddenly saw a dozen pigeons sitting on a telephone line. The sky that day was very clear, very sunny, and very blue. The pigeons were all puffed up to stay warm—it’s quite clever the way birds do that. So there was this lovely image of a row of puffy pigeons perched against this deep blue background. Ah! It was one of those moments when a sense of wonder arises. The mind stops, and there’s just *this*. There’s only the way things are, just as they are in that moment, without any analysis or mental comment. I like to think of this as “connection.”

We might also consider the opposite of connection: alienation. There are many kinds of alienation. A more blatant kind of alienation is when a refugee experiences a sense of not belonging, of being out of place, of not being connected. But there are also more subtle types of alienation or separateness. When we’re daydreaming or fantasizing, we’re not connected to the way things are. We’re just lost in the habits of our emotions and of our thinking mind. It’s rather like the habit of needing to eat junk food. The habit itself comes from a place of non-peace and the final result is not nutritious. Unfortunately, it stimulates and strengthens a desire to consume more junk food. As the ad goes: "Bet you can't eat just one."

Just think about the hindrances to meditation: dullness, worry, aversion—they're all disconnections. They aren't connected to life as it is. When we're lost in drowsy, foggy states, obsessive worry states, or judgmental, critical states, that's not being connected to the present moment, is it? More to the point, these are states of *dukkha*, which is the Pali term for stress, unease, unsatisfactoriness, or suffering. So we might say that alienation adds to our suffering, whereas connection diminishes our suffering.

It might be helpful to think about how connection can take place. Let's say there's a little old lady crossing a very busy street. For an old person whose eyesight isn't so good and who moves slowly, the simple task of crossing a busy street at the traffic light can be quite challenging. This simple act can produce a lot of anxiety. So imagine that you're out walking and all of a sudden you see this little old lady's predicament, and you think, "Oh, that's so difficult for her." Your own personal concerns and mental wanderings fall away and suddenly you're connected. So compassion is one way of being connected. Or perhaps the situation is more joyous. For example, you're waiting in an airport lounge and you notice a loving family heading out on what might be some adventure. The genuine laughter and warm interactions of the children and parents touch you, and you smile at their good fortune. You're happy for their happiness. Again, without any analysis or mental comment, you're connected through appreciative joy.

In so many ways, life offers us a mode of being—whether it be wonder, compassion, or appreciation—that's not self-serving and narcissistic. As we bring to mind these "Ah!" moments of connection, we can begin to cultivate the heart in such a way that these experiences of connection aren't merely the accidents of circumstance, but rather the results of our own aspirations and intentions. So how do we transit from alienation to connection? What bus gets us from "A" to "C"? Well, if the means condition the ends, then we have to start with connection. Therefore, our first task is connecting to the way things are. We do this by being awake, present, and mindful. Let's say I come to the morning chanting and I'm feeling grumpy and uninterested. Because I'm feeling this way, I don't like the sound of the chanting, which strikes me as too slow. I'm now critical of the monks and novices and so on.

If I'm not aware that this is simply a passing mood of the mind I'm identified with and not any ultimate reality, I fall victim to the mood and suffer. This is alienation. If, on the other hand, I think that I shouldn't be this way and I start feeling guilty, I also suffer. This too is alienation. But if I simply allow myself the time to be aware that this is just a mood and it will change, I'm once again connected to life. Consequently, the first step on the path from alienation to connection is becoming aware of how a mood begins, is maintained, and ceases according to causes and conditions. Awareness is thus the initial step on the path to connection.

However, things don't stop there. Let's imagine that I'm feeling quite annoyed at someone. For me to be truly connected to life as it is, there would have to be an awareness as well as a profound acceptance of that upwelling of anger. To accept something profoundly, you have to feel it in a pre-verbal way. You can't simply have a kind of commentary up in the brain saying, "I know I'm feeling a bit off." Instead, you have to experience the mood in a wholehearted way, noting how it feels in the body: that's connection. When you stay connected throughout the life of that mood—for a minute, an hour, a day—the sense of alienation can't get a footing because the seemingly endless inner dramas aren't being fueled. This is staying connected to the Dhamma of change. Being connected to the Dhamma of change means you're aware of the objects that enter consciousness from the time they arise until the time they cease. This kind of sustained connection is the bus from "A" to "C."

As you practice being aware of objects (such as moods) from the time they arise until the time they pass away, you develop insight. You begin to realize that it's not pleasant to attach to objects that are constantly changing. So you stop holding on to them. When you stop attaching to these objects, they lose their capacity to overwhelm you. For instance, you might be very inspired by something, such as a heroic story of adversity, a profound and moving insight, or a generous gesture from a stranger. You feel that inspiration, but you also realize that it's only a movement through consciousness, something that arises and ceases. So while we can still appreciate inspiration, we don't attach to it. We don't let it become something that drags us into disappointment as the emotional charge of that initially pleasant feeling inevitably peters out. Inspiration doesn't drag us into disappointment because we're now connected to something deeper: a clear understanding that anything that comes also goes.

Practicing awareness therefore means staying connected to the way things are. So we ask ourselves, "How do I stay connected to the way things are?" This is a helpful way to ponder our practice because it doesn't require that we have a certain quality of experience. In other words, staying connected to the way things are doesn't mean that we always need to be happy or compassionate or like everything that's going on. If we simply stay connected to the way things are, there isn't any kind of qualitative judgment about who we are or what we should be experiencing. That's a relief, isn't it?

If we keep practicing in this way, we have the potential to connect to a sense of wonder. But this may not always seem possible, especially when we're in the midst of experiencing something very uncomfortable. However, if we just stay with the way things actually are, we begin to detach from our perceptions about the way things should be. When we detach from our perceptions about the way things should be, that whole egotistical side of us that has the strong sense of "self and other" is being put aside. That's when we can begin to feel a sense of wonder as we connect in a more vivid, direct, and heartfelt way to the world around us.

But we can't just create wonder by desiring it, can we? Go out there and create wonder! If we think to ourselves, "I'm going to create wonder," we can't do it because it doesn't work that way. And we can't generate a sense of wonder by trying to get rid of things. For instance, we don't want negative states of mind, so we try to get rid of them. When we do that, we block our innate capacity for wonder and connection, which are totally accepting. In fact, they go against the grain of the desire to reject or get rid of something. It's desire that creates alienation and takes us away from the way things are. On the other hand, connection—or the recognition and acceptance of things however they are, attractive or unattractive, appealing or unappealing—grounds us in the reality of the way things are. That grounding is what leads to wonder, because you—with all the likes and dislikes attached to "you-ness"—are getting out of the way. That's the odd thing about non-attachment: non-attachment is actually connection.

In the English language, we have the word "detached." As meditators, we may be tempted to think, "I should be detached." But it's not that simple. If you push away an emotion you don't like or if you blame yourself for experiencing it, you become more attached to it. Conversely, when you're open and connected to the way things are, to the impermanence of all conditioned things, non-attachment arises naturally.

On meditation retreats, you sometimes have to sit through some really awful memory patterns. You can have a day on the cushion when all these negative emotions keep coming up. When that happens, we can think we're having a terrible retreat. Then the next day, the mind is just empty. At that point we think, "Well, why can't I just do the empty bit?" We don't see that the two things are linked, and that the act of bearing witness to those painful emotions without getting caught up in their drama leads to their falling away. That's how our potential for wonder comes into being. Now our attention is freed up to notice the beauty or goodness in the world, or whatever it is that fills us with a sense of awe or gratitude.

That sense of wonder and connection is based on the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path factor of right effort. Right effort, which seeks to cultivate wholesome qualities and abandon unwholesome qualities, is grounded in an awareness of the way things are. As such, right effort is attentive, investigative, and focused on cause and effect. For instance, if a complaining mind-state arises, we make a point of being aware of it and accept that it's there. That's the attentive part of right effort. Once we're aware of that mind-state, we can then shift our focus from the narrative in the brain down to the feelings of the mind-state in the body. That's the exploratory part. Finally, we notice the effect that changing our focus in this way has on the mind. If we find that this shifting of our focus helps to keep us from getting caught up in our moods and storylines, then we can regard it as skillful and choose to cultivate it. That's the part of right effort that explores cause and effect.

Wrong effort is quite different. Wrong effort is grounded in a lack of awareness. For, example, if we instinctively try to do away with a complaining mind-state by thinking, "I shouldn't feel this way. I'm such a bad person," we're oblivious to what's actually happening. Wrong effort also manifests as heedless reactivity. We latch onto a thought as soon as it arises without exploring whether or not we're acting skillfully. A final result of this grasping and subsequent reactivity is that we're unaware of whether we're making our state of mind better or worse by acting in this way, which means that we've failed to notice cause and effect at work.

Noticing and accepting negative states of mind is something we can learn to do. In fact, learning to look at negative states of mind by being aware of them and staying with them is a very good habit to develop. As we train in watching the restless mind in everyday life, we experience a sense of acceptance, a sense of connection. By using acceptance as the basis for our practice, we can then pick up other practices in a skillful way. For example, if we have an attitude of acceptance when it comes to the restless mind, we can use the breath as a skillful means by which to calm the mind without falling into a willful need to control it.

When contemplating the desiring mind and the accepting mind, it can be useful to reflect on the Four Noble Truths. The second of the Four Noble Truths states that the attachment to craving is the cause of suffering. The Third Noble Truth maintains that the abandonment of craving is the cessation of suffering. In a sense, acceptance is the abandonment of craving. Acceptance doesn't involve fighting or trying to analyze anything; instead, it comes from knowing, "Right now, it's like *this*." However, there can be a lot of struggling leading up to that sense of acceptance. We can get completely caught up in the stress of trying to get rid of this and trying to become that. When we get caught up in this way, we should stop and ask ourselves, "What does this feel like right now?" At that point, we can become reconnected to the way things are.

I once met someone who had just been through a divorce. Feeling extremely lonely one day, this person went out for a coffee. In the coffee shop, there were four people with kids, all laughing and enjoying themselves, and a young couple completely engrossed in each other. Needless to say, this individual felt even more lonely and alienated. Of course, what this person was doing was projecting an unsustainable ideal of perfect companionship onto those other people. There was no recognition of the fact that each person in the coffee shop—from the children to the young couple—was experiencing a mood that wouldn't last. This person also failed to realize that the feeling of loneliness is not unique to one person, and that those other people would, at some point, also experience loneliness.

It's one thing to feel lonely; but it's quite another thing to be identified with the feeling of loneliness to the extent that we build up a sense of self around it. Being the lonely person is alienation, whereas really getting in touch with the experience of loneliness is connection. And those continue to be our choices: connection or alienation. We can learn to see moods and feelings for what they are (i.e., not-self), or we can construct a strong sense of self around them by clinging to them.

Imagine that this person had employed a different strategy: instead of going to the coffee shop to feel less lonely, they had gone there to observe loneliness in themselves and in other people. This doesn't happen too often, does it? Feelings like loneliness can make us look for distractions. Or they can make us project all of our needs and aspirations for overcoming our loneliness onto other people in an unrealistic way. When we're enmeshed in our experience of loneliness, we tend to see wonderful qualities in other people that just aren't there—or at least they're not there all the time. And when we project onto other people in this way, we can become disappointed in them. We can think that they aren't what they're supposed to be, even though they never promised us they'd be a certain way. This behavior is pretty common when we're seeing others from the perspective of alienation. Our perceptions about them aren't coming from our being in touch with how they really are.

I've been describing how a sense of wonder and connection stems from our ability to be aware and accepting. But if we think that we're practicing these things in order to feel wonder and connection all the time, then that would just be another desire mode we're getting caught up in. As humans, we have the profound possibility of touching a deeply silent and compassionate way of being quite naturally. So when we sit in meditation for an hour, we're engaged in a very deliberate exercise in connection. As Ajahn Chah would say: "If your meditation makes you peaceful, accept it. If your meditation doesn't make you peaceful, accept it." It's not the quality of the experience that counts, but rather our being connected to the experience. This acceptance I'm referring to is not simply an intellectual action. Staying connected is an attitude you bring to life.

Of course, it can be challenging trying to remain receptive to a difficult experience. Much of my early monastic life involved sitting around waiting—waiting for the meal to start, waiting for the food to come out, waiting for Ajahn Chah to come out, waiting for Ajahn Chah to stop talking, waiting for the food to be passed out, waiting for the chanting to end, and worst of all, waiting for the monk in front of me to start eating. That was torture!

I was a rather greedy little novice stationed at the end of a line of fifty people. When we sat down to eat, there were two rows of monks, with Ajahn Chah in the center. The etiquette stated that you wouldn't start eating until the person senior to you had started.

Being the last of fifty monks isn't so good! The greedy mind was focused on the food. Then, inevitably, you would have an ascetic young monk sitting just senior to you who was going to contemplate his food a little longer before taking a bite. I could have strangled him! But I just had to wait. Meanwhile, the mind is saying, "This is a waste of time. Let's get on with it!" Just sitting and waiting was excruciating, and yet it was very good training because you had to surrender to the situation. There was nothing negative happening, and certainly there wasn't a problem if you didn't make it a problem. Yet the mind would make it a problem by becoming critical and judgmental.

What to do? When the mind becomes critical and judgmental, we just stay with that experience and wait. That capacity to simply wait goes against the impulses of the controlling mind, the desiring mind, the repressive mind, the judgmental mind, the impatient mind. It goes against the mind that wants to fix the situation or get rid of it. Oftentimes, this mind doesn't give us a chance to allow an experience to come to us so that we can learn from it. This is especially true if what's coming up seems to be ugly, negative, unpleasant, or difficult. So we make the effort to develop the patience and determination to just be with these difficult states of mind. There doesn't seem to be much of a payoff when you're enduring a challenging state of mind, but it's actually building a foundation for peace. It's laying the foundation for a calm, connected mind.

In this way, we learn to endure impatience, and that's transformative. We recognize the impatience, we watch it, and eventually it falls away. We do the same with restlessness and all of the other hindrances. We sense these things when they're coming up, but we're just with them, rather than willfully repressing them. We breathe with them and accept them. We accept them again and again.

So, do contemplate connection and alienation. Contemplate how they work in the mind. Contemplate the meaning of letting go into a sense of wonder. Contemplate the sense of stillness and emptiness that results from that. Exploring these important ideas will help us in our quest to know peace.

Cetovimutti

2

Making the Dhamma Our Own

In Buddhism, we gain a type of experientially acquired knowledge that grows in our hearts through what we call “practice.” We use the word “practice” in Buddhism much more than we use the word “belief.” We don’t say to each other: “How’s your belief going?” Instead, we ask, “How’s your practice going?” It’s a different way of learning.

Some of our Sri Lankan friends studied Buddhism as a subject in high school. Here in the West, you might decide to take a course in Comparative Religion to learn about it. When you learn about Buddhism’s history and its various beliefs through formal study, you end up with an academic knowledge of Buddhism. You might even get an A+ on the final exam; but then when you arrive home, you get into a furious argument with your brother. Although you have what’s called an “explicit knowledge” of Buddhism that’s easily shared with others, it hasn’t helped to liberate you, has it?

Intellectual learning gives us intellectual knowledge. Having an intellectual knowledge of Buddhism is akin to memorizing instructions on how to cook rice. Just because we’ve read or memorized the instructions doesn’t mean we’re going to be successful at cooking rice. To put it simply, we won’t really know how to cook rice until we’ve done it ourselves. To be successful at it, we need to put into practice the knowledge we’ve gained.

This second, more experiential way of learning is called "implicit learning," which gives us "implicit knowledge." Implicit knowledge is not the kind of superficial information that we can jot down on an examination paper as a result of having memorized it. It's much deeper and harder to put into words than that. Implicit knowledge is something we learn for ourselves through practice, through trial and error. Implicit learning involves a particular type of process for acquiring knowledge. For example, we might read a set of instructions and then want to apply them. So we proceed to try to follow the instructions in real life, but then discover that things aren't working out well. Consequently, we go back and reread the instructions to figure out what we may have done wrong. Eventually, there's that "Aha!" moment when we're able to carry out the instructions successfully. But to reach that point, we have to keep putting the instructions into practice until we get things right.

Right Understanding

We develop insight into the Dhamma, or the truth of the ways things are, in the same way: through the implicit knowledge we acquire through practice. To live our lives in accordance with the Dhamma, we have to understand certain ideas, just as we have to understand the cooking instructions on the packet of rice before attempting to make the rice. The ideas that we first need to grasp include that of impermanence, causality, the cause of suffering, and so on. We achieve this preliminary understanding by taking up the Buddha's teachings and asking, "What do they really mean?" We have to ponder them and work through them. When we use the intellect in this way to study the Buddha's teachings, we begin to establish what we call "right understanding" (*sammā-diṭṭhi*), which is the first part of the Noble Eightfold Path. Right understanding is the deep understanding of the Dhamma that we acquire from reflecting on the teachings of the Buddha, and then applying them to our own lives.

So gaining an intellectual comprehension of the Buddha's teachings from studying or reading books about Buddhism is the beginning of the process of developing right understanding. Then you can begin to make an effort to bring your energies, personal narratives, and habits in line with the Buddha's teachings. It's important to bear in mind that the intellectual knowledge we've acquired about Buddhism isn't meant to be left as just a set of interesting ideas. What would be the benefit of that? Therefore, we try to apply our understanding of the teachings to our lives. As we do this more and more, different types of insights into the truth of the way things are start to arise that are very personal; they represent the kind of implicit knowledge we've been talking about. For instance, the First Noble Truth asks us to understand suffering not just intellectually, but as a concrete, lived experience. Thus we are being asked to patiently observe the various forms of discontent that arise in our mind until we have gained an intuitive understanding of the nature of our inner stress and conflict.

As your practice deepens, the implicit knowledge you attain into the nature of what-is becomes even more profound. And even if you can't articulate this knowledge, you certainly have it. You have it because you've done the work of observing your inner world, which has enabled you to glean insights into the workings of your mind. After all of that trying and making of mistakes and then trying again, you've had some success, which gives you confidence. You think, "I know this way of inner reflection works." And if someone says to you, "That's a load of rubbish," you think, "That's OK because I know this works." You've seen the results for yourself. You've had some deep insights into the causes of human suffering and how you can begin to let go of them.

Right Intention

Without insight into how things really are, life can appear to be little more than a series of random experiences of suffering from which we're constantly trying to escape. But as our understanding and implicit knowledge of the Dhamma become more profound, we begin to make the Dhamma truly ours. Rather than viewing it merely as intellectual knowledge or as something belonging exclusively to the Buddha or the monks, we start to "own it," as they say in modern parlance. When we begin to make the Dhamma our own, it conditions the way we create our intentions. This brings us to the second part of the Noble Eightfold Path, called "right intention" (*sammā-sankappa*). Right intention is very far-reaching in that it refers to the entire inclination of your life: how you're thinking and how you're approaching this craft of living your life.

Let's go back to right understanding for a moment. Right understanding, in the way that I've been talking about it, means that you've acquired implicit knowledge about how to work with negative habit patterns. You've gained this knowledge through studying the Buddha's teachings and then making an effort to bring those negative habit patterns into accord with them. That implicit knowledge is your right understanding. And right understanding ensures that your thinking mind will be in line with the Dhamma when those unskillful habit patterns come up again. Say, for example, you have a colleague at work who really annoys you. If you have right understanding in regard to your annoyance, then when your co-worker starts to bother you, your thinking mind will remind you to "Be mindful. Be careful," or "Pay attention to the body." There's a thinking process going on that isn't random, impulsive, or reactive.

This kind of experientially acquired knowledge is what leads to right intention. As you gain implicit knowledge into the way your mind works as a result of applying the Buddha's teachings, your mind begins to incline in new directions. It now inclines towards renunciation, harmlessness, and goodwill towards oneself and others. So how might I set a right intention? Let's say that I begin to notice that I'm habitually critical and judgmental of myself and others. Because I realize how much suffering this creates, I make an intention to notice the arising of these recurring judgments and then give up that behavior. So with applied attention and intention, which are based on my insights and the desire to be free from suffering, I slowly abandon my unskillful habits and acquire more skill in living a truly wholesome life.

Setting the right intention, however, doesn't necessarily mean that the follow-through will be easy. Some things have very simple instructions, but are extremely hard to do. For instance, if you have diabetes, your recommended diet is quite strict: no high-sugar or high-carb foods, and so on. The instructions are easy enough—just don't eat the things you're not supposed to; but following them is more difficult. While it's usually fairly obvious what your path of skillful conduct should be, something inside of you often resists following it. Take self-disparagement, for example. I talk a lot about that because people ask me about it and I suffer from it, too. Simply put, if you want to stop being self-disparaging, just be kind to yourself. The instructions are straightforward, but our habits can be exceedingly hard to break.

Despite having clear insights into how to deal with our difficult habit patterns, we're still up against the forces of kamma—or the consequences brought about by our intentional actions of body, speech, and mind—which, if unwholesome, can keep us at least temporarily snarled in the energies of greed, hated, and delusion. For instance, the mind can get deluded around certain areas of our lives. If we see that we're repeatedly falling back into old modes of suffering, then there's something we haven't fully understood yet, there's some aspect of the Dhamma we haven't truly made our own. So we need to keep trying to see why we're succumbing to these modes of suffering until insight arises. This persistence in wanting to understand is very important because it's those areas where we get most caught up in suffering that provide us with the richest opportunities for developing our capacity to let go. Like it or not, these difficult areas are our teachers.

Let's take road-rage as an example. If I typically suffer from road-rage, it's likely that I'll eventually see how harmful and futile this form of behavior is, and then begin to shift my attitude in the direction of equanimity and patience with the way things are while driving. In our practice, we're continually trying to understand the structures of suffering, discontent, and conflict. Once we gain some understanding into the nature of these things, we can then work on developing ways of keeping our attention from getting "hijacked" by them. These efforts to prevent our attention from getting caught up in difficult mind-states are very personal and unique to each individual.

Right Effort

This brings us to the sixth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path known as "right effort" (*sammā-vāyāma*). Right effort involves trying to sustain wholesome qualities and abandon unwholesome ones. The intention to understand the various forms of suffering is an important wholesome quality. It stands in stark contrast to the intention to try to get rid of suffering, which is not the Dhamma—it's simply aversion. So we apply right effort to try to sustain this powerful intention. Making the effort to understand the Buddha's teachings around suffering is an intelligent approach to take when it comes to wanting to be free of our distress. As the saying goes:

"When all else fails, read the instructions." What do the instructions say? They say that if you're suffering, you have to let go. What do you have to let go of? You don't know. So you struggle with these things. The struggling itself is important because it's through that struggle to understand how to let go of suffering that implicit knowledge arises. It's like grappling with a complicated recipe: What do they *mean* by a pinch of salt? It's through this intense effort to understand that you learn.

The effort to develop wholesome states of mind and release unwholesome ones can be coarse or subtle. Perhaps you're getting impatient with someone and you're aware of wanting to say something nasty, even though you know that the consequences would be disastrous. In this case, you need to apply strong effort to stop yourself from blurting out something hurtful. So you might just say to yourself, "Be careful, be careful, be careful ...." Right effort can be very subtle, too. When your energies are balanced and you're able to stay with the breath, you hardly have to make any effort to cultivate or relinquish certain states of mind. You might only have to make infrequent inner suggestions such as "peace" or "quietly." Right effort is a necessary part of the Path, but you need to know how much effort to apply in different situations.

Right Mindfulness

The seventh stage of the Noble Eightfold Path, called "right mindfulness" (*sammā-sati*), can help you to gauge which amount of right effort is appropriate at a given time. Right mindfulness is the capacity to be fully in the moment and aware of what's happening in our body and mind, as well as in the world around us. This includes noticing and closely observing whatever changes are taking place in and around us. Right mindfulness is supported by right understanding, right intention, and right effort. It's cultivated and deliberately sustained by wisdom. If we're unable to sustain mindful awareness for any length of time, we won't be able to see the workings of cause and effect as they pertain to our thoughts, words, and deeds. Without right mindfulness, we can't see the results of our efforts, nor can we see how conditions arise and whether or not we're dealing with them skillfully or unskillfully. That's why the need to be mindful is consistently emphasized in the early teachings of the Buddha.

This capacity to be mindful means that no matter what we're doing, we're present to it. Mindfulness begins to shine a light on our reasons for acting in the ways that we do. For instance, we can be mindful of the intention or motive that underlies our effort to work with restlessness during meditation. We can ask ourselves, "What's my intention here? What's the motivation behind the effort I'm making?" We might see that our intention isn't to understand restlessness, but rather to get rid of it. Then perhaps we'll see that wanting to get rid of something doesn't work too well, and that if the motivation behind the effort we're making is wrong, then the results won't be beneficial. If we're not mindful of our intentions, we won't understand why we're getting bad results from the effort we're putting forth. So it is essential to have the intention to practice sustained awareness.

In our effort to sustain awareness, we need to keep a close eye on our use of willpower to make sure we're applying it skillfully. In my own practice, I've seen how there can often be a willful desire to overcome certain hindrances. On a certain level, this makes sense. But whenever I've attempted to impose my will in a more forceful way to try and turn a situation around, it hasn't worked; it's just made me tense. Self-disparagement isn't fruitful either. Willfully commanding: "I shouldn't be like this. I should be different," really doesn't help. But we can come at it from a different angle by gently suggesting, "May I be free from suffering. May all beings be free from suffering." This has a different effect: the former is rooted in aggression, while the latter is rooted in compassion. Our intentions are now coming from a place of skill, wisdom, and understanding of the Dhamma.

Right Concentration

Along with right effort and right mindfulness, we have "right concentration" (*sammā-samādhi*). This eighth factor of the Path completes the three "mental discipline" factors we're working with. Right concentration is the capacity of the mind to stay closely focused on one object of attention (such as the breath) for longer lengths of time. In a 45-minute meditation session, for example, we can lose our concentration many times. To sustain our focus, we can ask ourselves, "How does our focus get lost in delusions? Why is it so difficult to stay present to a simple thing like the breath?" This basic line of inquiry can help us to see the mind's tendency to go to the past or future. This is important, because if we want to stay focused during meditation, we're going to have to find a way to address the mind's propensity to dwell either in the future or the past. So perhaps we set an intention to say, "Later. Not now," whenever a thought about the future comes up that we want to follow up on.

One way or another, we have to make the intention and the effort to awaken. How do we do this when the mind gets confused, sleepy, annoyed, lonely, or jealous? The secret is to be curious about the very state of mind that seems problematic. Let confusion come into consciousness. Let jealousy come into consciousness. Let whatever mood that's arising become fully conscious. How to do this? Observe the mood *before* you start thinking about it, analyzing it, or making it a problem. How does that mood feel in the body? This brings us to the First Noble Truth—which is the truth of suffering. To understand suffering, we need to allow it to come into consciousness as a direct experience without an overlay of judgements and opinions, so that we actually feel the suffering rather than just thinking about it. This experience of direct knowing allows our natural intelligence to understand the way things are. This work requires patience and trust in the practice. But it's this kind of inner inquisitiveness that keeps us interested in the very things that can otherwise appear confusing or troubling to us. And it's because of this curiosity and inner vigilance that we gain insight.

The Interconnectedness of the Mental Discipline Factors

In a sense, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration are what we're always working with in our practice. Once you begin to get a handle on the precise conditions that trigger in you a sense of unease, then the factors of effort, mindfulness, and concentration become honed to very specific things. Maybe it's your relationship to your spouse or your children. If you're a parent, for instance, a large component of your practice might center on understanding and thereby attempting to release the feelings of stress that arise around your children's welfare. The very areas of your life that are sources of suffering for you can also help you to develop all the inner qualities which are necessary for attaining peace.

Repetition is a wonderful tool for helping us to hone in on the behavior patterns that bring stress into our lives. We see this with monastic life, which is extremely repetitive. The same Pali chanting has been going on for 2,500 years now. As monks, we do the same few chants again and again; we live with the same people; we more or less follow the same monastic schedule; and so on. This high degree of repetition means that there's a chance for us to "get things right" eventually. It's like the movie "Groundhog Day." Let's say that I acted unskillfully with one of the newer monks: I really lost my temper with him, which caused a lot of stress for both of us. The next day, I get an opportunity to interact with him again; but now I make a point of applying the three factors of mental discipline to get things right this time.

A more varied lifestyle is harder to practice with because the situations we encounter are so different that we may not realize that it's the same patterns of reactivity that keep cropping up. A more repetitive lifestyle, on the other hand, gives you the chance to see your reactions to a particular condition (or triggering event) over and over. This kind of environment—where you're dealing with the same group of people, at the same location, who are doing the same work—can be very good for developing insight. It can show you the precise patterns of reactivity that your mind tends to fall into again and again. Of course, this kind of situation may be too crushing and consequently unhealthy for some people.

Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood

There are three factors in the Noble Eightfold Path that directly address the way we live our lives: "right speech" (*sammā-vācā*), "right action" (*sammā-kammanta*), and "right livelihood" (*sammā-ājīva*). Right speech refers to speech that is truthful, harmonious, soothing, and worth taking to heart. Difficulties around speech come up a lot for most people. For this reason, the capacity to be mindful of speech, to pause speech, and to see the result of speech in our hearts is very edifying. As we become aware of the effect that our speech has on ourselves and on others, we gain a better understanding of our inner life and once again abandon some of the causes of our suffering. It's extremely important to develop an awareness of speech, since speech can be very reactive and quite easily misunderstood.

Let's imagine that someone says something to me that sounds like a personal criticism. Instead of waiting to respond, I just blurt out something hurtful back to them. If I had been more mindful of my speech, I could have held my reaction in check and made a more conciliatory type of remark. In effect, I could have made the other person feel more peaceful, as opposed to exacerbating their anger towards me, which also compounds my own suffering. That capacity to pause, to *not* say the first thing that comes to mind, takes a lot of mindfulness. Because so much of our lives revolves around the way we relate to one another through speech, there are ample opportunities for things to go wrong. For this reason, the capacity to know the intention behind our words is an essential part of our practice.

To better understand your intention, you can ask yourself, "Is my intention for speaking skillful or unskillful? Is it rooted in compassion and wisdom, or is it simply the product of habitual delusion?" To illustrate what I mean by speech that's motivated by habitual delusion, let's say that I had learned as a youngster that whenever I got angry, people would give me what I wanted. That way of speaking from anger then becomes a habit I fall into whenever I'm not getting what I want. Even though these belligerent outbursts aren't producing good results for me as an adult, I'm still engaging in them thinking that they'll somehow work to my advantage. If I see a situation (like this one) where I'm continually getting tied up in wrong speech, I can think, "OK, I know this area is difficult for me. But I'm going to try to see if I can be more aware and careful with my speech here."

This intention is one which aspires to freedom rather than self-judgment. A mind that is very self-averse will tend to come down heavily on minor mistakes by thinking, “Well, I shouldn’t have spoken in that way. I should have been more mindful.” Maybe so, but putting yourself down doesn’t make you more mindful the next time. Intentions that recognize the problem but avoid self-deprecation are usually more effective. Consequently, it’s better to think, “OK, that produced a bad result. I’m going to see if I can cultivate more awareness the next time I’m in a similar situation. I’m going to try to breathe more, or pause more, or be more aware of my tendency to react blindly to things.”

Our insights and good intentions need to be in sync with the way we act, speak, and live in the world. If we’re not acting on our newfound understanding of the causes of suffering, then we’re not keeping faith with the Dhamma. True insight gives rise to right action, right speech, and right livelihood. This means that we live in a way which causes the least amount of harm to ourselves and others, while contributing to the well-being of all sentient beings. Our wholesome intentions also help to create the sustained mindfulness that we need in order to relinquish suffering. Simply making the intention to try to be more aware and more careful in the areas where we lack mindfulness is very powerful because it reminds us to pay attention to life as it presents itself to us. In fact, trying to sustain mindfulness in those areas where we get most caught up in reactivity is one of the most important aspects of what we call “practice.” Although it’s challenging, we have to keep at it.

I happen to enjoy trying to solve puzzles that involve string. But the real puzzle in life pertains to inner freedom. What’s holding me back from being free of stress, of unease, right now? Why isn’t my heart open to the way things are? That’s the real puzzle. What greater thing could we do in this lifetime than solve that puzzle so the heart and mind can be liberated? So we strive to make the Dhamma our own. Only once it's our own, can we offer it to others.

3

The *Brahmavihāras* as Mature Emotions

**Based on a talk given at a retreat sponsored by
the Ottawa Buddhist Society in February 2011.**

In Buddhism, mature emotional happiness is defined as the four *brahmavihāras*. These benevolent states of mind, which consist of goodwill (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), empathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*), are also known as the four "immeasurables" or "divine abodes." This almost sounds like a heavenly realm. But this is heaven experienced in your own heart and mind, rather than some celestial sphere "out there." And it's based on *mettā*, which is the Pali term denoting the strong wish for the well-being and happiness of all living beings, including oneself.

Mettā is often taught as a kind of prayer-at-a-distance for someone, especially if that person is known to be unwell or dying. Phrases such as "May you be well," "May you be free from sickness," or "May you be serene even in the face of bodily afflictions," can be recited with the intention of trying to help someone through their suffering. This form of *mettā* practice doesn't click with me, since we really don't know whether or not it works to improve that person's physical or mental state. It certainly feels good to send kind wellwishes to another person; and if that person hears about it, they may also feel good. However, the Buddhist texts don't portray the monks as sitting in circles offering *mettā* in that way.

On a more pragmatic level, the practice of goodwill or friendliness towards myself and others comes from my own intelligent aspiration for happiness. Happiness arises when I'm free from suffering. And just as I want to be free from pain, stress, loneliness, etc., so do you. Therefore, I make a point of letting go of negative states of mind that give rise to suffering for myself and sometimes for others, too. Ill-will is one of these difficult mind-states. Ill-will is expressed in thoughts such as "May you *not* be happy. May you be miserable and lonely." It's often a very vengeful mindset that can trigger unskillful behavior, which leads to even more suffering for myself and others. Because ill-will is not a happy state of mind to be in, it's in my best interests to sincerely wish you well. So, in one sense, I benefit from the cultivation of goodwill towards others because if I'm holding on to aversion towards you, then I'm clinging to a mental object that is in itself unpleasant and causes me harm. In another sense, others reap the benefits of my *mettā* practice, since planting these seeds of goodwill will naturally bring about a deeper concern for the welfare of others. Essentially, the wish for the well-being of myself and others is a natural expression of the open heart.

The feeling of ill-will also prevents me from realizing the Unconditioned—or that deeper state of inner peace and wisdom in Buddhism that isn't dependent on external circumstances. This is because I'm now preoccupied with the conditioned in the form of you and my dislike or hatred of you. So it actually works in my favor to wish you freedom from suffering. In developing this kind regard for another's welfare, I'm also opening my heart to experiencing the pleasant, warm-hearted feeling of connecting with another living being. This too promotes a sense of happiness in us.

When I tell people to offer *mettā* to Muammar Gaddafi, the response I sometimes get is: "I'm not giving *him* any!" as if goodwill is a commodity that I have only a limited amount of. That's a misunderstanding of *mettā*. The practice of goodwill is wishing that Mr. Gaddafi would be compassionate, generous, wise, and ethical because that would be in *his* best interests; then he would be truly happy. When I wish that Mr. Gaddafi be happy, I'm not wishing that he continue to be in power and increase his family's wealth by exploiting Libyan oil revenues. In other words, I'm not agreeing with Mr. Gaddafi's current political actions—what he's doing is unconscionable. But if I harbor hatred in my own heart for this image of Mr. Gaddafi, then that hatred becomes a part of my inner system and the way I live in the world. While this sense of indignation may be justified and supported by other people, what is it doing to my consciousness? It's creating the habitual tendency towards hatred whenever the mind is contacted by an object of a similar nature. That in itself is a mode of suffering that preempts my capacity for happiness.

It's important to remember that *mettā* is not a form of sentimentality in the sense that I need to have cloyingly sweet feelings for everyone. In fact, it's not even necessary for me to like the person to whom I'm directing my well-wishing. The word *mettā* is often translated as "loving-kindness," which is a pretty loaded word. When I hear the term "loving-kindness" used in relation to a cruel person, it doesn't seem to fit. But extending friendly goodwill to this same person, knowing the beneficial effect this will have on my inner world, makes a lot of sense to me. It's also something I think I can realistically do. In this way, the practice of goodwill has an insightful quality to it; it's a form of intelligence rather than sentimentality. So that's how I look at *mettā*: goodwill as opposed to ill-will.

Goodwill is the first of the *brahmavihāras* that is defined as limitless. We call these four attitudes limitless because they include everyone and everything, at all times and in all places. In terms of my *mettā* practice, if there's still one aspect of the external world that I refuse to accept or relate to without animosity, then that's where I need to let go. When I harbor ill-will towards another person, it creates a sense of "me" and a sense of "them." This very division between self and other creates suffering, since there is now a tension that has arisen between the two. In addition, desire and aversion are born because we crave that which supports our sense of self, while we reject that which undermines it.

Thus my ability to experience a sense of boundless peace and contentment is cut short by the person or people to whom I cannot extend goodwill. The same is true of those difficult parts of my own consciousness—the Gaddafis of my own mind—that I reject; they continue to haunt my mind because I haven't learned to let go of my aversion to them. So goodwill has a quality of insightful awareness to it. In the same way, there may be moods of the mind that I don't like, but I have to learn to bear with them until they come to an end. To hate them or say that I shouldn't have them would demonstrate a lack of goodwill and a lack of wisdom.

Compassion is the second of the *brahmavihāras*. Being an extension of goodwill, it refers to the empathy I have for beings who are not well-off or who are suffering physically or mentally. For example, if you're suffering from a particular illness, then not only would I wish you to be free from that illness, but I would do what is within my power to help you through it. This is what I would want others to do for me if I was unwell. So *karuṇā* is compassion in action.

Empathetic joy or gladness is the third *brahmavihāra*. This is the sense of my being genuinely joyful for your success or happiness. This is quite different from focusing on the idea that "Your success will soon change," or "You're happy now, but that will end."

Although these statements are true, if they're the expressions of a cynical mind, then that becomes a kind of "wet-blanket" Buddhism. Instead, I wish your good fortune to continue. *Muditā* is a lovely quality that you can also extend to yourself. You can do this by making conscious your own skills and wholesome attitudes, your own good intentions to help others, your own capacities to create worthwhile things (such as a meal for your family or a set of shelves for your neighbor), and so on. There are innumerable areas in our lives that can be the focus for *muditā* and gratitude.

If you're jealous of or angry at another person's good fortune, it's hard to bring up that feeling of gladness. You can also see how unhappy you'd be if every time another person experienced joy, you experienced envy or resentment. That would be a rebirth of suffering for you again and again. Therefore, it's in your best interests to free your mind from those negative mind-states. If you're truly interested in realizing the Unconditioned, then if you're caught up in any condition—including resistance to someone else's happiness—you have to figure out how to let go of it. So it works in my favor to rejoice in your happiness. In a broader sense, empathetic joy also brings more peace and happiness into the world.

The fourth *brahmavihāra* is equanimity. This evenness of mind, which allows me to have a calm and measured response to situations, is the balancing factor for the other three divine abodes. For instance, if my goodwill for another human being isn't tempered by equanimity, I might be tempted to overlook or minimize their unethical conduct in my wish to extend to them a sense of deep personal acceptance. While it's important not to have animosity towards a violent criminal, I can't let my goodwill for them cloud my judgments about their moral and social responsibilities in the world.

Similarly, if compassion is not balanced by equanimity, then my caring for others can easily lead to excessive worrying about them or even burnout in my capacity as caregiver. Equanimity allows me to see that as much as I wish to help those who are suffering, I also have to acknowledge my own limitations in terms of what I'm able to do for them, realistically-speaking. In this vein, while still doing what we can to help other beings, the Buddha suggests that we also reflect upon the law of kamma. Simply put, this natural law holds that intentionally skillful actions will produce positive results, while intentionally unskillful actions will produce negative results. Hence the Buddha tells us: "All beings are the owners of their kamma, heirs to their kamma, born of their kamma, related to their kamma, abide supported by their kamma; whatever they shall do, whether for good or for ill, of that they will be the heirs."

We all have things we have to work through in our lifetime. Parents certainly see this as they watch their children struggle with their own life challenges. So it's important to know that there are some areas of suffering in the lives of others that you can't put an end to, no matter how much you'd like to. The practice of equanimity helps us to face this fact without getting overly distressed about it. At the same time, the qualities of goodwill and compassion are what keep equanimity from degenerating into a cold indifference to other people's suffering.

Equanimity also prevents me from getting overwhelmed by appreciative joy. If *muditā* is not balanced by a steadiness of mind, it can lead to a giddy restlessness that will eventually exhaust me. And when I become overly excited, I forget the age-old axiom: "This, too, shall pass."

So consider how you can cultivate the *brahmavihāras* in your own life. I try to really make conscious what the open heart feels like.

The Buddhist texts speak of how the practice of goodwill can be expanded in a limitless fashion by including different categories of beings. Once you understand the importance of these four sublime attitudes and how they relate to your inner world as well as to the world at large, you'll make a point of developing them with great benefit to yourself and other beings.

4

Finding the Deep Peace of the Heart

Based on a talk given at a Day of Mindfulness at Tisarana Monastery in March 2008.

I once took my mother to visit the eye doctor. In the waiting room was a middle-aged fellow who kept restlessly clicking away on his BlackBerry mobile phone. After Mum had seen the doctor, we went down to the main lobby to wait for our ride. That same man was also in the lobby. I watched as he phoned someone, left a message, and then proceeded to wait for the person to call him back. The next thing you know, he's phoning another person. I got the sense of a mind that just craves stimulation, a mind that just needs to do things. This mind-state is so unpeaceful, so unhappy, and people who get caught up in it even look unhappy. Everything is just about doing, doing, doing. Now. Without patience.

Life at the monastery is different. At the monastery, we have the opportunity to develop the reflective mind. This is a capacity that all human beings have. Imagine you're going to the symphony. You get your best outfit on, stand in front of a mirror, make sure your hair looks OK, double-check that your tie is on straight, and so on. You're really looking at your appearance. The human reflective capacity allows us to do the same with our minds. We can carefully watch our motivations, our feelings, etc. But this is something we have to cultivate. When we use this reflective ability, we aren't just doing things; we're observing how we do things. We see what our inner world is like and how we're responding and reacting. Without that reflective capacity, we're simply victims of circumstance, getting blown around by the winds of fortune. Moreover, we're just creatures of habit, blindly following our typical reactions to different situations. We might be politically free or economically successful, but we're not truly free.

Practicing the Buddha's teachings depends upon the ability to notice life and see how things really are. This may not seem like a big thing, but very often people who don't practice Dhamma lack this reflective capacity. They just indulge in anger, or in a negative mood, or in wrong speech, and remain unaware of the consequences of that indulgence. They don't see that succumbing to anger and wrong speech leads to suffering. Then they wonder: "Why am I unhappy?" So we have to train in honing this reflective skill. In honing our reflective powers, we're not seeking any particular experience. Instead, we're developing the ability to witness. Witnessing is a skill; it's a faculty to be developed in the mind. If we go on long retreats, we have an excellent opportunity to develop our capacity to witness. Of course, our reflective capacity is not something that's limited to the time spent sitting on a meditation cushion.

In many ways, it's easier for monks to be reflective because our lives are so slow and uncomplicated compared to the pace of urban life. Monks have the opportunity to cultivate reflection in most of the things we do. We're very fortunate that way. As practitioners—whether we're monastics or laypeople—it's both useful and important to contemplate and reflect on our lives, on our intentions, and on our habits. However, we don't just observe these things and then do nothing. We use the Buddha's teachings to see whether our mind-states are skillful or unskillful. If they're unskillful, we can try applying different techniques to make them more skillful. But we always do it from the perspective of witnessing.

In order to work in this way, it's necessary to have some knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. If we don't have this as a starting point, we might notice reactions in the mind coming up, but not have any idea of how to deal with them. So the teachings give us the pathway to understanding because they tell us: "Look in this way. Practice in this way." The Buddha's teachings help us to look in the right place, which is the mind itself. Once we're looking in the right place, they help us to ask the right questions about what we see. The right questions would be: "Why am I suffering with this? Why are my reactions so strong? Why can't I just let go?" Our questions have to come from the heart. They have to come from our own experience and not from some abstract intellectual theory. If our questions are coming from the heart, from the witnessing of experience, then the answers to these questions can be very beneficial.

The Buddha's teachings are always pointing to the same kinds of themes. The basic theme is non-attachment or non-grasping. The Buddha emphasized non-attachment quite a lot. But we need to hear about it time and again because of our inclination to forget. This is why our reflective capacity needs to be honed. If we keep developing our capacity to observe the intentions behind our actions and the outcomes of those actions, our ability to practice non-attachment deepens. When a negative mood arises, we learn to just patiently watch it. Then we can see the best course of action. We can see how to apply the Buddha's teachings.

One way to practice non-attachment is to reflect on our tendency to develop a strong personal identity around the contents of our experience, which include our psychological make-up, our social experiences, and so on. In practicing the Buddha's teachings, we're trying to break down that sense of a personal identity. We do this by looking at it in terms of the *khandhas*—or the five aggregates or components of the mind-body experience that make up a human being. The five *khandhas* are form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The Buddha states that we should look at each of these aggregates as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not-self. If we look at ourselves in terms of the *khandhas*, that's a big step away from taking things personally. It's a big step towards seeing things as natural functions, as natural movements in consciousness.

Lots of unpleasant things can enter consciousness, such as disappointment, self-doubt, jealousy, vindictiveness, etc. But there's a big difference between being a witness to something unpleasant and being a person who's afflicted by something unpleasant. Take sickness, for example. There's a big difference between witnessing sickness and being a sick person. If we just bear witness to the symptoms of cancer, the flu, an ingrown toenail, or whatever it is, we suffer less. On the other hand, if we take on the persona of a sick person and worry about our symptoms and wallow in self-pity because of our pain, we suffer a lot more. A hypochondriac would be an extreme example of someone who has built a personal identity around sickness.

At times, the unpleasant feelings we experience in a sickness can be made worse by our own attitudes towards them. If our tendency to worry that things will get much worse for us is making our symptoms feel worse, then our symptoms are not only the products of sickness, but the products of delusion as well. These symptoms arise in part because we're thinking in terms of self, of "my" sickness. So our symptoms may be exacerbated by the worrying that self-thinking can create. Therefore, if we're attached to our sickness, we suffer more. If we let go of it, we suffer less. How to let go? Well, we can observe that sickness is just sickness—it is what it is. Symptoms are as they are. They are painful, they are unpleasant, and so on. If something needs to be done about them, we go to the doctor. What we don't want to do is to create a personality around them, to think that these symptoms (or this sickness) define us.

The Buddha's teaching on *anattā* (not-self) goes against this whole sense of personality. It goes against this sense of self. What is a sense of self? It's the idea that "I" am this kind of person with these kinds of characteristics. A sense of self is also born of the feelings that arise when external circumstances challenge my idea of what "I" am. So the Buddha taught the contemplation of *anattā*. When we reflect on the teaching of not-self, it leads us towards the insight into emptiness. The word "emptiness" is used in various ways in the different Buddhist traditions. In the Theravada tradition, emptiness refers to a mind state that isn't preoccupied with, addicted to, or deluded by personality view. It's empty of that. Through the contemplation and understanding of not-self, we can see personality view arising. We can see that moment in which the mind attaches to something and makes it personal.

Personality view can easily arise around unpleasant people. If you're with a person whose behavior happens to be toxic—perhaps someone at work, in your family, or at the monastery—you can be really impacted by their negativity. So you practice witnessing the way you're affected by their toxic behavior. You witness the feelings and impulses that come up, and you resist the temptation to make them personal. If you're not practicing witnessing these things, and if you don't understand that your feelings which arise around this person are empty of self, then you might heedlessly identify with their mood. For example, if you're around an angry person, you might be drawn into their world and become angry. If you're around a fearful person, you might become fearful. On the other hand, if you're practicing witnessing, then you'll notice the effect that this person has on you. You'll feel the emotional result that their actions have on you, but you won't become "something" because of it. You won't become an angry person. You won't become a fearful person. Instead, you'll just witness.

However, just because we practice witnessing doesn't mean that what we bear witness to will be pleasant. It doesn't mean that at all. But if we hold the insight into emptiness, we think, "Unpleasant? Yes. But this is simply the way it is right now." We continually let go into the moment, even if it means observing ugly, painful, and unpleasant sensations. If we continually let go, then ugly, painful, and unpleasant sensations are just that—they're just sensations. We don't build a personality around them. If we simply stay with that witnessing, then the experience is as it is—empty of a sense of self. If you can just bear witness to unpleasantness, you might be surprised at how quickly it passes. Conversely, if you grasp at unpleasantness, it tends to last much, much longer. We grasp at a negative experience when we think, "I don't want it to be this way!" and when we try to will it to be a certain way. We're now relating to the experience according to the way we think things should be, instead of how they actually are.

That created sense of self can seem very real and permanent. It can seem like we'll never escape from that terrible feeling. But the length of time an experience lasts depends on the strength of our attachment to it. We create a connection to an experience by building a sense of self around that experience. We construct a sense of self around an experience by grasping at it. As we refrain from grasping at an experience, the mind becomes more and more transparent, thereby allowing the experience to flow through it rather than get stuck in it. When the mind is transparent, our experiences are empty of self. We still feel; but when we feel something, we remember: "This is not 'me.' This is not 'mine.' This is not 'myself.'" So we practice emptiness by watching, by bearing witness. We see that the emptiness of experience is true. We also discern that the sense of self we built up around an experience is just a delusion, and that there's nothing solid in it.

"Cessation" is an important word in Buddhism, and it's one that I like to define as the fading away of the sense of self. The sense of self fades away when we don't attach to an experience. Cessation occurs when we learn to look at experience objectively. For instance, if I'm becoming irritated while I'm talking with someone, I can notice my reactions as objects in the mind and feelings in the body. Just as I can notice changing weather patterns in nature, I can also notice the changing "weather" of the mind—that is to say, the changing inner patterns of emotionality, thought, and mood. If I don't attach to the storyline, then I see that these habits of the mind are not ultimately real, but are part of changing patterns in nature. But even more importantly, I notice the absence of a strong sense of "me" and "mine"; the sense of self has ceased. There's still consciousness, presence, sight, sound, and so on. Now, however, things are simply the way they are and the mind is at ease.

At times, the inner reactions are very strong and enduring. In this case, it's very helpful to return to mindfulness of the body. When you feel a strong emotion, just witness its effect on your body; don't go to the narrative in your head. The sense of a self and all the "me" and "mine" thinking is what keeps the reaction bubbling away in consciousness. When you just stay with how that emotion feels in your body, the reaction fades away as does the strong sense of a self.

As the reaction subsides of its own accord, we have the realization of cessation. So we see that these reactive tendencies are not a problem.

When we practice in these ways, we've begun our journey on the path to liberation. By practicing cessation, the mind is freed from toxicity. It's liberated from its habits, from its compulsion to cling. The mind is not liberated through denying, or through getting rid of anything, or through indulging. It's liberated through knowing experience as Dhamma. It's set free through knowing experience as *anattā*, as empty of self. *Anattā*—which is one of the three characteristics of existence along with *dukkha* (suffering or unsatisfactoriness) and *anicca* (uncertainty or impermanence)—is hard to understand conceptually. But if we watch closely, we can see it operating. We see the difference between "There is sickness" and "I am sick." When we grasp at sickness and construct a sense of self around it, it can bring up a whole train of behaviors, memories, and reactions that are less than helpful.

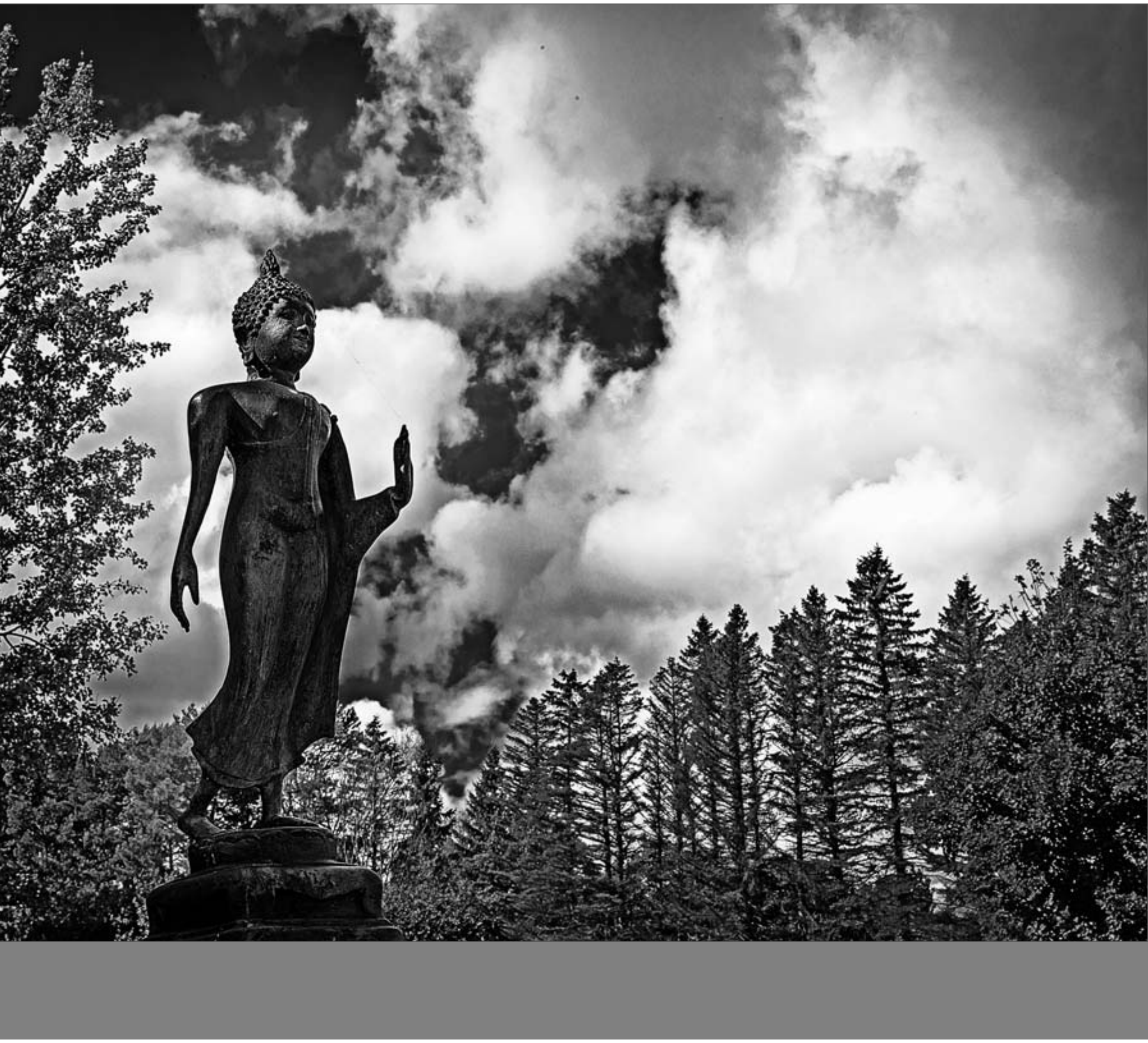
We can counter our grasping tendencies by drawing on the teaching of not-self, which leads to the doorway of emptiness. And we can open the doorway of emptiness if we practice using our witnessing consciousness. We can notice how the sense of self changes when conditions change. When praised, a certain kind of self arises. When insulted, another kind of self arises. When our meditation goes well, a confident self arises. When our meditation goes poorly, a hopeless self arises. This sense of self comes into being in so many different ways. As we contemplate this, we see that this sense of self is just like a soap bubble. It isn't real and it's always based on conditions.

Earlier, I mentioned the *khandhas*: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The nature of the aggregates is that they exhibit changing qualities. The pleasant feeling that comes from warmth is a quality; the unpleasant feeling that comes from cold is also a quality. If you're walking down the street and you see a beautiful form, that's a quality. If you see an ugly form, that's also a quality. If we have the perception of being praised, that's a quality. If we have the perception of being blamed, that's also a quality. However, all of these qualities are uncertain, transitory, and subject to change. You'll never find lasting peace in a quality because all qualities, all *khandhas*, are unreliable. But while we can't trust qualities, we can trust the mind that knows changing experience. It's not going anywhere, nor is it dependent on conditions.

As with *anicca* and *anattā*, we can also contemplate the five aggregates as *dukkha*. If we seek fulfillment through the five *khandhas*, we're always going to be disappointed. Even if we get some satisfaction, in some way, for some period of time, that will eventually change. For example, if an actor or actress is attached to their physical beauty (form), they're bound to suffer sooner or later because there's no way to stop the aging process. So as they get older and their physical beauty fades, they suffer. Similarly, the feelings of pleasure or satisfaction they take in their beauty will change. Since those feelings are by their very nature subject to change, they can't provide any lasting happiness. Therefore, becoming attached to them inevitably results in unsatisfactoriness.

If you keep relinquishing this delusion of "I" and this identification with the *khandhas*, where does that take you? It takes you from the head to the heart. If there's a strong sense of self, we're always thinking or worrying about "me." We're always engaged in thought as we create and perpetuate a sense of self. When we let go of that, our attention goes to the heart. Then we're able to see how the wholesome things that we're encouraged to do in this life support a mind that lets go. We can see how generosity, compassion, patience, endurance, and determination support the ability to be aware. It's this practice of being aware, of bearing witness to unpleasant things rather than running away from them that leads to peace of mind. When something unpleasant arises, we're able to think, "I'll watch this. I'll just be with this now."

When we practice viewing unpleasant experiences in this way, the heart gets quenched. There's this wonderful sense of freedom in which you realize that the heart is free. This kind of insight is not spectacular; it's just something that creeps up on you. Just let it happen. And notice how the heart can experience an incredibly deep peace.



5

Seeing the Buddha, Seeing the Dhamma

Based on a talk given at the Vesākha Pūjā at Tisarana Monastery in May 2009.

We don’t usually say that the Buddha “died.” Instead, we say that he entered *parinibbāna*, which means the “complete extinction” or final nibbāna following the bodily death of an enlightened being. The Buddha’s *parinibbāna* might seem very distant to us because it is something that happened about 2,500 years ago. And yet the Buddha made the path to enlightenment highly accessible to us in a timeless way by virtue of his having grounded it in the lives of ordinary people. My own life, for example, has been totally transformed by the Buddha’s teachings. I met my first bhikkhu, Ven. Bodhesako, in India in 1971 and was basically “blown away.” I was utterly inspired by both him and the Buddha’s teachings, so I decided to take up the training of a bhikkhu.

Whether as a monastic or a layperson, one of the things we’re trying to do in Buddhist practice is to bring forth wholesome states of mind. And gratitude is one of them. Having lived as a Buddhist monk for many years, I feel deeply grateful not only for the teachings, but also for the lifestyle I've had as a bhikkhu. What about you? How have the teachings of the Buddha affected your life? Ask yourself that question. It's an excellent way to evoke gratitude. You can also contemplate the life of the Buddha to bring forth gratitude. This type of *sati* (mindfulness) is called *Buddhānussati*, or the recollection of the Buddha. Whenever we recollect some achievement that is extraordinarily courageous and noble, it elevates us because we see the possibility of doing something very grand and profound with this human existence. As we look at a Buddha-image or a stupa, or as we contemplate the Dhamma, we realize that we wouldn't be on this Path were it not for this remarkable being who taught so many centuries ago.

Since gratitude is a foundation for enlightenment, we try to make gratitude into something we can cultivate—and not just when things are going well for us. For instance, when someone is nice to us, we feel grateful to them: that's gratitude of circumstance. Now there's nothing wrong with feeling grateful in favorable circumstances. But we can certainly make our gratitude more robust by practicing the bringing forth of gratitude regardless of the situation. This is what we call *bhāvanā* (development of mind). We're now cultivating a skillful state of mind—in this case, one of thankfulness.

Another good way to develop gratitude is to create a personal shrine. On my shrine, I have two Buddha-images, pictures of my teachers, and other objects of interest. A Buddha-image points to both the historical Buddha, as well as our own possibility for enlightenment. When I look at the various items on my shrine, I experience a sense of gratitude—gratitude to my teachers and parents, gratitude to all those who have made mendicant life possible for me, and gratitude for a way of looking at the world which was given to me by the Buddha. This attitude of thankfulness is a very beautiful state of mind. I like to joke that when you get enlightened, you'll probably be extremely grateful for that. The enlightened mind isn't greedy, impatient, or complaining; the enlightened mind is grateful. Of course, we're not always thankful for life's difficulties. However, we can still cultivate gratitude in so many different ways.

For example, we can develop a deep sense of gratitude for the exemplary qualities of the Buddha, for his teachings, and for this lineage. Moreover, we can evoke a feeling of appreciation for our teachers. When you meet a great teacher like Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Sumedho, you're touched by them. You're so grateful to be in their presence, and you think, "Thank you." And when you ask them about a difficulty you're having, they'll say, "Don't make it into a problem. Let it go." This doesn't sound like a major teaching since it seems so simple; but it's very hard to do and it's ultimately the challenge of our lives. We can also express gratitude for the fact that we've been born as humans at a time when the Buddha's teachings are still available to us. And most of us live in societies that are not beset by war, starvation, or disease, so we have tremendous opportunities for personal reflection. These are all things for which we can be immensely thankful.

So how do we use this valuable human birth skillfully and avoid frittering it away in trivial pursuits? We do this by practicing the Buddha's teachings and by developing wholesome states of mind such as generosity. Generosity is one of the virtuous qualities that leads to enlightenment. If you think about the life of the Buddha—his renunciation, his many years of selfless teaching, and his enlightenment—you can see the depth of his generosity. For forty-five years, he walked up and down the Ganges Valley offering teachings, admonishments, and reflections to countless monks and many thousands of laypeople in a spirit of tireless generosity. He even had to deal with a lot of recalcitrant monks along the way.

People sometimes think, "Oh, you Buddhists are so selfish. All you want is enlightenment," as if enlightenment is some kind of corrupting, self-seeking, narcissistic endeavor. Well, it's not. Enlightenment is actually the *end* of the ego. It's the opening of the heart of compassion, the heart of generosity, and the heart of gratitude. My first teacher—the monk who I met in India—used to describe the Buddhist desire for enlightenment as "the selfishness that puts an end to selfishness." The aspiration to awaken is not self-seeking in the sense that you care nothing for the welfare of others. Rather, it's self-investigating in the sense that you're investigating your own suffering for your benefit and for the benefit of all beings. You're exploring the conflicts and fears and arguments you have with life—in other words, that whole business of being a human being. When you come to understand quite clearly that the suffering of the mind is caused by various mental habits that need not be followed, then greed, hatred, and delusion begin to fall away. As they fall away through the practices of non-attachment and patient awareness, the heart begins to relate to others quite spontaneously with goodwill and compassion.

The selfless nature of the desire for enlightenment is beautifully expressed in the life of the Buddha. If we recall, the Buddha left home to find the answer to a very personal existential question. He wanted to know: "If I am subject to death, and if all those around me are subject to death, is there the Deathless? Is there an element in consciousness that is not subject to birth and death?" He pursued the answer to that question for six years until he attained enlightenment. But his enlightenment wasn't simply a personal possession—that wouldn't make sense. While he did experience the peace of awakening in a personal way, he also expressed this awakening in all of his actions, including in the ways he taught and generally related to people, in his giving nature, and in his establishment of the Sangha of monks and nuns.

The aspiration to go beyond suffering means taking personal responsibility for our suffering. It's easy to blame our stress or unease on something or someone else, or to distract ourselves away from it. But if we always avoid assuming responsibility for our suffering, we'll never be free of it. We really have to take charge and figure out why we're distressed. The Buddha's teachings have a universal appeal because they address the suffering that is common to all of humanity: the fears, the disappointments, the doubts, the aging of the body, etc. The Buddha points to these very mundane discomforts and asks, "Why do we suffer?" The response is that we suffer because of attachment. Attachment means identifying with the movement of life and not realizing that there's a deep stillness behind that movement—a stillness of awareness, of knowing. So if we're moved by fears, or desires, or prejudices and biases, then the task is to find that which is unmoving. When we're aware of the flow of life, and when we have the courage to watch this flow rather than react to it, we begin to discover the beautiful quietude of the mind. Where that quietness takes you is ineffable—you can't describe it. You're just there with the stillness of the mind.

Another question to ponder is: "How well am I undertaking the path that the Buddha set out for us?" It's an extremely rewarding path, but it's very hard work. Ajahn Chah would always say, "Training your dog is easy; but training your mind is very difficult." Yet what could be more interesting or more important than understanding what motivates you to say and do the things you do? And what could be more essential than finding that place within ourselves where we can choose peace over suffering?

We can create the causes of peace even if we don't feel peaceful. You discover this in meditation. If you're a beginner in meditation and you sit for ten minutes, you'll probably start to feel restless. Then if the teacher says, "Just hang in there for another twenty minutes," you might think, "But I've had enough; I want to get up." But if you do hang in there, you'll discover that you can choose to connect with peace even when the mind is agitated. You do this by choosing to witness, to be aware of, whatever experience is arising in the present moment—even if it's an unpleasant one. It's this choice that lays the foundation for our meditation practice. Once we've finished meditating, we realize that we feel more peaceful because even though the meditation itself may have been difficult, we made a *choice* for peace. Ajahn Chah used to say, "People want to be peaceful, but they make the choice for suffering." For instance, if we feel annoyed at someone and we yell at them, then that's choosing to suffer. How can we be peaceful if we make a choice for suffering?

Of course, at times we all experience impulses that lead to stress and conflict. Although it's difficult to curtail these impulses through force of will, we can still be aware of them, which can help us not to react to them. Restlessness is a good example of an impulse that can precipitate suffering. When we're feeling restless for whatever reason, we often find ourselves wanting to escape from the present moment. This can create even more suffering for us, since it's not possible to run away every time we face an unpleasant situation. Because this becomes clear when we meditate, we learn to simply observe restlessness rather than act on it. The same principle of skillful witnessing applies to other feelings and emotions as well. If we just bear witness to our wanting to follow some mood or emotion, then we'll eventually see that mood or emotion pass away. In this way, we're making a claim for peace. Peace will become part of our consciousness because we're no longer a victim of our moods and emotions.

Seeing Buddha-images and other symbols of the Buddha's life and enlightenment can help to remind us that mindful witnessing is meant to be an ongoing practice of ours. When we enter a Buddha hall, for example, we always bow to the shrine. We can use that Buddha-image to remind us of our aspiration to go beyond suffering, which can easily be forgotten in the course of our day.

As meditators, we can sometimes be very hard on ourselves when we see that we're still getting caught up in painful emotions. One way to remember that we're essentially good people doing good work with our practice is to reflect on the life of the Buddha. This reminds us that we're also honorable people aspiring to bring greater peace into the world. I personally enjoy reading about the Buddha's life. I'll read different accounts of it or even the same account again and again. I never get tired of it: it's such a great story! There's a famous actress living next to one of our monasteries whose husband won an Oscar for his work on the film "Doctor Zhivago." At one time he was working on a screenplay on the life of the Buddha. When Ajahn Sumedho asked this man's wife how the screenplay was going, she replied, "Oh, it's a really difficult story. He's a good guy who got better."

One statement that often comes up in Buddhist teachings is "When you see the Dhamma, you see the Buddha. When you see the Buddha, you see the Dhamma." When you see the Dhamma, you understand the way things are without the distortions of ignorance. Thus you are awake to the truth of the way things are. This is Buddha—or awakened consciousness. So when we realize the Dhamma by being awake, by being present, that's seeing the Buddha. What's the sign that we're not awake to the truth of what-is? Suffering!

Once we've suffered enough, we might one day realize: "This really hurts. I've had enough of this." That's the first step towards peace, towards enlightenment.

Awakening to the truth of things takes some practice. If we look at the people who come to meditate at the monastery or on retreats, they're typically nice people. But because they're conscientious people, they can sometimes be self-judgmental. They might find themselves harboring some negative emotion towards someone in their family and think, "I shouldn't feel this way." However, that's not awakening to truth—that's just perpetuating a sense of ego. Awakening to truth means recollecting: "Right now, it feels like *this*." That's a constant refrain that comes up in Buddhism, and one which we need to practice coming back to over and over again.

Socially, we do our best to live responsibly and in harmony with others. But inwardly, there's always very important work to do, and because it's hard work, we need to keep encouraging ourselves to carry on with the practice. We also need to continue to bring to mind that which is wholesome and uplifting. There's no better gift we can give to ourselves, our workmates, our family, our friends, or the world at large than to operate from an enlightened mind, a mind of clarity.

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Learning to Bookbind, Learning to Practice

Based on a talk given at a Day of Mindfulness at Tisarana Monastery in August 2009.

In our training as monastics, there's a tremendous emphasis put on doing things well. As monks, we place a lot of value on being mindful of the ordinary, whether it's washing an alms-bowl, sewing a robe, or taking care of your teacher—all very mundane sorts of things. But what this adds up to is a life of care. It's a simple enough training, but it has a profound effect on a person over time. Staying mindful of your everyday activities encourages a continuity of presence, of awareness, of being with the way things are now, that keeps the mind from wandering into the past or future. On both the inner and outer levels, this training is important, since it's what enables you to hopefully gain the ability to do things well.

I once had some notes I wanted to bind into a little booklet using a method of binding that was very simple, but which I hadn't done for a few years. I bound four booklets of about twenty pages each. The first booklet didn't come out so well, but the second booklet turned out better. By the time I finished the fourth booklet, I was quite happy with the result. We learn this way, don't we? When we do something mindfully, and we're really present to how things are unfolding, we see what it takes to produce a better result. For instance, we see how one way of sewing the thread doesn't work, while another way works much better. In other words, we're engaged in a process of learning simply by paying close attention to the mundane things we do.

Becoming Conscious of Our Inner World

The same principles apply, of course, to our inner world—although affecting change in this area is more complicated. It takes a great deal of patience and determination to turn a chronically anxious mind into a peaceful one. This kind of mindfulness practice is much more difficult than binding a few loose pages together, but the *modus operandi* is similar. If you're binding a book, you need to be aware of how far the text sits from the edge of each page, the numerical order of the pages, and so on. In the same way, when you're trying to transform your inner world, you obviously need to be aware of what's going on there. But quite often we neglect to bring consciousness to the contents of our inner life.

In learning to know our inner world, we can start with the practice of naming things. For example, if I'm engaged in a physical chore and I'm rushing to get it done, I can inwardly name that mind-state by using the word "rushing." This labeling of mental states is a very simple exercise, but it helps to make me conscious of my inner life. As soon as I label a particular state of mind, it has already become more tangible to me. If I never make conscious the frustration, restlessness, fear, or whatever it is I'm feeling, then I can never work with it. And if I never work with it, then it can never really cease; it will just fester. Very intellectual people, however, can sometimes get caught up in having to find the right name for a given mind-state. For instance, they might think to themselves, “Is this doubt or is this uncertainty?” But the point is not to obsess over finding the perfect description, but simply to make things conscious.

Becoming conscious of the inner world is a vital part of our awareness practice. How often do we feel frustrated about something, and then just continue feeling that frustration without truly awakening to it? Awakening to it means saying to ourselves, “This is frustration; frustration feels this way.” So we become fully aware of how frustration feels in the body. We can become more conscious of a difficult mind-state by dropping the storyline associated with it, and instead feel how that mind-state manifests as tension in the body. In this way, we become more objective towards, and less attached to, the mood of the mind. Although the frustration is still there, this more objective perspective allows us to apply effort in the direction of transforming that unwholesome mental state into a more wholesome one, rather than heedlessly following it in an ill-considered way.

If we don’t put any effort into becoming conscious of the inner life, we can get enmeshed in a whole range of reactions to a particular state of mind, including that of self-judgment for feeling this way to begin with. Life is a kind of interplay between what we sense and how we react, isn’t it? Life comes at us through the senses, through memory, and then there’s a response to this and a reaction to that. If I have no awareness of this impersonal process, then I’m simply a victim of habit or circumstance. And there’s no freedom in that. But if we can have the presence of mind to know, for example, that “This is uncertainty; this is how uncertainty feels,” then this gives the wisdom part of our mind a chance to operate skillfully. Quite often we’re simply too reactive—with a judgment, a distraction, etc.—to let that happen.

I was recently talking with some people about the uncertainties they're facing in their lives. That led me to think about my own parents, who were refugees from Latvia. At the beginning of World War II, the Russians had occupied Latvia, followed by the Germans, and then, towards the end of the war, the Russians were coming in a second time. My parents were caught up in the whole mess. They, like all the other Latvian refugees, were rushing to the Baltic coast as the German army was holding back the Russians. There was bombing going on all around them. Somehow my parents and grandparents managed to get onto a refugee boat, although they weren't too sure where they were going. At one point, their boat was being torpedoed. My father still had a whole set of keys from his life in Latvia, where my parents were quite well-to-do; my father was a lawyer there. But seeing the situation from aboard that boat, he simply said, "Well, that's *that*." And then he threw the keys into the ocean. In circumstances like that, you don't know where you're going to end up or what you're going to do. You just think, "Wow, that's uncertainty."

My mother was pregnant with my older brother during this time. She gave birth to him towards the end of the war—around 1945. My brother was born in a little town about 50 km from Nuremberg, which was being carpet-bombed at that time. My mother said the sky was black with airplanes. Although my parents were well out of the way of the bombing, they could see Nuremberg burning in the distance. The town where my brother was born was mainly populated by women and children, and very old men, since all the other men had either gone to war or were dead. So when my mother gave birth to a boy, everyone was elated. My mother said she's never been given so many baby clothes in her life! So there you go. You're in the middle of a war, everything's uncertain, and then you receive all these baby clothes. That was a nice moment in my parents' story.

Sometimes it's good to bear in mind how our uncertainties or fears compare to what other people have to go through. At times, this can help us to gain a perspective on our own situation. Nevertheless, we're still affected by what we're feeling. For this reason, it's not particularly helpful to dismiss our own uncertainties or fears by saying, "Oh well, the people in war-torn Sudan are much worse off." Yes, the people in Sudan are worse off, but our uncertainty or fear still has the feeling of being all too real. So when we have a life circumstance that brings up uncertainty or fear, the key thing is to practice with that mind-state. We can learn to bring awareness to the uncertain situation—whether it be our health, our job, or whatever circumstance brought about the uncertainty. Socially, we do our best to deal with this challenging situation. But we also need to look inwardly at our reactions around the sense of uncertainty, and then learn to train with them. This is true of any negative mood or emotion that arises: rather than getting lost in it, we use it to strengthen our understanding of it, which then gives us the wisdom to practice letting go of it.

Training the Mind

Once you've made conscious what's going on in your inner world by either naming it or acknowledging, for instance, that "This is disappointment. Disappointment feels this way," you can choose how to respond to it. And making choices is the way you train the mind. For example, you can make a determination not to follow some negative mood that comes up. This is important, because if you follow that negative mood through a lack of awareness, you can end up thinking in ways that cause unnecessary suffering for you and possibly for others, too.

When we observe our actions and their results, we can see quite quickly that it's better not to follow the storyline that the reactive mind presents. Instead, it's better to introduce into the mind input that will produce a good result. For instance, I might be feeling anxious about the future. Even though I've done everything I can to plan for a positive outcome, my mind wants to keep going to the future to try to figure out what will happen. It's fear that's driving my mind to want to try to solve this problem of the unknown future. So I say to myself, "This is what fear feels like. Don't follow that thought." Of course, I may have to do that hundreds of times, which makes the process of inner change seem almost as slow as the process of Darwinian evolution. But no matter how slowly things go, the miniscule changes that awareness brings about have a profound cumulative effect on human consciousness. That's because the whole direction of our thinking—which was oriented towards fear and delusion—is no longer being encouraged. We've turned around and are heading the other way.

This other direction we've taken is usually tied to the development of new and positive habits of mind. When sitting in meditation, just think of all the wholesome qualities you're cultivating. You're certainly developing the capacity to be conscious of inner movement. And when sitting is difficult, you're learning to acknowledge that you don't want to be there. Whatever's going on, you're fostering this lovely strength to be awake to the experience of the meditation session. This doesn't mean that you're judging the quality of the sitting based on whether you have strong *samādhi* (concentration) or no *samādhi*. Rather, there's just this quality of being fully conscious to whatever is presenting itself during the meditation period. That full awareness of whatever is arising in our inner world is what we want to extend into daily life. But remembering to do this is the hard part.

When a negative feeling like irritation comes up, it can be challenging to *want* to be truly awake to that irritation. At those moments, one just needs to trust in this practice because one's intentions are good. Developing trust in that full consciousness is often all you have to do. You don't have to get rid of a negative mood or emotion, nor do you have to hate yourself for having it; but you do have to be awake to it—all of it. By staying with a difficult emotion such as irritation, we begin to see the cessation of these negative, egotistical energies. Why? Well, because we haven't invested in that difficult feeling. We haven't reacted to it. We haven't made more of it than what it is.

As your consciousness of the movements of your inner life becomes more consistent, you'll find that right speech begins to function because you're now awake to the impulses that would have otherwise taken you to wrong speech. By wrong speech, I mean speech that is abusive, divisive, slanderous, spreads gossip, and tells lies. The opposite of this is right speech, which is harmonious, soothing, truthful, and worth taking to heart. Ajahn Sumedho would often say, "Consciousness is the escape hatch." The famous image he uses is of a group of prisoners within your mind who are banging on the doors of your consciousness, and you keep saying, "No, no, I'm not going to look at you." Then, when you do decide to become conscious of them, they float away, they're liberated.

The mind that doesn't bring things into clear consciousness tends to murmur on and on, doesn't it? How often, when we've been experiencing some sense of uptightness or annoyance, has there been a kind of ghostly whispering in the back of the mind—a whispering that we're not fully aware of? Then, all of a sudden, we notice it and bring it into full consciousness. It's like having a stone in your shoe when you're walking. You're usually so preoccupied with something else that you don't think to take off your shoe to have a look inside. The stone is there, it's somewhat bothersome, but we don't really pay attention to it—much like we tend to do with negative mind-states. But when we do finally acknowledge the problem and address it skillfully, there's usually a tangible sense of relief.

The awakened mind, however, isn't necessarily a mind that's always happy, peaceful, and compassionate. Instead, it's awake to the way things are. The awakened mind has faith in the fact that full awareness of this condition or of that mental state *does* liberate the mind. This kind of awareness involves bringing a mind-state into full consciousness and simply observing it—as opposed to running with it, ignoring it, getting in there and re-organizing or fixing it, or trying to get rid of it.

Using Wise Reflection to Transform the Mind

In our monastic training, we try to create a very low standard of what we need in life. I took care of my elderly mother for about nine years until she died. During that time, I lived with her in her condo apartment in Ottawa. When an extremely old person died, it was sometimes mentioned on TV or in the newspaper. Once, there was a British airman who died at 113 years of age; my mum was ninety-three at the time. After she read his obituary aloud, we just looked at each other and didn't say anything. The deluded part of my consciousness wanted to say, "How many more years can I live like this?" But then the training would lead to a voice saying, "Don't go there; don't pick up the future."

In situations like that, I would reflect on the four monastic requisites of food, shelter, robes, and medicine—the only four things a Buddhist monastic can reasonably expect. The fifth requisite is not a vacation! So I would reflect on the fact that I had food, a roof over my head, and medicine and clothing. Everything was fine. That kind of reflection on the minimal standard of living held by monastics can be quite helpful because the mind can be greedy for the "extras" that we think will make us happy in life. We forget about how little we really need to live a good life. Therefore, when the mind starts wanting things to be other than what they are, reflecting on the four monastic requisites can be a powerful training.

In monastic life, we're taught to work with very simple reflections that we try to bring forth at different times. For instance, before the main meal, we say:

> *"Wisely reflecting, I use alms-food not for fun, not for pleasure, not for fattening, not for beautification, but only for the maintenance and nourishment of this body, for keeping it healthy, for helping with the holy life. Thinking thus, I will allay hunger without overeating, so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease."*

Offering this as a simple suggestion to the mind day in and day out is comparable to having a mirror that shows a monk his own attitudes to, in this case, food. Naturally, his way of relating to food will sometimes be greedy, or ungrateful, or indifferent, and so forth. But rather than blindly operating from these habitual attitudes, the monk notices them more clearly because the daily reflection encourages him to be mindful of his inner world as he partakes of the meal. So day after day, he reflects on his inner world and then has the choice to take up the Buddha's suggestions, which subsequently becomes a foundation for peace. It's not rocket science. It's more like tortoise work or earthworm work: you're just inching along day by day, but the cumulative effect is very profound.

The monastic training that we receive in caring for our elders is another example of how we can train the mind in these small but ultimately transformative ways. One of the things I used to reflect on when I was looking after my mother was the way in which Ajahn Chah was cared for after he had his stroke. Ajahn Chah was paralyzed for the last ten years of his life, but he was beautifully ministered to during that time. For instance, a monk would never touch his body without first doing *añjali*, or a joining of the hands in a gesture of utmost respect. When serving as caregivers to Ajahn Chah, the monks would always talk to him, even though they couldn't see any reaction from him. In the monastery, we're trained to look out for our elders. For example, a novice or junior monk will be assigned a senior monk to care for. The reflection that's used in this form of training is "How can I help this person? How can I make sure they're OK?" This is an excellent training for the newer monks. Having to look out for the needs of someone other than yourself day in and day out can have a transformative effect on the mind.

In a more general sense, that's what our training in monastic life and lay life is all about: doing little things that profoundly change us over time. Certainly, we can experience grand insights and life-altering events in the course of our lives. However, the moment-to-moment focus in our training is on these very grounded and wholesome small steps, which build a foundation for the larger things like freedom, happiness, and peace. In and of themselves, these small steps aren't difficult to take; but remembering to take them can be tricky. Remembering to do our mealtime reflections and to bring forth gratitude and contentment with little can be challenging. And remembering to try to relate to the people with whom we live in a spirit of friendship and affection requires effort, especially since we don't always feel that way. Nevertheless, the training is in amity and affection, and it's in this way that we cultivate empathy in our hearts. We ask ourselves, "How can I help others to be free from suffering?" That reflection takes us out of selfishness.

Working with Difficult Emotions

It's not that you don't sometimes feel negative or at least conflicting emotions towards others in monastic life or in any other type of relationship. You do feel them. However, the task is to make them conscious and see them for what they are. Experiencing difficult emotions is normal. But those emotions are not to be believed or pursued. Instead, they're to be known for what they are: changing conditions that can trigger a certain reaction in us. Once we recognize that a difficult emotion is nothing more than a changing condition, this allows it to end. And how does something in the mind come to an end? It ends when the mind doesn't react to it—when the mind doesn't put any energy into it.

At one of the larger monasteries like Wat Pah Pong, you might have twenty, thirty, or fifty monks living there at one time. As monastics, we have to learn how to be friends even with someone who "gets up our nose." That's an interesting situation because all the monks are very good people. So the first part of the practice is to watch the tendency to be judgmental. The next part of the practice is to respond to the other person in a spirit of friendliness and caring, rather than judgment and cynicism. It's lovely that we can consciously make those kinds of choices. This enables us to use interpersonal conflicts as a way of training the mind. We can actually focus on a difficult relationship at work, at the monastery, or with family, and use it to make our negative habits of mind conscious.

Say, for instance, that monk A or monk B is making me feel annoyed or intimidated. Rather than simply shying away from them, or blaming either myself or them for the fact that I'm feeling this way, I'm going to learn more about this feeling. When an interaction with this person triggers in me some egotistical or negative state of mind, I can reflect: "OK, this is what arrogance, annoyance, dislike, or inferiority feels like." In effect, this conscious knowing—which includes being aware of how this negative mind-state feels in the body—allows the mind-state to emerge into full consciousness, which then allows it to cease.

It's a wonderful feeling to confront some habit of the mind that makes you suffer until you know it well enough that you're no longer falling victim to it. When you see that your emotional buttons aren't being pushed anymore, you have more confidence in your practice. But this change doesn't come without some effort. You have to make the determination: "I'm going to really look at this unskillful mental habit. I'm going to see how it operates in my mind." This training requires a lot of patience and, at times, it's not fun. Yet seeing it as a worthwhile challenge can be quite helpful.

Ultimately, any state of mind that obsesses us also limits our capacity to relax into the spaciousness of the mind. That's because whenever the mind is preoccupied or obsessed with something, there's no space for anything else. So you can ask yourself: "What objects obsess me? What trains of thought and emotional attitudes grab my attention and take hold of my mind?" Then ask yourself: "What's the way out? How do I free my mind from that?" This kind of inner inquiry is existential, not theoretical. It's about our individual existence and the particular modes of suffering we experience.

The Buddha's teachings give us seemingly abstract concepts to work with: the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, the three characteristics of existence, and so forth. As a contemplative, you have to know what these things actually mean; that's the only way you can find freedom from suffering. For example, as a model for enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths are peerless. However, if you leave them strictly at the level of thought, at the level of study, they'll never liberate you. You have to see pragmatically—through the vehicle of your own practice—how the Four Noble Truths are not only true, but ultimately beneficial for your well-being.

So we come to see that training in working with difficult states of mind is a lot like training in the craft of bookbinding: if we pay close attention, we learn from experience how to do things well.

7

Doctrine and Doing

Based on a talk given at a Day of Mindfulness at Tisarana Monastery in June 2009.

Religion, which can be fraught word for many people these days, is a term that comes from Western culture. Its Latin root word is "*religio*," which, according to modern scholars, derives from "*ligare*," which means "to bind or fasten." So the word "religion" implies a sense of binding yourself to something in the same way that ligaments bind the body. In binding yourself to a religion, you give yourself up to it—that is to say, you devote yourself to following its teachings and practices even at the expense of sacrificing your own more self-serving desires. In this sense, "religion" can be a positive word that conveys a very wholesome perception—provided that you're connected to a good tradition.

From what I can tell, the term "religion" as such didn't exist in the Buddha's time some 2,500 years ago. Instead, one wandering contemplative (*samana*) would ask another: "Whose teachings do you follow?" The reply would be something along the lines of: "I follow Mahavira," or "I follow the Buddha." So it was more the case that spiritual seekers were following the doctrines and practices of a particular teacher.

Buddhism's Emphasis on Practice

Today, there are many different schools or cultural forms of what we call "Buddhism." There is Pure Land, Zen, Vajrayana, and Theravada, and then there are the schools-within-the-schools. It's similar to the way in which there are different manifestations of the Abrahamic religions, such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, each containing within it its own schools. So Buddhism is not monolithic. However, all of its schools would agree that Buddhism is essentially a practice. As a Buddhist, you give yourself up to a certain structure of practice, which allows you to gain insight into the deeper levels of your consciousness. All the schools of Buddhism concur that Buddhism is a "doing"—that it's a cultivation or a craft.

The cultivation of generosity, morality, and goodwill has remained central to Buddhism to this day. Buddhism also has a long-standing tradition of chanting and reflection, with chanting comprising the ritual aspect of this tradition. Its doctrinal aspect consists of study, and its contemplative aspect is expressed through meditation. So in Buddhism, we have a tradition of ritual, of doctrine, and of contemplation. It's this particular form you bind yourself to if you have faith in it.

The monastery near Perth, Ontario, where I live comes from the Theravada tradition of forest monasticism in Thailand. This is a very orthodox tradition within Buddhism. Unfortunately, the word "orthodox" can carry a lot of negative connotations because it sounds like the most uptight, conservative part of spirituality. But in traditional Western religious language, the word "orthodoxy" (which means "correct belief") was used in combination with the word "orthopraxy" (which signifies "correct action or practice"). The word "orthopraxy" thus implies that there are practices which form an integral part of a religious tradition; it isn't just a set of beliefs that are blindly held. So even within the more orthodox schools of Buddhism, we find that the idea of practice is paramount.

So which English word might best describe the Buddhist tradition? Is there a term that could encompass a 2,500-year-old institution rich in spiritual teachings, iconography, art, chanting, monasticism, and monastic/laity interactions? What would you call that? Well, anthropologists would call it a "religion." But as I mentioned, many Westerners don't want to call Buddhism a religion, so they label it a form of "spirituality" instead. But somehow that word doesn't fit the whole idea of a tradition that has been practiced, honored, and cultivated for as long as Buddhism has. So Buddhism remains very hard to classify as a spiritual system.

You can have an orthodox tradition, but if that tradition doesn't have the component of orthopraxy—in other words, if it doesn't have a genuine practice element—then it can be merely superstition. It can also devolve into a series of rituals that people perform simply because their parents performed them. If Buddhists were to fall into this kind of mechanical observance of rituals, then their tradition would become little more than a cultural artifact that might be quite comfortable around religious holidays, but it would never liberate them. They might go through the motions of performing various Buddhist rituals out of a sense of superstition, duty, or even entertainment, but it wouldn't really free their minds from suffering.

The Structures of Moral Discipline

The heartwood of Buddhism—as taught by the Buddha—is meditation. Consequently, it's important that we lay a strong foundation for our meditation practice, and this begins with training in morality. It appears that the Buddha would inquire about a person's consciousness before he would teach them meditation. He would look at the way they lived socially, and how they acted in the world. In this way, he could tell whether or not they understood the basics of spiritual practice, such as the importance of cultivating generosity. So the Buddha's initial teachings would be on the benefits of generosity and of having a good heart. If a person has a sense of generosity and goodwill, they'll care about the well-being of others.

The Buddha encouraged people to extend their feelings of goodwill to include all sentient beings. Therefore, an attitude of benevolence wasn't reserved simply for a particular tribe, or even for humanity as a whole. The Buddha encouraged people to make their feelings of goodwill limitless. Once a person understood the merits of warm-hearted friendliness and generosity, and then lived their lives accordingly, the Buddha would teach them about the structures for a moral life—known as the Five Precepts (*pañcasīla*). Throughout its history, Buddhism has maintained the tradition of introducing the moral precepts as the starting point for all Buddhist practice. The five basic training precepts are:

1. *I undertake the precept to refrain from taking the life of any living creature.*
2. *I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given.*
3. *I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct.*
4. *I undertake the precept to refrain from false and harmful speech.*
5. *I undertake the precept to refrain from consuming intoxicating drinks and drugs which lead to carelessness.*

If we can observe the Five Precepts, then we're not only protecting ourselves, we're protecting society. Essentially, these precepts provide us with a formula to more easily discern and then ferret out our unskillful impulses. To put it simply, if our impulses go against the Five Precepts, we know they're unskillful.

Observing the Ethical Guidelines

A gathering of monastics and laity will often begin with the taking of the Five Precepts. This fundamental code of ethics is a good example of rules or guidelines that one binds oneself to, that one gives oneself up to. As monks, we have the 227 Vinaya (monastic discipline) rules that we do our best to follow. While the Vinaya guidelines have definite moral implications, they also serve to bring order to the monastic community. They regulate our relationships to the laity and to each other, and offer a means of working with the four monastic requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medicine—the basic requirements for living a life. The Vinaya rules are helpful because they don't depend on a particular opinion, viewpoint, or preference. They were laid down by the Buddha and his elder disciples, and are not the product of individual tastes and beliefs. As monastics, we give ourselves up to these various disciplines, which are bigger than any individual monk.

In recent years, the term "designer religion" has become quite popular. A designer religion is one that borrows elements from a number of different spiritual traditions, allowing you, in effect, to design your own set of spiritual principles. The danger in this is that you can end up tailoring your spiritual teachings to suit your own desires, some of which may end up being harmful to you and others. The benefit of sticking to one trustworthy spiritual tradition is that it becomes something you can subordinate your own desires to in the service of a higher good, such as the alleviation of suffering in the world. When you try to follow the rules of conduct within a good spiritual tradition, you can watch your reactions to the restrictions placed on you by that tradition. This is tremendously helpful because this set of ethical conventions acts like a mirror reflecting the conditioned contents of your own mind back to you.

The monastic tradition, for example, asks one to conform to a communal way of life comprised of long-standing practices. If a monk resists the suggestions, guidelines, rules of etiquette, and communal agreements contained within the Vinaya, then that resistance becomes the place on which to focus his attention and understanding. The roots of the monk's resistance might be pride, greed, laziness, or any number of other mental qualities. These inclinations become apparent as the containment of the discipline frustrates desire, as well as the ability to just do what one wants.

The Precepts

The Five Precepts also serve to reflect the workings of the mind back to us. The first of the Five Precepts is an undertaking not to kill. This precept provides a mirror for that which is violent in the human mind and wants to expunge anything displeasing. In giving us a moral structure that we can give ourselves up to, this first precept makes it easier for us to notice that impulse of ill-will as it first arises. And by providing us with an ethical standard by which we can judge our actions, the first precept protects us from harming sentient beings. If we can stop ourselves from impulsively or deliberately harming ourselves and other beings, goodwill can arise. This is very important, since a heart of goodwill is the foundation for enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition.

The precept structure is a skillful way of helping us to develop our reflective abilities. A reflective capacity allows us to see our intentions and the results of those intentions. It also enables us to see when the results of our intentions are foundations for peace and when they're foundations for remorse. So honing the powers of reflection is crucial to our spiritual practice. If you think about the second precept—to refrain from taking that which is not freely given—it requires that we be honest in our dealings with the world.

In our Buddhist training, we're encouraged to keep to the precepts quite strictly. So if we carefully observe the precept of not stealing, we'll see the tendencies of the mind to want to take things that aren't ours to take. We probably wouldn't see these tendencies if we weren't being asked to reflect upon them in some way. Hence the second precept can help us to shine a light on some of the more morally questionable areas of our conduct.

Let's take as an example the act of copying a copyrighted CD. Now that's a pretty commonplace occurrence. The thinking mind tends to reason: "What the heck, it's Sony; they've got lots of money. It's not like the world is going to fall apart if I copy that music." But the training in following the precepts oftentimes takes us to a more difficult place in our reflections. This isn't a spiritual path where you just get to do what you want to do. At first, you might rationalize: "I just want this one album, but I can't afford it. So I'll download it from the internet." But then you begin to reflect: "But is that an honest or a dishonest thing to do?" The second precept is now acting as a mirror to help you build the foundation for inner peace.

At times, however, people can get so obsessed with morality that it becomes impossible for them to live with any sense of ease. A good illustration of this occurred when I was living in a monastery in Northumberland, England, in the early 1980s. At that time, we were absolutely broke and trying to build a new monastery. We didn't have any heating, and for our plumbing we had to salvage steel pipes from the junk yard and thread them, since that was all we could afford. Although it was marginal living, it was still a good life. Back then, we probably had about £15 in the bank, which is the equivalent of approximately $30 Canadian. We also had one committee member who was obsessed with upholding the principles of ethical banking. I remember being present at one particular committee meeting about ethical banking that must have gone on for hours. I thought, "Give me a break—we've only got £15 in the bank!" This person was so preoccupied with maintaining his high standards of ethics that no one could stand to live with him even though all of his standards were very logical. So that's one extreme. The other extreme is to have no reflective capacity or ethical standards whatsoever, and simply give in to the whims of the mind.

The fourth of the Five Precepts deals with right speech, which is speech that is harmonious, helpful, truthful, beautiful, and aligned with the Dhamma. Wrong speech, on the other hand, is speech that is abusive, divisive, slanderous, spreads gossip, and tells lies. Just ask yourself, "How many times have I suffered remorse because I've used wrong speech?" Wrong speech can come up pretty quickly if you're not watchful. But if you contemplate the fourth precept (i.e., "to refrain from false and harmful speech"), it becomes a very powerful mirror to help you look at states of mind that would produce unskillful results were you to follow them.

For instance, if you're in a bad mood and you aren't mindful of it, you might end up dumping your mood onto someone else. And then you'll probably think, "I shouldn't have said that." A sense of remorse arises—if you're a reflective person, that is. If you're not a reflective person, then you'll just unload your mood on them again! And that's obviously not going to produce good results. If you just mouth off at someone because they've annoyed you, you're not creating a foundation for peace. So the kind of careless mind-state that can easily lead to wrong speech is not one you want to cultivate.

For these reasons, it's very useful to resolve to keep the precept around right speech. It's a reminder of what is wholesome and what is not wholesome. For example, if you're using your speech to try to manipulate people, or to try to make yourself look better to them, or whatever it is you might be using your speech for, you can begin to look at that. You can ask yourself, "Does this intention to flatter people and have them like me all the time *really* lead to peace? Where's this intention coming from?" So if you can adhere to this fourth precept and use it as a mirror for your mind, it can really help you to see how your mind operates.

Surrendering to the Form

People sometimes ask me about the precepts. They ask, "Can I keep three?" I reply, "Which three? They're all pretty important." That's where the binding aspect of a religion or spiritual tradition comes in. If you surrender to its form, and the form is skillful, you can truly benefit from it. But if you decide to throw out all the teachings that conflict with your own desires or preferences, you can really cut short your spiritual growth—to the point where it's stunted.

A structure of moral discipline isn't something that's meant to cater to the needs of your ego. Rather, it's something that's meant to challenge you. It challenges you to look at yourself in a helpful way, rather than in a self-deprecating way. The precepts certainly do that. However, the importance of the precepts isn't in the rules themselves, but in how we practice with them. Just blindly keeping to the precepts can degenerate into superstition or conceit. In the latter case, we can develop an attitude of "I've got more precepts than you. I keep eight of them." It can get very silly at times. But when the precepts act as mirrors to the impulses arising in the mind, and when they become something we reflect upon and practice with, they become very beneficial. So think of your work around the precepts in terms of orthopraxy—or right effort based upon right understanding—and the good results that come from that effort. If you think of these moral disciplines in terms of awareness, contemplation, and kamma (or the consequences brought about by our intentional acts of body, speech, and mind), they'll really help you.

Using Meditation to Calm the Desire-Mind

Once we've laid a foundation for our spiritual life by cultivating generosity and goodwill, and by upholding the precepts, our meditation practice will proceed much more smoothly. It unfolds with greater ease because the mind isn't so confused or taken up with unpleasant memories, guilt, or remorse over some unwholesome deed for which we may be responsible. If, however, meditation practice is still difficult for you, stick with it because you can develop virtuous qualities just by persevering. When things get tough on the cushion, try surrendering to forty-five minutes of non-distraction. Giving yourself up to doing something that you don't want to do provides you with insight into how your mind works because it allows you to see where your mind really wants to go. So try giving yourself up to not being able to do what you want to do. You'll quickly see how your mind can create suffering when it doesn't get what it wants.

Of course, the desire-mind—or the mind that is resisting the reality of the present moment or is hankering after some other experience in another time and place—doesn't want to surrender; it doesn't want to be still. It wants to think and organize and talk to itself. If you follow the desire-mind, you end up engaging in a kind of "inner committee meeting" where there's this profusion of inner dialogue being spoken by different characters within your consciousness all jostling for your attention. Have you ever really looked at all the different people—or facets of your personality—who populate your mind? There's the arrogant one and there's the humble one. There's also the obsequious one and the know-it-all. In short, there's a wide array of these committee members inhabiting your consciousness.

The beauty of the reflective mind is that it allows you to realize that none of these personalities is your true self. You're not the arrogant one, the humble one, the obsequious one, or the know-it-all. They're simply conditioned moods, perceptions, and mental formations—the latter of which includes will, mental impulses (such as fear or compassion), prejudices, and many other mental states. So practice getting to know all of the committee members as objects of the mind that come and go, rather than identifying with any of them. This too is part of Buddhist orthopraxy. If you think about it, which one are you? Are you the very humble one when you meet with the Ajahn? Or are you the arrogant one when you're feeling conceited? You're none of them, because they're all just changing conditions of the mind. Unfortunately, they can seem all too real at times.

The capacity to know the different phenomena of the mind, and to reflect upon them, becomes strengthened through meditation. It becomes strengthened through developing the ability to be still and to know one breath at a time. It's very difficult just to observe the way things are in any given moment. More often than not, we're trying to get rid of something, trying to figure something out, or trying to have an experience we've heard about or experienced in the past. The mind is often either resisting the present or moving into the past or future: it's continually restless. So we have to firmly resolve to notice all of the things that occupy our attention, but without getting caught up in them. We have to set an intention to observe the committee members as they make their speeches, but not get drawn into the emotions fueling their arguments. In other words, we resolve to monitor the mental objects that arise, but not grasp at them. In this way, we make up our mind to be the observer and not the participant. That's the practice.

Working with Obsessive States of Mind

Let's say there's a person who's always worried about what other people think of them. They're worried about what their boss thinks of them and they're worried about what their colleagues think of them. However, their worry isn't just a healthy concern with their own performance; it's a more general sense of anxiety over how others perceive them. That's not a very productive or happy state of mind to be in. But we all do that, don't we? Or instead of being driven by worry, we might be driven by resentment, by jealousy, by self-criticism, by the tendency to fantasize, and so on. The mind can become preoccupied with many different ways of thinking. So we can ask ourselves, "How much of this thinking is actually necessary?" Isn't most of it unnecessary? Isn't most of it just an unproductive habit of the mind? When life is interesting or exciting or frightening, we focus on the present moment; we absorb into it. But when there's nothing to focus our attention on, our minds just go "Blah, blah, blah," on and on.

So how do we practice with these obsessive states of mind? Well, in the case of people who have a strong tendency to worry, they can begin to look at their worry as being just a mood of the mind rather than a reality. This can be done by first identifying the mood instead of simply believing in the storyline behind it. By awakening to the mood that's being experienced, we see it more objectively to the point where we can even observe the stress it creates in the body. It's important to remember that thought which is being driven by these inner delusions begins to overwhelm our inner space if we're not careful. Then we end up living in realms of suffering. But by observing our obsessive habits in this more mindful, objective way, they have less and less power to delude us. Getting that perspective on how the mind operates is the first step towards liberation. So we inquire, "What's the mood of the mind right now?"

Buddhists sometimes develop an idealized sense of what their minds should be like. I did that, and I suffered a lot because of it. During my first year of meditation at a monastery in Thailand, I found myself fuming with anger over a mango, or something equally unimportant. After the rage had cooled down, I felt terribly guilty that I'd gotten so upset over another monk eating the last mango. I went to Ajahn Sumedho and told him what had happened and said, "I have so much anger. I shouldn't be angry. I should love everyone." He said, "Just swear." He advised me to walk up and down and just swear for a while. So I went and swore for five minutes. Then I began to see, "Oh, *this* is anger." So rather than thinking that I shouldn't be angry, or buying into the anger, I turned the feeling of anger into an object of awareness.

Given the right conditions, all of us get into moods that tend to obsess us and take us over. If we're observant, we can see that certain conditions cause certain moods to arise. Perhaps I have difficulty receiving criticism, so that every time someone finds fault with my behavior, I react defensively or with aggression. We can work with our habits of mind by making the determination to observe them and to know them as moods that are transient, as opposed to identifying them as personal problems or absolute realities. We can set an intention to become aware of the fact that a critical mind-state, for instance, is simply an object of the mind, rather than who we are in a more permanent, self-defining way—as in "I'm a critical person." The more we make these kinds of intentions, the more we tend to see our thought patterns as mere objects whose arising depends on certain conditions being in place. On the other hand, as we become more familiar with our habits of mind, we can end up hating and criticizing ourselves by thinking, "I shouldn't be this way!" But that's more an expression of ego than a product of awareness.

Even as full-grown adults, we sometimes have to confront mental states that are quite childish. When I was living at the Wat Nong Pah Pong monastery in Northeast Thailand, my desires were often thwarted, so I had to face up to some fairly immature states of mind. In our monastery, we had fifty monks who, at mealtime, would line up in two long rows on each side of a lengthy dining hall. Being the newest novice, I was number twenty-five on my side of the dining hall, so the food would get to me last.

At the midday meal, big pots of food and trays of cakes and sweets would be set out for all the monks. So we'd go down the line and slop the food from the pots into our bowls. But the young monks who were distributing the cakes would have so much devotion for the senior monks that they would give them all the cakes. By the time they'd reach me at the very end of the line, there'd be no cakes left—only half a banana! My mind would get really critical at those times, and I'd think, "This is absolute hypocrisy! It's not fair! ... Blah, blah, blah." Sometimes at night, Ajahn Chah would give a Dhamma talk and ask, "Why do you suffer?" And I'd think to myself, "Well, it's because you had all the cakes!"

When it became very obvious I wasn't going to get any cakes, I either had to figure out why I was suffering or I had to leave the monastery. Thankfully, I began to see that it was just the greedy mind. And being an object in awareness, it will change. That was the beginning of freedom for me. The mind would still want to complain when the banana arrived or when the monk next to me got the last mango; but now I'd think, "No, I'm not going there." So I wouldn't follow that train of thought.

This scenario may sound childish and even funny, but it was actually extremely painful because it was so absurd. There I was, a grown man, but my thinking was so juvenile. But that's the way it is, isn't it? We may think of ourselves as being mature people, but the stuff we have to look at inside the mind can be rather embarrassing. Fortunately, when these immature attitudes come up, we can be aware that this is simply the conditioning of the mind; it's not who I am.

Touching the Deep Peace of the Heart

The monastic structure that existed at Wat Nong Pah Pong forced me to watch my own tendency to be greedy. Previously, when I was hungry, I just ate whatever I wanted. I had lots of freedom to travel, too; if I didn't like the country I was in, I'd just go to another one. When I arrived in Thailand and entered the monastery, however, there weren't the same levels of freedom around food or travel. When it came to eating, I just ate whatever was offered to me. Surrendering to that structure paradoxically gave me a kind of freedom I hadn't experienced before. Prior to coming to the monastery, I thought freedom meant having the opportunity to do what I wanted; but that didn't bring me peace. Now, as a monk, I could observe this seemingly endless pattern of wanting. But instead of following those impulses, I was giving myself up to a way of life that was bigger than me. This was a way of letting go of craving, which is the true source of peace.

Notwithstanding this intention to relinquish desire, there would still be greed arising in the mind while I was staying at the monastery. At one point, I became so obsessed with cakes that I had a cake dream. In my dream, I was in a grocery store with a shopping cart piled full of cakes. Then I'd get to the checkout counter and I'd be a monk—I'd have no money! After I had that dream, I thought, "Wow! Where is your mind at?" In training with an obsessive state of mind that's coming up, you can reflect: "This thing constantly preoccupies my mental energy. And if I'm always preoccupied in this way, I can't touch the deepest silence of the heart." You can't touch the deepest peace of the heart because your attention is lost in thoughts, in emotions, and in the past and the future. So you have to learn how to be very present to the way things are. This is how you connect with the profound silence of the heart.

So our challenge is simply to bear with these strong emotions and regard them as impersonal objects that arise and pass away. When we do this, we can also open to them in a more accepting way. Of course, your desire-mind will either want to get rid of these powerful emotions or it will want to grasp at them. If it grasps at them, then that will make them seem all the more real. For instance, if you buy into self-doubt, it can seem very substantial and important. Conversely, if you refrain from giving credence to the self-doubt, it eventually loses its momentum, which allows you to see it for what it really is: just another passing thought in the mind.

As Buddhist practitioners, we bind ourselves to the Buddha's teachings. This means that not only do you remember the Buddha's teachings and have confidence in them, but you apply them to your life. Liberation comes from putting the Buddha's recommendations into practice and observing for ourselves the results that this brings. Our faith in the Buddha's path of awakening deepens as we practice and realize that the Buddha's teachings are not just intellectually or philosophically significant, but they have enormous practical value within the ordinary day-to-day living of our lives.

8

Just the Sensed

Based on a talk given at a Day of Mindfulness at Tisarana Monastery in August 2008.

The Bahiya Sutta is a famous discourse of the Buddha that was given to the ascetic Bahiya of the Bark-cloth. Bahiya seemed to possess his own deep wisdom—so much so that he had his own disciples. At one point, he began to believe that he might be enlightened. The story goes that Bahiya was informed of his mistake by a deva, who suggested to him that he go see a truly enlightened being, also known as Gotama Buddha. So that's what he did. Being very ardent, devoted, and sincere, he had a mind that was primed to receive the teaching.

Bahiya traveled to the Jetavana monastery where the Buddha was staying. But once he arrived there, he learned that the Buddha was away on alms-round in the village, so he set out to find him. When Bahiya finally located the Buddha, he prostrated himself and said, "Please, would you give me some teaching?" The Buddha replied, "This is the wrong time. We are on alms-round." Bahiya then asked, "Please, life is very short. I could die at any moment and you could die any moment. Please offer me some teaching." The Buddha replied for a second time, "No, not right now. We are on alms-round." Bahiya then pleaded for a third time, and the Buddha relented and gave the following teaching:

> *"Herein, Bahiya, you should train yourself thus: 'In the seen will be merely what is seen; in the heard will be merely what is heard; in the sensed will be merely what is sensed; in the cognized will be merely what is cognized.' In this way, you should train yourself, Bahiya.*
>
> *"When, Bahiya, for you in the seen is merely what is seen ... in the cognized is merely what is cognized, then, Bahiya, you will not be 'with that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'with that,' then, Bahiya, you will not be 'in that.' When, Bahiya, you are not 'in that,' then, Bahiya, you will be neither here nor beyond nor in between the two. Just this is the end of suffering."*
> ~ Udāna 1.10 (John D. Ireland trans.)

One of the many things I like about this sutta is that when the Buddha taught Bahiya, he gave him a training rather than stating a philosophical position. The training he gave was around the practice of emptiness. This practice is rather difficult for many of us to understand because emptiness—as it's often understood in the English language—implies there is nothing there. In Theravada Buddhism, however, emptiness is a state in which our conscious experience isn't infected by a sense of self.

But before we contemplate the more challenging aspects of the Buddha's teachings on emptiness, we need to make sure that we're well grounded and morally responsible in our ordinary, conventional lives. The Buddha asks us to live our day-to-day lives in a manner that is generous and not harmful to ourselves and others. This leads to a caring sensitivity to the people, animals, and environment around us, and also becomes the basis for self-respect. As much as possible then, we try to speak and act with generosity and moral restraint. Having established the right attitudes in terms of our actions and speech, we can then use the challenges of life and the Buddha's teachings to understand ourselves and free the mind from ignorance and suffering.

Let's return now to the instructions that are given to Bahiya. Imagine that you go to retrieve your car from the parking lot, only to discover that your tires have been slashed. In this situation, it's hard to practice "in the sensed is merely what is sensed," because in the sensed there is also "Bloody hell, my tires have been slashed!" Rather than simply being aware of things *just as they are*, the mind grasps at that shock and disappointment with anger. Instead of engaging with the world from the standpoint of functional necessity or equanimity, you're reacting from a place of anger. When you engage with the world from a state of anger, a sense of self arises from the energy of that anger. And anger is an energy that causes suffering. Later, you might react to your earlier anger with a sense of guilt and think, "I shouldn't have gotten angry." But this only compounds the problem and leads to the sense of self being created again.

We "pick up" the world—that is to say, we operate within it in our usual, conventional ways—from a state of suffering because we don't see clearly. If we don't see that greed, hatred, and delusion are at the root of our unskillful behavior, then that limits our ability to correct it. It's very important to be able to see these things clearly, because if we don't, we're forever reacting blindly to whatever is going on in and around us. Someone who doesn't know how to abide in "in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard" and so forth, tends to be a compulsive consumer of experience. They're always doing something, fixing something, or becoming something. They're always consuming—not just in terms of material things—but in terms of buying into ideas, feelings, thoughts, notions of self, and all of that.

Extremes are useful to look at. If you consider a workaholic, for example, they can never really stop picking up the world in unskillful ways. They always need to be doing things, probably due to some unconscious fear that's driving them, such as a fear of failure, boredom, emotion, etc. In other words, they're driven by delusion to keep taking on more work. Grasping at the delusion of workaholism can lead to an inability to relax, and even worse, it can result in burnout, alcoholism, and other extremes of suffering.

Through delusion, you can even misuse the Buddha's teachings to Bahiya. For instance, if you're a monk in a large monastery, you can become somewhat institutionalized knowing that the laypeople will be bringing you food and generally taking care of things. As you get accustomed to this type of care, you might think, "Now I just have to meditate and get enlightened. I don't need to look after anything else. So what if the dishes are dirty, no one swept the porch, or the abbot is ill? It's okay because 'in the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard.'" You can really lapse into selfishness if you understand the instructions in the wrong way.

In terms of practice, it's easy to apply the teaching of "in the heard is merely what is heard" when you're sitting in the meditation hall listening to the rain pattering on the rooftop. It's a lot harder to follow that teaching when you have a tent outside and you suddenly realize that your tent flap was left open and the rain is getting in. In other words, it's a lot easier to stay with awareness when you're experiencing something peaceful. The challenge is to be mindful of things just as they are when you're experiencing something more difficult. Once you've established this awareness, you can try to develop the ability to notice the roots of skillful and unskillful behaviors. Once you're able to do this, you can wisely choose when to pick up the world and when to let it continue on its way.

Training in awareness is a bit like bird-watching. I think of it as a kind of “Buddhist bird-watching.” You learn to step back and note the inner creatures of your consciousness. Imagine, for example, that you’ve just finished a 10-day retreat where you were working hard, and now you want to reward yourself with a treat—perhaps a movie rental. What has arisen in consciousness is a little bit of greed. So try to practice “in the sensed is merely what is sensed” by trying to know for yourself: “This is just wanting.” Try to watch greed arise and then cease. But since you’re now keeping five precepts rather than the eight precepts you observed while on retreat, you can indulge in a film rental if you want to.

So that’s what you do. You head off to the store, get the movie, return home, prepare your popcorn, stick the DVD into the machine, and finally settle in to enjoy the movie. Then you notice the screen is blank ... the DVD player is broken! That’s the world that has just arisen for you. Thus you make an effort to practice “in the sensed is merely what is sensed.” But what you sense—in this case, keen disappointment—isn’t always what you want to sense. The content of the world doesn’t always end up conforming to your plans for it. In this instance, the world that came into being didn’t follow the expectations you had at the end of the retreat; it arose according to factors other than your desire. These things happen, since the content of the world is impermanent and unpredictable. So in a situation like this, you simply remember that “in the sensed is merely what is sensed,” and then you attempt to keep the experience empty of self. You don’t cling to disappointment and consequently become a disappointed person; you just let it arise and pass away. By not taking ownership of disappointment, you keep it devoid of self. Try to practice in this way even with strong disappointments.

For example, if you’ve made a mistake and been strongly criticized for it, you may feel a deep sense of disappointment in yourself. If this happens, don't escalate it into self-disparagement by thinking about what a failure you are. If you do this, then you're channeling more energy into the sense of self that's already been born into the mind. If you can just bear with something unpleasant like disappointment or criticism, that keeps it empty of self. This is a more difficult thing to do, but you can see the value of not creating more conditions that lead to suffering. If you can learn to simply stay with the disappointments that life inevitably brings, and know that in the disappointment there is just disappointment, then, in being the witness rather than the participant in the situation, you're practicing the roots of renunciation. What are you renouncing? You're renouncing a desire to blame yourself or others. You're also relinquishing a desire to distract yourself from the problem at hand. In other words, you're letting go.

Letting go is more difficult than distracting ourselves because it requires that we bear with the unpleasant without getting involved in it. Our consciousness is conditioned to seek the pleasant and avoid the unpleasant—that's natural. And as humans, it's also natural for us to experience both pleasant and unpleasant feelings because the world presents itself in both pleasant and unpleasant ways. But if we're looking for freedom from suffering, we remember that—pleasant or unpleasant—the experience will change.

We often act out of habit instead of clarity. Something might happen that triggers a memory. That memory might bring up feelings and attitudes that applied to a completely different time and place; or it might bring up grief or happiness. Then we might find ourselves reacting to the feelings that the memory brought up. But if we just react habitually in this way, we miss the chance to examine whether our motives and actions are skillful or unskillful. Picking up the world from clarity is different. If we pick up the world from clarity, then when there's a movement in consciousness (such as anger or gratitude), we observe it before we grasp at it. We can now choose whether or not it's something we should stay with. When we're able to notice the movements in consciousness without attaching to them, that's letting go. Letting go doesn't mean that we never pick up the world—we can still do that. But now we're picking it up very skillfully.

In Pali, the word for greed is "*lobha*." *Lobha* has a much broader connotation than the English word "greed." It refers to that aspect of consciousness that is always seeking the pleasant. This constant seeking of the pleasant makes experiencing the unpleasant more difficult. "*Dosa*" is the Pali word for aversion. It has also been translated as hatred or ill-will. *Dosa* refers to that aspect of consciousness that is continually trying to avoid the unpleasant. As such, *dosa* underlies all that which I am averse to, while *lobha* underlies all that which I am attracted to. Greed and aversion would be the causes, for instance, of fidgeting in meditation, since we're greedy for comfort and averse to discomfort. If we fidget every time we feel discomfort, then we're strengthening both the greed and the aversion. Of course, sometimes we have to move to avoid injuring ourselves. But if we need to move, it's better to observe that need first, and then ask ourselves, "Is it really necessary to move, or am I just acting from greed and aversion?" In other words, when it's necessary to move, it's better to do it from a state of clarity rather than of ignorance. The same is true whenever we pick up the world.

The capacity to identify something and know it just as it is, without injecting a sense of self into it, is also part of "in the sensed is merely what is sensed." It's not about me having greed or thinking that I'm a terrible person for being greedy. Rather, it's about noticing: "Greed feels this way. Aversion feels this way." We do the same with the roots of the wholesome by simply noticing: "Compassion feels this way. Appreciation of others feels this way. Renunciation feels this way." This is how we practice Buddhist bird-watching.

If you're a bird-watcher, you can see the difference between a loon and a cormorant right away, can't you? And yet their forms are quite similar. If someone hasn't done a lot of bird-watching, they probably can't differentiate between them. This shows us that we can become very attuned to distinguishing subtle differences between birds simply by training ourselves to tell them apart. We get a pair of binoculars, observe the birds, and then consult the bird-watching guide. After a while, we can identify the birds just by glancing at them. In the same way, the inner vigilance of Buddhist bird-watching allows us to become increasingly better at identifying which impulses of ours are skillful and which are unskillful.

But we need to be careful not to make a big fuss when we make a mistake. After getting upset with ourselves enough times, we come to realize that it's more skillful to be self-forgiving rather than self-disparaging. After all, *not* filling the mind with self-recriminations is so much more peaceful than filling it with such difficult energy. By just observing what leads to peace and what doesn't, we experience a natural movement towards letting go of suffering, towards compassion. When we practice in this way, our inner vigilance isn't forced, nor is it harsh. It's honest. It has integrity. We're simply taking responsibility for what's going on in our hearts and minds.

Of course, the more challenging the feelings are that are arising, the more challenging it is to notice that it's like *this*. If you go home for Christmas and encounter a difficult relative who presses your buttons, this can give rise to very strong feelings. When intense feelings come up, it's quite hard to practice "it is just this way," and *not* create a sense of self and other around those emotions. So we can see how applying this teaching in some areas of life can be quite difficult. However, the more we apply this principle in the meditation hall, or at those times that aren't too stressful for us, the more adept we become at it. Take pain, for instance. We all experience a certain amount of pain during meditation. If you can (without injuring yourself) apply the teaching "in the sensed is merely what is sensed," then the pain remains simply a physical experience and not "you" having the pain. After you've watched the pain for a while, you can pick up the world and change your posture—that's allowed. If you can learn to practice equanimity around a certain degree of discomfort, then when you eventually have to face more serious pain—whether it be physical or emotional—you'll be able to handle it more skillfully because you will have trained in this way.

If we know that a particular situation is going to be taxing for us, we can set an intention beforehand to act more skillfully when confronted with it. For example, I was talking to someone who has an extremely difficult relationship with their brother to the point that simply having to see him makes the sense of self arise very strongly in them. In a situation like this, you can make a determination along the lines of "OK, when I see him, I'm really going to try to notice the arising of tightness in my stomach, and so on." In essence, you're pre-programming the mind to respond with a skillful approach to the situation, rather than succumbing to the unskillful reaction: "Oh God, I have to see him again. I'm not going to be able to handle it!" Then you do what you can to not follow any negative impulses that might arise when you see him. You do your best to cultivate thoughts of compassion, of loving-kindness towards him.

There's tremendous freedom in abandoning impulsive mental habits and not picking up the world in the same old ways we have in the past. Picking up the world in the right way is rewarding and certainly makes sense. So remember: "In the seen is merely what is seen, in the heard is merely what is heard, in the sensed is merely what is sensed, and in the cognized is merely what is cognized." Not making more of things than they actually are is something we can learn to do as we keep in mind that the way to the end of suffering is just this.

9

Gradual or Sudden Enlightenment?

Based on an evening talk given at Tisarana Monastery in 2007.

In Buddhism and in Eastern spirituality in general, enlightenment is usually seen as being either a gradual or sudden phenomenon. In the case of instant enlightenment, the argument goes—and I'm oversimplifying a bit here—that there's nothing to do because you're already enlightened. You simply have to see through delusion and not get caught up in it. The gradual path to enlightenment, on the other hand, is one where you just keep carrying on with the practice, and in the course of time, perhaps lifetimes, you finally realize enlightenment.

However, I don't think these two different approaches to enlightenment need to be mutually exclusive. In the Thai Forest tradition, through teachers like Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, we come to understand that "now is the knowing." In the Thai language, they use the expression "poo roo," which means to "be the knowing" or "be the awakened consciousness." The idea is that this awareness or this awakened consciousness is intrinsically pure. So you can't purify it, nor can you sully it. You also can't become it. You can only *be* it. You can only awaken to it. Viewed in this way, it doesn't make sense to say, "I'm going to awaken tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow, or when I go on my next retreat." It just doesn't compute.

In essence, awakened consciousness is simply knowing "This is the way it is, right now." It's rather like when Ajahn Kusalo and I were walking down one of the main roads near the monastery, and we suddenly realized: "Oh, there's Denny's cottage." There was an instant recognition of what we knew to be Denny's cottage. Or, let's say you're traveling across a bridge over the Mississippi River and you remark, "That's the Mississippi River." You recognized the river; you *knew* what it was. It's the same with awakened consciousness. You just keep recognizing: "This is awakened consciousness." This kind of awareness is pure. There's no place other than *here*, and no moment other than *now*.

When we think about our own practice, we might conclude, "I'm a better person for having worked at this for a number of years. Now there's less greed, hatred, and delusion; there's also less fear. And there's more compassion and happiness. It's different now—there's been a change." In this sense, we might say that awakening is gradually taking place as our practice deepens over time. But how did that change take place? What does that change imply? One thing that it does not imply is that the purity of consciousness has changed. Awareness is always awareness. However, awareness can sometimes get "kidnapped." This happens when we spend our lives engrossed in thoughts, fears, worries, and all those other things we experience as human beings, both pleasurable and not-so-pleasurable, which entangle us in delusion and result in a lack of mindfulness.

The wrong definition of the gradual path to enlightenment occurs when people think, "There's something wrong with me. I've got too much fear, too much anger. I have to get rid of all this stuff, and then I'll eventually be a better, happier person." That viewpoint is, of course, heavily invested with a strong sense of self. In addition to being self-view, it's also wrong view. And that's why people who favor the idea of sudden enlightenment think that the gradual path to enlightenment is a mistaken notion. The right view (*sammā- diṭṭhi*) on the arising of a negative mind-state would be: "This condition is present. Having arisen, how can I sustain awareness around it?" If awareness can be sustained around a difficult mood or emotion, then it won't delude the sense of knowing, so the condition will be recognized for exactly what it is.

We've all seen our tendency to get swamped by the powerful energies of greed, fear, depression, jealousy, anger, and so forth. We can also get thoroughly caught up in thoughts, in distractions, and in programmed modes of reactivity. The constant challenge, if we're not to be overwhelmed by these conditions, is to sustain this awakened consciousness, which is always in the present moment and never in the future or the past. If we're mindful of our fear and anger, and can recognize them just as they are in the present moment, then the fear is less powerful, the anger is less powerful. How does that process work? In a sense, it's instantaneous—but it's also gradual.

Let's imagine that my mind is moving towards some depressed state. Because of the depression, I've suffered, worked with it, understood it, and now I acknowledge: "Depression feels like *this*." I take the time to feel the sensations of depression in the body, since the body is always in the present moment. So the sustaining of that awareness is always in the present moment and involves being in a state of knowing. And that's what enlightenment is about: being awake to whatever feeling is arising. We're mistaken when we think that there's something wrong with "me" that can only be resolved by "me" becoming something else in the future. In reality, there's only a condition that has arisen which needs to be recognized so that its power over us can be dispelled.

Now, what we're waking up to might be very unpleasant, so the challenge is to recognize and be fully conscious of that negative mind-state without wanting it to end or to be different from what it is. That's what we're being asked to do: to be aware of the mind-state as it is—without craving, without blaming, without distraction, and without identifying with the mind-state as "me" or "my" or "mine." We simply recognize: "Right now, it's like *this*." We can be free from suffering or unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) even in the midst of an unpleasant mood if we can know unpleasantness as just another aspect of experience, and then be patient until that time when it ceases. In some cases, the unpleasant aspect of a strong mood may persist for a long time. Moods such as loneliness or hopelessness can have quite a strong momentum. So we persevere with the practice I just described. In this way, the end of suffering can be known moment-by-moment until the unpleasantness eventually runs out of steam.

Because the craving mind usually doesn't want to be with a difficult mental state, we need to bring some determination (*adhiṭṭhāna*) to the task of simply being with the way things are, in this instant. We see this on meditation retreats, don't we? We come to a retreat and some painful emotion or mood comes up, and the teacher says, "Hang in there. Be aware. Feel it in the body." We also have to develop patience (*khanti*) by adopting the attitude of "I'm really going to watch this now." And when we cultivate that kind of forbearance, we're showing a determination to bring awareness to what's coming up for us. It's not a blindly willful determination. Rather, it's simply an attitude of wanting to understand this mind-state.

With this determination comes a willingness to just be with whatever is arising in the present moment. Instead of wanting to become someone who's more patient when facing difficult moods and emotions in the future, we're being patient right now. We're really doing the work of not resisting experience. And as a consequence of doing this work with determination and patience, we see its immediate results in the present moment. We come to realize that the path to enlightenment which the Buddha set out for us can only be in the here and now—that is, instantaneous—because we can only work in the present moment, we can only wake up *now*.

Yet we also see the gradual results of this kind of mental training. We see that after having worked at this practice for a number of years, and in spite of our tendency to still get overwhelmed at times, we're better people. No matter what the self-disparaging mind may say, over time we've changed for the better. We're happier, calmer, easier to get along with, more forgiving, more patient, etc. And this gradual improvement has come about as the result of our ability to sustain awareness in the present moment.

It's very important to understand these truths. We need to recognize what mindful awareness is, and know that there's a way of being, of knowing, that is not a sense experience. Mindful awareness is not the same as seeking comfort and happiness through the six senses—it's quite different. When it becomes apparent that the seeking or getting rid of physical or mental experiences is endless and ultimately futile, then the craving for different sense experiences begins to dissolve. There's a shift in consciousness: you're now willing to bear witness to difficult mind-states rather than once again seeking compensations and distractions in the face of them.

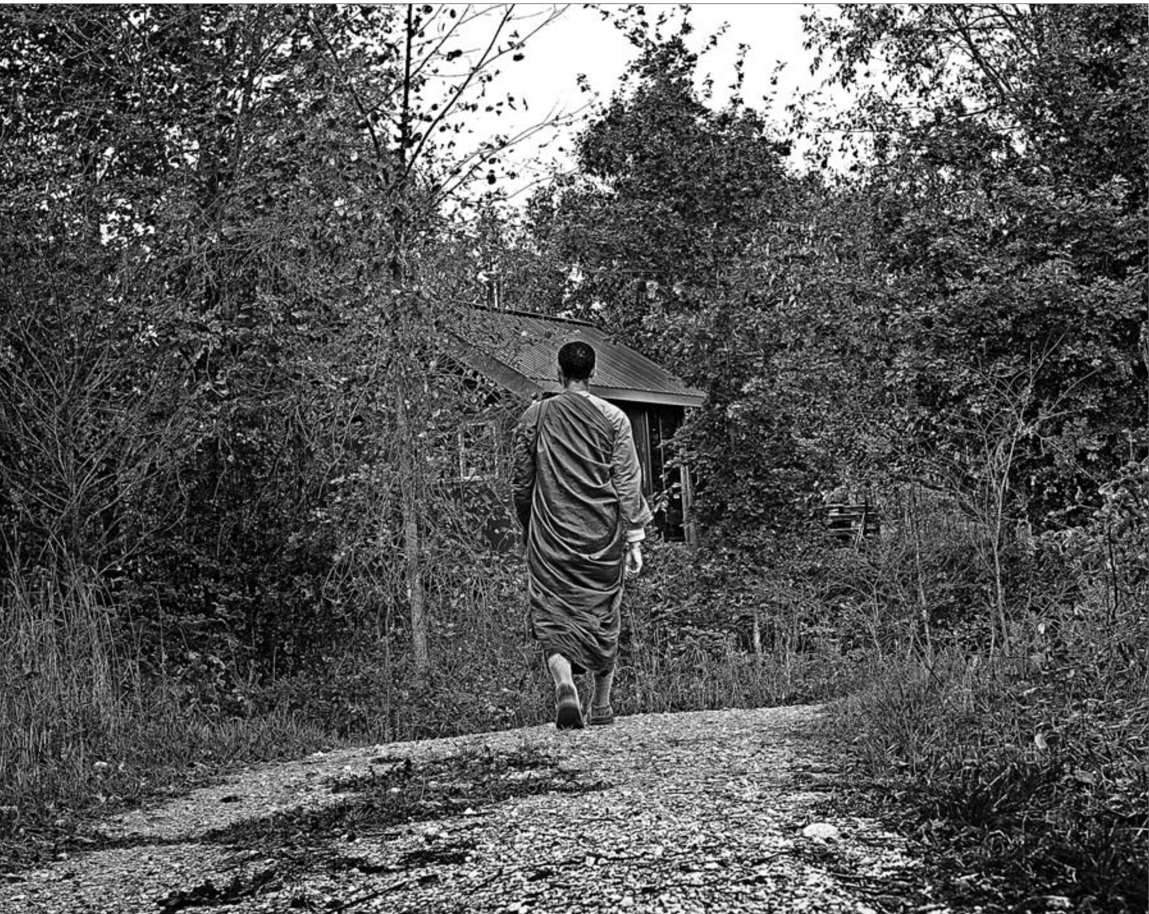
As a young monk in Thailand, whenever I was fed up with living in the monastery and found myself longing to be somewhere else, I'd ask myself, "If you can't be with this experience, where are you going to go?" That's where renunciation comes in. Renunciation (*nekkhamma*) shifts our attention away from a craving relationship to sense objects such as sights, sounds, tastes, sensations, and ideas, to the coming back to that which knows sense objects. Renunciation is not a denial or repression of craving. Rather, it's being aware that we cannot ultimately fulfill our desire for happiness through craving, since the very objects of our craving—whether it be a cheeseburger or the latest text message from a friend—are impermanent and uncertain (*anicca*), and therefore unsatisfactory. Worst of all, they leave the sense of craving unsatisfied. And if the sense of craving has not been seen for what it is—a hunger that can never be truly satisfied—then it goes on and on.

So once we see craving for what it is, what exactly are we left with? Well, we're left with "This is the way things are," which is instant enlightenment, moment-by-moment. And we're enlightened not because we've rejected anything, but because we've seen into the true reality of things. Once we reach this point, we begin to see what suffering is all about. We see that *dukkha* isn't just about being unhappy. It's the fact that sense experience itself is unsatisfactory. This may seem like a "wet blanket" way of looking at sense consciousness. It may also make Buddhism seem like a "downer" religion. But if we find ourselves thinking in this way, we're missing the point. The real point of acknowledging the limits of sense consciousness is to re-shape our understanding of sense consciousness.

Ajahn Sumedho would often ask, "What does a Buddha know that others don't know?" The answer is: "A Buddha knows that that which has the nature to arise, has the nature to cease. And it is not personal." When we perceive things in this way, we begin to be objective in our observations and become a witness to the changing flow of consciousness. Once we see into the inconstant nature of all conditioned phenomena (including sense objects), we see the *dukkha* that comes from forming attachments to things that simply won't last. And when we've understood that all conditioned things have an inherent tendency to arise and to cease—putting them beyond our control—we can enjoy them while we have them, without becoming attached to them. The same is true of our various mind-states that come and go: we recognize them, but we don't attach to them as "ours." We just let them be. With this greater understanding comes a sense of peace as a result of our not wanting things to be other than how they are.

Of course, each of us has to work this out for ourselves. So when negative states of mind come up, we apply the right view or right understanding I've been talking about. And right view leads to right intention (*sammā-sankappa*), which, in this case, means orienting our lives in the direction of this new understanding. At this point, your whole intellectual system is now in line with the Dhamma, so you're no longer operating from a sense of self or ego, nor are you being repeatedly overwhelmed by challenging conditions, such as anger or craving for a particularly enticing sense object. Eventually, the whole path of Dhamma practice comes together with this idea of "This is the way it is, right now."

However, we also see how difficult it is to sustain this awareness of the way it is now for longer periods of time. We're challenged because our underlying habits of mind—or what we call our "latent tendencies" (*anusaya*)—often derail our best intentions. These harmful mental habits include sensual desire, aversion, speculative views, doubt, conceit, wanting to become, and ignorance. So on the one hand, it's quite easy for us to practice "This is the way it is, right now." On the other hand, our latent tendencies are so ingrained that, in the beginning at least, it's hard for us to sustain that awareness for more than a few seconds or a minute at a time. Yet as we continue to practice in this way and encourage ourselves in the right manner, our ability to sustain the recognition that "This is the way it is, right now" becomes ever stronger. Then the whole Noble Eightfold Path becomes quite beautiful. Everything becomes clearer and fits together as we come to experience the real blessings of the Buddha's teachings.



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Living a Contemplative Life

Based on two talks given at a retreat sponsored by Satipañña Insight Meditation Toronto in July 2013.

Our Reflective Capacity

The teachers who have most inspired and encouraged me in my own spiritual training have always offered their teachings for reflection rather than as the basis for assuming dogmatic positions. Buddhism has a well-developed doctrine, but when doctrine is merely held as an opinion, it easily becomes the source of a lot of argumentative debate that is not productive. The task of the contemplative is to take a teaching and internalize it, thereby making it alive in your own heart. You do this because you have faith in a teaching, rather than any blind belief in it. When I hear a teaching that makes sense to me, I need to learn how to apply it to my own life. This is a reflective capacity that we have as human beings.

I like to differentiate between what I believe in and what I can reflect upon in a very alive way. I find this helpful because I'm not always sure whether the ideas presented in Buddhism are true or not. But then there are things that I know for sure are true. For example, if you tell me that killing people is going to make me happy, I'll say "no" because I know that harming people is not conducive to happiness. However, if you ask me about rebirth, I'll say, "Beats me."

In my early days as a monk, I struggled with those areas of Buddhist doctrine whose truthfulness was difficult to prove one way or another. I thought that if I couldn't know for myself if something was true, then it mustn't be true. I came to see that attitude as quite arrogant. Then I felt that I had to believe in a teaching such as rebirth because *I'm a Buddhist monk, after all!* But that way of thinking didn't feel authentic either. Then I began to reflect: "What if it was true? How would that affect me? And what would that imply about the way I live my life and how I perceive my world?" That worked for me. I thought to myself, "I'll take this model on as a kind of working hypothesis." That challenged my own beliefs and world views that weren't so well formulated at the time. I found this to be a helpful strategy to apply to those areas of the teachings I just wasn't sure about. I felt that I could take them on board because there was so much within Buddhist doctrine that I already trusted.

This reflective capacity is what defines human consciousness. In Thailand, it's said that a biped isn't necessarily a human being—that it's living morally and reflecting on the way things are that qualifies you as such. This is a higher definition of Homo sapiens than we typically encounter. So to be fully human, we need to have this capacity to investigate and understand life, which involves a training of the mind and heart.

When I reflect on the Buddha's teachings, I obviously come at it from a monastic angle. That's how I learned about this tradition. I met my first Buddhist monk in India in 1971, and within a couple of months, I wanted to ordain. When I went to Thailand to train as a monk, I had never done a meditation retreat; I didn't even know what retreats were, much less who Ajahn Chah was. I just felt a strong pull to be in monastic life. Although we don’t all have the vocation to be a monk or a nun, I think that all of us gathered here today have a bit of the monk or nun in us. We all have that aspiration for a deeper meaning in life; otherwise, we wouldn’t be here.

As Theravada monastics, we have different lifestyle conventions and social responsibilities that we adhere to which are collectively known as the Vinaya. These 227 rules of conduct include moral precepts, legal processes, hierarchical considerations, ways of assigning authority, guidelines for interacting with laypeople, and so forth. Our monastic training has two streams of practice: the first encompasses our conventions of social etiquette, while the second centers on our stream of consciousness approach to understanding ourselves. In terms of the social, ethical way that I live, I’m defined as Ajahn Viradhammo. I have a Canadian passport, a Social Insurance Number, a diary, my responsibilities as the abbot of Tisarana Monastery, etc. That’s when we use the sense of “I”—the sense of my being a particular person. This sometimes gets confusing in light of the Buddhism concept of not-self. “Not-self is going to the dentist.” This doesn’t make sense, so we say that “I” go to the dentist. In conventional reality, each of us does conceive of himself or herself as a person, which defines how we operate in the world in terms of our livelihood, morality, social responsibilities, social activism, care for the land, and so on.

As bhikkhus, our monastic training with respect to how we live is quite detailed. Because we’re encouraged to try to keep things as simple as possible, one of the strong suggestions that we work with is “contentment with little.” This is a very important perception to cultivate. Oftentimes our culture promotes the opposite messages: more is better, supersize everything, buy the upgraded model, wear the latest fashion, etc. To incline the mind towards contentment with little is countercultural, and hence a powerful antidote to the restless consumerism of our society. So as monks, we're encouraged to consider the basic monastic requisites of food, clothing, shelter, and medical care as "good enough for the day."

It's essential to know how to use our capacities for reflection and perception for training the mind. When I first entered the monastery as a trainee, I was *not* content with little; in fact, I was not content *at all.* Forty years ago, contentment was not one of my strong points. But if I thought that I *had* to be content with little, then I was finished from the get-go. Taking the ego-position that I am someone who should be content is not a real training of the mind; rather, it's a form of inner tyranny. To illustrate what I mean by this, let's imagine that I sit down and look at the food being offered to me and think, "This is rubbish! Oh no, I *shouldn't* think like that." So instead I try to tell myself, "Laypeople are really kind. Thank you, thank you." But instead of actually feeling this, I'm thinking, "Gosh, I don't want to be here." When I think that I have to be a certain way, I've attached to an ideal that's not at all indicative of the way things are. So when I feel that I should be grateful and content with little, that's not being reflective.

For me, being reflective means that as I receive my alms-food, I try to be mindful not just of my physical actions, but also of my inner attitude in each and every situation. And as I'm aware of my inner attitude, I can also consider whether my mind is involved in wholesome or unwholesome thinking. If I'm feeling discontented with the food I've been given, I can reflect on that and ask myself, "How did the Buddha ask me to train?" He asked me to train to be content with little. Now I can make a choice not to pursue this feeling of discontent, which is not denying it. I'm not saying that I shouldn't feel discontented; I'm simply no longer making it the core value of my life. Instead, I'm choosing to cultivate a different core value: to be content with little. This is how we go about training in perception, which is very different from training in idealism. We're observing discontent arising and then we're noting that discontent feels this way in the body. Then we shift our mind to a more wholesome perception: "Yes, discontent may be present, but still, thank you for this food."

Perhaps your discontent is so deep that you can't do anything about it. If so, then you simply have to hang in there. When I was involved in very rigorous training as a young monk in Thailand, there were times when I felt that I couldn't bear it any more—I just wanted to jump the wall. So I'd reflect: "This is the feeling of wanting to jump the wall." As I stayed with that feeling of wanting to escape, it would eventually cease, even though I hadn't run away. When Ajahn Sumedho became really frustrated with some aspect of monastic life, he'd say, "I can't take another moment of this! ... Oh, there's another moment." This capacity we have to become fully conscious of our inner world, to awaken to the totality of the present moment, is the true basis of understanding ourselves and realizing the highest possibilities of human consciousness.

For monastics, the Vinaya provides a kind of mirror with which to look at our behavior. How am I behaving around the requisites? How am I using the communal resources? How am I relating to senior and junior monks? What is my speech like? How do I admonish correctly? How do I receive admonishment? The Buddha conferred this wealth of teachings upon the monastic community because he lived within it. Laypeople, however, have to extrapolate what these guidelines might mean in the context of non-monastic life. The principles remain the same though.

Consider right speech, which is addressed in the fourth of the Five Precepts. This precept states: "I undertake the precept to refrain from lying, divisive gossip, swearing, and foolish speech. I undertake to train in right speech, to speak in concord, truthfully, and beautifully." Because language is so powerful in terms of producing either beneficial or harmful effects, good communication is obviously very important. When we study the Buddha's teachings on right speech, we tend to observe our own speech more carefully. In this way, we become more deliberately conscious of how we communicate with others. And when we compare our own habits of speech to the Buddha's recommendations, we gain insight into what is skillful and what is unskillful. This gives rise to the intention to refrain from harming ourselves and others with wrong speech. We do this by developing inner boundaries and markers to help guide us in the ways we converse with others.

As part of my own spiritual practice, I write down the elements of right speech and then I really explore them until they become ingrained in my consciousness. By doing this, these teachings—which continue to echo in my mind—become an integral part of my daily life. They remind me to mindfully choose the path of least suffering, or what's known in Pali as *dukkha*—also translated as "unsatisfactoriness" or "stress." As an example of how this works, I may find myself talking with someone and notice that I'm stretching the truth. This may not be totally immoral, but because I've pondered right speech as it relates to truthfulness, I can, even as I'm speaking, ask myself, "Why do I have to overstate the truth? What's going on in my consciousness that I now need to be untruthful in some way?" Because the reflective mind is awake and aware, I see: "Ah, I want this person to like me." Or "I want to manipulate them." Or "I like to exaggerate to get more attention." Then there's some understanding of my motive for embellishing the truth. And because this understanding is there, I can then choose to refrain from engaging in speech that is grounded in attitudes of selfishness or deceit. This course of action isn't easy, but it's a noble and potentially very fruitful one.

Because these impulses—which are the causes of wrong speech and the suffering it engenders—are no longer being given free rein, they tend to die away. So there's less regret and confusion in the mind over having spoken untruthfully in one way or another. If we're aspiring to follow the Buddha's teachings, we try to communicate from a place of compassion and wisdom, which are the roots of right speech. Therefore, we train ourselves to act in accordance with the Buddha's basic recommendations to "Do good, refrain from causing harm, and purify the heart." This is not a form of idealism, but rather the hard work of right mindfulness and right effort.

So far we've been looking at the first kind of truth, which is known in Buddhism as "conventional truth," in which on a functional, social level, I'm Ajahn Viradhammo, abbot of a monastery, living within a world of responsibilities and relationships. Because these social parameters are clearly defined, it's easy for me to dedicate my life to being a monk. If my social role wasn't so well defined or if I had a whole array of social roles to choose from, I might end up spending a lot of my time trying to get my social life in order. I think we've all seen that getting our lives totally right on an external level is impossible. So the more clearly we can define the social conventions we live by, the easier it will be for us to engage in inner reflection and find inner peace. The Buddha suggests that we try to maintain a stable lifestyle and, as much as possible, a simple one, too. As a monk, I can't say what that is for laypeople. But I think we all feel that "less, not more" is a good attitude to have in modern life. Certainly, having a simpler life where we don't get caught up in too much busyness or too many trivial distractions gives us more space in which to reflect.

We now come to the second way that the Buddha asks us to look at life—one that doesn't reference a sense of self. This second kind of truth is called "ultimate truth," and on this level of reality, we no longer think in terms of "me" or "mine." Instead, we witness our stream of consciousness as a physical and mental phenomenon that is always changing according to the arising and passing away of myriad causes and conditions. When I say "stream of consciousness," I don't just mean the rushing flow of thoughts as exemplified in the literature of James Joyce; rather, I'm referring to stream of consciousness in the Buddhist sense. This includes all of the events in the conscious realm: sights, sounds, bodily feelings, smells, tastes, emotions, thoughts, perceptions, memories, and all other phenomena that constitute our inner world. Instead of relating to conscious experience in a personal way, we now relate to experience through the awareness of change.

As we investigate this deeper level of reality, we notice that our bodies are sensitive to temperature, to pleasure and pain, and to comfort and discomfort. We also see that emotional feelings affect us both mentally and physically, and that the thinking mind responds to the presence of stress in the body. For instance, let's say that I go for a job interview and that creates mental and physical stress, both during and after the interview. This is natural. This is Dhamma (or the nature of what-is), and I can observe it through the awareness of change. In effect, I can become intimate with the ever-changing nature of my experience. That's a stepping out of taking things personally, a stepping out of the storyline into a more fundamental knowing of thought as simply thought, bodily feeling as simply bodily feeling, and emotion as simply emotion. Rather than relating to these experiences as the subject (or person) who is experiencing them, I become more of an objective witness to their unfolding. This reflective skill of knowing what's going on in my inner world is something that needs to be developed.

In the same way, when I'm talking with someone, I'm trying to not only get my idea across or hear what they're saying, but I'm also attempting to notice what my inner world is doing in the course of the discussion. So I'm essentially living on two levels. Most of us do this from time to time, don't we? Let's imagine that you're talking with someone and you find you're getting uptight about what they're saying. Maybe they're expressing some strong opinions about politics or religion that you disagree with. So there's the discussion going on, but there's also the heartfelt reaction to it. If the inner reaction is unskillful, I can patiently watch it until it eventually ceases, rather than getting embroiled in it and being the victim of habitual reactivity. This is a skill that needs to be honed—one that we get better and better at with practice. In effect, not only am I functioning socially, but I'm also witnessing the way things are in the stream of consciousness of my inner world. Hence when we refer to awareness and not-self, as in "Feelings are not-self," we're referring to this impersonal or "witnessing" level of experience.

But as I mentioned, when we're talking about social responsibility, we're back to the self-referencing. For example, if my fellow bhikkhus find me acting inappropriately and causing harm to others, it would be ridiculous for me to say, "This behavior is not-self." Instead, I need to be responsible for my conduct and try to live according to the principles of morality and generosity that the monastic code requires of me. So the social level of reality also matters, which is why we want to get that as neat or as right as possible. But as important as it is for us to function well as individuals within social parameters, if we only have that part of the equation, then we'll never realize the peace that comes with knowing that all things that arise, pass away. On the other hand, if we ignore the fact that we're individuals with social and moral responsibilities, then that will confuse us so much that we won't even have the capacity for reflection. Therefore, part of the method of Buddhism is right living to the best of our abilities. To have a flawless outer life, however, is impossible because our experiences are dependent on so many variables.

As we gain more understanding of how our consciousness works and what is and isn't conducive to peace, we can start to develop the right language with which to train ourselves. For instance, when I'm meditating, I'll often silently repeat to myself the word "non-anticipation." This helps me to become aware of any sense of anticipation that may be arising in the mind. Almost all meditators experience the desire to try to get some result because that's how we're conditioned to see effort: "If I make an effort to do something, I expect to get something out of it. I'm not doing this for nothing." But if I'm able to patiently stay aware of the feeling of anticipation, knowing it will change, then the anticipation changes to non-anticipation. So the use of the word "non-anticipation" can help me to notice my tendency to reach forward to the next moment during meditation. This is quite useful, since I'm now in the position to choose to notice the changing nature of anticipation, rather than attaching to that feeling through a lack of awareness.

As a young monk, I came to see how the wise use of language was also a form of right thought. In other words, it came about as a direct result of understanding the way things are. When I first started to meditate, I was an extremely willful and testosterone-driven monk with a very gaining mind: I thought I was going to get enlightened tomorrow! Although this kind of ignorance was well-intentioned, it was still wrong understanding. After suffering through an enormous amount of willful effort, with various teachers telling me to "take it easy," I finally began to reflect on what right effort was. I began to contemplate: "Well, that doesn't work—that's for sure. So what does work?" That was the beginning of right understanding for me.

If we can maintain an attitude of inner vigilance—observing and reflecting on our suffering and the errors we make in our practice—then our choices in life become more in tune with the Dhamma. As a result of this, the suffering that we create through ignorance fades away. This kind of training is very pragmatic; it allows me to see that when I try too hard, I get a bad result. What would produce a good result then? So I tell myself, "Be gentler, kinder to yourself. Take it easy, be more patient." That language is coming from insight. Thus, from right understanding, you get right thought, right suggestion, and right aspiration.

Working with Perceptions

Besides having a reflective capacity, we also have the capacity to perceive. This is a necessary part of living in the world: you know where the kitchen is, what a car is, etc. Perception, which operates through memory, builds up the world around us. Your city, partner, boss, and even your own personality are created through the perceptions you have of them. Sometimes our perceptions are neutral and merely functional, as when we perceive that this is a traffic light, this is a spoon, this is a dog, and so on. Sometimes perceptions are loaded with unseen biases based on culture, gender, and other forms of conditioning. It's not uncommon to be the victim of unskillful perceptions that are founded on ignorance. Consider someone who's raised in a very racist culture where one ethnic group is demonized by another. To the unreflective person, the sense of another ethnic group being inferior to one's own can seem like an absolute truth. So these kinds of perceptions can become ingrained habits of mind which then create an ostensible reality that's fraught with suffering.

On the other hand, it's also possible to be aware of perceptions as objects of the mind, and to discern which ones are conditioned by delusion. Once we've discerned which perceptions are unskillful, we can then direct the mind towards perceptions that are skillful and that lead to the end of suffering. My elderly mother would often say to me, "I really like that Buddhist idea of what comes, goes." I'd think to myself, "Good for you, Mum." She used the perception of impermanence to help her during her bouts of arthritic agony and suchlike. In Buddhism, we refer to this way of interpreting a set of events as *anicca-saññā*, or the perception or recognition of change. It's important to keep in mind that we're not just "prisoners" or victims of a whole set of perceptions that have been built up over the course of a lifetime. We can also introduce new perceptions into the mind which enable us to experience greater peace.

As we observe our inner world, we need to discern when perception is skillful and when it's unskillful, thereby causing us distress. That's not a judgment—it's more of an assessment of the situation through watching what's going on in your mind. If we pick up the teachings of the Buddha, we can ask ourselves, "What perceptions did he encourage? What perceptions might be skillful?"

In guided meditation, I sometimes suggest that you work with the perception of the body being in awareness. However, if you then go on to interpret that perception as an absolute truth and take up the philosophical position that awareness is vast and unchanging and that all conditioned things arise and pass away in awareness—then OK, big deal. Does that statement really help you in any way? But to actually use that perception as you're practicing meditation is radically different. Notice how a perception is not asking you to believe in anything. You just try it out and see how it works. For example, notice how sound is in awareness. Then notice how the body is in awareness. That's the use of perception.

In my own practice, this has a good effect because it brings me to a state of peaceful, silent awareness that's not dependent on these objects of awareness being in my field of consciousness. I find that very freeing.

What happens when you take up the perception of all things transpiring in awareness and then begin to cultivate it? For instance, what happens when you apply that perception to an argument you're having with your neighbour? You'll probably discover that you have the mindfulness, the centeredness, and the quickness of mind to notice that the quarrel is transpiring *in* awareness. To me, that's very liberating. The argument is still going on, but once I see it as unfolding in awareness, the strong emotions I'm experiencing and all my attachments in their various forms start to dissolve. There's now a perspective on things. This shift in viewpoint is part of the larger movement of the stream of consciousness. More and more, I find that if something is happening in awareness, then I can make better choices about how to respond because I'm no longer being driven by my blind reactions to these objects of conscious experience.

Another very important perception that the Buddha suggested we develop is that of "dependent origination." In its most basic formulation, this teaching centers on the principle that with *this* being, *that* comes to be. With the arising of *this*, *that* arises. With *this* not being, *that* does not come to be. With the cessation of *this*, *that* ceases. Take the example of a light switch. With the light switch on, the light comes on. With this being, that comes to be. With the light switch off, the light goes off. With this not being, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases. That's a basic reality in nature much like the law of gravity. The principle of dependent origination is not constructed out of abstract thoughts; rather, it's something I can experience for myself and reflect upon.

For instance, with the air conditioning (as a condition) on, there is bodily comfort—for me, at least. With the arising of this, there is the arising of that. With the air conditioning not on, there is not bodily comfort. With the cessation of this, there is the cessation of that. This dynamic is playing out all the time.

Now apply the perception of dependent origination to your emotional life. Let's say that I'm talking with someone and I perceive them as acting aggressively towards me and that affects me. If I'm not aware of the principle of dependent origination, I might react by becoming equally aggressive, defensive, or submissive. And then they'll have their corresponding counterreaction and so on. But if I have enough mindfulness to reflect: "With this aggression as a condition, that sense of defensiveness comes to be," then all of a sudden I'm no longer the defensiveness; there's simply a reaction (i.e., defensiveness) in nature. This realization is very liberating because from that perspective I can choose to follow or not follow that feeling of defensiveness. Whereas if I'm simply in the midst of that reaction and I'm believing that I'm being unfairly treated and a sense of self arises, then, of course, I don't make skillful choices. I just *am* that reactive mechanism that leads to suffering. It's quite a skill to have enough inner vigilance to see: "With this as a condition, that arises. Without this, that does not arise." The mind is now available for a response that is in context and appropriate for the way things are. You can introduce that perception into your most complex life situations.

While we are responsible for our individual lives, what we're emphasizing when we look at life through the lens of dependent origination is that life is *not* to be taken personally. This is the paradox that you have to wrap your head around in Buddhism. And certainly don't take your personality personally, since that too depends on causes and conditions triggering off whatever kind of personality is manifesting at any given moment. For example, if an arrogant person approaches you, then one type of personality comes up. If you meet a kind and loving person, then a different kind of personality surfaces. But none of these personalities is actually "you" in any permanent, definitive sense. To have this perspective is very freeing.

I've been talking with friends about the notion that you have to change your personality as part of your spiritual development. That's a losing game, isn't it? Now, you don't want to hurt anyone of course; but to try to always be clever or charming or quick or upbeat—you'll never get that quite right. And so what if I am slow-witted under certain conditions? Is that *so* bad? When that happens, you simply notice that *this* is what slow-wittedness feels like in the body and mind. It's OK. Whereas if you take slow-wittedness as a personal problem, then you're always trying to become some quality that keeps eluding you, which in turn leads to the suffering that results from endless self-criticism and self-judgment. If we think that we need to develop a perfect personality as part of our spiritual path, then we'll always feel compelled to become a different, better personality. We can get really depressed trying to do this, since we can never live up to that ideal. The beauty of Buddhism is that it's not asking you to become a "personality." Instead, it's asking us to be decent human beings.

This basic formulation of "With this, there is that. With the ceasing of this, there is the cessation of that," is one of the perceptions that the Buddha asked us to introduce into our lives as an antidote to the perception of ego or self. To illustrate how this works, let's imagine that I made a cruel remark to someone with whom I was arguing last week. As I'm sitting in meditation, that memory comes up, together with the sense of my having been in an argument with someone. If I'm not careful, I could use that memory as an opportunity to hate myself by thinking, "I'm a terrible person. I shouldn't have said that." So with this memory as a condition, that self-referencing image comes to be. If I hold onto and buy into that sense of self, then I'm perpetuating the attachment to this sense of "me" and "mine."

But if I notice that there's no permanent person in that scenario even though there is a personality (or "memory-person") that arises in consciousness—and see that as a flow (i.e., with this as a condition, that arises)—then I see it's all just one piece. I also see that I don't always have that memory. I have other memories, too—ones of my having done something beneficial for someone. So with this memory of my cruel remark *not* being, that sense of myself as being a bad person does *not* come to be. Applying the perception of dependent origination to the flow of consciousness is one of the methodologies for letting go of taking this stream of consciousness personally. We discern that there's no fixed person there.

It's this kind of interpretation of the movement of consciousness that needs to be applied to our understanding of *anattā* (not-self). The teaching of *anattā* basically says that our mind-body experience is continuously changing according to causes and conditions, and that there's no essential, fixed entity at the center of it. If I have the presence of mind to know that, then I'm able to see memory as just memory when it does come up. I may remember something and think to myself, "What a stupid thing to have done." But that very sense of my being stupid is actually just a condition with the potential to trigger another type of self-view. Knowing how these things work, I patiently notice that this sense of myself as being foolish is just a thought—and nothing else. I don't need to believe in it.

Another area where many of us tend to cling to a limiting self-perception is that of body image. Consider body image and the difficult cultural norms surrounding body shapes. A self-perception can arise from all the cultural propaganda telling you that your body shape is wrong. For example, if you happen to have what the media calls a “pear-shaped body,” you might start thinking, “I’m someone who’s pear-shaped.” That’s a self-view. You can believe that perception and become very self-critical, or other people can become very critical of that body-type. You can see that with this kind of propaganda as a condition, that kind of self-view arises. If you subscribe to that particular spin on things, then you’re finished; they’ve got you. However, if you say to yourself, “With this kind of suggestion, there’s that kind of self-image,” then that’s not who you are. You’re not your body shape. That would be a disaster! You’re not ultimately pear-shaped; that’s just what bodies do over time. Certainly getting in shape and eating well is good. But we can get obsessed with these things and begin to think that somehow a fit and healthy body is where liberation lies. You do your best to take care of your body, but ultimately you come to see that real freedom lies in understanding how this flow of consciousness comes and goes.

The sense of self is extremely insidious. For this reason, we have to observe how a particular sense of self arises because of a certain cause or condition. Once you notice that happening in your mind, you can make a choice not to grasp at that self-conditioning. Instead, you see it as part of the impersonal stream of consciousness that we’ve been talking about. Once you’re able to do that, your mind begins to abide in the silence that knows this movement of coming and going. Your mind begins to see the end of self-view. But that’s not because you’ve rejected it or repressed it; rather, it’s the result of wisdom. There’s a profound sense of peace and freedom in no longer clinging to a sense of self, isn’t there? You don’t have to develop the perfect personality. It’s lovely.

However, if you *are* charming, then great. Ajahn Chah was the most charming and charismatic person. Ajahn Sumedho once asked him, "Why are you so charming? What's with the charisma?" Ajahn Chah replied, "It's my hook. It brings people to the practice of Dhamma." So he used these qualities for good rather than for his own self-inflation. But he could turn them off, too, when there was no longer the need for him to be that way. Sometimes not only was his charisma *not* there, but there was *no one* there. At Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah would often sit in a wicker chair on the bottom level of his hut and counsel various monks, nuns, and laypeople who had come from the town to meet with him. They would discuss their spiritual, business, or family problems with him, and he would give them advice and cheer them up. But once they left, you could see that Ajahn Chah was no longer there as a personality, even though he remained quietly seated in his chair. At first I felt confused by this, but then I just rested peacefully in that state of non-being, as it were. That was a very interesting insight into how personality can manifest when it's coming from a place of purity. Ajahn Chah's charm was a natural expression of compassion, joy, and wisdom.

When you have empathy and you're not consumed with self-referencing, then you don't have an agenda that might get in the way of your heartfelt response to what someone is saying or doing. A troubled person may come to you and your personality just arises in the context of your compassion for them. If a child shows you their beautiful drawing, you might say, "Ah, you're a Picasso!" You have joy in response to the child's own sense of delight. That arises in context. Or if the child is starting to play with matches, you'll have a more gruff personality as you tell them: "Don't do that. It's dangerous!" So personality is very fluid: it comes and goes.

Our tendency is to say things like "I'm not diligent enough." Or "I'm too angry." Or "I'm too fearful." Or even "I eat too much ice cream."

These statements correspond to the different self-views we take on. Once we see what our own self-creating tendencies are, we need to train in identifying which conditions engender them. Let's say that I'm prone to cynicism. I'm now going to notice that with this as a condition, cynicism arises. In this way, I become more aware of what conditions provoke cynicism in me so that I can mindfully choose not to follow my habitual reaction (of cynicism) to this triggering condition. That's using perception to train the mind in a good way. But this training is never the result of thinking, "I'm a bad person who needs to become a better person." In fact, it's completely divorced from any sense of self-view. We're ultimately doing this work in order to let go of the various unskillful mental and emotional habits that our attention gets caught up in.

Investigating Why We Suffer

It's helpful to ask the question, "With what as a condition, is there suffering?" That's why we're in this ballgame, isn't it? We want to be happy. If we suffer, then we want to free ourselves from that suffering—that's natural. Our aspiration for happiness exists on the physical, emotional, and spiritual levels. This aspiration is what leads us to investigate the cause of suffering. So we can ask ourselves, "With what as a condition, does suffering come to be? With the cessation of what, is there the cessation of suffering?" The Buddha's answer is that ignorance is the primal cause of suffering. In other words, with ignorance as a condition, there's the arising of suffering. What do we mean by ignorance? Ignorance, in the Buddhist sense of the word, is when I see permanence in that which is impermanent. This is a major cause of *dukkha* for us.

Common examples of this type of ignorance are when I think that this good health I'm enjoying will always be present, or when I think that death only happens in other families. The attachment to inspiration is another instance of this. It's wonderful when inspiration arises and we get that feeling of "Great, *now* I've got it!" Being inspired by a spiritual teacher is very much like this. At one moment I can feel incredibly uplifted by a teacher's words; but later on I can feel quite disappointed in that person. I can even hate that teacher who I was so devoted to some months ago on account of the fact that they no longer inspire me. This is because the feelings of uplift I experienced earlier are dependently originated. They arose because of causes and conditions, and they will likewise cease because of causes and conditions. From a Buddhist perspective, not seeing the truth of this is ignorance.

So seeing permanence in the impermanent is ignorance that will result in some form of suffering, including disappointment. It's quite simple, but insidious. You can also consider this idea from a different angle. Let's say that I'm in the monastery and I'm subject to the same chanting, the same monks, the same Dhamma talk, the same sticky rice, and the ever-present mosquitoes and heat ... day after day. Because intense boredom and exasperation are welling up in me, it all feels never-ending. Then I think, "Oh man, I can't take another fifty years of this Pali Buddhism!" We've all experienced some difficult emotion that feels eternal. But thinking that the feeling of eternal depression is permanent is ignorance. If, however, I can introduce the perspective of "With the arising of this, that arises. And with the cessation of this, that ceases" into the negative parts of my experience, then that feeling of eternal misery transforms into the realization that this is just the feeling of eternal misery; it will pass. Now I'm obviously not talking about clinical depression, but rather the more "garden-variety" bouts of unhappiness that we all have.

Another form of ignorance that leads to *dukkha* is when you perceive that which is not-self as a permanent self. It's important to remember that the body itself is a part of nature, which is subject to constant change. As such, the emotions within it are also natural, and they too come and go. Yet it's very tempting to create the sense of a permanent self around a certain mood of the mind, especially an intense one. Years ago, I contracted typhus in Thailand. It was an awful sickness. I remember feeling so utterly wretched and alone that I started to think of my mother—who was living in Canada—comforting me by feeding me grapes. My mood was that of a child wanting protection, although I was about thirty years old at the time.

Because the feeling of vulnerability was so real to me, it easily gave rise to the sense of a helpless, child-like self—as well as a sense of personal drama in my life. If I had clung to that particular self-image, I would have brought even more stress into the sickness by perhaps feeling sorry for myself and so forth. But once the condition (of feeling extremely vulnerable) had passed, so did that particular sense of self. Rather than indulging in thoughts like "Poor me. It's not fair. I wish I wasn't here"—which were being driven by my attaching to the sickness as "me" and "mine"—I tried to observe the sickness as a phenomenon in nature, albeit a very unpleasant one. When I was able to do this, I could abide in a mind that was empty of a sense of self. Thus the physical suffering didn't have to become mental suffering.

So with ignorance as a condition, there's suffering. Let's imagine that you went through an acrimonious divorce from your wife five years ago. What happens when someone compliments your former partner? They tell you: "She was really a wonderful woman, wasn't she?" Your blood boils! With memory as a condition, anger and resentment arise. Then you might think, "You really don't know her. The things she did to me ...." Another scenario might be: "Oh, no. I thought I had forgiven her. My meditation isn't working very well. I'm hopeless." That's taking the memory of your ex-wife and your reaction to it personally. If, on the other hand, you can choose to see the memory as just memory, and observe that memory feels this way in the body, then there's no opportunity for a sense of self to get triggered.

And if you do have a strong memory of someone or something, why shouldn't it be there for a lifetime? Why should it *have* to end? Its intensity might change, but if you get the right causes and conditions, it'll continue to arise. That's just the way memory works: it's neither good nor bad, although it might be difficult for you to experience. But if you can learn not to take your reaction to the memory personally, then that's seeing your reaction as not-self. It's also seeing it as dependently originated. Even if you might feel fury at the memory of a particular person, that's just fury. There's no intention to hurt that person. Or if there is a harmful intention forming, then you choose not to act on it. In this way, you're no longer taking that which is not-self as a permanent self.

Believing that the unsatisfactory is satisfactory is also an aspect of ignorance. This brings us back to the Pali word for suffering or unsatisfactoriness, which is *dukkha*. This is basically the unpleasant side of sense experience. According to the Buddha, *dukkha* is comprised of three different facets: *dukkha-vedanā* (unpleasant or painful sensation); *dukkha-saccā* (the Noble Truth of Suffering within the Four Noble Truths); and *dukkha-lakkhaṇa* (unsatisfactoriness as one of the three universal characteristics of existence). So I might say, for example, that the heat in this room this morning was *dukkha-vedanā* for this body. Right now, the air conditioning is *sukha-vedanā* (pleasant sensation). These two possibilities express the feeling of attraction or repulsion that's often present in sense experience.

Within Buddhism, the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness is typically contrasted with what is referred to as the Unconditioned, the Unoriginated, the Unformed, the Island, the Refuge, the Deathless, the Timeless, Peace, nibbāna, or enlightenment. One way to understand these terms is to notice that the knowing/awareness of conditioned phenomena is not a condition. The knowing/awareness of anger is not anger. And the knowing/awareness of doubt is not doubt. Having had his own realization of the Unconditioned, the Buddha was then able to point to that which is *not* that realization. So he drew our attention to the fact that anything that begins and ends cannot be timeless. In the same way, anything that is dependently originated cannot be independent. And anything that is born and dies cannot be deathless. Hence we see that letting go of the limited leads to the attainment of the unlimited.

As you contemplate the five *khandhas* (i.e., the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and sense consciousness) that make up the mind-body experience of a human being, you notice that they're always dependently originated. Because the *khandhas* by their very nature arise and pass away, they're unsatisfactory. They're not unsatisfactory in that they're bad. They just have their limits in terms of how much happiness or pleasure they can bring us. For instance, a nice cup of coffee is very enjoyable, but it's not the Deathless. So we see that the pleasant—or sense happiness—is unsatisfactory in comparison with the Buddha's realization of a happiness that's even more profound. The realization of the Unconditioned comes about through the non-grasping of conditions. And the grasping of conditions comes about through greed, hatred, and delusion. When faced with these causes and conditions, my tendency is to love them, hate them, be confused by them, want more of them, want less of them, etc. My mind is almost always preoccupied with my dependently originated reactions to things. So there's no sense of peace in the mind.

Through noticing this flow of dependently originated change in our inner and outer worlds, the mind begins not to grasp at that which is unsatisfactory. By not grasping at unsatisfactory objects, the mind begins to abide in a clear, silent knowing of the way things truly are. And the more this happens, the more we intuitively know: "Yeah, that feels right. That's the Path." Then the sense of renunciation around the objects of sense experience (including thoughts and emotions) becomes very strong, not because we've rejected them, but because we now know how limited they are in terms of their capacity to make us happy. That being said, we can still enjoy the goodness of sense objects and the benefits we derive from them. Just think of your favorite piece of music or the beauty of a calm lake. Even if they're only finite sources of happiness, you don't make that a problem. They can still be relaxing and uplifting. If we relate to sense objects through the perception of change, then when they do change, we see that the awareness of change is what ultimately leads to the realization of an awareness that is changeless.

So try introducing these kinds of skillful perceptions into your way of relating to your experiences. You'll get a feeling for what the contemplative life is like in Buddhism. It's not just about meditation: it also involves an ongoing inner vigilance which is immensely fruitful.

Question and Answer

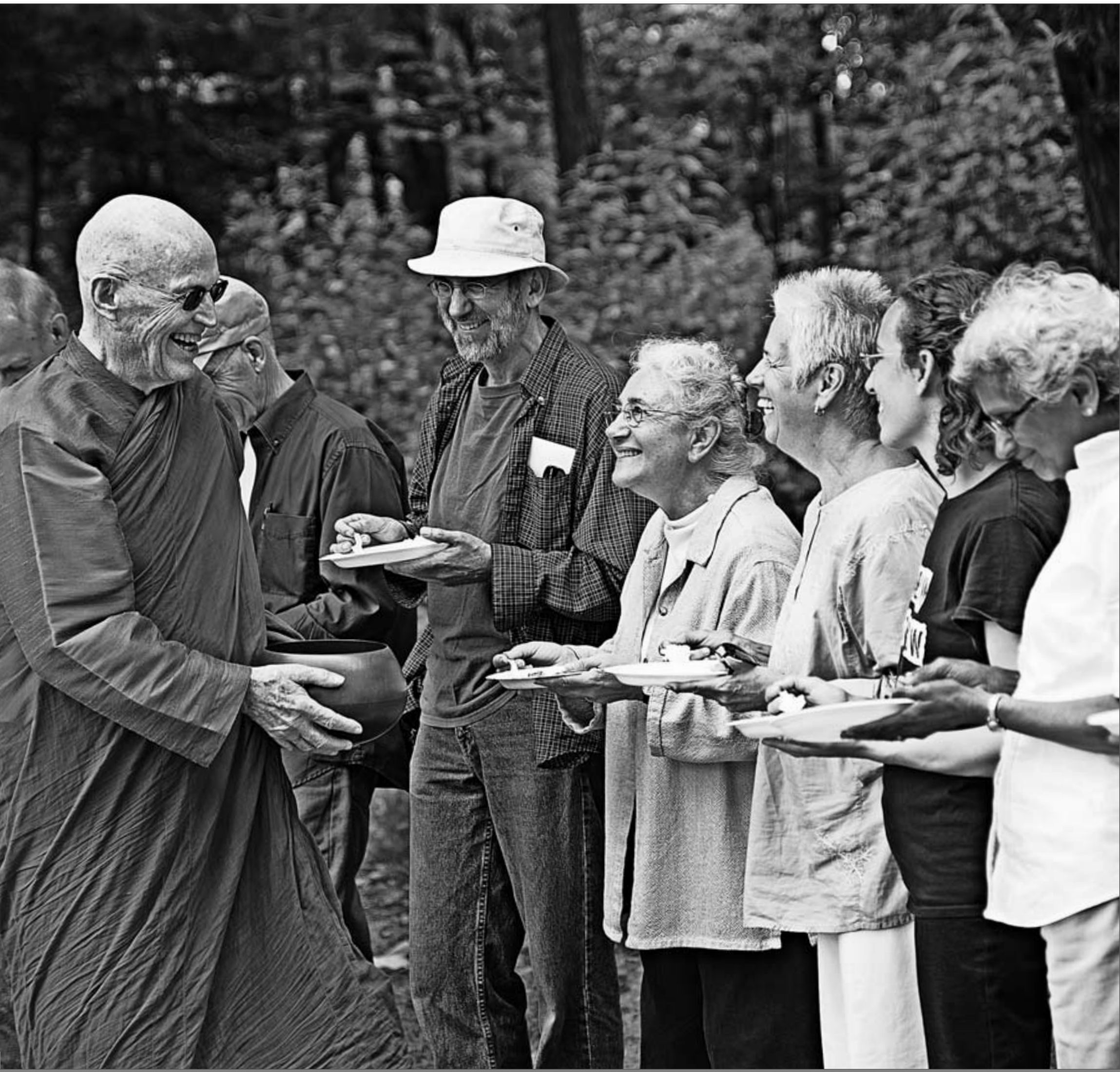
Question: I have a deep craving for attention, for which I feel a lot of shame. How do I give it up?

***Answer** (Ajahn Viradhammo):* First, you have to simply observe the craving, because acting on it only strengthens it. The craving is analogous to the itch you get when you have poison ivy. When I was a young fellow, I once fell asleep in a patch of poison ivy in a park. It was awful. Most of you probably know what a bout of poison ivy feels like. The poison ivy plant has an acidic liquid that transfers to you on contact, creating a blister on your skin that itches. So you scratch it and it feels good. The act of scratching briefly stops the itch, but it results in a bigger blister forming. Then you determine not to scratch it again. But the itch comes back more intensely! After resisting the urge to scratch for a while, you give in and scratch the itch, which once again feels good ... until the itch returns with a vengeance. There's no doubt that the scratching gives a good result of temporary relief. However, if you want to go beyond the affliction of itching, you have to forgo the short-term satisfaction that comes with scratching your skin. And that's largely what Buddhism is all about!

If I feel lonely and want attention, that's a form of craving that has just arisen. That's the itching. If I make contact with someone, it certainly feels better and it's not wrong. But if I'm not aware of the desire for attention, then the craving just keeps me in an endless cycle of itching and scratching. At some point, I'll probably realize that I can't just keep scratching—that I have to look at what's causing the itch. So I can decide to investigate this sense of lack that's coming up. What does the suffering that I have around wanting attention really feel like in the body? I have to bear witness to that feeling of a lack of attention or loneliness, no matter how uncomfortable it gets. This takes a lot of endurance and patience, since this is when the craving mind gets activated. And the more we've been unable to be with this suffering in the past, then the more we almost instinctively jump into the craving mode in order to distract ourselves from it.

It can seem counter-intuitive to stay with that unpleasant feeling without judging it, wanting to fix it, etc. But if you can hold in awareness the feeling of being unnoticed or lonely long enough, it will eventually cease, since all conditioned phenomena are subject to change. Because this issue grabs so much of your attention, your best shot at freedom from suffering is the overcoming of this very problem. So you make that your project.

To see the itching and forgo the short-term satisfaction of scratching is a nice model to apply to our practice. It's important to have the willingness to confront suffering and to try to figure it out in this lifetime. How does it operate? This is the challenge *and* opportunity that presents itself to us again and again.



11

Openness of the Heart

Based on two talks given at Bodhinyānārāma Buddhist Monastery in New Zealand in February 2012.

When I speak about listening, I don't just mean the auditory element. I also use "listening" as a synonym for awareness beyond the sense of hearing. So when I suggest that you listen, you can go to sound first if you'd like; but then you let go of sound so that there's just pure awareness. "Looking" is also used as a synonym for this broader sense of awareness. Looking at the way things are is obviously not just a visual experience. Rather, it points to a knowing of the truth of the moment's experience.

In the development of their meditation practice, most meditators find some way of abiding in the present moment which indicates that the mind is not caught up in preoccupations. Part of it is just the letting go of thought; part of it is having a sign. Ajahn Sumedho, for example, uses the sound of silence as his touchstone for being in the present moment. He says that when the mind is relaxed, open, attentive, awake, and non-grasping, you'll hear this background silence. For other people, bodily feelings such as a sense of physical relaxation may signal this open, accepting state of consciousness. As I meditate, I note my state of mind and the state of the body, especially with respect to bodily tension. When I'm anticipating any kind of result from my practice, my body informs me of this by exhibiting traces of tension throughout the body. If my mind is serene and receptive as opposed to being in a "wanting" state, then the body is physically relaxed. Do you have any signs or indications in your own practice that signify for you the calm and spacious mind? These are very helpful signposts that are usually quite individual in nature.

Another way of peacefully abiding in the present moment is to go to the heart and listen from there. So often our focus is on trying to analyze life's complexities or resolve various issues using the brain. As an alternative to this rather stressful way of living, one can instead bring attention directly to the center of the chest—or what is sometimes known as the "heart chakra"—and allow the sensations there to become conscious. This takes training and patience, but it gives very good results. So the next time you're in a meeting and you start to feel agitated, see if you can bring your attention to the physical sensations at the center of the chest. Rest your attention there and see what happens.

In his teachings on the foundations for open-heartedness, the Buddha spoke of the four *brahmavihāras* (sublime states of mind): *mettā* is the sense of goodwill, of well-wishing to all beings; *karuṇā* is compassion for the suffering of beings; *muditā* is joy or gladness for the success or good fortune of other beings; and *upekkhā* is equanimity or even-mindedness. The *brahmavihāras* enable us to relate to both ourselves and others in the right or most beneficial ways. These four attitudes help us to resolve social conflicts, as well as heal from the suffering inherent in the human condition. They promote harmonious and mature relationships, and make it possible to let go of self-centredness. The *brahmavihāras* allow kindness, joy, hope, and forgiveness to flourish in our hearts.

Of course, it's also natural not to be open-hearted. There is nothing unnatural about being close-hearted, such as when you're angry, frightened, or jealous. Sometimes you might discover that open-heartedness is conjoined with fearfulness of some sort, in which case that's not the open heart. Just think of those times when you've been overly deferential, solicitous, or obsequious towards someone. If we find ourselves being kind to someone in order to try to appease them or make them like us, that's not *mettā*; rather, that behavior is based in fear.

But if we can try to develop the genuinely open-hearted attitudes, they become strengths. The combination of deep open-heartedness and fearlessness is very powerful. I've never met more radiantly compassionate beings than His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Ajahn Chah. What was so impressive about Ajahn Chah's profound compassion was that he was also totally fearless. He wasn't a soft-hearted pushover whom you could manipulate with a please-feel-sorry-for-me storyline. Rather, his compassion and fearlessness always brought you back to the suffering you were creating by not letting go of your attachment to wanting things to be different. People sometimes think that *mettā* is some kind of a "doormat" practice where you're adopting a subservient stance; but it's not. It's a natural strength of the heart. When the heart can be free from aversion and deeply accept the way things are, then where's the problem? There is no problem. Whereas if you look at anger or fear, they're not strengths. They're actually weaknesses in that they undermine your confidence and sense of security in the world.

Bringing up the memory of my mum, my brother, or my teacher connects me with the feeling of well-wishing in my own *mettā* practice. The more we can enhance that natural tendency towards goodwill, then the more that manifests even in negative situations. The more I can say, "May I be free from suffering," and feel that outflow of benevolent regard wholeheartedly, then when suffering does come up in the form of annoyance, for instance, I can remember to be kind to myself by saying, "May I be free from annoyance." This is quite different from thinking that I shouldn't be irritated, or believing in the irritation and running with it.

The teachings around the openness of the heart also include equanimity. Equanimity is the capacity to be at peace with success and failure, gain and loss, good and bad health, and so on. It's this steadiness of mind that allows us to remain balanced when confronted with life's ever-changing circumstances. However, equanimity without an open heart can easily become cold indifference, repression, or disassociation in the face of whatever may be arising in one's own experience or in the experiences of others. So the joy, compassion, and well-wishing that naturally flow from an open heart are meant to coexist with this sense of deep peace. When open-heartedness and equanimity are both present, there's a profound acceptance of the fact that that which has the nature to arise, has the nature to cease. Events are as they are. According to Theravada Buddhism, it's this combination of open-heartedness and evenness of mind that gives us a sense of emotional balance.

When we hear about someone sustaining a serious loss, or getting sick or dying, it's this equanimous mind that enables us to reflect: "Ah, life is this way. Life has loss." To recognize this fact implies a kind of strength without being dismissive. While you need to have compassion to do the utmost you can to help other beings, you also have to realize that we all have lives that include both gain and loss. Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Liem are perfect examples of this: both teachers possess tremendous compassion, but they also have a deep, peaceful acceptance of the ways things are, rather than demanding that they be different.

Do look at the difference between sentimentality and the open heart. When you sincerely abide in the open heart, it's not at all sentimental in the sense of seeing things as sweet and syrupy and then thinking, "Oh, everything is wonderful." Open-heartedness is a beautiful, direct, and honest connection to life that's very powerful and visceral. It's when you connect with someone who's happy and you also revel in their happiness. That's not being sentimental or "gushy." You're simply connecting in a kind, heartfelt way to another person.

An important part of my own inner life involves continually bringing attention to the heart chakra. When I'm conversing with people, I'll very often let my attention rest at the heart. This allows me to listen with empathy and be more in touch with the tone of the conversation, rather than just the specific details of what's being said. For me, this kind of empathic listening is more about understanding a person than simply taking in information. When I allow my attention to rest at the heart throughout the day, an intuitive sense of discernment is available to me which connects me to life in a way that complements my thinking brain. I'm not sure why this is, but perhaps the heart center gives us direct access to the empathic part of our consciousness. In any case, focusing on the field of sensation at the heart chakra helps to calm the brain by giving it something to attend to other than thought.

Abiding in the open heart is a craft. So you've got to experiment with it to see how it works. It's really a major component of Buddhist practice. As we're receiving the meal offering today, think of these good people who have been coming to this monastery and supporting us with their *dāna* for so long. As you're looking at them, let your attention go to the heart and make a point of inwardly saying, "Thank you." Then go to each person individually and thank them. You can use a situation that's as naturally beautiful as this one as a way of resting in a heart full of gratitude.

Empathetic joy is the third *brahmavihāra*. When you look at this wall of green plants, you experience the beauty of its colors, textures, and movements. That's the sense of delight and uplift that nature sometimes instills in the heart. Someone once asked me, "Is it OK to be happy?" Yes. A real gladness of the heart isn't the hedonistic gladness that comes with being stoned or drunk. This second type of pleasure is the "high" associated with an episode of heedless abandon. A genuine rejoicing of the heart, on the other hand, is when you see someone who's doing well and you're sincerely happy for their good fortune. That's beautiful! This gladness of the heart can also take the form of the happiness and gratitude I feel when I look at this lovely carving behind the Buddha statue. I know who carved it, I saw it being carved, and I was present when the artist offered it to the monastery. It's a magnificent piece of work. It's also a good example of how beauty can really open the heart. An attachment to beauty, however, means that you want a similar carving for your home. That's when grasping at beauty becomes a form of greed. What's so good about appreciating the beauty in nature is that as much as you can admire this wall of greenery, for example, you can't truly "own" it.

Do ask yourself, "How do I open my heart to the way things are? What is the pathway to open-heartedness for me?" In my own meditation practice, I reflect on the good friendships I have to stimulate an openness of the heart. Notice that the open heart is all about gladness, gratitude, and compassion, which help quite naturally to dispel any negative emotions I might be experiencing. The heart opens in different ways according to the time and place. Start to notice: What does the open heart feel like? How does the heart feel when I'm anxious, mistrusting, critical, or fearful? What's that like?

I like working with the idea of contrast. If you see light, then you'll also see shadow. If you see light as the open heart, then you'll see the shadow of the closed heart more clearly. For instance, if I note what it feels like to forgive a child and make fully conscious that way of relating to another human being, then when my heart does close with resentment for whatever reason, I'll be more likely to see that resentment as a changing mood rather than as a fixed reality. It's not that the open heart is right and the closed heart is wrong; they're both natural responses to your experiences. But knowing how these things operate gives you a better sense of how to move towards the freedom of a more open heart.

I think that the *brahmavihāra* practices of goodwill, compassion, appreciative gladness or joy, and equanimity are the way to emotional perfection. Consequently, it's the difficult emotions that close the heart that we're trying to be aware of and not attach to. The less we feed them, the less they influence us. These more harmful emotional states will still come and go, but they don't become fixed realities that we buy into, since we know they're simply objects of the mind. Instead, we encourage wholesome states by being kind and generous, by making gratitude conscious in the mind, and by noticing how beauty can open the heart. Because the heart likes to go to these comfortable places, this becomes the momentum of the heart.

One person mentioned that he couldn't feel anything in the heart. Well, you don't want to manufacture some kind of incredible, blissful heart-state because that wanting is a form of greed. That's the problem whenever someone describes their pleasant experience: you may try to produce a similar one. And that doesn't work because the very desire to get something means that you're no longer available to experience anything new, since you're already preoccupied with something you've heard about. Because you're fixated on a memory, you can't have any kind of fresh experience.

If you're having trouble feeling anything in the heart, then I suggest you try to notice the sensations in that area. Get to know what that part of the body feels like as you breathe. Notice as you breathe in, it feels this way, and as you breathe out, it feels that way. Just rest your attention at the heart and become conscious of the changing sensations there. As different events unfold, this area will become more alive because of your consistent attention to it. If you repeatedly pay attention to something, then your attention will tend to go there naturally. For example, if you've been practicing mindfulness of breathing at the belly, then you'll find that your awareness will tend to gravitate to your belly even as you eat your food. In the case of the heart-sensitizing practice I've been describing, you're learning how to focus on a certain part of your physiology. This is very different from trying to manufacture an experience. As you abide more and more in the region of the heart, you'll eventually notice more of what's going on there, whether it's a negative contraction or an opening of sorts. From there, your heart-centred practice will continue to evolve naturally.

In my early days as a monk, I had an extremely cerebral practice: I often felt quite dead from the neck down. Therefore, it was very important for me to make conscious what the open heart feels like. So I followed my teacher's instructions and did more training in body awareness, which gradually revealed to me how unalive I was in the heart area. Sometimes we're just not attuned to these things because we haven't given them much attention. In fact, if you don't direct any attention to the body, you'll only notice it when it's undergoing extreme pain or pleasure. But if you start to work with the body by doing Qi Gong, Tai Chi, or yoga, you'll start to notice the body's subtler energies and become more sensitized to them. In this way, your attention will also be in the body, rather than simply being in thought all the time. This will help you to understand yourself on a visceral level as tensions and energies come and go according to the moods of the mind.

There are many ways to stabilize our attention in the present moment. Bringing awareness to the heart chakra is particularly helpful because it connects us to the body and to aspects of our emotional life. If we train in developing this kind of sensitivity, then the heart becomes a place that we can continually return to for a sense of peace and well-being. Cultivating an openness of the heart is an essential part of being in tune with the true nature of things.

12

Stepping Outside of Our Comfort Zones

Based on a talk given on a Uposatha day at Tisarana Monastery in 2013.

Today at the monastery, we have the opportunity to sit in meditation until midnight. So we can make the effort to do that, switching to walking meditation when we need to. Sleep is a very attractive thing, so a lot of aversion can arise from not being able to lie down and rest. The Thai Forest monastic tradition encourages us to experiment with discomfort, using it as a source of investigation rather than as a form of self-mortification.

By putting forth the effort to meditate well past our usual bedtime, we're ensuring that our practice isn't just limited to sitting when it feels comfortable, or for the length of time that suits us. By challenging ourselves in this way, we're being made to look at the discomfort associated with doing what we don't want to do and not doing what we want to do. Ajahn Chah used to encourage us to frustrate desire and then learn how to be patient with unfulfilled desire. In this way, we develop the kind of resilience and strength of character that serve to lay a foundation for peace and well-being in all circumstances. Without these qualities, we're easily cast into suffering by the fickle winds of fortune, sometimes getting what we want, but often getting what we don't want. Of course, you don't want to make the mistake of turning this type of training into a willful practice of self-mortification that's devoid of wisdom and skillful intention.

The study of the Dhamma is another area that often requires us to venture outside of our comfort zones. *Pariyatti*—which is the Pali word for the theoretical comprehension of the Dhamma acquired through reading and study—is an important part of Theravada Buddhism. For anyone intent on pursuing the Noble Eightfold Path, there has to be a deep curiosity about the Buddha's teachings and how they might be applied to one's life. It is not enough to just come at it from one's own perspective on what needs to be done. Although it's fine for us to have our own agendas in terms of spiritual learning and practice, those agendas are often grounded in popular cultural norms. But the Buddha's teachings on freedom from suffering are actually quite radical and entail a complete transformation of consciousness. Therefore, an in-depth study of his teachings is necessary.

When I say this, I don't mean that you just read the easier, more popular books on Buddhism—the ones that only present little bits and pieces of the teachings. Rather, I'm suggesting that you really take the time to engage with the more difficult texts from the Buddha's own discourses, and then ask yourself, "What did the Buddha *really* mean by that?" There has to be some kind of challenge to the intellect taking place, some form of rigorous intellectual inquiry. For example, truly ponder the teachings of the Four Noble Truths, dependent origination, and the cessation of suffering. In addition, ask yourself, "What are the five *khandhas* and how do they relate to my own conscious experience?" And carefully consider what the terms *dukkha-vedanā* (unpleasant sensations), *dukkha-*

lakkhaṇa (suffering as one of the three universal characteristics of existence), and *dukkha-saccã* (the First Noble Truth of suffering) mean within the larger framework of Buddhist ideas.

If you don't have an understanding of the basic Pali formulas, you're not able to see how the various theoretical structures fit together and support one another. They're all one piece. The Four Noble Truths correspond to the teachings of dependent origination, which in turn correlate with the three universal characteristics of existence. These concepts and constructs also connect with the five *khandhas*, which subsequently link with the ten fetters. Taken as a whole, the Buddha's teachings present a brilliant analysis of the human condition; but more importantly, they offer a clear strategy for the personal realization of profound peace. So you need to internalize these structures by patiently reflecting on them, memorizing them, and then letting them arise in your consciousness. For instance, spend a year contemplating the *khandha* of perception. Instead of thinking, "Oh yeah, I know what that means," ask yourself, "What *is* perception?" Since the Buddha talks quite a bit about perception, it's important to know what it means. In order to answer this question, you start by consulting the suttas. But eventually you refer to your own mind to see and ultimately understand how perception works. In this way, Buddhist theory becomes an avenue for highly fruitful investigation.

Engaging in this mode of study is more difficult than reading those lighter, popular books and magazines on spirituality that make us feel good. There's nothing wrong with this type of reading material. However, some degree of intellectual rigour greatly helps to guide the investigative work that's such a vital part of Theravada Buddhist practice. This process of intellectual inquiry also serves to counter any intellectual doubt that can crop up around, for example, the trustworthiness of the Buddha's teachings or even one's own progress on the Path. It's rather like having studied a road map of a journey you've embarked on. The journey will have obstacles, but because you've scrutinized the map and know the overall terrain, even if you do get a bit lost, you can return to your recollection of the map to regain your sense of direction and carry on. You don't have to wander around in aimless circles of doubt and uncertainty.

So it is essential for you to do your homework by delving deeply into the teachings and internalizing them, rather than simply listening to Dhamma talks or university lectures on Buddhism. These are fine supplements to one's own intellectual work; but in our Western culture, many people turn primarily to academic courses and meditation retreats to acquire knowledge about the Buddhist path. They expect the teacher to guide them through the teachings. I'm sometimes surprised by the number of people who have been coming to meditation retreats for years, but who have no real background in the formal study of Buddhism. These individuals have never really been curious about the basic structures of Theravada Buddhism. Perhaps that's the fault of the teacher.

But if you genuinely have the aspiration to nibbāna, you should be encouraging that by being the one to ask the question: "What did the Buddha teach?" Allowing your own initiative, curiosity, and investigation to guide your study is more powerful than having a teacher tell you what you're going to learn that day. So try arousing this spirit of vigorous inquiry by recognizing for yourself what the important teachings are that need to be understood. You can also examine any doubts you may have around a particular teaching and look for the sources of that doubt. This kind of work is called *dhamma-vicaya*, which is the Pali term for the deep investigation of the Buddha's teachings, as well as the physical and mental phenomena they describe. *Dhamma-vicaya* allows us to see how things transpire in accordance with the Four Noble Truths. Ultimately, it's the wisdom we gain through investigation that frees us from the defilements of greed, hatred, and delusion.

A thorough, systematic study of Buddhist theory also involves breaking down the intellectual structures into their component parts and investigating each of those parts in relation to one another. It's rather like the understanding that a mechanic needs in order to know how a car works. The braking system, the engine, the fuel gauge, the rear axle, etc., all serve the overall function of mobility. By understanding the individual parts and how they work in conjunction with one another, the mechanic has an overarching grasp of how a car operates. The same holds true for the Buddha's teachings. So study the various components of the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the seven factors of enlightenment, the ten perfections, and so on, until you understand the teachings as a whole, rather than as separate bits and pieces. Ajahn Chah, who spent the first seven years of his monastic life studying the Buddhist texts, had a very good background in the structures. Hence this dedication to *pariyatti* is to be encouraged; but it's also a highly personal endeavor. The key point is to challenge yourself and not fall into the habit of simply reading the Buddhist literature that caters to the individual with little intellectual patience.

Applying the Buddha's teachings to one's own life is also an aspect of study. *Pariyatti* encompasses both intellectual study and the study of one's inner world. So consider what it means to apply the theory of dependent origination, the three characteristics of existence, and so on, to your own conscious experience as viewed from a Buddhist perspective. While it's fine to read what Carlos Castaneda, Carl Jung, Rumi, or the *Advaita Vedānta* have to say about conscious experience, you don't want to be entertaining too many different viewpoints at one time, since that can get quite confusing. If one has no solid grounding in intellectual principles on which to base one's understanding of human consciousness, one can just keep getting inspired by new theories about it. Eventually, the intellect develops a need to be stimulated and inspired in ways that can be quite trivial or short-lived.

So take up the Four Noble Truths or the ideas around craving and look at your own mind through these specific lenses. Once you make these concepts and structures your focus, you begin to observe the fundamental truths about the way things really are that the Buddha is trying to bring to your attention. Buddhist doctrine isn't a philosophical body of knowledge that the Buddha dreamt up out of thin air. Rather, his teachings are the product of years of contemplative practice, and the simple but profound realizations that sprang from that practice. Thus they are reflective teachings as opposed to belief teachings. So what if you believe in the Four Noble Truths or the law of impermanence? That won't liberate you from suffering in any transformative way. In order for the Buddha's teachings to be effective avenues for awakening to the true nature of things, they need to be actively contemplated and applied to one's own life.

So work with perceptions such as craving (*taṇhā*) and ask yourself, "What is craving?" Moreover, bring up the perceptions of *bhava-taṇhā* (the desire to become something), *vibhava-taṇhā* (the desire to get rid of something), and *kāma-taṇhā* (sense desire). What are these things and how are they operating in the mind? When and how do they cease? What does cessation mean? What does it mean to realize cessation in your own mind? Cultivating this kind of intellectual curiosity means that the mind will have questions; but they now stem from a more silent, inward inquiry into the nature of consciousness.

In order to adhere to this path of rigorous inquiry, you need to have both determination and humility. You have to be willing to look at a lot, give up a lot, and endure a lot, while being humble enough to carry on with this challenging work. Determination and humility can seem like an odd combination of qualities. But determination without humility can translate into a form of willful arrogance. And humility without determination can amount to a kind of meek whimpering in the face of life's difficulties. It's also important to bear in mind that the quality of humility doesn't demand that a certain result ensue from doing this investigative work. In fact, humility is not demanding of anything.

In his biography entitled *No Worries*, Ajahn Liem advises us to practice for the sake of practicing. In other words, we simply keep at it because it's the right thing to do. That's the humility of not demanding any kind of result from our practice. Although this investigative process makes it possible for us to have deep insights into the nature of the human condition, it's our anticipation of a result that prevents us from patiently allowing truth to reveal itself. If we can just be patient, with our attention focused on the way things are, then we'll eventually notice that anticipation and resistance are the root causes of suffering.

As we try to integrate the Buddha's teachings into our daily lives, we can reflect on the following questions: Why is life burdensome? And how does life become burdensome? When does it feel like I'm carrying around a mountain of problems? And when does my attention get entangled in thoughts and worries about the past and future? How does that entanglement work? We're obviously not free from suffering at those moments. You can also consider: When do I start to find relief in my practice? Where do I feel that the practice is working well? Where do I derive joy from the practice? It seems to me that joy comes when the mind is no longer burdened by old modes of programming, and you find yourself beginning to let go of your former sources of stress and reactivity. This is when the mind becomes truly free and attentive to the way things are. This kind of liberation is not an attainment so much as a relinquishment, an unbinding, a letting go. So contemplate: What am I clinging to? Why can't I just be free? It's just this way now. Why am I always getting angry at someone? What's with the fear? How come I doubt my practice all the time? Why can't the mind just be silent? What's going on?

This kind of inward observation can sometimes be interpreted as an obsession with the inner life—or a judgment of it. But it's neither of these things. Rather, this path of inner inquiry is about noticing why we're suffering at any given moment. And that's the Four Noble Truths in action. The First Noble Truth tells us that suffering needs to be understood. I sometimes take a moment to reflect on the fact that I've got enough food to eat. I've got a roof over my head. I can go to the hospital if I'm sick. The taxes are paid. No one is trying to kill me. So why am I making this situation into a problem? This kind of honesty and curiosity allows you to begin to awaken to the entanglements of thought, of "self and other," and of how these things work. And this leads to the ability to attend to these various forms of stress or unsatisfactoriness so we can eventually be free of them. In this way, we assume the role of a contemplative intent on internalizing and actualizing the teachings of the Buddha.

How is suffering to be understood then? Well, you have to be in the midst of suffering to understand it. Take aversion, for instance. Let's say that someone walks into the room and they proceed to do something that annoys you. That annoyance then leads to thoughts like "This person is so irritating. Why can't they be different? They need to stop doing that. I don't like this person." Or, if they're coming into the room a second time, you might think, "Oh gosh, I don't want to be with this annoying person." So you naturally conclude that it's the person who's creating the difficult mood. But in reality, it's the mood that's creating the person. They're interdependent, aren't they? The more I buy into the mood of annoyance, the more I see the person in that negative light. Thus the mood gives rise to the person, and then that person's conduct (as I perceive it) feeds back into the mood. It's actually one thing. However, our perception can get deluded and we can think, "I'm here and the person I dislike is over there. They're doing that, but if they weren't doing that, I'd be OK." Or we might think, "I shouldn't be thinking like this." That's the same delusion: I am someone.

But if you're able to see the aversion you're experiencing as stemming from a particular mood of the mind that comes and goes, then that entire storyline of "self and other" falls away. They fall away and you fall away, because that person is ultimately pointing back to the mood. Hence that whole scenario is dependently originated. In its most basic formulation, the law of dependent origination states that with this as condition, there is that; when this isn't, that isn't. It's quite simple. So with the mood of aversion as condition, there is that person (whom you perceive as annoying). When aversion is not present as a condition, there isn't that annoying person. It's not that the other person doesn't *exist*. It's just that the drama in your mind is actually one piece; it's not comprised of "you and them." And when these constructs of "self and other" dissolve, you're left with silence, with emptiness, with a timeless and radiant knowing. In Buddhism, we call this the realization of the cessation of craving and self-identity.

Let's look at another example of this disbanding of things. Imagine that I'm worrying about a presentation I have to give at work next week. Because the mood of worrying is arising, the fearful mind is generating the image of a future possibility of failure, public humiliation, etc. Then I begin to think, "I'm going to be giving this speech and *that's* going to happen and it's going to be very bad for me." The mood is creating the scenario and the scenario is in turn reinforcing the mood. So they're actually one thing—they're dependently originated. Once you see this, the whole drama collapses because you now understand that there is no substance to it. What initially gave it substance was the fact that you believed in it. In Buddhism, we call this kind of belief ignorance.

Once you've seen into the truth of dependent origination, you can see cessation taking place moment-by-moment with the ongoing dismantling of "self and other" and of craving itself—which includes the desire for things to be different than they actually are. At these moments, there is no longer any becoming or non-becoming, any aversion or non-aversion. All that is left is silence. And then you realize: "Ah, I see. This is cessation." You have to make that realization conscious in the mind. As the mind becomes more and more aware of the deep sense of peace accompanying the experience of cessation, there's a greater inclination to experiment, to observe cause and effect, and to taste this kind of letting go.

How to live then? You live by following the precepts and by taking care of your responsibilities. You do what you have to do. You go to the market to get the week's groceries, guide your children through the minefields of adolescence, pay your car insurance, go for a walk in the park, and so forth. But inwardly, you maintain a sense of inner vigilance in order to deepen these basic insights into cessation. Over time, the heavy fogs of delusion dissipate and the heart abides at ease with the way things are.

13

Artful Awareness

Based on a talk given at a Day of Mindfulness sponsored by the Ottawa Buddhist Society in November 2013.

I was once at a retreat center that had a large-format book of thangkas, or Tibetan paintings, which were highly elaborate and beautifully executed. The reproductions of the paintings were about 2½ feet x 1 foot. My mind was utterly absorbed in the wealth of detail characterizing these amazing pictures. My thinking went something like this: "There's a Bodhisattva. What's *this* configuration? And what does *that* cycle represent? How does *this* connect to *that*? I wonder how this imagery compares with Theravada art? Wow, those Tibetans are far-out ...." My mind was totally caught up in the details.

This same retreat center had a few paintings of abstract art on its walls. One image was of a rather cloud-like shape, although this particular "cloud" was a curious mixture of pinkish, whitish, and purplish tones. When I looked at that painting, the first thing my mind did was ask, "*This* is art?" And so forth. But then when I stopped the critical commentary and just allowed my consciousness to be with the colors, letting the colors come to me, my mind was very calm. For me, this was an interesting insight into the different ways in which we can use the mind. There's nothing wrong with focusing on detail; but allowing consciousness to be spacious and receptive can bring an inner peace that is not dependent on sense objects. Abiding in this sense of open awareness is probably more foreign to us. Perhaps you notice it more often at the cottage, in nature, or even at the end of a period of meditation, when, after trying for forty-five minutes to be peaceful, the bell rings and you suddenly let go of all the mental activity you've been engaging in.

If you just watch what your mind is doing during meditation, you'll see that quite often it's engrossed in thinking, planning, worrying, etc. Once you've noticed that, you can then bring your mind back to focusing on your object of meditation. And if you're very diligent, you'll completely let go of your storyline, at which point the bell rings. That's not a nice scenario, but it does happen. So what's going on with the mind there? Attention is jumping from one object of consciousness to another. These objects consist of bodily phenomena (such as discomfort, itching, etc.); emotions (such as annoyance, inspiration, doubt, and so on); and memories (which might include recollections about work, old TV programs, encounters we've had during the day, etc.). The mind can really spin off in many different directions: "When is this sitting going to end? Will the pain in my knee go away? Should I or should I not move? Did I turn the gas stove off? I should sit in a chair next time. There's self-blame coming up ...." And that can last for a large part of the meditation session.

The other way of attending to these objects of consciousness is to be aware of them, but not engage with any particular object. This isn't something we normally do. Let's imagine that this room, with its various features, is analogous to consciousness. The room contains interesting light fixtures, a Christmas tree, a monk who is talking, different sounds and colors, a particular temperature, the smell of burning incense, and other objects of consciousness. To simply notice the space in the room, what do you need to do? You need to take your attention away from any particular object. When you don't focus on any specific object while still keeping your eyes open, the visual field presents itself in a wide and spacious way. When this happens, you're able to notice that as well as there being objects in the room, there is also space in the room, outside of the room, and everywhere else. So if you choose *not* to focus on any particular object and just let your mind relax into that sense of space, you'll shift into this still, receptive state of awareness.

In the same way, we can also choose to focus on the space underlying all of our mental activity or "clutter." When it comes to our meditation practice, listening is a very good way to enter into this more spacious mode of consciousness, rather than getting drawn into object consciousness. But the listening isn't just about the sense experience of a sound: it is awareness itself. That is, the listening is synonymous with awareness.

As meditators, most of us have an object of meditation we've chosen that helps us to anchor the mind in the present moment. For instance, we can follow the breath or concentrate on manifesting the energy of loving-kindness. These are very fruitful practices because they make it easier for us to compose and collect the mind. But there's also a form of meditation that we call "choiceless awareness," which points to what I'm talking about here. Instead of choosing a particular object to pay attention to, you focus on whatever is arising in the present moment. You're simply present with the way things are, thereby allowing them to change according to their transitory nature. Strictly speaking, this type of meditation isn't really choiceless, since you're choosing to abide in the present moment and not localize your attention on any particular sense object. In fact, what you're choosing to notice is change. If you're willing to be patient with this kind of observing, you might notice the space between thoughts—that is, the space before a thought arises and especially the space after a thought ceases.

As an experiment, say to yourself, "Tomorrow is ..." and fill in whatever day of the week tomorrow is for you. Let a bit of time pass. Then stop your train of thought and just listen. Notice how quickly the space that succeeded the "Tomorrow is ..." thought got filled with planning or anticipating the next day's activities—in other words, with some kind of "doing." Or maybe you started to question: "'Tomorrow is ....' Is that what he means by paying attention to the space? Am I doing this right?" Even now, the mind is thinking. But you need to stop trying to figure things out, since there's nothing that needs to be figured out. Once you can get the thinking to stop, you have it. You have the silence, the space. In this way, you begin to emphasize the space and sense of awareness which are the background of consciousness, rather than emphasizing the objects of awareness which are the foreground of consciousness.

It's relatively easy for me to practice this kind of listening and awareness in a neutral situation that's free of pain, confusion, or any sense of threat. However, if I'm experiencing emotions that are quite strong, such as fear, anger, or greed, then to be aware of and receptive to these emotions just as they are is more difficult. This is because our usual attitude towards them is one of resistance or aversion. We either want to blame someone or something for making us feel this way, or we want to get rid of the unpleasant feeling. This push and pull of the mind re-engages us with objects of consciousness. We hate ourselves, we hate others, we worry, we become fearful—in other words, we start chasing our thoughts and emotions.

At this point, we usually seek compensations or distractions in order to try to bypass these difficult mind-states. We reach for a slice of pizza, a tub of yogurt, or our favorite musical recordings by Bach or the Grateful Dead. Or we work out or become a couch potato. But when our various forms of escapism are driven by fear, greed, hatred, or delusion, then they're not going to lead to peace. In fact, they can lead to addictions in minor or major ways. In this way, the mind becomes entrenched in the object world of thoughts, emotions, and experiences. By and large, there's nothing wrong with this involvement with objects. We certainly need to think and to analyze things to some degree. This other way of abiding, however, takes us to a deep space of silence whose being is not dependent on the arising of certain conditions. You don't need to be feeling or thinking in a certain way to be in a state of receptive awareness. Moreover, this sense of open, spacious awareness can accommodate the most awful emotions, just as it can accommodate the most beatific ones. Awareness is like a gracious host who allows all the guests to come and go with the wisdom that whatever has the nature to arise, has the nature to cease.

Entering into that space of non-attachment and non-preference can be challenging though, since what usually arises for us is desire. This can be the desire for pleasant objects or the desire to get rid of unpleasant objects. And so we have various strategies in Buddhism for working with this kind of craving. One is restraint—or refraining from doing something that will lead to a negative outcome. Restraint can be a very skillful response to the surfacing of certain emotions. Consider the difference between anger and hatred. For me, anger is simply an emotional flare-up, whereas hatred is a more deep-seated and sustained toxic energy. To illustrate what I mean by this, let's imagine that I park my car and then I find that someone has whacked it. Furious, I respond with "*Argh*!" That's a flare-up. Hatred, however, is something more intentional, where I think, "I'm going to get that guy!" You're deliberately fanning the flames of ill-will. In this case, hatred is what is driving the mind. So when we talk about refraining from acting on our impulses, we're actually referring to those energies that are intended to do harm to oneself or others.

Restraint is a vital part of living a moral, civil life. It's what stops us from physically or verbally lashing out at people for whom we're feeling deep antipathy. Refraining from doing these things takes mindfulness. Mindfulness allows us to be receptive to an impulse and not act on it. That's not repression—that's wisdom. In order for me *not* to think that I have to clobber that guy who dented my car, what do I have to do? I have to go back to feeling the anger and observe what that anger feels like in the body. I have to be receptive to it in the same way that I was receptive to that abstract painting at the retreat center. If you can fully feel the energy, the heat, and the discomfort of the anger (or whatever emotion you may be experiencing) in your heart, in your viscera, then you're allowing it to be processed. Awareness in the body allows these energies to run their course without our getting caught up in the tendency to repress or indulge them, thus making things worse.

This practice of fully experiencing the energies arising in the body takes a lot of patience and trust in the fact that it's OK to feel a difficult emotion since we know it will change. You don't have to analyze the emotion, nor do you have to fix it. And you don't have to distract yourself from it either. You just have to bear witness to the feeling, and eventually it does cease. That experience of cessation, of liberation from suffering, leads to a beautiful kind of happiness, doesn't it? We've all experienced that to varying degrees.

The great thing about having a meditation practice is that you can learn these lessons in the safe, non-threatening situation of sitting on a meditation cushion or in a chair. You can learn how to be open to everything that surfaces. Fears or annoyances might come up and you know it's acceptable to have them and to feel them fully. So you first discover how to be in this still, spacious awareness in a place of safety. In the same way, you're able to learn about how the mind works and what leads to freedom from suffering in a relatively risk-free environment before having to apply your practice (and the insight it yields) to complex life situations where your buttons will really get pressed.

Even if your meditation leaves you feeling very calm, it's the insight that arises from the meditation that's important, not just the experience itself. This leads us to an interesting point: the peace that comes from insight leads to the peace of the Unconditioned. To grasp this idea, we first have to consider what is meant by the term "Unconditioned." If you think about that word, you'll see that it's not a word you can easily figure out. You have to approach it from a more contemplative mindset. So try asking yourself: "What is there that is *not* conditioned?" By conditioned, I mean reliant upon certain causes and conditions for its existence. For example, sound is conditioned by my sense organ (i.e., my ear) coming into contact with a sense object (i.e., sound). Anything that I perceive through the six sense doors of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking is conditioned.

So what is not conditioned? It's awareness. Awareness is different from sense objects, isn't it? When I ask you to listen to sound and feel that in the body, you have to stop thinking and just listen. Try that. Listen to sound. And then squeeze one of your hands. The awareness is there, isn't it? But it's not dependent upon the pressure of the hand or the volume of the sound: it's ever-present. We generally don't notice awareness because we're so engrossed in our personal dramas, our sensory pleasures, our memories, our physical pain, our intellectual pursuits, and so forth.

Hence our mind is attached to all these different objects of consciousness. When those objects no longer satisfy our desire for pleasure, what do we do? We seek out other objects to replace them. The Buddha states that while this search might bring you a certain amount of pleasure, it has its limitations. This is not to negate the enjoyment of a nice dinner or a cooling swim on a hot summer's day. You can still delight in life's pleasures without feeling guilty about it. But you realize that sensual enjoyment is not the peace of the Unconditioned. So when you put on a few pounds from eating those delicious meals, that's just the way it is: it's unsatisfactory, or *dukkha,* as it's known in the Pali language. In Buddhism, we say that even the pleasure derived from pleasant emotions, thoughts, and sensory experiences is unsatisfactory because it doesn't last. This pleasure doesn't last because the objects (or sources) of pleasure are themselves impermanent. However, you can still be grateful for the pleasure while it's there. But if you're looking for a deeper, more lasting sense of happiness that is not dependent on objects, then don't put all your chips on pleasure.

The peace of the Unconditioned, on the other hand, comes from not attaching to that which is conditioned, changing, and unsatisfactory. As you realize what non-attachment is—which is simply knowing the way things are—your mind begins to sense a profound silence and stillness that is unconditioned. This is consciousness that is not enmeshed in sense objects. This is the peaceful, receptive state of awareness that allowed me to simply be with the abstract "cloud" painting without my getting lost in a like-or-dislike reaction to its details.

Before you know it though, your attention gets re-absorbed in the next engaging object and the restless mind takes off again. Then it crashes as boredom or disappointment sets in, and you find yourself going back to the meditative practice of listening. As more time goes by, that listening consciousness becomes sweeter, more interesting, and more attractive. Meanwhile, the world of objects becomes less and less appealing to us, but not because we don't enjoy a tasty donut at Tim Hortons. It's simply that we're gaining more maturity as our insight into the uncertain, impermanent, and unsatisfactory nature of conditioned phenomena deepens.

When you're a child, you enjoy playing with dolls or guns or whatever strikes your fancy. And when you're a teenager, you want to race motorbikes or perform in a rock band. Does that mean that in your less active old age you're condemned to a life of complete dullness and boredom? No. Maturity is about appreciating the Unconditioned, and the deep sense of peace and contentment that can generate in the mind and heart. I think that's what the spiritual life is all about. As an older person especially, if you don't have a spiritual path to turn to as an alternative to object consciousness, you're in trouble. Your senses and other body parts will eventually start to fail, and then what do you have left? You always have awareness because it's not conditioned by things. That's the beauty of it. Open-hearted, receptive awareness is a key factor in the path to awakening. May your practice bear the fruit of liberation and bring you to your real home.

14

Revisiting the Four Noble Truths

Based on a talk given at the Ecology Retreat Centre in Ontario, Canada, in April 2013, with additional excerpts from a talk given at Bodhinyānārāma Buddhist Monastery in New Zealand in February 2012.

In the remote region of Northeast Thailand, there exists a lineage of highly accomplished Theravada Buddhist teachers dating back to the time of the Buddha. Unfortunately, their teachings—of which we have very few written records—have largely been lost to history. Little is known about these ascetic, forest-dwelling monks prior to the time of Ajahn Mun, who was a renowned meditation teacher in this lineage during the first half of the twentieth century. Ajahn Mun was among the first of these Thai Forest monks to have passages from his discourses recorded for posterity. He, like other practitioners of Forest monasticism, focused on meditation and the development of contemplative insight as the vehicles for realizing enlightenment.

Because we don't know too much about this lineage, our knowledge of the history of Theravada Buddhism tends to come from the ancient texts of the Pali Canon and their subsequent commentaries. These sources primarily emphasize the perspectives of urban monasteries. As centers of monastic learning and scholarship, these monasteries were considered the "universities" of their day, and attracted the best Buddhist scholars and intellectuals. We're extremely fortunate that these texts have been preserved over the centuries.

However, as a forest monk, a great part of my own learning stems from the oral tradition of a teacher instructing a pupil according to the pupil's needs and level of understanding of the Dhamma. This one-on-one interaction between a teacher and disciple is obviously very important, whether it involves a discussion of the Buddha's first discourse, or coming to a contemporary understanding of what the attachment to rites and rituals means. Also, there's nothing like a real-life examination of a given theme by a living teacher who can illustrate their points using culturally relevant analogies and metaphors to broaden one's understanding of a subject. Consequently, I've always appreciated the Dhamma talks given by contemporary forest practitioners such as Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho, my peers, and others. Their teachings can be quite penetrating because rather than expressing the Dhamma using stories and analogies found in the Pali Canon, they use pertinent examples from our times and our cultures to elucidate the principles. And because aspects of these teachings often derive from the teacher's own direct meditative experiences and insights, they can suggest different ways in which to work at overcoming suffering.

A more scholarly monk, on the other hand, might typically expound the teachings by making reference to the ancient texts and presenting examples and stories that were believed to be from the Buddha himself. While this traditional sutta-based approach to teaching the Dhamma has been the cornerstone of Theravada Buddhism for over two-and-a-half millennia, there's also been this oral, unrecorded transmission of ideas that has existed since the time of the Buddha. This more unconventional way of reflecting on the teachings can sometimes be controversial, but it certainly wakes you up. If you're used to hearing a teaching in one way and then it's presented to you in another way, that's valuable because it makes you re-explore the teaching rather than just routinely agreeing with it in a manner that doesn't inspire you to apply it to your own life. For this reason, it's very helpful and important to get different perspectives on the Buddha's basic teachings.

Ajahn Dune was another monk in the Thai Forest tradition who could present the Dhamma in an entirely new light. Ajahn Dune was born in 1888 in a village in Surin province in Northeast Thailand, and ordained at the age of twenty-two. He was a town monk for several years until he got fed up with all the rituals and left for Ubon to study the Dhamma in greater depth. Several years later he met the esteemed Ajahn Mun, who was a great ascetic wanderer. Ajahn Dune was so inspired by his teachings and the forest practice that he re-ordained in Ajahn Mun's sect, himself becoming an itinerant forest monk under the guidance of his accomplished teacher. In the course of his wanderings, Ajahn Dune practiced meditation continuously and lived a very simple, austere life—much like the hermit monks of China.

After almost twenty years of wandering in the forests and mountains of Thailand and Cambodia, Ajahn Dune was called back to Surin by his ecclesiastical elders. He was then asked to become the abbot of a town monastery, which would have been a challenge for him. He remained at the busy, academically-oriented monastery of Wat Burapha for the next fifty years. It probably wasn't his cup of tea, yet he agreed to serve in this way. Ajahn Dune was famous for not giving Dhamma talks. Yet he was generous with his advice and made himself available to anyone, at all times. His teaching style was more *satsang*, and involved exchanging questions and answers within the context of a genuine spiritual gathering. Ajahn Dune's teachings were succinct and very powerful, including one given on the Four Noble Truths.

The traditional expression of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths is that there is the Noble Truth of suffering (*dukkha-saccã*); there is the Noble Truth of the cause of suffering (*samudaya-saccã*); there is the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering (*nirodha-saccã*); and there is the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of suffering (*magga-saccã*). In addition, the Noble Truth of suffering has to be understood; the Noble Truth of the cause of suffering has to be abandoned; the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering has to be realized; and the Noble Truth of the Path has to be developed. The Buddha then states that as a result of having practiced in these ways, the Noble Truth of suffering has been understood; the Noble Truth of the cause of suffering has been abandoned; the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering has been realized; and the Noble Truth of the Path has been developed.

Suffering (*dukkha*), in the sense in which the Buddha uses it, can mean discontent, trauma, stress, or any situation in which the heart feels a sense of lack or let-down. So that's the classic twelve-factor formulation: four truths, each with its three aspects. You should memorize that formulation and be able to write it out for yourself. You can then draw on it as a contemplative tool, thereby making the Four Noble Truths an essential part of your consciousness.

Before I present Ajahn Dune's reworking of the Four Noble Truths, I'll briefly review some of the Buddha's teachings. The Pali term for cessation is "*nirodha*." This is a problematic word to translate because it's used in various ways in different contexts. *Nirodha* can mean cessation, as in something decaying or naturally fading away. Feelings of pleasure and pain, for example, cease as a result of the inevitable process of things changing. *Nirodha* can also signify the cessation of a certain phenomenon when its supportive or causal factors are no longer there. For example, when electricity is not present, there is no luminosity in the light bulb. Now that's a different way of thinking about cessation which can lead us to a more complete understanding of the Four Noble Truths.

According to the Second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering is the attachment to craving, which can also be expressed as a kind of compulsive wanting. So the abandonment or relinquishment of this persistent wanting is what leads to the realization of the Third Noble Truth (i.e., the cessation of suffering). Using the analogy of a wheel with its rim and hub, craving is always intent on going out to objects on the rim. These objects can be thoughts about the past or future, material items such as food or new forms of technology, someone's approval, and so on. Craving is also associated with the ignorance of self-view: it's about *me* getting something in time.

Craving can take the form of sense craving, craving to become something, or craving to get rid of something. Sense craving involves the pursuit and consumption of sense pleasures in their many forms. The craving to become is an expression of our ego-based desires, such as our wanting to get somewhere or be someone. A good example of this is the desire to become a person who has a perfect relationship with a perfect partner in a perfect home overlooking a perfect seascape in a tropical paradise. The craving to get rid of, or annihilate, points to our wanting things to be different than they actually are. For instance, if you've judged your tendency to get angry or annoyed in certain situations as terrible and pathetic, then you might desire to become a person who never loses their temper and is always perfectly composed and compassionate in all circumstances. In other words, the craving to get rid of certain personality traits has now arisen.

The abandonment of these three forms of craving is the Third Noble Truth. When you hear about the idea of the cessation of suffering in Buddhism, you might feel a bit daunted and think, "I've got a lot of work to do. This suffering isn't about to cease!" But if you consider *nirodha* in the second way in which I've been talking about it, and reflect on the fact that when the supporting conditions for suffering are not there, then suffering is not there, you have a more concrete and direct understanding of how the end of suffering comes about. In other words, you now know what to let go of in order to bring suffering to an end.

In 1956, Ajahn Dune reformulated the Four Noble Truths to read:

> *"The mind sent outside is the origination of suffering. The result of the mind sent outside is suffering. The mind seeing the mind is the path. The result of the mind seeing the mind is the cessation of suffering."*
>
> ~ Ajahn Dune, "Gifts He Left Behind: The Dhamma Legacy of Ajaan Dune Atulo," collected teachings complied by Phra Bodhinandamuni

He's rearranged the traditional order of the Noble Truths: Second, First, Fourth, and Third. You could spend a lifetime contemplating this unconventional approach to the teachings. Since Ajahn Dune states that the cause of suffering is "the mind sent outside," you might begin by asking yourself: "What does 'outside' mean?" In Buddhism, the idea of "outside" isn't a physical location, like the foyer of this building. Rather, "outside" in this context refers to any object of consciousness that the mind goes out to, including bodily sensations. For instance, I might be sitting in meditation and my knee suddenly begins to hurt. I start to get restless and look at the clock. There's twenty minutes left in the session, so my mind starts to think about those twenty minutes. I begin to wonder: "What if this pain gets worse? Should I move my leg?" As a result of the mind getting snarled in physical discomfort, a sense of self gets born, as well as a sense of time.

Because my mind has gone out to this pain, I'm now experiencing the truth of Ajahn Dune's second statement: "The result of the mind sent outside is suffering." The suffering isn't the physical discomfort in my knee; it's all the other stuff going on that's leaving me feeling agitated and upset. It's important to remember that something which is unpleasant (such as loud traffic noises, extremely cold weather, or fear) is not *dukkha*. The unpleasant becomes *dukkha* only when I get caught up in it. What do I mean by that? All of us have experienced physical discomfort of some kind, and it's not suffering: it's just discomfort. Discomfort is natural—it's part of the human condition. When does it become suffering? When there's the aversion to it (which makes it feel even worse), the worrying about how long it will last, the wanting to get rid of it, the attempts to distract oneself from it, and so on. In this way, we fully go out to the physical displeasure.

Another illustration of this second part of Ajahn Dune's equation is when the mind follows a powerful memory. Let's say that several years ago you ended your closest friendship after discovering that your best friend had been bad-mouthing you for years behind your back. This experience left you feeling extremely angry and betrayed. One day, a mutual friend suddenly praises your ex-best-friend. Your first reaction is one of disbelief and rage, and you think, "You really don't know what they're capable of." A powerful memory has now surfaced in consciousness and you choose to give your full attention to it. Consequently, all sorts of emotionally charged thoughts are activated ("That person treated me so badly," "I was so stupid to trust them," etc.), and a sense of self is created. This is another example of the second formulation: "The result of the mind sent outside is suffering."

Even when the mind pursues pleasant objects, we experience *dukkha*. For instance, I might have a nice memory of my late mum emerge into consciousness. I might recall how happy she was whenever I brought her fresh-cut flowers. If I'm not careful, I can get quite involved in that memory, which makes me think about her even more. Even though I'm immersed in some lovely memories of my mother, there's still suffering or unsatisfactoriness there because these warm memories will inevitably dissolve. They're also keeping me from abiding in the peace of the present moment, which is free of any form of craving or clinging to transitory things. Another danger of entering into pleasant thoughts is that while they can be very enjoyable, there's still a sense of self or "me" informing them. And if I entertain pleasant thoughts by following the storylines of self, I'll also develop a habit of doing the same with negative thoughts. In effect, both of these tendencies will keep me preoccupied with the objects of thought, emotion, and memory. The mind simply won't have the space to realize the peace of non-preoccupation. So, what to do?

Ajahn Dune proposes that we train in "the mind seeing the mind" as a means of realizing the cessation of suffering. This meditation practice, which is found in many spiritual traditions, is also spoken of as "awareness of awareness" or "witnessing the witness." So how do we practice this? Well, let's imagine that someone else brings up the subject of your ex-best-friend again. The same painful memory comes up, but this time you just stay with that uncomfortable feeling in the body, noting: "Memory feels this way." The recollection of your duplicitous friend still has emotional power—it still wants to create a sense of self and a whole host of thoughts around it. But you simply stay with awareness: "Yeah, this memory is really strong.

It feels *this* way." If you don't go out to the memory, the energy of suffering is not fed. And because it's not fed, it eventually dies. The same is true of mental objects such as greed, worry, aversion, jealousy, loneliness, and so forth. If you're able to see them as they arise in the mind and just know that greed or worry feels *this* way, without grasping at them, then there's no opportunity for suffering to take hold of the mind. This is the path of the mind seeing the mind.

Let's return to the earlier example of the discomfort in my knee. Because I'm now practicing the mind knowing the mind, I notice the mind wanting to do something about that pain. I can see it starting to veer towards craving for the discomfort to end. Since I'm aware of the craving, I simply focus on how craving feels in the body, rather than following it. If I just bear witness to the energy of craving, sooner or later it runs out of steam. Because the mind is aware of what's going on in the mind, I can also see its attempt to go out to the clock; so I note: "It's just this way." Moreover, I'm now able to recognize more clearly when the sense of self is trying to regain its foothold in my consciousness ("What if I need to have a knee operation?" etc.). However, I don't buy into that either. I simply pay close attention to that sense of self being born until it eventually ceases. In this way, I begin to be at peace with discomfort. Thus I experience for myself the truth of Ajahn Dune's statement: "The result of the mind seeing the mind is the cessation of suffering." That whole disturbance of the mind has come to an end.

If you stay with the practice of the mind knowing the mind, ignorance falls away. Ignorance is always tied to the sense of self that gets embedded in a sense experience. We're simply conditioned through habit to think that if something is happening in the mind or body, it must be happening to *me*: a separate self with specific, lasting qualities. When you identify with a particular experience of the mind or body, you can forget that its very nature is one of impermanence. Instead, you might be inclined to define yourself as someone who is in pain, for example. This can make the experience of physical pain seem even more substantial and lasting than it actually is. You can even feel like the experience will never end. The perception of not-self (*anattā*) isn't saying that there's no discomfort in your knee—your knee pain obviously still exists. And the concept of *anattā* isn't denying your sense of individuality. Rather, it's pointing to the fact that the idea of a true and fixed self is merely a fabrication devoid of any real substance. So even if feelings of discomfort are still arising in your knee, they're experienced as mere sensations that are no longer conjoined with ignorance.

As you continue to train in the mind seeing the mind, you see that whole sense of "I," "me," and "mine" simply arising and passing away. That's the realization of emptiness. In Theravada Buddhism, emptiness is synonymous with not-self. With the realization of emptiness comes the cessation of suffering. Why? Because the supportive condition of ignorance is absent—although it can certainly resurface later. Conditions such as memories, thoughts, emotions, and perceptions are still there, as are bodily feelings; but there is no suffering because there is no one suffering. As this insight takes root, it becomes a foundation for peace.

So if Ajahn Dune's way of practicing appeals to you, give it a go. But it's also essential to return to the traditional teaching of the abandonment of craving. To see craving simply as a mental object or impulse that comes and goes, and *not* pursue its pull is crucial. You learn this in meditation, when you're able to clearly see how indulging your craving precipitates some degree of suffering. If we go back to our earlier example of knee pain during meditation, we get a sense of how quickly craving in the form of wanting *my* pain to go away can arise. Quite often, you'll also start to fixate on the time:

"Oh gosh, I hope the next twenty minutes go by fast!" When you're *this* caught up in craving, you know it's going to be a long twenty minutes. If you're already embroiled in the suffering of persistent wanting, you can try working with the practice of the mind knowing the mind. By training in this way, you're not going to punish yourself for having those craving-based thoughts, since you're more interested in what's causing the discomfort in your body to escalate into *dukkha*. It's ignorance, of course.

Whether you're working with the standard rendition of the Four Noble Truths or Ajahn Dune's reformulation of it, the point is to apply this reflective framework to your own consciousness. You can ask yourself: "How does my mind 'go out' in my own life?" You can see what happens when your mind is sent outside by comparing that experience to what it's like to be home. In meditation, you learn to come home—that is, to just "be here now," in the words of Ram Dass. The terms often used to describe being in the present moment are "non-becoming," "non-rejecting," and "receptive." This is the language of not going anywhere. So you establish in your own heart and mind what it means to be home. Then you try to make that capacity to be present, to be aware of the way things are, stronger and stronger in your daily life. In this way, you really begin to see for yourself that the mind sent outside is truly the origin of suffering.

Glossary

Pali is the scriptural language of the Theravada Buddhist tradition. Several Pali words, as well as some Thai words, are used throughout this book. This glossary briefly defines those terms.

adhiṭṭhāna: determination, resolution.
Ajahn (*Thai*)**:** teacher.
anattā: not-self, impersonal, without individual essence.
anicca: impermanent, inconstant, uncertain.
anicca-saññā: the perception of impermanence or change.
añjali: to join the palms in a reverential gesture of respect.
anusaya: latent tendencies, predispositions.

bhāvanā: cultivation of mind.
bhava-taṇhā: desire to become something.
bhikkhu: a fully-ordained Buddhist monk.
brahmavihāras: sublime states of mind (goodwill, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity).
Buddhānussati: recollection of the Buddha.

dāna: generosity, giving.
Dhamma: natural law, the teaching of the Buddha.
dhamma-vicaya: investigation, contemplation of Dhamma.
dosa: ill-will, hatred.

dukkha: suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness.

dukkha-lakkhaṇa: unsatisfactoriness as one of the three universal characteristics of existence.

dukkha-saccã: the First Noble Truth of suffering.

dukkha-vedanā: unpleasant or painful sensation.

kāma-taṇhā: sense desire.

kamma (*Skt. karma*)**:** intentional action.

karuṇā: compassion.

khandhas: aggregates—the five components comprising physical and mental experience (form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and sense consciousness).

khanti: patience, forbearance.

lobha: greed, unskillful desire.

magga-saccã: the Fourth Noble Truth of the Path leading to the cessation of suffering.

mettā: goodwill, loving-kindness.

muditā: appreciative joy, joy at others' welfare.

nekkhamma: renunciation.

nibbāna (*Skt. nirvāna*)**:** the extinguishing or dying out of the "fires" of greed, hatred, and delusion.

nirodha: cessation.

nirodha-saccã: the Third Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering.

pañcasīla: the five "precepts" or guidelines in Buddhism for training in wholesome actions of body and speech.

parinibbāna: the "complete extinction" or final nibbāna following the bodily death of an enlightened being.

pariyatti: theoretical understanding of Dhamma obtained through reading, study, and learning.

poo roo (*Thai*)**:** to be the knowing.

samādhi: concentration, unification of mind.

samana: contemplative, renunciant.

sammā-ājīva: right livelihood; the fifth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-diṭṭhi: right view; the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-kammanta: right action; the fourth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-samādhi: right concentration; the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-sankappa: right intention; the second factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-sati: right mindfulness; the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-vācā: right speech; the third factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

sammā-vāyāma: right effort; the sixth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.

samudaya-saccã: the Second Noble Truth of the cause of suffering.

Sangha: international community of renunciate disciples, and collective of those who have experienced some degree of realization (ariyan Sangha).

sati: mindfulness.

sukha-vedanā: pleasant sensation.

sutta: discourse or sermon by the Buddha or one of his contemporary disciples.

taṇhā: craving, thirst.

Theravada: literally "Way of the Elders"; the oldest still-existing school of Buddhism grounded in the discourses recorded in the Pali Canon.

upekkhā: equanimity.

Uposatha: Observance Day (corresponding to the phases of the moon) on which Buddhists gather to reaffirm the precepts, listen to the Dhamma, and practice meditation.

vibhava-taṇhā: desire to get rid of something.

Vinaya: the monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries on them.

wat (*Thai*)**:** monastery.

wat pah/ba (*Thai*)**:** forest monastery.

The Author

Ajahn Viradhammo was born in Germany in 1947 to Latvian refugee parents. They moved to Toronto, Canada, when he was four years old. While living in India in 1971, he was introduced to the teachings of the Buddha, which eventually led to his taking bhikkhu ordination in 1974 at Wat Pah Pong Monastery with the Thai Forest meditation master Ajahn Chah. Upon completing a visit to Canada in 1977 to see his family, he was asked by Ajahn Chah to join Ajahn Sumedho at the Hampstead Vihāra in London, England. Later, he was involved in the establishment of both the Chithurst and Harnham monasteries in the UK, as well as the Bodhinyānārāma Monastery in New Zealand, where he served as abbot.

In 1995, Ajahn Viradhammo returned to the UK to assist Ajahn Sumedho at Amarāvati Monastery, and in 1999, he went back to New Zealand. In 2002, he moved to Ottawa to care for his elderly mother until her death in 2011. During this time, he helped to establish the Tisarana Monastery in Perth, Ontario, where he took up the position of abbot. He is now a full-time resident there.

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