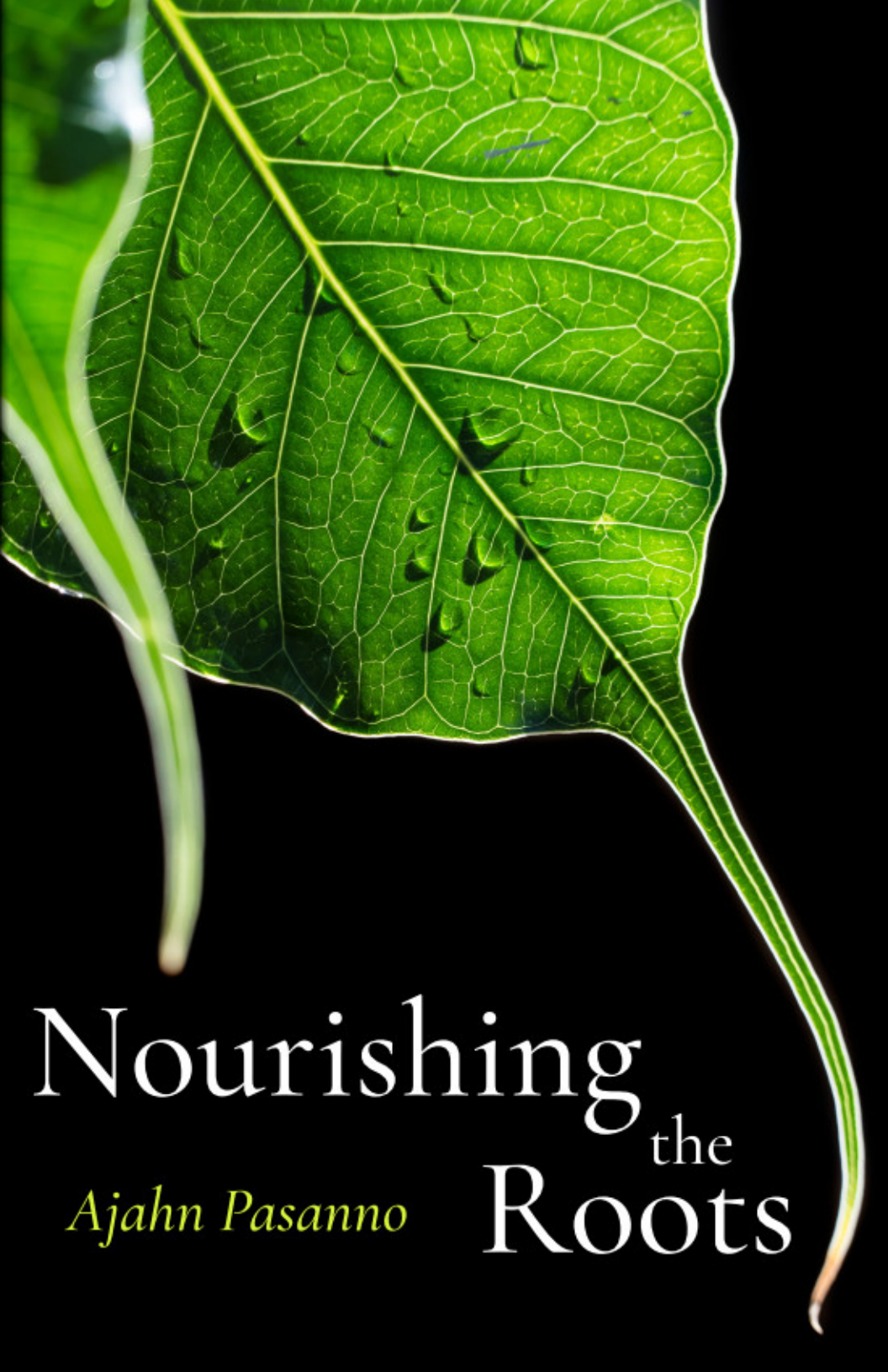
Nourishing the Roots
Ajahn Pasanno

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Purifying the Foundation

Often, how we begin something tends to condition the direction it goes. Whenever there are various beginnings and endeavors that we embark on, starting in a clear and skillful way is really helpful.

When we think about practicing meditation in our lives or developing our Buddhist practice, we tend to think of the different meditation techniques and our successes and failures in our meditation. Ajahn Chah was a great meditation master. He was somebody who taught meditation to the monastic and lay communities. He himself was very adept. But if you look at the bulk of his teachings, there's much more of an importance placed on two themes: *sīla* and *sammādiṭṭhi,* virtue and right view. It's very important to take note of this because so often we think, "What's wrong with my meditation technique? What's wrong with my mind? My mind is all over the place." We forget that there are roots that need to be nurtured.

Sometimes it's much more useful to backtrack and see what we can do to reestablish our connection with our *sīla*, our virtue, and examine what kind of view we are holding. In what ways can I adjust my view to be supportive of my practice? Often the meditation flows out of that. Everything has a root, and we are able to nourish the roots skillfully.

There's a discourse in the Saṃyutta Nikāya that has the same theme. A monk comes to the Buddha and asks him for instructions so that he can go off and practice diligently. Curiously enough, the Buddha actually admonishes him, speaks to him pretty sharply, saying,

"What is this, people coming and asking questions and not bothering to follow up on the practice." Then the monk reiterates, saying, "Please, may I have some instruction in brief so that I can go off and practice?"

Then the Buddha agrees to teach. He says to purify the very starting point of wholesome states. To purify the very starting point of wholesome states is to purify virtue and to make one's views straight, aligning the views with *sammādiṭṭhi*, right view. He says that once one has purified *sīla* and made one's views straight, with that foundation, then direct one's attention to the four foundations of mindfulness. It's a very interesting instruction. The Buddha is placing emphasis on coming back and purifying the very starting point of wholesome states.

When we direct our attention to mindfulness and to meditation, if that root of wholesome mental qualities is there, then the meditation is going to go a lot more smoothly; it's going to be much more accessible to us. Purifying virtue is not so much about getting the legal description of the precepts and then seeing how much one has to do and how much one can get away with. It's more about approaching the precepts from a place of *hiri* and *ottappa*. In Buddhist practice, these qualities are called the protectors of the world.

These protectors of the world are difficult to translate into English. A good translation for *hiri* is conscience, but it's sometimes a sense of shame or shrinking back from the unwholesome. It's important to recognize the difference because shame and guilt can make it very complicated. The root of conscience is a respect for oneself when one either is contemplating doing something or when one has done something that is unskillful, and it elicits a sense of "Gosh, I can do a lot better than that." One wants to protect oneself from one's own unskillfulness. There's a sense of respect for oneself. There's directing attention to a sense of protection, of looking after oneself so that one is able to nurture the qualities that uplift the mind and brighten the heart. That's *hiri*.

Ottappa is often translated as a fear of wrongdoing. Again, it's a sense of shame and fear, but it's a fear of wrongdoing because of respect for others. So *hiri* and *ottappa* are rooted in respect: respect for oneself and respect for others. One holds oneself and others dear. Then one doesn't want to harm or create suffering for others.

When our integrity, our *sīla*, has this wholesome root, it keeps bringing more and more wholesome mental states because it's based on a wise understanding that our actions have results, both for ourselves and for others. Since our actions have results, we want to make sure those results are ones that we can delight in and that create a sense of well-being and harmony with those around us.

From a Buddhist perspective, our *sīla*, our precepts, are training rules. Training: we're learning, educating ourselves. It's not beating ourselves into submission; it's a learning process. When we take the precepts, the Pali for the word precept is *sikkhāpadaṃ*. That word *sikkhāpadaṃ* is a mixture of two words, *pada*, which means foot or base, and *sikkhā*, which is to learn, to study, to train, to educate. Certainly in the Buddha's time, education was an actual, hands-on engagement. It's not sitting down with a book and memorizing something but learning through our conduct.

We train and learn through doing. It's through our actions of body and speech that we're training. We're learning. We educate ourselves. What works? What doesn't work? What's beneficial? What's not beneficial? What leads to well-being and happiness? What leads to complication and difficulty?

That's what precepts are: they're training rules that we gain skill in through living. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we get it wrong, but we can learn from it. Purifying virtue is that willingness to learn from our engagement with our actions of body and speech, and then our mind is right there as well. It's a learning process.

Virtue is something we're cultivating and developing because it does have a result, and that is the foundation of right view, making our views straight, making our views align with *sammādiṭṭhi*. The foundation of right view is the sense of being the owner of our actions.

When we do the chant on the Divine Abidings, for equanimity we chant, *sabbe sattā kammassakā kammadāyādā kammayonī kammabandhū kammapaṭisaraṇā*. "I am the owner of my action, heir to my action, born of my action, related to my action, abide supported by my action." We tune into the sense that we *do* reap what we sow—what we do has results.

We're hard-wired to prefer happiness and well-being to suffering, pain, and difficulty. It's very much a part of our human nature. And we *still* do things that create suffering for ourselves. It's one of the curious aspects of human existence. We know something, forget about it, and then go ahead and do things that are to our detriment. But that is also the cultivation of wisdom and discernment: being able to have clear knowledge and understanding, having that right view so that we follow through with our actions and speech. "If I'm the heir to my actions, owner of my actions, then I really want to do that which brings happiness and well-being to myself and to others." Again, that's the very starting point of wholesome states. This phrase I find very beautiful.

When we say we're the owners of our actions, heirs to our actions, it's also recognizing that we have a certain element of freedom to make choices and to make *skillful* choices. I've heard it expressed many times in Buddhist circles, "Everything is kamma. Everything you experience is a result of kamma. Whatever you experience, it's because of something that you've done in your past." That is an extreme view, which is not *sammādiṭṭhi*, not right view. It's a view, but it's not *right* view. The Buddha himself said that, in addition to kamma, there are just the aspects of nature. We inhabit a natural world and a human body, and we're affected by all of it.

In the Buddha's teachings there are different natural laws that affect us. There are inorganic laws of science, *utu-niyama*. I can remember years ago—it's actually sixteen years ago around this time—this big tsunami that took place in Southeast Asia and affected South Asia. People said, "Well, it's kamma." Well, no! There are tectonic plates.

It's science. These are natural laws and that's the way the natural world works. These are laws that govern us.

Bīja-niyama are organic natural laws. *Bīja* means seed and refers to aspects of the way plants and nature work. One can even say genetics can be a part of *bīja-niyama*. These are organic laws of nature and they affect us.

We're conditioned in different ways, *citta-niyama*, the way the mind responds to circumstances. It can be in a beneficial way or it can be in a non-beneficial way. The mind has a role to play. *Kamma-niyama* is your force law. And the last one is *dhamma-niyama*, which is a catch-all. It ends up being more social: how things integrate and play together and create social dynamics.

All these different dynamics are affecting us. Kamma is one of them. But what we *do* definitely has a result. If you respond to somebody with anger and aversion, you'll probably get a negative response back. If you respond with kindness and patience, you tend to get that same response back. That's how we *feel* it as well: it resonates internally. At the very starting point of wholesome states we have a role to play.

The Buddha points to the root defilements: greed, hatred, delusion. These are going to create problems. When the Buddha points to the cause of suffering, he's pointing to *taṇhā*: desire, thirst. But *taṇhā* is always desire that is tainted with greed, hatred, delusion. It always ends up in a place of suffering and complication. It always ends up unsatisfactory.

We translate *taṇhā* into English as desire, but it's important to recognize that *taṇhā* as a cause of suffering is a technical term. It is desire that has greed, hatred, and delusion and is always going to end in suffering, whereas we have different kinds of desires in English. You have the desire to do good. You have the desire to meditate, to start the new year with practicing Dhamma. It's incredibly wholesome. That's a great desire. That's a really wholesome desire. But that wouldn't be called *taṇhā* in the scriptural language. That would be *chanda*. It's desire or motivation that can be wholesome.

When we recognize that we have these different desires we can nurture something that is good. You can't try to annihilate all forms of desire or all forms of action, like "I shouldn't be doing anything." What we do has results. It can be wholesome results; it can be unwholesome results. We need to do the work that allows us to establish clarity, wisdom, and discernment so that we can make the choices that nurture well-being, skillfulness, happiness, and peace. One of the words that the Buddha uses to describe the peaceful mind is *kammaniya*, ready for work. It's ready to do what needs to be done, to do what is skillful. Being the owners of our actions means cultivating skill in developing our wisdom.

As we purify virtue and right view, the very starting point of wholesome states, we start directing attention to the four foundations of mindfulness. We bring attention to the body, feelings, mind, and objects of mind: basically, body and mind. This is the ground that we're cultivating. Our development is just this body and mind. It's not far away. It's not some other realm, somewhere else. It's just in this very body, this very mind, learning about it, studying it. Again, one of the bases of our Buddhist practice is *sikkhā*, training. In the same way that precepts are a form of training, the whole path of cultivation is a training, an education, a learning.

In a summary of the Noble Eightfold Path, the Buddha brings it down into what's called *tri-sikkhā*, the three trainings in virtue, meditation, and wisdom. Those are things to train in. Those are things to cultivate. Those are things to develop. As we pay attention, we can train ourselves; we can learn. The great beauty of a human birth is that we can actually learn. One is not able to actually learn in the lower realms or even in some of the higher realms. We have this human birth, and we can learn from our experience of happiness and suffering. We can learn from the things we did right; we can learn from the things we did wrong. And we can learn how to be free, how to liberate the heart. That is an incredible blessing.

But that learning needs to be based on directing attention mindfully. In the description of establishing mindfulness, the Buddha says

that having established those roots of wholesome states, one directs one's attention to the four foundations of mindfulness in three ways: internally, externally, and both internally and externally. For each of those four foundations of mindfulness, how do we experience it internally? How do we pay attention to our own experience and learn from that? And then how do we pay attention to the world outside of us and see how things play themselves out externally?

We're not isolated beings. We are inevitably connected to the world around us through our connections with our family, our friends, and our social situation. There are all these different layers of connection and we can learn from the external. *Opanayiko* in this sense means seeing something external and bringing it into the heart: learning from it, understanding it, cultivating discernment. How do we integrate the internal and external? How do we seek a balance so that there's a recognition and an understanding of both our own internal processes and the world around us?

Of course, that's a function of mindfulness. The foundation or the base is always in terms of coming back to the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha said it over and over again, "I teach only two things: *dukkha* and cessation of *dukkha*": suffering and ending of suffering, dissatisfaction and the ending of dissatisfaction, stress and the ending of stress. We need to be paying attention to ourselves and to the world around us. Then we have to integrate those two so that there's an evenness, a smoothness.

It's not just about being mindful of oneself. "If I'm just mindful and I keep my head down being mindful, then it's all going to work out." No, you have to pay attention to the world around you. When we do the chanting and recollect the Buddha, one of the qualities of the Buddha is *vijjā-carana-sampanno*: perfect in knowledge and conduct. The two are working together: the internal knowledge, the external expression, and then the understanding of those two. It's that sense of cultivating a clear understanding.

What are these four foundations of mindfulness for, and what is mindfulness anyway? Especially these days, there's a lot of complications around the expression of mindfulness. Whenever the Buddha talks about mindfulness, he always talks about it with four particular qualities. In the Pali they are *ātāpī*, *sampajāno*, *satimā*, and *vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṁ*. *Ātāpī* is ardent. There's an effort there, it's not passive-just-vegging-out mindfulness; there's some application. One needs to put forth a bit of effort. But again, even when we think of right effort in the Noble Eightfold Path, it's always about wholesome and unwholesome mental states. It's not necessarily about how spectacular it looks on the outside or how energetic it appears or how much flailing around one does. It's about the quality of the heart: increasing wholesome qualities and decreasing the unwholesome qualities. That's the purpose of right effort. *Ātāpī* is application, being ardent.

Sampajāno means clearly comprehending. A part of clear comprehension is that sense of how our actions of body, speech, and mind affect ourselves and affect others, clear comprehension of seeing how that plays itself out.

Satimā is possessed of mindfulness: being aware, being alert, being present.

The last quality, *vineyya loke abhijjhādomanassaṃ*, means pulling back from the habit of liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting, approving and not approving. We bounce around with our likes and our dislikes, the sense of "should be" or "shouldn't be" and keep spinning around. Mindfulness is the ability to have balance, to not be pulled in, the willingness to relinquish or let go of the positions we tend to take. We tend to invest in our positions: liking and disliking, right and wrong, good and bad. We take a stand on them, and we tend to suffer accordingly, usually sharing it out as well.

So, we seek a sense of balance in our practice, purifying the very starting point of wholesome states, then put our attention on these four foundations of mindfulness: the Buddha said that if we do that,

we will reap only that which is wholesome and skillful. That is the fruit. That is the result.

In the discourse itself, as these discourses go, the monk took the teaching that he received, went off and practiced, and realized awakening. But it's a teaching for all of us, recognizing that there are foundations that we need to build and practices that we need to be cultivating.

Mindfulness of Breathing: Food for the Heart

Mindfulness of breathing is probably the most common meditation object in the Buddhist tradition. Certainly in the discourses it's the most common meditation that the Buddha himself taught, and, one would assume, that he actually practiced himself.

There was an occasion when the Buddha went on an extended period of retreat in his dwelling place in Jeta's Grove at Sāvatthī. Ananda, his attendant, would come to bring food and look after his needs. One day the Buddha asked Ananda, "What would you tell people if they asked you about what the Buddha is doing? What meditation is the Buddha dwelling in? How would you answer?" Ananda said, "Well, I'm not sure. How should I answer?" The Buddha said, "You can tell people that the Tathāgata dwells in mindfulness of breathing. He's doing *ānāpānasati*."

Ānāpānasati is a meditation that one can take wherever one goes. You have to breathe, so it's always there for you, always present. It's something that can always be tuned in to. I remember one time Ajahn Chah was asked by a lay person what to do because it seemed so difficult to practice in the world: looking after livelihood, family, and various social relationships. It just seemed that there wasn't enough time to meditate. Ajahn Chah asked him, "Do you have enough time to breathe?" He said, "Well, yeah." "Then, you have enough time to meditate." Your meditation is your breath. The breath is always there, so you can direct attention to it. Also, when one sees that meditation, mental cultivation, and spiritual development are as important as

breathing, then one makes the time. It's really true. It's so critical to our well-being and existence.

One of the idioms that Ajahn Chah often used was "food for the heart." We provide sustenance and nourishment for our hearts with mindfulness of breathing. The classical sutta presentation of mindfulness of breathing is the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. These are found in the teachings on mindfulness of breathing and there are several discourses where the Buddha talks about it. It's something that Abhayagiri and many monasteries chant on a regular basis. It's familiar to us. We chant it. We recollect it. It comes to mind consistently.

It's a very straightforward discourse. It was given to monks, but it includes all practitioners. "When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it is of great fruit and great benefit. When mindfulness of breathing is developed and cultivated, it fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness." The development of mindfulness of breathing follows the structure of the four foundations of mindfulness. The four foundations of mindfulness are central to the tools that the Buddha has given us. "When the four foundations of mindfulness are developed and cultivated, they fulfill the seven factors of awakening." These seven aspects of training the mind lead us to awakening and enlightenment. When developed and cultivated, the seven factors fulfill true knowledge and deliverance. The Buddha puts a lot of weight behind this: it develops the tools and ripens the fruits of true knowledge and freedom.

"And how is mindfulness of breathing developed and cultivated so that it is of great fruit and great benefit? Here, a bhikkhu, gone to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty hut sits down having crossed his legs and sets his body erect, having established mindfulness in front of him." Just go to a quiet place. It can be anywhere: it can be in your home, in your apartment, at a park, or at a meditation center. Of course, it can be at your local monastery. Sit comfortably: it can be in a chair, sitting down and crossing one's legs, or however one needs to sit so that it's comfortable.

Set the body erect: don't slump and collapse in on oneself. When the body is upright, the mind is more upright. Establish mindfulness wherever it feels comfortable: tip of the nose, around the area of the throat, the chest, or the abdomen; wherever it's comfortable and recognizable. Ever mindful, breathe in. Mindful, breathe out. Then he goes into establishing mindfulness with the rhythm of the breath, however one is experiencing it.

This begins the actual sixteen steps. The sixteen steps are divided into sections according to the four foundations of mindfulness. Four steps in the section on the body, four in the section on feeling, four in the section on mind, four in the section of the mind objects or phenomena, the *dhammas*.

"Breathing in long, one knows, 'I breathe in long.' Breathing out long, one knows, 'I breathe out long.' " That's the first step: the long breath coming in, going out. The verb is *pajānāti*, clear knowing. In the noun form, the word is *paññā*, which means wisdom, discernment, or knowing clearly.

"Breathing in short, one knows, 'I breathe in short.' Breathing out short, one knows, 'I breathe out short.' " These are the first two steps: long breath, short breath. There's no need to control the breath. It's just a matter of knowing what the breath is. There's no right or wrong way to breathe. There's no "Oh, you've got too many long breaths in there. You're doing it all wrong! You should have a few short ones." That isn't the case at all; it's whatever the body is comfortable with. Settle into the rhythm of the breath and know clearly when one is breathing in long and breathing in short, whatever and however it is. Sometimes you'll take a long in-breath and have a short out-breath. It's however the body responds. The most important thing is the knowing.

The next section is on the body. For the rest of the fourteen steps, the verb changes in terms of duty or approach. The first two steps were *pajānāti*, knowing. For the rest, the operative verb is *sikkhati*, which means training, learning, and educating oneself. The noun in Pali is *sikkhā* and in Sanskrit, *śikṣā*. Thais use that word for study, "to

be a student." That's what you do as a student: *śikṣā*. We're learning; we're training. How we learn is through this training.

We study our experience as we breathe in and breathe out. "Training thus, I shall breathe in experiencing the whole body. Training thus, I shall breathe out experiencing the whole body." Take the whole body as a foundation to learn from, for what we're studying and for what we're training: "How do I inhabit my body?"

There's a short story in James Joyce's *Dubliners*. "Mr. Duffy lived a short distance from his body." Most of us are Mr. Duffys. We're a bit distant and not tuned in, anchored, grounded, or embodied. That's a very common experience for people who live in busy societies and who have gone through years if not decades of formal education and livelihood. There's so much emphasis given to the head that the rest of the body is sometimes forgotten or missed out on.

I don't know about Europe as I haven't been there in a while, but in America the pedestrian crosswalks have a stick figure that turns green for go. The figure is bent over, the head is leaning out, and it's *going*: that's what it's like for most people. I've heard that Europe is a little more upright and body-centered, but certainly in North America the head is really going out there and leading the way. How do we inhabit this whole body? How do we not get so caught up in our heads that we forget that there's something below the neck? Forgetting is not an uncommon experience.

Learning how to be aware and experience are the instructions given by the Buddha. The verb that is used for that is *paṭisaṃvedī*. Ajahn Geoff translates this as "sensitive to," a nice translation. "Experiencing" is also a good translation because the stem is *vedī*. *Paṭi* and *saṃ* are both amplifiers, and *vedī* has the same root as *vedanā*, feeling. Feeling the whole body fully: sensitive to, experiencing, present for the whole body.

Grounding the practice in the bodily experience is a helpful anchor for our practice. Our minds can be all over the place, but the body's corporeal: it's physical, it's material, it has some gravity to it. Our

minds can flit all over the place, but gravity helps to hold us here, and that's helpful.

Sensitive to bringing our experience into the body as we breathe in, as we breathe out. The last step in the section on the body is, "Training thus, I shall breathe in tranquilizing the bodily formations. Training thus, I shall breathe out tranquilizing the bodily formations." Ajahn Geoff translates it as calming, which I actually prefer, but I'm reading it from our chanting book. The word is *passambhayaṃ*, which has the same root as the enlightenment factor of *passaddhi*, tranquility. This calming has a mental and physical element.

The whole body (*sabbakāya*) is slightly different from the bodily formations (*kāyasaṅkhārā*). In the discourses, when the Buddha said the bodily formations or conditioners, he meant the in-and-out breathing. One uses the breath as a way to calm the body so that one settles, makes tranquil, the bodily processes. Of course, that's the whole body itself.

One uses the body as a vehicle for settling, calming, and making tranquil. It's an exercise and a training. When we train and we learn, it's the same as any other kind of training or learning. Sometimes we're successful and sometimes we're not. It's in the doing that we learn. When we train, sometimes it's easy and sometimes it's difficult, but we keep coming back to the training. Work with the breath, work with the body, and work with *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing. As we practice, we keep learning about what works and what doesn't work; what's helpful and what's not helpful. We learn what feels supportive and what seems like a dead end.

Sometimes when we're learning or training in something, after a while things that used to feel completely hopeless and difficult start to become easy. It's just the nature of training and learning. With mindfulness of breathing, it is not that one sits down and pays attention to the breath and everything becomes completely clear. This is an ongoing learning, an ongoing training.

The next section is on feeling, *vedanā*, if one lines it up with the four foundations of mindfulness. *Pīti paṭisaṁvedī*: "Training thus, I

shall breathe in experiencing rapture. Training thus, I shall breathe out experiencing rapture." Once the body is more relaxed, there's a settling, and one can start tuning into the pleasant feelings that arise. For *pīti*, "rapture" might be a bit strong; other words are joy or exhilaration. As the mind settles on the breath and becomes more steady, the body relaxes and becomes more easeful. Internally, the feeling that arises within the mind is one of exhilaration and light; it's joyful. That should be attended to and encouraged.

"Training thus, I shall breathe in experiencing pleasure. Training thus, I shall breathe out experiencing pleasure." The Pali word here is *sukha*. *Pīti*, joy, tends to be a bit more mind-oriented, more of a mental event. *Sukha*, happiness or pleasure, is a bit more of a bodily experience. It's satisfying to feel pleasure. For some people, meditation doesn't seem very pleasurable. Why would you make yourself sit there and just do nothing? Good grief! The opportunity to settle, to deeply relax, is very conducive to joy, to pleasure, and to happy states of mind.

The next step in the section on feeling is, "Training thus, I shall breathe in, experiencing the mental formations. Training thus, I shall breathe out, experiencing the mental formations." This is *citta-saṅkhāra*: *citta* being mind and *saṅkhāra* is formation and also that which forms. These are what condition the mind. This is why it's in the section on feeling, because it's what forms the mind, constructs the mind.

What forms the mind? What constructs it? What conditions it? The Buddha points to feeling and perception. Every mental state has a feeling tone: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. And each has *saññā*: perception, memory, association, a pre-thought process. It's not thinking; it's perceiving, recognizing, and associating. This is what starts the ball rolling in the mind. In order to understand the mind, we have to understand its fundamental or root processes. We have to experience, be sensitive to, and be able to fully feel the mental formations, feeling and perception. They're at a deep level of the mind, and the mind starts to move out from that point. Once it starts

moving, then it's like the train has left the station, and we're left behind. That's a problem.

The last step in the section on feeling is, "Training thus, I shall breathe in tranquilizing the mental formations. Training thus, I shall breathe out tranquilizing the mental formations." These point to the sense of calming, settling, and making the mind tranquil. This has to be done with full awareness, full recognition. The more clearly one sees, recognizes, and experiences, the more one is inclined to settle and calm rather than getting on the proliferation train. That is deeply settling, and it's a very fundamental process.

The first section of mindfulness of breathing was on paying attention to the body, next is paying attention to feeling. How do we feel? What is the tone? Not on the emotional level, but just the basic feeling tone. Is it pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?

Next is the section on the mind, *citta*: "Training thus, I shall breathe in, experiencing the mind. Training thus, I shall breathe out, experiencing the mind." Looking at the Buddha's teachings on the four foundations of mindfulness, he talks about mindfulness of the mind as knowing the mood, the content of the mind. It's knowing the mind with greed as the mind with greed and the mind without greed as the mind without greed; the mind with anger as the mind with anger. It's not getting a commentary going, "Oh, my mind has anger." Rather, it's "This is what a mind with anger is like. This is the experience without anger." With delusion, without delusion. The contracted mind as a contracted mind, the expanded mind as an expanded mind. The settled mind as a settled mind, the entangled mind as an entangled mind. The mind that's released as a mind that's released. It's knowing the fundamental mood of the mind, knowing the state of the mind and its basic content.

All through this cultivation, one relies on the breath. This is the thread that comes through all of this training, through all of this teaching. It's mindfulness of the in-breath, mindfulness of the out-breath. This has a very settling, integrating quality that supports our exploration, development, learning, and training.

The next one is "Training thus, I shall breathe in, gladdening the mind. Training thus, I shall breathe out, gladdening the mind." Gladdening is *abhipamodayaṃ*. It's sometimes understood as "delight." Ajahn Geoff translates it as "satisfying." Satisfying the mind with gladness, delight, and well-being. It's helpful to see that the cultivation of mindfulness of breathing is integral to our whole practice, as is incorporating joy, pleasure, and gladness. It's not illegal to meditate and feel good. It's an integral part of the whole unfolding process of Dhamma to let go and relinquish. We release much more readily from a place of well-being than if we're feeling put upon, oppressed, or closed in. Those feelings are not conducive to this path of practice.

The next one is *samādahaṃ:* "Training thus, I shall breathe in, concentrating the mind. Training thus, I shall breathe out, concentrating the mind." I'm not so keen on the word "concentrating." People tend to get really tense. Settle the mind, make the mind stable and firm. "Firming up the mind, I breathe in. Firming up the mind, I breathe out." Settling, calming, and firmly establishing are for our growth and well-being.

The next one is "Training thus, I shall breathe in, liberating the mind. Training thus, I shall breathe out, liberating the mind." *Vimocayaṃ* means liberating or releasing. This doesn't necessarily mean complete and final liberation, release. It's being willing to release just a little bit. The willingness to release our habits, our attachments, identity, and identification with things offers another avenue that's pleasurable. It's very satisfying. This wraps up the section on the mind.

It's important to note that this is not a one-to-sixteen program. You can pick up the sixteen steps at any point you want or need, or however many you find useful. It's a mix and match. It's all there for us to develop as completely as we want, in whatever way. But, we don't want to overwhelm ourselves. The Buddha has given us an incredible smorgasbord of tools—a great array of tools to choose and work with.

The aspect of letting go or release is an integral part of the whole training and cultivation of practice. It's like Ajahn Chah's well-known saying "If you let go a little, you'll get a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll get a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you'll get complete peace." Letting go is an ongoing unfolding. The sense of gladdening the mind is important. We can direct attention to themes, thoughts, and perceptions that facilitate the gladdening and satisfying of the mind. It's part of the practice or training.

The last part of this section is on *dhammas*: mental objects, phenomena, or themes of Dhamma. The first part is, "Training thus, I shall breathe in contemplating impermanence (*aniccānupassī*). Training thus, I shall breathe out, contemplating impermanence." Ajahn Geoff translates it is "inconstancy." Ajahn Chah expressed it often as uncertainty. "Training thus, I shall breathe in and out contemplating uncertainty, on change, on impermanence." The manifestation of *anicca* is a universal characteristic. The contemplation of change is a doorway to insight. The lack of permanence in everything, internal, external, coarse or refined, far or near: everything. Body, mind, personal, world: it's all *anicca*. It's all impermanent, uncertain, inconstant.

The next is "Training thus, I shall breathe in, contemplating the fading away of passions (*virāga*). Training thus, I shall breathe out, contemplating the fading away of passions." This is dispassion, directing attention to the cooling and releasing of the desire mode, the grasping mode. Releasing the passion for getting fired up to get this, be that, or want that. Reflect on it: has it ever really been satisfying? Has it ever fulfilled everything? This is where dispassion arises. It's not aversion or rejection. It's just fading. The passions fade because they're actually not satisfying.

Bringing the mind or the heart to a place of joy, tranquility, and delight—that's satisfying. Following desire, going out into the world, following the desire of self, propping up self in various ways—these are worth letting fade, allowing the mind to return to cooling and dispassion.

"Training thus, I shall breathe in, contemplating cessation (*nirodha*.) Training thus, I shall breathe out, contemplating cessation." This is contemplating the ending of things. The mind is attracted to beginnings. We can get really excited about new things. Even on a microcosmic level with mindfulness of breathing, why is the in-breath more interesting than the out-breath? Why does attention tend to fade or get distracted on the out-breath? It's because we tend to turn away from cessation or ending.

As a word, "cessation" has a nihilistic feeling to it, but *dukkha-nirodha*, the ending of suffering, can be a synonym for *nibbāna*. This is to bring about the end of defilements; the end of greed, hatred, and delusion. Another valid translation is "non-arising." In dependent origination, there's the arising of contact, feeling, and desire. There's also the cessation of contact, feeling, and desire. With the non-arising of ignorance, there is the non-arising of mental formations. With the non-arising of desire, there's the non-arising of clinging. That's an important distinction because we get obsessed with stamping out our greed, hatred, and delusion, stamping out our ignorance and lack of knowledge. Attuning to non-arising is very settling. There's a sense of peace in the non-arising of *dukkha*. We don't have to be stamping out *dukkha*; it's more like paying attention to the non-arising of *dukkha*, the non-arising of complication.

The last step in the whole Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118) is "Training thus, I shall breathe in contemplating relinquishment. Training thus, I shall breathe out contemplating relinquishment." Relinquishment in this sense is *paṭinissagga*. There's another word that's quite similar, *vosagga*. It's relinquishment of self-identity, the I-me-and-mine program that takes over. It's the relinquishment of a misapprehension, misperception, or misunderstanding as opposed to the relinquishment of some kind of solid self. This is the whole point of the non-self teaching of the Buddha.

In the different formulations of clinging, *upādāna*, the Buddha described *attavādupādāna*, the attachment to self. But it is attachment to *attavāda*, the belief in self, the assumption of self. We assume it

into existence; there's no solid self there. We're seeing that all the things that we assume as self are actually not. The *anattā* teaching is a middle-way teaching that gives us an opportunity to not get caught in the extremes of either negation or affirmation. In the Pali, you've got *attā*, which is an affirmation or propping up of self. But *niratta* is a negation, pushing away, rejection of self. *Anattā* is recognizing that whatever it is, it's not self. Whatever we assume in terms of body, mind, form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, or consciousness is not self. All the things that we take to be self are not. That's the not-self teaching of the Buddha.

It's through understanding, mindfulness, awareness, and clarity that we can turn to relinquishment and find that that's where our satisfaction lies. It's where our peace lies. Our well-being and clarity lie in the relinquishment itself. Mindfulness of breathing gives us a tangible approach to something that could easily be perceived as some kind of philosophical doctrine or religious belief.

What Accords With Dhamma

How are we holding the practice? The Buddha taught many different aspects of technique and method, often from an organic, big picture, complete view. How do we encompass that for ourselves? How do we develop a context for using different methods, techniques and particulars of practice?

One of the most clear and tangible examples showing the Buddha's approach is the discourse in the Anguttara Nikaya entitled Volition (AN 10.2). The Buddha explains that, beginning with virtue, causes and conditions are put into place and one reaps the fruits of that. The Buddha says that there is no real need for a virtuous person to set the intention, "May I experience non-regret, non-remorse." It is natural that that person would experience non-regret, non-remorse, and a sense of clarity and well-being with one's conduct. There's no need to set the intention or put forth the will, "May I experience gladness." The Buddha explains that it's natural.

He repeats this for gladness, joy, tranquility, happiness, and concentration. The Buddha then takes it from concentration on to seeing things clearly, experiencing dispassion, disenchantment, liberation, and knowledge and vision of liberation. It is important to note that it's not as if you are trying to squeeze gladness or joy out of your meager being. When we fill the heart with a sense of virtue, gladness is quite natural. The word the Buddha uses for that is *dhammatā*. It has a deep meaning: according to Dhamma, according to fundamental realities of truth. This is the way the universe works. It involves paying attention to the qualities that support a sense of well-being. It all ties in.

It is the effort of observing what increases wholesome *dhammas* and what decreases unwholesome *dhammas*. Virtue is for the increase of wholesome qualities, wholesome *dhammas*. Happiness, joy, appreciation, loving-kindness: these are all qualities that we can be attending to and cultivating. They lay the foundation for well-being within the *citta*, within the mind, the heart: wholesome dhammas increase, unwholesome dhammas decrease. It is a natural progression.

This is the way the Buddha describes the cultivation of our meditation—secluded from sensuality, secluded from unwholesome *dhammas*, unwholesome qualities. It's whatever we can do to facilitate the increase of wholesome qualities, wholesome *dhammas*, wholesome states of mind, and facilitate the decrease in the unwholesome. This is right effort, but the emphasis is on a natural cause-and-effect relationship. This leads to a refining of the *citta*, a sensitivity of the *citta*. That opens it to settling, to stillness, to clarity, to relinquishment, to release. That is *dhammatā*, according to Dhamma. This is the natural way of things. We want to be attending to ways that facilitate that. We have our precepts and our etiquette, so we can tune in to the appropriateness of our actions of body and speech. It beautifies the heart. We don't need to be keeping precepts out of fear of divine retribution; it is an opportunity to beautify the heart and to create the conditions for increased refinement and clarity. It's a natural process—we don't need to be trying to squeeze it out of ourselves.

Some of it is our own efforts, but it also involves paying attention to the conduct of others. The reality is that we are incredibly blessed to live with people who value virtue and sensitivity, honesty and integrity. That's incredibly rare in the world. Really make that conscious and delight in it. Living in that way, it's quite natural that there would be delight, *pāmojja*, gladdening. Given the habitual mind, we can easily home in on our flaws and faults, and the flaws and faults of others, and obsess over them. This creates pain for ourselves and others. That's why it's so important to have that bigger picture. It's a very wholesome quality to have the sense of conscience and a wish to

dwell in integrity. But balance is essential, so that one is not forgetting the bigger picture.

When we sit down to meditate, we are paying attention to whatever meditation object we use. When using the breath, we are paying attention to the in-breath, the out-breath, paying attention to the body, soothing the body with the breath, settling the mind with the breath-filled body. There's an ease that comes from that awareness and mindfulness. There's the appreciation of stillness, tranquility, and calm. We don't have to get all tied up in knots trying to hang on to it, or trying to force it to be there. When we are able to step back, attend to the breath, attend to the posture, attend to mindfulness and clear comprehension, there is an ease and a settling that quite naturally takes place. We want to direct our attention in that way, to be able to foster that, to abide and dwell in that.

It's not about developing our personality or trying to become the perfect person. Rather, it is learning how to be mindful and appreciating the things that we *do* have or what we *do* experience. I remember Luang Por Sumedho one time saying, "I am absolutely certain that my personality is never going to become enlightened." It's quite true. The nature of personality, personhood, the me-and-mine stance, is always going to be fraught with praise and blame, gain and loss, happiness and suffering. That is its very nature. How do we step back into the process of what is in accordance with Dhamma, *dhammatā*? What is actually natural? What is according to nature? When we are willing to drop all the other fears, concerns, obsessions, and desires, what is left? There is this tremendous opportunity for stillness and clarity, for well-being.

It's a natural process that relies on the wholesome. It relies on the skillful. We use *mettā*, loving-kindness. That sense of mettā is a field of well-being. We do the chant, "May I abide in well-being, may everyone abide in well-being." That kind of wish is a very beautiful state of mind; there's an uplift to it. It is so overwhelmingly wholesome that it's a powerful doorway into *samādhi*, the settling of the mind. It's extremely difficult—if not impossible—for the mind to

settle into stillness through analysis, comparing, and judging. That quality of loving-kindness becomes a foundation, a field that can be used in conjunction with the breath. It's like riding the breath with loving-kindness. There's a moving into stillness. It's a natural process, *dhammatā*. This is according to Dhamma. Secluded from sensuality, secluded from unwholesome *dhammas*. That's your basic foundation for *sammā-samādhi*, right concentration.

We use loving-kindness. Turn to it. Make it conscious. Again, it's not that we don't have it, but when it's not made conscious and appreciated, then one misses that opportunity. It's using *yoniso manasikāra*, wise attention, considered reflection, so that one is attending to the wholesome, attending to loving-kindness, to compassion, to gladness, to appreciation, to equanimity—the *brahmavihāras*. These are abidings that are truly divine. They are divine abidings not because they take you somewhere else, but because they place you front and center, right in the middle of what is completely wholesome, and the mind settles. It is the opportunity to be happy within and not be seeking for some kind of perfection or rightness of our personality that puts us in doubt and uncertainty. Rather, we fill the *citta*, the heart, with these wholesome qualities that the Buddha keeps pointing to over and over again.

One is looking at it from the place of a bigger picture rather than getting tied up in the nuts and bolts of which mental state comes first or how much of *this* is needed for *that*. There are many people who would be happy to explore that but, to me, it doesn't seem that fruitful. The Buddha is giving us the tools, "I teach only suffering and the ending of suffering."

We want to be able to recognize this feeling of limitation and lack, this feeling of somehow being at fault for something or other. We can analyze it, struggle with it, demonize it, or whatever. Or we can recognize it: "This is suffering." Then we can ask, "What is the cessation of suffering? What is the ending of suffering? What is the non-arising of suffering, *dukkha-nirodha*?" All of the components of the process—virtue, gladness, joy, happiness, tranquility, samādhi, stillness, seeing

things in their true nature, dispassion, and disenchantment—they all have that flavor of the non-arising of *dukkha*, the cessation of *dukkha*. This accords with Dhamma. This is natural. This is a natural process that we can be plugging into: *dhammatā*.

How do we approach practice? How do we see ourselves practicing? Is it *me* that is lacking in meditative skill and lacking in wisdom that has to get more stillness, more wisdom? Or is it that we have this life and this body, and this *citta* which can distinguish between happiness and suffering? Can I incline it toward that which is really uplifting and beneficial for myself and for others? Yes, of course. Not so much as a personal project to enhance my personality, but as the giving of oneself to the practice because it accords with Dhamma and it would be the wise way to accord with nature. That's a very different approach and the result is very different.

We can dedicate our practice for the well-being of others, trying to bring more goodness and peace into the world. Again, it's not personalized, but it is a recognition that people naturally appreciate something that is peaceful, clear, trustworthy, associated with happiness, not consumer-based. It's not just gratification of the senses, but it is a happiness that is unalloyed. It stands on its own and is based on skillfulness, on goodness, and it doesn't have any kind of problematic quality.

It's like in the story of the Buddha. He was fully committed to following the path of liberation that was the accepted standard in his time, and even in modern times: the path of abnegation, renunciation, and extreme asceticism. The Buddha was incredibly gung-ho. I am reading a book on the history of Tibet that is based on a series of conversations between the author, a historian, and His Holiness the Dalai Lama. It's not a scholastic history, but it relies on scholasticism. The author asks His Holiness what his favorite Buddha image is. His Holiness' favorite is a Gandhāran image found in northern Pakistan that depicts the Buddha at the peak of his extreme asceticism. It's very grim: eyes sunken and, as in the Buddha's description, ribs are sticking out like jutting rafters of an old run-down barn. When he touched his

belly he could feel his spinal column. Of course the author is surprised: "What? How can that be?" His Holiness explains that it reminds him of the dedication of the Buddha, the willingness of the Buddha to give everything for liberation. I thought that was very moving. The Buddha tried everything. He did realize, "This is fruitless." In his first discourse he describes it as an extreme that is not to be taken because it's painful and it doesn't bear fruit.

In the Mahasaccaka Sutta (MN 36), the Buddha is talking about his own ascetic practices to another ascetic, Saccaka. He describes the recollection of a time when he was a young boy, sitting outside in the shade of a tree. His mind became very still and he experienced tremendous happiness. He questioned why he feared that happiness, the happiness that has nothing to do with sensuality, nothing to do with unwholesome things, secluded from sensuality, secluded from unwholesome *dhammas*. It is completely wholesome. Probably many of us have that sense of not wanting to feel too good, not wanting to indulge, thinking, "I am going to pay for this." The Buddha was referring to *nirāmisa sukha*, a happiness that is not of the flesh, that is not bait. It's the happiness that is not bait set in a trap. It's not bait that you use to put on the end of a hook to catch something. It's a happiness that is unalloyed.

So virtue, mindfulness, settling the heart. Reflecting and considering: What is natural? What accords with Dhamma? What is *dhammatā*? What are those processes of cause and condition that lead to release, to the non-arising of *dukkha*? It's an exploration. It's the big picture, recognizing that if we start with that perspective, it's going to take us in that direction. If we start with "I've got to get this to gain that. I've got to achieve this, attain that in order to become something like a good practitioner," we tend to tie ourselves up. Yes, that has a conventional basis, but the underlying assumptions lead us in ways that entangle us. That itself is a kind of baited hook. So we direct our attention to the bigger picture, this sense of what accords with Dhamma. We are feeding, nourishing, and nurturing our practice.

I'll leave this for your reflection.

Awakening Through the Noble Truths

How can we live in the world skillfully? One aspect of right view, in a more worldly sense, is the recognition that we are the owners of our actions. Understanding this, we can actually create causes for well-being and happiness for ourselves, as well as for others. A deeper aspect of right view is the right view of the Four Noble Truths: there is *dukkha*, there is the cause of *dukkha*, there is the cessation of *dukkha*, and there is the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.

Our lives revolve around the sense of self and other, being and non-being, trying to get and trying to push away. This is ordinary. The view of me and others is deeply ingrained, with the focal point on *me*. The right view of the Four Noble Truths takes it away from the personal. The Buddha is encouraging us to reflect in terms of experience, cause and effect, skillful and unskillful, wholesome and unwholesome. These perspectives are less personal so we can reflect with a bit more clarity, spaciousness, and understanding on how these processes work.

Dukkha—normally translated as suffering, unsatisfactoriness, dis-ease, or stress—is an unskillful effect. The cause that brings about that *dukkha* is an unskillful cause. The cessation of *dukkha*, the ending of suffering or stress, is a skillful effect; it's a desired effect. We want to be free from any kind of discontent, dissatisfaction, and dis-ease. The path leading to the cessation of *dukkha* is a skillful cause. If we desire this effect, then we'll need to put in the causes. Nothing comes into being without a cause. It's a spacious way of looking at ourselves and the world around us so that we're not getting too tangled up in or

tortured with the kinds of assessments and judgments around "me" and "mine."

In reality we are hardwired to want happiness and well-being, but the Buddha understood that there are many different levels of happiness. There is the fleeting pleasure of the senses, the happiness of our relationships and connections with other people, and the happiness of goodness. But due to that sense of self, ownership, and identity, we end up getting tangled up with attachment. We tend to bounce around between happiness and suffering, joy and sorrow, pain and pleasure. Even when things are going really well, seeking and propping up happiness and well-being gets tiring.

The Buddha is very specific: if there was no happiness, people would not get attached to it and would not get entangled and stuck. One of the goals of the Buddha's path is peace and freedom. The Buddha is giving us the opportunity to move beyond happiness, the opportunity for peace and a sense of happiness that isn't shaken by anything. The Buddha actually says, "*Nibbānaṃ paramaṃ sukhaṃ*," nibbāna is the highest happiness (Dhp 204). It's a refinement of happiness—it's not gratification that hops, shifts, and changes.

These Four Noble Truths, set up in the time of the Buddha, follow a classical medical model. You look at the symptoms of the disease, you look for the cause, you look for the prognosis, and then you look for the treatment. The Buddha compared himself to a doctor treating the ills of the world. The primary ill of the world is this feeling of discontent, dissatisfaction, dis-ease, stress. The Buddha is pointing to it as a symptom of a disease. There is a cause. If it were the primary and only unmitigated condition, then we couldn't do anything about it. But the Buddha observed that this is an illness that has a cause. You go to a doctor and the doctor asks, "What are the symptoms? Where does it hurt? What does it feel like?" If you say, "I'm fine. It doesn't hurt," the doctor can't treat you.

We need to understand: What are the symptoms? What is the cause? This is where the Buddha points to the different forms of desire and attachment and clinging. Is it hopeless? No, there is the

possibility of cessation of *dukkha*, freedom from suffering. That is the prognosis—that the ending of *dukkha* is possible. There is a course of treatment: the Noble Eightfold Path.

The Buddha is not pointing to the Four Noble Truths as something that is to be believed in and blindly accepted. The Buddha is extremely practical. He is giving us the tools to explore so we can figure it out for ourselves. In the same way, a doctor can't really make us get better. They can give us medicine, a course of treatment, but *we* have to take the medicine. We have to look after ourselves so that whatever illness we have will abate and go away. The practice of Dhamma is this course of treatment for the underlying difficulty inherent in our existence.

The Buddha points to three main aspects of *dukkha*. There's *dukkha-dukkha*, the *dukkha* that is actually painful, that is uncomfortable, that is unsatisfactory—the actual feeling of pain when we experience grief, loss, frustration, or whatever. In his first discourse the Buddha says, "Birth is *dukkha*; aging is *dukkha*; illness is *dukkha*; death is *dukkha*; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are *dukkha*." We live in physical bodies that get tired; they age. We're awash with all sorts of different feelings and reactions, and there is an inherent discomfort there. *Dukkha* almost invariably keeps us off balance, keeps us uncomfortable. This is ordinary, but it's to be taken note of, reflected on, and investigated. How do we ameliorate the *dukkha*? It's not that we're endlessly putting up with it. You have to put forth the effort to figure out ways to settle it.

The Buddha points to another kind of *dukkha*, *vipariṇāma-dukkha*—the *dukkha* of separation. This is the separation from pleasure, happiness, and well-being. It is deeply disturbing when we're feeling happy or pleasant and then it ends. In reality, however refined it is, it always has to end. This is the suffering some meditators experience when they've had peaceful, blissful states of mind that eventually disappear, leaving a sense of grief for the loss. The reality is that it's not possible to sustain those experiences permanently. This is the *dukkha* of separation: when things change, when things aren't going

how we want them to be or how we assumed they were going to be. That's *dukkha*.

I remember Ajahn Chah saying that we create many problems around our lives, our existence, and what we do. Our problems are similar to somebody who wants ducks to be chickens. They think, "Why is this duck like this? It should be more like a chicken." Well, chickens are chickens and ducks are ducks. It's that simple. When it's put it in that light, it seems really absurd. But how much time, energy, and emotional investment do we put into wanting the world to be other than it is, wanting the people around us to be other than the way they are, wanting ourselves to be other than the way we are, and then struggling and feeling pain because of that?

There have to be skillful causes in place for skillful effects to manifest. When we step back from personal identification and investment in self, we can look at things in a broader, more spacious manner. This gives us a perspective of the cause and effect process and the process of investigating what's skillful and what's unskillful. The Buddha is very clear and pointed: one, it's ordinary; two, one doesn't have to buy into that *dukkha*, that dissatisfaction. One can observe things. One of the insights that takes one past, through, and beyond *dukkha*, is the idiom "knowledge and vision of the way things truly are." It's the clear knowledge and understanding of the true nature of things. It can't be other than that. That's where a sense of real happiness and ease comes from.

There is *dukkha* that's actually pain and discomfort. There's *dukkha* that's separation from the pleasant, separation from happiness and comfort. A third form of *dukkha* that the Buddha points to is *saṅkhāra-dukkha*. A *saṅkhāra* is anything of a compounded nature. For something to be of a compounded nature, it's constructed. To have anything constructed, it has to have different components and pieces. Everything around us of a material nature is constructed in some way; our mental states and our emotions are all constructed. When something is constructed, all of the different components are out of our control. They're going to follow all sorts of different agendas. Sometimes

they're working against themselves or at cross-purposes. It doesn't necessarily mean good or bad; it's the way things are. The complexity of our existence means that things are changing, shifting, moving, coming to be, and ceasing. On a certain level, we don't have a whole lot of control. Some of it can be a bit disturbing. Some of it can be really amazing.

An example is the way our bodies heal. The body is incredibly complex. It wants to heal. I remember when our next-door neighbor was dying of cancer. We would go over there every day to visit and sometimes help look after her. One day she had a fall that resulted in a bit of a cut on her forehead. Her life forces were clearly fading as a result of the cancer but, at the same time, you could visibly see the wound healing. So, the body is trying to heal itself at the same time that it's falling apart. That's what our human existence is like, all these different processes. It's a bit disconcerting. Often we don't even notice it, but that complexity is *dukkha*. It is the nature of things, but it also leaves a sense of dis-ease, a sense of being slightly off-balance.

Seeing these different aspects of *dukkha* is important for the cultivation of the Four Noble Truths. Understanding *dukkha* gives us both a clarity and a motivation as to how we work with this. What tools are helpful and appropriate for overcoming this *dukkha*? The Buddha gives the Noble Eightfold Path and this process of *sīla, samādhi,* and *paññā*: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. This path is also constructed, compounded: it's a *saṅkhāra*. It can be developed, leading to peace, to understanding, to well-being, and to a sense of being truly awake.

With the cultivation of these Four Noble Truths, there's the possibility of freedom from suffering. Each of the Noble Truths has a corresponding duty or response that we have to give appropriate attention to. Suffering is to be understood; it's to be known clearly. That seems counterintuitive. Who wants to understand *dukkha*? We just want to get rid of it. That habit, of course, keeps us skimming the surface. We don't see or clearly understand.

The cause of *dukkha* is to be abandoned, to be let go of. We tend to go about it backwards. We want to abandon suffering, to let go of suffering, but when it isn't known—when it isn't understood clearly—then the cause is still simmering underneath. If you get a cut on your arm you can put a Band-Aid on and then you don't have to see it anymore. But if you haven't cleaned it properly, if you haven't put some kind of antibiotic cream on it before putting on the Band-Aid, it's going to get infected. Similarly, with our own *dukkha*, when it's not understood, when we haven't cleaned up our understanding of *dukkha*, then we can't really let go of it.

Seeing and understanding *dukkha* doesn't mean wallowing in *dukkha*: it means understanding and reflecting on it. Where is this? What is the cause? What is this origin? Where is its place of origin? The Buddha is always pointing back to *taṇhā*, desire that is inevitably bound up with greed, hatred, delusion. It's inextricably bound up with defilement and attachment. It's a special and prevalent kind of desire.

One form of desire is *kāma-taṇhā*, sensual desire, seeking gratification, stimulation from the senses. I'm happy when I see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think things that are agreeable and pleasant. It's not the experience itself that causes *dukkha*. When we relate to it with desire, pinning all of our hopes on maintaining that gratification, then we're at a great disadvantage.

The desire for being or becoming, *bhava-taṇhā*, is more around the sense of self, me, becoming, being, trying to be somebody, trying to make an impression on somebody. How many times do we walk into a room trying to present ourselves in a certain way? That's a desire for being, a desire for becoming. As long as we're invested in trying to prop that up, we are carrying a burden.

The desire for non-being, non-becoming, *vibhava-taṇhā*, is that sense of pushing away, resistance, aversion, the feeling that it shouldn't be like this, I shouldn't be like this, the world shouldn't be like this. That leaves us very unbalanced, uncentered.

These forms of desire are fundamental to our existence, but we need to investigate and contemplate this. We need to see clearly how it works. On a certain level, it's very simple, very basic. But simple things keep spreading out and creating problems for us.

One time, somebody who was very learned and well read came to visit Wat Pah Pong and asked Ajahn Chah, "What is the essence, the heart of the Buddha's teachings? What's the central piece, the most important part of the Buddha's teachings and thoughts?" Ajahn Chah picked up a piece of wood that was near his seat and asked the visitor, "Is this a big piece of wood or a little piece of wood?" The person, who was asking in a very formal, religious, and theoretical way, was befuddled. "I don't understand." Ajahn Chah said, "Well, if you wanted to build a house, you'd say, 'This is a little piece of wood.' If you just wanted to pick something out of your tooth, you'd say, 'That's a really big piece of wood. That's too big.' "

We're constantly creating our perception and evaluation of the world and ourselves through the lens of desire; we're judging it all the time. The problem of our existence is in desire and creating discontent, dissatisfaction, dis-ease. So, in Buddhist practice, we need to understand *dukkha*—how it's formed and what sort of desire is there. We need to pay attention to abandoning and relinquishing these different forms of desire.

When we do that, we will experience a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, a release, or a cessation of suffering. It may not be complete and final nibbāna, but it is a cessation of suffering. We have to pay attention so that when we do experience a release from suffering, difficulty or complication, we actually realize it. So often we're on to the next thing according to our desires: "I need more *samādhi*. I need more insight." We keep seeking the next experience, and we don't realize a cessation, an ending, a settling of suffering, of discontent, of dissatisfaction. Pay attention and *make it real*. Don't keep skipping over and missing it. With a lack of mindfulness, clear comprehension, and discernment, we lose sight of what's really important.

The path leading to the cessation of suffering is to be developed and cultivated. This means putting in the causes for a skillful effect. The cessation of *dukkha* is the place of rest and deep peace.

The Four Noble Truths are a way of looking at our experience, laying out the tools to develop an understanding and leading us to peace, happiness, and freedom. The Buddha calls this a happiness that is unalloyed: it's not tainted by anything. In some ways, the Four Noble Truths are like kindergarten teachings for Buddhism, but really it is the essence. This is the Buddha's very first teaching that he taught to his first five disciples. It came from a fully-awakened mind. Think about the power of a fully awakened being—the power of clarity that the Buddha carried with him. Although his first inclination was that nobody would actually understand this, compassion arose. As the Buddha walked from his place of awakening, Bodh Gaya, to Sarnath, where he gave this teaching, he had time to reflect on how he might be able to teach what he had learned. Through the power of a fully-awakened mind responding with compassion, these Four Noble Truths were taught. Through his entire forty-five years of teaching, these Four Noble Truths were expounded on, presented from different angles, manifesting in all the different teachings that he gave.

The Buddha said that these Four Noble Truths were like the elephant's footprint. The footprints of all animals, whether they're lions, tigers, dogs, cats, cows, or sheep, they all fit in the footprint of the elephant. In the same way, all the different teachings fit into the Four Noble Truths. Repeatedly, throughout the Buddha's life, the Buddha said, "I teach only two things: *dukkha* and the ending of *dukkha*." These Four Noble Truths are part and parcel, pointing to this possibility of understanding and practice, that there is a liberation that is possible. The Buddha experienced this himself, through his effort and practice. He felt certain that this is what would really bring about true happiness. Nibbāna is the highest happiness because it's not built on desire. It's not built on identity. It is something that can be realized and experienced.

About the Author

Ajahn Pasanno took ordination in Thailand in 1974 with Venerable Phra Khru Ñāṇasirivatana as preceptor. During his first year as a monk he was taken by his teacher to meet Ajahn Chah, with whom he asked to be allowed to stay and train. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Pasanno became its abbot in his ninth year. During his incumbency, Wat Pah Nanachat developed considerably, both in physical size and reputation. Spending twenty-four years living in Thailand, Ajahn Pasanno became a well-known and highly respected monk and Dhamma teacher. He moved to California on New Year's Eve 1996 to share the abbotship of Abhayagiri with Ajahn Amaro. In 2010 Ajahn Amaro accepted an invitation to serve as abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, leaving Ajahn Pasanno to serve as sole abbot of Abhayagiri for the next eight years. In the spring of 2018, he stepped back from the role of abbot. Ajahn Pasanno now serves as the guiding elder for the community at Abhayagiri.

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