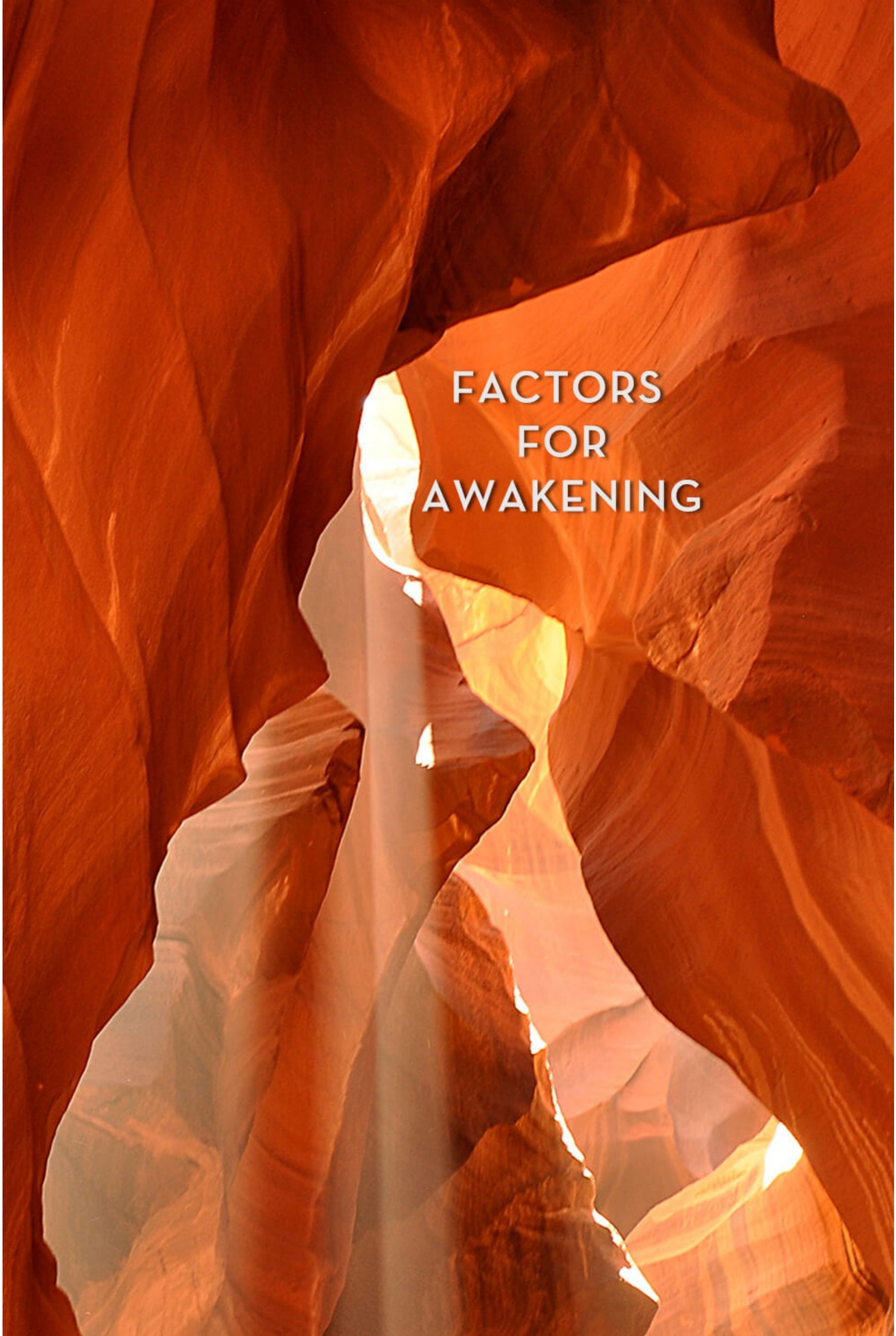
FACTORS
FOR
AWAKENING

# *Factors for Awakening*

**TEN DHAMMA TALKS**

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# *Factors for Awakening*

**September 26, 2009**

Several years back, I was asked to give a talk on the factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity. And it turned out that the people who'd organized the event had asked for that topic under the impression that the factors for awakening were a description of the awakened mind, the goal toward which we were aiming. Whereas they're actually a path leading to awakening.

Part of the misunderstanding was based on the question of how to translate the Pali term *bojjhanga*: "awakening-factors." Because it's a compound, it could be factors *of* awakening, but if you actually look at how these factors are explained in the texts, the meaning of the term is very much factors *for* awakening. These are qualities of mind you develop in order to become awakened. You can't take awakening and develop it. You can't clone the awakened state. But you *can* work on developing everyday factors of the mind that eventually will lead to awakening.

This is one of the important aspects of the Buddha's teaching: The path to awakening is built out of very ordinary, day-to-day things, like mindfulness and alertness. It's simply that when you learn how to look at them in a new way, to analyze them in a new way, and to develop and use them in a new way, they can take you all the way to awakening.

This is especially important when you try to understand the second factor for awakening, analysis of qualities, which is the heart of the set. As the people who had arranged that event said, their impression of this factor was that in the awakened mind everything is just mental qualities arising, passing away, arising, passing away, with a great lightness. You see these things coming and going, coming and going, and they don't weigh on the mind anymore. Which *is* a stage of the path, but to look at the factor in that way misses out on a very useful aspect of what it's all about. When the

Buddha talks about developing that factor, he says it's a matter of paying appropriate attention to what's skillful and what's not. And then, based on that factor, you develop the next factor: which is persistence in actually developing what's skillful and abandoning what's not.

So instead of trying to clone yourself into a very rarefied state, the Buddha's asking you to look very carefully at what you're doing. You apply appropriate attention to what you're doing in body, speech, and mind, but especially mind, to see how skillful your actions are. We often describe appropriate attention as looking at things in terms of the four noble truths, but that level of appropriate attention builds on another level of appropriate attention, which is simply seeing what's skillful and unskillful in your actions, judging your actions by the results they yield.

This involves questioning. It's not simply a matter of conviction, although the simple fact that you're going to follow this path of looking at what's skillful and unskillful requires that you be convinced that the Buddha knew what he was talking about. That, and conviction that there are wise people who've been trained in this path and who know what they're talking about, too. Because when the Buddha asks you to look at what's skillful and unskillful in general terms—as when he's talking to the Kalamas—he says that it's not simply a matter of judging things in terms of your own experience and your own standards. It also involves taking into account the teachings of the wise, people whose behavior you've looked at carefully and whom you've learned to trust.

As the Buddha shows in his instructions to Rahula, you don't just look at your own actions and then come to conclusions about them. If you find that you've made a mistake or done something harmful, you go talk to somebody else who's more advanced on the path. In other words, you seek the counsel of the wise. So it's a matter partly of looking for yourself and partly of taking into account the advice you get from wise people who have more experience on the path than you do.

Now, you recognize wise people by using your own powers of judgment as honestly as you can, so in the ultimate analysis appropriate attention does come down to your willingness to look at actions, to see where they're

causing suffering and to ask yourself questions: "Okay, where is this suffering? Exactly what am I stressed out about? Do wise people do these sorts of things, too?" You may have some general knowledge on the basic principle that stress comes from craving and clinging, but the Buddha wants you to go beyond general principles. He wants you to see specific things arising and passing away: "When does the stress come? When does it get intensified? When does it weaken? What else happens in the mind at the same time that it's intensifying? What else is happening at the same time it's weakening?" That's applying appropriate attention.

Now, to do this, of course, you need to develop the other factors for awakening, starting with mindfulness. Mindfulness, in the Buddha's sense of the term, means keeping something in mind. Right mindfulness means keeping in mind your resolve to stay with the body or with feelings or with mind states or with mental qualities, in and of themselves, as your primary frame of reference, at the same time that you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. The word *primary,* here, is important, because there's no way you're going to be focused on the body without noticing feelings or mind states or mental qualities. After all, they all come together right here. This is why the Buddha says that you can focus on any of the four and follow it all the way to awakening. You choose one of them as being primary and then you relate the other three to that primary focus.

For instance, right now we're with the breath, which is the frame of reference that the Buddha recommends most specifically for dealing with all four frames. When feelings come up, relate them to the breath. How does the breath affect the feelings? How do the feelings affect the way you breathe? For instance, if there's a pain in your body, do you tend to breathe in a way that walls off the pain so that it doesn't spread? We often have a sense of the breath spreading but we don't like the idea of the pain spreading, so we tense up around it so that it doesn't spread along with the breath. If you find yourself doing that subconsciously, ask yourself, "What if I deliberately think of the breath going through the pain? Can I open up that part of the body?" In this way, you keep the breath as primary and then the pain becomes secondary, simply related to the breath.

The same principle applies to mind states. Certain mind states are

fostered by tense or constricted breathing. Other more skillful states are fostered by a sense of breath that flows thoroughly throughout the body, refreshing the body. You want to notice that and take advantage of it.

Now notice, we're not simply staying with the breath or feelings or mind states simply as they are. We're trying to do something skillful with them. This counts as the quality of ardency that, as part of right mindfulness, the Buddha also has you keep in mind. If you see that a certain way of breathing, a certain feeling, or a certain mind state is leading to unskillful thoughts, words, or deeds, change it. If any of these things lead to skillful thoughts, words, and deeds, you maintain them and try to develop them.

It's not that these tools we develop as part of right mindfulness are for use only while we're here sitting with our eyes closed. They're meant to be used throughout the day. Somebody says something and you notice a catch in the breath: You can take that as a warning sign that something's going on in the mind as well. You've reacted to what that person has said. And if you have the time, you want to look into it. If you don't have time, just make a mental note and then try to breathe through whatever tension has developed in the breath so that you're not carrying that little bit of tension around with you for the rest of the day.

Otherwise, it acts like a magnet. It attracts other little bits and pieces of tension until you've got a huge armor or a huge cluster of tension that's invaded the body. And then there's the problem of how to get it out. Whereas it's a lot easier if you begin to notice the little pieces as they form and you can breathe right through them to make them dissolve away. That's the function of what the Buddha calls mindfulness as a governing principle: As you're anchored with the breath in the present moment, you *make* good things come and stay, and you *make* bad things go.

This puts you in a better position to look at the mind. Again, your basic foundation is the breath, and you watch the mind from the position of a very comfortable, very refreshing, very fulfilling way of breathing. You see the mind in a very different light than if you were looking at it from a feeling of being all tensed, tight, and wound up.

So that's mindfulness.

As you practice mindfulness in this way, you're already beginning to develop analysis of qualities, seeing which mind states or which breath states or breath patterns are skillful and which ones are not. And you learn how to foster the skillful ones. This is another area where conviction comes in. As the Buddha says, if it weren't possible to develop skillful qualities and to abandon unskillful ones, he wouldn't have taught people to do that. If it weren't the case that you would benefit from developing skillful ones and abandoning unskillful ones, he wouldn't have taught that, either. And you need to have conviction that he knows what he's talking about.

But this factor of analysis of qualities is very much a path factor, not a factor to arrive at. It's what enables you to see what needs to be done. Then, based on that, you develop the factor of persistence, which is the same as the ardency in right mindfulness, and the same as right effort. And to encourage persistence, it's good to develop heedfulness, realizing that you really do need to develop skillful qualities *now.* You can't wait until tomorrow or next week or next month or next year. You need to do this now. After all, you could die at any moment. Not just physical death: Your goodness could die at any moment. Something could come up, either a thought about something that someone has done or said, or an actual event right here right now that could catch you off guard, and you could do or say things that are really harmful. That can happen at any time. So you have to be careful. You have to be heedful all the time.

When you're heedful like this, the other factors for awakening come in, the factors that show how mindfulness and discernment—the first two factors—lead to concentration. There's the rapture that comes as the mind gets more and more full, as your sense of the breath energy gets more and more full. You're not wounding it with unskillful thoughts, unskillful attitudes, or unskillful ways of breathing, so its fullness can grow. From that there's calm; from calm there's concentration. And when the mind is concentrated and calm, it can look at things with a more solid sense of equanimity.

As the Buddha said, there are levels of equanimity. The lowest level is what he calls equanimity based on diversity. You simply make up your mind that whatever comes up in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes,

tactile sensations, or ideas, you're going to try to stay non-reactive. That kind of equanimity can be maintained as long as you maintain your mindfulness and your will to be non-reactive.

A lot stronger, though, is the equanimity that the Buddha says is based on unification, i.e., when the mind really settles down and is one. With that sense of calm, well-being, and fullness, you feel less touched by events, because you've got something much better to feed on. You're not going out nibbling off other people's words or gulping down sensual pleasures, because you've got something much better right here. It's not simply a matter of willing yourself not to react. You don't feel any *need* to react.

But we're not practicing these things just to arrive at equanimity. That's another problem with seeing the awakening factors as a map of the enlightened mind. Many people think, "Well, all you need to do is arrive at equanimity and there you are: nibbana." But that's not the case. Nibbana is not the ultimate equanimity. It's the ultimate happiness. Equanimity is part of the path. You gain equanimity toward all the things that are not important in life so that you can keep analyzing that issue of what's skillful and unskillful in the mind, and can do that analysis with more subtlety and precision. That's what equanimity is for.

What the Buddha's doing is putting you in a position where your happiness depends more and more on one thing: the good qualities of the mind, the mind as it's trained. You then use this sense of well-being to pry away your attachments to other things. Because you can see: When you do this sort of action, bodily or verbal, you get these results; when you foster this quality of mind, you get these results; and when you foster *that* quality of mind, you get other kinds of results. You get more and more sensitive to where there's stress. Then you know what to do to get rid of that stress. Again, you have to look at the particulars so that you can apply a precise solution.

This is why analysis of qualities is *the* central factor here. You're looking at events. The word *dhamma*, qualities, can also mean events or actions, and here we're particularly looking at mental actions. Look at your actions and see what you're doing: where there's stress; what you did to aggravate that

stress; what you could do to undercut it, i.e., how you abandon the cause. You follow these questions all the way to the questions about wherever there's anything that's inconstant, it's stressful; wherever there's anything that's stressful, it's to be regarded as not-self, something to let go, let go, let go.

But all of these qualities working together are needed to take you to awakening. If you try to do the letting go without having developed concentration, the insights can get very dry and very alienating. I've heard of people letting go of their sense of self prematurely and getting very disoriented as a result. They think, "Wow, I've let go of my sense of self so it must be awakening." But it's not. It's destabilizing. They've cut away all the tools they need in order to stay on the path. After all, you do need a sense of self to function on the path: a wise sense of self, a skillful sense of self, which you've been developing as part of the path. You let it go only when you don't need it anymore. And part of that sense of self is the state of well-being that comes when you get the mind into good strong concentration.

So all these factors are needed.

But it's important to remember that they *are* a path. You're not trying to clone awakening. You're not trying to will the mind into some expansive, unconditioned state. The path to awakening is followed in little tiny incremental steps, looking at each of your actions and every instance of stress as it comes up. The more precisely you can see these things, the more clearly you can see exactly where you're causing suffering and how you can stop. Seek the counsel of the wise when you need it. But otherwise stay focused right here on the particulars.

It's through the particulars that you break through to a state that's totally unlimited, and not defined in any way at all. It's called freedom because, in reaching that state, we're freed from our defilements. In other words, it's called freedom as a comparison, but in and of itself it can't properly be described. That's a sign of how special it is.

# *Mindfulness*

**July 23, 2011**

When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, he says that there are some that are appropriate when the mind is sluggish. Those factors are analysis of qualities, rapture, and persistence: the qualities that energize the mind. Then there are qualities appropriate when the mind is overly excited, overly energetic: calm, equanimity, and concentration. Those calm the mind down. You need both sets of qualities in the practice. It's simply a matter of finding balance, and of having a sense of time and place.

There's one quality, though, that's appropriate everywhere, all the time. That's mindfulness. So it's especially important, as we practice, that we understand what mindfulness is.

Sometimes you hear that mindfulness is simply an open, accepting, awareness of things—just noting what's happening and allowing it to happen, without interfering. But that's actually equanimity.

The Buddha himself defines mindfulness as the ability to remember for a long time what's been done and said. It's the ability to keep things in mind.

And what do you keep in mind? To begin with, you keep in mind the need to develop the skillful factors of the path and to abandon the unskillful ones. This applies to all the factors. Once you know what's right view, what's wrong view, right resolve, wrong resolve, all the way down to right concentration and wrong concentration, you keep in mind your intention to develop the right side and to abandon the wrong.

The Buddha compares mindfulness to a gatekeeper for a frontier fortress. In a frontier fortress you have to be very wary because there are spies and other people from the outlying countries. They want to sneak in and do damage to your fortress. So you have to be very careful who comes in and who doesn't. And mindfulness, the Buddha says, is like a wise gatekeeper who recognizes who should be let in and who should not be let in, and he

lets in only those who should be let in. So you have to keep this distinction in mind: Which qualities in the mind are skillful and which ones are not? Which ones should be developed and which ones abandoned?

There's another passage where the Buddha says that mindfulness is like a goad. Most of us have gotten away from animal husbandry and farming, and so we don't even know what a goad is. It's a long stick with a sharp point. You use it to poke your animals when they're going the wrong direction, or if they're standing still when they should be going. The implication here is that the ability to remember what's skillful and what's not, and to be able to give yourself a little push or a poke in the right direction: That's what mindfulness does for you.

And sometimes it's more than just a little poke. There's another passage where the Buddha says that when you see that something unskillful has arisen in your mind, then you act as if your hair were on fire. You do everything you can, as quickly as you can, to put it out. You're relentless and mindful in being focused on putting out the fire, and nothing else.

So all of these passages show that mindfulness is not just a broad, open, accepting, state of mind. It serves a particular purpose, and it can be narrowly focused: keeping in mind what you know about what's skillful and what's not, and reminding yourself that you really do want to focus on pursuing the skillful path and avoiding the unskillful one at all costs.

This is why mindfulness and discernment usually go together. In fact, in Thai they have a term, *sati-paññā,* mindfulness-discernment, which is their word for intelligence. It's the intelligence of a really practical person, one who knows the distinction between what's skillful and what's not, and is wise enough to know that you have to keep that in mind so that you can act on it all the time.

In the Buddha's portrayal of how all the different factors of the path work together, right mindfulness, right view—which is the discernment factor—and right effort all go together. You have right view about what's right and what's wrong, what's skillful and what's not. You keep that in mind, you keep in mind your desire to do the right thing, and you motivate yourself to act on that desire. That's right mindfulness. As the Pali phrase

describing right effort says, you generate the desire to prevent unskillful qualities that haven't arisen from arising, and abandon them if they have arisen. At the same time, you generate the desire to give rise to skillful qualities and then, once they're there, you encourage them, develop them.

So you're not just sitting here watching things coming and going, arising and passing away, and saying, "Well, that's that." You realize that your mind is the factor that shapes your life and that its decisions will have a huge impact. You keep that in mind. And when the mind begins to wander off, you use the goad of mindfulness to bring it right back. Sometimes all you have to do is simply remind it and it'll come back. Other times, it's a bit more resistant. That's when you give it a sharp poke.

This is where you can use other meditation techniques as well. But mindfulness helps there, too. It has to keep in mind all the various techniques that you've heard about, and that you've actually put into practice and found that they work. You've got to keep all that in mind.

Because we do have this tendency to forget. Sometimes the forgetting is just a simple dropping of what we were trying to remember, and other times it's willful forgetfulness, when part of the mind has decided it's not interested in the path at all. It wants to go off and get a little pleasure on the side: fantasizing about this beautiful person, that lovely sound, those nice flavors, whatever you're fantasizing about. When you're in that state of mind, you willfully forget the fact that you're sitting here meditating or that you're trying to follow a path of practice. That's when mindfulness has to be especially sharp in reminding you.

So try to be very clear about what mindfulness does. We're not here just to watch things arise and pass away, trying to be equanimous. There are times when equanimity is going to be needed, but not the type of equanimity that simply lets things take over, regardless of whether they're good or bad. There are times when equanimity is skillful, and times when it's not. You want to keep in mind the Buddha's teachings, you want to keep in mind the Buddha's example, you want to keep in mind whatever other teachings you've heard that are skillful, along with your own discoveries concerning your own mind about what's skillful and what's not, and what

works and what doesn't work.

This is why mindfulness is useful at all times, everywhere, regardless of whether the mind is sluggish or over-energized. You can't let yourself forget these things. Otherwise, it's like having a water buffalo when you have no goad, no control over the buffalo at all. If you're trying to plow the field, the buffalo will just go anywhere it wants, and then stop whenever it wants. The field never gets plowed, and you never get done with your work.

So remember that little voice inside that remembers: that remembers to be heedful, that remembers to be on top of things, and remembers the importance of your actions. Your actions really do shape your life; they really do shape your meditation. The decisions you're making from moment to moment to moment are important. Keep that point in mind and you'll find that it really helps you keep on track, and keeps you at work. And if the work seems tiresome, remember that it's not all just work. You can have elements of calm, concentration, and rapture, all the good parts of the path as well, as the carrot to nourish you. But the mindfulness is the stick. You need both the carrot and the stick in order to get your field plowed so that it will provide the food you need for your true well-being.

# *Analysis of Qualities*

**January 11, 2019**

We all come to the practice with doubts and questions. But we don't get past our doubts by not asking questions. We do it by learning how to ask the right questions.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about how to overcome doubt. He says it's by paying appropriate attention to the qualities of the mind to see whether they're skillful or unskillful, dark or bright. And that's the same approach he recommends for developing what's called analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening. You bring appropriate attention to qualities of mind to see whether they're skillful or not, dark or bright.

Now, analysis of qualities is the discernment factor in those factors for awakening. This means that you replace doubt not with belief but with discernment. In both cases—dealing with the doubt and developing the discernment—appropriate attention is how you do it. Appropriate attention is basically learning how to ask the right questions, focused on the issue of what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

The Buddha himself said he got on the right path by noticing that he could divide his thoughts into two sorts: those imbued with sensuality, ill will, or cruelty on the one hand, and those imbued with renunciation, non-ill will—i.e., goodwill—and harmlessness on the other. And he divided the thoughts into those categories not in terms of what he liked or didn't like, or what he found entertaining or instructive or interesting. Instead, the question was: Where do these thoughts lead? The unskillful side led to all kinds of unskillful behavior. The skillful side led to more skillful behavior.

So he decided to keep his unskillful thoughts in check in the same way that a cowherd keeps his cows in check during the rainy season. In Asia, during the rainy season when the rice is growing, you have to be very careful that your cows don't wander into the rice fields. Otherwise, they'll

eat the rice and cause trouble with the rice farmers. So if you see them heading toward the rice, you've got to check them, beat them back.

As for skillful thoughts, he saw no problem. In that case, they would be like the cows during the dry season. The rice has been harvested. There's no danger of their eating the rice in the rice fields, so you can let the cows wander where they like.

But even then, if you thought skillful thoughts for 24 hours, it would tire the mind. When the mind is tired, it's more likely to go back to unskillful thinking. This was when he realized that he should bring his mind to concentration to get it calm and still. But even getting the mind into concentration requires that you do some questioning. And here again, you apply appropriate attention.

When the Buddha discusses the factors for awakening, he says that they're fulfilled by following the sixteen steps of breath meditation. And in the sixteen steps, the questions of discernment concerning the mind have to do with: What is the state of your mind right now? Is it in balance or out of balance? If you find that it's out of balance, in which direction is it leaning? And what do you do to bring it back in line? For instance, if you're feeling depressed, irritated, or down, what can you do to gladden the mind? If the mind is scattered, what can you do to make it more solid?

The sixteen steps also give you some advice on how to answer those questions. They require first, though, that you understand the process of fabrication in the present moment. Fabrication, *sankhara,* comes in three types: bodily, verbal, and mental. "Bodily" is the in-and-out breath. "Verbal" is the way you talk to yourself before you break into speech. Technically, this is called directed thought and evaluation: directing your thoughts to an object and evaluating it—asking questions or commenting on it. "Mental" covers perceptions and feelings. Perceptions are the labels you apply to things. Feelings are feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.

If you want to gladden the mind or steady the mind, to get rid of unskillful qualities and develop skillful ones, you have to work first with mental fabrications: your feelings and perceptions. What images do you

hold in mind? The same as when you're dealing with the breath: What kind of image do you have of the breath? It's good to think of the breath as the energy flowing throughout the body, down through the nerves, down through the blood vessels, out to the tips of the fingers, out to the tips of the toes, all around, because that perception of the breath allows feelings of ease to spread easily through the body. It makes the body a more pleasant place to stay. When the body is pleasant, the mind gets into a better mood. It's not so irritable. And you can both gladden the mind and steady the mind by making the body feel pleasant through the breath.

So you've been working with all three kinds of fabrication there. First you have the perception. And then you work with bodily fabrication, the way you breathe based on that perception, and then the way you breathe gives rise to a feeling of pleasure. You allow that feeling to spread. In the meantime, you're talking to yourself about how to do this well. You're noticing what works, what doesn't work.

That's how you develop your discernment, and that's how you overcome doubt. Ajaan Fuang had a nice passage in one of his Dhamma talks where he said that if you have doubts about things, just ask yourself, "Is the breath coming in, is the breath going out, or is it still?"—something that's right there. And if you can doubt this, he said, you're going to doubt everything in life. So at least you have something really sure right here that you can begin with.

You know what the breath is doing, but you still may not yet be so clear as to whether it's comfortable or not. Well, you experiment. Try different ways of breathing. Try different ways of perceiving the breath, thinking of it coming in maybe not through the nose but through the eyes, the ears, down from the top of the head, coming in through the forehead, coming in from behind, coming into the back of the neck, going down the spine. When you think of the breath in those ways, what does it do to the sensation of breathing?

Or, while you breathe in, you can think of the fact that even though the air is coming in through the nose and into the lungs, the energy that allows that to happen is actually spreading from within the body itself. It can

spread from the area around the navel, the area around the breastbone—anyplace in the body, actually. And if you hold that perception in mind, how does it affect the way you breathe? Does it give rise to a sense of ease? If so, maintain that perception and maintain that kind of breathing. You find that it has a calming effect on the mind, gladdening it if it's been feeling irritated, steadying it if it's been feeling scattered.

At the same time, you're beginning to understand the process by which you create your experience of the present moment through these processes of fabrication. It's in this way that discernment can lead to concentration. That's one of the basic patterns of the factors for awakening as a set: They start with mindfulness, followed by discernment—the analysis of qualities factor—and then they end up in concentration. They basically show how, starting with mindfulness, you use your discernment to get the mind to settle down. They explain how right view gets you from right mindfulness to right concentration, or how discernment fosters concentration.

Now, the Buddha has other lists of teachings where things happen the other way around. You get the mind focused on establishing mindfulness, from which you then develop concentration, and then the discernment comes. It can happen either way. Different people will find that different lists describe the way their minds work, and even one person will find that the processes of the mind can vary from day to day. The ultimate level, of course, is when discernment develops your concentration at the same time that concentration develops your discernment.

So even though these factors in the different lists come in a row, the later factors turn around and help the ones earlier on in the list. In this way, they all work together to get the mind in the proper state where you have no doubts about what's going on in the mind. You can see it clearly.

You begin to see it so clearly that you can understand how the mind creates unnecessary suffering for itself—because that's the original question we're trying answer as we follow the four noble truths: Why is there suffering? Because of craving. Where is the craving? The craving is in the mind. So the questions of appropriate attention come back to the questions of the four noble truths, the realization that we're suffering not because of

things outside, but because of things the mind is doing. We practice meditation to become more sensitive to exactly what the mind is doing, where it's skillful, where it's not, so that we can stop creating that suffering.

Discernment, or wisdom, is pragmatic. We're not here to discover great truths about the world outside. We're here to understand why we're causing suffering and how we can stop. It's a practical question, answered with a practical form of discernment or wisdom.

I was recently reading a footnote on the factors for awakening in a sutta anthology. The author was saying that the factor of analysis of qualities is the wisdom factor in the set—"although," he said, "it's defined as looking into what's skillful and what's not skillful in your behavior." I was surprised at the word "although" there, that somehow understanding what's skillful or not was not a matter of wisdom. That's what the author seemed to be implying. But that's not the case at all. Wise discernment is precisely a quality of understanding what's skillful and what's not, because our minds are primarily active. We need discernment to direct that activity. When our activity is based on ignorance, we create suffering. If we can learn how to base our activity on knowledge, on wisdom, on discernment, we don't suffer.

That's what the practice is all about.

# *Persistence*

**August 7, 2011**

The Buddha says that three factors of the path hover around all the other factors. There's right view, which helps you to know what's, say, right speech or wrong speech, right action or wrong action, right mindfulness or wrong mindfulness. Then there's right mindfulness, which keeps in mind the fact that you want to develop skillful qualities—the right factors—and you want to abandon the unskillful ones, the wrong factors. And then there's the actual effort, a right effort that tries to develop the skillful ones and abandon the unskillful ones.

These factors are also the first three factors for awakening, simply that they're listed in a different order: mindfulness; analysis of qualities, which is the same thing as right view; and persistence, which is the same thing as right effort. These qualities have to go together because without right view and right mindfulness, your effort to goes straying off in other directions. Without right effort, right view and right mindfulness can't accomplish anything much.

So as you put effort into the practice, you have to understand it. Understand what you're doing, why you're doing it and, once you've got that understanding, you've got to keep it in mind. Otherwise, the effort goes in fits and starts. It wanders off. It doesn't build up momentum. Or else it's simply wasted.

There's a series of images the Buddha gives of people who put a lot of energy into the practice, but who do it the wrong way and so don't get results. As a result, they get discouraged. They begin to wonder if effort can do anything at all. You have to remember that there were a lot of people in the Buddha's time who said that if you put effort into the practice, you won't get any results regardless of how much you want them, because human effort is just too weak and ineffectual. Nowadays we've got the idea that any effort is going to get in the way of the unconditioned, so you stop

exerting any effort at all. Just sit there and let the mind be like a big open sky with clouds floating in and floating out, without your doing anything at all, and that's the unconditioned.

But that's not the unconditioned, and that wasn't the Buddha's approach. He said that you have to understand where effort is best applied. It's like trying to get milk out of a cow. If you twist the horn, you're not going to get any milk. If you twist the horn more and more and more, and put a lot of effort into twisting the horn, it still doesn't make any difference. You won't get any milk. At that point, it's easy to get discouraged, thinking that maybe effort isn't a good thing. You stop twisting the horn and you feel much better, more relaxed. But the fact is, you're still not getting any milk. You have nothing to satisfy your hunger or thirst.

The problem is not so much with effort in general. It's with your misunderstanding of where to apply it. You pull on the udder and you get the milk. You don't have to pull hard, either. You put the effort in the right spot and you get results.

You've got to keep this point in mind because it's so easy to forget that you're sitting here meditating and focusing on the breath: You're off someplace else. Or you get distracted by something in the breath itself. Things get nice, things get comfortable, and as Ajaan Fuang would say, your hands and feet let go and you just fall into the pleasure, forgetting that the pleasure has to come from causes, and if you abandon the causes, the pleasure's going to disappear after a while.

So that's something you've got to watch out for. It's not the case that only the things that pull you away from your meditation are going to be troublesome. Sometimes some of the good things that come up as part of the meditation can be troublesome, too. Ajaan Lee has a whole list of good things in the meditation that can cause trouble if you don't handle them well. For instance, lots of people meditate so that they can get visions. They want to see something. In fact, that's often one of the first questions you're asked in Thailand when people find out that you meditate: "Ah, when you meditate, what do you see?"—hoping that you've been seeing lottery numbers, or spirits of the dead, or whatever. That's a big distraction.

Even the sense of rapture that can come in the meditation can be a distraction, too. The sense of pleasure and ease can be overwhelming. If you see it coming along and you reach out to grab it, you're going to miss everything that's really good. You'll leave the breath, and your meditation will float around for a bit, and then you'll come out and wonder where you were.

This is why mindfulness is such an important part of the concentration. You've got to remember to keep your breath in mind. If you're not focusing directly on the breath, well, at least keep in mind the fact that you're dealing with feelings and mind states, any one of the four frames of reference. And if you're going to focus on feelings, don't just wallow in the feeling. Remember that you're looking for the cause. That takes you back to the breath on one hand, and to the steadiness of your gaze on the other.

You've got to keep in mind that this is work that we're doing here, even though it can be very pleasant work. You don't want to be the sort of person who does a little bit of work and then, when you get your first salary check, you disappear for a week as you go out to spend all your money. And when you've run out of money you have to come back and ask for the job again. If you keep this up, you're never going to get a raise.

You have to realize that the progress comes by sticking with the breath in its various manifestations. If you're not sticking with the in-and-out breath, then try to stay with the sense of breath energy suffusing the body. Make sure that every part of the body is nourished by that energy. You stop twisting the cow's horn, but you actually put effort in: You pull on the udder.

Another image the Buddha gives is of trying to get oil. You grind gravel but gravel doesn't have oil. All you get is gravel dust. If you want oil, you can grind sesame seeds or any plant that has oil. The same with the meditation: You've got to know where the effort has to be focused. You focus on the steadiness of your gaze. You don't want to focus on anticipating things.

I got a call this evening from someone who wanted to know how long it was going to take to attain stream-entry. She was hoping that it would be a

matter of months. And as I told her, you can't focus on that. Where are you going to look for stream-entry? You've got to look right here at your breath. As with any journey, you have to focus on where you're placing your feet. If you have an imaginary picture in mind of what the goal is going to look like, you can't walk on the picture. The picture isn't going to take you there. It may motivate you, but the actual getting there has to depend on watching where you're taking your steps to make sure you're on course, and that you're not going to step on something slippery and fall.

So you focus the effort right here, on constantly coming back to the breath, to your frame of reference. As for whatever comes up, you want to deal with it skillfully in the context of that frame. This is what the objects of mindfulness are all about. They're not just simply things that you watch coming and going while you don't do anything.

I was reading a book a while back where the author claimed that there are basically two paths. One is the path of right mindfulness and the other is the path of right effort and right concentration. In the path of right mindfulness, you don't do anything aside from watching things arise and pass away, and letting them sort themselves out, whereas in the path of effort and concentration you put a lot of effort into getting the skillful things to come and the unskillful things to go away. The author's idea was that the first path is the one that uses more discernment and is wiser and easier. But I've never seen that path go anywhere. I've never seen the Buddha teach that path. He taught only one path, and in that path right mindfulness, right effort, and right concentration all have to go together.

You remember to apply right effort and remember where to apply it, based on what you've been learning, either from Dhamma talks you've heard, from your own reading, or from your own practice. You learn your lessons and you try to keep them in mind so that you can apply them. Then you gain your own sense of touch as to how much you have to push. Sometimes you're very observant, but you don't do much—you simply watch what's going on. Especially when you can't figure something out, when all the different approaches you've applied in the past don't seem to work, just watch things for a while to understand what's happening. But when you find something that works, go ahead and do it.

Because the frames of reference are there to remind you that these are the things you watch out for. When you see them arise, remember that there's a duty with regard to them. You've got the four noble truths and they're telling you to do this: If you run into any stress or suffering, you want to comprehend it. If you can see what's giving rise to that stress, you want to let that go. As for the factors of the path—everything from right view through right concentration—those are things that you're trying to give rise to if they're not there, and to maintain and develop them further when they are. And in that way, you begin to realize what the end of suffering is like.

So there are duties applying to everything listed in the four frames of reference. And you keep those frames of reference in mind so that you can remember, when sensual desire arises, that it's something you want to abandon. And how do you do it in a way that's effective? When rapture arises, how do you develop it in a way that's skillful? When calm arises, how do you develop *that* in a skillful way? When ill will or sloth or torpor arise, how do you abandon them and not get sucked into them?

This means that you maintain your mindfulness in order to remember the right thing to do right now and the right questions to ask about what you're doing. That way, you can apply your effort in a way that really gets the milk or gets the oil—because you're applying the right kind of effort and you're focusing it in the right place.

# *Rapture*

**August 22, 2011**

Take a few deep, long in-and-out breaths and think of the breath energy filling the body. When we talk of the breath energy being full, it's not a matter of having your lungs stuffed with air. It's more that the energy channels throughout the body are open and they feel saturated with comfortable energy. So try to notice where in the body you have that sense of fullness right now. Protect that spot as you breathe in; protect it as you breathe out. Don't squeeze it. Don't pull it. Think of it floating in mid-air right there. Some people feel this sense of potential fullness most easily in their hands. Other people feel it most easily in the chest. It really varies from person to person where you're going to feel it first.

Once you notice that there's an area that does feel relatively full of nice energy, think of it spreading out from that spot. This is something you can't push or pull. You *allow* it to spread at its own rate. Tell yourself that you're in no hurry. You don't have to anticipate how soon it's going to happen or how long it's going to take. It's something that happens right on the cusp of the present moment. So if you're leaning too much into the future, you're not going to see it. If you're leaning back into the past, you're not going to see it. Try to think of yourself being balanced right here. The image the Buddha gives is of a mustard seed on the tip of an awl, like an extremely sharp nail.

Now, developing this sense of fullness, this sense of well-being, requires that you pay very careful attention to the breath and that you be very meticulous in how you evaluate the breath. How is it feeling right now? When you breathe in, does the breath energy spread smoothly or does it feel like you're pushing or pulling it too much? What we're working on here is something called *piti* in Pali. You can translate it as rapture; you can translate it as fullness; you can translate it as refreshment. The basic meaning is that it feels really good, really nourishing. The Buddha lists it as

one of the energizing factors for awakening.

It's also a kind of food. There's that passage where he says that when we meditate, we feed on rapture like the radiant gods. The problem with the word *rapture* is that sometimes it seems too intense for the way some people experience it. Some people feel it as a tingling through the body, their hair standing on end. For others, it's gentler—a sense of balanced, full well-being. Some people feel it in waves coming over the body. And for some people it's so intense that the body starts moving.

The intensity is not a measure of the intensity of your concentration. It's more a measure of how starved of energy the body's been feeling. If it's been feeling really starved, the sense of rapture will be extremely intense. If the body hasn't been starved, the rapture or refreshment will be gentler. It's like drinking a glass of water: The sense of refreshment will be a lot stronger if you've just come in from three days in the desert, and a lot weaker if you've been resting in a cool, damp place. The amount of water will be the same, but the felt intensity will be different.

Sometimes you may want the rapture to be intense yet it's not going to be intense, but that doesn't matter. Be very patient with it. Again, if you start pushing it too much, it withers up. Have a strong sense of *allowing* the energy to be there and to radiate out. If it's going to spread, it'll spread at its own rate. You just try to maintain your balance right there on the cusp of the present, keeping the energy channels open, and it'll do its own thing.

This is a really necessary part of meditation. Ajaan Fuang used to say that your mind is like a machine that needs lubricant. Otherwise, it's going to dry up. Your practice gets dry if there's no sense of real refreshment and well-being. That's what rapture is: lubricant for your meditation. He talked about being alone up in the forest for years in Northern Thailand, missing Ajaan Lee. And what kept him going through the day, each day, was his ability to tap into a sense of rapture whenever he needed it.

Realize that rapture is waiting here for you in the present moment. Just look very carefully and give it some space. In the beginning, it might not seem like much, but you've got to give it a chance. It's like that old fable of the mouse and the lion. The lion catches the mouse, but the mouse

promises the lion that if he lets him go, maybe someday he'll save the lion's life. The lion is so amused at the mouse's presumption that he lets the mouse go. After a while, though, the lion is caught in a net, and the mouse comes and eats away at the net, freeing the lion.

So don't disparage little things, don't disparage weak things—because they can grow. They can get stronger. Wherever in the body there's a feeling of "okay," allow it to stay okay. Protect it. Ajaan Fuang would use the word *prakhong*, which means to hover around something to keep it from being damaged—as when you hover around a child who's learning to walk. Try to develop that same attitude of hovering around these sensations in the body. Don't push them or squeeze them too much. Give them their space. Just protect them so that nothing comes in and steps on them.

As for any questions the mind may have about how long this is going to take or how much longer we're going to be sitting here, just drop them, drop them, drop them. Let them fall away. Try to find a sense of balance right here, because right here is where all the good things happen—and where all the important things happen as well. If you can nourish and protect this sense of fullness, then you begin to notice any movements of the mind that might disturb it. You see where the mind is hungry and how it often goes out looking for what's basically junk food to assuage its hunger. Now, however, you realize you don't have to do that, for you've got something really nice and nourishing right here. Why go out looking for trouble?

Greed, aversion, and delusion are all looking for trouble. They're like strong attacks of hunger and they're never really satisfied. When you act on these things, they may provide a little bit of fullness and a little bit of energy, but then it goes. It's like food that's bad for your health. But here's something that you've been carrying around with you all the time: the potentials in the body. Ajaan Lee talks about this a lot—that the body has all kinds of potentials that we rarely take advantage of because we don't let the mind get quiet enough for them to show themselves. So give this potential—this potential for fullness, a sense of refreshment—some space. Give it some time. You'll find that it really can strengthen your practice and give you a source of energy that you can tap into whenever you need it at any time throughout the day. Whether you're in formal meditation or not,

these potentials are always there. When you can recognize them and learn how to allow them to grow, you'll have a constant source of food, a constant source of energy that you can take with you wherever you go.

# *Calm*

**January 13, 2019**

As we meditate, we try to bring the mind to a state of calm. But you notice, if you look at the Buddha's explanations for the factors for awakening, there are times when calm is appropriate and times when it's not. The fact that there are times when it's not doesn't mean that you're not going to try to aim there eventually during those times. Simply that if the mind is sluggish, if your body lacks energy, you first have to energize it. *Then* you calm it down. Otherwise, if you simply try to calm it down from the very beginning, you fall asleep.

This may be one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee, when he begins his breath meditation instructions, tells you to breathe in and out deep and long, three times, seven times, just to air out the body, air out the mind: to make sure you have enough energy before you start calming things down. This is also one of the reasons why, in the factors for awakening, rapture comes before calm: to create a sense of energy in the body, energy in the mind, so that when you calm things down you can still be bright and alert —because that's what we're looking for: a state of concentration that's very alert.

So notice if you need some energizing and do that first. Think in ways that are energizing. Breathe in ways that are energizing. Think of the Buddha's analysis of how we fabricate the present moment by the way we talk to ourselves, by the way we breathe, and by our feelings and perceptions. Or to put them in another order: bodily fabrication: the breath; verbal fabrication: how you talk to yourself; mental fabrication: perceptions and feelings. So if, when analyzing your state of mind, you find that you're feeling sluggish, breathe in a way that's energizing. Talk to yourself in a way that gives you some energy. Think of images that stir up energy—like the forest ajaans, who use images of going out into battle or working on a skill to remind you that you're not here just trying to have a moment of calm

and relaxation. There's work to be done here, problems to be solved, battles to be won.

So hold helpful perceptions in mind. What kind of perception of the breath gives you energy? Hold that perception in mind until you get a sense of fullness, or rapture. The Pali word for rapture here, *piti,* can also be translated as refreshment: simply feeling refreshed by the way you breathe, by the way you're sitting here, by the way you're relating to your body. Then you can allow things to grow calm.

Now, if you start out already with too much energy, you have to avoid adding more energy. That's when you have to simply calm things down right from the start.

Here again, remember the three different types of fabrication. Breathe calmly. Talk to yourself in a way that's calming. If you have any distracting thoughts, talk to yourself in a way that reminds you that you don't have to pay attention to them. You're not responsible for the thoughts. And, for the time being, they have no meaning. Think of them that way: They're just the mind's empty chatter or the play of images on a movie screen—red, yellow, green, blue. They have meaning only if you *give* them meaning. If particular thoughts are really insistent, try to think in ways that counteract them. With thoughts of lust, you can think about the unattractiveness of the body. With thoughts of anger, you can think about your own well-being and your need for goodwill to maintain your well-being. In other words, find a calming antidote.

Then, after things have calmed down a bit, remind yourself that even though there may still be some chatter in the mind, and thoughts may still be appearing here and there, you don't have to pay them any attention. You can breathe right through them. If you can locate the part of the body that's tensed up around a particular thought, try to breathe through that little pattern of tension. Or you can think of yourself as being like a spider on a web. If a thought appears in the left-hand corner of the web, you can go over to the left-hand corner, breathe through it, and then go back to your center. If a thought appears and it's related to some tension in your knee, move your attention down to the knee, breathe through that, and then

return to your center.

The effect of all this is to gain a sense of detachment from your thoughts. You're not so interested in what they're thinking. That's how the mind can happily grow calm.

We spend so much of our time listening to our thoughts, trying to straighten them out if we don't like them, feeling that they're really interesting and important. The thought comes up and you ask yourself, "What does this mean in terms of the world? What does it mean in terms of me? What does it show me about my psyche?"—all kinds of ways you can get interested in your thinking. You have to learn how to un-think those ways, to hold a new perception in mind: that the skill of getting the mind quiet is much more interesting and valuable than your ability to think right now. If you *are* going to be thinking, think about how to still the mind, to bring the mind to serenity, to calm.

As for pains in the body, think about how you can breathe around the pains or through the pains. Find a spot in the body where you can create a sense of well-being by the way you breathe. That gives you a foundation you can stand on. You don't have to go jumping into the pain. Stay in your spot and, as the breath energy there gets good, think of it spreading through the pain so that the pain doesn't form a wall.

Then you can look at the perceptions you have around the pain. Ask yourself, "Is it one big solid pain, or is it made up of little moments of pain?" You're trying to find a perception that's more calming, and the perception of little moments of sensation is more calming to the mind than the perception of a solid block or band of pain. Then if you think of the pain moments going away from you as they arise, instead of coming at you, that, too, is more calming.

You could also hold in mind the perception that the pain is one thing, the body is something else, and your awareness is something else. After all, the body is composed of four elements: earth, water, wind, fire—or solidity, coolness, warmth, energy. The pain is something else entirely from those four things. Your awareness is something else. They may all seem to be in the same space, but they're on a different level, a different frequency. Hold

that perception in mind.

When you see that these perceptions are true and you can hold onto them, you'll find that the pain has much less of an effect on the mind—and that the problem really wasn't with the pain to begin with. It was with the perceptions you circled around the pain, saying, "The pain is invading my space. The pain is invading my knee, my back. *I* am being pained by it. It has a bad intention toward me. It's coming at me." Those perceptions stir up the mind. So you replace them with perceptions that are more calming.

These are some of the ways you use those three different kinds of fabrication to get past the barriers to getting the mind into calm and concentration. You begin to settle down and gain a sense of stillness.

The problem is that once the mind gets into concentration, it can still stir itself up. Rapture comes. Sometimes it really is rapturous and very strong. Some people get a strong sense of pressure in, say, the chest or in the head. The more they concentrate, the stronger the pressure grows and the harder it is to deal with. Here again, though, you think about how you're breathing, what perception you're holding in mind. Sometimes, as you breathe in, the breath energy pulls up into the head or concentrates in the chest. So you want to think of the breath going down: out the legs, out the arms, out the soles of the feet, out the palms of the hands, or out the base of the spine and into the ground. Hold that perception in mind. And remind yourself that there are many levels of breath energy in the body. If you're focusing on one that's energizing and becomes unpleasant, then—after you've opened up all the escape channels—try to tune in to a calmer energy in the same spot where the excited energy is.

It's like digging a well. When I was living in Wat Asokaram, they had a constant problem because the monastery was right at the edge of the sea, and yet they needed to dig wells there. There was no public water coming in from outside. They discovered that if you dug down to one level you'd get salt water, and on another level you'd get fresh water—and then another level, more salt water. There were layers and layers. The problem was that the layers would sometimes shift. A well that had been bringing in fresh water suddenly would bring in salt water. So they had to dig a new well,

right at the same spot, but at a new depth. You can hold that image in mind, that your body has many layers of breath energy. Focus in on the layer that's appropriate right now. If you need a sense of refreshment and energy, focus in on one that's energizing. If you need one that's more calming, try a level that's more calming.

And ask yourself about your perceptions concerning the body. If there's a perception that the energy is bottled up in the body, that means you're perceiving a membrane someplace that can hold it in. Try to hold a perception in mind that there is nothing that holds energy in. It's more of an energy field with wide-open boundaries. The energy can go in and out of the body, and doesn't have to be contained here. There's nothing pushing it against anything else. It can flow freely in, freely out, through all the pores of the skin, or through the spaces between the atoms of the body. Then the sense of oppression can go away.

There are some people who have trouble with feelings of rapture because they've had near-drowning experiences. They say that when you almost drown, there's a point where there's a strong sense of fullness in the body—and feelings of rapture can seem very much like that. So when you're meditating and you feel oppressed by the rapture, you can hold in mind the perception that you're not surrounded by water. You're surrounded by air; you're surrounded by space. You're not going to suffocate; you're not going to drown.

I had a student who, after a couple years of meditation, came to me and said, "I've got to stop doing breath meditation. Every time I focus on the breath, I get this strong sense of fullness." And I said to her, "That's what a lot of people *want.*" She said she didn't like it. I asked her, "Have you had any near-drowning experiences?" And she said, "Yes, twice." So I told her, "Work on a perception that allows you to remind yourself you're not surrounded by water." So she came up with an image of herself as being a peninsula surrounded by air. That helped her get over her fear of that sensation and calmed her down.

This is a frequent problem because even though there may be a part of the mind that feels threatened by the fullness, there may be a part of the

mind that really likes it and doesn't want to let it go. But then the holding-on starts making it excessive.

So you have to remind yourself: Deeper concentration lets the sense of fullness go. That, too, is a helpful perception and a helpful thing to say to yourself. Focus in on a subtler level, and that sense of fullness will be there together with the subtler level for a while. But because you're not focusing so much on the sense of fullness, eventually it dissipates, and the mind gets into a state of concentration and calm that's deeper than the sense of being full.

Then think of the breath energy connecting everywhere throughout the body. There's no need to pull the breath in or push the breath out. There's a sense of sufficiency. It may happen that the breath stops. Don't be afraid of its stopping. If you need to breathe, you'll breathe. You're not suppressing it. If you try to suppress it or to make it stop, there will be a problem, but here you're not trying to make it stop. You're just allowing everything in the body to connect. The fact that everything is connected and wide-open means that whatever energy needs you have are being met simply by having everything connected, and there's no felt need to breathe. Remind yourself that everything is okay. This perception will help you settle in there and feel at home rather than feeling threatened.

So the process of getting the mind into concentration is one of deeper and deeper stillness, deeper and deeper calm. Sometimes it will happen simply on its own. The mind is ready to rest and it rests. But you want to make sure that, in resting, you stay alert and awake. You have to use some discernment in getting the state of calm just right, giving yourself more energy if you're coming to the meditation feeling sluggish or tired. Or if you're feeling frenetic, over-energetic, and wired, start in with the calm right away, using the different types of fabrication—the breath, the way your mind talks to itself, your perceptions, your feelings—to calm things down. And in arriving at calm here, you're gaining some important lessons in discernment, in using the factor of analysis of qualities. It's in this way that all the factors for awakening come together. Each one provides an important part of the mix that gets the path just right.

So in calming the mind down, don't be afraid to use your discernment. Don't be afraid to analyze things. In fact, your ability to analyze things means that you'll be able to deal with the times when the mind has trouble settling down, because you've learned how to figure out what the blockages are, what the obstacles are, and how to get around them.

Ajaan Fuang noticed that there were two types of people who came to practice meditation with him: those who found that getting the mind quiet and calm was really easy and those who didn't. He called them people who didn't think enough and people who thought too much. The problem with the people who don't think enough, even though they find that it's easy to get the mind still, is that when they *do* run into obstacles, they don't know what to do. What used to be easy is suddenly hard, and they don't know how to get around obstacles. The problem with the people who think too much is that they easily get discouraged in the beginning. They wonder, "*When* is my mind ever going to settle down?" But if they stick with it and use these different types of fabrication—understanding how the mind is shaped by them, how the sense of the body is shaped by them—then meditation becomes a real skill. You find that you can meditate in more and more difficult environments and deal with problems in the body and problems in the mind as they come up because you've got the key to figuring them out and bringing the mind to serenity and calm.

# *Concentration*

**September 12, 2011**

Focus your attention right here. The mind will be creating other "heres" to carry you away from right here. But you don't have to go with them. Ajaan Lee's image is of a post at the edge of the sea. The sea rises, but the post doesn't rise with the sea. The sea ebbs away, but the post doesn't go out with it. It stays right there. Try to establish your attention as consistently as you can. Keep it still.

In Thailand, when they translate "concentration" into Thai, they translate it as being "firmly intent." In other words, the mind is not simply still and quiet. There's also a very strong intention to stay that way, to maintain this stillness.

And for the time being, put aside what you've read about concentration. Don't let it get in the way of actually being right here. You're here to focus on the breath, not on thoughts of jhana or absorption. In fact, even the words of this talk: Don't let them get in the way of your focusing on the breath, watching the breath as it comes in, as it goes out, being intent to stay right here with the breath. The talk is here to encourage you. It's not meant to distract you.

Of course, to stay right here you need motivation. You have to understand that this is a good thing to do. And there's so much out there that will pull you away and tell you that it's not. In the world outside they say that lots of other things are much more worthwhile and interesting in life. Even modern books on Dhamma say that you don't want to get stuck on concentration, that you'd much rather go straight onto insight because that's where the real action is.

In fact, it's pretty perverse. In so many books on concentration, on page one they define it, on page two they tell you that it's dangerous, before they even explain anything else about it. Which, of course, was not the Buddha's

approach. He was always encouraging people to get the mind concentrated. Jhana, right concentration, he said, was the heart of the path. When he told the monks to go meditate, he'd say: "Go do jhana." This is the "doing" of the path.

And, as Ajaan Lee points out, it's one of the more difficult parts of the path to do. It requires the most work and the most intention. This may be one of the reasons why people like to find some way around it. In Ajaan Lee's image, the three main divisions of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—are like the posts for a bridge over a river. Virtue is the post on this side of the river, discernment is on the other side of the river, while the concentration post is right in the middle of the river, where the current is strongest, so it requires the most work to get it in place. Be willing to give as much energy as you can, realizing that this is really what's going to make all the difference.

You can read as much as you'd like about discernment, inconstancy, stress, not-self, emptiness, whatever, but it's not really going to have a hold on the mind until the mind settles down firmly and can be still. However much the mind likes to read about those things, its feeding habits are still low. Ajaan Chah's image of Westerners is one of those comments that's right in your face. He said that Westerners are like vultures: They fly very high but they eat very low. We like to think about abstract concepts, but when we're looking for pleasure, where do we go? Straight for lust, all the gross sensual pleasures.

We've got to train the mind to raise its standard of taste. That's one of the functions of concentration: to give us a better standard of pleasure, a pleasure that comes not from sensuality but from form, i.e., the body as you feel it from within. This pleasure doesn't require that the world outside be a certain way. All it requires is that you pay attention to what you've already got here—which means that there's a lot less unskillful activity involved in accessing this pleasure and maintaining it. It doesn't require that you take anything from the world, and it doesn't obscure your vision in the same way that sensual pleasures do.

So being in concentration is actually a lot safer than not being in

concentration. When you're not in concentration, you go back to your old fascination with sensuality. And it's because of sensuality that people kill and steal and lie and engage in all sorts of unskillful behavior. But nobody's ever killed over jhana, nobody's ever stolen anything. In fact, being in jhana makes you a lot less likely to kill and steal, because you've got something really, really good here that doesn't have to depend on anybody else.

So learn to cultivate this pleasure, this sense of well-being inside. Look after it. Care for it. It's so important that the Buddha, when he talked about having respect for the threefold training, stepped back again and said: Have respect for concentration. It's part of the threefold training, but it's the part that tends to get overlooked, so he emphasized it again. Realize that you've got something precious here. It may not seem like much in the beginning, but if you care for it, it grows.

And learn how not to be impatient. It's a matter of having the right balance: knowing how to encourage your concentration without pushing it so hard that you kill it. Think of the Buddha's image of the foolish, inexperienced cow. She's got grass and water in her meadow on the hillside, and she looks over to another hillside where she sees another meadow with grass and water, and she wonders: "What's the grass and water over there like?" So she heads down the hill to go up the other hill. But because she's foolish and inexperienced, she doesn't know how to go up or down hills properly and she gets stuck down in the ravine. That way, she loses both meadows. So learn how to content yourself with what you've got and allow it to develop. Look after it, and it'll grow on its own. You've got grass here, you've got water here, you've got everything you need. If you tend to the spot wherever you're focused—you find it congenial, the breath feels good, the mind feels at home—tend to it and it'll grow.

And as you tend to it, you're going to learn a lot about the mind. It's not the case that you drop concentration to go to discernment. You learn about the mind, you gain discernment, by tending to your concentration, noticing its ups and downs. When it gets better, what did you just do when it got better? When it gets worse, what did you just do when it got worse? When it looks like it's going to lose its balance and fall over, how do you get it back into balance?

As you look after concentration this way, you learn a lot about form, i.e., the form of the body, the feelings that arise as you focus on the breath, the perceptions that either keep you with the breath or pull you away, the thought fabrications that, again, either help you investigate the breath or help you lose the breath, and your awareness of all these things: your consciousness. You learn about the five aggregates in a hands-on way by maintaining your concentration.

So as you learn how to maintain it in lots of different situations, you learn lots of useful things about the mind. You learn about the aggregates, you learn about which ones are skillful and which ones are not. You learn how to develop skillful fabrications and abandon unskillful ones. And it's in this way that concentration leads to discernment. It both builds on discernment and creates the conditions for more discernment. After all, if you didn't have some understanding of the mind, you wouldn't be able to get it to settle down. Once it settles down, you can see things even more clearly.

So try to develop this combination of concentration and discernment, and everything you want to know will appear right here.

# *Equanimity*

**September 27, 2011**

When the Buddha lists the factors for awakening, equanimity comes at the end of the list, which gives the impression that it's the highest of the list. And in one way it is, but in many ways it's not. It's listed as one of the factors that's useful on some occasions. When the mind is overly excited, overly energetic, overly worked up about things, equanimity is one of the calming factors. It goes together with calm and concentration. When your energy is too low, though, that's not the time to be developing equanimity. You have to work on the factors that are more energizing: analysis of qualities, rapture, and persistence. Otherwise, your practice will stagnate.

So you have to use your equanimity together with your discernment to figure out what's just right. There's a story that Ajaan Chah told about a time when he was invited to the palace in Bangkok along with a couple of other ajaans. The King was worried at the time about some political problems: a standoff between the students and the military. There were demonstrations in the streets. After the meal, he asked the ajaans what to do. The other two ajaans were more senior to Ajaan Chah, so they spoke first. They both recommended that the King develop equanimity. When it came Ajaan Chah's turn he said, "Well, yes, you need to develop equanimity, but you have to develop it together with discernment."

The discernment here is a matter of knowing what to accept and what not to accept, or what not to be equanimous about. This connects with two principles. One is that there are some areas where you can make a difference, and those are areas that you don't want to just leave alone. If you can make a difference for the better, that's what you focus on doing. Leave equanimity for the areas where you really can't make a difference.

The other principle is that there are some things in the mind that respond just to your watching them. In other words, certain kinds of greed, aversion, or delusion come up, and when you recognize them for what they

are, it's as if they get embarrassed and they just go away. There are other instances, though, where they're not embarrassed at all. When you look at them, they stare right back. They're firmly entrenched. They're armed with lots of arguments, lots of justifications, and you can sit there and watch and watch and watch as much as you like, but they're not going to go away. They may go away after a while, but they come back—and keep coming back until you dig down and do something about them.

That's when the Buddha says that you have to use the fabrications of exertion. In other words, you use the way you breathe, you use the way you think about things, evaluate things, you use your perceptions and feelings to deal with those problems: to figure out where they're coming from and what you can do to undercut them so that eventually they don't come back.

So you need to use your discernment together with your equanimity to know when you let things be and when you don't.

And it's important to recognize that there are three levels to equanimity. The first one is the one the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, when he first taught him meditation. His first instruction: Make your mind like earth. People spit on the earth, people throw dirty things on the earth, but the earth doesn't recoil. Make your mind like water. People use water to wash dirty things away, but the water isn't upset. Make it like fire and wind. Fire burns dirty things, wind blows dirty things around, but the fire and wind aren't affected by them. So a very beginning instruction in meditation is that you have to make your mind really solid, and not run away from unpleasant things. This is where equanimity is combined with your powers of endurance.

Now, the Buddha's not saying that you make the mind like a lump of dirt, totally unresponsive. The purpose here is to make it solid so that you can watch things carefully, and watch them in a reliable way. If you're the sort of person who runs away from negative things, you're never going to know them. You're never going to understand them. So we're not here just to put up with things, or just to be equanimous. We're here to endure them so that we can understand them: how they come, how they go. Learn how to observe them so that you can see problems and solve them.

This is shown in how the Buddha followed up those instructions. After telling Rahula to make his mind like earth, he then taught him the steps for breath meditation, which involve a lot of proactive involvement with the breath, a lot of experimentation where you have to learn how to judge the results of your experiments in a reliable way. You're not just sitting there letting the breath come in and go out any old which way. In fact, the Buddha criticized those who practiced breath meditation by just letting the breath come in and go out while trying to be equanimous all the time.

In the Buddha's sixteen steps, you train yourself to breathe being aware of the whole body, you try to calm down the effect that the breath has on the body, you breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, that gives rise to a sense of pleasure and ease, you learn to breathe in a way that calms down the effect of feelings and perceptions on the body and on the mind. And while you're breathing in and out, if you see that the mind needs to be gladdened, you gladden it. If it needs to be steadied, you steady it. If it needs to be released, you release it. In other words, in this case equanimity is the foundation for acting skillfully: assessing the situation, making a difference where you can, and reading the results of your actions in a fair and objective way. That's the first level of equanimity.

The second level comes when you really can get the mind to settle down and be still in concentration so that there's a sense of ease and rapture. Then the ease and rapture fade away, so you're left with equanimity. That's when the mind is really solid and even more observant, aware all around. This is the kind of equanimity you can use to watch subtle things clearly in the mind. You begin to notice some of the defilements in the mind—and they *are* defilements. We usually don't like to use the word "defilement" with regard to our thoughts and emotions, but that's often what they are. They cloud the mind; they darken the mind.

The equanimity that comes from concentration is useful in some cases in dealing with problems of the mind, because you begin to see that the mind has all kinds of ways of creating problems for itself. When you see that the problems are superfluous, it's very easy to let go. Those are the ones that aren't really deeply rooted.

That leaves the deeper problems, and these are the ones where you really do have to figure them out, to understand: "Where is this coming from? Exactly why does the mind go for greed, aversion, and delusion? Why does it like these things?"

As the Buddha said, if you're going to go beyond these defilements, you have to figure out how they come about, how they disappear, and how they're going to come back again after they disappear. Then you figure out what their allure is: Why do you like them? What is there about greed that you really like? What is there about anger that you really like? Usually it's something you don't want to admit to yourself, so it's hard to see.

This is why the solidity of equanimity is, again, a useful foundation for seeing these things so that you can finally admit to yourself that, yes, there is that element in the mind, there's that desire, there's that taste in the mind, that really likes these things.

Then you compare the allure with the drawbacks. Is the taste worth the price you pay? It's amazing how the mind can very easily magnify the taste and try to minimize the drawbacks. But, again, the equanimity of concentration is a good foundation for seeing this. As you get a greater sense of well-being and stability in the mind, there's less hunger, and when there's less hunger you don't fall for the things that look like food but make you pay a heavy price in the end—because now you've already got better food.

So as you use this foundation of equanimity for analyzing things, understanding things, you finally get to the point where you can develop the dispassion that can fully let them go.

This opens up to an even higher level of equanimity: the equanimity that comes when you've found true happiness. There's nothing else you have to struggle for, and you can look at all the different things in the area of sights, sounds, smells, taste, tactile sensations, and ideas, where you used to go foraging for food, and you don't feel any desire to go looking there anymore. Ever. You've got something better.

This level of equanimity is one of the by-products of reaching the goal. It's not the essence of the goal. Sometimes you hear the factors for

awakening being described as descriptions of awakening itself, but that's not the case. They're part of the path. They're to be developed. The goal is something even beyond developing, and as the Buddha said, it's the highest happiness. From the outside it may look like equanimity, but from inside it's a totally satisfying happiness.

So there's an equanimity that's a product of the practice, and there are levels of equanimity that function as factors in the practice. Don't confuse the two. The factors of the practice are the ones we need to pay attention to. The one that's a by-product is going to happen on its own. But the ones we work with—developing the equanimity that allows us to endure things, developing an even deeper equanimity that allows us to see things really clearly, very deeply in the mind: Those are the ones you want to focus on because those are the ones you can *do;* those are the ones you can be responsible for. As for the results, they'll take care of themselves.

But it's always essential that you understand that equanimity is only one of the factors, and not the whole path. You need to use your discernment to figure out when it's appropriate and when the more proactive side of the path has to come into play. The discernment is what does the real work, so make sure that it's as sharp as possible. This is one of the reasons why analysis of qualities comes so early in the list of the factors for awakening, because it has to inform all the other ones—your mindfulness, your persistence, rapture, serenity, concentration, and equanimity—to make sure they stay pointed in the right direction.

# *Skills for Awakening*

**April 7, 2019**

We often come to the meditation to gain a sense of peace and calm, to find some rest. And it is important that we gain these things from the meditation: We learn how to breathe in a way that calms the body, calms the mind; we think in ways that calm the body, calm the mind. And these are skills we can develop to benefit the mind. But they're not the whole story. In spite of what you may have heard, we cannot relax our way to awakening or decree that awakening means being perfectly happy right as we are.

When you look at the Buddha's similes for people who practice, or at the similes given by the great ajaans, you never find the image of someone relaxing his or her way to awakening, or just sitting back and saying, "I'll be okay the way I am right where I am." The similes all have to do with people who are searching, people developing skills, warriors going into battle: people who have a goal and who will do everything they can to reach that goal.

The people searching are searching either to get away from suffering or to get toward something that they can use to assuage their suffering. As the Buddha said, all our searches begin from suffering. From pain. We get mystified by pain. You can imagine being a little child with no knowledge of language, so that nobody can explain things to you. You encounter pain and you don't understand it. All you know is that you want to get away from it or get rid of it. As the Buddha said, your response is twofold: bewilderment and then a search for someone who might help get you past this pain. In the beginning, the "someone" is your parents. But you find that there are pains that your parents can't assuage, so you go looking for other people.

So we're always looking for something. As the Buddha said, for most of us, life is a search. The only people for whom it's *not* a search are people who are already awakened. Everybody else is looking for something.

The search that's most worthwhile to conduct, he said, is a noble search, one that looks for a way out of pain and suffering, and ends up finding a happiness that's reliable, harmless, and will not change—a happiness free from birth, aging, illness, and death. That's the kind of search that's really worth it. And it requires that you develop skills and do battle with your unskillful tendencies.

So it's good to think about where, as a meditator, you're similar to a person developing a skill and where you're similar to a warrior. And the list of qualities comes down to the factors for awakening.

In both cases, you have to be mindful. In the case of the person developing a skill, you have to remember the lessons you've learned from others and from what you've done in the past so that you can compare them with what you're doing right now as you develop your skill.

Then you use the factor the Buddha called analysis of qualities, where you actually examine what you're doing and make comparisons: Is this as good as you can do it, or could it be better? If it's not as good as you can do it, what are you doing wrong? You look at your own physical motions. Say, you're making an object, like a pot. You look at the motions of your hands and your body as you try to shape the pot. But you also look at the attitude of the mind. Where is your mind right now? Is it on what you're doing or is it wandering off someplace else? If you're a person developing a skill, you have to be right there.

Years back, I was visiting a huge pottery shed in Thailand and I watched a potter throw a pot on a wheel. I mentioned to him, "You must have good concentration in order to keep that up." And he said, "Yes, your mind has to be set straight." In other words, you've got to be steadily right there. Then you have to be able to notice when your hand has moved off in the wrong direction, and to figure out what you need to do in order to bring it back.

This is where analysis of qualities moves into persistence. You've got to keep at it and keep at it. You can't be mindful and alert and concentrated just for a few moments and then start thinking about other things, hoping that your hands will be able to do things on their own. You've got to be right there on top of what you're doing.

Then, as the Buddha said, when you develop the quality of being really persistent at being skillful, there arises a rapture not-of-the-flesh—in other words, the happiness that comes from doing something well. This is not the happiness of gaining a thing or a pleasant sensation. It's the deeper happiness that comes from knowing you've mastered something.

And then to support all this, you need the qualities of calm, concentration, and equanimity. Calm keeps you balanced and at ease so that you can stick with your craft easily for long periods of time. Concentration keeps you focused on what you're doing. Equanimity is needed to observe things carefully so that you can make clear and accurate judgments.

Here, as we meditate, we're observing the mind as we're trying to get it calm and still, because when it gets still, you see things more clearly. But we don't simply stop with the calm and the stillness. When you look at the list of the factors for awakening, they move from mindfulness and the discernment in analysis of qualities on through concentration and equanimity—but they don't stop there. You have to take the equanimity and the concentration and turn them around to look at what you're doing—Where are you causing yourself unnecessary suffering?—in the same way that a potter has to keep looking to see what he's doing well, what he's not doing well. He has to have a certain equanimity about when things are working and when they're not.

If you don't have equanimity and steadiness of mind, then when things are not working, you get upset. It gets in the way of solving the problem. And sometimes it even gets in the way of being willing to recognize the problem.

The same list of qualities apply to a warrior: The warrior has to be mindful to remember what he's learned both in school—if he went to warrior school—and what he's learned from his own battles in the past. And, like the skilled potter, he has to have some ability to analyze his own actions, as well as the actions of the enemy, to see what he needs to do. This requires some ingenuity.

As we've heard many times, armies usually prepare for war by preparing

for the last war. That's how we live our lives even in peacetime. But, of course, new things come up in each new war. It's only the people who've developed their ingenuity who are able to solve the new problems as they arise. This also applies to you as a meditator. New things will come up. Not every defilement or distraction that comes into the mind is explained in the texts or the Dhamma talks you've heard. You've got to figure out: Where exactly is the allure of this particular instance of greed, aversion, or delusion?

You may not be able to foresee the particulars of a particular defilement, but you *can* learn the basic principles of how to approach a problem skillfully. You look for the allure. And you look for the drawbacks. You look to see, when something comes up in the mind, why you go for it. And then you look at the results, to see the harm they cause. If you're being very honest with yourself, this is where, again, the qualities of calm and equanimity come together with persistence.

You keep at this. But notice, the equanimity of a warrior is not the equanimity that says, "I'll just put up with whatever. If I lose, that's okay. If I win, that's okay." You have to want to win—really want to win. Remember the desire that underlies the search for victory. Equanimity is for the instances where, if you do lose a battle, you can't let yourself get upset. You just prepare for the next battle. What you want is the equanimity that persists, that doesn't give up, and that also works together with a sense of well-being when you've won a war or when you've done something well. This, in the factors for awakening, would be called rapture or *pīti,* a word that also means refreshment. It's basically an energizing quality that comes when you've mastered a skill or won a battle.

You also need the ability to keep the mind calm in the midst of all the things that are coming at you. Imagine what it's like to be in a battle. Arrows are flying. People are yelling all sorts of insults and threats at you. In one of the images in the Canon, the Buddha says you've got to be like an elephant in battle: Horrifying sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations are going to come at it in the course of the battle, but the elephant can't lose heart, can't let himself be affected by them. As a meditator—both as you're living in daily life and as you're meeting up with

difficulties in your meditation—you can't let yourself get discouraged. You've got to maintain your calm and concentrate on what really needs to be done.

So when you think about these analogies—the skilled craftsman, the warrior—it helps you to understand what the Buddha's talking about when he talks about mindfulness, analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, calm, concentration, and equanimity: all the factors for awakening. You're not just simply being calm and equanimous, telling yourself that the mind is a lot calmer when it isn't trying than when it is trying. That doesn't get anywhere. When you're working on your concentration, you have to really want to get the mind concentrated. You have to want to do the path for it to work.

The people who tell you that the desire for awakening is the one thing that's going to keep you from being awakened are people who don't know how to handle their desires. As the Buddha said, all phenomena, or *dhammas,* are rooted in desire and that includes the path to awakening.

Awakening itself is not rooted in desire. It's not a thing. Nibbana isn't even a phenomenon, according to the Buddha. But the path *is* a phenomenon and it has to be based on desire. This means that you have to learn how to train your desires so that, instead of getting in the way, they inform and nurture your mindfulness, your analysis of qualities, persistence, and concentration. And they have to inform even your calm and equanimity. You do this by approaching the path as a craftsman searching to master a skill or as a warrior in search of victory.

The knowledge we gain along the path is not the kind of knowledge we can get from books. Books are helpful. They give us pointers. They tell us where to look, what questions to ask. But *we're* the ones who have to find the answers, using our own ingenuity, so that in the search for awakening we really do find what we're looking for: something that is timeless, deathless, something that doesn't disappoint and doesn't cause harm.

So think of these analogies and practice in line with them. Do what you can to be up for the challenge of the practice, because there are a lot of things in the mind that won't be willing to go away nicely once you've

decided you want to find awakening. They want to hold on. And where do they come from? They come from your own actions. This is what makes it difficult, because sometimes you feel that you're getting rid of part of yourself, like cutting off your own arm. You're passing judgment on part of yourself. But that's what the analysis of qualities is all about: passing judgment wisely.

You're passing judgment on your past actions and sometimes your present habits. But you have to pass judgment in a mature way. As you practice, you'll be seeing certain desires that you used to go for, that you really identified with, and you'll have to see them as enemies. And as the ajaans say, there are two ways of dealing with enemies. One is to fight them off and chase them out; the other is to try to convert them. But even when you convert them, you've got to be very mindful and very alert and very heedful. Otherwise, when they get their chance, they'll try to turn around and convert *you.* So it's not an easy task. It requires all your ingenuity in finding ways of giving yourself strength—and getting the mind concentrated and calm is one of those ways.

In one of the Buddha's analogies, he describes the practice as being like defending a frontier fortress. Mindfulness is the gatekeeper who makes sure the wrong people don't come into the fortress. Then there are the soldiers of right effort, to fight the enemy; and the plastered wall of discernment, which provides the enemy with no footholds. And you've got concentration, which provides food for the soldiers and the gatekeeper: the food of rapture and calm. And the equanimity is there in the concentration, too, to help you see things clearly: not just to stay where you are, but to see clearly what needs to be done, what has to be accepted, what does not have to be accepted in defending the fortress. When you've got all these qualities working together, you can protect the fortress, and you have the strength and the nourishment to keep at it successfully.

So this is what the concentration is for. It's not just resting for the sake of resting. It's resting for the sake of strength. It's resting for the sake of the tasks that need to be done. One of the forest ajaans made a comparison: When you get the mind into calm and concentration, he said, it's like piling up all the materials you're going to need to build a house. But then if you

just stay right there, you'll simply have a pile of materials. It won't give you the shelter you need. The next step is to build the house so that you can get some real use out of it. Building the house stands for using your concentration to gain discernment.

This means that we practice concentration, we get the mind calm, we focus on the present moment as nourishment, as strength, as materials that we then fashion with our skills, so that we can find the object of our search —and find an object at the end of the search that really puts an end to searches. That's the point where the craftsman can put down his or her tools. As a warrior, you can put down your weapons because you've found a victory that exceeds all your possible desires.

So we don't deny that we have desires. We simply learn how to train them to be mindful and wise, and to approach our happiness as something that requires a skill to master. When we see the path as a question of mastering skills, that's when we really understand it and we can carry through with it, realizing that sometimes it'll involve battles. We make the path our own and give ourselves the chance to emerge victorious.

# *Toward Release*

**April 9, 2019**

Practicing mindfulness means keeping something in mind. Practicing right mindfulness means keeping in mind two activities that we'll be doing here as we meditate.

One is being with the breath. The Buddha calls this keeping track of the body in and of itself. In other words, you don't think about your body in the context of the world: how it looks to other people, how it looks to you, whether it's strong enough to do the work you want, how much longer it's going to last. Just be with it as it is right now: your sensation of the body right here. It's something you know you've got right here. As Ajaan Fuang said, if you can doubt the fact that you're breathing, then you can doubt everything. There would be nothing certain in the world at all.

So focus on something that's sure. You've got the body here. You've got the breath coming in, the breath going out. That's one of the activities of right mindfulness: remembering to stay with the sensation of the breathing in and of itself.

The other activity the Buddha calls "putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world": All your thoughts about what you want out of the world or your past disappointments with the world—put those aside. The problem is that we're very quick at picking them up again. Even though a lot of those issues are not right here right now, we can easily create them into little worlds, and then we go into them.

We're so good at that: creating worlds for our thoughts, worlds for our emotions, and then entering into them, losing our bearings here with the breath. So you have to take apart not only your greed and distress with reference to the world, but also any reference to the world at all. The Thai ajaans talk about this a lot with reference to a Pali term, *sammati*—although in Thai it's pronounced *samut*. It can be translated as "convention" or

"supposition." One of their examples of a convention is paper money. It's just paper, but we give it much more value than just paper. We agree that it's worth one dollar, ten dollars, 100 dollars, and so on, and because the agreement carries on through time, and because enough people agree to it, it's more than just children playing make-believe. We can actually get some value out of the paper.

So these suppositions have their purposes. They serve their functions. But outside of those functions, they still are make-believe. And they can be a burden. You don't want to carry them into areas where they're not appropriate, as when you're carrying a lot of paper money in a sack over your back as you walk into a dangerous neighborhood at night. In the same way, right now as you're meditating, any supposition that has anything at all to do with the world is a burden on the concentration. It's not appropriate here.

People complain about how hard it is to practice nowadays. Part of it's because we're invaded by the suppositions of the world all the time. Or we open ourselves to their invasions. We carry little screens around with us. We're constantly in contact with other people who have those suppositions. To be in conversation with them, we have to pick up their suppositions and agree to them. But when you're coming here to be alone with your breath, you want to divest yourself of them.

For the time being, think of the world outside simply as an idea. And that's what it is in your mind right now: just an idea. You have no other direct experience of it. Memories of the past are things you're churning up from inside. Plans for the future, you're churning up from inside. You could even take your sense of "here" and how you're sitting here—where's east, where's west, where's north, south—and try to erase those directions. Think about the fact that your mind is simply present but not oriented in any direction. We tend to think of the mind as facing forward because the eyes are in the front of the body, and the information from the eyes takes up so much of our awareness. But now that our eyes are closed, we don't need to think about which direction is forward, which direction is back, up, or down. As the Buddha said, you want to make forward and back, up and down, all equal, so that there's just awareness.

That's just one of the conventions of the world that we've brought in. Put aside as many of these conventions as you can. See them as suppositions, things you've supposed into being. And then watch for the mind that wants to go out and get involved in those worlds again. Ask it, "Where are you going? And why are you going?" The more thoroughly you can put away these ideas, the easier it'll be to stay with the breath in and of itself, and to develop your sensitivity for what's actually going on right here in body and mind.

Instead of wanting to know so much about out there, ask yourself something simple about in here. The Buddha starts his instructions for breath meditation with something very, very simple. He says, "Discern long breathing. Discern short breathing." It's interesting that, in his sixteen steps for breath meditation, he uses the verb "to discern" only in the very first two steps: discerning long breathing, discerning short breathing. How are you going to know if a breath is long or short? You have to make comparisons: Is this breath longer than the last one, or is it shorter? That requires that you be mindful to remember the last breath, and that you can compare it with this one.

It's not that you can put two breaths side by side. The last breath is gone while you're with this breath, and yet you're able to compare it. What are the functions of the mind that allow you to do that? Mindfulness and discernment: mindfulness to remember; discernment to pass judgment. And you *are* passing judgment. So you're not exclusively in the present. You do want to get anchored in something that's right here, something that you don't have to suppose into being, but at the same time you have to exercise some mental functions that can encompass the past. And you want to get good at that. You want to get good at keeping something in mind that's relevant to what you want to do now, and you have to want to develop the ability to make comparisons.

You read so much about what's wrong with the judging mind or the comparing mind. But the only place I've ever seen the Buddha counsel against the judging mind is when he says, "Don't try to judge other people's attainments." You can never really know for sure what someone else's attainment is. But you *do* want to pass judgment on which people are good

to hang around with, which people are not, and—in your own mind—which mental states are good to hang around with and which ones are not. And you want to learn how to reliably judge these things for yourself. That requires powers of observation and the ability to ask the right questions, because that's a lot of what discernment is. So we start developing those powers and functions of the mind in the right direction by focusing them on something direct and immediate: the process of breathing.

When the Buddha talks about the factors for awakening, there are two processes or two exercises that he says are really helpful: one is to develop appropriate attention, the ability to ask the right questions; and the other is to practice breath meditation. And it's not as if these were two things to be done separately. You do them together. You focus on the breath, applying the right questions to the breath and to your mind's relationship to the breath.

We're here looking at three things, basically: the breath, the feelings that come up with the breath, and then the mind state that watches and that is soothed by the breath. The mind is both on the receiving end and on the proactive end in its relationship to the breath. On the receiving end, it's alert to the level of comfort coming from the breath and its effect on the mind. On the proactive end, it tries to figure out which kind of breathing is more comfortable, long or short—because that's what appropriate attention does: It asks you which kinds of things are having a good effect and which kinds of things are having a bad effect.

Then you extend that questioning further: When the breath feels comfortable and gives rise to a sense of well-being, even a sense of rapture, what do you do with it? Well, you spread it around. You expand your awareness and try to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. You let the feeling of well-being and rapture spread to fill both the body and your awareness. Then you ask yourself, "What kind of impact is the breath having on the body? What kind of impact is the breath having on the mind?" If the mind needs to be gladdened, you're happy to breathe in a way that gives energy. If the mind needs to be steadied, you breathe in a way that's more calming.

Now, even though the Buddha mentions the word "discern" only in the first two steps of breath meditation, that doesn't mean that you don't use discernment in the remaining steps. It's just that the word goes into the background, and the actual issues of discernment come to the foreground. For instance, in the fourth step, the Buddha tells you to calm bodily fabrication, i.e., the in-and-out breathing. In steps seven and eight, he tells you to breathe sensitive to mental fabrication—feelings and perceptions—and then to calm mental fabrication.

Now, seeing things in terms of fabrication is one of the basic principles of insight and discernment: getting sensitive to how the actions of the breath fabricate your sense of the body, and how the actions of feelings and perceptions fabricate your state of mind. But the Buddha doesn't leave you with just being sensitive: In telling you to calm these things, he's telling you to make the best use of this sensitivity, to combine insight with tranquility. To calm the body, you calm the breath. To gladden the mind, you focus on feelings and perceptions that give you energy. To steady the mind to get it concentrated, you focus on more calming feelings and perceptions—such as the labels you apply to the body or the breath.

As you do this, you get more and more sensitive to the fact that you are doing things here in the present moment to create this experience. True, you're not creating it out of whole cloth, but you are fabricating your sense of the present out of the raw material provided by your past kamma. This applies to all your present experiences, whether you're meditating or not. The desire to fabricate your present experience well and the questions you ask as a result of the desire to do it well: Those qualities take you beyond simply being with the breath and turn into right view and appropriate attention.

Then, once the mind feels soothed by the breath and the feelings of ease associated with the breath, it'll settle down. The breath itself, then, as the mind settles down, gets more and more steady. More and more calm. It can even get to the point where it stops because your brain is using so little oxygen and the breath energies in the body are so well connected that you don't need to breathe. Now, you're not forcing the breath to stop. It's just that you feel no need for it. The mind is that calm.

And then the next question is, what do you do with that calm? What do you do with the concentration and equanimity that go along with it? The Buddha talks about developing the factors for awakening even further. He says that, based on seclusion—by which he means the mind secluded in concentration—you try to develop dispassion. You do that by looking at how inconstant the things are that you tend to latch onto in the body, feelings, and mind, and in the world at large. They come, they go, they leave us, and so much of our interest in them is very, very constructed. In other words, a little something happens out in the world and we have to embroider it to make it satisfying enough, interesting enough, to feed the mind. But when you see the extent to which you have to put so much effort into getting satisfaction out of things that are just going to keep leaving you, leaving you, you begin to wonder, "Well, why do I go for that? What's the allure?"

When you can start taking apart some of the suppositions or conventions that you use to create a sense of interest in the world, or to function in the world, you can get down to where the real allure for these things is, what gratification you're getting out of them. And when you begin to see that the allure isn't worth it, when it's compared with the drawbacks: That's when you develop dispassion. Your interest in all these things that you fabricate begins to cease. As a result, the fabrications themselves begin to cease, because the desire that kept them going is no longer there. Part of the mind keeps analyzing what's going on, but it's a very subtle kind of analysis on top of what you've done here.

The mind eventually lets go—and it lets go of everything, even those most basic conventions and suppositions at that point, even the conventions of the path itself. After all, even right view is a convention—it's based on the desire for true happiness, and it has its assumptions and suppositions, which have their value in leading to true happiness. But once that happiness is found, you can let it go, too. In fact, you have to. Otherwise, the mind wouldn't be totally released. Once the letting-go is total, the release, the freedom that's revealed, is total as well.

Now, this is something that *can* be done. It's not just a story that comes from ancient India. We read the stories about people gaining awakening

listening to the Buddha and we wonder, "Why was it so easy for them and so hard for us?" That's hard to say. We'd have to go back and interview them.

But we do have the teachings of the forest ajaans and the people who've practiced with them. They say it can still be done. It may be harder now. It may require more work because there are more suppositions to undo. It's really hard to say. But a lot of it has to do with our willingness to put our suppositions aside, to step back from even the most basic things we assume about ourselves and about the world, and to ask ourselves, "What would the mind be like if we could just drop those assumptions for the time being?" We're not denying that they have their validity, their time and place. But when you bring them into the mind in areas where they're not relevant, you create a lot of unnecessary trouble for yourself.

So right now the issues of the world are not relevant. See how much you can put them aside, let them go, and focus on what needs to be done to get the mind to settle down, to develop these qualities of concentration and discernment in dialogue with each other. After all, that's what it comes down to. In the factors for awakening, you've got discernment first and it leads to concentration. In the five faculties, concentration leads to discernment. They're in dialogue. And the dialogue is about appropriate attention: "Where is the suffering right now? What am I doing to cause it? What qualities of mind can I develop to help abandon the cause so that I can calm the mind and realize what the noble people of the past have realized: that the news of awakening, the news of release, doesn't have to be just their news. It can be my news, too."

You have to remember that putting aside suppositions is not something that happens just at the end of the path. When you're asking the questions of appropriate attention, you're looking at everything in terms of cause and effect, action and result. A lot of the constructs of the world that we build around our actions and our identities and our thoughts about the world get in the way of directly seeing our actions and their results. So get your discernment in dialogue with your concentration to strip these things away. And you'll find that instead of becoming poorer as you let things go, you're actually a whole lot richer.

# *Glossary*

***Ajaan*** (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

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

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

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

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

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

***Sutta:*** Discourse. Sanskrit form: *sutra.*

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