

Purity of Heart

Essays on the Buddhist Path

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Purity of Heart

During my first weeks with my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, I began to realize that he had psychic powers. He never made a show of them, but I gradually sensed that he could read my mind and anticipate future events. I became intrigued: What else did he know? How did he know it? He must have detected where my thoughts were going, for one evening he gently headed me off: “You know,” he said, “the whole aim of our practice is purity of heart. Everything else is just games.”

That one phrase—purity of heart—more than intrigued me. It reverberated deep down inside. Although I was extremely disillusioned with Christianity, I still valued Kierkegaard’s dictum: Purity of heart is to will one thing. I didn’t agree with Kierkegaard as to what that “one thing” was, but I did agree that purity of heart is the most important treasure of life. And here Ajaan Fuang was offering to teach me how to develop it. That’s one of the reasons why I stayed with him until he died.

His basic definition of purity of heart was simple enough: a happiness that will never harm anyone. But a happiness like that is hard to find, for ordinary happiness requires that we eat. As the first of the Novice’s Questions says: “What is one? All beings subsist on food.” This is how the Buddha introduced the topic of causality to young people: The primary causal relationship isn’t something gentle like light reflecting off mirrors, or jewels illuminating jewels. It’s feeding. Our bodies need physical food for their well-being. Our minds need the food of pleasant sensory contacts, intentions, and consciousness itself in order to function. If you ever want proof that interconnectedness isn’t always something to celebrate, just contemplate how the beings of the world feed on one another, physically and emotionally. Interbeing is inter-eating. As Ajaan Suwat, my second teacher once said, “If there were a god who could arrange that by my eating I could make everyone in the world full, I’d bow down to that god.” But that’s not how eating works.

Ordinarily, even well-intentioned people may not see eating as harmful. We’re so compelled to eat that we blind ourselves to its larger impact. Our first pleasure, after the terror of being born, was getting to feed. We did it with our eyes closed, and most people keep their eyes closed to the impact of their feeding throughout life.

But when you go to a quiet, secluded place and start examining your life, you begin to see what an enormous issue it is just to keep the body and mind well

fed. On the one hand, you see the suffering you create for others simply in your need to feed. On the other, you see something even more dismaying: the emotions that arise within you when you don't feel that your body and mind are getting enough to eat. You realize that as long as your source of physical or mental food is unreliable, *you're* unreliable, too. You see why even good people can reach a point where they're capable of murder, deceit, adultery, or theft. Being born with a body means that we're born with a huge bundle of needs that compels and can overwhelm our minds.

Fortunately, we human beings have the potential to civilize our eating habits by learning to wean ourselves from our passion for the junk food of sights, sounds, smells, etc., and look instead for good food within. When we learn to appreciate the joy that comes from generosity, honor, compassion, and trust, we see that it's much more fulfilling than the pleasure that comes simply from grabbing what we can for ourselves. We realize that our happiness can't be independent of the happiness of others. We can give one another our belongings, our time, our love, our selves, and see it not as a loss but as a mutual gain.

Unfortunately, these qualities of the heart are conditional, for they depend on a tender web of beliefs and feelings—belief in justice and the basic goodness of human nature, feelings of trust and affection. When that web breaks, as it so easily can, the heart can turn vicious. We see this in divorce, broken families, and society at large. When the security of our food source—the basis of our mental and material well-being—gets threatened, the finer qualities of the mind can vanish. People who believe in kindness can suddenly seek revenge. Those who espouse non-violence can suddenly call for war. And those who rule by divisiveness—by making a mockery of compassion, prudence, and our common humanity—find a willing following for their law-of-the-jungle agenda.

This is why compassion based only on belief or feeling is not enough to guarantee our behavior—and why the practice of training the mind to reach an unconditioned happiness is not a selfish thing. If you value compassion and trust, it's an imperative, for only an unconditioned happiness can guarantee the purity of your behavior. Independent of space and time, it's beyond alteration. No one can threaten its food source, for it has no need to feed. When you've had even just a glimpse of this happiness, your belief in goodness becomes unshakable. That way other people can totally trust you, and you can genuinely trust yourself. You lack for nothing.

Purity of heart is to know this one thing.

Faith in Awakening

The Buddha never placed unconditional demands on anyone's faith. For people from a culture where the dominant religions *do* make such demands, this is one of Buddhism's most attractive features. It's especially appealing to those who—in reaction to the demands of organized religion—embrace the view of scientific empiricism that nothing deserves our trust unless it can be measured against physical data. In this light, the Buddha's famous instructions to the Kalamas are often read as an invitation to believe, or not, whatever we like.

Don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, "This contemplative is our teacher." When you know for yourselves that, "These mental qualities are skillful; these mental qualities are blameless; these mental qualities are praised by the wise; these mental qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare and to happiness" — then you should enter and remain in them. (AN III.65)

Pointing to this passage, many modern writers have gone so far as to say that faith has no place in the Buddhist tradition, that the proper Buddhist attitude is one of skepticism. But even though the Buddha recommends tolerance and a healthy skepticism toward matters of faith, he also notes a conditional imperative: If you sincerely want to put an end to suffering—that's the condition—you should take certain things on faith, as working hypotheses, and then test them through following his path of practice. The advice to the Kalamas, in fact, contains the crucial caveat that you must take into account what wise people value.

This caveat gives balance to the Buddha's advice: Just as you shouldn't give unreserved trust to outside authority, you can't give unreserved trust to your own logic and feelings if they go against experience and the genuine wisdom of others. As other early discourses make clear, wise people can be recognized by their words and behavior as measured against standards set by the Buddha and his awakened disciples. The proper attitude toward those who meet these standards is faith:

For a disciple who has conviction in the Teacher's message and lives to penetrate it, what accords with the Dhamma is this: "The Blessed One is the Teacher, I am a disciple. He is the one who knows, not I" (MN 70)

Repeatedly the Buddha stated that faith in a teacher is what leads you to learn from that teacher. Faith in the Buddha's own Awakening is a requisite strength for anyone else who wants to attain Awakening. As it fosters persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, this faith can take you all the way to the deathless.

So there's a tension in the Buddha's recommendations about faith and empiricism. Few of Asian Buddhists I know find the tension uncomfortable, but Western Buddhists—raised in a culture where religion and faith have long been at war with science and empiricism—find it very disconcerting. In my discussions with them, they often try to resolve it in the same ways that, historically, the tension between Christian faith and scientific empiricism has been resolved in our own culture. Three general positions stand out because they are at the same time so common and so clearly Western. Consciously or not, they attempt to understand the Buddha's position on faith and empiricism in a way that can be easily mapped onto the modern Western battle lines between religion and science.

The first interpretation has its roots in the side of Western culture that totally rejects the legitimacy of faith. In this view, the Buddha embodies the Victorian ideal of the heroic agnostic, one who eschewed the childish consolations of faith in favor of a purely scientific method for strengthening one's own mind. Because his method focused entirely on the present moment, questions of past and future were totally irrelevant to his message. Thus any references to faith in such issues as past karma, future rebirth, or an unconditioned happiness separate from the senses are later interpolations in the texts, which Buddhist agnostics, following the Buddha's example, should do their best to reject.

The second interpretation has roots in the side of Western culture that has rejected either the specifics of Christian faith or the authority of any organized religion, but has appreciated faith as an essential requirement for mental health. This view presents the Buddha as a hero from the Romantic era, appreciating the subjective value of faith in establishing a sense of wholeness within and interconnectedness without, regardless of what the object of that faith might be. In other words, it doesn't matter where faith is directed, as long as it's deeply felt and personally nourishing. Faith in the Buddha's Awakening, in this view, means simply believing that he found what worked for himself, which carries no implications for what will work for you. If you find the teaching on karma and rebirth comforting, fine: Believe it. If not, don't. What's important is that you relate to your faith in a way that's emotionally healing, nourishing, and empowering.

A third interpretation encompasses the first two, but—instead of presenting the Buddha as a hero—depicts him as a victim trapped in his historical situation.

Much like us, he was faced with finding a meaningful life in light of the worldview of his day. His views on karma and rebirth were simply assumptions picked up from the primitive science of ancient India, while his path of practice was an attempt to negotiate a satisfying life within those assumptions. If he were alive today, he would try to reconcile his values with the discoveries of modern science, in the same way that some Westerners have done with their faith in monotheism.

The underlying assumption of this position is that science is concerned with facts, religion with values. Science provides the hard data to which religion should provide meaning. Thus each Buddhist would be performing the work of a Buddha by accepting the hard facts that have been scientifically proven for our generation and then searching the Buddhist tradition—as well as other traditions, where appropriate—for myths and values to give meaning to those facts, and in the process forging a new Buddhism for our times.

Each of these three interpretations may make eminent sense from a Western point of view, but none of them do justice to what we know of the Buddha or of his teaching on the role of faith and empiricism on the path. All three are correct in emphasizing the Buddha's unwillingness to force his teachings on other people, but—by forcing our own assumptions onto his teachings and actions—they misread what that unwillingness means. He wasn't an agnostic; he had strong reasons for declaring some ideas as worthy of faith and others as not; and his teachings on karma, rebirth, and nirvana broke radically with the dominant worldview of his time. He was neither a Victorian nor a Romantic hero, nor was he a victim of circumstances. He was a hero who, among other things, mastered the issue of faith and empiricism in a radical way. But to appreciate that way, we first have to step back from the Western cultural battlefield and look at faith and empiricism in a more basic context, simply as processes within the individual mind.

Although we like to think that we base our decisions on hard facts, we actually use both faith and empiricism in every decision we make. Even in our most empirically based decisions, our vision is hampered by our position in time. As Kierkegaard noted, we live forwards but understand backwards. Any hard-headed business entrepreneur will tell you that the future has to be taken on faith, no matter how much we know of the past. What's more, we're often forced into momentous decisions where there's no time or opportunity to gather enough past facts for an informed choice. At other times we have too many facts—as when a doctor is faced with many conflicting tests on a patient's condition—and we have to go on faith in deciding which facts to focus on and which ones to ignore.

However, faith also plays a deeper role in many of our decisions. As William James once observed, there are two kinds of truths in life: those whose validity has nothing to do with our actions, and those whose reality depends on what we do. Truths of the first sort—truths of the observer—include facts about the behavior of the physical world: how atoms form molecules, how stars explode. Truths of the second sort—truths of the will—include skills, relationships, business ventures, anything that requires your effort to make it real. With truths of the observer, it's best to stay skeptical until reasonable evidence is in. With truths of the will, though, the truth won't happen without your faith in it, often in the face of unpromising odds. For example, if you don't believe that becoming a pianist is worthwhile, or that you have the makings of a good pianist, it won't happen. Truths of the will are the ones most relevant to our pursuit of true happiness. Many of the most inspiring stories in life are of people who create truths of this sort when a mountain of empirical evidence—racism, poverty, physical disability—is against them. In cases like this, the truth requires that faith actively discount the immediate facts.

If we dig even deeper into the psychology of decision-making, we run into an area for which no scientific evidence can offer proof: Do we actually act, or are actions an illusion? Are our acts already predetermined by physical laws or an external intelligence, or do we have free will? Are causal relationships real, or only a fiction? Even the most carefully planned scientific experiment could never settle any of these issues, and yet once we become aware of them we have to take a stand on them if we want to put energy into our thoughts, words, and deeds.

These were the areas where the Buddha focused his teachings on empiricism and faith. Although the first noble truth requires that we observe suffering until we comprehend it, we have to take on faith his assertion that the facts we observe about suffering are the most important guide for making decisions, moment by moment, throughout life. Because the third noble truth, the cessation of suffering, is a truth of the will, we have to take it on faith that it's a worthwhile and attainable goal. And because the fourth noble truth—the path to the cessation of suffering—is a path of action and skill, we have to take it on faith that our actions are real, that we have free will, and yet that there's a causal pattern to the workings of the mind from which we can learn in mastering that skill. As the Buddha said, the path will lead to a direct experience of these truths, but only if you bring faith to the practice will you know this for yourself. In other words, "faith" in the Buddhist context means faith in the ability of your actions to lead to a direct experience of the end of suffering.

The Buddha offered these teachings to people seeking advice on how to find true happiness. That's why he was able to avoid any coercion of others: His teachings assumed that his listeners were already involved in a search. When we

understand his views on what it means to search—why people search, and what they’re searching for—we can understand his advice on how to use faith and empiricism in a successful search. The best way to do this is to examine five of his similes illustrating how a search should be conducted.

The first simile illustrates search in its most raw and unfocused form:

Two strong men have grabbed another man by the arms and are dragging him to a pit of burning embers. The Buddha notes, “Wouldn’t the man twist his body this way and that?”

The twisting of his body stands for the way we react to suffering. We don’t bother to ask if our suffering is predetermined or our actions have any hope of success. We simply put up a struggle and do what we can to escape. It’s our natural reaction.

The Buddha taught that this reaction is twofold: We’re bewildered—“Why is this happening to me?”—and we search for a way to put an end to the suffering. When he stated that he taught nothing but suffering and the end of suffering, he was responding to these two reactions, providing an explanation of suffering and its end so as to do away with our bewilderment, at the same time showing the way to the end of suffering so as to satisfy our search. He had no use for the idea that our suffering comes from our struggle to resist suffering; that the search for an end to suffering is precisely what keeps us from seeing the peace already there. In light of the above simile, simply relaxing into a total acceptance of the moment means relaxing into the prospect of being burned alive.

The second simile:

A man searching for fruit climbs up into a tree to eat his fill and to stuff his garments with fruit to take home. While he is there, another man searching for fruit comes along. The second man can’t climb the tree but he has an axe, so he chops the tree down. If the first man doesn’t quickly get out of the tree, he may break an arm or a leg, or even die.

This simile shows the perils of looking for true happiness in the wrong place: sensual pleasures. If your happiness depends on anything other people can take away from you, you’re putting yourself in danger. As the Buddha notes, we hope for happiness in sensual pleasures not because they’ve ever really satisfied us but because we can’t imagine any other escape from pain and suffering. If we allowed ourselves to believe that there *is* another alternative, we’d be more willing to question our strong faith in our cravings and attachments, more willing to look for that alternative and give it a try. And, as the third simile argues, if we look in the right way, we’ll find it.

A person searching for milk tries to get milk out of a cow by twisting its horn. Another person searching for milk tries to get milk out of the cow by pulling at its udder.

This simile is a response to the assertion that no human action can bring release from suffering. We *can* attain release, the Buddha said, as long as we follow the right method, like the person pulling at the udder of the cow.

The right method starts with right understanding, and this is where faith in the Buddha's Awakening comes in. As the Buddha once stated, he didn't tell us everything he awakened to. What he told was like a handful of leaves; what he learned was like all the leaves in the forest. Still, the leaves in the handful contained all the lessons that would help others to awaken. Right understanding begins with learning what those specific lessons are.

The most important lesson, and the most important item of faith, is simply the fact of the Awakening itself. The Buddha achieved it through his own efforts, and he did so, not because he was more than human, but because he developed mental qualities we all have the potential to develop. To have faith in his Awakening thus means having faith in your own potential for Awakening.

However, the specifics of what he learned in his Awakening are important as well. It's not simply the case that he found what worked for him, while what works for you may be something else entirely. No matter how much you twist a cow's horn, it'll never produce milk. The Buddha's insights penetrated into how things work, what it means for them to work. These insights apply to everyone throughout time.

When summarizing his Awakening in the most condensed form, the Buddha focused on a principle of causality that explains how we live in a world where patterns of causality fashion events, and yet those events are not totally predetermined by the past.

The principle is actually a dual one, for there are two kinds of causality interweaving in our lives. The first is that of a cause giving results in the immediate present: *When this is, that is; when this isn't, that isn't*. When you turn on a stereo, for example, the noise comes out; when you turn it off, the noise stops. The second type of causality is that of a cause giving results over time: *From the arising of this comes the arising of that; from the cessation of this comes the cessation of that*. If you study now, you'll have knowledge long into the future. If you damage your brain, the negative effects will be long-term as well.

Applied to karma, or intentional action, the dual principle means this: Any moment of experience consists of three things: (1) pleasures and pains resulting from past intentions, (2) present intentions, and (3) pleasures and pains immediately resulting from present intentions. Thus the present is not totally shaped by the past. In fact, the most important element shaping your present experience of pleasure or pain is how you fashion, with your present intentions, the raw material provided by past intentions. And your present intentions can be totally free.

This is how there is free will in the midst of causality. At the same time, the pattern in the way intentions lead to results allows us to learn from past mistakes. This freedom within a pattern opens the way to a path of mental training, mastered through experience, that can lead to the end of suffering. We practice generosity, virtue, and meditation to learn the power of our intentions and in particular to see what happens as our intentions grow more skillful. To fully test the power of intention, we work at making them so skillful that present intentions actually stop. Only when they stop can you prove for yourself how powerful they've been. And where they stop is where the unconditioned—the end of suffering—is found. From there you can return to intentions, but you're no longer their captive or slave.

In presenting his teachings on karma and suffering, the Buddha offered empirical evidence to corroborate them—noting, for instance, how your reaction to another person's misery depends on how attached you are to that person—but he never attempted a full-scale empirical proof. In fact, he heaped ridicule on his contemporaries, the Jains, who tried to prove their more deterministic teaching on karma by claiming that all those who kill, steal, lie, or engage in illicit sex will suffer from their actions here and now. "Haven't you seen the case," the Buddha asked, "where a man is rewarded by a king for killing the king's enemy, for stealing from the king's enemy, for amusing the king with a clever lie?" Even though the basic principle of karma is simple enough—skillful intentions lead to pleasure, unskillful intentions to pain—the dual principle of causality through which karma operates is so complex, like a Mandelbrot set, that you would go crazy trying to nail the whole thing down empirically.

So instead of an empirical proof for his teaching on karma, the Buddha offered a pragmatic proof: If you sincerely believe in his teachings on causality, karma, rebirth, and the four noble truths, how will you act? What kind of life will you lead? Won't you tend to be more responsible and compassionate? If, on the other hand, you were to believe in any of the alternatives—such as a doctrine of an impersonal fate or a deity who determined the course of your pleasure and pain, or a doctrine that all things were coincidental and without cause—what would those beliefs logically lead you to do? If you acted consistently in line with them, would they allow you to put an end to suffering through your own efforts? Would they allow any purpose for effort at all? If, on the other hand, you refused to commit to a coherent idea of what human action can do, would you be likely to pursue a demanding path of practice all the way through to the end?

This was the kind of reasoning that the Buddha used to inspire faith in his Awakening and in its relevance to our own search for true happiness.

The fourth simile stresses the importance of not settling for anything less than the genuine thing:

A man searching for heartwood goes into a forest and comes to a tree containing heartwood, but instead of taking the heartwood, he takes home some sapwood, branches, or bark.

Faith in the possibility of nirvana—the heartwood of the path—is what keeps you from getting waylaid by the pleasures of the sapwood and bark: the gratification that comes from being generous and virtuous, the sense of peace, interconnectedness, and oneness that comes with strong concentration. Yet, nirvana isn't connected to anything we've ever experienced. It's already there, but hidden by all our desires for physical and mental activity. To touch it, we have to abandon our habitual attachment to activity. To believe that such a thing is possible, and that it's the ultimate happiness, is to take a major leap.

Many in the Buddha's time many were willing to take the leap, while many others were not, preferring to content themselves with the branches and sapwood, wanting simply to learn how to live happily with their families in this life and go to heaven in the next. Nirvana, they said, could wait. Faced with this honest and gentle resistance to his teaching on nirvana, the Buddha was happy to comply.

But he was less tolerant of the stronger resistance he received from Brahmas, heavenly deities who complacently felt that their experience of limitless oneness and compassion in the midst of samsara—their sapwood—was superior to the heartwood of nirvana. In their case he used all the psychic and intellectual powers at his disposal to humble their pride, for he realized that their views totally closed the door to Awakening. If you see your sapwood as heartwood, you won't look for anything better. When your sapwood breaks, you'll decide that heartwood is a lie. But if you realize you're using bark and sapwood, you leave open the possibility that someday you'll go back and give the heartwood a try.

Of course, it's even better if you can take the Buddha's teachings on nirvana as a direct challenge in this lifetime—as if he were saying, "Here's your chance. Can you prove me wrong?"

The fifth simile:

An experienced elephant hunter, searching for a big bull elephant, comes across a large elephant footprint in the forest. However, he doesn't jump to the conclusion that it's the footprint of a big bull elephant. Why? Because there are dwarf female elephants with big feet. It might be one of theirs. He follows along and sees some scratch marks and tusk marks high up on the trees, but still doesn't jump to the conclusion that he's on the trail of a big bull elephant. Why? Because there are tall female elephants with tusks. The marks might be theirs. He follows along and finally sees a big bull elephant under a tree or in a clearing. That's when he concludes that he's found his bull elephant.

In explaining this simile, the Buddha identified all the preliminary steps of the practice—going into the wilderness as a monastic; adhering to the precepts; developing restraint, contentment, and strong concentration; seeing past lives and gaining vision of the beings of the cosmos dying and being reborn in line with their karma—as simply footprints and scratch marks of the Buddha’s Awakening. Only when you have your own first taste of Awakening, having followed his path, do you really know that your faith in his Awakening was well placed. Touching the dimension where suffering ends, you realize that the Buddha’s teachings about it were not only true but also useful: He knew what he was talking about and was able to point you there as well.

What’s interesting about this simile is the way it combines healthy faith with honest skepticism. To act on this faith is to test it, the way you’d test a working hypothesis. You need faith to keep following the footprints, but you also need the honesty to recognize where faith ends and knowledge begins. This is why, in the Buddhist context, faith and empiricism are inseparable. Unlike a monotheistic religion—where faith centers on the power of another, and skepticism implies a rejection of that power—faith in the Buddha’s Awakening keeps pointing back to the power of your own actions: Do you have enough power over your intentions to make them harmless? Do harmless intentions then give you the freedom to drop intention entirely? The only way you can answer these questions is by being scrupulously honest about your intentions, to detect even the slightest traces of harm, even the slightest movement of intention itself. Only then will you know the deathless, totally unconditioned by intention, for sure. But if you claim to know things that you don’t, how can you trust yourself to detect any of these things? You’ve got to make your inner honesty worthy of the subtle truths you’re trying to prove.

This is why science will never be able to pass valid judgment on the truths of Awakening, for the path deals in matters that outside experimenters can’t reach. Although others may sympathize with your suffering, the suffering itself is an experience you can share with no one else. The honesty and skillfulness of your intentions is an affair of your internal dialogue, something that is also purely your own. Scientists can measure the neurological data indicating pain or intentional activity, but there’s no external measurement for how the pain feels, or how honest your intentional dialogue may be. And as for the deathless, it has no physical correlates at all. The closest that outside empirical measurement can get is to pictures of the footprints on the ground and the marks in the trees.

To get to the bull elephant, you have to do what the Buddha’s disciple Sariputta did. He kept following the path, without jumping to dishonest conclusions, until he saw the elephant within. Then, when the Buddha asked him, “Do you take it on faith that these five strengths—faith, persistence,

mindfulness, concentration, and discernment—lead to the deathless,” Sariputta could answer honestly, “No, I don’t take it on faith. I know.”

As Sariputta stated in another discourse, his proof was experiential but so inward that it touched a dimension where not only the external senses but even the sense of the functioning of the mind can’t reach. If you want to confirm his knowledge you have to touch that dimension in the only place you can access it, inside yourself. This is one of two ways in which the Buddha’s method differs from that of modern empiricism.

The other has to do with the integrity of the person attempting the proof. As in science, faith in the Buddha’s Awakening acts like a working hypothesis, but the test of that hypothesis requires an honesty deeper and more radical than anything science requires. You have to commit yourself—every variation on who you feel you are—totally to the test. Only when you take apart all clinging to your inner and outer senses can you prove whether the activity of clinging is what hides the deathless. The Buddha never forced anyone to commit to this test, both because you can’t coerce people to be honest with themselves, and because he saw that the pit of burning embers was coercion enough.

Untangling the Present

The Role of Appropriate Attention

If the ways of the mind were simple, its problems would be simple and easy to solve. The Buddha, in showing how to put an end to its problems, could have kept his instructions simple and short—a single blanket approach to whatever happens in the present, a noble one-fold path: just mindfulness, just concentration, or just non-reactivity. Or he might not have bothered to teach much at all, knowing that people could easily solve their problems on their own. “Trust,” he might have said, “your innate nature, your innate understanding,” and left it at that. But that’s not how the mind works, and that’s not how he taught.

Even just a few minutes spent observing the ways of the mind can show how complex and convoluted they are. And this means that its problems are complex as well. In particular, the problem of suffering: As the Buddha noted, the causes of suffering are knotted and tangled like a bird’s nest, like the thread in a tangled skein. As anyone who has solved a complex problem knows, the trick to finding its solution lies in how you frame the issue: identifying the problem and sorting out the pattern of factors related to it. Seeing the pattern, you can decide which factors to focus on as crucial to its solution, and which ones you have to ignore so as not to get distracted and led down blind alleys. Framing the issue also means deciding how to approach each of the crucial factors so that instead of maintaining or exacerbating the problem, they aid with its solution. What this boils down to is, when faced with a problem, knowing which questions are helpful to ask about it, and which questions aren’t.

To continue the Buddha’s analogy, the ability to solve complex problems is like knowing how to untangle a tangled knot. You need a basic understanding of how tangles work so that you can learn through experience—testing and observing—which strands in the tangle should be pulled in which way, and which strands should be left alone.

If, for example, you’re a doctor in an emergency room faced with a patient complaining of chest pains, you have many quick decisions to make. You have to decide which tests to conduct, which questions to ask the patient, and which physical symptoms to look for, before you can diagnose the pains as a sign of indigestion, an incipient heart attack, or something else entirely. You also have to decide which questions *not* to ask, so as not to get waylaid by extraneous

information. If you focus on the wrong symptoms, the patient might die—or might spend a needless night in the intensive care unit, depriving a patient with a genuine heart attack of a bed. Once you've made your diagnosis, you have to decide which course of treatment to follow and how to keep tabs on that treatment to see if it's really working. If you frame the symptoms in the wrong light, you can do more harm than good. If you frame them in the right light, you can save lives.

The same principle applies in solving the problem of suffering, which is why the Buddha gave prime importance to the ability to frame the issue of suffering in the proper way. He called this ability *yoniso manasikara*—appropriate attention—and taught that no other inner quality was more helpful for untangling suffering and gaining release.

In giving his most detailed explanation of appropriate attention, he starts with examples of inappropriate attention, which center on questions of identity and existence: “Do I exist?” “Do I not?” “What am I?” “Did I exist in the past?” “Will I exist in the future?” These questions are inappropriate because they lead to “a wilderness of views, a thicket of views” such as “I have a self,” or “I have no self,” all of which lead to entanglement, and none to the end of suffering.

In contrast, the Buddha then depicts appropriate attention as the ability to identify that “This is suffering (the Pali word *dukkha* here covers stress and pain as well),” “This is the origination of suffering,” “This is the cessation of suffering,” and “This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of suffering.” These are the four categories that the Buddha, in his first discourse, called the four noble truths. The ability to frame the issue of suffering in line with these categories is what enables you ultimately to put an end to the problem of suffering once and for all. This is why they're appropriate.

The most obvious lesson to be drawn from this way of distinguishing inappropriate from appropriate attention is that inappropriate attention frames the issues of the mind in terms of abstract categories, whereas appropriate attention frames them in terms of things that can be directly pointed to in immediate experience as “This ... This ... This ... This.” Ideas of identity and existence are basic to abstract thinking, and many philosophers have maintained that they lie at the basis of any spiritual quest. The Buddha, however, noted that the thought, “I am the thinker” lies at the root of all the categories and labels of conceptual proliferation, the type of thinking that can turn and attack the person employing it. These categories are notoriously hard to pin down, often dissolving into arbitrary semantics. “Do I exist?”—It depends on what you mean by “exist.” “Do I have a self?”—It depends on what you mean by “self.” Thinking driven by definitions like these often falls prey to the hidden motives or agendas behind the definitions, which means that it's unreliable.

However, suffering is something directly knowable: preverbal, private, but universal. In framing the issues of the mind around suffering, the Buddha bases his teachings on an intention totally trustworthy—the desire for his listeners to put an end to all their suffering—and focuses on something not dependent on definitions. In fact, he never offers a formal definition of the term “suffering” at all. Instead, he illustrates it with examples—such as the suffering of birth, aging, illness, and death—and then points out the functional element that all forms of mental suffering share: clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, mental fabrication, and consciousness. The clinging is not the same as the pain of the suffering, but it’s the aspect of suffering most useful to focus on for the purpose of bringing the suffering to an end.

Although there is a passage where the Buddha defines clinging as desire-passion, he never describes precisely what desire-passion is. When devoting what is apparently the oldest part of the Canon, the Atthaka Vagga, to the topic of clinging, he fills the discussion with puns and word play, a style that discourages systematic attempts at set definitions and the conceptual proliferation they can foster. What this means is that if you want to refine your understanding of clinging, desire-passion, and suffering, you can’t cling to words or texts. You have to look deeper into your present experience.

In pointing repeatedly to direct experience, however, the Buddha doesn’t discourage all thought and concepts. The ability to distinguish the four categories of appropriate attention requires thought and analysis—the type of thought that questions past understandings and misunderstandings, and ponders what’s happening in the present; the type of analysis that can ferret out connections between actions and their results and can evaluate them as to whether they’re helpful or not. There are desires, for instance, that act as a cause of suffering, and other desires that can form part of the path leading to its end. Although the Buddha gives a general outline to tell which kind of desire functions in which way, you have to learn how to watch your own desires carefully and honestly to tell which kind of desire they are.

As you keep analyzing the present under the framework of these four categories, you’re tracing the Buddha’s steps as he approached Awakening. Having focused on clinging as the functional handle on suffering, he looked for the conditions that formed its basis, and found them in three types of craving or thirst: sensual craving, craving for states of being, and craving to destroy states of being. Then he identified the cessation of suffering as total dispassion for, cessation of, and release from those forms of craving. And he identified the mental qualities and practices that would lead to that cessation—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right

mindfulness, and right concentration—all of which, in potential form, can be found in the present moment.

So instead of simply throwing the present moment at you as a monolithic whole, the Buddha points your attention to four significant things you might find there. This is because there's a pattern to the changes we experience from moment to moment. Change is never so random or radical that knowledge gained from the past is useless in the present. Concepts still serve an important purpose even though they may lack the freshness of the immediate here and now. When you stick your finger into fire, it's bound to burn. If you spit into the wind, it's bound to come back at you. Lessons like these are good to keep in mind. Although the patterns underlying suffering may be more tangled than those underlying fire and wind, still they are patterns. They can be learned and mastered, and the four categories of appropriate attention are crucial for getting a handle on those patterns and directing them to suffering's end.

In practical terms, distinguishing among categories is worthwhile only if you have to treat each of the different categories in a different way. A doctor who formulates a theory of sixteen types of headaches only to treat them all with aspirin, for example, is wasting her time. But one who, noting that different types of headaches respond to different types of medications, devises an accurate test to differentiate among the headaches, makes a genuine contribution to medical science. The same principle applies to the categories of appropriate attention. As the Buddha stated in his first account of his Awakening, once he had identified each of the four categories, he saw that each had to be treated in a different way. Suffering had to be comprehended, its cause abandoned, its cessation realized, and the path to its cessation fully developed.

What this means is that, as a meditator, you can't treat everything in the present moment in the same way. You can't simply stay non-reactive, or simply accept everything that comes. If moments of stillness and ease arise in the mind, you can't just note them and let them pass. You should develop them to *jhana*—the full-body pleasure and rapture of right concentration that forms the heart of the path. When mental suffering arises, you can't just let it go. You should focus whatever powers of concentration and discernment you have to try to comprehend the clinging that lies at its heart.

The Buddha expands on this point in the discourses where he shows how appropriate attention should be applied to various aspects of the present. Applied to the five aggregates of form, feeling, and so forth, appropriate attention means viewing them in such a way as to induce a sense of dispassion that will help alleviate clinging. Applied to perceptions of beauty or irritation, it means viewing them in such a way as to keep them from fostering such obstacles to right concentration as sensual desire or ill will. Applied to feelings of serenity

or the potential for rapture, it means viewing them in such a way that helps develop them into factors for Awakening.

Even within a particular category, there's no one approach that works in all cases. In one of his discourses Buddha observes that some unskillful mental states wither away if you simply watch them with equanimity, while others require an active effort to take them apart. In another discourse he expands on this observation by recommending five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts: replacing them with more skillful thoughts, focusing on their drawbacks, consciously ignoring them, relaxing the tension that goes into maintaining them, and forcefully suppressing them. In neither discourse, though, does he give hard and fast rules for telling which type of thought will respond to which approach. You have to find out for yourself by sharpening your discernment through trial and error as to what works and what doesn't in any given situation.

The same principle applies to skillful mental states. The Buddha's final summary of his teachings, the wings to Awakening, lists seven ways of conceiving the path to the end of suffering—in terms of four establishings of mindfulness, four bases for success, four right exertions, five strengths, five faculties, seven factors for Awakening, and the noble eightfold path. And again, it's up to you to learn through trial and error which way of conceiving the path is most useful at any particular time in your practice.

This means that applying appropriate attention to skillful and unskillful mental states is not a one-shot affair. The tasks connected with each of the four categories of appropriate attention all have to be tested through trial and error, and mastered as skills. To borrow an analogy from the Canon, full Awakening is not a matter of picking up a bow and arrow and hoping for a fluke bull's eye. The insight of Awakening comes in the course of practicing on a straw man until you're able "to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses."

As the Buddha noted in his first discourse, he didn't claim to be awakened until he had fully mastered the tasks appropriate to all four categories. In fully developing the factors of the path, he fully comprehended the five clinging aggregates to the point of abandoning all passion and craving for them. That was when he fully realized the end of suffering. With that, the categories of appropriate attention had done their work in solving the problem of suffering, but even then they still had their uses. As the Buddha noted, even a fully awakened arahant would still apply them to experience to provide a pleasant dwelling for the mind in the here and now.

In all of these cases, appropriate attention means seeing things in terms of their function—what they can do—while the act of appropriate attention is itself

a type of doing, adopted for what it can do for the mind. And the test for appropriate attention is that it actually works in helping to put an end to suffering. When we contrast this with the Buddha's examples of inappropriate attention, we see that attention is inappropriate when it frames things in terms of being and identity, and appropriate when framing them in terms of actions and their results. In fact, appropriate attention looks at being itself as an action, with each act of being or assuming an identity to be evaluated by the pleasure or pain it produces. When we look at ourselves with appropriate attention, we focus not on what we *are*, but on what we're *doing*—and in particular on whether what we're doing is unskillful—leading to suffering—or skillful, leading to its end.

This point is important to bear in mind when we reflect on the two criticisms often leveled against the four categories of appropriate attention. The first criticism is that they provide a limited view of the fullness and variety of life, that they don't encompass the virtually infinite number of skillful ways of approaching experience. When formulating a theory of being, you could argue that the more variety it can contain, the better. But when choosing a doctor, you wouldn't want one who insists on exploring an infinite variety of approaches to your disease. You want one who focuses on the approaches most likely to work. The same holds true with appropriate attention. The four categories, with their attendant tasks, are meant not to encompass reality but to focus your attention at the right factors for curing the most basic problem in experience. The Buddha limits his discussion to these four categories because he doesn't want you to get distracted from the problem at hand.

The second criticism is that the four categories are dualistic and thus inferior to a non-dualistic view of the world. Again, when formulating a theory of being, you could argue that a non-dualistic theory would be superior to a dualistic one, on the grounds that a non-dual concept of being is more encompassing than a dualistic one, yielding a more unified theory. But appropriate attention is not a theory of being. It's a guide to what to do in the present moment. Because the present moment is so tangled and complex, the multiple categories offered by appropriate attention are a strength rather than a weakness. Instead of limiting you to one way of understanding and approaching events in the present, they provide you with a more discerning understanding and a wide variety of options for dealing with the tangles and complexities of suffering.

When offering options for solving a problem, no particular number of options is, on principle, superior to any other. What matters is that the options are enough to be adequate for the problem, but not so many as to obscure its solution and become a tangle themselves. In other words, the options are to be judged, not against abstract principles, but by what they enable you to do. And although the Buddha describes his path to the end of suffering as the one form of

doing that ultimately puts an end to doing, as long as you're still doing something in the present moment, appropriate attention ensures that what you're doing stays on the path. And once the path is developed to the point where it can untangle the problem of suffering, everything else gets untangled as well.

Pushing the Limits

Desire & Imagination in the Buddhist Path

All phenomena, the Buddha once said, are rooted in desire. Everything we think, say, or do—every experience—comes from desire. Even *we* come from desire. We were reborn into this life because of our desire to be. Consciously or not, our desires keep redefining our sense of who we are. Desire is how we take our place in the causal matrix of space and time. The only thing not rooted in desire is nirvana, for it's the end of all phenomena and lies even beyond the Buddha's use of the word "all." But the path that takes you to nirvana *is* rooted in desire—in skillful desires. The path to liberation pushes the limits of skillful desires to see how far they can go.

The notion of a skillful desire may sound strange, but a mature mind intuitively pursues the desires it sees as skillful and drops those it perceives as not. Basic in everyone is the desire for happiness. Every other desire is a strategy for attaining that happiness. You want an iPod, a sexual partner, or an experience of inner peace because you think it will make you happy. Because these secondary desires are strategies, they follow a pattern. They spring from an inchoate feeling of lack and limitation; they employ your powers of perception to identify the cause of the limitation; and they use your powers of creative imagination to conceive a solution to it.

But despite their common pattern, desires are not monolithic. Each offers a different perception of what's lacking in life, together with a different picture of what the solution should be. A desire for a sandwich comes from a perception of physical hunger and proposes to solve it with a Swiss-on-rye. A desire to climb a mountain focuses on a different set of hungers—for accomplishment, exhilaration, self-mastery—and appeals to a different image of satisfaction. Whatever the desire, if the solution actually leads to happiness, the desire is skillful. If it doesn't, it's not. However, what seems to be a skillful desire may lead only to a false or transitory happiness not worth the effort entailed. So wisdom starts as a meta-desire: to learn how to recognize skillful and unskillful desires for what they actually are.

Unskillful desires can create suffering in a variety of ways. Sometimes they aim at the impossible: not to grow old or die. Sometimes they focus on possibilities that require distasteful means—such as lying or cheating to get

ahead in your job. Or the goal, when you get it, may not really keep you happy. Even the summit of Everest can be a disappointment. Even when it's not, you can't stay there forever. When you leave, you're left with nothing but memories, which can shift and fade. If you did mean or hurtful things to get there, their memory can burn away any pleasure that memories of the summit might hold.

In addition, desires often pull in opposite directions. Your desire for sex, for instance, can get in the way of your desire for peace. In fact, conflict among desires is what alerts us to how painful desire can be. It's also what has taught each desire how to speak, to persuade, to argue or bully its way into power. And just because a desire is skillful doesn't mean it's more skillful at arguing its case than the unskillful ones, for those can often be the most intransigent, the most strident, the slickest in having their way. This means that wisdom has to learn how to strategize, too, to strengthen skillful desires so that less skillful desires will listen to them. That way desires can be trained to work together toward greater happiness. This is how a mature and healthy mind works: conducting a dialogue not so much between reason and desire as between responsible desires and irresponsible ones.

But even in a mature mind, the dialogue often yields compromises that don't really go to the heart: snatches of sensual pleasure, glimpses of spiritual peace, nothing really satisfying and whole. Some people, growing impatient with compromise, turn a deaf ear to prudent desires and tune into demands for instant gratification—all the sex, power, and money they can grab. But when the rampage of gratification wears itself out, the damage can take lifetimes to set right. Other people try their best to accept the compromise among desires, trying to find a measure of peace in not reaching for what they see as impossible. But this peace, too, depends on a deaf inner ear, denying the underlying truth of all desires: that a life of endless limitations is intolerable.

Both sorts of people share a common assumption that true, unlimited happiness lies beyond reach. Their imaginations are so stunted that they can't even conceive of what a true, unlimited happiness in this lifetime would be.

What made the Buddha special was that he never lowered his expectations. He imagined the ultimate happiness—one so free from limit and lack that it would leave no need for further desire—and then treasured his desire for that happiness as his highest priority. Bringing all his other desires into dialogue with it, he explored various strategies until finding one that actually attained that unlimited goal. This strategy became his most basic teaching: the four noble truths.

Most of us, when looking at the four noble truths, don't realize that they're all about desire. We're taught that the Buddha gave only one role to desire—as the cause of suffering. Because he says to abandon the cause of suffering, it sounds

like he's denying any positive role to desire and its constructive companions: creativity, imagination, and hope. This perception, though, misses two important points. The first is that all four truths speak to the basic dynamic of desire on its own terms: perception of lack and limitation, the imagination of a solution, and a strategy for attaining it. The first truth teaches the basic lack and limitation in our lives—the clinging that constitutes suffering—while the second truth points to the types of desires that lead to clinging: desires for sensuality, becoming, and annihilation. The third truth expands our imagination to encompass the possibility that clinging can be totally overcome. The fourth truth, the path to the end of suffering, shows how to strategize so as to overcome clinging by abandoning its cause.

The second point that's often missed is that the noble truths give two roles to desire, depending on whether it's skillful or not. Unskillful desire is the cause of suffering; skillful desire forms part of the path to its cessation. Skillful desire undercuts unskillful desire, not by repressing it, but by producing greater and greater levels of satisfaction and well-being so that unskillful desire has no place to stand. This strategy of skillful desire is explicit in the path factor of right effort:

“What is right effort? There is the case where a monk (here meaning any meditator) generates desire, endeavors, arouses persistence, upholds and exerts his intent for the sake of the non-arising of evil, unskillful mental qualities that have not yet arisen ... for the sake of the abandoning of evil, unskillful qualities that have arisen ... for the sake of the arising of skillful qualities that have not yet arisen ... for the maintenance, non-confusion, increase, plenitude, development, and culmination of skillful qualities that have arisen. This is called right effort.” (DN 22)

As this formula shows, the crucial elements for replacing unskillful mental qualities with skillful ones are desire, persistence, and intent. Desire gives the initial impetus and focus for right effort, while persistence provides staying power. Intent is the most complex factor of the three. The Pali word here, *citta*, also means “mind,” and in this context it means giving your whole mind to the work at hand: all your powers of sensitivity, intelligence, discernment, and ingenuity. You don't want your mind to be split on this issue; you want all of its powers working together on the same side.

These three qualities—desire, persistence, and intent—underlie every attempt to master a skill. So it's useful, in undertaking the path, to reflect on how you've used these qualities to master skills in the past. The Buddha made this point in his many similes comparing the person on the path to a master craftsman—a musician, carpenter, surgeon, acrobat, cook. As with any skill, there are many steps to developing the path, but four stand out.

The first is to use your ingenuity to fight off the chorus of inner voices trying to dissuade you from making the effort to be skillful in the first place. These voices are like devious lawyers representing strongly entrenched interests: all your threatened unskillful desires. You have to be quick and alert in countering their arguments, for they can come from all sides, sounding honest and wise even though they're not. Here are some of the arguments these voices may propose, along with a few effective responses:

Trying to manipulate your desires like this is unnatural. Actually, you're already manipulating your desires all the time, when you choose one desire over another, so you might as well learn to do it skillfully. And there are plenty of people out there only too happy to manipulate your desires for you—think of all the advertisements clamoring for your attention—so it's better to put the manipulation in more trustworthy hands: your own.

Trying to change your desires is an attack on your very self. This argument works only if you give your sense of self—which is really just a grab bag of desires—more solidity than it deserves. You can turn the argument on its head by noting that since your “self” is a perpetually changing line-up of strategies for happiness, you might as well try changing it in a direction more likely to achieve true happiness.

To think of “skillful” and “unskillful” desires is dualistic and judgmental. You don't want non-dualistic mechanics working on your car, or non-dualistic surgeons operating on your brain. You want people who can tell what's skillful from what's not. If you really value your happiness, you'll demand the same discernment in the person most responsible for it: yourself.

It's too goal-oriented. Just accept things as they are in the present. Every desire tells you that things in the present are limited and lacking. You either accept the desire or accept the lack. To accept both at once is to deny that either has any real truth. To try to dwell peacefully in the tension between the two—in a “path of no craving” to be rid of either—is what the Buddha called limited equanimity, and what one Thai forest master called the equanimity of a cow.

It's a futile attempt to resist such a divine and mysterious power. Desire seems overwhelming and mysterious simply because we don't know our minds. And where would we be if we kept slapping the term “divine” or “cosmic” on forces we didn't understand?

Arguing with unskillful desires is too much work. Consider the alternative: an endless wandering from one set of limitations to another, continually seeking happiness and yet finding it always slipping from your grasp, repeatedly taking a stance for one desire one moment and shifting to another desire the next. Right effort at least gives you one steady place to stand. It's not adding a more

demanding desire to the chaotic mix; it's offering a way to sort out the mess. And the Buddha's path holds open the hope of an unlimited happiness, preceded by increasingly refined and reliable levels of happiness all along the path. In short, his alternative is actually the one that's more enjoyable and involves less work.

Once you've silenced these voices, the next step is to take responsibility for your actions and their consequences. This requires being willing to learn from your mistakes. Several years ago, a sociologist studied students in a neurosurgery program to see what qualities separated those who succeeded from those who failed. He found ultimately that two questions in his interviews pointed to the crucial difference. He would ask the students, "Do you ever make mistakes? If so, what is the worst mistake you've ever made?" Those who failed the program would inevitably answer that they rarely made mistakes or else would blame their mistakes on factors beyond their control. Those who succeeded in the program not only admitted to many mistakes but also volunteered information on what they would do not to repeat those mistakes in the future.

The Buddha encouraged this same mature attitude in his first instructions to his son, Rahula. He told Rahula to focus on his intentions before acting, and on the results of his actions both while he was doing them and after they were done. If Rahula saw that his intentions would lead to harm for himself or others, he shouldn't act on them. If he saw that his thoughts, words, or deeds actually produced harm, he should stop them and resolve never to repeat them, without at the same time falling into remorse. If, on the other hand, he saw no harmful consequences from his actions, he should take joy in his progress on the path, and use that joy to nourish his continued practice.

Although the Buddha aimed these instructions at a seven-year-old child, the pattern they outline informs every level of the practice. The whole path to awakening consists of sticking to the desire always to do the most skillful thing; it develops as your sense of "skillful" gets more refined. If you act on an unskillful desire, take responsibility for the consequences, using them to educate that desire as to where it went wrong. Although desires can be remarkably stubborn, they share a common goal—happiness—and this can form the common ground for an effective dialogue: If a desire doesn't really produce happiness, it contradicts its reason for being.

The best way to make this point is to keep tracing the thread from the desire to its resulting actions, and from the actions to their consequences. If the desire aimed at a happiness that caused suffering to others, notice how their corresponding desire for happiness leads them to undermine the happiness you sought. If the desire aimed at a happiness based on things that can age, grow ill,

die, or leave you, notice how that fact sets you up for a fall. Then notice how the distress that comes from acting on this sort of desire is universal. It's not just you. Everyone who has acted, is acting, or will act on that desire has suffered in the past, is suffering right now, and will suffer in the future. There's no way around it.

Reflecting this way helps to weaken the "why me?" tendency that aggravates suffering and makes you cling fiercely to the desire causing it. It also helps develop two important attitudes that strengthen skillful desires: a sense of dismay (*samvega*) over the universality of suffering, and an attitude of heedfulness (*appamada*) to avoid being duped by that particular type of desire again.

Unskillful desires don't really give way, though, until you can show that other, less troublesome desires actually can produce greater happiness. This is why the Buddha emphasizes learning how to appreciate the rewards of a virtuous, generous life: the joy in fostering the happiness of others, the solid dignity and self-worth in doing the hard but the right thing. It's also why his path centers on states of blissful, refreshing concentration. Accessing this refreshment in your meditation gives you immediate, visceral proof that the Buddha was no killjoy. The desires he recommends really do produce a happiness that can give you the strength to keep on choosing the skillful path.

That's the next step: patiently and persistently sticking with the desire to do the skillful thing in all situations. This isn't a matter of sheer effort. As any good sports coach will tell you, hours of practice don't necessarily guarantee results. You have to combine your persistence with intent: sensitivity, discernment, ingenuity. Keep an eye out for how to do things more efficiently. Try to see patterns in what you do. At the same time, introduce play and variety into your practice so that the plateaus don't get boring, and the downs don't get you down.

The Buddha makes similar points in his meditation instructions. Once you've mastered a state of concentration, see where it still contains elements of stress. Then look for patterns to that stress: what are you doing to cause it? Find ways to gladden the mind when it's down, to liberate it from its confinements, to steady it when it gets restless. In this way, as you learn to enjoy rising to the challenges of meditation, you also gain familiarity with subtle patterns of cause and effect in the mind.

The fourth step, once you've mastered those patterns, is to push their limits. Again, this isn't simply a matter of increased effort. It's more a rekindling of your imagination to explore the unexpected side-alleys of cause and effect. A famous cellist once said that his most exhilarating concert was one in which he broke a string on his cello and decided to finish the piece he was playing on the remaining strings, refingering it on the spot. The most obvious strings in

meditation are the specific techniques for fostering stillness and insight, but the more interesting ones are the assumptions that underlie the quest for skill: lack, strategy, dialogue, your sense of self. Can you learn to do without them? There comes a point in your meditation when the only way for greater happiness is to begin questioning these assumptions. And this leads to some intriguing paradoxes: If desire springs from a sense of lack or limitation, what happens to desire when it produces a happiness with no lack or limitation at all? What's it like not to need desire? What would happen to your inner dialogue, your sense of self? And if desire is how you take your place in space and time, what happens to space and time when desire is absent?

The Buddha encouraged these queries by describing the awakened person as so undefined and unlimited that he or she couldn't be located in the present life or be described after this life as existing, not existing, neither, or both. This may sound like an abstract and unreachable goal, but the Buddha demonstrated its human face in the example of his person. Having pushed past the limits of cause and effect, he was still able to function admirably within them, in this life, happy in even the most difficult circumstances, compassionately teaching people of every sort. And there's his testimony that not only monks and nuns, but also lay people—even children—had developed their skillful desires to the point where they gained a taste of awakening as well.

So imagine that. And listen to any desire that would take you in that direction, for that's your path to true happiness.

All About Change

Change is the focal point for Buddhist insight—a fact so well known that it has spawned a familiar sound bite: “Isn’t change what Buddhism is all about?” What’s less well known is that this focus has a frame, that change is neither where insight begins nor where it ends. Insight begins with a question that evaluates change in light of the desire for true happiness. It ends with a happiness that lies beyond change. When this frame is forgotten, people create their own contexts for the teaching and often assume that the Buddha was operating within those same contexts. Two of the contexts commonly attributed to the Buddha at present are these:

Insight into change teaches us to embrace our experiences without clinging to them—to get the most out of them in the present moment by fully appreciating their intensity, in full knowledge that we will soon have to let them go to embrace whatever comes next.

Insight into change teaches us hope. Because change is built into the nature of things, nothing is inherently fixed, not even our own identity. No matter how bad the situation, anything is possible. We can do whatever we want to do, create whatever world we want to live in, and become whatever we want to be.

The first of these interpretations offers wisdom on how to consume the pleasures of immediate, personal experience when you’d rather they not change; the second, on how to produce change when you want it. Although sometimes presented as complementary insights, these interpretations contain a practical conflict: If experiences are so fleeting and changeable, are they worth the effort needed to produce them? How can we find genuine hope in the prospect of positive change if we can’t fully rest in the results when they arrive? Aren’t we just setting ourselves up for disappointment?

Or is this just one of the unavoidable paradoxes of life? Ancient folk wisdom from many cultures would suggest so, advising us that we should approach change with cautious joy and stoic equanimity: training ourselves to not get attached to the results of our actions, and accepting without question the need to keep on producing fleeting pleasures as best we can, for the only alternative would be inaction and despair. This viewpoint, too, is often attributed to the Buddha.

But the Buddha was not the sort of person to accept things without question. His wisdom lay in realizing that the effort that goes into the production of happiness is worthwhile only if the processes of change can be skillfully managed to arrive at a happiness resistant to change. Otherwise, we're life-long prisoners in a forced-labor camp, compelled to keep on producing pleasurable experiences to assuage our hunger, and yet finding them so empty of any real essence that they can never leave us full.

These realizations are implicit in the question that, according to the Buddha, lies at the beginning of insight:

“What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term well-being and happiness?”

This is a heartfelt question, motivated by the desire behind all action: to attain levels of pleasure worthy of the effort that goes into them. It springs from the realization that life requires effort, and that if we aren't careful whole lifetimes can be lived in vain. This question, together with the realizations and desires behind it, provides the context for the Buddha's perspective on change. If we examine it closely, we find the seeds for all his insights into the production and consumption of change.

The first phrase in the question—“What, when I do it, will lead to” — focuses on the issues of production, on the potential effects of human action. Prior to his Awakening, the Buddha had left home and gone into the wilderness to explore precisely this issue: to see how far human action could go, and whether it could lead to a dimension beyond the reach of change. His Awakening was confirmation that it could—if developed to the appropriate level of skillfulness. He thus taught that there are four types of action, corresponding to four levels of skill: three that produce pleasant, unpleasant, and mixed experiences within the cycles of space and time; and a fourth that leads beyond action to a level of happiness transcending the dimensions of space and time, thus eliminating the need to produce any further happiness.

Because the activities of producing and consuming require space and time, a happiness transcending space and time, by its very nature, is neither produced nor consumed. Thus, when the Buddha reached that happiness and stepped outside the modes of producing and consuming, he was able to turn back and see exactly how pervasive a role these activities play in ordinary experience, and how imprisoning they normally are. He saw that our experience of the present is an activity—something fabricated or produced, moment to moment, from the raw material provided by past actions. We even fabricate our identity, our sense of who we are. At the same time, we try to consume any pleasure that can be found in what we've produced—although in our desire to consume pleasure, we often gobble down pain. With every moment, production and consumption are

intertwined: We consume experiences as we produce them, and produce them as we consume. The way we consume our pleasures or pains can produce further pleasures or pains, now and into the future, depending on how skillful we are.

The three parts of the latter phrase in the Buddha's question—"my / long-term / well-being and happiness"—provide standards for gauging the level of our skill in approaching true pleasure or happiness. (The Pali word, here—*sukha*—can be translated as pleasure, happiness, ease, or bliss.) We apply these standards to the experiences we consume: if they aren't long-term, then no matter how pleasant they might be, they aren't true happiness. If they're not true happiness, there's no reason to claim them as "mine."

This insight forms the basis for the Three Characteristics that the Buddha taught for inducing a sense of dispassion for normal time- and space-bound experience. *Anicca*, the first of the three, is pivotal. *Anicca* applies to everything that changes. Often translated as "impermanent," it's actually the negative of *nicca*, which means constant or dependable. Everything that changes is inconstant. Now, the difference between "impermanent" and "inconstant" may seem semantic, but it's crucial to the way *anicca* functions in the Buddha's teachings. As the early texts state repeatedly, if something is *anicca* then the other two characteristics automatically follow: it's *dukkha* (stressful) and *anatta* (not-self), i.e., not worthy to be claimed as me or mine.

If we translate *anicca* as impermanent, the connection among these Three Characteristics might seem debatable. But if we translate it as inconstant, and consider the Three Characteristics in light of the Buddha's original question, the connection is clear. If you're seeking a dependable basis for long-term happiness and ease, anything inconstant is obviously a stressful place to pin your hopes—like trying to relax in an unstable chair whose legs are liable to break at any time. If you understand that your sense of self is something willed and fabricated—that you *choose* to create it—there's no compelling reason to keep creating a "me" or "mine" around any experience that's inconstant and stressful. You want something better. You don't want to make that experience the goal of your practice.

So what do you do with experiences that are inconstant and stressful? You could treat them as worthless and throw them away, but that would be wasteful. After all, you went to the trouble to fabricate them in the first place; and, as it turns out, the only way you can reach the goal is by utilizing experiences of just this sort. So you can learn how to use them as means to the goal; and the role they can play in serving that purpose is determined by the type of activity that went into producing them: the type that produces a pleasure conducive to the goal, or the type that doesn't. Those that do, the Buddha labeled the "path." These activities include acts of generosity, acts of virtue, and the practice of

mental absorption, or concentration. Even though they fall under the Three Characteristics, these activities produce a sense of pleasure relatively stable and secure, more deeply gratifying and nourishing than the act of producing and consuming ordinary sensual pleasures. So if you're aiming at happiness within the cycles of change, you should look to generosity, virtue, and mental absorption to produce that happiness. But if you'd rather aim for a happiness going beyond change, these same activities can still help you by fostering the clarity of mind needed for Awakening. Either way, they're worth mastering as skills. They're your basic set of tools, so you want to keep them in good shape and ready to hand.

As for other pleasures and pains—such as those involved in sensual pursuits and in simply having a body and mind—these can serve as the objects you fashion with your tools, as raw materials for the discernment leading to Awakening. By carefully examining them in light of their Three Characteristics—to see exactly *how* they're inconstant, stressful, and not-self—you become less inclined to keep on producing and consuming them. You see that your addictive compulsion to fabricate them comes entirely from the hunger and ignorance embodied in states of passion, aversion, and delusion. When these realizations give rise to dispassion both for fabricated experiences and for the processes of fabrication, you enter the path of the fourth kind of kamma, leading to the Deathless.

This path contains two important turns. The first comes when all passion and aversion for sensual pleasures and pains has been abandoned, and your only remaining attachment is to the pleasure of concentration. At this point, you turn and examine the pleasure of concentration in terms of the same Three Characteristics you used to contemplate sensual experiences. The difficulty here is that you've come to rely so strongly on the solidity of your concentration that you'd rather not look for its drawbacks. At the same time, the inconstancy of a concentrated mind is much more subtle than that of sensual experiences. But once you overcome your unwillingness to look for that inconstancy, the day is sure to come when you detect it. And then the mind can be inclined to the Deathless.

That's where the second turn occurs. As the texts point out, when the mind encounters the Deathless it can treat it as a mind-object—a *dhamma*—and then produce a feeling of passion and delight for it. The fabricated sense of the self that's producing and consuming this passion and delight thus gets in the way of full Awakening. So at this point the logic of the Three Characteristics has to take a new turn. Their original logic—"Whatever is inconstant is stressful; whatever is stressful is not-self"—leaves open the possibility that whatever is constant could be (1) easeful and (2) self. The first possibility is in fact the case: whatever is

constant *is* easeful; the Deathless is actually the ultimate ease. But the second possibility isn't a skillful way of regarding what's constant: if you latch onto what's constant as self, you're stuck on your attachment. To go beyond space and time, you have to go beyond fabricating the producing and consuming self, which is why the concluding insight of the path is: "All dhammas" — constant or not — "are not-self."

When this insight has done its work in overcoming any passion or delight for the Deathless, full Awakening occurs. And at that point, even the path is relinquished, and the Deathless remains, although no longer as an object of the mind. It's simply there, radically prior to and separate from the fabrication of space and time. All consuming and producing for the sake of your own happiness comes to an end, for a timeless wellbeing has been found. And because all mind-objects are abandoned in this happiness, questions of constant or inconstant, stress or ease, self or not-self are no longer an issue.

This, then, is the context of Buddhist insight into change: an approach that takes seriously both the potential effects of human effort and the basic human desire that effort not go to waste, that change have the potential to lead to a happiness beyond the reach of change. This insight is focused on developing the skills that lead to the production of genuine happiness. It employs the Three Characteristics—of inconstancy, stress, and not-self—not as abstract statements about existence, but as inducement for mastering those skills and as guidelines for measuring your progress along the way. When used in this way, the Three Characteristics lead to a happiness transcending the Three Characteristics, the activities of producing and consuming, and space and time as a whole.

When we understand this context for the Three Characteristics, we can clearly see the half-truths contained in the insights on the production and consumption of change that are commonly misattributed to the Buddha. With regard to production: Although it may be true that, with enough patience and persistence, we can produce just about anything from the raw material of the present moment, including an amazing array of self-identities, the question is: what's *worth* producing? We've imprisoned ourselves with our obsession for producing and consuming changeable pleasures and changeable selves, and yet there's the possibility of using change to escape from this prison to the freedom of a happiness transcending time and space. Do we want to take advantage of that possibility, or would we rather spend our spare hours blowing bubbles in the sunlight coming through our prison windows and trying to derive happiness from their swirling patterns before they burst?

This question ties in with wisdom on consumption: Getting the most out of our changing experiences doesn't mean embracing them or milking them of their intensity. Instead it means learning to approach the pleasures and pains they

offer, not as fleeting ends in themselves, but as tools for Awakening. With every moment we're supplied with raw materials—some of them attractive, some of them not. Instead of embracing them in delight or throwing them away in disgust, we can learn how to use them to produce the keys that will unlock our prison doors.

And as for the wisdom of non-attachment to the results of our actions: in the Buddha's context, this notion can make sense only if we care deeply about the results of our actions and want to master the processes of cause and effect that lead to genuine freedom. In other words, we don't demand childishly that our actions—skillful or not—always result in immediate happiness, that everything we stick into the lock will automatically unlatch the door. If what we have done has been unskillful and led to undesirable results, we want to admit our mistakes and find out *why* they were mistakes so that we can learn how to correct them the next time around. Only when we have the patience to look objectively at the results of our actions will we be able to learn, by studying the keys that don't unlock the doors, how finally to make the right keys that do.

With this attitude we can make the most of the processes of change to develop the skill that releases us from the prison of endless producing and consuming. With release, we plunge into the freedom of a happiness so true that it transcends the terms of the original question that led us there. There's nothing further we have to do; our sense of "my" and "mine" is discarded; and even the "long-term," which implies time, is erased by the timeless. The happiness remaining lies radically beyond the range of our time- and space-bound conceptions of happiness. Totally independent of mind-objects, it's unadulterated and unalterable, unlimited and pure. As the texts tell us, it even lies beyond the range of "totality" and "the All."

And that's what Buddhist practice is all about.

The Roots of Buddhist Romanticism

Many Westerners, when new to Buddhism, are struck by the uncanny familiarity of what seem to be its central concepts: interconnectedness, wholeness, ego-transcendence. But what they may not realize is that the concepts sound familiar because they *are* familiar. To a large extent, they come not from the Buddha's teachings but from the Dharma gate of Western psychology, through which the Buddha's words have been filtered. They draw less from the root sources of the Dharma than from their own hidden roots in Western culture: the thought of the German Romantics.

The German Romantics may be dead and almost forgotten, but their ideas are still very much alive. Their thought has survived because they were the first to tackle the problem of how it *feels* to grow up in a modern society. Their analysis of the problem, together with their proposed solution, still rings true.

Modern society, they saw, is dehumanizing in that it denies human beings their wholeness. The specialization of labor leads to feelings of fragmentation and isolation; the bureaucratic state, to feelings of regimentation and constriction. The only cure for these feelings, the Romantics proposed, is the creative artistic act. This act integrates the divided self and dissolves its boundaries in an enlarged sense of identity and interconnectedness with other human beings and nature at large. Human beings are most fully human when free to create spontaneously from the heart. The heart's creations are what allow people to connect. Although many Romantics regarded religious institutions and doctrines as dehumanizing, some of them turned to religious experience—a direct feeling of oneness with the whole of nature—as a primary source for re-humanization.

When psychology and psychotherapy developed as disciplines in the West, they absorbed many of the Romantics' ideas and broadcast them into the culture at large. As a result, concepts such as integration of the personality, self-fulfillment, and interconnectedness, together with the healing powers of wholeness, spontaneity, playfulness, and fluidity have long been part of the air we breathe. So has the idea that religion is primarily a quest for a feeling-experience, and religious doctrines are a creative response to that experience.

In addition to influencing psychology, these conceptions inspired liberal Christianity and reform Judaism, which proposed that traditional doctrines had to be creatively recast to speak to each new generation in order to keep religious experience vital and alive. So it was only natural that when the Dharma came

west, people interpreted it in line with these conceptions as well. Asian teachers—many of whom had absorbed Romantic ideas through Westernized education before coming here—found they could connect with Western audiences by stressing themes of spontaneity and fluidity in opposition to the “bureaucracy of the ego.” Western students discovered that they could relate to the doctrine of dependent co-arising when it was interpreted as a variation on interconnectedness; and they could embrace the doctrine of not-self as a denial of the separate self in favor of a larger, more encompassing identity with the entire cosmos.

In fact, the Romantic view of religious life has shaped more than just isolated Dharma teachings. It colors the Western view of the purpose of Dharma practice as a whole. Western teachers from all traditions maintain that the aim of Buddhist practice is to gain the creative fluidity that overcomes dualities. As one author has put it, the Buddha taught that “dissolving the barriers that we erect between ourselves and the world is the best use of our human lives ...[Egolessness] manifests as inquisitiveness, as adaptability, as humor, as playfulness... our capacity to relax with not knowing.” Or as another has said, “When our identity expands to include everything, we find a peace with the dance of the world.” Adds a third: “Our job for the rest of our life is to open up into that immensity and to express it.”

Just as the Chinese had Taoism as their Dharma gate—the home-grown tradition providing concepts that helped them understand the Dharma—we in the West have Romanticism as ours. The Chinese experience with Dharma gates, though, contains an important lesson that is often overlooked. After three centuries of interest in Buddhist teachings, they began to realize that Buddhism and Taoism were asking different questions. As they rooted out these differences, they started using Buddhist ideas to question their Taoist presuppositions. This was how Buddhism, instead of turning into a drop in the Taoist sea, was able to inject something genuinely new into Chinese culture. The question here in the West is whether we will learn from the Chinese example and start using Buddhist ideas to question our Dharma gate, to see exactly how far the similarities between the gate and the actual Dharma go. If we don’t, we run the danger of mistaking the gate for the Dharma itself, and of never going through it to the other side.

Taken broadly, Romanticism and the Dharma view spiritual life in a similar light. Both regard religion as a product of human activity, rather than divine intervention. Both regard the essence of religion as experiential and pragmatic; and its role as therapeutic, aimed at curing the diseases of the human mind. But if you examine the historical roots of both traditions, you find that they disagree

sharply not only on the nature of religious experience, but also on the nature of the mental diseases it can treat and on the nature of what it means to be cured.

These differences aren't just historical curiosities. They shape the presuppositions that meditators bring to the practice. Even when fully present, the mind carries along its past presuppositions, using them to judge which experiences—if any—should be valued. This is one of the implications of the Buddhist doctrine on karma. As long as these presuppositions remain unexamined, they hold an unknown power. So to break that power, we need to examine the roots of the Buddhist Romanticism—the Dharma as seen through the Romantic gate. And for the examination to jibe with Buddhist ideas of causality, we have to look for those roots in two directions: *into the past* for the origin of Romantic ideas, and *into the present* for the conditions that keep Romantic ideas attractive in the here and now.

The Romantics took their original inspiration from an unexpected source: Kant, the wizened old professor whose daily walks were so punctual that his neighbors could set their clocks by him. In his *Critique of Judgment* he taught that aesthetic creation and feeling were the highest activities of the human mind, in that they alone could heal the dichotomies of human experience. Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805), perhaps the most influential Romantic philosopher, elaborated on this thesis with his notion of the aesthetic “play drive” as the ultimate expression of human freedom, beyond both the compulsions of animal existence and the laws of reason, bringing both into integration. Man, he said, “is fully a human being only when he plays.”

In Schiller's eyes, this play drive not only integrated the self, but also helped dissolve one's separation from other human beings and the natural environment as a whole. A person with the internal freedom needed for self-integration would instinctively want others to experience the same freedom as well. This connection explains the Romantic political program of offering help and sympathy for the oppressed of all nations in overthrowing their oppressors. The value of internal unity, in their eyes, was proven by its ability to create bonds of unity in the world of social and political action.

Schiller saw the process of integration as unending: perfect unity could never be achieved. A meaningful life was one continually engaged in the *process* of integration. The path was the goal.

It was also totally unpatterned and unconstrained. Given the free nature of the play drive, each person's path to integration was individual and unique.

Schiller's colleague, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834), applied these ideas to religion, concluding that it, like any other art form, was a human creation, and that its greatest function lay in healing the splits both within the human

personality and in human society at large. He defined the essence of religion as “the sensibility and taste for the infinite,” which begins in the receptive mind state where awareness opens to the infinite. This feeling for the infinite is followed by an act of the creative imagination, which articulates that feeling to oneself and others. Because these creative acts—and thus all religious doctrines—are a step removed from the reality of the experience, they are constantly open to improvement and change.

A few quotations from his essays, *On Religion*, will give a sense of Schleiermacher’s thought.

“The individual is not just part of a whole, but an exhibition of it. The mind, like the universe is creative, not just receptive. Whoever has learned to be more than himself knows that he loses little when he loses himself. Rather than align themselves with a belief of personal immortality after death, the truly religious would prefer to strive to annihilate their personality and live in the one and in the all.”

“Where is religion chiefly to be sought? Where the living contact of a human being with the world fashions itself as feeling. Truly religious people are tolerant of different translations of this feeling, even the hesitation of atheism. Not to have the divine immediately present in one’s feelings has always seemed to them more irreligious than such a hesitation. To insist on one particular conception of the divine to be true is far from religion.”

Schiller and Schleiermacher both had a strong influence on Ralph Waldo Emerson, which can easily be seen in the latter’s writings. We’re sometimes told that Emerson was influenced by Eastern religions, but actually his readings in Buddhism and Hinduism simply provided chapter and verse for the lessons he had already learned from the European Romantics.

“Bring the past into the 1000-eyed present and live ever in a new day. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do. The essence of genius, of virtue, and of life is what is called Spontaneity or Instinct. Every man knows that to his involuntary perceptions a perfect faith is due.”

“The reason why the world lacks unity is because man is disunited with himself.... We live in succession, in division, in parts, in particles. Meanwhile, within man is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related, the eternal One. And this deep power in which we exist, and whose beatitude is all accessible to us, is not only self-sufficing and perfect in every hour, but the act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one.”

At present, the Romantics and Transcendentalists are rarely read outside of literature or theology classes. Their ideas have lived on in the general culture largely because they were adopted by the discipline of psychology and translated into a vocabulary that was both more scientific and more accessible to the public at large. One of the most crucial translators was William James, who gave the psychological study of religion its modern form a century ago, in 1902, with the publication of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. James' broad sympathies extended beyond Western culture to include Buddhism and Hinduism, and beyond the "acceptable" religions of his time to include the Mental Culture movement, the 19th century's version of the New Age. His interest in diversity makes him seem amazingly post-modern.

Still, James was influenced by the intellectual currents alive in his time, which shaped the way he converted his large mass of data into a psychology of religion. Although he spoke as a scientist, the current with the deepest influence on his thought was Romanticism.

He followed the Romantics in saying that the function of religious experience was to heal the sense of "divided self," creating a more integrated self-identity better able to function in society. However, to be scientific, the psychology of religion must not side for or against any truth claims concerning the content of religious experiences. For instance, many religious experiences produce a strong conviction in the oneness of the cosmos as a whole. Although scientific observers should accept the *feeling* of oneness as a fact, they shouldn't take it as proof that the cosmos is indeed one. Instead, they should judge each experience by its effects on the personality. James was not disturbed by the many mutually contradictory truth-claims that religious experiences have produced over the centuries. In his eyes, different temperaments need different truths as medicine to heal their psychological wounds.

Drawing on Methodism to provide two categories for classifying all religious experiences—conversion and sanctification—James gave a Romantic interpretation to both. For the Methodists, these categories applied specifically to the soul's relationship to God. Conversion was the turning of the soul to God's will; sanctification, the attunement of the soul to God's will in all its actions. To apply these categories to other religions, James removed the references to God, leaving a more Romantic definition: conversion unifies the personality; sanctification represents the on-going integration of that unification into daily life.

Also, James followed the Romantics in judging the effects of both types of experiences in this-worldly terms. Conversion experiences are healthy when they foster healthy sanctification: the ability to maintain one's integrity in the rough and tumble of daily life, acting as a moral and responsible member of human

society. In psychological terms, James saw conversion as simply an extreme example of the breakthroughs ordinarily encountered in adolescence. And he agreed with the Romantics that personal integration was a process to be pursued throughout life, rather than a goal to be achieved.

Other writers who took up the psychology of religion after James devised a more scientific vocabulary to analyze their data. Still, they maintained many of the Romantic notions that James had introduced into the field.

For example, in *Modern Man in Search of a Soul* (1933), Carl Jung agreed that religion's proper role lay in healing of divisions within the personality, although he saw the same basic split in everyone: the narrow, fearful ego *vs.* the wiser, more spacious unconscious. Thus he regarded religion as a primitive form of psychotherapy. In fact, he actually lay closer than James to the Romantics in his definition of psychic health. Quoting Schiller's assertion that human beings are most human when they are at play, Jung saw the cultivation of spontaneity and fluidity both as a means for integrating the divided personality and as an expression of the healthy personality engaged in the unending process of integration, internal and external, throughout life.

Unlike James, Jung saw the integrated personality as lying above the rigid confines of morality. And, although he didn't use the term, he extolled what Keats called "negative capability": the ability to deal comfortably with uncertainties and mysteries without trying to impose confining certainties on them. Thus Jung recommended borrowing from religions any teachings that assist the process of integration, while rejecting any teachings that would inhibit the spontaneity of the integrated self.

In *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (1970), Abraham Maslow, the American "father of transpersonal psychology," divided religious experiences into the same two categories used by James. But in an attempt to divorce these categories from any particular tradition, he named them after the shape they would assume if graphed over time: peak-experiences and plateau-experiences. These terms have now entered the common vernacular. Peak-experiences are short-lived feelings of oneness and integration that can come, not only in the area of religion, but also in sport, sex, and art. Plateau-experiences exhibit a more stable sense of integration and last much longer.

Maslow had little use for traditional interpretations of peak experiences, regarding them as cultural overlays that obscured the true nature of the experience. Assuming all peak experiences, regardless of cause or context, to be basically the same, he reduced them to their common psychological features, such as feelings of wholeness, dichotomy-transcendence, playfulness, and effortlessness. Thus reduced, he found, they weren't of lasting value unless they could be transformed into plateau experiences. To this end he saw

psychotherapy as necessary for their perfection: integrating them into a regime of counseling and education that would actualize the full potential of the human being—intellectual, physical, social, sexual—in a society where all areas of life are sacred, and plateau-experiences commonplace for all.

These three writers on the psychology of religion, despite their differences, kept Romantic ideas about religion alive in the West by giving them the scientific stamp of approval. Through their influence, these ideas have shaped humanistic psychology and—through humanistic psychology—the expectations many Americans bring to the Dharma.

However, when we compare these expectations with the original principles of the Dharma, we find radical differences. The contrast between them is especially strong around the three most central issues of spiritual life: What is the essence of religious experience? What is the basic illness that religious experience can cure? And what does it mean to be cured?

The nature of religious experience. For humanistic psychology, as for the Romantics, religious experience is a direct feeling, rather than the discovery of objective truths. The essential feeling is a oneness overcoming all inner and outer divisions. These experiences come in two sorts: peak experiences, in which the sense of oneness breaks through divisions and dualities; and plateau experiences, where—through training—the sense of oneness creates a healthy sense of self, informing all of one's activities in everyday life.

However, the Dharma as expounded in its earliest records places training in oneness and a healthy sense of self prior to the most dramatic religious experiences. A healthy sense of self is fostered through training in generosity and virtue. A sense of oneness—peak or plateau—is attained in mundane levels of concentration (jhana) that constitute the path, rather than the goal of practice. The ultimate religious experience, Awakening, is something else entirely. It is described, not in terms of feeling, but of knowledge: skillful mastery of the principles of causality underlying actions and their results, followed by direct knowledge of the dimension beyond causality where all suffering stops.

The basic spiritual illness. Romantic/humanistic psychology states that the root of suffering is a sense of divided self, which creates not only inner boundaries—between reason and emotion, body and mind, ego and shadow—but also outer ones, separating us from other people and from nature and the cosmos as a whole. The Dharma, however, teaches that the essence of suffering is clinging, and that the most basic form of clinging is self-identification, regardless of whether one's sense of self is finite or infinite, fluid or static, unitary or not.

The successful spiritual cure. Romantic/humanistic psychology maintains that a total, final cure is unattainable. Instead, the cure is an ongoing process of personal integration. The enlightened person is marked by an enlarged, fluid

sense of self, unencumbered by moral rigidity. Guided primarily by what feels right in the context of interconnectedness, one negotiates with ease—like a dancer—the roles and rhythms of life. Having learned the creative answer to the question, “What is my true identity?”, one is freed from the need for certainties about any of life’s other mysteries.

The Dharma, however, teaches that full Awakening achieves a total cure, opening to the unconditioned beyond time and space, at which point the task is done. The awakened person then follows a path “that can’t be traced,” but is incapable of transgressing the basic principles of morality. Such a person realizes that the question, “What is my true identity?” was ill-conceived, and knows from direct experience the total release from time and space that will happen at death.

When these two traditions are compared point-by-point, it’s obvious that— from the perspective of early Buddhism—Romantic/humanistic psychology gives only a partial and limited view of the potentials of spiritual practice. This means that Buddhist Romanticism, in translating the Dharma into Romantic principles, gives only a partial and limited view of what Buddhism has to offer.

Now, for many people, these limitations don’t matter, because they come to Buddhist Romanticism for reasons rooted more in the present than in the past. Modern society is now even more schizoid than anything the Romantics ever knew. It has made us more and more dependent on wider and wider circles of other people, yet keeps most of those dependencies hidden. Our food and clothing come from the store, but how they got there, or who is responsible for ensuring a continual supply, we don’t know. When investigative reporters track down the web of connections from field to final product in our hands, the bare facts read like an exposé. Our sweatshirts, for example, come from Uzbekistani cotton woven in Iran, sewn in South Korea, and stored in Kentucky—an unstable web of interdependencies that involve not a little suffering both for the producers and for those pushed out of the production web by cheaper labor.

Whether or not we know these details, we intuitively sense the fragmentation and uncertainty created by the entire system. Thus many of us feel a need for a sense of wholeness. For those who benefit from the hidden dependencies of modern life, a corollary need is a sense of reassurance that interconnectedness is reliable and benign—or, if not yet benign, that feasible reforms can make it that way. They want to hear that they can safely place their trust in the principle of interconnectedness without fear that it will turn on them or let them down. When Buddhist Romanticism speaks to these needs, it opens the gate to areas of Dharma that can help many people find the solace they’re looking for. In doing so, it augments the work of psychotherapy, which may explain why so many psychotherapists have embraced Dharma practice for their

own needs and for their patients, and why some have become Dharma teachers themselves.

However, Buddhist Romanticism also helps close the gate to areas of the Dharma that would challenge people in their hope for an ultimate happiness based on interconnectedness. Traditional Dharma calls for renunciation and sacrifice, on the grounds that all interconnectedness is essentially unstable, and any happiness based on this instability is an invitation to suffering. True happiness has to go beyond interdependence and interconnectedness to the unconditioned. In response, the Romantic argument brands these teachings as dualistic: either inessential to the religious experience or inadequate expressions of it. Thus, it concludes, they can safely be ignored. In this way, the gate closes off radical areas of the Dharma designed to address levels of suffering remaining even when a sense of wholeness has been mastered.

It also closes off two groups of people who would otherwise benefit greatly from Dharma practice.

1) Those who see that interconnectedness won't end the problem of suffering and are looking for a more radical cure.

2) Those from disillusioned and disadvantaged sectors of society, who have less invested in the continuation of modern interconnectedness and have abandoned hope for meaningful reform or happiness within the system.

For both of these groups, the concepts of Buddhist Romanticism seem Pollyannaish; the cure it offers, too facile. As a Dharma gate, it's more like a door shut in their faces.

Like so many other products of modern life, the root sources of Buddhist Romanticism have for too long remained hidden. This is why we haven't recognized it for what it is or realized the price we pay in mistaking the part for the whole. Barring major changes in American society, Buddhist Romanticism is sure to survive. What's needed is for more windows and doors to throw light onto the radical aspects of the Dharma that Buddhist Romanticism has so far left in the dark.

Reconciliation, Right & Wrong

“These two are fools. Which two? The one who doesn’t see his/her transgression as a transgression, and the one who doesn’t rightfully pardon another who has confessed his/her transgression. These two are fools.

“These two are wise. Which two? The one who sees his/her transgression as a transgression, and the one who rightfully pardons another who has confessed his/her transgression. These two are wise.” — AN II.21

“It’s a cause of growth in the Dhamma and Vinaya of the noble ones when, seeing a transgression as such, one makes amends in accordance with the Dhamma and exercises restraint in the future.” — DN 2

The Buddha succeeded in establishing a religion that has been a genuine force for peace and harmony, not only because of the high value he placed on these qualities but also because of the precise instructions he gave on how to achieve them through forgiveness and reconciliation. Central to these instructions is his insight that forgiveness is one thing, reconciliation is something else.

In Pali, the language of early Buddhism, the word for forgiveness—*khama*—also means “the earth.” A mind like the earth is non-reactive and unperturbed. When you forgive me for harming you, you decide not to retaliate, to seek no revenge. You don’t have to like me. You simply unburden yourself of the weight of resentment and cut the cycle of retribution that would otherwise keep us ensnarled in an ugly samsaric wrestling match. This is a gift you can give us both, totally on your own, without my having to know or understand what you’ve done.

Reconciliation—*patisaraniya-kamma*—means a return to amicability, and that requires more than forgiveness. It requires the reestablishing of trust. If I deny responsibility for my actions, or maintain that I did no wrong, there’s no way we can be reconciled. Similarly, if I insist that your feelings don’t matter, or that you have no right to hold me to your standards of right and wrong, you won’t trust me not to hurt you again. To regain your trust, I have to show my respect for you and for our mutual standards of what is and is not acceptable behavior; to admit that I hurt you and that I was wrong to do so; and to promise to exercise restraint in the future. At the same time, you have to inspire my trust, too, in the respectful way you conduct the process of reconciliation. Only then can our friendship regain a solid footing.

Thus there are right and wrong ways of attempting reconciliation: those that skillfully meet these requirements for reestablishing trust, and those that don't. To encourage right reconciliation among his followers, the Buddha formulated detailed methods for achieving it, along with a culture of values that encourages putting those methods to use.

The methods are contained in the Vinaya, the Buddha's code of monastic discipline. Long passages in the Vinaya are devoted to instructions for how monks should confess their offenses to one another, how they should seek reconciliation with lay people they have wronged, how they should settle protracted disputes, and how a full split in the Sangha—the monastic community—should be healed. Although directed to monks, these instructions embody principles that apply to anyone seeking reconciliation of differences, whether personal or political.

The first step in every case is an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. When a monk confesses an offense, such as having insulted another monk, he first admits to having said the insult. Then he agrees that the insult really was an offense. Finally, he promises to restrain himself from repeating the offense in the future. A monk seeking reconciliation with a lay person follows a similar pattern, with another monk, on friendly terms with the lay person, acting as mediator. If a dispute has broken the Sangha into factions that have both behaved in unseemly ways, then when the factions seek reconciliation they are advised first to clear the air in a procedure called "covering over with grass." Both sides make a blanket confession of wrongdoing and a promise not to dig up each other's minor offenses. This frees them to focus on the major wrongdoings, if any, that caused or exacerbated the dispute.

To heal a full split in the Sangha, the two sides are instructed first to inquire into the root intentions on both sides that led to the split, for if those intentions were irredeemably malicious or dishonest, reconciliation is impossible. If the group tries to patch things up without getting to the root of the split, nothing has really been healed. Only when the root intentions have been shown to be reconcilable and the differences resolved can the Sangha perform the brief ceremony that reestablishes harmony.

Pervading these instructions is the realization that genuine reconciliation cannot be based simply on the desire for harmony. It requires a mutual understanding of what actions served to create disharmony, and a promise to try to avoid those actions in the future. This in turn requires a clearly articulated agreement about—and commitment to—mutual standards of right and wrong. Even if the parties to a reconciliation agree to disagree, their agreement needs to distinguish between right and wrong ways of handling their differences.

This is one of the reasons why genuine reconciliation has been so hard to achieve in the modern world. The global village has made instant neighbors of deeply conflicting standards of right and wrong. In addition, many well-funded groups find it in their interest—narrowly defined—to emphasize the points of conflict that divide us—race, religion, social class, education—and to heap ridicule on sincere efforts to establish a widely acceptable common ground. Although the weapons and media campaigns of these groups may be sophisticated, the impulse is tribal: “Only those who look, think, and act like us have the right to live in peace; everyone else should be subjugated or destroyed.” But although the global reach of modern hate- and fear-mongers is unprecedented, the existence of clashing value systems is nothing new. The Buddha faced a similar situation in his time, and the way he forged a method for reconciling conflicting views can be instructive for ours.

The beliefs he encountered in the India of his day fell into two extreme camps: absolutism—the belief that only one set of ideas about the world and its origin could be right—and relativism, the refusal to take a clear stand on issues of right and wrong. The Buddha noted that neither extreme was effective in putting an end to suffering, so he found a pragmatic Middle Way between them: Right and wrong were determined by what actually did and didn’t work in putting an end to suffering. The public proof of this Middle Way was the Sangha that the Buddha built around it, in which people agreed to follow his teachings and were able to demonstrate the results through the inner and outer peace, harmony, and happiness they found. In other words, instead of forcing other people to follow his way, the Buddha provided the opportunity for them to join voluntary communities of monks and nuns, together with their lay supporters, whose impact on society resided in the example they set.

The obvious implication for modern Buddhist communities is that if they want to help bring peace and reconciliation to the world, they’ll have to do it through the example of their own communal life. This is one area, however, where modern Western Buddhist communities have often been remiss. In their enthusiasm to strip the Buddhist tradition of what they view as its monastic baggage, they have discarded many of the principles of monastic life that were a powerful part of the Buddha’s original teachings. In particular, they have been extremely allergic to the idea of right and wrong, largely because of the ways in which they have seen right and wrong abused by the absolutists in our own culture—as when one person tries to impose arbitrary standards or mean-spirited punishments on others, or hypocritically demands that others obey standards that he himself does not.

In an attempt to avoid the abuses so common in the absolutist approach, Western Buddhists have often run to the opposite extreme of total relativism,

advocating a non-dual vision that transcends attachment to right and wrong. This vision, however, is open to abuse as well. In communities where it is espoused, irresponsible members can use the rhetoric of non-duality and non-attachment to excuse genuinely harmful behavior; their victims are left adrift, with no commonly accepted standards on which to base their appeals for redress. Even the act of forgiveness is suspect in such a context, for what right do the victims have to judge actions as requiring forgiveness or not? All too often, the victims are the ones held at fault for imposing their standards on others and not being able to rise above dualistic views.

This means that right and wrong have not really been transcended in such a community. They've simply been realigned: If you can claim a non-dual perspective, you're in the right no matter what you've done. If you complain about another person's behavior, you're in the wrong. And because this realignment is not openly acknowledged as such, it creates an atmosphere of hypocrisy in which genuine reconciliation is impossible.

So if Buddhist communities want to set an example for the world, they have to realize that the solution lies not in abandoning right and wrong, but in learning how to use them wisely. This is why the Buddha backed up his methods for reconciliation with a culture of values whereby right and wrong become aids rather than hindrances to reconciliation. Twice a month, he arranged for the members of the Sangha to meet for a recitation of the rules they had all agreed to obey and the procedures to be followed in case disputes over the rules arose. In this way, the sense of community was frequently reinforced by clear, detailed reminders of what tied the group together and made it a good one in which to live.

The procedures for handling disputes were especially important. To prevent those in the right from abusing their position, he counseled that they reflect on themselves before accusing another of wrongdoing. The checklist of questions he recommended boils down to this: "Am I free from unreconciled offenses of my own? Am I motivated by kindness, rather than vengeance? Am I really clear on our mutual standards?" Only if they can answer "yes" to these questions should they bring up the issue. Furthermore, the Buddha recommended that they determine to speak only words that are true, timely, gentle, to the point, and prompted by kindness. Their motivation should be compassion, solicitude for the welfare of all parties involved, and the desire to see the wrong-doer rehabilitated, together with an overriding desire to hold to fair principles of right and wrong.

To encourage a wrongdoer to see reconciliation as a winning rather than a losing proposition, the Buddha praised the honest acceptance of blame as an honorable rather than a shameful act: not just *a* means, but *the* means for

progress in spiritual practice. As he told his son, Rahula, the ability to recognize one's mistakes and admit them to others is the essential factor in achieving purity in thought, word, and deed. Or as he said in the Dhammapada, people who recognize their own mistakes and change their ways "illumine the world like the moon when freed from a cloud."

In addition to providing these incentives for honestly admitting misbehavior, the Buddha blocked the paths to denial. Modern sociologists have identified five basic strategies that people use to avoid accepting blame when they've caused harm, and it's noteworthy that the early Buddhist teaching on moral responsibility serves to undercut all five. The strategies are: to deny responsibility, to deny that harm was actually done, to deny the worth of the victim, to attack the accuser, and to claim that they were acting in the service of a higher cause. The Pali responses to these strategies are: (1) We are always responsible for our conscious choices. (2) We should always put ourselves in the other person's place. (3) All beings are worthy of respect. (4) We should regard those who point out our faults as if they were pointing out treasure. (Monks, in fact, are required not to show disrespect to people who criticize them, even if they don't plan to abide by the criticism.) (5) There are no—repeat, no—higher purposes that excuse breaking the basic precepts of ethical behavior.

In setting out these standards, the Buddha created a context of values that encourages both parties entering into a reconciliation to employ right speech and to engage in the honest, responsible self-reflection basic to all Dhamma practice. In this way, standards of right and wrong behavior, instead of being oppressive or petty, engender deep and long-lasting trust. In addition to creating the external harmony conducive to Dhamma practice, the process of reconciliation thus also becomes an opportunity for inner growth.

Although the Buddha designed this culture of reconciliation for his monastic Sangha, its influence did not end there. Lay supporters of the Sangha adopted it for their own use—parliamentary procedure in Thailand, for instance, still uses terminology from the Vinaya—and supporters of other religions who had contact with Buddhism adopted many features of this culture as well. The Buddha never placed a patent on his teachings. He offered them freely for all who found them useful in any way. But regardless of whether anyone else followed his example, he stuck to his principles in all his actions, secure in the knowledge that true change has to begin by taking solid root within. Even if its impact isn't immediate, a solid inner change is sure to have long-term results. If Buddhist groups are to bring reconciliation to modern society, they have to master the hard work of reconciliation among themselves. Only then will their example be an inspiration to others. And even if their impact is not enough to prevent a general descent into the madness of fascism, terror, and war, they will

be planting seeds of civilization that can sprout when the madness—like a fire across a prairie—has passed.

The Buddha admitted that not all disputes can be reconciled. There are times when one or both parties are unwilling to exercise the honesty and restraint that true reconciliation requires. Even then, though, forgiveness is still an option. This is why the distinction between reconciliation and forgiveness is so important. It encourages us not to settle for mere forgiveness when the genuine healing of right reconciliation is possible; and it allows us to be generous with our forgiveness even when it is not. And as we master the skills of both forgiveness and reconciliation, we can hold to our sense of right and wrong without using it to set the world ablaze.

Getting the Message

The Buddha is famous for having refused to take a position on many of the controversial issues of his day, such as whether the cosmos is finite or infinite, eternal or not. In fact, many people—both in his time and in ours—have assumed that he didn't take a firm position on any issue at all. Based on this assumption, some people have been exasperated with the Buddha, accusing him of being wishy-washy and indecisive, while others have been pleased, praising him for being tolerant and refreshingly free from ideas of right and wrong.

Both reactions, however, are misinformed. The early texts report that a group of wanderers, in a discussion with one of the Buddha's lay disciples, once accused the Buddha of not taking a position on any issue, and the disciple replied that they were mistaken. There was one issue on which the Buddha's position was very clear: what kind of behavior is skillful, and what kind of behavior is not. When the disciple later reported the conversation to the Buddha, the Buddha approved of what he had said. The distinction between skillful and unskillful behavior lies at the basis of everything the Buddha taught.

In making this distinction, the Buddha drew some very sharp lines:

“What is unskillful? Taking life is unskillful, taking what is not given... sexual misconduct... lying... abusive speech... divisive tale-bearing... idle chatter is unskillful. Covetousness... ill will... wrong views are unskillful. These things are called unskillful....

“And what is skillful? Abstaining from taking life is skillful, abstaining from taking what is not given... from sexual misconduct... from lying... from abusive speech... from divisive tale-bearing... abstaining from idle chatter is skillful. Lack of covetousness... lack of ill will... right views are skillful. These things are called skillful.”—MN 9

Killing is never skillful. Stealing, lying, and everything else in the first list are never skillful. When asked if there was anything whose killing he approved of, the Buddha answered that there was only one thing: anger. In no recorded instance did he approve of killing any living being at all. When one of his monks went to an executioner and told the man to kill his victims compassionately, with one blow, rather than torturing them, the Buddha expelled the monk from the Sangha, on the grounds that even the recommendation to kill compassionately is still a recommendation to kill—something he would never condone. If a monk

was physically attacked, the Buddha allowed him to strike back in self-defense, but never with the intention to kill. As he told the monks,

“Even if bandits were to carve you up savagely, limb by limb, with a two-handled saw, he among you who let his heart get angered even at that would not be doing my bidding. Even then you should train yourselves: ‘Our minds will be unaffected and we will say no evil words. We will remain sympathetic, with a mind of good will, and with no inner hate. We will keep pervading these people with an awareness imbued with good will and, beginning with them, we will keep pervading the all-encompassing world with an awareness imbued with good will—abundant, expansive, immeasurable, free from hostility, free from ill will.’ That’s how you should train yourselves.”—MN 21

When formulating lay precepts based on his distinction between skillful and unskillful, the Buddha never made any allowances for ifs, ands, or buts. When you promise yourself to abstain from killing or stealing, the power of the promise lies in its universality. You won’t break your promise to yourself under any conditions at all. This is because this sort of unconditional promise is a powerful gift. Take, for instance, the first precept, against killing:

“There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones, abandoning the taking of life, abstains from taking life. In doing so, he gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In giving freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings, he gains a share in limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression. This is the first gift, the first great gift—original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated, unadulterated from the beginning—that is not open to suspicion, will never be open to suspicion, and is unfaulted by knowledgeable contemplatives & brahmins.”—AN VIII.39

If you make exceptions in your promise to yourself—trying to justify killing in cases where you feel endangered or inconvenienced by another being’s existence—your gift of freedom is limited, and you lose your share in limitless freedom. Thus the gift of freedom, to be fully effective, has to be unconditional, with no room for exceptions, no matter how noble they may sound, of any kind.

The dynamic of this kind of gift, of course, depends on an important principle, the teaching of karma and rebirth: If you act on unskillful motivations, the act will result in your suffering, now or in lives to come; if you act on skillful intentions, the act will result in your pleasure now or in lives to come. If you don’t kill anyone, you are not creating the circumstances where anyone or anything will cut short your life span. Your past karma may still leave an opening for your murder or accidental death—you can’t go back and undo what

you've already done—but once you make and follow through with the promise not to kill again, you are creating no new openings for having your life cut short. As the Dhammapada says,

*If there's no wound on the hand,
that hand can hold poison.
Poison won't penetrate
where there's no wound.
There's no evil
for those who don't do it.—Dhp 124*

This is why the Buddha listed virtue as one of a person's greatest treasures. Kings and thieves can steal your material belongings and even take your life, but they can't take your virtue. If it's uncompromising, your virtue protects you from any true danger from now until you reach nirvana.

Even if you're not ready to accept the teaching on karma and rebirth, the Buddha still recommended an absolute standard of virtue. As he told the Kalamas, if you decide to act skillfully at all times, harming no one, then even if it turned out that there was no life after death, you'd still come out ahead, for you would have been able to live and die with a clear conscience—something that no amount of money or political influence can buy.

So the Buddha's position on the precepts was uncompromising and clear. If you want to follow his teachings, there's absolutely no room for killing, stealing, or lying, period. However, in our current climate of terrorism and counter-terrorism—where governments have claimed that it's their moral duty to lie, kill, and torture in order to prevent others from lying, killing, and torturing—a number of Buddhist teachers have joined in the effort, trying to find evidence that there were some occasions, at least, where the Buddha would condone killing or offer a rationale for a just war. Exactly why they would want to do this is up to them to say, but there's a need to examine their arguments in order to set the record straight. The Buddha never taught a theory of just war; no decision to wage war can legitimately be traced to his teachings; no war veteran has ever had to agonize over memories of the people he killed because the Buddha said that war was okay. These facts are among the glories of the Buddhist tradition, and it's important for the human race that they not be muddied in an effort to recast the Buddha in our own less than glorious image.

Because the Pali Canon is such an unpromising place to look for the justification of killing, most of the arguments for a Buddhist theory of just war look elsewhere for their evidence, citing the words and behavior of people they take as surrogates for the Buddha. These arguments are obviously on shaky ground, and can be easily dismissed even by people who know nothing of the

Canon. For example, it has been argued that because Asian governments claiming to be Buddhist have engaged in war and torture, the Buddha's teachings must condone such behavior. However, we've had enough exposure to people claiming to be Christian whose behavior is very unchristian to realize that the same thing can probably happen in the Buddhist world as well. To take killers and torturers as your guide to the Buddha's teaching is hardly a sign of good judgment.

On a somewhat higher note, one writer has noted that his meditation teacher has told soldiers and policemen that if their duty is to kill, they must perform their duty, albeit compassionately and with mindfulness. The writer then goes on to argue that because his teacher is the direct recipient of an oral tradition dating back to the Buddha, we must take this as evidence that the Buddha would give similar advice as well. This statement, of course, tells us more about the writer's faith in his teacher than about the Buddha; and when we reflect that the Buddha expelled from the Sangha a monk who gave advice of this sort to an executioner, it casts serious doubts on his argument.

There are, however, writers who try to find evidence in the Pali Canon for a Buddhist theory of just war, not in what the Buddha said, but in what he didn't. The arguments go like this: When talking with kings, the Buddha never told them not to engage in war or capital punishment. This was his tacit admission that the king had a justifiable duty to engage in these activities, and the kings would have understood his silence as such. Because these arguments cite the Pali Canon and claim a historian's knowledge of how silence was interpreted in the Buddha's day, they seem to carry more authority than the others. But when we actually look at the Pali record of the Buddha's conversations with kings, we find that the arguments are bogus. The Buddha was able to communicate the message to kings that they shouldn't kill, but because kings in general were not the most promising students of the Dhamma, he had to bring them to this message in an indirect way.

It's true that in the Pali Canon silence is sometimes interpreted as acquiescence, but this principle holds only in response to a request. If someone invited the Buddha to his house for a meal and the Buddha remained silent, that was a sign of consent. However, there were many instances in which the Buddha's silence was a sign, not of acquiescence, but of tact. A professional soldier once went to the Buddha and said that his teachers had taught the existence of a heaven awaiting soldiers who die in battle. What did the Buddha have to say about that? At first the Buddha declined to answer, but when the soldier showed the sincerity of his question by pressing him three times for a response, he finally replied:

“When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, his mind is already seized, debased, & misdirected by the thought: ‘May these beings be struck down or slaughtered or annihilated or destroyed. May they not exist’: If others then strike him down & slay him while he is thus striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the hell called the realm of those slain in battle. But if he holds such a view as this: ‘When a warrior strives & exerts himself in battle, if others then strike him down & slay him while he is striving & exerting himself in battle, then with the breakup of the body, after death, he is reborn in the company of devas slain in battle,’ that is his wrong view. Now, there are two destinations for a person with wrong view, I tell you: either hell or the animal womb.” — SN XLII.3

The soldier then broke down and cried—not because he felt that the Buddha’s words were cruel, but because he believed their truth and was upset at his earlier teachers for having lied to him. In this case, the Buddha’s reticence and tact helped to make his teaching effective. A similar set of events happened when an actor asked the Buddha if there is a special heaven reserved for actors. The Buddha’s reticence and tact in informing the actor of a hell for actors who incite their audiences to greed, anger, and delusion inspired the actor to respond in the same way as the soldier.

If the pride of soldiers and actors required special handling, even more care was required in the handling of kings, for their pride was often coupled with an unrestrained sense of power. A remarkable feature of the Pali Canon is that even though the Buddha was a member of the noble warrior caste, the discourses generally show a low regard for the spiritual standing of kings. In many passages, kings are mentioned in the same breath with thieves: They confiscate property and show little regard for the rule of law. The Canon does recognize exceptions—King Bimbisara of Magadha achieves stream-entry the first time he hears the Dhamma, and he never engages in war—but for the most part, kings are depicted as spiritually stunted. King Ajatasattu, on first seeing the Buddha sitting surrounded by monks, can’t tell which person in the assembly is the Buddha, a sign of his spiritual blindness; this blindness is later proven by his asking the Buddha’s advice on how to defeat his innocent neighbors in war. As one of the discourses suggests, this sort of blindness is an occupational hazard for rulers, in that the unfair exercise of power can make a person unfit for learning the truth.

“Because of having wrongly inflicted suffering on another person through beating or imprisonment or confiscation or placing blame or banishment, [with the thought,] ‘I have power. I want power,’ when told what is factual, he denies it and doesn’t

acknowledge it. When told what is unfactual, he doesn't make an ardent effort to untangle it [to see], 'This is unfactual. This is baseless.'—AN III.69

Even King Pasenadi of Kosala, the king most closely associated with the Buddha, comes across as well-meaning but somewhat dense. An entire discourse, MN 90, is a satire of how his royal position has thwarted his ability to learn the Dhamma. He can't phrase his questions properly, has trouble following a discussion for more than a few sentences, and is unable to come to any certain conclusions about the truth. Still, in other discourses he has his occasional moments of spiritual clarity, and the Buddha uses those moments as opportunities to teach the Dhamma. The Buddha's approach here is twofold: to try to expand the king's perspective on life at times when the king is willing to be frank; and to encourage the king when the latter gains insights on his own.

For example, there's the famous discourse (SN III.25) where Pasenadi comes to visit the Buddha in the middle of the day. The Buddha asks him what he's been doing, and the king replies—in a moment of rare and wonderful frankness—that he's been involved in the sort of activities typical of a king intoxicated with his power. The Buddha takes this moment of frankness as an opportunity to teach the Dhamma. Suppose, he says, that four mountains were rolling in inexorably from the four directions, crushing all life in their path. Given that the human birth is so rare and hard to achieve, what should be done? The king's reply: What else should be done but living in line with the Dhamma? The Buddha then draws the lesson: Aging and death are rolling in inexorably. Given that the human birth is so rare and hard to achieve, what should be done? The king draws the obvious conclusion that, again, the only thing to be done is to live in line with the Dhamma. He then goes on to make the observation that when aging and death are rolling in inexorably, there is no role for armies, wars, clever advisors, or great wealth to prevent their rolling in. The only thing to do is to live in line with the Dhamma.

In another discourse, Pasenadi comes to the Buddha and reports his own independent observation:

"Those who engage in bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct leave themselves unprotected. Even though a squadron of elephant troops might protect them, a squadron of cavalry troops, a squadron of chariot troops, a squadron of infantry troops might protect them, still they leave themselves unprotected. Why is that? Because that's an external protection, not an internal one. Therefore they leave themselves unprotected. But those who engage in good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct have themselves protected. Even though neither a squadron of elephant troops, a squadron of cavalry troops, a squadron of chariot troops, nor a squadron of infantry troops might protect them, still

they have themselves protected. Why is that? Because that's an internal protection, not an external one. Therefore they have themselves protected." — SN III.5

It's highly unlikely that Pasenadi would have come to this conclusion if he hadn't spent time in conversation with the Buddha. From that conversation, he would have learned the meaning of good bodily, verbal, and mental conduct: the ten forms of skillful action. As a tactful teacher, the Buddha simply concurred with the king's insight. The discourses suggest that this strategy encouraged the king to spend time in reflection of this sort, for in other discourses the king reports many similar insights for the Buddha to confirm.

We learn that the king did not always follow through with his insights, but that's not because the Buddha encouraged him to view killing as his duty. In fact, there is one striking example where these insights had at least a partial effect. Ajatasattu once attacked Pasenadi's kingdom, and Pasenadi responded by raising an army to fight him off. After an initial setback, Pasenadi was able to capture Ajatasattu. He could have killed him in revenge, for that was allowable under the rules of engagement during his time. But he chose not to, and it's hard not to see the Buddha's impact on this decision. When told of the battle, the Buddha said:

*"A man may plunder
as long as it serves his ends,
but when others are plundered,
he who has plundered
gets plundered in turn.*

*A fool thinks,
'Now's my chance,'
as long as his evil
has yet to ripen.
But when it ripens,
the fool
falls
into pain.*

*Killing, you gain
your killer.
Conquering, you gain one
who will conquer you;*

insulting, insult;
harassing, harassment.
And so, through the cycle of action,
he who has plundered
gets plundered in turn.” — SN III.15

Benighted as he was, Pasenadi still got the message. The question is, why can't we?

Educating Compassion

If you have any friends or family members who are sick or dying, I know of no one who would tell you to treat them in a hardhearted way. Everyone would agree that you should be as compassionate as you can. The problem is that there's little agreement on how compassion translates into specific actions. For some people, compassion means extending life as long as possible; for others it means terminating life—through assisted suicide or euthanasia—when quality of life falls below a certain level. And neither of these two groups sees the other as compassionate at all. The first sees the second as criminal; the second sees the first as heartless and cruel.

For those of us trying to negotiate the murky territory between these two extremes, there's not much reliable guidance. Ours is a culture that doesn't like to think about illness and death, and as a result, when faced with someone who's sick or dying, we're at a loss as to what to do. Some people will advise you simply to do what feels right, but feelings have a way of turning slippery and devious. Some things feel right simply because they make you feel good, regardless of whether they're genuinely right for the other person. A desire to extend life may mask a deeper fear of your own death; a desire to terminate a miserable illness may rationalize your distress at having to witness suffering. Even if you're told to act from a place of mindful presence, you may find that what seem to be your spontaneous inspirations are actually conditioned by hidden, unexamined assumptions about what life and death are all about.

This is why the simple injunction to be compassionate or mindful in the presence of a sick or dying person isn't enough. We need help in educating our compassion: specific advice on how to think through the implications of our actions in the face of life and death, and specific examples of how people who have contemplated these issues thoroughly have actually acted in the past.

With this thought in mind, I searched through the Pali Canon—the oldest extant record of the Buddha's teachings—to see what lessons could be drawn from the Buddha's example. After all, the Buddha often referred to himself as a doctor, and to his Dharma as medicine for the sufferings of the world. From his point of view, we're all sick and dying on a subtle level, so we all deserve continual compassion. But what sort of advice did this doctor give when face-to-face with the flesh and blood suffering of illness and death? How did he treat people who were physically sick or dying?

You probably know the story of how, together with Ven. Ananda, he once found an unattended sick monk lying in his own filth. After washing the monk, he assembled the other monks, chided them for abandoning their brother, and gave them strong incentive to follow his example: "Whoever would tend to me," he said, "should tend to the sick." He arranged that monks nursing their fellow monks should receive special allotments of food, to encourage them in their work and help lighten their burden. But he didn't subscribe to the notion that medical treatment should try to extend life at all costs. The Vinaya, his monastic discipline, imposes only a minor penalty on a monk who refuses to care for a fellow monk who is sick or dying, or who totally abandons a sick monk before the latter recovers or dies. And there's no penalty for withholding or discontinuing a specific medical treatment. So the rules convey no message that the failure to keep life going is an offense of any kind. At the same time, though, a monk who deliberately ends the life of a patient, even from compassionate motives, is expelled from the monkhood and can never reordain in this life, so there's no room for euthanasia or assisted suicide.

This means that the middle ground is where true compassion can be exercised. The Buddha sets out some guidelines for this area in his definition of the ideal nurse. You're qualified to tend to the sick if (1) you know how to prepare medicines; (2) you know what's amenable to the patient's cure, taking away whatever's unamenable and providing things that are amenable; (3) you're motivated by compassion and not by material gain; (4) you're not squeamish about cleaning up urine, excrement, saliva, or vomit; and (5) you're competent at encouraging the patient at the proper times with talk on Dharma.

Of these five qualifications, the one most discussed in the Pali Canon is the fifth: What qualifies as a helpful and compassionate talk on Dharma to a person who is sick or dying? What doesn't?

Here again, the *don'ts* mark off the territory for the *do's*. The Vinaya cites cases where monks tell a sick person to focus his thoughts on dying, in the belief that death would be better than the miserable state of his life. The sick person does as they advise, he dies as a result, and the Buddha expels the monks from the monkhood. Thus, from the Buddha's perspective, encouraging a sick person to relax her grip on life or to give up the will to live would not count as an act of compassion. Instead of trying to ease the patient's transition to death, the Buddha focused on easing his or her insight into suffering and its end.

This is because he regarded every moment of life as an opportunity to practice and benefit from the Dharma. It's a well-known principle in all meditation traditions that a moment's insight into the pain of the present is far more beneficial than viewing the present moment with disgust and placing one's hopes on a better future. This principle applies as much at the end of life as it

does anywhere in the middle. In fact, the Buddha encouraged his monks to reflect constantly on the potential imminence of death at every moment, even when in ordinary health, so that they could bring a sense of urgency to their practice and give the present moment their full attention. If you learn to treat all moments as potentially your last, then when your last moment does come you will face it prepared.

Most often, though, a sick or dying person hasn't been living with this sort of urgent alertness, so the first step in advising such a person is to aim at clearing away any emotional obstacles to learning from the present. The Pali texts note two such obstacles: worry over the responsibilities the person is leaving behind, and fear of death. In one poignant discourse, a man appears to be dying and his wife consoles him not to worry: She'll be able to provide for herself and their children in his absence; she won't go looking for another husband; and she'll continue in her practice of the Dharma. With each reassurance she repeats the refrain, "So don't be worried as you die. Death is painful for one who is worried. The Blessed One has warned against being worried at the time of death." The man recovers unexpectedly and, while still frail, goes to visit the Buddha, telling him of his wife's reassurances. The Buddha comments on how fortunate the man is to have such a wise and sympathetic wife.

As for fear of death, the Buddha notes that one of the primary reasons for this fear is the remembrance of hurtful or cruel things you've done in the past. Thus the Vinaya shows that monks would often console a fellow monk on his deathbed by asking him to call to mind something more positive—his highest meditative attainment—and to focus his thoughts there. In a similar vein, a common practice in Asian Buddhist countries is to remind a dying person of the acts of generosity or virtue he or she has performed in this life. Even if the person is unable to muster the mindfulness and alertness needed to gain further insight into the present, any Dharma talk that helps allay worries and forestall fears is an act of true compassion.

The Buddha comments, however, that there are three additional reasons for fearing death: attachment to the body, attachment to sensual pleasures, and a lack of direct insight into the unconditioned Dharma of the Deathless. His more advanced instructions for sick and dying people thus focus on cutting these reasons for fear at the root. He once visited a sick ward and told the monks there to approach the moment of death mindful and alert. Instead of focusing on whether they would recover, they should observe the movements of the feelings they were experiencing: painful, pleasant, or neutral. Observing a sensation of pain, for instance, they should notice how inconstant it is and then focus on the repeated dissolution of all pains. They could then apply the same focused alertness to pleasant and neutral feelings as well. The steadiness of their focus

would give rise to a sense of ease independent of sensory feelings, and from this point of independence they could develop dispassion and relinquishment, both for the body and for feelings of any sort. With relinquishment would come a genuine insight into the Dharma which, being Deathless, would end all fear of death.

On another occasion, Ven. Sariputta visited the famous supporter of the Buddha, Anathapindika, who was on his deathbed. After learning that Anathapindika's disease was worsening, he advised him to train himself: "I won't cling to the eye; my consciousness won't be dependent on the eye. I won't cling to the ear; my consciousness won't be dependent on the ear," and so forth through all the six senses, their objects, and any mental events dependent on them. Although Anathapindika was unable to develop this independent consciousness in line with Sariputta's instructions, he asked that these instructions be given to other lay people as well, for there would be those who would understand and benefit from them.

Obviously, these recommendations are all shaped by the Buddha's teachings on how the state of one's mind influences the process of death and rebirth, but that doesn't mean that they're appropriate only for those who would call themselves Buddhist. Regardless of your religious beliefs, when you're faced with obvious pain you're bound to see the value of any instructions that show you how to reduce suffering by investigating the pain in and of itself. If you have the strength to follow through with the instructions, you're bound to want to give them a try. And if you encounter the Deathless in the course of your efforts, you're not going to quibble about whether to call it by a Buddhist or non-Buddhist name.

This point is illustrated by another story involving Ven. Sariputta. Visiting an aged brahman on his deathbed, Sariputta reflected that brahmans desire union with Brahma, so he taught the man to develop the four attitudes of a Brahma— infinite good will, compassion, appreciation, and equanimity. After following these instructions, the brahman was reborn as a Brahma after death. The Buddha, however, later chided Sariputta for not teaching the brahman to focus instead on investigating pain, for if he had, the brahman would have experienced nirvana and been freed from rebirth altogether.

What's striking about all these instructions is that, from the Buddha's point of view, deathbed Dharma is no different from Dharma taught to people in ordinary health. The cause of suffering is in every case the same, and the path to the end of suffering is the same as well: comprehend suffering, abandon its cause, realize its cessation, and develop the qualities of mind that lead to its cessation. The only difference is that the obvious proximity of death makes teaching the Dharma both easier and harder—easier in that the patient is freed

from extraneous responsibilities and can see clearly the need to understand and gain release from pain; harder in that the patient may be too weakened physically or emotionally, through fear or worry, to put the instructions into practice. But whatever the case, it's worth noting that up to the moment of death the Buddha would have you focus less on the limitations of the situation than on the potential opportunities. Even one moment of insight in the midst of pain and suffering, he said, is worth more than one hundred years of good health.

From my own personal experience—both in watching my teachers implement these instructions and in trying to implement them myself—I've learned two major lessons. One is that the patients best suited for making the most of the Dharma when sick or dying are those who are not tormented with memories of cruel or hurtful things they did in the past, and who have already developed a meditative or contemplative practice prior to their illness. Even if that practice isn't Buddhist, they intuitively respond to the Buddha's message on pain and are able to use it to alleviate their own sufferings. The lesson here is that as long as you know you're going to die someday, it's a good idea to avoid cruel actions and to get started on a meditative practice of your own, so that you'll be prepared for illness and death when they come. As my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, once said, when you meditate you're gaining practice in how to die—how to be mindful and alert, how to endure pain, how to gain control over wayward thoughts and maybe even reach the Deathless—so that when the time comes to die, you'll do it with skill.

The second lesson is that if you want to help other people overcome their fear of death, you have to learn how to overcome your own fear of death as well, by abandoning attachment to the body, abandoning attachment to sensual pleasures, avoiding cruel actions, and gaining direct insight into the Deathless. With your fears overcome, you'll be much more effective in teaching the Dharma to those on their deathbed. You won't be disturbed by the physical horrors of death, you'll be able to communicate directly to the needs of the dying person, and your words will carry more weight, for they come from direct experience. Your compassion will be educated not by books or feelings, but by a clear insight into what dies and what doesn't.

Ultimately, these two lessons boil down to one: Meditate, as an act of compassion both for yourself and for others, even if death seems far away. When the time comes to die, you'll be less of a burden on those who are caring for you. In the meantime, if you're called on to comfort those who are sick or dying, your compassion will be more genuinely helpful, and you'll have a more effective message to teach.

Jhana Not by the Numbers

When I first went to study with my teacher, Ajaan Fuang, he handed me a small booklet of meditation instructions and sent me up the hill behind the monastery to meditate. The booklet—written by his teacher, Ajaan Lee—began with a breath meditation technique and concluded with a section showing how the technique was used to induce the first four levels of jhana.

In the following years, I saw Ajaan Fuang hand the same booklet to each of his new students, lay and ordained. Yet despite the booklet's detailed descriptions of jhana, he himself rarely mentioned the word jhana in his conversations, and never indicated to any of his students that they had reached a particular level of jhana in their practice. When a student told him of a recurring meditative experience, he liked to discuss not what it was, but what to do with it: what to focus on, what to drop, what to change, what to maintain the same. Then he'd teach the student how to experiment with it—to make it even more stable and restful—and how to judge the results of the experiments. If his students wanted to measure their progress against the descriptions of jhana in the booklet, that was their business and none of his. He never said this in so many words, but given the way he taught, the implicit message was clear.

As were the implicit reasons for his attitude. He had told me once about his own experiences as a young meditator: "Back in those days you didn't have books explaining everything the way we do now. When I first studied with Ajaan Lee, he told me to bring my mind down. So I focused on getting it down, down, down, but the more I brought it down, the heavily and duller it got. I thought, 'This can't be right.' So I turned around and focused on bringing it up, up, up, until I found a balance and could figure out what he was talking about." This incident was one of many that taught him some important lessons: that you have to test things for yourself, to see where the instructions had to be taken literally and where they had to be taken figuratively; that you had to judge for yourself how well you were doing; and that you had to be ingenious, experimenting and taking risks to find ways to deal with problems as they arose.

So as a teacher, he tried to instill in his students these qualities of self-reliance, ingenuity, and a willingness to take risks and test things for themselves. He did that not only by talking about these qualities, but also by forcing you into situations where you'd have to develop them. Had he always been there to confirm for you that, "Yes, you've reached the third jhana," or, "No, that's only

the second jhana," he would have short-circuited the qualities he was trying to instill. He, rather than your own powers of observation, would have been the authority on what was going on in your mind; and you would have been absolved of any responsibility for correctly evaluating what you had experienced. At the same time, he would have been feeding your childish desire to please or impress him, and undermining your ability to deal with the task at hand, which was how to develop your own powers of sensitivity to put an end to suffering and stress. As he once told me, "If I have to explain everything, you'll get used to having things handed to you on a platter. And then what will you do when problems come up in your meditation and you don't have any experience in figuring things out on your own?"

So, studying with him, I had to learn to take risks in the midst of uncertainties. If something interesting came up in the practice, I'd have to stick with it, observing it over time, before reaching any conclusions about it. Even then, I learned, the labels I applied to my experiences couldn't be chiseled in rock. They had to be more like post-it notes: convenient markers for my own reference that I might have to peel off and stick elsewhere as I became more familiar with the territory of my mind. This proved to be a valuable lesson that applied to all areas of my practice.

Still, Ajaan Fuang didn't leave me to reinvent the Dharma wheel totally on my own. Experience had shown him that some approaches to concentration worked better than others for putting the mind in a position where it could exercise its ingenuity and accurately judge the results of its experiments, and he was very explicit in recommending those approaches. Among the points he emphasized were these:

Strong concentration is absolutely necessary for liberating insight. "Without a firm basis in concentration," he often said, "insight is just concepts." To see clearly the connections between stress and its causes, the mind has to be very steady and still. And to stay still, it requires the strong sense of well being that only strong concentration can provide.

To gain insight into a state of concentration, you have to stick with it for a long time. If you push impatiently from one level of concentration to the next, or if you try to analyze a new state of concentration too quickly after you've attained it, you never give it the chance to show its full potential and you don't give yourself the chance to familiarize yourself with it. So you have to keep working at it as a skill, something you can tap into in all situations. This enables you to see it from a variety of perspectives and to test it over time, to see if it really is as totally blissful, empty, and effortless as it may have seemed on first sight.

The best state of concentration for the sake of developing all-around insight is one that encompasses a whole-body awareness. There were two exceptions to Ajaan Fuang's

usual practice of not identifying the state you had attained in your practice, and both involved states of wrong concentration. The first was the state that comes when the breath gets so comfortable that your focus drifts from the breath to the sense of comfort itself, your mindfulness begins to blur, and your sense of the body and your surroundings gets lost in a pleasant haze. When you emerge, you find it hard to identify where exactly you were focused. Ajaan Fuang called this *moha-samadhi*, or delusion-concentration.

The second state was one I happened to hit one night when my concentration was extremely one-pointed, and so refined that it refused settle on or label even the most fleeting mental objects. I dropped into a state in which I lost all sense of the body, of any internal/external sounds, or of any thoughts or perceptions at all—although there was just enough tiny awareness to let me know, when I emerged, that I hadn't been asleep. I found that I could stay there for many hours, and yet time would pass very quickly. Two hours would seem like two minutes. I could also “program” myself to come out at a particular time.

After hitting this state several nights in a row, I told Ajaan Fuang about it, and his first question was, “Do you like it?” My answer was “No,” because I felt a little groggy the first time I came out. “Good,” he said. “As long as you don't like it, you're safe. Some people really like it and think it's nibbana or cessation. Actually, it's the state of non-perception (*asaññi-bhava*). It's not even right concentration, because there's no way you can investigate anything in there to gain any sort of discernment. But it does have other uses.” He then told me of the time he had undergone kidney surgery and, not trusting the anesthesiologist, had put himself in that state for the duration of the operation.

In both these states of wrong concentration, the limited range of awareness was what made them wrong. If whole areas of your awareness are blocked off, how can you gain all-around insight? And as I've noticed in years since, people adept at blotting out large areas of awareness through powerful one-pointedness also tend to be psychologically adept at dissociation and denial. This is why Ajaan Fuang, following Ajaan Lee, taught a form of breath meditation that aimed at an all-around awareness of the breath energy throughout the body, playing with it to gain a sense of ease, and then calming it so that it wouldn't interfere with a clear vision of the subtle movements of the mind. This all-around awareness helped to eliminate the blind spots where ignorance likes to lurk.

An ideal state of concentration for giving rise to insight is one that you can analyze in terms of stress and the absence of stress even while you're in it. Once your mind was firmly established in a state of concentration, Ajaan Fuang would recommend “lifting” it from its object, but not so far that the concentration was destroyed. From that perspective, you could evaluate what levels of stress were still present in the concentration and let them go. In the initial stages, this usually involved

evaluating how you were relating to the breath, and detecting more subtle levels of breath energy in the body that would provide a basis for deeper levels of stillness. Once the breath was perfectly still, and the sense of the body started dissolving into a formless mist, this process would involve detecting the perceptions of “space,” “knowing,” “oneness,” etc., that would appear in place of the body and could be peeled away like the layers of an onion in the mind. In either case, the basic pattern was the same: detecting the level of perception or mental fabrication that was causing the unnecessary stress, and dropping it for a more subtle level of perception or fabrication until there was nothing left to drop.

This was why, as long as your awareness was still and alert all-around, it didn't matter whether you were in the first or the fourteenth jhana, for the way you treated your state of concentration was always the same. By directing your attention to issues of stress and its absence, he was pointing you to terms by which to evaluate your state of mind for yourself, without having to ask any outside authority. And, as it turns out, the terms you can evaluate for yourself — stress, its cause, its cessation, and the path to its cessation— are the issues that define the four noble truths: the right view that the Buddha says can lead to total liberation.

The Integrity of Emptiness

For all the subtlety of his teachings, the Buddha had a simple test for measuring wisdom. You're wise, he said, to the extent that you can get yourself to do things you don't like doing but know will result in happiness, and to refrain from things you like doing but know will result in pain and harm.

He derived this standard for wisdom from his insight into the radical importance of intentional action in shaping our experience of happiness and sorrow, pleasure and pain. With action so important and yet so frequently misguided, wisdom has to be tactical, strategic, in fostering actions that are truly beneficial. It has to outwit short-sighted preferences to yield a happiness that lasts.

Because the Buddha viewed all issues of experience, from the gross to the subtle, in terms of intentional actions and their results, his tactical standard for wisdom applies to all levels as well, from the wisdom of simple generosity to the wisdom of emptiness and ultimate Awakening. Wisdom on all levels is wise because it works. It makes a difference in what you do and the happiness that results. And to work, it requires integrity: the willingness to look honestly at the results of your actions, to admit when you've caused harm, and to change your ways so that you won't make the same mistake again.

What's striking about this standard for wisdom is how direct and down to earth it is. This might come as a surprise, for most of us don't think of Buddhist wisdom as so commonsensical and straightforward. Instead, the phrase "Buddhist wisdom" conjures up teachings more abstract and paradoxical, flying in the face of common sense—emptiness being a prime example. Emptiness, we're told, means that nothing has any inherent existence. In other words, on an ultimate level, things aren't what we conventionally think of as "things." They're processes that are in no way separate from all the other processes on which they depend. This is a philosophically sophisticated idea that's fascinating to ponder, but it doesn't provide much obvious help in getting you up early on a cold morning to meditate nor in convincing you to give up a destructive addiction.

For example, if you're addicted to alcohol, it's not because you feel that the alcohol has any inherent existence. It's because, in your calculation, the immediate pleasure derived from the alcohol outweighs the long-term damage it's doing to your life. This is a general principle: attachment and addiction are not metaphysical problems. They're tactical ones. We're attached to things and actions, not because of what we think they *are*, but because of what we think they

can *do* for our happiness. If we keep overestimating the pleasure and underestimating the pain they bring, we stay attached to them regardless of what, in an ultimate sense, we understand them to be.

Because the problem is tactical, the solution has to be tactical as well. The cure for addiction and attachment lies in retraining your imagination and your intentions through expanding your sense of the power of your actions and the possible happiness you can achieve. This means learning to become more honest and sensitive to your actions and their consequences, at the same time allowing yourself to imagine and master alternative routes to greater happiness with fewer drawbacks. Metaphysical views may sometimes enter into the equation, but at most they're only secondary. Many times they're irrelevant. Even if you were to see the alcohol and its pleasure as lacking inherent existence, you'd still go for the pleasure as long as you saw it as outweighing the damage. Sometimes ideas of metaphysical emptiness can actually be harmful. If you start focusing on how the damage of drinking—and the people damaged by your drinking—are empty of inherent existence, you could develop a rationale for continuing to drink. So the teaching on metaphysical emptiness wouldn't seem to pass the Buddha's own test for wisdom.

The irony here is that the idea of emptiness as lack of inherent existence has very little to do with what the Buddha himself said about emptiness. His teachings on emptiness—as reported in the earliest Buddhist texts, the Pali Canon—deal directly with actions and their results, with issues of pleasure and pain. To understand and experience emptiness in line with these teachings requires not philosophical sophistication, but a personal integrity willing to admit the actual motivations behind your actions and the actual benefits and harm they cause. For these reasons, this version of emptiness is very relevant in developing the sort of wisdom that would pass the Buddha's commonsensical test for measuring how wise you are.

The Buddha's teachings on emptiness—contained in two major discourses and several smaller ones—define it in three distinct ways: as an approach to meditation, as an attribute of the senses and their objects, and as a state of concentration. Although these forms of emptiness differ in their definitions, they ultimately converge on the same route to release from suffering. To see how this happens, we will need to examine the three meanings of emptiness one by one. In doing so, we'll find that each of them applies the Buddha's commonsensical test for wisdom to subtle actions of the mind. But to understand how this test applies to this subtle level, we first have to see how it applies to actions on a more obvious level. For that, there's no better introduction than the Buddha's advice to his son, Rahula, on how to cultivate wisdom while engaging in the activities of everyday life.

Everyday Wisdom

The Buddha told Rahula—who was seven at the time—to use his thoughts, words, and deeds as a mirror. In other words, just as you would use a mirror to check for any dirt on your face, Rahula was to use his actions as a means of learning where there was still anything impure in his mind. Before he acted, he should try to anticipate the results of the action. If he saw that they'd be harmful to himself or to others, he shouldn't follow through with the action. If he foresaw no harm, he could go ahead and act. If, in the course of doing the action, he saw it causing unexpected harm, he should stop the action. If he didn't see any harm, he could continue with it.

If, after he was done, he saw any long-term harm resulting from the action, he should consult with another person on the path to get some perspective on what he had done—and on how not to do it again—and then resolve not to repeat that mistake. In other words, he should not feel embarrassed or ashamed to reveal his mistakes to people he respected, for if he started hiding his mistakes from them, he would soon start hiding them from himself. If, on the other hand, he saw no harm resulting from the action, he should rejoice in his progress in the practice and continue with his training.

The right name for this reflection is not “self-purification.” It's “action-purification.” You deflect judgments of good and bad away from your sense of self, where they can tie you down with conceit and guilt. Instead, you focus directly on the actions themselves, where the judgments can allow you to learn from your mistakes and to find a healthy joy in what you did right.

When you keep reflecting in this way, it serves many purposes. First and foremost, it forces you to be honest about your intentions and about the effects of your actions. Honesty here is a simple principle: you don't add any after-the-fact rationalizations to cover up what you actually did, nor do you try to subtract from the actual facts through denial. Because you're applying this honesty to areas where the normal reaction is to be embarrassed about or afraid of the truth, it's more than a simple registering of the facts. It also requires moral integrity. This is why the Buddha stressed morality as a precondition for wisdom, and declared the highest moral principle to be the precept against lying. If you don't make a habit of admitting uncomfortable truths, the truth as a whole will elude you.

The second purpose of this reflection is to emphasize the power of your actions. You see that your actions do make the difference between pleasure and pain. Third, you gain practice in learning from your mistakes without shame or remorse. Fourth, you realize that the more honest you are in evaluating your

actions, the more power you have to change your ways in a positive direction. And finally, you develop good will and compassion, in that you resolve to act only on intentions that mean no harm to anyone, and you continually focus on developing the skill of harmlessness as your top priority.

All of these lessons are necessary to develop the kind of wisdom measured by the Buddha's test for wisdom; and, as it turns out, they're directly related to the first meaning of emptiness, as an approach to meditation. In fact, this sort of emptiness simply takes the instructions Rahula received for observing everyday actions and extends them to the act of perception within the mind.

Emptiness as an Approach to Meditation

Emptiness as an approach to meditation is the most basic of the three kinds of emptiness. In the context of this approach, emptiness means "empty of disturbance" — or, to put it in other terms, empty of stress. You bring the mind to concentration and then examine your state of concentration in order to detect the presence or absence of subtle disturbance or stress still inherent within that state. When you find a disturbance, you follow it back to the perception — the mental label or act of recognition — on which the concentration is based. Then, you drop that perception in favor of a more refined one, one leading to a state of concentration with less inherent disturbance.

In the discourse explaining this meaning of emptiness (MN 121), the Buddha introduces his explanation with a simile. He and Ananda are dwelling in an abandoned palace that is now a quiet monastery. The Buddha tells Ananda to notice and appreciate how the monastery is empty of the disturbances it contained when it was still used as a palace — the disturbances caused by gold and silver, elephants and horses, assemblies of women and men. The only disturbance remaining is that caused by the presence of the monks meditating in unity.

Taking this observation as a simile, the Buddha launches into his description of emptiness as an approach to meditation. (The simile is reinforced by the fact that the Pali word for "monastery" or "dwelling — *vihara* — also means "attitude" or "approach.") He describes a monk meditating in the wilderness who is simply noting to himself that he is now in the wilderness. The monk allows his mind to concentrate on and enjoy the perception, "wilderness." He then steps back mentally to observe and appreciate that this mode of perception is empty of the disturbances that come with perceptions of the village life he has left behind. The only remaining disturbances are those associated with the perception, "wilderness" — for example, any emotional reactions to the dangers that wilderness might entail. As the Buddha says, the monk sees accurately which

disturbances are not present in that mode of perception; as for those remaining, he sees accurately, “There is this.” In other words, he adds nothing to what is there and takes nothing away. This is how he enters into a meditative emptiness that is pure and undistorted.

Then, noting the disturbances inherent in the act of focusing on “wilderness,” the monk drops that perception and replaces it with a more refined perception, one with less potential for arousing disturbance. He chooses the earth element, banishing from his mind any details of the hills and ravines of the earth, simply taking note of its earthness. He repeats the process he applied to the perception of wilderness—settling into the perception of “earth,” fully indulging in it, and then stepping back to notice how the disturbances associated with “wilderness” are now gone, while the only remaining disturbances are those associated with the singleness of mind based on the perception of “earth.”

He then repeats the same process with ever more refined perceptions, settling into the formless jhanas, or meditative absorptions: infinite space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, neither perception nor non-perception, and the objectless concentration of awareness.

Finally, seeing that even this objectless concentration of awareness is fabricated and willed, he drops his desire to continue mentally fabricating anything at all. In this way he is released from the mental fermentations—sensual desire, becoming, views, ignorance—that would “bubble up” into further becoming. He observes that this release still has the disturbances that come with the functioning of the six sense spheres, but that it’s empty of all fermentation, all potential for further suffering and stress. This, concludes the Buddha, is the entry into a pure and undistorted emptiness that is superior and unsurpassed. It’s the emptiness in which he himself dwells and that, throughout time, has never been nor ever will be excelled.

Throughout this description, emptiness means one thing: empty of disturbance or stress. The meditator is taught to appreciate the lack of disturbance as a positive accomplishment, and to see any remaining disturbance created by the mind, however subtle, as a problem to be solved.

When you understand disturbance as a subtle form of harm, you see the connections between this description of emptiness and the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula. Instead of regarding his meditative states as a measure of self-identity or self-worth—in having developed a self that’s purer, more expansive, more at one with the ground of being—the monk views them simply in terms of actions and their consequences. And the same principles apply here, on the meditative level, as apply in the Buddha’s comments to Rahula on action in general.

Here, the action is the perception that underlies your state of meditative concentration. You settle into the state by repeating the action of perception

continually until you are thoroughly familiar with it. Just as Rahula discovered the consequences of his actions by observing the obvious harm done to himself or to others, here you discover the consequences of concentrating on the perception by seeing how much disturbance arises from the mental action. As you sense disturbance, you can change your mental action, moving your concentration to a more refined perception, until ultimately you can stop the fabrication of mental states altogether.

At the core of this meditation practice are two important principles derived from the instructions to Rahula. The first is honesty: the ability to be free of embellishment or denial, adding no interpretation to the disturbance actually present, while at the same time not trying to deny that it's there. An integral part of this honesty is the ability to see things simply as action and result, without reading into them the conceit "I am."

The second principle is compassion—the desire to end suffering—in that you keep trying to abandon the causes of stress and disturbance wherever you find them. The effects of this compassion extend not only to yourself, but to others as well. When you don't weigh yourself down with stress, you're less likely to be a burden to others; you're also in a better position to help shoulder their burdens when need be. In this way, the principles of integrity and compassion underlie even the most subtle expressions of the wisdom leading to release.

This process of developing emptiness of disturbance is not necessarily smooth and straightforward. It keeps requiring the strength of will needed to give up any attachment. This is because an essential step in getting to know the meditative perception as an action is learning to settle into it, to indulge in it—in other words, to enjoy it thoroughly, even to the point of attachment. This is one of the roles of tranquility in meditation. If you don't learn to enjoy the meditation enough to keep at it consistently, you won't grow familiar with it. If you aren't familiar with it, insight into its consequences won't arise.

However, unless you've already had practice using the Rahula instructions to overcome grosser attachments, then even if you gain insight into the disturbances caused by your attachment to concentration, your insight will lack integrity. Because you haven't had any practice with more blatant attachments, you won't be able to pry loose your subtle attachments in a reliable way. You first need to develop the moral habit of looking at your actions and their consequences, believing firmly—through experience—in the worth of refraining from harm, however subtle. Only then will you have the skill needed to develop emptiness as an approach to meditation in a pure and undistorted way that will carry you all the way to its intended goal.

Emptiness as an Attribute of the Senses and their Objects

Emptiness as an attribute, when used as a departure point for practice, leads to a similar process but by a different route. Whereas emptiness as an approach to meditation focuses on issues of disturbance and stress, emptiness as an attribute focuses on issues of self and not-self. And whereas emptiness as an approach to meditation starts with tranquility, emptiness as an attribute starts with insight.

The Buddha describes this kind of emptiness in a short discourse (SN XXXV.85). Again, Ananda is his interlocutor, opening the discourse with a question: In what way is the world empty? The Buddha answers that each of the six senses and their objects are empty of one's self or anything pertaining to one's self.

The discourse gives no further explanation, but related discourses show that this insight can be put into practice in one of two ways. The first is to reflect on what the Buddha says about "self" and how ideas of self can be understood as forms of mental activity. The second way, which we will discuss in the next section, is to develop the perception of all things being empty of one's self as a basis for a state of refined concentration. However, as we shall see, both of these tactics ultimately lead back to using the first form of emptiness, as an approach to meditation, to complete the path to awakening.

When talking about "self," the Buddha refused to say whether it exists or not, but he gave a detailed description of how the mind develops the idea of self as a strategy based on craving. In our desire for happiness, we repeatedly engage in what the Buddha calls "I-making" and "my-making" as ways of trying to exercise control over pleasure and pain. Because I-making and my-making are actions, they fall under the purview of the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. Whenever you engage in them, you should check to see whether they lead to affliction; if they do, you should abandon them.

This is a lesson that, on a blatant level, we learn even as children. If you lay claim to a piece of candy belonging to your sister, you're going to get into a fight. If she's bigger than you, you'd do better not to claim the candy as yours. Much of our practical education as we grow up lies in discovering where it's beneficial to create a sense of self around something, and where it's not.

If you learn to approach your I-making and my-making in the light of the Rahula instructions, you greatly refine this aspect of your education, as you find yourself forced to be more honest, discerning, and compassionate in seeing where an "I" is a liability, and where it's an asset. On a blatant level, you discover that while there are many areas where "I" and "mine" lead only to useless conflicts, there are others where they're beneficial. The sense of "I" that leads you

to be generous and principled in your actions is an “I” worth making, worth mastering as a skill. So, too, is the sense of “I” that can assume responsibility for your actions, and can be willing to sacrifice a small pleasure in the present for a greater happiness in the future. This kind of “I,” with practice, leads away from affliction and toward increasing levels of happiness. This is the “I” that will eventually lead you to practice meditation, for you see the long-term benefits that come from training your powers of mindfulness, concentration, and discernment.

However, as meditation refines your sensitivity, you begin to notice the subtle levels of affliction and disturbance that I-making and my-making can create in the mind. They can get you attached to a state of calm, so that you resent any intrusions on “my” calm. They can get you attached to your insights, so that you develop pride around “my” insights. This can block further progress, for the sense of “I” and “mine” can blind you to the subtle stress on which the calm and insights are based. If you’ve had training in following the Rahula instructions, though, you’ll come to appreciate the advantages of learning to see even the calm and the insights as empty of self or anything pertaining to self. That is the essence of this second type of emptiness. When you remove labels of “I” or “mine” even from your own insights and mental states, how do you see them? Simply as instances of stress arising and passing away—disturbance arising and passing away—with nothing else added or taken away. As you pursue this mode of perception, you’re adopting the first form of emptiness, as an approach to meditation.

Emptiness as a State of Concentration

The third kind of emptiness taught by the Buddha—as a state of concentration—is essentially another way of using insight into emptiness as an attribute of the senses and their objects as a means to attain release. One discourse (MN 43) describes it as follows: A monk goes to sit in a quiet place and intentionally perceives the six senses and their objects as empty of self or anything pertaining to self. As he pursues this perception, it brings his mind not directly to release, but to the formless jhana of nothingness, which is accompanied by strong equanimity.

Another discourse (MN 106) pursues this topic further, noting that the monk relishes the equanimity. If he simply keeps on relishing it, his meditation goes no further than that. But if he learns to see that equanimity as an action—fabricated, willed—he can look for the subtle stress it engenders. If he can observe this stress as it arises and passes away simply on its own terms, neither adding any other perceptions to it nor taking anything away, he’s again adopting emptiness as an

approach to his meditation. By dropping the causes of stress wherever he finds them in his concentration, he ultimately reaches the highest form of emptiness, free from all mental fabrication.

The Wisdom of Emptiness

Thus the last two types of emptiness ultimately lead back to the first—emptiness as an approach to meditation—which means that all three types of emptiness ultimately lead to the same destination. Whether they interpret emptiness as meaning empty of disturbance (suffering/stress) or empty of self, whether they encourage fostering insight through tranquility or tranquility through insight, they all culminate in a practice that completes the tasks appropriate to the four noble truths: comprehending stress, abandoning its cause, realizing its cessation, and developing the path to that cessation. Completing these tasks leads to release.

What's distinctive about this process is the way it grows out of the principles of action-purification that the Buddha taught to Rahula, applying these principles to every step of the practice from the most elementary to the most refined. As the Buddha told Rahula, these principles are the only possible means by which purity can be attained. Although most explanations of this statement define *purity* as purity of virtue, the Buddha's discussion of emptiness as an approach to meditation shows that purity here means purity of mind and purity of wisdom as well. Every aspect of the training is purified by viewing it in terms of actions and consequences, which helps to develop the integrity that's willing to admit to unskillful actions, and the mature goodwill that keeps aiming at consequences entailing ever less harm, disturbance, and stress.

This is where this sort of emptiness differs from the metaphysical definition of emptiness as "lack of inherent existence." Whereas that view of emptiness doesn't necessarily involve integrity—it's an attempt to describe the ultimate truth of the nature of things, rather than to evaluate actions—this approach to emptiness requires honestly evaluating your mental actions and their results. Integrity is thus integral to its mastery.

In this way, the highest levels of wisdom and discernment grow primarily not from the type of knowledge fostered by debate and logical analysis, nor from the type fostered by bare awareness or mere noting. They grow from the knowledge fostered by integrity, devoid of conceit, coupled with compassion and goodwill.

The reason for this is so obvious that it's often missed: if you're going to put an end to suffering, you need the compassion to see that this is a worthwhile goal, and the integrity to admit the suffering you've heedlessly and needlessly caused throughout the past. The ignorance that gives rise to suffering occurs not

because you don't know enough or are not philosophically sophisticated enough to understand the true meaning of emptiness. It comes from being unwilling to admit that what you're obviously doing right before your very eyes is causing suffering. This is why awakening destroys conceit: it awakens you to the full extent of the willful blindness that has kept you complicit in unskillful behavior all along. It's a chastening experience. The only honest thing to do in response to this experience is to open to release. That's the emptiness that's superior and unsurpassed.

In building the path to this emptiness on the same principles that underlie the more elementary levels of action-purification, the Buddha managed to avoid creating artificial dichotomies between conventional and ultimate truths in the practice. For this reason, his approach to ultimate wisdom helps validate the more elementary levels as well. When you realize that an undistorted understanding of emptiness depends on the skills you develop in adopting a responsible, honest, and kind attitude toward all your actions, you're more likely to bring this attitude to everything you do—gross or subtle. You give more importance to all your actions and their consequences, you give more importance to your sense of integrity, for you realize that these things are directly related to the skills leading to total release. You can't develop a throwaway attitude to your actions and their consequences, for if you do you're throwing away your chances for a true and unconditional happiness. The skills you need to talk yourself into meditating on a cold, dark morning, or into resisting a drink on a lazy afternoon, are the same ones that will eventually guarantee an undistorted realization of the highest peace.

This is how the Buddha's teachings on emptiness encourage you to exercise wisdom in everything you do.

A Verb for Nirvana

Back in the days of the Buddha, nirvana (*nibbana*) had a verb of its own: *nibbuti*. It meant to “go out,” like a flame. Because fire was thought to be in a state of entrapment as it burned—both clinging to and trapped by the fuel on which it fed—its going out was seen as an unbinding. To go out was to be unbound. Sometimes another verb was used—*parinibbuti*—with the “*pari-*” meaning total or all-around, to indicate that the person unbound, unlike fire unbound, would never again be trapped.

Now that nirvana has become an English word, it should have its own English verb to convey the sense of “being unbound” as well. At present, we say that a person “reaches” nirvana or “enters” nirvana, implying that *nibbana* is a place where you can go. But nirvana is most emphatically not a place. It’s realized only when the mind stops defining itself in terms of place: of here, or there, or between the two.

This may seem like a word-chopper’s problem—what can a verb or two do to your practice?—but the idea of nirvana as a place has created severe misunderstandings in the past, and it could easily create misunderstandings now. There was a time when some philosophers in India reasoned that if nirvana is one place and *samsara* another, then entering into nirvana leaves you stuck: you’ve limited your range of movement, for you can’t get back to *samsara*. Thus to solve this problem they invented what they thought was a new kind of nirvana: an unestablished nirvana, in which one could be in both places—nirvana and *samsara*—at once.

However, these philosophers misunderstood two important points about the Buddha’s teachings. The first was that neither *samsara* nor nirvana is a place. *Samsara* is a process of creating places, even whole worlds, (this is called *becoming*) and then wandering through them (this is called *birth*). Nirvana is the end of this process. You may be able to be in two places at once—if your sense of self is infinite enough, you can occupy the entirety of space all at once—but you can’t feed a process and experience its end at the same time. You’re either feeding *samsara* or you’re not. If you feel the need to course freely through both *samsara* and nirvana, you’re simply engaging in more *samsara-ing* and keeping yourself trapped.

The second point is that nirvana, from the very beginning, was realized through unestablished consciousness—one that doesn’t come or go or stay in

place. There's no way that anything unestablished can get stuck anywhere at all, for it's not only non-localized but also undefined.

The idea of a religious ideal as lying beyond space and definition is not exclusive to the Buddha's teachings, but issues of locality and definition, in the Buddha's eyes, had a specific psychological meaning. This is why the non-locality of nirvana is important to understand.

Just as all phenomena are rooted in desire, consciousness localizes itself through passion. Passion is what creates the "there" on which consciousness can land or get established, whether the "there" is a form, feeling, perception, thought-construct, or a type of consciousness itself. Once consciousness gets established on any of these aggregates, it becomes attached and then proliferates, feeding on everything around it and creating all sorts of havoc. Wherever there's attachment, that's where you get defined as a being. You create an identity there, and in so doing you're limited there. Even if the "there" is an infinite sense of awareness grounding, surrounding, or permeating everything else, it's still limited, for "grounding" and so forth are aspects of place. Wherever there's place, no matter how subtle, passion lies latent, looking for more food to feed on.

If, however, the passion can be removed, there's no more "there" there. One sutta illustrates this with a simile: the sun shining through the eastern wall of a house and landing on the western wall. If the western wall, the ground beneath it, and the waters beneath the ground were all removed, the sunlight wouldn't land. In the same way, if passion for form, etc., could be removed, consciousness would have no "where" to land, and so would become unestablished. This doesn't mean that consciousness would be annihilated, simply that—like the sunlight—it would now have no locality. With no locality, it would no longer be defined.

This is why the consciousness of nirvana is said to be "without surface" (*anidassanam*), for it doesn't land. Because the consciousness-aggregate covers only consciousness that is near or far, past, present, or future—i.e., in connection with space and time—consciousness without surface is not included in the aggregates. It's not eternal because eternity is a function of time. And because *non-local* also means *undefined*, the Buddha insisted that an awakened person—unlike ordinary people—can't be located or defined in any relation to the aggregates in this life; after death, he/she can't be described as existing, not existing, neither, or both, because descriptions can apply only to definable things.

The essential step toward this non-local, undefined realization is to cut back on the proliferations of consciousness. This first involves contemplating the drawbacks of keeping consciousness trapped in the process of feeding. This contemplation gives urgency to the next steps: bringing the mind to oneness in concentration, gradually refining that oneness, and then dropping it to zero. The

drawbacks of feeding are most graphically described in SN XII.63, *A Son's Flesh*. The process of gradually refining oneness is probably best described in MN 121, *The Lesser Discourse on Emptiness*, while the drop to zero is best described in the Buddha's famous instructions to Bahiya: "In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. In reference to the heard, only the heard. In reference to the sensed, only the sensed. In reference to the cognized, only the cognized.' That is how you should train yourself. When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in reference to the heard, only the sensed in reference to the sensed, only the cognized in reference to the cognized, then, Bahiya, there is no you in connection with that. When there is no you in connection with that, there is no you there. When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress."

With no here or there or between the two, you obviously can't use the verb "enter" or "reach" to describe this realization. Maybe we should make the word nirvana into a verb itself: "When there is no you in connection with that, you nirvana." That way we can indicate that unbinding is an action unlike any other, and we can head off any mistaken notion about getting "stuck" in total freedom.

The Practice in a Word

The Buddha could have concluded his teaching career with some inspiring words on the bliss of nirvana or emptiness, but he didn't. He ended with this piece of advice: "Achieve completion through *appamada*." Common English translations of "through *appamada*" — such as "untiringly," "earnestly," "with diligence" — convey the notion of sustained, determined effort. These give the impression that the Buddha's last message was to stick with the practice. Translations of the phrase into various Asian languages, though, give it a different twist. Sri Lankan commentaries translate *appamada* as "unrelaxed mindfulness"; Thais interpret it as heedfulness, vigilance, wariness, care. In these interpretations, the Buddha wasn't simply saying to persevere. He was saying, "Don't be complacent. Watch out for danger. Don't get caught with your guard down."

These interpretations help make sense of other instances where the Buddha stressed the importance of *appamada*, as when he said that *appamada* is the path to the Deathless, or that all skillful qualities of mind are rooted in *appamada*, converge in *appamada*, and have *appamada* as the foremost among them. Mere sustained effort can't fill the role of *appamada* in these passages, for effort without wisdom can wreak all sorts of havoc. Vigilance and heedfulness, however, provide the perspective needed to keep effort on the right track: keeping us wary of our potential for causing pointless suffering for ourselves and others, and teaching us to trust in our ability—if we take the appropriate care—to bring those sufferings to an end.

This combined sense of wariness and trust is based on conviction of the principle of karma: that our actions really do make a difference, that the difference between causing and not causing suffering really does matter, and that the principles of skillful and unskillful action are patterned enough that we really can learn useful lessons from our mistakes. At the same time, this combination of wariness and trust is what allows *appamada* to play such an important role in the practice, providing the motivation to get on the path of skillful action in the first place, and the inner checks and balances that can keep us on the path all the way to the Deathless. Without a strong sense of trust in the path, it's hard to attempt it; without a strong sense of the dangers inherent in any conditioned happiness, it's easy to fall off.

The chief danger, of course, lies in the mind's creative capacity for self-deception. But—unlike many other religious figures—the Buddha didn't simply recommend that if we can't trust ourselves we should place our trust in him.

Instead, he provided ways for us to train ourselves to be trustworthy by investigating the areas where we tend to lie to ourselves most: our intentions and the results of our actions. In his first instructions to his son, Rahula, he told Rahula to reflect on his intentions before acting on them, and to carry through with them only if he saw that his intended action would cause no harm. While acting, he should reflect on the immediate results of his actions; if they were causing any unintended harm, he should stop. After acting, he should reflect on the long-term results of his actions. If he saw that they actually did cause harm, he should resolve never to repeat them. If they didn't, he should take joy and continue on the path.

These are basic instructions in integrity: learning to see where you can and can't trust yourself, and—by repeatedly testing yourself against the principle of action and result—making yourself a person you can consistently trust. As you develop this inner integrity, it becomes easier to gauge the integrity of any teaching or teacher you encounter, for here, too, the Buddha recommends vigilance, testing things through action and result. Gauge teachings by the harm they do or don't create when you put them into practice. Gauge teachers, not by their special powers, divine authority, or enlightened transmission, but by the harm they do or don't do through their actions.

This pattern of heedful scrutiny applies not only to blatant actions but also to the most subtle workings of the mind: your response to sensory stimuli, your deepest meditative and non-meditative experiences. Whatever you're doing—and especially when you don't seem to be doing anything at all—don't be complacent. Look carefully, again and again, for even the slightest stress or disturbance you might be causing inadvertently, and learn how to drop whatever you're doing that's causing it. Keep at this until there's nothing more to be dropped.

In this way, your sense of appamada helps to ensure that your path goes all the way to the Deathless. To borrow an old analogy: if the practice is like a building, then appamada is not only the foundation. It also acts as the walls and the roof as well.