



*In the Elephant's
Footprint*

THREE TALKS

In the Elephant's Footprint

T H R E E T A L K S

Thānissaro Bhikkhu

PALELAI BUDDHIST TEMPLE

SINGAPORE

DECEMBER 15-17, 2017

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Ven. Sāriputta said, “Friends, just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprint of the elephant, and the elephant’s footprint is reckoned the foremost among them in terms of size; in the same way, all skillful qualities are included in the four noble truths. In which four? In the noble truth of stress, in the noble truth of the origination of stress, in the noble truth of the cessation of stress, and in the noble truth of the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress.”
— MN 28

I : THE WISDOM OF GOODNESS

December 15, 2017

It used to be that people thought that Buddhism was very pessimistic and talked about nothing but suffering, suffering, suffering. Nowadays, though, people are beginning to realize that the Buddha was actually talking about happiness. He talked about suffering because he wanted people to understand that there is suffering in life but that it's also possible to find happiness in spite of the suffering. In fact, his teachings are all aimed at happiness. It's just that we have to comprehend suffering before we can find a happiness that's genuine and true.

But still, people often interpret the Buddha's teachings on happiness as being quite defeatist and pessimistic—in other words, teaching that, because things change and are impermanent, we have to learn how to accept the way they are. If you can be at ease with the way they are, then you'll be happy. That's what they say, but that's still pretty miserable. It gives the impression that there's really nothing that we can do about change, and so there's no long-term happiness in life, no deeper happiness, no special happiness in life at all. All we can do is just be very passive and accept whatever comes up—which is very pessimistic.

The Buddha actually taught something much more daring and of much greater value, which is there is a happiness that we can attain through our efforts, something that's not dependent on conditions; something that lies beyond the normal pleasures that come and go, a happiness that doesn't change. The happiness he actually teaches is something that lies deeper in the heart.

The idea that we simply have to accept that things come and go, I think, comes from taking what we might call the Buddha's two wisdom teachings—which are the three characteristics and the four noble truths—and putting the three characteristics first, and the four noble truths second. In other words, according to this interpretation, the Buddha's basic principles are that things are inconstant or impermanent; things are stressful; things are not-self. In fact sometimes this is often defined as what right view is. Then the four noble truths—about suffering, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation—are interpreted to fit into those principles. But when people fall into this interpretation, there are several conclusions they come to.

One is interpreting the teaching on not-self as a no-self teaching—i.e., that

there really is no self; there is no agent here. We're simply on the receiving end of things coming in, depending on conditions, and we have no agency in changing anything. That is one of the conclusions that's drawn.

The second conclusion is that suffering comes from not being okay with change, from thinking that you have the power to change things. But if you accept that change is going to happen and can learn how to be okay with it, then you won't suffer.

Based on this interpretation is the idea that clinging means that you don't realize that things are impermanent, so you hold on hoping that they'll be permanent; but if you're okay with the fact that things are going to change, then you're not really clinging. You're just embracing things lightly and letting them go as they pass.

But if you've ever noticed, when people cling, they don't always cling with the idea that things are permanent. The two big things that we cling to in life are food and sex, right? Does anyone think food is permanent? No. Does anyone think sex is permanent? No. We all know that these things are impermanent and yet we still cling anyhow. In fact, knowing that they're impermanent makes us cling all the more. We cling not because we think they are permanent but because we think that the effort that goes into clinging is worth it. The Buddha says we cling because of the pleasure we get out of things, with the idea that the pleasure we gain from holding on is worth the effort that goes into the clinging.

Now, in general, human beings are pretty bad at calculating what's worth the effort and what's not. I live in America and when I out into the forest, I go to the North Rim of the Grand Canyon. On the way there, I have to ride through Las Vegas. And Las Vegas is an excellent example of people not knowing what's worth the effort. Someone once said that what he liked about Las Vegas was that Las Vegas is very honest. The signs on the road leading there say, "93% payback rate." You know what they're telling you, right? You give them one dollar, and they'll give you 93 cents back. And yet, every Friday night, people go, go, go to Las Vegas. Every Sunday, the traffic jam coming back from Las Vegas is incredible. We're very bad judges of what's worth doing in our lives.

There was once a positive psychologist—the kind of psychologist who studies why people can be happy or what they do to be happy. He would ask people, "What makes you happy in life?" and they would give him a list of answers. And then, if he actually interviewed them while they were experiencing those things and ask, "Are you happy?" the answer would be, "Well, not so happy." And yet later, people would still say, "This is what makes me happy."

You can think about the meal that you're going to have after this talk tonight.

Singapore is a food haven, and you can have a whole world available to you, so you can think about that for the entire hour: “I’d like to have some pizza and maybe some Szechuan food” or whatever. You can enjoy thinking about these things for the whole hour and miss the Dhamma talk entirely. And then when you go out, the eating is very short: quick quick, eat eat, and then you go. Not much pleasure.

And so this psychologist was saying to himself, “Why is it that these people are such bad judges of what makes them happy?” Then he thought about himself: He likes to climb mountains. Now, if there’s anything that’s stupid, it’s climbing mountains. You get to the top then you have to go down. That’s it. And a lot of effort goes into getting to the top and a lot that goes into coming back down. And he realized that while he was doing it, he was actually pretty miserable. But then he would come back to work and couldn’t wait for the next chance to go climb a mountain.

So clinging comes basically from bad judgement. We think that something is going to be worth the effort, and so we hold on to it—we keep doing it repeatedly—and yet it’s not really worth the effort at all.

This is why the Buddha’s teaching us to look carefully at why we cling to things—not because we think that they’re going to be permanent, but because we think the effort that goes into the clinging is going to be worth it.

So the whole purpose of his teaching is not to accept things as there are. Instead, the teaching aims at helping us develop our powers of judgment so that we become better judges of what is worth the effort. And this better judgment comes when, instead of putting the three characteristics first, we put the four noble truths first. The four noble truths are based on the realization that, yes, we are active in our approach to life. We don’t just sit here and receive things coming in. We’re more proactive. As the Buddha said, all dhammas are based on desire. Everything we experience in life is based on desire of one kind or another. Our sense of who we are and our sense of the world around us is based on our desires.

I’ll give you an example. My brother is an alcoholic. One time, he came to visit me at the monastery, and as we were driving from the airport through the nearby town, we went past the one place in town where they sell liquor. Now, I had never really paid attention to this place, as I wasn’t interested. But as soon as we drove past, my brother said: “Geoff, can I borrow your car tomorrow?” I said “No.” I’d been his brother long enough. I knew what he was thinking. But his world is different from mine. As they say: If an alcoholic goes into a house, he knows very quickly where the alcohol is kept. If a monk goes into a house, he knows very quickly where the dark chocolate is kept. Our experience or our

sense of the world is dependent on our desires. Our sense of who we are is also dependent on our desires. What the Buddha is telling us in the four noble truths is that we have to look at our desires to see: Are they leading to happiness or are they leading to suffering?

Now, we all know that the Buddha said that suffering is based on three kinds of craving: craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for not becoming.

Sensuality is what I talked about just now. It's thinking about sensual pleasures. It's our fascination with planning our next meal, our next trip, our next whatever the sensual pleasure is going to be. The problem is not necessarily the pleasure itself. The problem is our fascination with thinking about it. Again, you can think about tonight's meal for the whole hour and make different changes to your plans for what you're going to eat and where you're going to eat it. The meal itself is not so much the problem. It's the amount of time and effort that's put into thinking about it.

As for craving for becoming, the word "becoming" basically means your sense of who you are in a particular world of experience, and that's going to be based on a desire, too. If you have a desire for pizza, then who you are is, one, the person who will enjoy the pizza and, two, the person who has the ability to obtain the pizza: in other words, you as the consumer and you as the provider. That's your sense of who you are. The world around you, as far as it's relevant to this particular becoming, is what's going to be helpful in getting the pizza and what's getting in the way. Anything that's not related to pizza is totally irrelevant in that particular world.

Once you have the pizza, then what's next? There will be other desires, and there will be a different you and a different world dependent on which desire you focus on. Sometimes you have conflicting desires at the same time, which is why we have conflict inside—conflict between different senses of who you are — which also leads to conflict in the world outside.

So, basically, this is what the Buddha means by the word, "becoming": a sense of who you are and the world you inhabit. To crave that is a kind of craving that would lead to suffering.

And then there's craving for not becoming. You get into a particular sense of who you are or a particular sense of the world, and you don't like it. You want to abolish it. That's craving for not becoming.

The Buddha says we suffer because of these three different kinds of craving. That's the second noble truth. But not all craving is bad. The craving to gain awakening is actually part of the path. The craving to get rid of unskillful thoughts and to develop skillful thoughts in your mind: This is all part of right

effort, which is part of the path, the fourth noble truth.

So what the Buddha is doing with the four noble truths is teaching us to look at our desires, realizing that our desires are going to shape our sense of who we are and the world that we live in, and they can go in two very different directions: either leading to happiness or leading to suffering.

When the Buddha explains this as part of the four noble truths, on the unskillful side he lists the desire as the three kinds of craving: Those are the cause of suffering. Then there's the suffering that comes as a result. That's one side. On the other side, the skillful side, is the desire that's part of right effort, part of the path to end of suffering; and then the end of suffering is the result. So that's how we've got four noble truths.

Now, each of the four noble truths carries a duty. The duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it—in other words, to understand it, to understand it so thoroughly that you finally don't feel a passion for it anymore. We don't usually think that we're passionate for suffering, but then you look at how people suffer again and again and yet they keep going back to things that make themselves suffer: That's because there is passion there.

When the Buddha talks about craving and clinging, he's basically talking about our addiction to things from which we've suffered before but we keep going back. So the duty there is to comprehend that there really is suffering in that clinging: in the things we hold on to, and in the holding on.

The duty with regard to the cause of suffering is to abandon it. When we see the craving arise, we should see it as something we should get rid of. These are the activities we have to do.

Now, our problem with these first two noble truths is that usually we get them backwards. We think that suffering is our enemy and craving is our friend. As Ajaan Suwat said, "No, you've got it backwards. You have to see craving as your enemy and suffering as your friend—your friend in the sense that you want to get to know it well, to understand it. When you understand it, then you can go beyond it." For most of us, when we see suffering, we try to get rid of the suffering right away. This is the wrong duty. It's like going into your house, seeing your house full of smoke—and trying to put out the smoke. If you don't look for the fire, you can keep on putting out the smoke, putting out the smoke, but it's never going to end the smoke. The smoke will keep on coming. You have to find the fire to put it out. In the same way, you look for the craving and let it go. That's how you put an end to the suffering.

On the other side of the noble truths, the skillful side, you have the end of suffering and the path to the end of suffering. The duty with the end of suffering is to realize it, and you do that by developing the path. The path is something

that you actually have to bring in to being: everything from right view to right concentration.

So these are the four duties we have with regard to the four noble truths.

Now, when the Buddha taught the three characteristics: One, he didn't call them "three characteristics." He called them "perceptions"—ways of looking at and labeling things. And the purpose of these perceptions is to help with these duties for the four noble truths. In other words, when you see that there's suffering, you want to perceive that suffering is inconstant. When you perceive it as inconstant, you realize that it's stressful. And when you perceive it as stressful, you realize that it's not worth holding on to as you or yours. In other words, this is a value judgement: It's not worth clinging to. It's not worth holding onto. You should let go of it. That's what "not-self" means: not that there is no self, but that the things you usually label as "self" aren't worth holding on to. You develop dispassion for them. That's what it means to comprehend suffering.

Similarly with the causes of suffering: You see that these things lead to something bad, so to let go of them you have to perceive them as inconstant, i.e., they're undependable, that they're stressful, and that they're something you shouldn't identify with. You can think of your mind as being like a committee, and that "not-self" here means that there are some members of the committee that you no longer want to identify with. You don't want to side with them.

As for the path, you don't apply the three perceptions there quite yet. You're actually trying to develop the path, so you apply the three perceptions to things that would pull you *away* from the path. For instance, part of the path is virtue, and as the Buddha said, sometimes we're afraid to follow the precepts because we feel that our health would be at stake, or our wealth or our relatives. And the Buddha says we have to realize that these things don't last. You don't go to hell from lack of wealth or health or relatives. But the act of breaking the precepts can take you down to hell. You may say, "Wait a minute. I broke this precept because of my mother. I broke this precept so that I could make more money to give to my mother." But what do you think the hell guardians are going to say? "That's your mother's business. You've got to go to hell. We don't care how noble your motive was, you broke the precepts."

So even in cases like that, you have to say, "I can't lie for the sake of my health, I can't lie for the sake of my wealth, I can't lie even for the sake of helping my relatives." You have to see these things as inconstant and stressful—things that you cannot rely on and are not really yours.

Similarly when you're practicing meditation: You apply the three perceptions to things that would pull you out of concentration or get in the way

of discernment.

Now, you have to be skillful in how you use these three perceptions, having the right sense of time and place for when to apply them and when not to. And that sense comes from seeing things in terms of the duties of the four noble truths. You apply the three perceptions when they help with the duties of the four noble truths, but not when they interfere with those duties.

So basically, it's important that you see that the four noble truths come first and these three perceptions come within the context of the four noble truths. And so instead of simply accepting things coming and going, the Buddha counsels you to look at your desires. There are desires that would actually lead to the end of suffering. The desire for awakening is a good thing. The belief that you can do this, the Buddha calls a kind of conceit: "Other people can do this, so why can't I?" That's actually a skillful form of conceit, something that you should encourage, something that you should *make* come into being and keep from going away.

So what we're doing is not simply accepting things coming and going, while saying, "Everything is okay. Waves are coming on the shore, good waves are coming, bad waves are coming, and it doesn't matter, I'll just sit here and accept the waves." What's going to happen, of course, is that someday the waves are going to come on strong and, oops, you're gone. And who knows where they're going to wash you up again?

The image the Buddha gives of the practice is not of sitting there, accepting waves. Instead, he says it's as if there's a dangerous river that you have to cross, but you *can* get across the river. And you do that by holding on to the path—which is like a raft—and by making an effort. You have to paddle with your hands and feet, and you have to make a serious effort, but there is a place of safety that you can get to. If you get onto a raft and say, "Look! I'm not holding on!" What's going to happen? You'll fall off and get swept downstream.

There's a teaching by Ajaan Chah. He said, suppose you're coming back from the market. You're carrying a banana in your hand, and someone comes up and asks, "Why are you carrying the banana?" You say, "I'm carrying the banana because I want to eat it." He then says, "How about the peel? Are you going to eat the peel too?" "No." "Then why are you carrying the peel?"

At this point, Ajaan Chah asks, "What do you use to answer him?" And his answer comes in two stages. First, you have to use desire. You have to *want* to give a good answer. In other words, discernment is not going to come without the desire. You have to desire to give a good answer. And then, in the second stage, Ajaan Chah gives you a good answer for the person: "The time hasn't come to let go of the peel. If I let go of the peel now, the banana would become

mush in my hand.”

And it's the same thing with the practice of the path. There are things that we have to hold on to. If you don't hold on to the path, your mind becomes mush, so you have to hold on to the path and realize that this is a desire that's actually a skillful desire: The desire to follow the path is something that you need in order to practice.

As the Buddha said, wisdom comes from the question, “What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” This is the question that gives direction to your desire. And it's wise in three ways.

One, it recognizes that there is such a thing as long-term happiness, that it's not just waves coming in and going away, coming in and going away. Some pleasures are longer; some pleasures are shorter. Some pleasures are harmful; some pleasures are not.

Two, you want to look for pleasures that are not harmful: pleasures that don't harm you and that don't harm other people. And you want pleasures that last. That's the second part of wisdom, realizing that long-term has to be harmless, and that long-term is better than short-term.

Three, happiness is going to depend on your actions: That's the third part of the wisdom. Happiness is not going to come just rushing up to you on its own. It depends on what you're doing. Your actions make all the difference.

That's what wisdom starts with—having conviction in those three realizations.

Now, the first level of the Buddha's answer to that question—“What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?”—is making merit. Other answers also include practicing the path, developing concentration, developing discernment, but tonight I would like to focus on making merit, because sometimes people look down on making merit. They say that it's for people who are not serious about the practice, people who are just selfish, who want to make merit so that they can win the lottery the next time. Does that happen in Singapore? Do you have a lottery?

In America, we have five casinos in the area around the monastery. We're in an area where there are lots of Indian reservations, and in America, if you have an Indian reservation, you can build a casino, because the laws that govern Indian reservation are different from the laws for the rest of the state. And so the casinos are like traps for people coming into the monastery. They either trap you on the way in, in which case you may not make it to the monastery at all, or they trap you on the way out. People think “I wonder how much merit I made at the monastery” and then they go and throw some money away to test

their merit. If that's your approach to merit, then yes, it is selfish.

But that's not how the Buddha teaches merit. He's not teaching merit to win the lottery. He's teaching you merit because this is the way you can actually develop wisdom and discernment, and prepare yourself for the more advanced parts of the practice.

And merit is not selfish. When you look at what the Buddha taught about making merit, it's not just a matter of being generous. It also includes following the precepts and meditating to develop thoughts of goodwill for all beings. As the Buddha said, merit is a way of finding happiness. "This is actually another word for happiness," he said, "acts of merit." Now think about it: If you find your happiness by being generous, you find your happiness by being virtuous, you find your happiness by spreading thoughts of goodwill to everybody, it's not selfish. It's actually a kind of happiness that breaks down boundaries between you and other people. When you're being generous, you benefit, and other people benefit, too. When you're being virtuous, you benefit, other people benefit, too. When you practice goodwill, you benefit, other people benefit, too. So this breaks down boundaries. It's not selfish at all.

If you find your happiness in things like wealth, status, praise, and sensual pleasures, that actually creates divisions, because when you gain wealth, somebody else loses. You gain status, other people lose. You go around trying to get praise for yourself, other people are going to be jealous. That creates divisions. But if you're looking for happiness through merit, it's actually an unselfish way of practicing.

Of course, the Buddha recommends that you practice all three kinds of merit, and not just being generous, because if you practice just being generous or just observing the precepts, there are dangers.

Ajaan Wan, who was a famous teacher in Thailand many years back, once said that if you're generous but don't observe the precepts and don't meditate, you have hopes of being reborn as a dog in an American house: very comfortable, people love you, but you don't know anything. Right? You can listen to Dhamma talks all day and not understand a word.

If you're generous and observe the precepts, you have hopes of being reborn as a human being with wealth, but if you don't meditate, then you won't have the wisdom to use your wealth wisely and well. In that way, your wealth can actually turn around and destroy you. As we see many times around us: people who have all the wealth they need but they spend it on things that are worthless or things that are actually harmful to their genuine well-being.

So if you want your merit to be safe, you develop all three kinds: generosity, virtue, and thoughts of goodwill for all beings.

Now I'd like to go into these one by one, to show that in addition to being a skillful way of finding happiness, they also prepare you for the higher levels of the practice.

For example, with generosity: When the Buddha taught generosity, one of the first things he pointed out was that it's a matter of free choice. A king once came to ask him, "Where should a gift be given?" Now, this king had asked this question of brahmins and other religious groups in the past. He asked the brahmins, and the answer from the brahmins was that the gift should be given to the brahmins. He asked the Jains, and they said that the gift should be given to the Jains. So the king was expecting that the Buddha would say, "Give to the Buddhists." But that was not what the Buddha said. Instead, he said, "Give where you feel inspired. Give where you think people would use it well." There was no pressure to give to any particular person. The Buddha never said you should give here or you should give there—or should not give here or not give there. After all, it is your wealth. But also, beyond that, he was pointing out that your generosity should come from a free choice on your part.

He was trying to teach the basic principle of kamma: that we do have freedom of choice. And one of the best ways of realizing that is when you give a gift. You are perfectly free to give to anywhere you want. You don't have to be a slave to your desires. You can be generous. Think back on this: When was the first time you gave a gift, not because it was expected of you, and not because it was Chinese New Year, not because it was somebody's birthday, or because it was for your teacher, but simply because you wanted to give a gift. That means a lot more than when you were told that you had to give a gift—as when you go to weddings, you have to give a gift. It means more when you're simply fond of giving.

In my own case, I was thinking about this a while back and I recalled what I think was my first genuine gift. I was ten years old and we had moved from where we lived on a farm to a little town. And in the town, I could get on my bike and ride to the store. Here in Singapore, that's a common thing right? The stores are everywhere. But when I lived on the farm, it was very difficult to go to a store. But now I lived in a town, I could get on my bike and in five minutes I was at the store. So one day I had some money in my pocket—ten years old, walking into a store—and I noticed that they had an egg separator. Now, my mother liked to bake. She baked cookies, she baked pies, she baked cakes, and she was spending a lot of time separating the eggs. And I thought she would probably like an egg separator—you know, this little thing like a cup for the yoke with a space around it for the egg white to go through—and it cost about 15 cents. So I bought my mother an egg separator and came home and gave it to her. Later, I realized, thinking back, that was the first time that I gave a gift not

because I was told to give a gift but because I wanted to.

Years later, after my mother died, we went through her personal effects, and I found the egg separator. She had made a mistake one time and put it into the dishwasher and it had melted, but she kept it. And I know why she kept it. When a gift is freely given, it means a lot more.

And so the lesson from the Buddha's teaching is that when you really give out of the generosity of your heart, you're teaching yourself a lesson about freedom. You are not a slave to your greed; you are not a slave to your possessiveness. You have the freedom to give something away.

The Buddha wants to protect that. Monks are taught that if someone comes to them and asks, "Where should I give a gift?" they should say, "Give where you feel inspired. Give where you feel it would be well used." Several years back, a student of mine had a mother who was quite wealthy. She was going to give a gift of \$2 million to a Buddhist center, and he wanted her to give it to our monastery. And so he called me up and asked, "What should I tell my mother?" I said, "Tell her to give where she feels inspired and she feels it would be well used." So she gave it to an group. And I thought to myself that I preserved my precepts, and my precepts were now worth more than \$2 million.

The Buddha has lots of teachings for the monks about not asking for things, or not even trying to influence people to give. There was a case where monks were building huts and they were going out of bounds, competing with one another, and pestering lay people with requests for materials and workers. In fact, as the story said, it got so bad that when people started to see monks come, they would turn away, they would close the door. Even if they saw a cow coming, they thought, "This is a monk," and would turn away.

So word got to the Buddha. He called all the monks together and said, "Look, people don't like being asked for money. People don't like fund-raisers." He added that even animals don't like fund-raisers. He told the story about a monk living in a forest where there was a big marsh nearby, and the birds would come at night and settle in the trees, going *cha cha cha cha* all night long. The monk went to the Buddha and said, "I'd like the birds to go away." And the Buddha said, "Okay, in the first watch of the night, get up and make an announcement: 'Every bird here in the forest: I want one feather from each of you.' The second watch of the night: 'Every bird here in the forest: I want one feather from each of you.' Third watch of the night: 'Every bird here in the forest: I want one feather from each of you.'" The monk did as he was told, and the birds said to themselves, "This monk is greedy," and they all left.

So the Buddha wants to protect the freedom of choice in giving a gift. You should realize that generosity comes from your own choice and that you have

freedom of choice. This is the number-one principle of kamma. It's not that your bad kamma is going to get you. The basic principle of kamma is that you do have a freedom of choice. What you do makes a difference. You can change what you do for the better. And you learn this by being generous.

You also learn that you become a different person, and the world around you becomes a different world when you're being generous. This is a lesson in becoming, a skillful kind of becoming. You become a more generous person, your heart is wider, and the world becomes a wider, more welcoming place. So you learn an important lesson about how your actions shape who you are and the world around you.

Now if you approach generosity not simply as something you want to do but as a skill, then the Buddha gives you more instructions. Skillful giving depends on:

- your motivation,
- your attitude,
- the recipient, and
- the actual gift you give.

These are the four things you want to think about as you develop generosity into a skill.

In terms of your motivation, the Buddha said that the lowest motivation is, "If I give this gift, I'm going to get it back with interest." That *is* a good motivation. It's the lowest, but it still counts as a good motivation; it's better than not being generous at all. A higher motivation is that "It's good to give." A higher motivation is that "It's not right that here I have all this wealth and these other people are poor; they don't have anything. If I don't give, it's not right." That's a higher motivation.

A higher motivation still is that giving makes the mind serene. And then finally, giving becomes a natural expression of the mind, that when you have something, you can always think of how can you share it. The motivation goes higher, and the results that come with your generosity also go higher.

In terms of your attitude, you want to give with an attitude of respect. You want to give attentively, to pay attention as you're doing it. You want to give with a mind of sympathy for the person who is receiving it. You want to be glad when you think about giving the gift, glad while you're giving the gift, glad when you've given the gift. If you develop these attitudes, then the merit that comes from the gift goes higher and higher.

There's a story in the Canon about a very wealthy man who could not use his wealth. He had fine food but when he ate good food, he would throw up, so he

had to eat very poor food. If he rode in his nice chariot, he would get sick. He had to walk. If he lived in his fine home, insects would attack. He had to live in a little shed. Finally, he ended up dying without any heirs, and all his wealth went to the king. The Buddha said that the man, in a previous lifetime, had given a gift to a private Buddha, but then after he gave the gift he said to himself, “I wish I hadn’t done that. I could have given it to someone else or kept it for myself.” The gift meant that he was going to become wealthy, but the fact that he regretted the gift meant that he could not enjoy his wealth.

So when you give, try to be happy while you’re doing it, before you do it, and after you do it. That way, you get the most benefit out of the gift.

As for the gift itself, you want to give something that’s timely, that people can actually use. In America, they like to give knitted caps to the monks because it is cold. In Singapore, I don’t think you need knitted caps. It’s not timely in Singapore. And also, give a gift that doesn’t harm yourself or others. In other words, you don’t break the precepts, you don’t steal something to give, and you don’t cheat in order to get something to give. You give something that you’ve earned in a fair way.

As for the recipient, you try to find a recipient who would make good use of the gift. The Buddha would recommend someone without greed, aversion, and delusion, or someone who is working on the path to get rid of greed, aversion and delusion. With people like these, it’s more likely that you’ll actually be happy when giving the gift. If you give to people who are greedy and then you realize that they abuse it, you don’t feel so glad afterwards. So look for appropriate recipients.

The Buddha didn’t say that you *have* to do this, but if you want to be more skillful in giving, you should think about your motivation, about your attitude, about the appropriate gift, and about the appropriate recipient.

Now, as you approach gift-giving in this way, the gift doesn’t have to be a material thing. You can give of your wisdom, you can give of your knowledge, you can give of your energy, you can give of your time, you can give your forgiveness—which is often the hardest but also the most meaningful gift. The important point is that when you give a gift, it’s not a ritual—you don’t do it just because someone says to do it. As you give, you can approach it as a skill in terms of these four qualities, and the gift will provide that much more happiness. It will have that much more positive an effect on the world around you—and also on the person you become as a result of the gift.

That’s generosity.

Similarly with virtue: When you follow the precepts, you become a better person; the world around you becomes a better world. You’re learning an

important lesson in becoming, and an important lesson in how to channel your desires.

There are some people who complain about the precepts. On the one hand, they complain that the precepts are hard-and-fast rules, which they don't like. It's better to describe the precepts as clear-cut. After all, you need something very clear-cut when you're most tempted to break the precepts. If the precepts are complex and have a lot of ins and outs, it's very easy to wiggle through. But if you know—no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no drinking, no lying, at all—then when you feel tempted, you remember that there is a clear precept against this.

In Alaska they have bears. I was visiting some years back, and there was a big sign saying, "Bear Awareness." It listed a lot of Do's and Don't's. The first one was, "If you see a bear, don't run." Your first instinct when you see a bear is that you want to run. But they said, "Don't Run." They keep it short. "Stay where you are." "Raise your arms so you look bigger." The bears have very bad eyesight so you look big when you raise your arms. The sign also said, "Speak to the bear in a calm and reassuring voice." In other words, don't scream. Then they went down a long list of Do's and Don't's. It was all very crisp, short, sharp, very clear-cut. Finally they got to: "If the bear attacks you, lie down, play dead." Then the difficult one was when the bear starts chewing on you. "Try to figure out if the bear is chewing on you out of curiosity or if it's chewing on you out of hunger."

This is what the Do's and Don't's said. If the bear is chewing on you out of curiosity, it would stop because it would think that you're dead and pose no danger, and so it would go away. So just lie there. But if the bear is chewing you out of hunger, attack the bear with all your might. Which means that you need a lot of mindfulness and alertness—which gets into the area of meditation, the topic of tomorrow night's talk.

Now, the Do's and Don't's were short and clear-cut for a reason: When you see a bear, you can remember only simple things. In the same way, the precepts are very clear-cut for a good reason, because you need something short and clear-cut when you feel most tempted to break them. If you're tempted to lie: No Lies. If you're tempted to have illicit sex: No Illicit Sex. Period. That way you can remember the precepts when you need them.

Some people often complain that the precepts are too narrow. For instance, there is a precept against killing, but no precept against eating meat. People say, "Well, if you're eating meat, then you're encouraging other people to kill the animals." But the precepts focus on the area where you are absolutely in control, where you are in charge. And that means that they focus specifically on

what you do and what you tell other people to do. You can control that.

Beyond that, you cannot control. All too often, when we focus on things that are beyond our control, we forget to look at what we *can* control. So the precepts are there to focus on what you can control. If you decide that you don't want to eat meat, that's perfectly fine, but the precepts start with what you are doing and what you are telling other people to do. That's what you are responsible for. And again, that is focusing yourself back on the way your life is shaped by your intentions and your desires. You have to be responsible for those.

At the same time, the precepts teach you qualities like mindfulness, alertness, and ardency, which are all part of mindfulness practice. Mindfulness: You have to keep the precepts in mind. You have to remember, "I have taken these precepts." Alertness is to be alert to what you are doing.

My teacher had a student one time who wanted to observe the eight precepts. She came to the monastery in the afternoon and she walked past a guava tree and the guavas looked really nice and ripe and before she knew it, oops, she had put one in her mouth. My teacher was standing a few yards away and so he asked, "What's that in your mouth?" She realized that she wasn't paying attention. That was a lack of mindfulness and alertness. So the precepts require you to be alert about what you're doing right now.

Ardency is something that you have to make the effort to give rise to, because sometimes there is a very strong temptation. You may tell yourself, "This is just a little white lie and it'll be okay." Ardency says, "NO." That means you have to figure out, "How can I not say things that give information to someone who might abuse it, and yet how can I also not lie at the same time?" This is where the precepts develop alertness, ardency, and also your discernment.

So the precepts are not just rituals. They're actually there to train the mind in the qualities that you need when you meditate.

Finally with the practice of goodwill: The word *mettā* I prefer to translate as goodwill. Some people translate it as loving-kindness, an idea that's based on a passage in the Canon sometimes translated as, "Just as a mother would cherish her child, her only child, we should cherish all living beings." But that's not what the passage actually says. It says, "Just as a mother would protect her only child with her life, in the same way you should protect an unlimited mind toward all beings." In other words, you have to protect your attitude of universal goodwill at all times. This means that you don't have to like the other person. If you're going to have goodwill for snakes, you don't have to go and pat the snake. The snake probably wouldn't like it.

My teacher had a snake move into his room one time, and he decided that this would be test for his goodwill. So he lived with the snake for three days and spread lots of goodwill to the snake. But then by the third night, he said to himself, “Three days is enough.” In his meditation, he addressed his thoughts to the snake: “It’s not that I have any ill will for you, it’s just that we are different species, and it’s very easy for different species to misunderstand each other. There’s plenty of space out there in the forest where you can be happy, so please find some other place to go.” And the snake left. That was goodwill. It was not loving-kindness. He didn’t pat the snake. He didn’t cherish the snake. But it was goodwill for the snake. He wished the snake happiness.

The practice of goodwill is something you have to *do*, so it’s related to the teaching on kamma. The teaching on kamma also relates to your motivation for wishing goodwill, and what, exactly, you are wishing for the other person. So the practice of goodwill is a good way of developing insight into the principle of kamma.

To begin with, goodwill is something you have to develop. It’s not innate—or if it is innate, it’s no more innate than ill will. We can feel ill will just as easily as we can feel goodwill, sometimes more easily. So remember, this is something you need to work on. This is a quality you have to develop.

Secondly, in terms of motivation, you’re wishing goodwill for your own sake. It’s not because you are One with everybody, or because everybody has Buddha-nature. We wish goodwill because we want to make sure that our actions are going to be skillful even in very difficult situations. So you have to develop goodwill for people you don’t like—even goodwill for your boss. If you’re going to have a difficult day with the boss, think lots of goodwill first so that when you go in, you don’t say something harmful to the boss or whoever the person is in the office that you don’t like. It’s for your own sake that you’re sending thoughts of goodwill, to protect yourself from creating bad kamma.

And finally, when you’re wishing goodwill for others, it’s not just spreading thoughts of cotton candy. The Buddha basically says you are hoping that they will understand the causes of happiness and be able to act on them. We should be thinking in terms of kamma. If they are going to be happy, it has to be based on their kamma. So what you’re wishing for is, “May this person understand the causes of true happiness and be able to act on those causes.” And that’s a thought you can have for anybody, no matter how evil or malicious they have been in the past, whether they have hurt you or the people you love. We can think of any number of politicians—when I speak in America, everyone laughs at that. What you might think is, “I don’t really like this person. I don’t like his policies,” but you can wish, “May this person understand the causes for true

happiness and be able to act on them.” You can think that thought without hypocrisy.

When you develop goodwill in this way, you develop insight into the principle of kamma. You develop insight into your own mind: that your mind has these potentials that you have to develop. You have desires that go in different directions, so you have to be careful about which desires you’re going to follow.

So when you’re developing generosity, developing virtue, developing goodwill, you’re learning some very important lessons about how your desires shape the world in which you live, how your desires shape *you*, and how by acting on skillful desires you become a better person; the world around you becomes a better world.

In America—I don’t know what the attitude is in Singapore—but in America, people don’t like the word “merit.” Do you have Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts in Singapore? In America, “merit” sounds like Boy Scout rewards: Boy Scout badges, Girl Scout badges, Brownie points. I think a better word for translating *puñña* would be “goodness.” You develop your own goodness; you’re developing the goodness of the world.

Unfortunately, goodness is a word we don’t hear much. How many times do you speak about someone’s goodness? How many times do you speak about your own goodness? I tried an experiment one time. I got onto Amazon.com—I occasionally go online—and in the box for Search, I typed in “goodness.” Try it and see what comes up. It’s all books on cakes, pies, and cookies. That’s goodness in the modern world. But the Buddha teaches a much greater goodness: the goodness of your heart, which you develop by developing the principles of merit. By being generous, by being virtuous, by developing thoughts of unlimited goodwill, you’re developing your own goodness, and the goodness of the world affected by your actions. At the same time, you gain insight into how your desires shape your life; you gain skills in mindfulness, skills in alertness, skills in ardency, all of which are going to be useful as you go further and further along the path.

So what this means is that if you bring the right attitude to the practice of merit, it’s not just a ritual. It’s not just a selfish way of trying to get what you want. It’s not only for people who are not serious. It’s for everyone who is serious about the practice. You should look after your virtue, you should look after your generosity, you should look after your goodwill for the sake of true happiness. As the Buddha said, if people are stingy, there is no way they are going to get into right concentration, there is no way at all they are going to gain awakening. So everything begins with the practice of merit.

Which means that you should try to have the right attitude as you go about it, realizing that we live in a world in which things are not just coming and going. We are shaping the world with our desires. And we have it within our power to remake ourselves. Maybe you can't affect the wide world outside all that much, but the world that you live in, the world of your experience and the person that you are, are things that you can shape in the right direction. When you do this, you're becoming a wise person, you're learning how to change your actions so that they lead to long-term welfare and happiness: a happiness that doesn't harm yourself and doesn't harm anyone else—a happiness that is good for everyone.

Those are my thoughts for tonight.

2 : THE SKILLS OF CONCENTRATION

December 16, 2017

Last night we talked about how the four noble truths should always be put first when you're trying to understand the Buddha's teachings. We also mentioned that there's a problem when people sometimes put the three characteristics before the four noble truths, because that can lead to a lot of misunderstandings and unskillful practices.

For example, if you just focus on the fact that things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, you may decide that all you need to do is just accept the fact that things come and go, that you'll be okay with that, and that's how you'll find happiness in life. But that's defeatist. It's the lazy way out.

The Buddha never taught that, and he wasn't lazy or defeatist. When he taught the four noble truths, he taught that there is suffering, that there is suffering that we can cure, and that we can put an end to suffering totally through our own efforts. This is because the world is shaped by our desires, and the four noble truths give us some guidance on which desires, if we follow them, will lead to suffering, and which desires, if we follow them, will lead to the end of suffering.

So, the path is an activity for training your desires. You don't just accept the fact that "I have desires, the desires come and the desires go, and I can watch them wash in and wash out like the waves in the ocean"—because you know how it happens with desires. The waves wash in and then wash you out to sea. You want to have a way of getting past the waves.

The image the Buddha himself gives of the practice is of crossing over a river and getting onto a bank where you're safe from the floods of the river. So it's important to keep in mind that there are things that we have to do and things that we have to change in ourselves in order to develop the path that would lead beyond suffering entirely.

The problem is that if you put the three characteristics first, especially in connection with the practice of concentration, then it short-circuits the practice. Some people believe that if the practice is just a matter of learning how to accept that things are coming and going, then why bother with getting into concentration? You can just practice acceptance, which they call mindfulness—which is not really what the Buddha defined as mindfulness. But

sometimes that's what you hear: Mindfulness is explained as the ability simply to accept things as they come, accept things as they go, without passing judgment. And then the question is, how does that fit in with the practice of concentration? When you're practicing concentration, you're not just accepting things; you're trying to put the mind in a state of stillness and trying to maintain that stillness. You're judging what should be focused on and what is a hindrance to your focus.

There is one teacher who actually said that the Buddha taught two different paths—the path of mindfulness, and the path of concentration and effort—and this person gave preference to mindfulness because he says, basically, the whole point of the practice is to learn how to accept that things come and go. But with concentration practice, you're not accepting. You're trying to make a change.

Other people object to the practice of concentration on the grounds that if you stick with one object, you're attached to that one object, and so to practice non-attachment, you let the mind wander as it will.

Another criticism of concentration says when you practice concentration, it requires effort; it requires that you plan ahead of time, looking for the results you want to get from your actions—and that requires a sense of self. Yet, in the practice, we're trying to get rid of our sense of self. So we should not practice concentration.

Those are some of the reasonings that people give to reject the practice of concentration. Yet when the Buddha taught mindfulness and concentration, he taught them as a single practice. You do them both together because they help each other along. The practice of mindfulness is the theme of concentration, what gets you into concentration. And mindfulness doesn't become pure until the fourth level of right concentration, the fourth jhāna. The Buddha also taught that concentration is actually necessary for the practice and, in fact, is the heart of the path. All the other factors of the path, including right mindfulness, are there to support concentration.

So the people who reject the practice of concentration are going against what the Buddha said about the practice—which means that they're misunderstanding something basic about what he taught. And the misunderstanding comes from the fact that they put the three characteristics ahead of the four noble truths. They start with the idea of inconstancy and run with it.

Now, inconstancy on its own doesn't imply any clear duty. You can react to inconstancy in any number of ways: You can just sit still and accept it. Or you can try to squeeze whatever pleasure out of the present that you can, with no

thought for the future, thinking that since things are going to change anyhow, you might as well grab what you can while you can. The principle of inconstancy on its own can lead to a lot of unskillful behavior.

But if you follow the Buddha and put the four noble truths first, then the perception of inconstancy has its place within the duties appropriate to each noble truth. You learn from the four noble truths which desires should be followed, and you apply the perception of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to whichever desires that would pull you away from the desires that are actually in line with the path.

Now, the desire to get the mind into concentration is an important part of the path. There are two reasons for why you need concentration. One is that concentration is good food for the mind. The mind needs nourishment. It has a tendency to feed on things, and as the Buddha said, even though you may understand that sensuality has its drawbacks, if you don't have a higher level of pleasure than sensuality, you're going to go back and feed on the sensuality.

It's like the coyotes at the monastery in America. We have an avocado grove, and when the avocados are ripe and falling from the trees, the coyotes feed on the avocados. They get fat, and their fur gets nice and sleek. But when the avocados are gone, then when you look at coyote scat, you find that they feed on anything. I've seen coyote scat containing plastic rope. They actually ate plastic rope, and the rope went through them and came out the other end. Which goes to show that when they're hungry, they'll eat anything. And it's the same with the human mind: If you don't give it something better than sensuality to feed on, it's always going to go back to feed on sensuality, again and again.

So, one of the purposes of concentration is to provide good food for the mind: a sense of pleasure, a sense of well-being that comes when you get the mind to settle down and you don't need to think about how to gain pleasant sights, nice sounds, pleasant smells, tastes, or tactile sensations. You've got something better, a better pleasure, inside.

The second reason for why you need concentration is that it's like a laboratory for understanding your mind. When that critic said that you need a sense of self in order to practice concentration, he was right. You do need a sense of self that says, "I'm going to be able to do this" and "This is something that I want to do, that I am capable of doing." With that thought, you're actually creating a state of becoming, and as you cultivate it, you come to understand becoming really well.

We talked about becoming last night. It's when you take on an identity in a particular world of experience, based on a desire. For instance, suppose you have a desire for Szechuan noodles tonight. There's going to be a certain "you"

that wants those noodles, that's going to benefit from those noodles—or at least likes the taste of the noodles. And there's also the “you” that knows how to buy them, where to get them. Those two “you's” are the self as consumer and the self as provider. Then there's the part of the world that is relevant to your desire, foremost being: Where is the nearest Szechuan noodle store? That's the part of the world right now that's relevant to your state of becoming. Other aspects of the world—what's going on in politics, what's going on in the weather—are not all that relevant to that particular desire, unless, for some reason, they get in its way.

Now, all of that is your state of becoming right now. As the Buddha said, we suffer from the ways that we want to become. But the solution to the problem of becoming is *not* trying to not become anything at all. It's trying to become skillful in developing our states of becoming. And concentration is one of the most skillful ways of engaging in becoming for the sake of going beyond becoming, because once the mind gets settled down, you can actually see the process: “This is how becoming happens in the mind.”

This knowledge arises on two levels. The first is when distractions come up. You see the distractions arise, how they take shape, and how you go into them. You realize: “This is how I take on an identity in the world of that distraction.”

The second level, which is deeper, is that you also understand how you take on a sense of becoming as you become a meditator, as you get the mind into concentration: You are inhabiting the whole body. The whole body is your world. You are the person who is focused on one spot and trying to gain a state of concentration. This is a kind of becoming, and because it is quiet, because it is clear, it's a becoming that you can understand as you're doing it. And then, by understanding it, you can potentially get beyond becoming altogether. But you need to *do* this first. This is a skill you have to master if you want to understand becoming well enough to transcend it.

As Ajaan Lee said, it's like trying to learn about eggs. You learn about eggs by getting chickens and feeding them. Some of the eggs you eat—you have to feed, right?—in order to have strength to continue studying the eggs. In the same way, you develop a state of concentration, and it's something that you feed on as you try to understand it as well. But you also have to do things with the eggs if you want to understand them. You could sit and watch an egg and learn some things about it, but not much. But if you try to fry it or steam it, you learn a lot more about the eggs—and you get something better to eat as you do.

So this is a level of becoming that you want to develop. It's something that you actually need to do in order to understand it and get beyond it, in order to get beyond the process of becoming. So, you don't say, “Well, I'll just let go

before I ever master concentration, and in that way I won't be attached to concentration." You need this attachment. You need this sense of self and this sense of the world if you want to go beyond selves and worlds.

The forest ajaans talk about this quite a lot. Ajaan Lee says that most people let go like paupers. They don't have any concentration so they say, "I'll just give up concentration." It's like a poor person saying, "I'm going to give up my BMW." You don't have a BMW to begin with, and giving it up is not going to bring you the benefits that come from having a BMW. You can't take a ride in it, and you can't give rides to anyone else. First you need to get the BMW so that you can use it. You don't need to hold on to the BMW once it's yours. It's there to use when you need it, and you can put it aside when you don't. In the same way, the Buddha developed concentration and discernment in the course of his path, and then let them go when gaining awakening. But even after he had let these things go, they were still there for him to use as he taught the way to others.

So you can benefit from this. Ajaan Maha Boowa talked about how, when we are practicing, we need to hold on in the same way as climbing a ladder. When you climb a ladder to the roof of a house, you hold on to one rung, then you hold on to the next one, and only when you are holding on to the higher one do you let go of the lower one to reach the next rung up. So there is going to be attachment in the practice. You go from one attachment to higher, higher, higher attachments. If you say, "Hey, watch me let go of everything," you fall back on the ground. So you need to hold on, step by step by step, until you get to the roof. Then you can let go totally.

Or as Ajaan Fuang said, it's like sending a rocket to the moon. You need a big booster to begin with, and the booster has to be attached to the moon capsule. Then, when the booster has done its job, that's when you let it go.

So there are things that you have to hold on to as you practice, and concentration is something that you need to hold on to because, as I said, it's food for the practice and it's also your laboratory for understanding your mind. Once you have this one thing, concentration, then you can understand the five aggregates, you can understand the process of becoming—issues that we will talk about tomorrow night. But right now I would like to focus simply on mastering the art of concentration.

The issue about the distinction between putting the four noble truths first or putting the three characteristics first becomes very clear when you look at the four qualities that the Buddha said you need to develop in order to have concentration. These are called the four *iddhipāda*, or bases of success: desire, effort, intentness, and using your powers of judgment.

Often when people teach mindfulness, they say that desire is a bad thing, effort is a bad thing, using your powers of judgment is a bad thing. So three out of four bases of success get thrown away. But if you really want to succeed at your meditation, you have to develop all four of these four qualities:

- the desire to do the meditation,
- the effort that goes into developing the factors of concentration and abandoning the hindrances that get in the way,
- the intentness with which you really focus on doing this well, giving it your full attention, and finally
- using your powers of judgment as to what's working and what's not working—and what you might do in order to correct a problem.

You need all four of these qualities in the concentration, but you need to have them in a balanced way. So let's go through them one by one.

The first one is desire. Desire often gets a bad rap in Buddhist circles. But actually, it's an important part of the path. As the Buddha said, everything—every phenomenon—is rooted in desire, so if you want concentration, you have to start with the desire, “I want the mind to settle down.”

Now, if you focus simply on how much you want the mind to settle down, you're misusing your desire. The desire has to focus on the causes. It's like driving to a mountain. If you drive along and just watch the mountain, what's going to happen? You'll run into somebody or drive off the road. You have to tell yourself: “Here is the road leading to the mountain, there is the mountain, and I am going to focus on the road. Step by step by step.” Every now and then, you look up to make sure that the mountain is not back there behind you in your rear-view mirror. But otherwise, you keep yourself focused on the causes that would lead to the result. This is the right use of desire.

So when you're sitting down to practice concentration, you don't think, “I want the fourth jhāna in five minutes.” You think, “I want to stay with the breath. I want to stay with this breath, this breath, this breath, to keep things going.” You focus on the step-by-step-by-step process to keep the desire focused and continuous, and that's how you get to the mountain.

In order to help with this desire, you need to think of various ways to motivate yourself. The first one is heedfulness. The principle of heedfulness is basically saying that “There are dangers in my mind that I need to protect myself from. If I don't provide the protection, they're going to come and cause harm.” You see the harm that can come, but you also see that you are able to foresee the harm and get out of the way or prevent the harm. That's what heedfulness is all about. So this does involve a sense of self: the “me” who is

going to be harmed by not practicing, the “me” who’s going to benefit from the practice, and also the “me” who can provide the way out. That’s your main way, your most basic way, of motivating yourself to do the practice.

So if you’re sitting meditating at night and say, “I’m getting kind of tired right now, this is enough meditation for tonight,” ask yourself, “Do I still have greed, aversion, and delusion? Yeah, the dangers are still there, so I need to meditate more.” And when can greed, aversion and delusion happen? Do they happen only when you’re meditating? No. They can happen any time at all. So you need to prepare yourself to get beyond these dangers throughout the day.

Another way of motivating yourself is a sense of compassion: “I will benefit from this. Do I love myself? If I love myself, I want to practice. Do I love the people around me? Yes. Do I want my greed, aversion, and delusion to go prowling around, biting everybody else around me? No. So I might as well show some compassion for them by getting my mind more trained.” This is how compassion is a way of motivating yourself to stick with the practice.

Another way of motivating yourself that the Buddha recommended is having a sense of shame. You’re sitting there and your mind is wandering all over the place, so you remind yourself that there are people in the world who can read minds. “What if they were reading my mind right now?” You say, “Well, I hope that the people reading minds have compassion and some understanding.” But still they will say, “Ah, this person. I don’t know about this person.” So tell yourself, “I want to have a good mind for them to read.” That’s one way of using a sense of shame.

Another way to use shame skillfully is when you know that you have an opportunity to practice the Dhamma and yet you’re sitting here thinking about tomorrow’s whatever, and wouldn’t you be ashamed of the fact that here you had this opportunity and yet you threw it away? So use that thought in order to motivate yourself.

There is also a sense of pride. When the Buddha is talking about shame, he’s not talking about the shame that’s the opposite of pride. He’s talking about the shame that’s the opposite of shamelessness. His sense of shame is part and parcel of a healthy sense of pride: “This is a technique I want to master. This is a skill I want to master.” Once you develop some level of skill, you don’t want to fall back. You want to take pride in your workmanship. You want to take pride in your skill, so that when you’re in a difficult situation you don’t say, “Oh, today I can’t concentrate. There’s too much noise in the neighborhood from these crazy people next door.” They’re always making noise during the Dhamma talk, so you might as well tell yourself, “I want to show them that I can still keep my mind concentrated even if they are making noise.” This is a sense

of pride that can focus you on your practice.

These are some of the various ways you can motivate yourself to generate the desire to work on the meditation, to work on concentration.

That covers the first base of success.

The second base of success is effort, persistence. You just keep at it again and again and again, trying to develop the theme of meditation and also trying to get rid of any hindrances that come up.

You may have heard of the hindrances. These are the things that get in the way of concentration. There are five major categories. There's sensual desire. There's ill will—"ill will" here meaning that you want to see somebody suffer. The other hindrances are sleepiness and drowsiness, restlessness and anxiety, and then uncertainty or doubt. These are the five things that get in the way of concentration. So when they come up in the mind—as the Buddha said in his description of mindfulness—you want to figure out when they come. You want to know that they are there, and you want to recognize them as hindrances, and then realize that these are things that you want to get past. These are things that you want to abandon. And then you abandon them.

There are three steps in abandoning them. The first one, when a hindrance arises, is recognizing that it is a hindrance. And when you recognize that it is a hindrance, that's a major step right there. Because for most of us, when sensual desire comes, we don't say, "Oh. This is a hindrance. This is sensual desire." We say, "Hey, this is cool, let's go with it!" So the first thing you've got to do is to recognize it: "This is a hindrance. It's something I've got to abandon."

Then you remember various ways that the Buddha recommended for abandoning the hindrance. There are five techniques altogether. The first one is simply recognizing, "I don't want to be here in this unskillful state of mind." Change the topic. Go back to your breath. "Oops, I've slipped off." You come right back. That's one technique. You just go back to your original topic of meditation.

The second technique is for when you keep coming back to the hindrance. Even though you recognize that it *is* a hindrance, you still like it, so you then have to look at its drawbacks: "If I thought this thought for 24 hours, where would it lead me? Not in a good direction. So why am I giving it even a little bit of time?" One of my favorite techniques for seeing the drawbacks of a hindrance is to ask myself, "If this were a movie, would I pay to watch? The acting is horrible. The storyline is very predictable. It's not worth it. If I'm going to watch a movie, I should watch a better one." In that way, you realize that the hindrance is not worth going with. That's what it means to see the drawbacks of a hindrance. That helps you get out of it and get back to your breath.

The third way of dealing with a hindrance is to ignore it. In other words, the thinking is going on in the mind, but you say, “My breath is still here, and I don’t need to pay attention to that thinking. It can chatter away as much as it likes, but I’m going to stay focused on my breath”—because, after all, the breath is still there. It hasn’t been destroyed by the hindrance. You can still focus on the breath even though the chatter is going on in the background.

Think of the chatter as being a crazy person coming to talk to you while you’ve got work to do. If you turn to the crazy person and try to chase him away, he’ll pull you into his craziness. So just pretend he’s not there. For a while, he’ll get crazier and crazier and crazier, to grab your attention, but you can still say, “Nope, I am not going to pay any attention.” And after a while, he will see that you’re not paying attention and then he’ll go away.

Or it’s like a stray dog coming for food. If you don’t feed the stray dog, after a while the stray dog goes away. Even though it’s bothering you for a while, whining and whatever, you just pay it no attention. With some kinds of thoughts all you have to do is just not pay them any attention and they eventually go away.

The fourth technique—and this is one that works exceptionally well when you get more familiar with the breath energies in the body—relates to the fact that whenever a thought appears in the mind, there will also be a little pattern of tension that appears someplace in the body along with it. There’s a little stirring in the body, and then there’s a label that latches on to that spot, and from that label you start thinking about things. But this little point of tension in the body is what keeps the thought going. So if you can find that little point of tension, wherever it may be—in your face, in your arm, in your leg—you breathe through it. That dissolves that pattern of tension, and the thought—with no marker to anchor it—will go away. That’s the fourth way of dealing with hindrances.

The fifth way, if none of the others work, is to put the tip of your tongue against the roof of your mouth, press hard, and tell yourself, “I will just not think that thought.” This is where you can use your meditation word really fast: BuddhoBuddhoBuddho, really rapid-fire. Just don’t give the mind any space to think about that other thought. Now, this last technique involves the least amount of discernment, but sometimes it’s necessary. When you compare these different techniques to different tools, this one is like a sledgehammer. You bang the thought and that may knock it out for a little while. It may want to come back eventually, but at least you give a little space to the mind. So don’t be afraid to use this one when you find that the other techniques don’t work.

So these are ways that you can deal with different hindrances as they come

into the mind. If you keep at this, you get more and more skilled from learning how to read the situation, that this particular kind of hindrance requires this kind of technique, and then you become more and more in control of the mind. As the Buddha said, when you've mastered these five techniques, then you can think any thoughts that you want, and you don't have to think the thoughts you don't want to think.

This is one important aspect of mastering your concentration: With the kinds of thoughts that would come into your mind and just keep driving you crazy, you realize, "I don't have to think those thoughts anymore. I can be in control of my thoughts. My thoughts don't have to be in control of me." So this is one of the benefits of developing what the Buddha calls the second base of success, which is putting in effort, having persistence as you stick with the practice.

The third base of success is being intent—in other words, giving full attention to what you are doing. Meditation is not a ritual. You don't just go through the motions. You really pay careful attention: When you do this, these are the results; when you do that, those are the results. You want to know clearly. You want to be observant, so that you can decide, "When I'm getting the results I want, I stick with it. If I'm not getting the results that I want, I'm going to try something else in the meditation."

The Buddha compares this to being a cook working for someone else. You learn how to notice what kind of food the person likes. "Does this person like salty food? Sweet food? Sour food? If he likes sour food, I can provide more sour food." If the person is getting sick and tired of sour food, you cook him something else. You have to pay careful attention because, as the Buddha said, sometimes your master won't tell you outright what kind of food he likes. The master expects you to notice the subtle signs—the look in his eyes, the tone of his voice. In the same way, when you meditate, you have to pay careful attention to the mind's subtle signs, because it doesn't always tell you right up front, "I want this, I want that." It just wanders off. So you have to pay careful attention. This is what intentness is all about.

And you pair this with the last base of success, which is using your powers of judgment, using your powers of discernment. If something is not working, you try to figure out why it's not working, and you use your ingenuity to figure out what else might work.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, these were the two qualities that he emphasized most in the practice of paying attention: being observant and then using your ingenuity. "If this kind of breathing doesn't work, what other kind of breathing might work? Or maybe tonight the mind just doesn't want to be with

the breath. What other topic can I try that it would be more willing to settle down with?” In this case, you try to analyse: What is the problem in the mind right now? Is the problem lust? Is the problem anger? Is the problem a storyline that came in from today?

One way of dealing with storylines is the practice we did at the very beginning of the evening: spreading goodwill for all beings.

Think about the Buddha and the three knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge was the knowledge of his previous lifetimes. If you think you’re bringing lots of stories into your meditation, think about remembering lifetimes going back hundreds and thousands of thousands of eons. The Buddha had a huge number of stories that night. If he hadn’t been careful, he could have easily gotten stuck in them. And here you have just the stories of only one lifetime. The Buddha was able to let go of all those stories; why can’t you let go of yours?

Now, he was able to let go of his stories because of the second knowledge, in which he saw all beings in the world dying and then being reborn in line with their actions. So if you find that there’s a storyline eating away at your mind, try to think of all beings in all directions and all their stories—and how small your story seems in comparison. Spread goodwill to all those suffering beings, and some goodwill to yourself in the context of “all beings.” That helps to pull you out of that storyline, and you can get back to the concentration.

If the issue is lust, you can contemplate the body. If the issue is anger, you can try to develop goodwill. Use your ingenuity in getting the mind to settle down. This is a basic principle in any skill: You start out by learning the basic steps from the teacher, but then you have to use your ingenuity in order to develop a skill of your own. It’s like weaving a basket. The teacher will tell you, “This is how to weave the strands in and out,” and then you try weaving—and your basket looks awful. You ask yourself, “What did I do wrong? Is the shape wrong? Is the weave wrong? What should I change?” Then you weave a new basket—keep on weaving baskets, paying careful attention to what you’re doing, keep on observing what’s still wrong, keep on trying to make improvements. In that way, you learn from your actions. You learn from the things you do.

This is how you develop a skill, and you do it by developing these four bases of success: You want to do well. You put in effort. You pay careful attention to what you’re doing, and then you use your ingenuity and powers of judgment to figure out how to make things better. These are all qualities that you need to develop as you practice concentration to make it a skill.

Now, the Buddha said that these four qualities also go together with another

list of qualities that he called the “fabrications of exertion,” which is a technical term. “Fabrication” here is the word, *sankhāra*, and it doesn’t mean lies, as when you fabricate a lie. “Fabrication” here simply means the way you put your experience together. The Buddha said there are three types of fabrication that we use as we get the mind into concentration.

- The first is bodily fabrication, which is the breath.
- The second is verbal fabrication, and here the technical terms are “directed thought” and “evaluation,” which basically mean the way you talk to yourself about what’s going on: You set up a topic in the mind, and then you ask questions and make comments on it.
- The third type of fabrication is mental fabrication, which includes feelings of pleasure, pain, and neither pleasure nor pain; along with perceptions—in other words, the labels you apply to things.

So when you’re working with concentration on the breath, you start with bodily fabrication, which is the way you breathe. Now, the word “fabrication” here means that there is an element of intention in the way you breathe. So you want to use that intention skillfully. What would be a good way to breathe right now? Does the body need long breathing? Short breathing? Deep breathing? Shallow breathing? Which parts of the body are lacking in good breath energy? You decide and you make changes.

Now, in making changes, you’re using the process of directed thought and evaluation. You focus on an issue in the breath and then you evaluate what to do.

As Ajaan Lee explained evaluation, it asks questions. One, does the breath feel good? And if the answer is No, then the next question is, what do you do to make it better? If the original answer was Yes, it does feel good, then how do you make the best use of it? How do you maintain that sense of ease? When you maintain that sense of ease, how do you spread it to the body to get the most benefit from it?

Some people have asked about how to spread the breath energy in the body. The breath will actually spread on its own. All you have to do is release tension in different parts of the body, so that the breath can flow naturally. It’s like opening valves so that water can flow through a pipe. This connects with the Buddha’s teaching that when you get the mind in concentration, there is a sense of ease or well-being, and you want that sense of well-being to permeate the entire body. So you use this perception of breath to allow it to permeate.

Other people have objected: The Buddha never said anything about spreading breath energy in his meditation instructions, so why are we adding

this teaching? And the answer is twofold. One is that the Buddha never said that “Dhamma” can mean only what he said or what is recorded in the Canon. If something is in line with what he said, even though he never said it, it counts as Dhamma, too. And that leads to the second answer: When the Buddha said to let the sense of ease and rapture found in *jhāna* permeate the entire body, he never explained how. It’s up to our ingenuity to figure that out—and here we have Ajaan Lee’s help in that he has explained how *he* figured it out. So as long as this practice helps in accomplishing what the Buddha said to do, it’s perfectly legitimate.

Now, allowing good breath energy to spread through the body involves the third kind of fabrication, which is feeling and perception. The feeling is the feeling of ease; the perception is the image of the breath you have in mind. If you think of the breath as just the air coming in and out the nose, it’s very difficult to get a sense of fullness or well-being out of the breath, or to let it spread through the body, because there are only two little holes here, and you’ve got a whole body that you need to breathe through. But if you think of the breath, not as air, but as energy, and of the whole body as being like a sponge, hold that perception in mind: When you breathe in, the breath can come in from all directions and go out through all directions. This is one kind of perception that makes it a lot easier for the breath to feel nourishing, to feel good for the whole body.

Another perception you may try is that if you feel you are struggling to bring the breath in, change the image: Remind yourself that breath energy starts in the body; it doesn’t start outside. It starts here inside the body, at any of the resting spots that Ajaan Lee identified, such as the tip of the breastbone or just above the navel. So you don’t have to pull the breath in. The breath starts here already, and all you have to do is allow it to spread through the body. Relax any tension that gets in the way of its spread. That will bring the air in and let it out smoothly.

In this way, you see how your perception has an influence on how the mind relates to the body: how it senses what’s going on in the body, and how it can adjust its sensations. And you learn these lessons by adjusting these three things: the breath, the way you talk to yourself about the breath, the perceptions you have in mind as you deal with the breath, and the feeling that results. These things allow the mind to get into concentration.

So you’ve got four bases of success; three types of fabrications.

Now the three types of fabrications are useful not only while you’re meditating. As you get used to adjusting your experience of your body, adjusting your experience of the mind as you meditate, you can also start doing it as you

go through daily life. In this way, these three fabrications provide you with your own internal refuge as you go through the day.

We say we take refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Saṅgha. What does that mean? It doesn't mean that the Buddha is going to come down and lift us out of our suffering. What it means is that the Buddha sets an example: This is how people find true happiness. So you look at his example. He was a person of wisdom. He was a person of compassion. He was a person of purity in his actions. How can we develop those qualities in ourselves? When you do that, when you follow the Buddha's example, that's when you take him as your refuge.

So let's look at how he recommended developing wisdom, compassion, and purity.

First, as he said, wisdom begins with the question I mentioned yesterday: "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" The Buddha developed wisdom by following that question, experimenting with his actions and getting better and better results.

As for compassion, that connects with wisdom in the sense that you realize that if you want your happiness to be long-term, it can't cause anyone else any harm.

There's a story in the Canon of King Pasenadi in his palace, one-on-one with his queen, Mallikā. In a tender moment he turns to her and says, "Mallikā, is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Now, you know what he's thinking, right? He wants her to say, "Yes, Your Majesty, I love you more than I love myself." And if this were a cheap movie, that's what she would say. But this is the Pali Canon, and she's no fool. She says, "No, there's no one I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" The king has to admit, "No, there's nobody I love more than myself." So that was the end of that scene.

The king goes down to see the Buddha and tells him what Queen Mallikā said. The Buddha says, "You know, she's right. You could go throughout the entire world and you would not find anyone you love more than yourself. And in the same way, there's nobody out there who's going to love you more than they love themselves. They all love themselves just as fiercely as you do."

Then what is the conclusion the Buddha draws from that? He doesn't say, "It's a dog-eat-dog world, just go for what you want and be prepared to fight for it." Instead, he says, "Be very careful that you don't harm anybody." After all, if your happiness harms somebody else, they won't want your happiness to last. They're going to do what they can to put an end to it.

So this is the beginning of compassion. You have to think about other people's happiness as you plan how to find your own.

As for purity, the Buddha taught his son the principles of purity, which focus on examining your actions, making your actions pure. Before you do something, ask yourself, "When I do this, what are the results going to be?" If you foresee any harm, don't do it. If you don't foresee any harm, go ahead and do it. While you're doing it, check to see whether there are any bad results happening right now. If you see that you're actually causing harm, stop. If you're not causing any harm, you can continue with the action.

Then, when it's done, you reflect back on the long-term consequences. If you realize that you *did* cause harm even though you didn't want to, learn from that mistake. Go and talk it over with someone who is more advanced on the path so that you can learn what other ways of acting you might try so as not to make that same mistake again. If you didn't cause any harm, then find joy in the fact that you're making progress on the path. This is how you purify your thoughts, your words, and your deeds.

Now, all of these cases—the search for wisdom, the search for compassion, and the search for purity—are based on taking seriously your desire for long-term happiness, and learning how to act on that desire at all times. This is how the Buddha developed his qualities of wisdom, compassion, and purity. This means that the search for happiness doesn't have to be selfish. It can be done in a way that produces noble qualities in the mind, the qualities of the Buddha. So we follow him as an example in taking our desire for long-term happiness seriously, too.

Similarly with the Dhamma and the Sangha: We take them as an example, and that's how we develop refuge. How do we do that? Through the three kinds of fabrication. Say that anger comes up in mind, and you want to protect yourself from the anger. The first thing you do is to look at how you're breathing right now. Can you calm the breathing down? All too often when we get angry, the breathing gets really difficult. When we say we want to "get it out of our system," it's because the anger has hijacked the breath and made it uncomfortable. So instead of the two usual ways of dealing with that sense of discomfort—getting it out of your system by yelling at the other person, or bottling it up and getting cancer—there is a third alternative, which is to breathe through it—as we talked earlier about breathing through the tension in your body. That's your first line of defense.

Then the second line of defense is, how are you talking to yourself about the issue that's making you angry? Can you talk about it in another way? This is where the Buddha has you look for the other person's good qualities, the good

things that the person has done, so that you realize that even though this person is doing some stupid things right now, he has done some good things in the past. “If I just let loose with my anger, that’s going to destroy a good relationship.” Or if you can’t think of anything good about the person—and there are many people in the world whose good qualities are hard to find—then the Buddha says that you should feel compassion for that person: “Just because someone is creating a lot of bad kamma for themselves, I shouldn’t let that make me create bad kamma.”

The Buddha said that it’s like seeing someone in a desert—sick, lying by the side of the road, with no one to help: You have to have compassion for them no matter who they are, because they are suffering so much. In this way, you change your verbal fabrication, the way you think to yourself about the issue.

The third line of defense is to look at your perceptions. What perceptions do you have in mind that stoke the anger? If you perceive that you’re being overwhelmed by the person, that you’re being threatened by that person, or that the person has power over you, you’re likely to lash back. So, as the Buddha said, change your perception. One, if the person has been saying nasty things about you, remind yourself that this is the way human speech normally is. There is kind speech and there is unkind speech. There is true speech and there is false speech. There is speech that is useful and there is speech that is totally useless. So the fact that this person is saying something unkind, lying to you, saying useless things: This is not abnormal. This is just the normal human way of speech. One.

Two, the Buddha said if they say something really nasty to you, you say to yourself, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear.” And leave it there. How many times have you thought that? You usually don’t stop with that thought. You go on to the next thought, and then the next: “Why are they saying that? Why are they so nasty? Why don’t they treat me well? Why do they disrespect me?” And you just go on and on. But why are you suffering? Because of all this extra stuff you’re adding on top. If, on the other hand, you can say, “An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear,” that’s it: You don’t have to suffer. You’re more in control. So hold that perception in mind.

The third perception the Buddha teaches you is to try to think of your goodwill as being larger than what the other person has done. For example, think of your goodwill as being like the Earth. People can come and spit on the Earth, they can dig in the Earth, they can piss on the Earth, but the Earth is still Earth. It’s too big for them to have any effect on it. Or think of your mind as being like space. Hold that perception in mind: “People can try to write things on my mind, but nothing stays. It all vanishes, because there’s no surface for

them to write on.” If you hold these perceptions in mind, you feel less threatened and overwhelmed. It’s a lot easier to deal with difficult situations and not be overcome by anger or suffering from anger.

So these are some ways in which you use these three kinds of fabrications: bodily fabrication—how you breathe; verbal fabrication—how you talk to yourself about the issue; and finally mental fabrication—the perceptions you’re holding in mind. Can you change these things so that you don’t suffer? So that you don’t act in an unskillful way?

If you learn how to master these three kinds of fabrications, they help both in the practice of concentration and in your conduct of daily life. This is how you provide refuge for yourself.

And finding refuge is what the Buddha’s teachings are all about: There is a path that goes beyond suffering. It’s not just accepting things as they are, resigning yourself to the fact that the world can’t change. That’s not the Buddha’s way. Look, if that were his attitude, he wouldn’t have gone into the wilderness. He would have stayed in the palace, thinking, “I guess this is the way things are and I’ll enjoy myself the best I can by accepting them, and then I will die.” Which is not the Buddha. The Buddha said, “There must be something that doesn’t die. I’ve got to find it.” He had that kind of lion-like determination. He tried different ways of finding it. If this way didn’t work, he tried that way. If that way didn’t work, he was going to keep on trying until he *did* find the way. And when he found the way, he taught it to everyone who was willing to listen: “Look, there is a way out of suffering. This is how you do it.”

That’s how he provided us with refuge. If you take his lessons and apply them to the way you shape your experience, then you can find this refuge as well. And the practice of concentration is a very important skill in finding that refuge. You learn how you gain control over your mind, control over these three kinds of fabrications, making use of the four bases of success: desire, effort, intent, and your powers of discernment, your powers of judgment, your powers of ingenuity—using the full faculties of your mind. In this way, you can find full release: the refuge that the Buddha found, the refuge he promised in his third noble truth.

So those are my thoughts for this evening.

3. THE JUDGMENTS OF INSIGHT

December 17, 2017

For the past couple of nights, we've been talking about how important it is when you think about the four noble truths and the three characteristics—which are the main wisdom teachings in Buddhism—that you put the four noble truths first.

The four noble truths carry duties. They imply activities that you have to do. They don't just sit there. Suffering is something you should try to comprehend. Its cause is something to let go of. The cessation of suffering is something to realize. And the path to the end of suffering is something to develop. So as you learn these truths, you realize that there's something you have to do based on knowing these truths.

Whereas the three characteristics don't necessarily carry any duties. If you use them in the context of the four noble truths, then they do carry duties. But on their own, they don't carry any necessary duties at all. They're just descriptions of the way things are. The simple fact that something is inconstant, for instance, doesn't carry any particular duty. You can enjoy its inconstancy, or you can fear it, or you can resign yourself to it. You can react any way you want. There's no inherent duty around the three characteristics if you just take them on their own.

We talked the first night about how the practice of the four noble truths is connected directly to the practice of merit. Last night, we talked about how important it is to put the four noble truths first when you're thinking about the practice of mindfulness and concentration. Tonight's talk is going to be on the importance of putting the four noble truths first when you try to develop insight.

If you put the three characteristics first when you think about insight, the usual interpretation is that the mind is essentially passive and, if left to itself, will be okay. But things come in, make contact with the mind, and the mind reacts, trying to control things that are going to change. And it suffers because it's trying to control the change. The solution that's proposed is that if you just realize that there is no essence to things—to outside phenomena or to the mind itself—and that they're constantly going to be changing, then if you just accept the fact that they change, you're going to be okay.

But you've got to ask yourself, does the mind really work like this? It would be like saying, "If food is inconstant, food is stressful, food is not-self, food is impermanent, my stomach is impermanent, then I just won't eat." It doesn't work that way. Hunger drives you. It's hunger, it's desire, that drives our experience.

Everything we work for is based on the fact that the mind wants to feed. We feed not only on physical food, but also on emotional food, mental food. We feed on our relationships. We feed on our wealth. We feed on our status. The mind is constantly looking for something to feed on. And this feeding is what the Buddha means by the word "clinging." And clinging is suffering. This is what we're trying to put an end to.

Now, it may sound a little scary to hear that he's telling you that you're not going to feed anymore. But instead of just saying, "Stop eating and you'll be okay," he's saying, "Look, I'll show you how to find a dimension where the mind feels no hunger, where it's totally satisfied. When there's no hunger, then there's going to be no clinging, and when there's no clinging, that's the end of suffering." But to attain that dimension requires that you develop the path and that you learn how to comprehend suffering—in other words, that you act in line with the four noble truths and their duties to take the mind to where there's no hunger.

So let's look at what we feed on when we cling. We cling to what are called the five aggregates. "Aggregates" sounds like gravel, but it's not. The five aggregates are activities we engage in.

- First, there's the form of the body, which is constantly in active mode.
- Then feelings: feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain.
- Perceptions: the labels you put on things when you identify, "That's a fan, that's a light, that's a Buddha image, these are people around you"—when you have names that you give to things. A perception can either be a word or an image that you see in the mind. Those are perceptions.
- Then fabrication, the fourth aggregate, is how you put things together when you start to fabricate your experience—and in a minute we'll get to the point that, basically, you're fabricating everything. There's an intentional element in everything you do and see and sense—and intention lies at the basis of fabrication.
- Finally, the fifth aggregate is consciousness at the senses: your awareness of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas—that first awareness as things hit the six senses, counting the mind as the sixth.

We feed on these five activities, these five aggregates. And as we feed on them, that's where there's suffering.

Now, why did the Buddha choose these five activities to focus on? Because these are the activities that are most directly related to the way we eat. Eating is our basic activity, whether physical or mental.

Think for a moment: When you're hungry, first there's form, the form of the body. In other words, the body right here is something that needs nourishment. And then there's the form of the physical food outside. That's form.

Feelings: You've got the feeling of hunger, which is painful. And the feeling of fullness, which is pleasant. And then the feeling of being too full, which is not pleasant again. You want to find something to give rise to the pleasant feeling of fullness that's just right.

Then there are perceptions, which try to identify two basic things. One, you try to identify, "What kind of hunger do I have right now?" And two, "What outside can I feed on that will satisfy that hunger?" If you have a hunger for pizza, that's one kind of hunger. If you have a hunger for a good relationship, that's another kind of hunger. You're looking for different kinds of food.

Think about when you were a very small child, when you first learned about the world. You were crawling around and you found something: What did you do first? You grabbed it and put it into your mouth, to see if it was food. That's the first thing we're interested in: learning to identify what's edible and what's not edible. The same principle applies to our relationships: We find that there are some people we can feed on, and other people we can't.

But our desire to find something to feed on: That's the first thing that drives us, that's the first thing we use our perceptions for: "Is this food? What kind of food is this? What kind of hunger is this good for?" That's how perceptions function in our eating.

As for fabrication: Say that you get some food. The question is, "What do you do with it in order to eat it?" If you get a raw potato, you can't just eat it as it is. You've got to cook it first. And if you don't have any food yet, what do you do to find food? That, too, is fabrication. This is the intentional element, going out and changing your environment so that you can feed off of it.

And finally, consciousness is your awareness of all these things as they are happening.

All five of these activities are necessary when we eat. And because eating is so central to being a being, these are the basic activities that the mind engages in. Everything else grows out of this.

And so when the Buddha says, "Hey, you're suffering because of these

activities,” part of the mind says, “Wait a minute, no, this is how I get my food. I don’t want to let go of this yet.” So first he has you find a better kind of food. That’s why we practice the path. We can learn how to feed off of generosity, how to feed off virtue, and in particular how to feed off of concentration.

Now, concentration is also composed of these same five aggregates. You’ve got the form of the body, the breath. You’ve got the feeling of pleasure that you’re trying to create as you stay with the breath. You’ve got the perception, which is the image you hold in mind to help you stay with the breathing: What kind of image do you think of when you think of the breath? What perception of the breath helps to make it a comfortable place to be focused? And then fabrication is how you talk to yourself about the breath: “Is the breath comfortable? Is it not comfortable? If it’s not comfortable, how do I change? Once it’s comfortable, how do I maintain it? How do I maximize it?” All of this is fabrication. And consciousness is basically your awareness of these things.

So as a first step, the Buddha says, “Here is some better food to feed on,” so that—when you’ve mastered it—you can turn around and look at your old ways of feeding and decide, “Maybe I don’t want to feed in those old ways anymore. Maybe wealth isn’t really a good kind of food. Maybe sex isn’t really a good kind of food. The various things I’ve been looking for all my life: Maybe they’re not really good nourishment for me.” But the important thing is that you now have an alternative source of food, so that it’s easier to peel away your attachment to the kinds of food that are not so skillful.

This is what insight is all about: learning how to say No to certain kinds of clinging, certain kinds of feeding. In particular, you want to look at what the causes of suffering are, to look at why you cling. The Buddha says that it’s all because of craving. And craving, he says, comes in two forms. One, there’s the kind of craving where, if you look at it clearly and steadily, you see that it’s stupid and you can let it go.

The other kind of craving, though, when you look at it, stares back. Defiantly. In other words, you look at it and say, “No, this is stupid,” but it says, “I’m going to eat this way anyhow. I don’t care.” And with that kind of craving, he says, you’ve got to make an effort. You can’t just say, “Oh, this is coming and passing away,” and leave it at that. Because it’s going to come back and come back and come back, making you suffer. You’ve got to do something so that you don’t keep going for it. In this case, he says, you’ve got to exert a fabrication, which is what the path is all about. It’s something that you fabricate, you put together, so that the mind can understand why you don’t want to feed on these things.

What kind of feeding is the kind of feeding that you’ve got to work on? What

is the kind that you don't have to work on? Think about physical food. Say you eat something and immediately get sick. That's obvious. You eat this, it's going to be bad for you. The next time you see it, you don't want to eat it again.

One time when I was a child, we had ham for dinner and I threw it all up. I looked at the bits of ham in the vomit on the floor, and for years after that I could not eat ham. All I could think about was vomit. So that's the kind of feeding that's very easy to deal with. Something makes you sick, doesn't taste good, or else you see that there's a direct connection between that kind of food and pain, and so you don't want to eat it again.

But there are other kinds of food where you really have to make an effort to say No. One is the kind of feeding where, even though it makes you sick, you don't care. Years back, when I was still a lay person living in Chiang Mai, I taught at the university. A group of us, Western and Thai teachers at the university, really liked Northern Thai food. So once a week we'd get together. We knew where all the best markets were in town, which market had the best *naam prik ong*, which market had the best *kai yang*, which market had the best *kaeng hang lay*, which market had the best *laab*. We fanned out into Chiang Mai and got all the best kinds of food and then came back and ate it. And the next day, everybody would have diarrhea. And the following week, we would do it all over again.

That was a case where "I don't care. The food makes me sick but I don't care. It tastes really good." If it's a case like that, we've got to remind ourselves that getting sick may have a long-term consequence. You've got to keep reminding yourself: This may taste good, and maybe you can see that there are some drawbacks to it, but the drawbacks may eventually become worse than you think they are. They're really not worth the flavor, because after all, the flavor of the food lasts in your mouth only very briefly, and after that you can't get any benefit from it. If you think about that, and it hits home, you'll finally say, "This is really stupid. What are we doing?" But again, it takes some determination and some reflection on your part in order to say, "Wait, I don't want to do this anymore."

The second kind of food where it's hard to say No is where you don't see the connection between the food and the drawbacks because it's something you're doing all the time. You've just accepted that there's suffering and it seems normal and necessary. You don't really see that it's not. Years back I was reading about a peasant family in Bhutan whose house was built up on stilts. Right below the house was an open-pit toilet. And sure enough, the flies would buzz around what was down in the open-pit toilet and then they'd come up and land on the food. The family was constantly suffering from diarrhea, and yet

they didn't see the connection because it was happening all the time.

So this is one of the areas where, if you're doing something all the time, you don't see that it's harmful. You just think that it's normal and necessary. This is why you need someone to teach you to see, "Look, you don't have to do this all the time, this particular way that you're holding on to something. There is another option. You don't have to feed in this way."

Again, this is one of the reasons why the Buddha teaches you concentration. He says, "Feed on the concentration for a while and then compare it with the pleasure you get from other things. You'll find that when you're feeding on concentration, it doesn't have the bad effects that came from feeding off breaking a precept, or feeding off lust, feeding off anger, feeding off any unskillful state of mind."

The third kind of food that's hard to say No to is sugar, or things like sugar. In other words, you eat it, you don't get sick, it seems okay. Forty years down the line, though, when they're wheeling you into the hospital to perform heart surgery, they'll say it was because of all the sugar you've been eating. But you didn't see it at the time. Sometimes things have long-term consequences but no perceivable short-term ones. But here again, if you've heard that there may be long-term consequences, and if you can learn how to say No to the sugar for a while, after a couple of weeks, sugar actually smells bad. I had to learn this the hard way. They took me in for a CAT scan of my heart and, oops: 70% closure of an artery. It was because I had been eating sugar. I wanted to go back to my stupid self when I was twenty years old and say, "Stop the sugar, okay?" But by that point it was too late.

So this is again why it's good to have a teacher to point out that these ways of feeding are harmful to you. But you've also got to develop the sense that you really do care. This is what heedfulness is all about: You care about the fact that the things you like can cause harm and you understand, "I don't want to cause that harm, so I've got to go back and look at the things I like." This, as I've said, requires that you have alternative sources of food, which is what the concentration is for, what virtue is for.

And this is why insight doesn't just happen. You can't take people off the street and say, "Just be okay with everything that changes, and that will be insight." That's not insight. Insight comes from seeing, "Okay, I eat in this way but I don't have to. If I don't eat in this way, then I don't suffer the way I did before." But it's because some habits are hard to change that you have to exert a fabrication on some of the ways the mind feeds.

I'll give you some examples. When you're trying to get over a compulsive way of thinking—for example, you may be addicted to anger, you may be

addicted to lust, you may be addicted to greed, you may be addicted to status—treat it as an addiction. The Buddha teaches five steps to understanding addictions so that you can get beyond them.

The first step is to just see: “When does this desire for something unskillful arise?” Is anger always there in the mind? Is greed always there in the mind? These things come and go. Sometimes they come and go more quickly than you might think. For example, with lust: Suppose you say, “I’m going to say No to lust.” But after a while it comes back, and then it comes back again, over and over, and it says to you, “Look, if you don’t give in now, this lust is going to get stronger and stronger, stronger and stronger. It’s going to build up until you can’t stand it anymore.”

But if you actually look at it, it comes and it goes, it comes and it goes, it comes and it goes, but it doesn’t necessarily build up. The problem is with the way the mind talks to itself. It creates the perception of lust building up to scare you. It says, “Hey, watch out, watch out, watch out, this is going to come get you if you don’t act on this, you’re going to go crazy”—all kinds of excuses the mind gives—and you have to say, “Well, no. There are people who can live without lust, and they’re perfectly okay. So maybe the perception that it’s building up is a lie.”

Or with anger: We get attached to anger. Or sorrow: We hold on to grief. There was a famous case in Thailand many years back. There was a high-ranking monk in Bangkok whose name is Chao Khun Upāli, and he was famous for having a sharp tongue, like Than Keng. In the old days, high-ranking people would say that when they lived at home, nobody could take them to task, so they’d go to hear Chao Khun Upāli take them to task. Then they felt at ease.

One time a woman went to see him. She had just lost her only son. He was twenty years old, he had died unexpectedly, and she was overcome with grief. She said, “I can’t think of anything else. All I can think about is my grief for my son.” Chao Khun Upāli said to her, “You’re saying that just to show off to other people and to get their sympathy.”

She was so shocked and felt so insulted that he said that, that she didn’t even bow down. She just left, went home and thought about how horrible he was. “How can Chao Khun Upāli say that I’m doing this just to show off to other people? This is really horrible, what he said.” Then, after two hours, she realized that she hadn’t thought of her son once during the two hours. All she had thought about was how nasty Chao Khun Upāli was. So she went back. She bowed down to him and thanked him.

This shows that even though we think we’re holding one thought in mind all the time, it’s not always there.

So the Buddha says that the first thing you want to look for is, “When does this come? Is this thought that’s eating away at my mind always there? If it’s not always there, then when it comes, what comes with it? What sparks it?” Sometimes you’ll see that the things sparking an unskillful thought are really very minor. You wake up in the morning with a little bit of a headache, and all of a sudden you go to anger. Or when you feel tired, you suddenly go to lust. Tiny feelings in the body can spark these things. It’s not necessary that you have to see something bad in order to feel anger. Sometimes you’re just in an angry mood and you search for something to be angry about. The same with lust. The same with greed. This is why they have Amazon: You can’t think of anything you want, so you go and look at Amazon to see, “Maybe there’s something I’ll want to want.” So basically, *you* are the one who’s looking for trouble. And as a meditator, you want to see that.

When you see the moment when these things come, then the second step is to see the moment when they go. When they go, *why* do they go? Sometimes you lose interest, sometimes something else comes up that simply elbows the first thought out of the mind. What seemed so important five seconds ago is suddenly not important anymore. Why? Something else comes in and pushes it out—like Chao Khun Upāli’s words to the woman. You’ll see that, just as minor things can give rise to a state of mind, minor things can make it go. That gives you a sense of how arbitrary these defilements are.

Then the third step, the Buddha says, is to look for their allure. What is attractive about this kind of thinking? Why is lust attractive? Why is anger attractive? Why is greed attractive? Why is worrying attractive? Even though you say you hate these mind states, why do you keep going back to them? What do you get out of them? Sometimes it’s easy to see why you enjoy them, and sometimes it’s not. When it’s not easy to see, that may be because you’re embarrassed about it—as when you tell yourself, “Anger is horrible, I say horrible things, I do stupid things when I get angry,” and then you go back to anger again because it gives you a certain amount of pleasure, a certain sense of superiority or of release from the restrictions of good behavior.

It’s not that the anger comes out of nowhere and attacks you. *You* are the one who sides with the anger. *You* are the one who picks it up. And you have to look: “When I pick it up, why? What do I find attractive about the anger?” You need a good, solid state of concentration in the mind to see this, because all too often, the mind will hide from itself the reasons why it goes for unskillful things. This requires a lot of honesty.

And then the next step, of course, is that after you see the allure, you look for the drawbacks. As with eating Northern Thai food once a week and then

having diarrhea, sometimes the drawbacks are easy to see. But sometimes they're not so easy. Sometimes they're long-term and slow to show themselves. When they're slow, you want to bring to mind what you've learned from watching other people's mistakes or from listening to the Dhamma. You don't have to wait until you're suffering before you say, "Gee, I shouldn't have done that."

The Buddha says that there are basically five kinds of people in the world, which he compares to five kinds of horses. With the first horse, all you have to do is say, "Whip," and the horse will do what you want it to do. With the second kind of horse, you have to show it the whip, and then the horse will do what you want it to do. With the third kind of horse, you actually have to touch the horse with the whip a little bit, to show, "I'm serious." Then the horse will do what you want it to do. With the fourth kind of horse, you have use the whip to dig a little bit into the skin before the horse does what you want it to do. And with the fifth kind of horse, you have to hit down into the bone. So which kind of horse do you want to be?

The Buddha has been telling us ever since 2,600 years ago that "Anger is bad for you, greed is bad for you, lust is bad for you, delusion is bad for you." And for 2,600 years, we haven't been listening. People sometimes ask, "Why is it that with people in the time of the Buddha, all they had to do was listen to the Dhamma once and they became awakened, whereas now, we listen to the Dhamma how many times and it's still not happening?" That's because the Buddha was gathering all the flowers, all the fruits, that were already ripe, whereas we were the unripe fruits. Who knows where we were or what we were when he was alive.

The Dhamma is still around. So here is our opportunity to say, "Do I want to wait until I really suffer more before I get to work at the practice? Have I had enough suffering? Do I want to change?" Look very carefully at the drawbacks of your unskillful thinking. Compare them with the allure. Are they really worth it?

It's in this area of contemplating the drawbacks that the Buddha brings in the teaching about what we call the "three characteristics." He never used the word "characteristic" to describe these teachings, though, and this is an important point to know. When we think "three characteristics," we think that they are describing something essentially and categorically true about, say, this microphone. "This is what the microphone actually is. This is the truth about the microphone. It's inconstant, it's stressful, it's not-self."

But the Buddha didn't use the word "characteristic" in this context. He used the word "perception": the labels you apply. Now, these perceptions should be

applied at the right time and place. And in this case, you should apply the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to contemplate the drawbacks—to remind yourself that clinging to unskillful thinking does have its drawbacks. The microphone on its own is no problem, right? But if I cling to the microphone and, after the talk, if someone says, “Let go of the microphone,” and I say, “No, I’m going to hold on to this microphone all night,” then we’ve got a problem.

So you want to look at the drawbacks of clinging to this. And you apply the perception, first, that this microphone is inconstant. Its use for you is not going to last. The word “*anicca*” is sometimes translated as “impermanent,” but that doesn’t really get to the reason for why it’s stressful. You know that mountains are impermanent, and yet you can still build a house on a mountain and feel fairly secure. You know that Singapore is impermanent, but you still feel okay about living in Singapore. But if you realize that things are inconstant, they are undependable, they can change at any time, then you realize that you can’t be complacent. That’s what the Buddha is trying to point to.

Let me tell you a story about Sebastian. Sebastian’s very first letter to my teacher, Than Ajaan Fuang, was back in the 1980s. He wrote, “I practice the Dhamma by seeing that everything I encounter is impermanent, stressful, and not-self.” And my teacher said to me, “Write back to him and say, ‘The things outside, those are not the problem. The problem is not that they are impermanent, stressful, and not-self. The real problem is that your own *mind* is inconstant, stressful, and not-self. Look at where the real problem is coming from, the part that’s blaming other things for being inconstant, stressful, and not-self.’”

So you look at the act of clinging: This clinging is inconstant. Even if you cling to something that’s constant—and there are cases where people meditate, they reach their first experience of awakening, and they cling to it; they’re clinging to something that’s constant—the problem with clinging is that the clinging itself is inconstant. That’s why it’s stressful. Clinging comes and goes erratically. It’s inconstant. You can’t really depend on it.

And the next question is, “If you can’t depend on it, is it easeful or is it stressful to hold on to?” It’s stressful. It’s like sitting in a chair where the legs are not even. If you’re not careful, you’ll tip over. You have to stay tense to maintain your balance. This is why inconstancy is stressful.

And then if something is inconstant and stressful, is it the right place to find true happiness? Well, no. If there’s no true happiness there, then why do you want to lay claim to it? Why do you want to hold on? Why would you want to identify with it?

This is what the meaning of “not-self” is: It’s a perception that tells you, “This is not worth holding on to. It’s not worth claiming as yours.” Notice, the Buddha is not saying, “There is no self.” The one time he was asked, “Is there a self? Is there no self?” he didn’t answer. He later said to Ven. Ānanda, “Whichever way you answer those questions, you’re going to get into wrong view.” So he’s talking about an adjective: “not-self.” He’s not talking about a metaphysical issue. And the adjective is making a value judgment: Is this thing worth claiming as you? Is this worth claiming as your self? This act of clinging that you hold on to: Do you really want to hold on to it?

No. It’s not worth it.

And the Buddha says, if you can perceive that it’s not worth it, then you can let go. You’re making a value judgment. Remember, clinging itself is a value judgment. You hold on to things because you perceive that they’re worth the effort. But the Buddha wants you to see that you’re fabricating all your sensory experience—everything you see and hear and smell and taste and touch and think about—and there’s an effort that goes into everything you fabricate. All of these aggregates that you’re focusing on, as he says, come from potentials in the past. But you have to do some fabricating in the present moment to turn them into food for the mind.

For example, say that you’re sitting and meditating. You have a pain in your knee. There are lots of different things you could do with the pain in the knee. The pain is there, maybe because of past kamma. But you can sit there and make yourself miserable because of the pain. Or you can learn how not to focus on the pain, and you’ll be okay for a while. Or you can learn how to focus on the pain with the attitude, “I want to understand this pain. I’m not going to be a victim of the pain. I want to understand it.” That changes your relationship. And it changes your experience of the pain.

And as the Buddha says when he’s describing dependent co-arising, your present intentions come before your experience of the kammic results coming in from the past. Your present intentions are prior, they come first, ready to fabricate what’s coming in from the past. And so your intention as you approach something is what’s going to make all the difference. You’re fixing your food. What kind of food are you fixing? The way you fix it determines whether you’re going to get good food or bad food to eat.

Years back, we held a group meditation session at the monastery, outside, under the trees. It was a lovely day. There was nice breeze from the west, nice shade from the trees. And there was a woman who was brought there by a friend of hers. I personally had a very nice meditation session. But at the end of the session, the woman who was brought by the friend opened her eyes and

said, “I have never suffered so much in my life.” All she did was to sit still for one hour, but she was suffering. Her body was the same body as before she came and after she left. But what she did with her sensations of her body and mind while she was sitting there: That was what made her suffer.

And so the Buddha wants you to see, “Here you are doing all of this to create food for the mind, but you’re creating lousy food. It’s making you sick. Do you want to keep on doing this? Is it really something that you want to hold on to? Or is it something you want to let go of?”

Because in clinging, we’re holding on to the aggregates. One, we’re holding on to the potentials coming in from the past. Two, we’re holding on to the act of fabrication in the present moment. And three, we’re holding on to the anticipation that “This is going to be good. I’m going to get something good out of this.” Insight is basically a matter of seeing, “No, you are not getting anything good.” It’s a value judgment.

It’s like owning chickens. You think, “I’m going to feed the chickens because when the chickens get big, they’re going to give eggs.” The chickens come from the potentials you’re preparing from the past. Then you think, “I’m going to work with these things, I am going to develop these potentials, and I hope I’ll get something good to eat out of them.” That’s the anticipation.

Now our problem is, as human beings, that we have very poor judgment as to what to feed on and what not to feed on. So it turns out that our first problem—once we’ve got the chickens and they get big enough to give eggs—is that we eat everything that comes out of the chickens. Whether it’s chicken eggs or chicken shit, we eat it all. And the Buddha is basically saying, “Hey, no, choose just the eggs.” That’s his first lesson. That’s where he says to feed off generosity, feed off gratitude, feed off virtue, feed off concentration, feed off practicing the path. Don’t feed off the chicken shit.

But the problem is that these chickens are not ordinary chickens. They’re the chickens from hell. As the Buddha says, even when we feed off good things, they come back and they feed off of us. The aggregates chew on us all the time, he says. Feelings chew on us, our perceptions chew on us, fabrications chew on us. When we lie down at night, the chickens come and peck at our eyes. So we have to realize, “I’ve got to stop feeding chickens altogether. Which means that I’ll have to stop eating eggs. I’ll have to find something else, something better to eat.”

This is where the Buddha says, “There is better food. There is the food of release.” And then there’s nibbāna, a dimension in which there’s no need for food at all. That’s what insight is for. When you realize that there is the possibility of a higher happiness, it makes it easier to see that “This is the

happiness I've been developing out of feeding these chickens and eating their eggs, and eating everything else. But there is something better. Maybe I can stop doing this." This is what the three perceptions are for. These chickens are inconstant, they are stressful, and you really don't want to own them and keep on feeding them. You want to let them go. This is what insight is all about.

So when you find yourself dealing with unskillful thoughts in the mind, remember the five steps for dealing with them. You don't have to keep on feeding, say, off of anger.

- First you look at, when it comes, why does it come? The things that spark anger: Do they really deserve your anger? Are they really worth it?

- Two, when it goes away, does it go away only because you resolved the issue? Or simply because you've lost interest? If it's because you lost interest, and the reason you picked up something else seems arbitrary, then you begin to wonder, "What is this anger anyhow? Why does it seem so important? Why do I want to go for it?"

- Three, then you look for the allure—what it is that you like about the anger.

- Four, you compare the allure with the drawbacks, to see that the allure is not worth the trouble it causes. That's when you realize, "This is not worth claiming as me or mine."

- And that's where you finally get to the fifth step, which is escape. Escape is dispassion: "I don't feel any interest in this anymore."

Notice, dispassion does not mean that you're averse to it or that you have no feeling at all. It means simply that you've outgrown it. You've grown wiser. You've grown more mature. You've realized that there is something better. That's when you feel dispassion for chicken shit. It's not because you hate chicken shit. It's just that you realize, "I don't need to feed on chicken shit anymore. There are better things to eat." You've outgrown it. The next time you see chicken shit, you don't hate chicken shit. But the thought of eating it just doesn't occur to you anymore. And when you're really mature, you don't even want to eat eggs. You've got something better. That's awakening.

This is going to require many stages of the practice as you get to deeper and deeper problems in the mind, but the same five principles apply all across the board: Look for why these things arise, how they pass away, what is the allure, what are the drawbacks. When you compare the allure with the drawbacks, you see that this is worth letting go of. That's when you develop dispassion for whatever the issue is. And the dispassion brings release.

At some stages in the practice, there will be certain things that you'll still hold on to, that you'll *need* to hold on to, at least for the time being. We talked

about this the other night. It's like carrying a banana back from the market. You don't throw away the peel until you're ready to eat the banana. Otherwise, the banana turns to mush in your hand. In the same way, there are certain things you have to hold on to as you develop the path so that your mind doesn't turn into mush. So hold on to your virtue, hold on to your generosity, hold on to your concentration and your discernment. But learn how to let go of other things, the things that pull you off the path. Finally, you'll turn around and look at the factors of the path and realize, "I can let go of these things as well."

The Buddha says that even at that stage, you apply the same five steps. See that, "Okay, there is the allure to the concentration or the discernment, but I don't need it anymore." The path requires effort, but you've reached the point where you don't need effort anymore. That's where you can let everything go. That's where the mind is totally free, and it reaches a place where it has no hunger for anything at all—because it's totally satisfied with what it's found. That's what insight is for.

It requires work to get there, because you have to learn. You basically learn how to understand why you lie to yourself, saying, "I like this, I like that." But are these things really worth liking? Maybe there's something better. You're making a value judgment and you're getting more and more mature in your judgments.

Remember the other night when I told you about the signs on the road going into Las Vegas, where they say, "93% payback rate"? In other words, you give them one dollar, they give you ninety-three cents. Now you get to the point where you see that sign everywhere—and there's no interest, because you know you've got something better. That's what insight is all about.

So those are my thoughts for tonight.

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