Ajahn Abhinando

Three Talks

THREE TALKS

Given at Dhammapala monastery in December 2020

Ajahn Abhinando

Three Talks – Given at Dhammapala monastery in December 2020
by Ajahn Abhinando

Produced with the LaTeX typesetting system, set in Roboto and Crimson Text.

CONTENTS

1

FEELING, ATTACHMENT AND LETTING GO

Adapted from a talk given in December 2020 at Dhammapala monastery

Vedanā, usually translated as 'feeling', is the feeling tone of our experience, how our experience feels to us. Experience is present whenever we are conscious. The Buddha offered different ways in which our experience can be categorised, allowing us to better investigate and analyse it. One of the ways of conceptually organising experience is according to the scheme of the five *khandhā*, the five groups or aggregates (consciousness, mental activities, perception, feeling and form). So *vedanā* is one of these five *khandhā*. Whenever we are conscious, three of these groups – consciousness, perception and feeling – are always present. Perception (*saññā*) refers to the cognitive aspect of our experience – we *recognize* things as something, from simple perceptions like 'blue' to quite complex perceptions, say, a friend from the past. Even if we are not sure what a perception actually is, we still categorize the experience as 'something'. This is *saññā*. Vedanā, on the other hand, refers to the affective aspect of our conscious experience; how the experience feels. As with perceptions, feelings also come in different shades. Feelings can be very subtle, very difficult to define or describe, yet always feeling like something.

In the Pali *suttas*, when the Buddha talks about feeling as *vedanā*, he is interested in just one aspect: whether a feeling is pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. No matter how subtle or intense they are, or whether they are physical or mental feelings, they can always be placed on a spectrum from very pleasant to very unpleasant with neutral, in Pali called 'neither pleasant nor unpleasant', lying

somewhere in the middle, where we are not interested enough to even find out. Every feeling has to correspond to one of these categories, which makes this a conveniently simple scheme for the contemplation of feelings. Of course this is not meant to be a philosophical or ontological system, but rather serves as a system of categories for contemplation. One could pose the questions: how does this sensation feel right now? Pleasant? Unpleasant? Neutral?

The feeling tone of our experience has profound effects on us. That is why it is important and why this approach is particularly relevant for the Buddha. In recent scientific literature, there is a lot of discussion concerning the quality of feeling as a rough guide provided by nature so that sentient beings can orient themselves even before any higher level of cognition will be activated. This basic feeling approach to our experience seems to be shared by all sentient beings. And we can see how this feeling orientation is directly connected to our resulting attitudes: a pleasant feeling is likeable, a neutral feeling is often ignored, unpleasant feelings we dislike. Of course, human beings are complicated, giving rise to limitless variations on these simple themes, but basically this is the ground rule.

If you look at nature in general, the question of how deeply rooted consciousness is seems unavoidable – is it a universal quality that is inherent in matter, as a 'proto consciousness', or is it something that emerges at a certain level of organization in biological organisms like us? But this basic feature of 'like-approach', 'dislike-withdrawal' is found even in very simple creatures like the amoeba. An amoeba in a petri dish environment will exhibit precisely this behaviour. The amoeba will withdraw from potentially dangerous stimuli (salt, for example), and will move towards potentially beneficial ones (sugar, for example). Of course, we don't know if the amoeba is conscious, but it certainly behaves as if it were. The principle is also directly observable in babies which are attracted to anything sweet. They lack the sophistication to understand that this rough guide that nature also gives to the amoeba is not always reliable.

In our modern artificially created environment, 'super-stimuli' such as sugar are present in overly abundant supply, in contrast to hunter-gatherer societies where these were quite scarce. Hunter-gatherers would have had only rare

opportunities for bingeing on sugar, for example with seasonal fruit trees, so that the exceptional binge would not be problematic. In today's environment, however, where sugar is added in many commercial food products, the possibility for constant overdosing and causing harm to the body is quite real. Interestingly, nature provides no direct feedback mechanism to signal the potential danger in this situation. That means young children are especially vulnerable. Luckily this feeling mechanism, though a hardwired biological circuit, is not something we have to remain enslaved to for life. We can learn how to navigate the environment so that we do not fall prey to this fundamental conditioning.

If we investigate our experience, we can see that 'pleasant' doesn't always mean 'good' and 'unpleasant' doesn't always mean 'bad'. Following from that we can also come to understand that the capacity to delay gratification is quite important, not only as a pause allowing for reflection but as a predictor for success in life. Some of you might have heard about the "marshmallow experiment" which was originally conducted at the psychology department at Stanford University in the 70s. In this experiment young children were offered a choice between eating one marshmallow immediately or getting a second one if they managed to somehow resist eating the first one for fifteen minutes. Follow-up studies then showed that those kids who exhibited a greater capacity for delayed gratification at an early age had on average more successful lives according to established evaluation scales. As often happens, later, larger and more diversified experiments in part relativised the significance of the correlation, but, as far as I know, it has never been entirely disproven.

The Buddha places *vedanā* quite preeminently in his discourses – here, everything is seen to converge on *vedanā*, because it is *vedanā* that motivates us. *Vedanā* is the glue that keeps our attachment going. The pleasure of sexual attraction, for example, or the pleasure it promises, is one of the biggest factors that keep people bound to the wheel of existence. It is one of the main driving forces for human beings. The Buddha said that if there was another force as strong as sexuality to keep us in thrall to sensual experience, liberation would be impossible.

Feeling is the basic motivational system of nature, but importantly it has some drawbacks. Nature, as we know it, does not seem to be interested in our enlightenment. Nature, if we would personify it, seems interested in our wellbeing, but only to a certain extent. It seems to favour the evolution of a species, rather than the individual. With the pressures of evolution, what assures the striving of the species is the development of broad survival and reproduction strategies. And the human species has been quite successful in developing these, to the extent of eventually dominating the planet. What makes us successful as a species, however, is not necessarily what makes us content and happy as individuals. So, if we look at the system from the perspective of the individual, we find further flaws. Apart from the fact that *vedanā* is just a rough guide to what's good for us, the Buddha emphasizes that *vedanā* is impermanent; pleasant feeling is certainly attractive, but it is impermanent. This is a key insight, since it can help us to give up the notion that what is pleasant is synonymous with what is good for us. Sense experience cannot give us peace, since the drive for the next experience is constant. Here mental feeling is the catch – we can keep our fantasies going long enough to get them so embedded that they're difficult to check. Then, soon after a satisfactory sense experience, we are left thirsting for more. So we keep running like a hamster on the wheel – what the Buddha called the wheel of samsara. By its very nature, sense experiences are constantly changing, so they can never provide lasting satisfaction.

In a manner of speaking, nature has conned us: as evolution works by advancing the species, without concern for us as individuals, the means to its success is our striving, so it needs to keep us running on the wheel. It would not be useful for its purpose if we were too content. Contentment doesn't work well for evolutionary striving, for procreation, for conquering the planet, for improving all the time.

We learn from the natural sciences that the state of contentment or pleasure is mediated by the chemistry of our brain. And it seems the brain releases more "pleasure chemicals" such as dopamine, serotonin and others, when we are just about to get what we are striving for, rather than at the moment of actually acquiring the desired object. Hence the slight disappointment we

tend to experience once we have gotten what we desired, when we realise that it's not quite as exciting as we had imagined. And, of course, there is also the rule of diminishing returns with pleasure. I remember discovering lemon ice cream as a small child – a real revelation! It was the highest imaginable bliss at that time! I was just not prepared for these kinds of delights the universe held in store for me. Total bliss! Whatever the object may be, the first time is always – well almost always – amazing.

Here we can see these three aspects of *dukkha* (stress or unsatisfactoriness) inherent in *vedanā*, on the level of sensual pleasure. First of all, you have this peak experience of lemon ice cream, but how long does it last? That's the impermanence aspect. Then you say, 'well, I've just got to have another one' – and feel the frustration as your parents will not immediately buy you another one. But at some point the time comes for you to taste lemon ice cream again. Of course you're quite excited and looking forward to it. But the second ice cream is not as exciting as the first one, because the novelty is gone. Then, with every subsequent experience of ice cream it becomes more ordinary – you already know that experience. That is the second aspect: diminished returns. The psychology of it makes sense: we get used to things, we take them for granted so we constantly need something new, something to excite us again. And the third aspect is that the pleasure of excitement peaks just before getting the object of desire. It's simply the way the brain works. Once the object is acquired, the chemical signals for pleasure begin to dissipate. So there is disappointment. From the point of view of evolution, however, all this makes good sense: if you were to achieve some lasting contentment from the experience of lemon ice cream, so that you would not need it for, let's say, another five years, then you stop striving, at least for a long time.

So, let's say you've had sex as a teenager and it was great, fully satisfying, so that, for the next five years the subject no longer occupies you, then there is not much chance you will be making many babies! In order to promote your species, it is not important that you are content, it is important that you keep on striving. Any experience desirable from that point of view has to be pleasant, but more importantly, the *striving* for it has to provide pleasure – the pleasure of excitement. These are interesting connections which are

not necessarily obvious, some of which may take us a long time to figure out. They contribute to the fact that *vedanā*, like anything else in experience, is not ultimately satisfying.

The Buddha pointed to this in his teachings: *vedanā* is the glue that makes all aspects of our experience converge, it is the glue that keeps us attached to experience. That is because we desire and are motivated by pleasant feelings, whether they are coarse or refined, immediate physical or derived mental feelings. Already in the teachings on the four noble truths and on dependent origination you can see that 'contact conditions feeling, feeling conditions thirst (*taṇhā*), and thirst conditions attachment (*upadāna*) or clinging'. So this is an important set of links to contemplate.

In the four noble truths, the Buddha asks us to investigate how the cause for suffering is this taṇhā, which literally means thirst, but which unfortunately often gets translated merely as 'desire' without further qualification, from which the popular notion arises that enlightenment means not having any desires, or that 'desire is bad'. As we know though, it is impossible to live without desire – one would not do anything. Desire can describe a whole range of experience, from slight interest to motivation, to enthusiasm, to greed and craving. 'Thirst' or 'hunger' is a more extreme manifestation of desire. And in the teachings on the dependent origination of suffering we see that desire becomes attachment, and it is here where we become trapped. When we attach, we attach to the wheel of saṃsara, which is the realm of *dukkha* – stress or suffering.

The Buddha illustrates attachment (*upadāna*) by the way fire is attached to its fuel: it attaches to the fuel by consuming it. The same way our mind is attached to the five khandhas by 'feeding' on them, hungering – or thirsting – for experiences, with our thirst (taṇhā) for *vedanā* being the glue. A liberated mind, then, is one that is no longer feeding on experience. It is like a flame that is not feeding on its fuel anymore, so what happens to the flame? It goes out – 'the mind like fire unbound' is the image used by the Buddha. The flame becomes unattached, unmanifest.

The view here, as in the time of the Buddha, is a non-materialistic view. The fire is not annihilated, it just becomes unmanifest. When manifest, the fire can be defined by the fuel it is consuming. So when the Buddha is asked in the *suttas* about what happens to the mind at death, about rebirth, he could answer that 'this person's mind was reborn as a deva, hungry ghost or human being', by seeing the trace of the mind left by the food it is feeding upon. A deva's mind feeds on different food than a human mind. And so, a liberated mind cannot be traced, because, like fire unbound, it is not feeding on anything anymore. It is an 'unmanifested consciousness' (*anidassanaṃ viññanaṃ*).

Attachment to experience is this feeding on what we depend on for our sense of wellbeing, whether it is lemon ice cream or something else. This is not like 'some ice cream would be nice', it is 'I really need to have this ice cream and it has to be lemon ice cream. Anything else, and I'm going to throw a tantrum'. So this is what is meant by 'attachment': my whole notion of wellbeing seems to hang on this experience. It is not just 'desire'. It is attachment to desire, meaning I feel dependent on this desire to be fulfilled. To the extent that I am attached to this movement of desire, I am stuck, bound to suffering. So the less space I have around my desire, the more I will suffer.

The good news is that there is not just saññа and *vedanā* (perception and feeling), there is also the quality of awareness in experience. By this I mean the quality of knowing that is inherent in consciousness, which is immediate and embodied, and permits relating to experience in a different way. We can know a pleasant feeling to be just a pleasant feeling, an unpleasant feeling to be just an unpleasant feeling, and the same with a neutral feeling. So we can know any kind of experience and rest in the knowing. This is the basis for the notion that heedfulness is the path to the deathless, an immediate kind of knowing that is closer to the heart than any desire because it is the prerequisite for any kind of experience.

To the extent that we can stay with awareness, we can be free of the compulsion to follow the movement of desire, to have our life defined by our feelings. So, according to the Four Noble Truths, we can say that the mind that follows the impulse of desire, attaching and grasping at the content of experience, is the mind that will become entangled in suffering; the mind

that stays at home, that stays in the knowing is the mind that can be free of suffering. It doesn't have to move with the wheel of *saṃsara*, it can remain in stillness at the centre. It's the mind that can be free of suffering. The simple injunction then is 'stay with the knowing' – let go of attachment. That's all very nice; it is in fact the third noble truth. But there is a good reason that the fourth noble truth comes after that. As we all know, letting go of our attachments is not easy – often it even seems counterintuitive because of the power of our conditioning. We all know that it's very difficult to just stay present in awareness, especially when you happen upon a burning desire for an object or experience. Even after forty or fifty years of experience, a desire can feel very convincing, in spite of all the lessons from the past. We think that somehow this time will be different. And the more sophisticated the mind, the better sounding reasons it will find to justify our holding on. There you have one of the dangers presented by an intelligent mind.

But even if there is the realization that, 'yes, I should let go', letting go is never easy because the desire still burns. So we need to develop the capacity to *let* it burn. It is not just a question of understanding the benefits of letting go, the possibility of real peace, however. Because of the momentum, because of the bodily aspects of this burning desire, the complex bio-chemistry of it, we need to have the capacity to remain present with that complex feeling and be able to allow it to burn itself out. We need to develop the capacity to be with unpleasant experiences and in particular the unpleasant experience of unfulfilled desire. We look for pleasure to relieve our experience of pain but in the next moment, we find our inability to fully satisfy our desire for pleasure is also painful.

Of course the Buddha warned against the blind pursuit of pleasure, because it binds us to a limited experience; and because wherever there is pleasure there is also pain. We need the capacity to say, 'Well, my desire tells me I need this ice cream, but I have a choice. I can believe there's a hole in my being that will only be satisfied by this ice cream, or I can stay with the desire itself.' I could perhaps also be perfectly happy just staying with the desire for an ice cream, accepting it as it is. Even realising that not to follow the desire can be painful, at least until we can come out of our addiction, we always have a choice.

Ajahn Chah used to say that patient endurance is the backbone of the practice, because often we know what we should be doing but we can't bring ourselves to do it, or we know what we shouldn't be doing, but can't bring ourselves to stop doing it. If we haven't developed this capacity for restraint – the Pali word for it is '*saṃvara*' – then our mindfulness is going to be weak, even helpless. We might mindfully be doing something that isn't good for us, and mindfully observe that, without being able to stop it. That's why mindfulness needs restraint as a backup – being able to say 'no' to yourself. This is by no means easy, but it is something that we can practise. That's what precepts and training rules are for. Refraining from things that are harmful, for example, takes real learning and muscle, which we must develop with patience.

The renunciation precepts that go beyond the five precepts the Buddha prescribed as a moral standard are a way for us to go outside our comfort zone; to give things up, not because they are necessarily bad for us, or immoral, but to test our attachment to things, to be able to learn how we become entangled in personal preferences and desires. That is the foundation of renunciation practice, strengthening this inner muscle, giving us confidence that we can trust ourselves. Moreover, it generates inner strength which in turn supports our mindfulness practice. If we can say 'no' to a desire, then we can look into that desire. It burns, but I can stay with it and investigate: why is this ice cream so important, what is this desire? What are the messages and perceptions that surface? How trustworthy are they? Then, when we have restraint, we can use mindfulness to look deeper into the structure of our experience and see how our mind is conditioned by preferences. If we do not have any restraint, we are just pushed around by our preferences, and desire has us as the farmer has the bull by the ring in its nose. He can lead the bull wherever he wants to. Whenever a particular stimulus appears, there is an automatic, habitual reaction. That is a very weak mind. And lack of restraint leads also to lack of self-respect.

It is important to work on this without being overly idealistic about it, since the conditioned mind is by its very nature 'sticky'. If it is not liberated yet, it is going to be attached to things. And it's going to suffer if its preferences are not met. The first step mentioned by the Buddha, then, is to have awareness

of these mechanisms, not to deny them, knowing that if we are attached we will suffer.

Awareness is the core of the practice, coupled with honesty. It allows us to take responsibility, not blaming the world for our suffering, realizing instead that it is something that *we* are doing. One of my teachers likes to say that the start of the practice is to suffer responsibly. If you are a 'good Buddhist', it does not mean you are 'unattached', it means you suffer responsibly, taking that experience as an opportunity for investigation. Together with mindfulness, then, it is important that we develop the quality of restraint, as it offers the possibility to look deeper into our attachments and to go towards the root of what we are really attached to, towards where the feeling of lack comes from. Sometimes that's simple, sometimes more complex.

And here we can see the Noble Eightfold Path as a way to build up inner wholesome resources, which would allow us to give up our attachment to things that are not wholesome. That is the path of purification. It includes qualities like restraint and investigation, but these also need to be balanced by developing positive, wholesome resources which fill our heart with constructive energy. Without such resources, it is very difficult to let go of attachments. Trying to let go, in this case, would just increase the misery of feeling that we are lacking something.

The Buddha said that an intelligent person gives up an inferior pleasure to attain a superior one. The superior pleasure, in the Buddhist sense, is more subtle, more refined, more wholesome. The Buddha recognized that the mind is drawn to pleasurable experience, and also that this could be used to our advantage if we let it orient us in a beneficial direction. We need the energy of desire, but it needs to be reined in; the objects of our desire need to be chosen consciously, wisely. Therefore the Buddha advised his disciples to follow the mind's inclination towards pleasure but steering it to those pleasures that we recognise as wholesome, like the subtle pleasures of collected attention (*samadhi*) or wholesome mental qualities like generosity, integrity and kindness, refining our 'taste' for pleasure in the process.

The pair of 'wholesome/unwholesome' is the most fundamental of the criteria proposed by the Buddha, to help us reflect on the course of our actions, instead of habitually choosing according to what feels pleasant or unpleasant. Therefore we need to use discernment: to evaluate the appropriateness of the pleasures we are seeking; to understand the nature of desire and attachment as a part of human experience; and to cultivate resources that enable us to direct desire to the long-term benefit of ourselves and others. Discernment is like distinguishing between good nourishment and junk food; it also knows that what's helpful at one stage may not be helpful later.

This is the path of purification, leading us eventually to a place in ourselves where we feel enabled to give up all attachments. Until then, however, we can learn to use the mechanism of desire wisely.

2

FAITH VERSUS BELIEF

Adapted from a talk given in December 2020 at Dhammapala monastery

I would like to share a few reflections on faith and belief.

Faith is one of the five faculties (*indriya*) that the Buddha advised us to develop in order to free our hearts. These faculties are faith (*saddhā*), energy (*viriya*), mindfulness (*sati*), collectedness (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). The list is presented throughout the Buddha's discourses (*suttas*) in different ways.

One way is progressive: you start out with faith. You need faith to get going, and this applies not only to the Buddha's path but to everything. It is the quality of the heart that allows us to move forward. Naturally, if we have faith, we are willing to make an effort – so that raises energy, the second faculty. Making an effort, with energy, is the prerequisite for establishing mindfulness, the third factor. And often, in the *suttas*, mindfulness is described as a precursor to *samādhi*. So, once we've established mindfulness, and we have continuous mindfulness, then our attention gets collected, concentrated, and the mind becomes still, with a steady focus. If you cultivate *sammā samādhi*, that is *samādhi* with mindfulness, the mind becomes still and focused, and you get a deeper, more purified vision. You start to see things you haven't seen before, or you see them in a new way – so you develop a deeper understanding, leading to wisdom, the final faculty in the list.

Another way of looking at the *indriya*, one that appears in the *suttas*, is to see them as qualities that balance each other, or that need to be brought into

balance. Faith needs to be balanced with wisdom. A lot of faith is good, gives us a lot of energy, but if there is no discernment around our faith, it may take us in a harmful direction. We can have faith in stupid things and raise quite a lot of energy through that. It is like driving a Ferrari in the wrong direction – you can create a lot of harm. You could also say that wisdom needs to be balanced with faith, that is, wisdom without heart-qualities like faith, or kindness and compassion, will be arid, dry. Perhaps it wouldn't even qualify as wisdom in that case. Wisdom is more than just intellectual discernment.

In the same way, we can examine the next pair, energy and *samādhi*. If we have a lot of energy and no *samādhi*, we would just be all over the place, restless. Our energy would have no proper containment. If, however, there is also *samādhi*, then the energy is focused and you can go deeper. On the other hand, if you have *samādhi* but no energy, then you will just go to sleep. We experience this when our mind gets quiet but also dull and we are not quite sure what is happening. That's not *sammā-samādhi*. For *sammā-samādhi*, there needs to be mindfulness; we need to know what is going on. For that to happen, there has to be enough energy. This gives us an interesting way of evaluating our meditation experience by looking to see whether these qualities are in the right balance, or seeing how we are out of balance – too much energy without enough calm, or too much calm without enough energy. This gives us an indication as to the quality of effort that might be needed. And that which can indicate is '*sati*', mindfulness, which doesn't have an opposite. *Sati* doesn't need to be balanced. You can never have too much mindfulness; rather mindfulness is what watches over the other qualities and allows us to asses in which way we are out of balance. It is the overseer, balancing all needed qualities.

When I thought about faith today, I was reminded of a meeting with Brother David Steindl-Rast, an Austrian Benedictine monk, whose home monastery is in California and who once visited us when I was staying at our monastery near Wellington in New Zealand. There is actually a TED talk by him, about a project he runs concerning gratitude. A very beautiful talk. One of the ideas that I remember from Brother David, is this distinction between 'faith' and 'belief'. What Brother David was saying, is that those people that have

faith, real faith, don't need to hold on tightly to beliefs. If one doesn't have much faith, then there is holding on to beliefs. This distinction caught my attention and I think it's worth unpacking a bit. What I think he is talking about here is that belief, as in belief in certain ideas, is mainly 'head centred'. Faith, however, is a much more fundamental quality of heart. It is this basic trust that 'it is going to be OK', on an ultimate level; that life, as weird as it is and as threatening as it often seems, is at some deep level OK. That's of course the place where the heart can find true peace.

In our tradition there is faith concerning the Buddha's realization: that it is genuine, fully authentic. This implies the faith that there is a real possibility of being at peace with this seemingly bewildering existence, even while not really knowing what it is ultimately all about. This was certainly the driving force that got me into spiritual inquiry. What *is* all this? What am I supposed to *do* with my life? What is *really* worthwhile? But even on an ordinary day-to-day level, faith is a natural quality of the heart that serves us in all kinds of ways. Even to get out of bed, you need to have some kind of faith that it is worth your while. So there has to be this faith that we can step forward and move on – even though we know, and not just intellectually, that life is dangerous. All kinds of things could happen any time, and some things are clearly unavoidable. We are all going to die, and that could happen any moment. The Buddha recommended always recollecting the radical uncertainty of life, never knowing what is going to happen next. So if you don't have any faith, life becomes impossible. You'd be in a state of paralysis.

So on one hand we know we could all die at any moment. Quite a few people that I know died recently. At the same time we have a natural faith that it is unlikely to happen to us today. So we step forward with confidence. For the time being we are still here, and most likely still going to be around for a while. On the other hand we have some awareness of the uncertainty of life and at one point we see how the two naturally come together. Faith here implies valuing the opportunities that life offers – we are alive, we are conscious and we can try to make the best of it. This is also what the Buddha was talking about: not wasting your time, because you don't know what is going to happen tomorrow. That is faith as a very basic quality. To give an example one of my

teachers offered: even sitting down on a chair requires faith that the chair will support you.

This illustrates quite well, I think, what Brother David meant when he distinguished between faith and belief. If you don't have faith in daily life, you might start to develop obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), or become very superstitious. Without faith you may even be afraid to sit on that chair. You might develop the obsession of checking every chair before you sit! This of course would be an unusual type of OCD – but there are a number of obsessive compulsive rabbit-holes a person can fall down because of the lack of this basic faith that things are going to be alright. If I don't have faith, I need to make sure I will be alright so I will need to do things in a particular kind of way. If I don't do that, something bad will happen. This is one of the key elements of OCD. 'If I don't wash my hands every twenty minutes I'll die of some contagious disease'. This can lead to extreme obsessions; obsessions that can make us dysfunctional.

In less extreme forms, obsession manifests in all kinds of rituals we develop, often on a superstitious basis, always informed by this lack of faith. It manifests as anxiety, worry or fear. This is also an element commonly found in rituals in religion and ritualised spiritual practice. In this area we come across strong beliefs that things must be done in a certain way in order to avoid a bad outcome. The perspective of the Buddha on the other hand, was not a ritual perspective, but one that focused on cultivating the heart and cultivating faith. More precisely, the emphasis of the Buddha was on intention. If our intention is in the right place, then we are moving in the right direction with the right kind of energy and that will ensure a beneficial outcome. The external form is secondary. We don't have to obsess about getting the form of the ritual perfectly right.

Recently, I listened to a presentation by an Indian monk from our tradition who is from a Brahmin family and so is very familiar with Brahmanic ritual and all the Brahmanic aspects of Hindu religion. And he would see quite clearly how much of Brahmanism is present in rituals of Thai Buddhism and officialdom, for example around royalty. Now, an important aspect in Brahmanic ritual is that the ritual is performed exactly, without any deviations.

If a Brahmin priest makes a mistake with his chanting, then, if I understood my Indian colleague correctly, he will have to repeat the ritual, since the ritual is not valid if there is a mistake in it. The form needs to be perfect.

In Thai Buddhist rituals, there are some interesting beliefs about numbers. Uneven numbers are supposed to be auspicious. It would be a real *faux pas* for two monks to show up for a baby blessing. An even number may be appropriate for a funeral, but not for a baby blessing. Same with the number of incense sticks. With incense sticks, the most auspicious number is three incense sticks – one each for the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. But three incense sticks create three times as much smoke as one, which, especially in a small room, might not be so auspicious for one's health – so in the West we often only burn one incense stick. I have come across Thai Buddhists getting upset about that – feeling that that was wrong! Theirs was a strong feeling based on belief. Faith is a different thing. Faith may say that it is a good thing to burn incense, but the number of sticks is not important; it is the gesture, the intention that counts.

In Sri Lanka, interestingly, the number of incense sticks doesn't seem important, the quantity does: the more incense, the better! In Sri Lanka, of course, temples are always open spaces, so you can burn loads of incense. But in some Western monasteries I lived in, we occasionally got the situation where Sri Lankan visitors, sticking to their devotional customs, would smoke out the meditation hall, which would be a closed space. In one case I remember them putting so many dozens of burning incense sticks into the incense bowl, that the whole lot would go up in flames, creating a 'ritual bonfire' on the shrine – luckily a contained one! So faith needs to be balanced by discernment!

In the Buddhist tradition we talk about faith as faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. They are called the Three Refuges: awakening, the nature or truth one needs to awaken to in order to overcome unnecessary suffering, and the disciples of the Buddha who awakened to this truth. According to the Buddha this awakening is possible for any human being who makes the right kind of effort, leading to true and lasting contentment, independent of external circumstances. In this case, faith means realizing the relevance of the teachings to our situation. If we have faith in the principles,

we trust that we will benefit from applying ourselves, but we have to make the effort. Faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, then, is an empowerment, a step towards developing faith in ourselves. Because then we have to make the effort to confirm in our experience what the Buddha was talking about. There is no liberation through mere belief. Faith, in the Buddha's teaching, is an initial faith, since we do not know yet; we have not experienced all the fruits of the practice. But something may ring true about the teachings, so we can have this initial faith that gets us started on the path. Once we experience the fruits of the teachings, it becomes confirmed faith.

An example to illustrate this is the use of a SatNav. First of all, if we go on a journey, we need to have the initial faith that we will be able to make it. If we use a SatNav, we also need to have some faith in the SatNav. But we also need to know how to use it wisely. We all know the relevant anecdotes: you can end up in an unpleasantly deep hole of some road works if you just follow it blindly. So our faith in the SatNav should not be a blind faith; it needs to be balanced by discernment. To use it wisely, we would have to cross-reference what the SatNav is telling us with what we experience. If you don't have faith in the SatNav, you are going to be in trouble, because you are always arguing with it, but if you have blind faith in it, you might just end up in the middle of a field. Similarly, faith in the Buddha's teachings is the initial spark that gets us going. Then, we use our discernment to check against our experience, until it becomes confirmed faith. That is very different from belief. Faith is ultimately empowering: we trust that there is the possibility of going forward, and it is even alright if we make mistakes. Even if things go wrong, we can learn from the experience, because we trust the principle of practice. If we don't have this trust, then we are inclined to hold on to belief – belief in a ritual, or a teacher, for example, giving our authority away because we want someone else to tell us what to do, as we lack the faith or trust in ourselves.

Saddhā, trust or faith, implies a certain capacity to be with uncertainty, to be OK with not knowing. When I take the train to Kandersteg, I have a belief that the train will get me there. I read the schedule, and I trust that it is going to take me there, but I really do not know; things might go wrong. As we all know, when you take a train, sometimes you don't arrive where you are

supposed to arrive. But trust can go beyond that. I can have the basic trust that even if it doesn't work out, it will somehow be alright, I'll be able to deal with it. These are the deeper layers of trust, ultimately the deep trust in life: that even though things may be difficult, we know that things are not always as they appear, so there is the deep trust that somehow things will be alright.

If we don't have this, we'll have to cling to a belief. Clinging to a belief will protect us from our fear of life; and this is what turns a person into a fundamentalist – someone who perceives those not holding that belief as threatening. That is because if what those others believe is true, then our belief may be false. And that would expose us to our fundamental fear, our basic lack of trust in life. If you have deep trust, then you don't have to hold on to belief; belief is something that's functional. Brother David may hold some Christian beliefs, I may hold some Buddhist beliefs – but we know that reality, ultimate reality, is something that is already here, something that we already are a part of and something that is already a part of us. Something that unites us. Even if some of our beliefs might turn out to be wrong, we have the possibility to revise them. But we have the deeper faith that that also is going to be alright. Our effort will never be wasted. We are still on the path of developing our understanding, developing wisdom irrespective of the form in which it manifests.

So, I stop here, and invite any comment or questions.

Q: *How do we handle the category of ideology, as it seems to be a form of belief, and today more and more present?*

A: Here we can use the same paradigm: faith always implies trust, so faith as trust means that we don't have to hold on to anything, that we are OK with uncertainty. We don't have to have fixed beliefs on anything. Of course we can have beliefs, but we don't have to hold on to them tightly. These don't have to be religious beliefs. It's the same for political or other ideologies: they get created and grasped at because of a lack of faith, lack of trust – and this can push us into believing all kinds of things. In our daily life we have the example of obsessive-compulsive disorder, the belief that if we do not do something in a specific way, then something bad will happen. We can become

obsessive-compulsive around political ideas, around religious rituals, around our daily routines. We hold on to fixed beliefs because they make us feel safe.

If I believe what I believe, this helps me make sense of the world. It becomes a less threatening place. It gives the world some order and gives me the illusion that I know what's going on. And that gives me the illusion of control. If I have the right idea, the right ideology, I have an explanation – and even if it is completely irrational, that makes me feel more secure. I have the map, I can orient myself. Precisely because of this, any idea that challenges my position becomes very threatening.

Now if you are the opposite type, that is, if you have deep faith, you don't need any of that. Even if some evangelical missionaries come to your door and ask you if you are sure about what's going to happen to you after death and the nature of God, and you say, 'well, actually, I don't have a clue' – they might think they have found a customer for their synthetic certainties. And if you can remain comfortable in that state of not knowing, that would probably confuse them. Then you realize what's going on: the one thing *they* find really threatening is uncertainty! So if you *practise* this ability to hold the space of uncertainty, it can take you really deep. It gives a deep sense of inner peace and confidence: you're fine even if you don't know.

Q: *I understand the way you counterpose faith and belief. I would like to ask, how can a person that doesn't have faith cultivate it? It seems to me that either a person has faith or not, according to the personality type, etc. So is cultivation possible?*

A: Yes, it's true that we seem predisposed towards more or less faith, as well as how well we can deal with doubt. Yet, as with all qualities, this can also be cultivated, even if it may take some time. I think the key here is learning to be with uncertainty, and of course, this takes us right back to meditation as a cultivation of awareness. Once we become aware of awareness, that core quality of consciousness which can just know and feel whatever you are experiencing right now, without reacting or adding anything onto it, we may realize that it is worth investing in that quality, to try to remember it, to refer to it more often, to trust it. The more we invest in awareness, the less we need to invest in the content of experience, the less we need to be concerned about

things being the way we feel we need them to be, the less we need to insist on our preferences being met, the less we need to be worried about getting it right. Awareness then increasingly becomes a refuge, particularly in the face of difficult, unpleasant experiences, including doubt: we try to stay with the experience, be aware of it, feel it, try to see if that is actually OK, good enough, bearable at least, so we do not have to immediately react to it out of aversion. Taking awareness as a refuge then becomes our gateway to freedom. Awareness is always here already, inherently peaceful, naturally patient – a permanent invitation. Taking refuge in the Buddha means taking refuge in this capacity to know what is happening right now. It is not an intellectual knowing, it is the capacity to feel just how it feels.

This is the most direct and powerful way to deal with doubt: to know it, to feel it. Of course, since doubt is a difficult state to be with, our tendency is always to seek some kind of authority to allay the doubt. Either through going back to the books or to some teacher – we seek anything to get us out of the state of doubt. But with the deeper existential questions, this will not really help, since life is uncertain by nature. You can never be certain that the decision you'll make will be the right one. We necessarily lack the necessary perspective. So that is where faith comes in.

Overly rational people tend to suffer a lot from doubt – if they are trying to get their answers from thinking alone. Being overly rational, they might neglect or positively distrust their intuition or other means of making decisions in the face of uncertainty or lack of information. And as life or the future are inherently uncertain, that is almost always the case with decisions pertaining to real- life situations. A more pragmatic, trusting person, on the other hand, will be unlikely to get caught in a dilemma about making decisions. He or she will just make a decision, based on their conscience and current best knowledge, and be willing to accept responsibility for the consequences. To work with doubt, we need to acknowledge that, most of the time, we cannot know, because we cannot know the future. The more we insist on knowing, the more we will be stuck in doubt.

How can we learn that? First we need the idea, then we apply it in practice. Meditation is a wonderful opportunity for this, since in meditation we practise

being here with and for whatever comes up. And if that happens to be doubt, instead of trying to resolve it frantically, we can just say 'I'm going now to look at doubt and feel what it is like'. We stay there, we wait and see. If there is a particularly difficult decision you have to make and you don't know what to do, don't do anything – at least if life affords you the luxury not to have to respond immediately to the situation. Just keep doing what you are doing, staying true to your experience, which is the doubt. You know that you want to know, and you know that you don't know, and that's exactly where you stay put and practise mindfulness. Being aware of that.

Life is going on anyway, you cannot stop it. In this sense, not making a decision is making a decision. You decide to continue as before, as you aren't ready to change direction. If you do need to change course, it will become clear at some point, precisely when you can't continue to do what you've been doing. This also works with small things. Whenever I've been stuck with doubt, I practised exactly that. And at one point the decision comes. Now, we may ask ourselves, 'where does that decision come from? Have I decided to make a decision to now decide to make a decision?'It doesn't work that way, does it? The decision arises when the circumstances for it are in place and then you just act! And if the decision does not arise, then you do not act. Of course if not acting is a problem, then by all means, act … and if you think you cannot act, then don't. Simple! It need not be a problem.

Doubt is a very uncomfortable place to be in, but if we practise with that, we find that everything in practice works this way, it all follows the same pattern. Initial faith, then practice, then experience, then confirmed faith. Then you realize that it is possible to be with uncertainty. It feels uncomfortable in the beginning, but the more you learn to be with that unpleasant feeling, the more you will be able to understand that feeling. Uncertainty certainly feels unpleasant. But if we don't insist on having pleasure all the time, then maybe it's OK. That is how practice works – developing the capacity of awareness, being capable to embrace anything, any content. And that is faith, in its deepest sense.

There is that line in T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*:

'Love is most nearly itself,
When here and now ceases to matter'

I think the line is about this theme, it is in the spirit of what the Buddha says. Now T.S. Eliot was not a Buddhist, but despite the different cultural context, when he says love is 'when here and now ceases to matter', that seems to me like the Buddha saying 'don't hold on to your idea of the future, because the future is uncertain, don't hold on to the past because the past is already gone, and don't hold on to the present either, because when you hold on to the present, to your preferences about how things should be, or what should be happening right now, that is where you attach to the wheel of *samsāra*, that's where suffering is created'. That's why the Buddha says that the freedom of the mind comes when we can let go of the present, so that even the content of our experience 'here and now' doesn't matter. Pleasant, unpleasant, success, failure, all the drama of life, on an ultimate level does not matter. What actually matters is how we *relate* to the content of our experience, the quality of our heart, the quality of awareness. When this awareness really comes to the foreground, when this awareness becomes your ultimate refuge, that is love. It means that the heart is so abundant with love that whatever here and now brings, what your experience feels like will not curb its radiance, there is no ground for fear to establish itself, so the heart remains spacious and peaceful.

3

ENERGY AND DESIRE

Adapted from a talk given in December 2020 at Dhammapala monastery

Energy is something that we all have – if we didn't have any energy, we wouldn't be here in the first place. In the Pali *suttas*, energy (*vīriya*) appears as one of five spiritual faculties (*indriya*). They translate as faith, energy, mindfulness, collectedness and wisdom. In one presentation of these faculties each one, when engaged will lead to the next, so we start with faith and end up with wisdom. Another presentation shows them as two pairs of qualities which need to balance each other, overseen by mindfulness in the middle – the pivot on which the pairs can balance, so to speak. In that way of looking at the faculties, energy needs to be balanced by collectedness. Once there is some enthusiasm for practice, dhamma chanda, we have a lot of energy and need to balance it with some steadiness and continuity of attention. Without the steadiness of *samadhi* (collectedness), energy could easily turn into restlessness either in the body or in the mind, manifesting for example as a lot of thinking. Energy is also one of the factors in what the Buddha called 'the four roads to success', where it appears as the effort or energy required to accomplish anything – whether spiritual or mundane. And we can also find energy in the seven factors of enlightenment as the third factor. It comes after investigation.

The seven factors of enlightenment are led by mindfulness, which sets up the stage for practice. First of all, we have to be mindful – that is, pay attention to what is presently happening – in order to be able to practise. The second factor then is investigation. As we become more present for our experience,

we become more and more able to investigate our experience. The fulfilment of the factor of investigation is energy – energy comes from investigation. We might say that energy comes from interest. In the context of the Buddha's path, this is connected to investigation. We investigate because we are interested. You might also say that energy, as related to interest, is connected to desire – where our desire is, that is where our energy is, because where our desire is, that's where our interest is; if we are interested we get motivated, and if we are motivated we have energy. Desire, interest, motivation and energy all hang together.

Now, in the context of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha's central teaching on suffering, its cause and the way to end it, the Buddha discusses the cause of suffering as being *tanhā*, which is often translated as desire. There are three types of *tanhā* listed: First *kāma tanhā*, which is desire for sensuality or experiences in the broader sense. Secondly, *bhāva tanhā*, which is desire for becoming, and is connected with self-view and our self image. Thirdly, *vibhāva tanhā*, which, as the opposite of *bhāva tanhā*, would be the desire for 'un-becoming', or 'non-being': the wish to get rid of things that we don't like about ourselves. Our spiritual practice, for example, can be motivated in part by the desire to get rid of defilements or bad habits.

We might see a problem here, certainly by the time we get to the Third Noble Truth (the cessation of suffering). If *tanhā* is the cause of suffering, and things cease when their causes cease, then if we give up *tanhā*, there should be no more suffering. This would be the cessation of suffering through the abandonment of these three forms of *tanhā*. 'So', we may wonder, 'does this mean that as good Buddhists, we should not have any desires?' We can try…. When we start to suspect that this project is doomed to fail, we might instead follow the interpretation that it's not desire but attachment to desire that is the problem. Then we may have the impression that as a good Buddhist we should be unattached. So we try to be unattached, or detached. Well, good luck with that! If we follow this notion, our striving might produce no more than a caricature of what the Buddha was talking about. If we misinterpret his teaching as a self-improvement project, we may find ourselves trying to impersonate an unattached person.

It is not that simple to give up desire or attachment to desire. From my point of view, the first important correction is that '*tanhā*' does not translate as desire but as 'thirst'. Desire is a simplistic translation. Desire is quite a broad thing. Interest is a mild form of desire. Enthusiasm is another kind of desire. And thirst is a particular manifestation of desire which has an edge to it. It is not by chance that the Buddha used the term 'thirst' in his teachings about the causes of emotional suffering. Thirst for sense experience is desire with an edge. Thirst implies that I really need to have this experience. If I'm thirsting, it implies that if I don't have something to drink I will die. So there is this intensity to it. This is where attachment comes in.

In the Buddha's teachings on Dependent Origination, attachment (*upādāna*) comes after thirst (*tanhā*). So if thirst is a form of desire which is driven by this type of energy, it implies attachment to my desire. There is that sense of urgency behind it. Desire itself is a natural force; desire is energy. Without desire you won't be doing anything at all. Attachment to desire – which tells me that I *really need* to get a particular experience to feel alright – presupposes a lack, a need without which I can't go on. So if I believe this, I am literally attached. Desire has me like a farmer who pulls a bull by the ring in its nose. Depending on how intense the energy of the desire we are attached to, it may take us to really weird places, make us engage in all kinds of activities, including unwholesome ones that will lead to suffering. And as long as we believe in the need to fulfil our desires, we remain attached to the world of manifestation, the wheel of *saṃsāra*.

This in a broad sense is the cause of our suffering. We don't suffer only if we become attached to unwholesome things, or because we crave things that can get us into trouble, but because the craving in itself is a restless movement that cannot come to an end. Every experience is fleeting, uncertain. Even if we get what we want, it's not going to give us any lasting satisfaction. It may give us a hit, but that's all; from our experience around sensuality, we know we will always want more; more of the same, or something different for a change. And so we find ourselves investing our energy in all kinds of projects, in an unending game of becoming. The same applies to its opposite – the game of getting rid of something, of unbecoming, never ends: there's

always something else you can get rid of. Therefore the project of perfecting yourself as a personality is really not recommended.

Upādāna, the Buddha's term for attachment, also means 'feeding', which relates to thirst – the Buddha could have also used the term 'hunger' instead. Thirst – or hunger – leads to attachment, which is attachment through feeding. Feeding on what? Well, in his discourses he often divided experience into five aggregates or groups, the *khandhas* in Pali: form, feeling, perception, mental activities, and sense consciousness. The first of these referring to what nowadays we usually refer to as 'matter' – the world of things appearing in consciousness, which is the fifth of the *khandhas*. In between lie three groups which refer to how consciousness apperceives and responds to what arises: how it recognises experiences (perception), the feeling tone of experience and further mental activities like thought, or even subtler ones like attention and intention. It is interesting to see then how, according to the Buddha, for the unenlightened mind, these become '*upādāna khandhas*' – groups of attachment. We are attached to these *khandhas* – that is to our experience – through feeding, our mind feeds on experience. The cause of dissatisfaction or suffering (*dukkha*) is the feeding on our experience which cannot satisfy our hunger. I think this is an interesting model for contemplation: to explore how, in one way or another, we feed on experience. We're always thirsting for more of something else. Where our desire is, that's where our energy and motivation are – and that's where we go! And we go just like a hamster on a wheel – going on, but not going anywhere.

The Buddha borrowed this image of attachment as feeding from the cultural description of fire available in his time. Fire was described as something that is feeding on its fuel. And therefore the flame of the fire is attached to its fuel, wood for example. The nature of the fire is defined by its fuel; we can have a 'wood fire', an 'oil fire' and so on. If the fuel burns out, what happens to thefire? It goes out. 'And when the fire goes out', the Buddha asked his disciples, 'where do you think the flame goes?' Well, of course it doesn't go anywhere, it just goes out…. In the modern materialistic view, we take for granted that when the fire goes out, there isn't anything anymore. If the fire goes out, it is just gone. But the Buddha was not a materialist; in his usage, the

image is more subtle. As Ajahn Thanissaro, an American monk in the Thai forest tradition, wrote in his book *The Mind like Fire Unbound*, the fire becomes 'unbound' from its fuel, it does not simply cease to be. It's as if it existed in a form of potential, in an un-manifest way.

The Buddha used this image to explain what happens to the mind that is freed. Just as the fire is attached to the fuel, the human mind is attached to the five *khandhas* through feeding on them. So if the mind stops feeding on the five *khandhas*, it isn't attached to them anymore. And then the mind is unbound, 'like fire unbound'. It becomes 'un-manifest'.

In the *suttas* this is referred to as *anidassana viññāna* – a consciousness that is not manifest or does not manifest anything. This would be a mind that you can't pin down. About such a mind you can't say that it exists or it doesn't exist; you can't trace it. Because it's not feeding on anything, it doesn't leave any trace.

In the *suttas*, the Buddha talks about being able to trace the mind of someone who has just died, as, for example, reappearing in some heavenly realm, or as a new human being. But about the mind of an *arahant*, someone whose mind was completely liberated, the Buddha said it was impossible to say where it went, since such a mind leaves no trace; it is unbound. The mind of an angel feeds on different things than a human mind does, but if a mind doesn't feed on anything anymore, nothing can be said about it. It is beyond the manifest, beyond language.

My aim here was to say that desire is not necessarily the problem. It is the attachment to desire that binds us to existence. Desire is a natural energy that motivates us. So for an unenlightened person, the effort to abandon desire will not lead to freedom: more likely it would amount to repression or denial of desire – and that would eventually lead to depression. Depression is lack of motivation; it's clearly not the freedom the Buddha was talking about.

The Fourth Noble Truth – the Path to the cessation of suffering – provides a model of what to do with the energy of desire or thirst; it is often described as the path of purification. We want to be careful with our desire, certainly not to pretend that we don't have any thirst or desire, but to acknowledge,

to be aware of desire and the attachment to desire and what these do to us. The Buddha never said not to be attached. The Buddha simply said that 'attachment leads to suffering'. Where there's attachment, there's going to be suffering. If there is suffering, somewhere there has to be attachment – they belong together. This is something that the Buddha urges us to investigate, to become wise about. The direction of the Buddha's path is towards wisdom, coming from thorough investigation. Through interest and investigation – which require motivating desire – arises the understanding that can lead us to freedom from desire.

And here freedom from desire does not mean not to have any desire, but that we can have a desire without feeling obliged to follow its message. We can reflect: 'this is desire, it is like this'. That's what awareness does; awareness is just aware, and awareness is here all the time – we don't have to create it. If you have a desire, for example the desire to eat something that you don't really need (the proverbial piece of cake in the refrigerator) – you realize how it is a motivating force: you have a project for a while. There's nothing morally wrong with that, but it's a good idea to allow awareness to know this desire: to be mindful of desire. Awareness gives you the ability to know how it feels to desire the chocolate cake – whether that's a mild interest or a burning desire. And what awareness provides here is the opportunity to stop and just be aware of the desire. Instead of believing that I need to fulfil the desire in order to be content, why not just be content with the desire?

We know we can do that, we can certainly understand the principle. And if we put this into practice, we find that sometimes it works. Certainly this is my experience. The experience of a moment of freedom that provides me some authority over impulses arising in the mind feels good. This is the authority of awareness; if you can abide in it, it becomes a refuge. This is taking refuge in the Buddha. And this increases our confidence in the possibility of awareness to act as a refuge: that we can just be content with being present with what is. The Buddha's claim was that in principle there are no limits to this ability. Therefore a self-sustaining source of well-being is inherent in this quality of awareness.

According to the Buddha, the way into suffering is for the mind or heart (*citta*) to believe in the world of appearances and of things; and then grasping, holding on to things in our search for happiness. Attachment surely follows, and we end up going round and round, on the wheel of *saṃsāra*. The way to peace is letting go, so that the mind stays at home, in the centre of the wheel. If this were all there was to desirelessness, we might say, 'so what, this would be boring'. However, this refuge in awareness is accompanied by a sense of plenitude and well-being.

The state of desirelessness for appearances is possible because the mind can let go of those obsessions and come back home into just being; being aware. And when we experience that for ourselves, we observe that it is not a kind of 'bored contentment' – there is a source of inner plenitude, an inner well-being that is completely independent of the circumstances of our life. This is a source of joy and ease, of energy not invested into running after a lot of things. This energy that becomes available is somewhat mysterious – at least to me – since we did not create it; it comes from beyond what we could identify with. It is something that can fulfil us, carry us.

We can see this happening when we give up even small preferences – for example for having our egg cooked for three and a half minutes and being discontent if it comes out too hard or too soft – and instead noticing how this discontent is created by the mind. The same applies to the experience of letting go of attachments to self, or self-view, or our pet projects. We can notice the relief and the liberation of energy that often comes with that. We might then get inspired because we have an inkling of what the Buddha's path might be about. We might however also find out that this state of resting in, or being awareness, is not so easy to sustain. We may have some initial successes that inspire us, but then later progress won't be that smooth and easy; after years of practice we might find ourselves to be that same old boring person with the same bad habits.

Habits go deep, so ours has to be an on-going practice of thorough investigation, looking deeply into them; and for this we need energy. Our temporary experiences of release from the grip of desires offer peace, and the heart feels refreshed when we can allow ourselves to let desires just be. This serves to

replenish our motivation and hence our energy reserves for the long journey along the path. The Eightfold Path – the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth – is also described as a path of purification. That is because our heart has to be purified of its stickiness – its tendency to attach to things and experiences – in order to abide with peaceful clarity in the midst of experience.

The ordinary mind is sticky by nature; it attaches to things, ideas, experiences and views. It is important to be honest about this, at least to ourselves. Then we start suffering responsibly. That is the first step. It means that we do not blame the world or other people for our suffering. We know that ultimately we are responsible. The world might be unfair, other people may be bad – there is no doubt about that. But whether we suffer from this or not depends primarily on how we deal with that. We can realize for example that, although our partner may have some faults, it is our attachment to ideas about how our partner should be that is the true cause of our suffering. Being aware means starting to be capable of suffering responsibly. Then the Buddha advises us to take an interest in our suffering, to investigate it. Hopefully we are motivated enough to do that and followour desire to overcome suffering. If we don't have that desire, we will never even be able to start to practise.

So we need desire, we need all the energy that is latent in our desire in order to be liberated. We cannot afford to give up any of that because the energy of desire that is suppressed, is energy that is lost. We need that energy, but we need to direct it in a way that is helpful to us. Practice then is first of all to find out where my desire, where my attachment, is directed and how I can channel this energy into wholesome directions. This can certainly be a creative endeavour, but also a slow and painful process as we keep learning from our mistakes.

It is worth remembering that the Buddha's most basic teaching is not about 'emptiness' or 'no-self', but about developing the capacity to distinguish between 'wholesome' and 'unwholesome' (*'kusala'* and *'akusala'*). According to the Buddha, we should always contemplate whether an object or endeavour is actually worthy of our desire – there are wholesome objects for desire and there are unwholesome objects for desire – and consider the quality of our desire, as to whether it is accompanied by a sense of urgency, whether we are

attached to it, or whether we could also let go of its pursuit if that would seem more suitable.

What qualifies as wholesome may also change with time; as we progress along the path we might see that what may have been helpful at one point is no longer so. So we withdraw our interest and energy from areas that are no longer helpful and direct them into more wholesome pursuits – rather than being idealistic and thinking that we have to give up everything at once. If we don't have anything wholesome to channel our desire energy into, then it will be quite difficult to give up the things we have, even if we see that they are not really useful to us anymore. The Buddha said that an intelligent person gives up a lesser satisfaction, a lesser pleasure, for a greater satisfaction. 'Greater' here does not mean more intense or more fantastic, it just means more refined, more wholesome. Behind this, there is the acknowledgment that our mind is motivated by pleasure. Pleasure then is not a bad thing – and consequently it's not the case that as Buddhists we should abandon all pleasure. We should just be careful and investigate what happens when we get attached to any particular source of pleasure. It means we start to manage this energy more skilfully.

I often quote one of my teachers saying that much of practice is just 'damage control'. Young men coming to the Sangha often have idealistic ideas about practice. They think that they must go at it like the ascetic Gautama who – before he became the Buddha – determined to sit under the *bodhi* tree without moving until he would become liberated from all delusion and suffering – even if his blood dried up or his bones crumbled to dust in the process. We can do a lot of harm to ourselves if we attach to idealistic images. To look at the practice as being mostly just damage control is a good corrective to this idealism. It takes into account that there might be a lot of unwholesome energies operating in our undeveloped mind, and that the first step is to take responsibility for that by carefully looking after it. That is a more modest and realistic approach. The cultivation of awareness in terms of what goes on in our mind is a big part of that.

This can be very humbling. As we become more aware, we start to notice more and more of our limitations and the not-so-presentable desires that we might

have. And we realize that there is a good amount of stickiness in our heart that can cause harm to ourselves and others. As we all share the human condition, it is important to realize not only our potential for goodness and beauty, but also our potential to do real harm to ourselves and others. Here we see the importance of the precepts and the commitment to an ethical impeccability as a foundation for our practice. 'Damage control' means we take responsibility for our attachments and desires, and we take care of them. That's why the precepts are about restraint – we abandon unwholesome desire. Gradually then, by reining in our impulses, we begin to recuperate more and more of our energy. This energy then becomes available for investing in the path, for investing into wholesome qualitieslike kindness, compassion, generosity and, of course, investigation. This way, energy and desire become purified by following the path of practice.

I hope this is an experience that we are all familiar with, even though sometimes the progress can be frustratingly slow. Frustratingly so, because patience is a quality that for most of us is underdeveloped – conditioned as we are by the modern consumer society with its focus on instant gratification. That conditioning usually makes us look or hope for quick and evident results. As modern people, we also tend to have an overly powerful inner critic. That critic can be an aid for us, noticing things that can be improved, but that capacity can also backfire by focusing too much on our shortcomings or failings, overlooking our good qualities or actual signs of progress. So it is important to allow our inner critic to play only a moderate role on our internal council – don't let it run the show!

I will add another example from the *suttas*.

In the Eightfold Path, energy appears as the sixth factor, 'right effort'. The word there is not *vīriya* it is *vayāma*; the two words are closely connected, often used interchangeably. Here the Buddha uses it as the effort needed to bring into existence wholesome states of mind that are not here yet, to make the effort to maintain wholesome states of mind that have arisen, as well as the effort to abandon unwholesome states of mind and the effort to prevent unwholesome states from arising. This is the standard formulation.

It is the formula that describes how to invest energy in our practice. This can be applied to any element or factor on the path.

This, then, is about the skilful steering of energy in spiritual practice. It is not necessarily 'the more energy or effort the better' as the steering needed can be very subtle. To illustrate it, the Buddha once used the metaphor of tuning a lute. The story is of a monk who did walking meditation until his feet were bleeding, without reaching enlightenment. As with many enthusiastic young monks, this over-exertion led to frustration and despair. Unbalanced energy can lead from one extreme to another. So it is not a surprise that the monk in the story, Bhikkhu Sona, after his ordeal was thinking about disrobing and returning to his family. The Buddha, aware of Bhikkhu Sona's frustration, spoke to him about right effort. Using the metaphor of tuning a lute so that the strings were neither too tight nor too loose, he explained that effort doesn't have to require blood, sweat and tears. Right effort is like this perfect tuning. In the end, Bhikkhu Sona remained a monk, and by taking to heart his teacher's advice and applying it in his practice soon realized *Nibbāna*.

We know that trying too hard to get concentrated may just lead to a headache; however, not doing anything, not applying any effort, will not work either. You don't reach enlightenment through effort, but also, you do not reach enlightenment without effort. It is a question of tuning the mind just right until things start to happen by themselves. You can't make happen what is needed for waking up, but you can contribute to the possibility by doing your bit to bring the necessary conditions into existence.

Something that I use myself for investigation and contemplation – the second factor of enlightenment – is to look at my meditation in terms of energy: 'What is the quality of energy now? Is it too tight? Is it too loose?' If you gauge your meditation in this way, you have a way to know which way to tune your effort. 'Should I raise my energy, or find ways of becoming more calm?' And this is where the subtlety of energy and right effort lies. If we have a criterion like this by means of which to help direct our investigation, we sustain interest. And out of interest comes energy – the kind of energy the Buddha was talking about. It's not the energy of fundamentalism or idealism, it's the energy of

truly taking an interest; with that, we start to see more clearly and our heart comes into tune like a motor that hums nicely.