Unshakeable Well-Being: Is the Buddhist Concept of Enlightenment a Meaningful Possibility in the Current Age?

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By Ajahn Amaro

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I am delighted to be here today in Amsterdam, sharing this time with so many of you; meeting many people for the first time and reconnecting with old friends, continuing to enjoy the meeting of the worlds of academic psychology and Buddhist meditation, and all their attendant branches.

The theme for this session is 'Unshakeable Well-Being: Is the Buddhist Concept of Enlightenment a Meaningful Possibility in the Current Age?'

First of all, I should lodge the caveat that even though the theme of this session includes the word 'enlightenment', I make no claims to having realized enlightenment myself. Please don't consider that I am speaking from that kind of exalted spiritual position, but rather as a spiritual friend and companion in life with all of you.

In terms of rendering the idea of enlightenment in a language that we can understand, or is meaningful to us in this current age, I've picked the words 'Unshakeable Well-Being'. Also, like several other speakers, I am old-school ... so, no PowerPoint. Whether or not one employs advanced technology, anything that is meaningful to us arrives through our own consciousness, our own mind. The learning comes from our side. I can sit here, I can speak, I can use words to express various ideas, but whether anyone learns anything is really up to your own interest and engagement. It is dependent on the receptive awareness that is in your own hearts and minds.

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I thought I'd start off with some of the definitions of what we are calling 'enlightenment' here. Some have called it a 'human flourishing' but the more classical Buddhist way of speaking about it is in *via negativa* terms – such as 'the ending of greed, hatred and delusion' and 'the ending of suffering'. That is the kind of language you come across in the Pali Buddhist scriptures of ancient India. They use more of a language of negation, speaking in terms of what things are *not* rather than what they *are*.

In Buddhist tradition, and in a more mythological expression, enlightenment is also called 'the ending of the cycle of birth and death' – this makes reference to rebirth as well as to the diminishing and ending of rebirth. I think it's helpful here to say that one of the things that attracted me and many other people towards the Buddha's teachings is its non-

dogmatic nature. I am quite aware that many people don't like the concepts of past lives, future lives and rebirth. That sort of terminology may send shudders through the system and that's fair enough. I feel that even though the texts talk in terms like 'ending the cycles of birth and death', it is completely valid to think of that in terms of 'psychological birth and death'.

What do I mean by that phrase? For example, you might be born into your current book project or your new experimental design. That is a birth. The mind takes hold of a particular venture, a possession, an identity, a personal relationship or a social role. We might say that we are born into the role of being a Dhamma teacher or into the role of being a professor, born into founding a particular project, and with that birth is also a delight. The delight comes from the sense that everything is going well, there is the aspiration that beautiful and useful things might come forth from it. But there is also the death element; perhaps things don't work so well, or you don't get funded the next time, or you present your thesis and you get slammed by your professors. There is a bitterness that comes when you have invested in something and then have to see your aspirations die. That is birth and death. Buddhist language does not just refer to physical birth and death, it also refers to psychological birth and death.

My own teacher Ajahn Chah would use these terms when he talked about birth and death. He would talk about being born into a hope, being born into a building project, being born into the role of being a monk or a nun. So I feel it's completely valid to think in terms of the freedom from birth and death as meaning freedom from being reborn into the entanglement and toxic identification that can come with taking hold of a project or a role or a position and so forth. 'Freedom from birth and death' therefore means a complete independence from addictive and compulsive attachments, as well as from self-centred attitudes.

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When I was an undergraduate student of psychology and physiology many years ago, we studied Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs', from his 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation'. I remember the pyramid that Maslow drew. 'Physiological needs' are at the base, above them is the 'need for physical safety', the next one up is the need for 'love and belonging'. Then comes 'esteem' and at the top of his pyramid is 'self-actualization'. I remember being in the lecture theatre and thinking, 'That top part looks interesting. I can't wait to get up to that self-actualization bit.' But as you can probably guess, that turned out to be a very small part of the study. I found myself wondering why we were not spending much more time on the most interesting part of the picture.

Around about the same time I was introduced to Freud's statement, at the end of his and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), that, '… much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common human unhappiness.' On hearing this, the clear intuition arose in me, 'We can do better than that! There must be something better than "common human unhappiness" to look forward to!'

In a way, I've spent the last forty years on that top little triangle of Maslow's Hierarchy. When we talk about the concept of enlightenment and its various degrees, I would suggest

that's all within that top triangle of self-actualization in Maslow's diagram. Again, I'm not an academic psychologist so maybe that's no longer considered a valid model, maybe it has been totally superseded over and over again, but that was what was in my mind forty years ago when I was a student. My desire to understand what self-actualization might consist of was one of the things that took me to Asia, so entering the forest monastic life was my way of working on my PhD. One of the reasons why I studied psychology was that I wanted to understand my own mind more completely, directly and effectively. I feel I'm still involved in this project, but from within the environment of the forest monastery instead of that of the Academy.

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In the classical Buddhist teachings, there are four gradations or stages of enlightenment that are described over and over again.

The first level is called 'stream-entry'. This represents an irreversible breakthrough into a quality of psychological integration or self-actualization, or 'emotional intelligence' that will necessarily result, eventually, in the 'unshakeable well-being' of full enlightenment. This means that the mind can only be deluded to a limited degree a certain number of times; the mind can only get *so* lost. This quality of stream-entry is something that the Buddha praised as a realizable goal, not just for monastics but for lay people as well. The Buddha referred to those who had reached this level of realization as 'noble people', people who had seen the nature of ultimate reality, who had 'glimpsed the Deathless' to use another classical expression. Many thousands of lay people in the Buddha's own time, as well as monastics, reached this level of stream-entry, and many have realized the same level since then. Stream-entry is a very realistic and realizable goal, as well as being an attractive one.

The Buddha once reached down and scraped the ground in front of him and asked, 'Do you see the dirt under my fingernail? What do you think is greater, the amount of dirt under my fingernail or the size of the great earth, the planet itself?' One of those present answered, 'Venerable Sir, the quantity of earth under your fingernail is small but the great earth is very large indeed.' The Buddha responded, 'Similarly, the amount of future suffering you can expect to experience if you reach stream-entry is comparable to the dirt under my fingernail; while the amount of suffering ahead for those who have not reached stream-entry is comparable to the great earth' (S 13.1). I think that one simile is enough to give you the idea of the appeal of realizing this level of psychological maturity.

The element of 'irreversibility' associated with stream-entry is hugely significant. It means that once that level of insight has been reached then – irrespective of health, IQ, wealth or social position, or whether you have got tenure or not – you're fine. A quality of profound ease, of deep psychological well-being manifests and it is independent of circumstances.

In addition, the Buddha declared that once stream-entry has been reached, full enlightenment is guaranteed within a minimum of seven lifetimes. For those of you who don't like the idea of past and future lives, you can validly read that, I feel, as saying you can really blow it, i.e. get totally distracted and lost, no more than seven times. You can get utterly wrapped up, confused and angry, compulsive and depressed, but you can't get

totally lost more than seven times. Furthermore, each time, it is going to get harder to be so carried away. Although that may sound somewhat heretical with respect to some conservative approaches to Buddhist teachings I feel that it is a perfectly valid way of understanding the Buddha's guarantee here.

At the level of stream-entry, three psychological, largely attitudinal, qualities are let go of. These are categorized in terms of what are called the 'ten fetters' or *'saṃyojana'* in Pali – a fetter being like handcuffs or chains or shackles that tie your mind down. The three assumptions or attitudes that are let go of at stream-entry are:

1) Attachment to the body and to the personality. This attachment is called 'self-view' or 'personality view', (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi)*; it comprises the view, 'I am the body, I am the personality, this is all and everything of what I am.'

2) Doubt about the path to liberation, about the way to arrive at genuine, unshakeable well-being, and about the possibility of full psychological integration.

3) Attachment to one's social conditioning, namely the conventions and forms, rites and rituals that one is familiar with. This technically refers to religious forms like feeling that you have to bathe in the River Ganges to wash away your bad karma or being baptised in a Christian church in order to be one of the saved. However, my teacher, Ajahn Chah, would say that it also refers to conventions in general, including social ones, such as the value of money, fashions, nationality or supporting a particular sports team – saying that 'this one is good, that one is bad', 'this is right, that is wrong', with the implication that that value is an intrinsic quality, rather than having been ascribed by social agreement. All of this is 'attachment to conventions'.

The level above stream-entry is that of the 'once-returner', *(sakadāgāmin)*. Such a person experiences a reduction of sense-desire (*kāma-rāga*) and a reduction of ill-will *(vyapāda)*. A 'once-returner' is reborn in the human realm only one more time before their complete enlightenment. The mind is far less drawn into sense-desire and ill-will. At this level of realization, well-being or psychological maturity, you can still feel anger or aversion, you can still feel craving or greed and lust, but these emotions can no longer dominate the heart. They can no longer overwhelm the mind.

The third level is that of the 'non-returner' *(anāgāmin)*. In terms of Buddhist cosmology, this means that such a person is never again reborn in the human realm. They would be reborn only in one of the higher heavenly realms, in what are called the 'The Pure Abodes' *(Sudhāvāsā)*. The basis of Pure Land Buddhism is the aim to be reborn in one of those higher realms. The realization of the level of *anāgāmin* brings with it the complete ending of craving for sense-pleasures and all ill-will.

With respect to the fourth level, even though the realization of the 'non-returner' represents an extremely advanced state, non-returners still have work to do if they are to arrive at complete enlightenment. In order for full enlightenment, *arahantship,* to be realized five more fetters, shackles that tie the heart down must be broken. These last five fetters are:

1) Attachment to and identification with blissful mind-states based on form.

2) Attachment to and identification with blissful mind-states based on formlessness.

3) Identification with the subtle mind-states associated with feelings of 'I', 'me' and 'mine'. This is *asmi-māna* and it is different from attachment to self-view *(sakkāya-diṭṭhi)*. In the *Khemaka Sutta* (S 22.89), a monk said, 'There is no attachment to the body or the personality. It is really clear to me that body and personality are not who and what I am. But still, this "I" feeling persists. Just as one cannot really tell where the scent of a flower comes from – is it the petals or the pollen or the stalk? – but the scent is there. So too, even though there is no attachment to the body or personality, no attachment to feeling, perception or consciousness, still the "I" feeling endures.' That is a very good description of *asmi-māna*, also known as 'the conceit of *I am*'. As a side note, the Venerable Khemaka actually became an *arahant* hearing his own explanation. He is the only person known to have become enlightened by hearing his own Dhamma talk. So that can happen. *Arahantship*, then, includes the letting go of *asmi-māna*, the conceit of identity.

4) The next fetter that is shed in the move from non-returner to *arahant* is the letting go of *'uddhacca'*, which literally means 'restlessness'. This is not about fidgeting on your meditation cushion, but rather is about a subtle kind of restlessness, the attitude that: '*That* looks more interesting than *this*'; or 'There is something over *there* in the future, in some other place that is more real, more rich, more satisfying, more interesting than *this*.' Letting go of *uddhacca* is letting go of the imputed 'otherness' based on the perceptions of time, place and subject-object duality.

5) The last fetter of all is *avijjā*, or 'ignorance' (also called 'nescience' or 'unawareness'). This describes the final remnants of unmindfulness and bias that prevent the mind from being attuned to the fundamental reality of experience. When this last fetter has fallen away, the mind or heart is said to be fully liberated *(vimutti)* or enlightened *(bodhi)*, and birth and death are said to have come to an end. The Buddha's own description of his enlightenment, to his first five pupils, states:

*'A*yam-antim*ā j*āti natthi d*ā*ni punabbhavo *'*ti.*'*
'This is the last birth. There will be no more renewal of being' (S 56.11).

There is no need to dwell too much on these broader details of the four stages at this time; they are spelled out here so that they are available as a general map.

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To come back to stream-entry, which is the main subject being explored here, I would like to emphasize that this should be considered to be a very realizable goal. My teachers and mentors would say such things as: 'If you have enough faith and interest to come and live in a monastery, or show up at meditation retreats to sit and deal with restlessness and physical pain, and to work hard at training your mind for a week or ten days, then you probably have all that you need in order to realize stream-entry.' If you have that amount of

faith and commitment, and focus, if you really want to understand how your mind works, and are prepared to work and deal with difficulty in order to gain that understanding, then you have most of the requisite qualities to realize stream-entry. When making a point to describe the necessary qualities for stream-entry, the Buddha once said, 'Even if these great *sal* trees, Mahānāma, could understand what is well spoken and what is badly spoken, then I would declare these great *sal* trees to be stream-enterers, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as their destination' (S 55.24, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.).

I don't make this point lightly. I feel that it's important to recognize that stream-entry is a doable goal. That irreversible quality of well-being, that breakthrough to full psychological integration that cannot be completely fallen away from, is a reachable goal for most people *if* they have the faith to engage and practise meditation, and to really sit down and work on their mind, their life.

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Stream-entry, that degree of profound well-being, is thus an achievable goal but merely knowing of it as a meaningful possibility does not make it an actuality in one's life, does it? The shelves of the larder can be filled with the right ingredients but that doesn't make a meal. Knowing that the Dutch language exists and wanting to be able to speak it is not the same as being able to. So, what are the means whereby we can make that ideal of stream-entry a reality in our experience?

Meditation, as mentioned, is certainly a significant contributor to its actualization, however, it is not the only factor that supports it. In his teachings, the Buddha speaks of a number of other elements that facilitate that realization; they are called 'the factors that support stream-entry' (S 55.5).

1) The first one is 'association with good people' *(sappurisa-saṃseva)*. *Sappurisa* means a good person or a well-rounded person; *'sa-'* means 'good' or 'right' or 'true' or 'harmonious', *'-purisa'* means 'a person'; *saṃseva* means 'companionship' or 'association'. So, spending time with good people, drawing close to good-hearted people, drawing close to wise people, is the first factor supporting stream-entry.

2) Next is to 'attend to wise teachings' *(sadhammasavana)*; this means to take the time to listen to teachings, to ideas and explanations that guide the mind towards that quality of psychological integration and well-being, towards peacefulness and clarity, and away from ego-centred drives and destructive behaviours. In Buddhist terms this is 'listening to the good Dhamma' or 'the true Dhamma'.

3) Then there is 'wise reflection' *(yoniso manasikāra)*, which means, literally, 'attending to the root or to the origin of things'. We attend, we consider, we reflect upon our experience. This includes reflecting upon our feelings of liking and disliking, our feelings of being approved of or the feeling of being criticized, the feeling of success, the feeling of failure. When you launch a project or carry out a study and you don't get the results you were expecting, *yoniso manasikāra* is that part of intelligence that wonders, 'Hmmmm …

what is the pattern here? How is this working?' It is the capacity to look into the way things work and to recognize the patterning of experience, and how the natural order functions. This is 'wise reflection' or 'attending wisely'. In Buddhist practice a lot of wise reflection revolves around watching our moods and listening to our thoughts. It is the quality of being able to step back and say, 'This is the feeling of liking, this is the feeling of disliking. Here is the experience of me getting into the car and being annoyed by the traffic.'

4) The final way to strengthen stream-entry is 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma' *(dhammānudhammappaṭipatti)*, which means engaging in meditation and developing wholesome states in tune with reality. That is to say, working with the mind in a way that is free from self-view and self-centred attitudes. This is because we often practise meditation in tune with our egotistical drives ('Because I want to attain enlightenment and be the most impressive!') or with a sense of obligation, because we have been told to 'do it this way' by an expert or a teacher. We can engage in meditation driven by obligation, by obedience, by ambition, by aggression: 'I'm going to wipe out my defilements. I'm going to make my thinking mind shut up!' But this is practising Dhamma not in accordance with Dhamma, but in accordance with aggression, with self-view, and with aversion, ambition and greed and so forth. Instead, meditation and the other aspects of training need to be guided by mindfulness and wisdom *(sati-paññā)* . This will then be what informs all action and decision-making rather than habitual fears, desires and aversions. Here the Buddha is encouraging us to make effort and give direction to our lives based on the cultivation of means that are helpful and wholesome since those will lead to the most beneficial results. The means and the end are unified. The Buddha is therefore encouraging us to incline away from working in a way that is unhelpful and unwholesome, as that can only lead to more alienation and disharmony, to more suffering in the end.

In summary those four factors supporting stream-entry are: associating with good people, listening to true teachings, reflecting wisely and practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma.

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Another small but significant aspect to mention is that sometimes we mistake awareness or knowing, as understood from the Buddhist perspective, to mean a sort of mental agility. The quality of stream-entry is not dependent on being able to articulate or even to think clearly. This is an important principle. It is not dependent on clarity of thought. You don't have to remember your lines. True insight can be established without a dependence on memory, conceptual thought or language. True insight is rather a quality of vision, a quality of attitude, and attitude is not a concept. It is a way of seeing, a way of being. It is an awakened knowing, awareness itself, rather than knowing *about* things.

Ajahn Chah had a stroke when he was in his sixties. His brain function was quite heavily compromised. During the period of time when he could still speak, sometimes monks would come to visit and he might want to say, 'Come here Sumedho' but what emerged was 'Come here Ānando'; or he'd mean to say, 'It's good to see you' while what would come out would be something like, 'Blue dog happy Thursday.' And he would realize that was nonsense. He knew that the words of his choosing hadn't been spoken and that a different

set of words had appeared instead, but he found this amusing instead of distressing. He understood that his thinking functions were misfiring, but he didn't have any suffering about it. He was at ease with it even though it was not under his control. He described it by saying, 'The monkeys are playing about in the telephone exchange.'

This shows that unshakeable well-being, as discussed here, does not depend on a healthy body or even on a capacity for orderly thinking. Rather it is a matter of attitude. It is a steadiness of the inner vision, of apperception. It is the ability to appreciate the ever-changing field of experience, regardless of its contents, with openness, easefulness and impartiality. Our happiness then does not depend on any single 'thing' or object as it is grounded in a commodious awareness of *the process* of experiencing, rather than in *the contents* of those experiences.

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What has been presented here is a short summary of the principles relating to enlightenment, as understood in the Southern School of Buddhism, in response to the question of the title: 'Is the Buddhist concept of enlightenment a meaningful possibility in the current age?' It is a description of some of the relevant ingredients available in the psychological 'larder' as well as something of a recipe of how to put them together in order to create a nourishing meal resulting, ultimately, in an 'unshakeable well-being'. Whether we as individuals make use of those ingredients in a skilful way to support that kind of well-being, or whether we ignore them or create an unnutritious concoction, is up to each one of us.

Please also bear in mind that the points described here are not intended to be dogmatic assertions that are expected to be believed out of hand. Rather they should be regarded as reflections offered for consideration that, if they prove to be valid and meaningful through personal experience, can be used to aid individuals in the actualization of a quality of well-being that is liberating, enriching and indeed unshakeable.

I have outlined a few of the main themes of the subject here and I suspect that there are many questions that arise accordingly; if there are any aspects of all this that it would be useful to elaborate on, please ask whatever you like…

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Questions & Responses

Q: You said you trained under Ajahn Chah and his teaching. Was Ajahn Chah an *arahant* or not? What are your views on it?

AJAHN AMARO: If I have met an *arahant* he definitely was one. But you can't really judge from the outside. If people asked Ajahn Chah if he was an *arahant*, he would say, 'It takes one to know one,' or 'Why are you asking me that? Instead, you should ask yourself why you are not.' He certainly seemed like the happiest man in the world. That was one of the most striking things about him.

The scriptures state that one of the qualities of stream-entry is to be 'independent of others in the training, the practice'. That quality of independence doesn't mean being isolated or abstracted, or having an egotistical attitude of 'I don't care what anybody thinks.' Rather it is a profound self-reliance, self-confidence. Ajahn Chah didn't need anyone to like him or to approve of him. If you tried to flatter him, he'd make you look at why on earth you were doing that. You could never second-guess him. He had an extraordinary quality of ease coupled with a tremendous liveliness. He paid close attention to those he was with and what was going on yet he simultaneously displayed an extraordinary relaxation at the same time. He was fully attuned to what was happening but he didn't need it to be a particular way in order for him to be happy.

Ajahn Chah was an extremely strict and orthodox monk – we practise in a rigorous and traditional religious order that is 2,500 years old – but despite that set of conventional limitations he had an astonishing quality of freedom. He was completely at ease with whatever happened, which doesn't mean to say that he had 'checked out', off in some distracted dream world; he was simply very flexible, responsive and adaptable with respect to how situations unfolded.

Having had a stroke, and pretty much physically paralysed, he was still cracking jokes about his brain function collapsing. Not trying to put a brave face on it out of insecurity, but being genuinely okay with watching what was unfolding in his life. He had enjoyed having his faculties and had made good use of them. He had used them well to help himself and others. Now that those faculties were fading, he was quite okay with them as they disappeared. He did the best he could with them as they were going, but there was no sense of loss as they were fading. The last ever formal Dhamma talk that he gave, in 1981, published in English as *Why Are We Here?*, spells out this skilful attitude out with great clarity. His stroke and the subsequent brain damage happened shortly thereafter.

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Q: Ajahn, how do the qualities leading to stream-entry align with the ways of working with each of the Four Noble Truths? Or, another way of putting it, how does 'self-actualization' relate to the Eightfold Path?

AJAHN AMARO: Throughout my monastic life and training, I have related to the Four Noble Truths as a set of practices to apply, rather than as a set of doctrines to believe in. In

application, these Truths are an embracing of the experience of living rather than a set of religious opinions. In his very first teaching, 'The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma' (S 56.11), the Buddha outlined specific ways of working with each of the Four Noble Truths.

Noble Truth #1: There is the pleasant, the unpleasant and the neutral. There is the recognition of what is harmful or beneficial or neutral amongst those feelings, as well as any mental pain *(dukkha)* that arises from the way the mind is hanging on to these. The response to this, the way of working with it that the Buddha advises is, 'This mental pain is to be apprehended, embraced, fully received *(pariññeyan'ti)*'.

Noble Truth #2: Is the recognition of where entanglements and grasping, where identification is happening, where the mental pain originates from *(dukkha-samudaya)*. The Buddha advises us to let go of whatever is being grasped at *(pahātabban'ti).*

Noble Truth #3: Is the realization of the ending of suffering *(dukkha-nirodha)*. When things have been let go, of what remains is the quality of peace and stillness, the sense of wholeness. Peace is present when the grasping stops. The response to this, the way of working with it that the Buddha advises, is 'it is to be known, to be made real or realized' *(saccikātabban'ti)*.

Noble Truth #4: Is the Eightfold Path that leads to that peace *(dukkha-nirodhagāminī paṭipadā)*. This Path needs to be developed, acted upon, cultivated *(bhāvetabban'ti).*

The question was how do the four supports for stream-entry align with the four ways of working with the Noble truths (embracing our suffering, letting go of grasping, realizing the stopping of *dukkha*, and actualizing the Path)? Those four supports for stream-entry can be summarized as: associating with good people, listening to valid teachings, reflecting wisely and Dhamma practice in accord with reality.

Stephen Batchelor uses the acronym ELSA to describe the four tasks associated with the Four Noble Truths: **E**mbrace *dukkha*, **L**et go of grasping, **S**top grasping, and **A**ct, i.e. get on with your work. A similar handy acronym for the supports for stream-entry could thus be GLAD: **G**ood people … **L**istening … **A**ttending … and **D**hamma practice in accord with reality. Or perhaps, (and thank you to Lynette Monteiro for this) more appropriately as a partner for ELSA is ANNA: **A**micable connections, **N**ourishing teachings, **N**avigate skilfully, **A**ctualize wholesome practice.

These two sets of four qualities could be reflected upon and aligned in a variety of ways but what springs to mind is this:
The four aspects of supporting stream-entry can be seen to refer to:

1) Who you choose to spend your time with – good or bad or neutral people.

2) What stimuli and materials you choose to pay attention to – wholesome or unwholesome or neutral.

3) How you reflect on the experience of your inner and outer world – with discretion or guided by habits and moods.

4) How you go about working with actions of your body, speech and mind – sensitively attuned to time and place or reactively and unconsciously.

The significance of ELSA (the ways of working with each of the Four Noble Truths) in relation to these four factors supportive of stream-entry, is in applying all the four factors of ELSA to each one of these zones of activity in turn. That might sound a bit complicated but take, for example, 'aspect #1' here – who you choose to spend your time with:

Noble Truth #1: Recognizing any suffering or stress associated with connecting with another person and **E**mbracing, apprehending that *dukkha*.

Noble Truth #2: Then **L**etting go of the grasping that is causing the stress. This would mean, for example, letting go of the feeling that you should stay near a person even though they might be selfish and dishonest.

Noble Truth #3: This is then followed by realizing the peace and ease that has arisen on account of **S**topping the grasping; the realization that, using the same example, 'There is nothing compelling me to stay close to this selfish, dishonest person. It is not a problem to pull away from this situation.'

Noble Truth #4: Lastly, the choice to **A**ct on that realization, e.g. taking your leave of that person in some appropriate way, according to the time and place.

If those skilful ways of applying the Four Noble Truths are brought to bear on each of these areas of our lives, the realization of stream-entry will be greatly facilitated. So you could say that when ELSA and ANNA cooperate, then the greatest benefit will result.

A follow-up point on the Third Noble Truth and the way to work with it is that, as Ajahn Sumedho noticed for himself and for many Westerners, peace tends to be boring. We like to engage. We like to act. When we experience peace, it's usually interesting for about three or four seconds, then we think, 'Okay, what's next?' We start looking for the next thing to become engrossed in, to be worried about, to be annoyed with. So true peace is important but elusive. It is like noticing space. In a room, we notice the other people because of faces and clothing, the histories between us and all the eyes looking at us. Our attention doesn't go to the space. The space is not interesting; the people are interesting. But if we don't notice the space then our life gets *very* crowded. If we don't notice silence, if we don't notice stillness, then our life is a continual lurch from one engagement, one agitation, to another.

When that stressing stops, when there is peace, that is the ending of *dukkha* but it needs to be realized, made *real*, noticed. It is like coming into an empty room. Instead of just scooting through on the way to the next thing, you sit down for a moment and feel the space. The initial blankness turns into a kind of flowering: 'This is peaceful. This is quiet. This is still. This is beautiful.'

That might seem like a mere perceptual effect but it is really the essence of what the Third Truth is pointing to – we need to *realize* peace. We need to know it consciously because the conditioning of our senses is in the opposite direction, towards objects. Our seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching are geared towards survival – keeping away from predators, connecting with our group, looking for objects to eat or to mate with or to possess, protecting our territory. Our attention is geared towards objects, towards movement, that which is loud, bright and mobile. So if we don't consciously notice space, silence and stillness, if we don't learn how to relish solitude, the subtle and the indistinct, then the state of inner peace will always be seen as a state of lack, a state in which something is missing. It will not be recognized for what it is.

If we are able to stop and realize that quality of spaciousness, we realize that there is a mysterious wholeness, a fulfilment, a completeness, a fullness of heart. In Sanskrit it is called *pūrṇa*, in Pali *puṇṇa*. We do not notice this state of beatitude if we are busy running on towards the next thing.

One of the very useful practices directly geared for developing the supports for stream-entry, specifically related to 'wise reflection' *(yoniso manasikāra)*, navigating skilfully, is called 'developing the perception of impermanence, or uncertainty' *(anicca-saññā)*. This was one of Ajahn Chah's central teachings. The practice is to keep bringing the awareness, the recollection of uncertainty to mind at all times. This is in relation to our judgements, our perceptions, and to anything that we think we are in the middle of doing. For example:

I might think: 'I'm going to fly back to England tonight.'
To which the wise reflective response is: 'Is that so?'

It is not certain. It is not a sure thing. Nothing is.

Conscious reflection on uncertainty, the development of the *anicca-saññā*, is a way of attuning the heart to the awareness that every aspect of the material world, of the sensory, conditioned world, is intrinsically uncertain and in a state of change. We literally don't know what it is going to change into, what is going to happen next. This reflection helps us wake up into the spacious stillness that is always 'here', rather than being entranced and enchanted by 'the thing that I'm doing' or 'the place that I think I'm going.' This reflection helps us to keep things in perspective.

It is a simple exercise. You can ask the question whenever you make a judgement:
'That's great!' – 'Is that so?'
'That's awful!' – 'Is that so?'

It is a very straightforward practice but, if we apply it, it is surprising how much space we find in our lives, both psychological space and social space. It is a simple way of correcting our perspective on things: 'This is a mental event that is part of a transient experiential field. That's what it has always been.' And what remains when that letting go happens? The awakened knowing. That letting go of the false sense of certainty, that expectation, and

realizing the peace that comes from that, these two stages are the essence of Dhamma practice. The more that process can be embodied, the more we will find genuine peace.

This realization is also the resolution of doubt about what is the Path and what is not the Path; grasping is the cause of tension, of *dukkha*, of imbalance, of discord in the heart, and when the grasping stops that is *Nibbāna*, here and now.

The Buddha said that reflection on impermanence helps the mind to be free of the conceit of 'I am' *(asmi-māna)* – '*I* am doing something. *I* am going somewhere. *I* am somebody' – and when the heart is free of the conceit 'I am', that is *Nibbāna*, here and now (A 9.3, Ud 4.1).

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Q: For the last three or four days we were spending time, via classes, studying the science of mindfulness. How do you reconcile teachings that are as old as traditional Buddhism with science that keeps advancing and redefining concepts of mindfulness?

AJAHN AMARO: As a monk in the Theravadan tradition, I confess that I am biased in my view, as you might expect! So, although I find a lot of the science very significant, I don't feel that Buddha-Dhamma needs modern science to validate it.

The language of the current age tends to be secular-materialist. In many respects, people worship the god of data – if you have a graph and verifiable statistics, that carries weight, 'Science has proved …'. In olden times, one mark of authority was a big hat. The bigger the hat you wore, the more impressive your spiritual status was, the more extensive and reliable your influence. Now it's not a hat. It's if you are an Oxford don, or a head of department at Brown University, or you've got a Nobel prize, those are the accoutrements of power, respect and authority: 'How many books have you published? How many papers? How many followers have you got on Facebook? What's your Erdős number?'

With the changing of language and cultural mores, even though Buddhist teachings and practices might be essentially as they were 2500 years ago, there is a need to translate things into a language that people respect and which has meaning for a modern audience. The Buddha himself was aware of this and accounted for it, both in what are called the *mahā-padesa* rules (for transmission of his teaching to other countries and for future ages), as well as in his own culturally inclusive pedagogical style.

The Buddha would regularly use long associative or adjectival strings of words when he spoke. For instance, in his first teaching he said, '*Cakkhuṃ udapādi, nāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, aloko udapādi.'* This means, 'Vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, awareness arose, light arose' (S 56.11). People often wonder why he used such long strings of words like that. An elder monk, Ven. Ānanda Maitreya, who was a very gifted scholar and meditator, once pointed out that, at any one time, the Buddha was very probably speaking to people from a number of different countries. So for example, when describing closely related qualities, maybe in Vaṃsa they say *'āloko'*, in Magadha they say *'paññā'*, while the folks up in Uttarakuru, they are always talking about *'vijjā'*. He would thus

use different words so that people from Uttarakuru and Magadha and Vaṃsa would all know what he was talking about. He was a supremely skilled communicator so he talked to people in the languages they could understand.

Such translation is essential in order to apply the Buddha's teaching to the purpose for which it was intended. A lot of those antique terms need translation in order to be meaningful today – like calling enlightenment 'unshakeable well-being' for the purpose of this conference. You put it into different language so that the people who are present can feel, 'Oh right – "well-being". Yes. That's my field. I know what that's talking about.' Whereas if you talk about '*sammāsambodhi*' literally, 'perfect self-enlightenment' it's a bit more remote, harder to relate to.

The Buddha was a pragmatic teacher, not an idealistic one. He was often described as being a kind of doctor. His style was, rather than merely stating, 'I assure you well-being is possible,' he was the kind of doctor who asks, 'Where does it hurt?' He put things into a language that was meaningful to people, so that they would think, 'That's talking about my life, my ailment, my problems. I can relate to that. These are methods I can pick up and use. Marvellous. I can do this!'

Even though I just said, 'I don't really feel that the Buddha-Dhamma needs modern science to validate it,' I also feel it would be a ridiculous conceit to say that Buddhism has nothing to learn from science. If Buddhism is to be a useful presence in the world then it has to connect with the people who comprise that human world, and that connection is through language and meaning. If what carries meaning these days is scientific studies and data, and all of the thousands of hours that you good people put into the laboratory and crunching your numbers, if that brings forth meaningful messages that help people, marvellous! Such science is a very helpful adjunct to what Buddhism has been doing for over two thousand years. It is helping the Dhamma message to be communicated in a language that people can understand and make use of.

I thus feel that the language of science is very helpful in encouraging people to pick up new methods, ways and means, that can genuinely benefit their lives. This language encourages people to use mindfulness practices such as MBCT, MBSR, Dot-be and all the other related disciplines, to bring benefit to their own lives and to the lives of the people around them.

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Q: Can you speak freely on the *arahant* versus the *bodhisattva* pathway?

AJAHN AMARO: Both of those pathways articulate very valuable and wonderfully admirable spiritual possibilities. I feel that what contention there has been, over the centuries, has been more to do with professional jealousy than any conflict or contradiction based in reality. There is a very human and natural tribalism: 'Our village is good, you people on the other side of the river are all idiots.' 'My department is way superior to yours.' And so forth ... I'm sure that some of you in the academic world are familiar with this condition.

The Mahāyāna movement grew out of an apparent ossification that was happening within the Buddhist monastic order in the first few hundred years after the Buddha's time. Buddhism had become, it seems, a kind of priesthood locked into its own self-interest. The Mahāyāna movement arose, according to the histories, from the intention to open things up to a wider sphere of people, to speak about the benefits of the teachings, the blessings that arise for all beings from people engaging in the practice of the teachings. It wasn't all about just practising for your own liberation. This is a very brief thumbnail sketch of the situation and, as you might expect, there are numerous versions of this history. However, the differences of perspective can be superficially characterized as: a) *arahant* – 'The best thing you can do with your life is to realize full and complete enlightenment'; and b) *bodhisattva* – 'The welfare of others is more important than your own. Spiritual fulfilment can only come when the suffering of all beings, even "down to the last blade of grass", has been fully alleviated.' These are over-simplifications, even caricatures, but they are representative of definitions that have been circulated and attached to over the centuries.

I would suggest that it is through a wrong grasp of the fundamental principle of the Four Noble Truths, as a teaching, that it can seem like so-called '*arahant* path' is all about liberating oneself from suffering and everyone else can just go take care of themselves. Similarly, I feel it's a wrong grasping of the Bodhisattva Vows, particularly through seeing them in terms of self-view, that makes the *bodhisattva path* seem to be in conflict with the *arahant* path. After all, if we vow to not reach full enlightenment until all other beings have been enlightened before us, if there is more than one *bodhisattva* in the mix, who is going to go first? As the Buddhist joke goes, with two such *bodhisattvas* at the Doors to the Deathless: 'After you.' 'No. I insist, after *you* …', *ad infinitum*.

I have spent a lot of time over the years in different Northern Buddhist monasteries and countries, with the Tibetan, the Chinese and the Japanese traditions. In most of such places there is a recitation of the Bodhisattva Vows as well as 'The Heart Sūtra' each day.
This is very significant, because 'The Heart Sūtra' says:

> 'There is no suffering, there is no origin of suffering, there is no cessation of suffering, no Path, no understanding and no attaining for there is nothing to attain.'

While the Bodhisattva Vows say:

> 1) 'Living beings are numberless, I vow to save them all;
>
> 2) 'Afflictions are limitless, I vow to cut them off;
>
> 3) 'The Buddha's Path is supreme, I vow to accomplish it;
>
> 4) 'Dharma doors are infinite, I vow to enter them all.'

So you have 'The Heart Sūtra' which takes the Four Noble Truths and empties them out, saying: 'There is no suffering … no origin … no cessation … there is no Path' – these are all empty. And you have the Bodhisattva Vows which are, apparently, a deliberate extension of the Four Noble Truths to spell out the principle that they relate not just to the individual but to all beings.

I came across an interesting *sūtra* in the Chinese tradition ('The Buddha Speaks the Brahma Net Sūtra') that spelled out the relationship between the Four Noble Truths and the Four Bodhisattva Vows. The latter, it seems, arose directly form the former.

1) In regard to the First Noble Truth, it says that the First Vow is based on the fact that not only is there *dukkha* here in our mind, but it arises in the minds of all beings. All are suffering. Thus is born the aspiration to help all beings to end their *dukkha*.

2) In regard to the Second Noble Truth, the vow is to cut off all afflictions (the cause of suffering) not just in our mind, but in the minds of numberless beings. The vow is to help every being to end all their afflictions, their cravings.

3) The Third Noble Truth gives rise to the aspiration towards Buddhahood: 'The Buddha's Path is supreme, I vow to accomplish it.' The Third Noble Truth is *dukkha nirodha*. The ending of suffering is possible. In this extension it is characterized by the possibility of the complete consummation of spiritual potential – i.e. not just with ending *dukkha*, which all *arahants* do, but developing all the teaching powers and skills of a Buddha as well, as *bodhisattvas* do.

4) The Fourth Noble Truth is that of 'The Eightfold Path that Leads to the Ending of *Dukkha*'. This expands to: 'Dharma doors are infinite' and there is the vow to enter them all. This refers to cultivating skilful social, psychological and spiritual means of every kind in order to help all beings to attain enlightenment, as well as fulfilling all the factors of the Eightfold Path.

These two, seemingly contradictory, teachings are being recited and reflected upon side by side on a daily basis. Thus in the Mahāyāna or Northern Buddhist tradition, 'The Heart Sūtra', empties out the Four Noble Truths, while the Bodhisattva Vows indicate that the Four Noble Truths relate to all beings – I would suggest that this juxtaposition is no accident, rather it is intended to express both the emptiness and the universality of those Noble Truths. In addition I would say that the Buddha's original teaching of the Four Noble Truths, as found in the Theravāda, or Southern Buddhist tradition, was meant to imply both of those qualities – emptiness *and* universality – but those dimensions have sometimes been missed or lost over the ages.

This understanding is what you find within some of the contemplative lineages of the Southern school, as well as within those of a similar nature in the Northern school today. These Truths are 'noble' insofar as they are conventional truths which, if applied correctly, lead to the realization of the ultimate truth. They are not ultimate or absolute truths in and of themselves, like some kind of would-be incontrovertible concept. Furthermore, if they are applied free from self-view, it will be recognized that they do not apply just to 'this' being, instead they are necessarily relevant to all beings. The focus of attention doesn't go just to this being, it is appropriate to apply universally.

The Buddha described this relationship between saving oneself and saving all beings very simply and clearly in the *Sedaka Sutta* ('The Bamboo Acrobats', S 47.19) with the following parable:

Once upon a time a bamboo acrobat, setting up his bamboo pole, addressed his young assistant Medakathalika:
'Come, dear Medakathalika, climb up the bamboo pole and stand up on its top.'
'Okay, master' Medakathalika replied to the bamboo acrobat; and climbing up the bamboo pole she stood at the very top.

Then the bamboo acrobat said to her:
'You look after me, dear Medakathalika, and I'll look after you. With us looking after each other, guarding one another, we'll show off our skills, receive good payment, and you'll be able to climb safely down from the pole.'

This being said, the assistant Medakathalika said to the bamboo acrobat:
'That's not right, master! You look after *yourself*, and I will look after *myself*. Thus with each of us looking after ourselves, guarding ourselves, we'll show off our skills, receive good payment, and I'll be able to climb safely down from the pole. That's the way to do it!'

Just like the assistant Medakathalika said to her master: 'I will look after myself,' this is the way you monks should practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness [of the: 1) body, 2) feelings, physical sensations, 3) mind states and 4) mental qualities, in terms of nature; D 22, M 10]. But you should also practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness by resolving, 'I will look after others' too. Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself.

And how does one look after others by looking after oneself? By practising mindfulness, by developing it, by using it over and over.

And how does one look after oneself by looking after others? By patience *(khanti)*, by non-harming *(avihiṃsa)*, by loving-kindness *(mettā-citta)*, by sympathy, and by caring for others *(anuddayatā)*. Thus by looking after oneself, one looks after others, and by looking after others, one looks after oneself.

* * *

Further recommended reading:

'Why Are We Here?' in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, (pp 133-143), Aruna Publications, Harnham Buddhist Monastic Trust, 2011.
https://cdn.amaravati.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/The-Collected-Teachings-of-Ajahn-Chah-Single-Volume-Ajahn-Chah.pdf

Chapters 16-19 of *The Island – An Anthology of the Buddha's Teaching on Nibbāna,* (pp 278-336) by Ajahn Pasanno & Ajahn Amaro, Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation, 2009.
https://www.amaravati.org/dhamma-books/the-island/

Into the Stream – A Study Guide on the First Stage of Awakening, by Thanissaro Bhikkhu, Access to Insight, 2102.
https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/study/into_the_stream.html

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ABBREVIATIONS

D = Dīgha Nikāya…… *The Long Discourses of the Buddha*
M = Majjhima Nikāya…. *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*
S = Saṃyutta Nikāya….. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*
A = Aṅguttara Nikāya…. *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha*
Ud = Udāna……. *The Inspired Utterances of the Buddha*