Emptiness: A Practical Course for Meditators

Lesson 6 Reading: Introduction, Chapters 11, 12, & 13
IN EARLIER CHAPTERS we saw that each moment of experience consists only of arising and passing sense phenomena, constantly forming and dissolving. In the last two chapters we’ve seen how, despite the lack of any ongoing entity, patterns of action continue; each moment conditions the next in such a way that volitional formations repeat themselves. In the Buddhist view, this continuity extends even beyond death into rebirth. In this chapter we will explore the creation and the undoing of karmic patterns—how we become bound and how we become free.

At first glance, the concepts of not-self and karma might seem opposed or even contradictory. If there is no ongoing self, why do the results of my actions come back to me? Why don’t they come to you? If there is no self, who is it that is affected by the results of karma?

In the Buddha’s time, one of his disciples raised this question: “What self, then, will actions done by the not-self affect?” The Buddha essentially told the monk that he hadn’t been paying attention. Since you, no doubt, have been paying close attention, you will know that this is another of those questions that has no answer
because it has been wrongly posed. In fact, not-self and karma need each other, both for us to understand the way things are and for us to stand any chance of liberation.

It is important to understand that the truth of not-self does not deny individuality. When you realize not-self in a transformative way, it does not mean that you merge with the cosmos and then live in a state of perpetual oneness with all things, with all personality washed away into a bland nothingness. Nisargadatta had a good explanation of this development:

When the “I am myself” goes, the “I am all” comes. When the “I am all” goes, “I am” comes. When even “I am” goes, Reality alone is and in it every “I am” is preserved and glorified. Diversity without separateness is the ultimate the mind can touch.³

When we stop conceiving of ourselves as “I am something,” then an experience of oneness may come. In the Buddhist view this is not essential, but it may happen. When the experience of oneness fades, there is still a sense of individuality (“I am”). When even that fades, there is only what is, and in that is still found every individual existence. The maturity of the insight into not-self is to see the uniqueness in individual existence but without the sense of separation created by concepts of self and other.

This recalls Dōgen Zenji’s famous statement from the “Genjōkōan”: “To learn Buddhism is to learn about the self. To learn about the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.”⁴ The diversity of the ten thousand things does not go away. Each still expresses itself in its own way—the song of the robin, the croak of a bullfrog, the love of a mother for her sick child. This is the variety of life, the limitless creativity of nature, each of us manifesting our unique expression. In Buddhism this unique, vital aspect of each thing is called its suchness (Pali: tathatā) and is often contrasted with emptiness (suññatā), the absence of selfhood common to all things.

In karmic terms we would say that a being’s suchness is at least partly the outcome of their past actions. So the teaching of not-self has to be paired with an understanding of karma to explain the incredible variety we see in beings. Equally, karma needs the understanding of not-self. Without it, individual transformation, much less liberation, would not be possible.
KARMIC PATTERNS AND THE CREATION OF SELF

In Buddhism, a sentient being is often described with the metaphor “mind stream.” A stream is “a body of running water flowing on the earth.” It is bounded by banks, but the flowing water is what constitutes the stream. Like a river, a stream has a definable shape and location. The Mississippi River refers to one body of water and the Colorado River refers to another. The shape of any stream varies from moment to moment depending on rainfall, snowmelt, tributaries, and so on, but each stream can be named, or designated, in a meaningful way. These designations are useful and take on increasing importance as water becomes scarcer all over the world.

Although the name is fixed, when we stand on the bank and look into the body of a running stream, we see there is no constancy there at all. We may be looking at a fairly steady shape, but the actual makeup of the stream is always changing. We see the water in front of us for just a moment and then it passes by, replaced by a new swash that also then moves on. A fish swims past; a branch floats by; an eddy forms and is smoothed out. Nothing is fixed in a flowing stream but something is always there. It’s an ongoing pattern of changing waters.

It is obvious why, for thousands of years, a stream has been used as an analogy for mind. The small portion of the stream we are looking at can be likened to the present moment. The past moment has already flowed downstream, and the future moment is still upstream. Nothing remains the same from one moment to the next, except the shape delineated by the banks, which we could say are analogous to the body. There is no enduring entity in the stream, just as there is no lasting self in the mind. Yet some streams are clear and fast, while others are slow and muddy. Each stream has its individual nature, its suchness. Once in place, the characteristics of a stream tend to continue, just as karmic formations tend to repeat, giving a sense of continuity to personality.

But unlike minds, streams don’t form an identity around their personality. “I’m the mighty Mississippi, the longest river in the country! I’m so wide, I carry more cargo than any other river around!” What a bore the Mississippi would be if it thought like that. But we do. Our mind stream contains karmic patterns that repeat over and over. Some are beautiful, with qualities of compassion, generosity, and intelligence. Some are painful, with qualities of selfishness, rudeness,
and confusion. Because we haven’t deeply understood the truth of not-self, these repeating formations make us think we are something in an ongoing way, something fixed. We create a self-image based on these patterns. The more strongly we believe in the self-image, the more likely it is those patterns will arise again in the future, confirming the self-image. So our repeated actions—our habitual karma—strongly condition our personality view, and the personality view in turn reinforces the tendency to act in those same ways.

In short, we identify with our habitual actions of body, speech, and mind. This is an identification with the personality, which as we have seen is made only of impermanent volitional formations. Each time we identify, we become that person again—I’m the angry person or the helper, the addict or the moralist. A negative self-image is inherently painful and unsatisfactory, but even a positive self-image limits us: it restricts our choices (“I should do something generous, but I don’t want to”) or we suffer if others don’t agree (“What do you mean I’m stingy?”). As the Chan master Zhaozhou said, “A clay buddha cannot cross water, a bronze buddha cannot get through a furnace, a wooden buddha cannot get through fire.” With entrenched patterns, we carry around this limiting sense of “I” over years or even a lifetime.

If we think of people we know well—or look closely at ourselves—we can see how sometimes a dominant pattern becomes the organizing principle for a person’s whole life. We see lives organized around addiction, craving for attention, greed for money, ambition, need to control, fear, aggression, perfectionism, self-judgment, melancholy, or confusion. These identities are based on unwholesome qualities, but even wholesome qualities can become neurotic if the identification is strong—the compulsive helper, the strict moralist (perhaps the discipline expert in the monastery), or the overly generous person who has time for others but not for his family. One’s whole life can be built around trying to satisfy these urges, which are of one’s own making. The patterns have been formed through our own volitions and ultimately our own ignorance (in the technical Dharma sense). When entrenched, they feel very compelling and we lose touch with our freedom of choice. They bring suffering and are not easy to change.

This is the bondage of the past, bondage to our own choices, our own karma. As the Buddha described karma, translated here as action:
Action makes the world go round,
Action makes this generation turn.
Living beings are bound by action,
Like the chariot wheel by the pin.7

The point of the Buddha’s teaching is for us to step out of these patterns of action and identification. He speaks of coming to the end of craving, which includes greed, aversion, and delusion; all unwholesome tendencies arise from these three roots. So craving is shorthand for all unwholesome tendencies of mind and thus is the basis for all unwholesome karmic patterns. Living beings are confined by karma, because these patterns shape our actions in compulsive ways that lead to suffering for ourselves and others. Dharma practice is to free the heart and mind from compulsive karmic habits. Given the power and tenacity of karma, a serious practitioner might ask, Is this possible? The Buddha’s reply is unequivocal:

Abandon what is unwholesome. It is possible to abandon the unwholesome. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. But because it is possible, I say, “Abandon the unwholesome.”

Develop what is wholesome. It is possible to develop the wholesome. If it were not possible, I would not ask you to do so. But because it is possible, I say, “Develop the wholesome.”8

USING KARMA TO CHANGE KARMA

To loosen the grip of mental habits, it can help to remember that there is no fixed self. If there were, if these habits were a part of “me,” they would probably be unalterable. But because they aren’t, they can be changed. How do we do this? We use the power of karma to change karma.

Suppose we are paying attention to our thoughts and feelings. We can do this while sitting still or engaged in daily activities. Something stimulates us and we notice a habitual reaction spring to life—desire or annoyance, anxiety or confusion. If we let the reaction pull us by the nose, we will soon find ourselves saying or doing something we’ll regret later, simultaneously reinforcing this well-worn pattern. Habits compel us, by the power of reactive emotions, to act unskillfully.
Mindful attention helps us see that we have choices. When we recognize the unskillful nature of emotional reactivity, we can pause before we act, and in the pause, we can contemplate more skillful responses. We might, for example, refrain from saying or doing anything, or we may be able to say or do something helpful, something compassionate or loving. This kind of response is from wisdom, not from compulsion. We aren’t being pushed into a habitual action by a strong emotion. Wisdom can discern the suffering in that choice and restrain us from acting upon it. Clear seeing has the power to transform a moment of compulsion into a moment of freedom. This is helpful, not only in the present moment but in future results as well. Whenever a karmic pattern is followed blindly, that pattern is reinforced. But when the unwholesome nature of the karmic reaction is seen and the pattern is not followed, the force of that habit is undermined and its karmic potency reduced.

TRANSFORMING OUR OWN HABIT PATTERNS

Working with reactive emotions in this way is a key part of Dharma practice. Sometimes clear seeing will be present—and we can heed the advice of wisdom and act skillfully. At other times it isn’t present and we aren’t able to do this. The old reaction will arise, and we’ll act in the same old way, shouting with anger or withdrawing out of fear. There may be just enough mindfulness present for us to watch the reactive emotion and the unskillful act with some clarity, but not enough to slow its momentum. This can be discouraging; just when we think we have learned to prevent acting on this pattern, we fall into it again. At this point, you might lament, “I’m so tired of seeing my same old stuff again and again!” Trudy Goodman, founding teacher of Insight Los Angeles, once said in response to this quandary: “Well, whose stuff would you like to have?” Everyone’s patterns are repetitive, including ours.

There is no shortcut. We have to see this pattern again and again until we learn how to relate to it. With each moment of clarity, the pattern loses some of its power over us. So the path to freedom from karmic habits is to see them clearly with wisdom and not to act on what is unskillful. Instead of following the old karma of the habit pattern, we can create new karma based on wholesome factors such as mindfulness, wisdom, renunciation, and compassion. Under the influence of wholesome karma, the old painful habit starts to fade away. It comes
less frequently and with less power. In this approach, the reactive emotion doesn’t need to be worked out, as some Western psychotherapies do, by revisiting past incidents, although psychotherapy may be helpful at an earlier stage. Rather the work of weakening the unwholesome reaction is done by mindfulness, wisdom, and compassion in the present moment.

It’s hard to say how long this process will take or to mark exactly how far along we are, but we can trust that these habits are losing their grip. The Buddha put it this way:

When a carpenter looks at the handle of his ax, he sees the impressions of his fingers and his thumb, but he does not know, “So much of the ax handle has worn away today, so much yesterday, so much earlier.” But when it has worn away, he knows that it has worn away. So too when a practitioner dwells devoted to [meditative] development... he knows that [his taints] have worn away.9

Or suppose, monks, an ocean-going boat rigged with ropes, having been exposed to the water for six months, has been dragged to the shore for the winter. Then the ropes that had been affected by wind and sun, when soaked by the monsoon rains, will easily go to waste and rot away. So too when a practitioner dwells devoted to [meditative] development, her fetters easily collapse and rot away.10

This is the path to freedom from past karma, which is one of the most binding forms of selfhood. The old karma of reactivity is replaced, moment after moment, by the new karma of the path. New patterns are created in the heart and mind based on wholesome factors: mindfulness, wisdom, and loving-kindness. The new volitional formations change our lives. We start to see that the path uses the law of karma—in fact, the path itself is a karmic unfolding.

K A R M A I S O U R R U D D E R

Where is the path leading? As Yogi Berra said, “If you don’t know where you’re going, you could end up somewhere else.” The new volitional formations of the path—the eightfold path factors, the four divine abidings, the factors of enlightenment—start to change the course of the Old Mind River. That river has
been flowing for a very long time into Lake Samsara, an Escher-like lake whose outflow channels back into its inflow, creating an endless recycling of currents. Now new intentions from Dharma practice start to flow into the old river like tributaries. They are tiny at first and their currents are weak. But as they grow stronger, the old flow gets weaker, and the tributaries start to dominate. They shift the channel of the river to an entirely new direction. It is now headed away from Lake Samsara and into the Nibbanic Ocean. That is the destination of this path.

If there were something fixed in the mind stream, it couldn’t be redirected. The existing habits would be there forever. However, nothing about volitional formations is fixed, nothing about karma is fixed, and nothing about the self or personality is fixed. There is no solid core at the center of self—only an endlessly changing sequence of volitional formations arising and passing. Craving and ignorance, which lie at the very heart of suffering, are not fixed. This is the truth of not-self. In the beginning, we are bound by our volitional formations, and then we are transformed by the power of new volitions. We abandon what is unwholesome and the mind stream is turned into purity and freedom. The absence of a substantial self makes liberation possible.

The key to the transformative power of the path is the quality of volition, or intention (cetanā). In the beginning, the intention to be mindful seems to produce little result, but over time it generates a tremendous power. Anyone who has sat a week’s silent retreat can testify to the cumulative power of continuous mindfulness. Our best intentions can’t force insight or wisdom, but we can intend to pay attention, to inquire, and to care. The only real tool we have for lasting change is our intention. The Tibetans say, “Everything rests on the tip of motivation.”

When I began Dharma practice, my life was chaotic. I was generally discontent and often miserable. What seems most alarming now is that I had no real understanding of why I was unhappy or how I could become happy. I felt adrift, at the mercy of forces beyond my control. Those forces felt as unpredictable as random winds, blowing sometimes hot and sometimes cold, sometimes north and sometimes west. Those winds sent me up into heaven and down into hell as they liked. To be sure, the winds of circumstance still blow around us, bringing alternating conditions of pleasure and pain, gain and loss, praise and blame, fame and dishonor. We are all afloat on a sea of changing conditions that are mostly
beyond our control. What is different now is that I have a boat and a rudder and I have learned something about how to steer. The boat of course is the Buddhist path. The rudder is intention.

Intention, or karma, is our only reliable rudder in the vast ocean of uncontrollable events that we call life. As we follow the intentions of awareness, investigation, concentration, loving-kindness, compassion, and wisdom, we are heading for a harbor. And it is a safe harbor—for harbor is one of the synonyms the Buddha used for nibbāna—which is peaceful, the goal of the path. From a dialogue with Nisargadatta:

Maharaj: “Your own will has been the backbone of your destiny.”
Questioner: “Surely karma interfered.”
Maharaj: “Karma shapes the circumstances [of your life], the attitudes are your own. Ultimately your character shapes your life, and you alone can shape your character.”

ENDING THE CYCLE OF BECOMING

Past karma may have shaped our present, but it is our will expressed now that sets our future course. Through Dharma practice we are shaping our character, which shapes our life. We can choose how we want to shape our life. If we aspire to ordinary worldly happiness, the way to that is through wholesome acts especially of generosity, virtue, and loving-kindness, which are the three bases of meritorious action (Pali: puñña). If we aspire to liberation, which the Buddha called the highest happiness, these three bases are important but not sufficient. Generosity, virtue, and loving-kindness can still be done from a place of self. Wholesome acts can be used to support the construction of a more polished, beautiful self-image. Such acts can lead to happiness, but until we have seen through self, we are still creating new karma and continuing the rounds of becoming, or samsara. Tsoknyi Rinpoche warns his students, jokingly, about the risk of their becoming “masters of samsara,” enjoying many worldly pleasures but turning away from the real work needed to become free.

The Buddha said that the true fruition of spiritual life is to end the cycle of becoming: “I attained the supreme security from bondage, nibbāna. The
knowledge and vision arose in me: ‘My deliverance is unshakable; this is my last
birth; now there is no renewal of being.’

Sometimes the body is referred to as a “house,” the home or abode of con-
sciousness, sense impressions, and mind objects. Immediately after awakening,
the Buddha spontaneously uttered this verse:

Through many a birth I have wandered through Samsara
Seeking but not finding the builder of this house.
Painful is birth again and again.
Housebuilder, you are seen!
You will build no house again.
All your rafters are broken.
The ridgepole is shattered too.
My mind has attained the Unconditioned
And reached the very end of craving.

The awakened being comes to the end of becoming. Such a one, the Buddha said,
has also come to the end of karma. This is a provocative statement. The Bud-
dha continued to live, act, and teach for forty-five years after his enlightenment.
How is it that he had come to the end of karma? What does that mean? There
are numerous stories in the discourses in which awakened beings still suffer the
results of past karma: Angulimāla, the former killer, was stoned while on alms
round, and Moggallāna, one of the Buddha’s two chief disciples, was murdered.
In both cases, the Buddha said these were karmic results due to their actions
prior to awakening. But enlightened beings, he said, do not generate new karma
from their actions. This is curious, but we may get some sense of its meaning by
considering the Buddha’s account of the night of his awakening as he sat under
the bodhi tree near the city of Gaya in northern India.

THE BUDDHA’S AWAKENING

In one discourse, the Buddha relates the events of that night in some detail. He
began the night as an unenlightened bodhisattva, a being seeking to be awak-
ened. In the early hours of the night the Bodhisattva directed his concentrated
mind to remembering his own past lives. He saw many lives over great stretches
of time, through a multitude of pleasant and painful situations. Later, in the middle hours of the night, the Bodhisattva investigated with his intuitive powers the deaths and rebirths of many other beings. He saw directly that those who had lived with good conduct were reborn in favorable circumstances, while those who had lived with harmful conduct were reborn in painful circumstances. This was his first recorded insight into the law of karma.

We might use our imagination here to wonder about the Bodhisattva’s thought process between the early hours and the middle hours. In the early hours, he recollected his own past births, which evoked and recalled mixed experiences of pleasure and pain. Seeing all those lives, someone intent on ending suffering would surely want to know what it was that led to happiness or unhappiness in a given life. We can imagine that in the middle hours of the night he set out to find the answer to this question. His investigation revealed that one’s conduct in the previous life gives rise to favorable or unfavorable circumstances in the next birth.

Now let’s imagine a step further. By good conduct one can gain a birth that is generally happy. But it would have been clear to the Bodhisattva—who had long ago given up the vanity of youth, health, and life—that even a happy life is still subject to the suffering of aging, illness, and death. Wholesome acts can lead to a good birth, but they don’t solve the problem of suffering entirely. We can imagine that at this point in the night, the Bodhisattva saw clearly the limitations of wholesome karma. It can lead to worldly happiness for some time, but one is still in the cycle of samsara, with one’s future welfare beyond one’s conscious choice. The Bodhisattva must have seen at this point that wholesome karma alone does not bring an end to becoming or suffering. Perhaps it was this revelation that spurred him on to the next and ultimate insight.

In the final hours of the night, the Bodhisattva directed his concentrated mind to the “destruction of the taints,” those root unwholesome qualities of mind that bind us to suffering. He understood the taints as they actually are, their origin, the potential of their end, and the way to their end. He continues:

When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of becoming, and from the taint of ignorance. I directly knew: “Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been
lived, what had to be has been done, there is no more coming to any state of being.”

**THE FOUR TYPES OF KARMA**

The Buddha had reached the end of becoming and also the end of karma. In many discourses he describes the eightfold path as the way to the end of suffering and becoming. But how does one reach the end of karma? In a few discourses, the Buddha describes not just two types of karma (or kamma, in Pali)—wholesome and unwholesome—but four:

There are these four kinds of kamma. . . . There is dark kamma with dark result; there is bright kamma with bright result; there is dark-and-bright kamma with dark-and-bright result; and there is kamma that is neither dark nor bright with neither-dark-nor-bright result, kamma that leads to the destruction of kamma.

The Buddha then explains dark karma as killing living beings, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and indulgence in intoxicants. These are unskillful actions because they cause harm and because the volition behind them involves some combination of greed, hatred, and delusion.

Bright karma is explained as conduct that abstains from these actions. We may recognize this description of bright karma as the five guidelines for ethical conduct for laypeople, commonly called the five precepts. Reflecting on the meaning of bright karma, I expand somewhat on this definition and summarize it for myself as equivalent to the bases of merit: generosity, virtue, and loving-kindness. This formulation of bright karma includes not just refraining from negative actions with negative intent but acting positively with positive intent, actions that express a caring, altruistic frame of mind.

The third type of karma, dark-and-bright karma, covers actions that mix ethical and unethical conduct, such as stealing for the benefit of someone in need.

Then there is the mysterious fourth type:
And what is kamma that is neither dark nor bright, with neither-dark-nor-bright result, kamma that leads to the destruction of kamma? Right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.\(^{19}\)

This, of course, is the noble eightfold path.

**THE PATH FACTORS AND THE PRACTICE OF NONDOING**

Developing the eightfold path is action that leads to the end of karma. Let’s look at these path factors in more detail to see what kind of action the Buddha is pointing to here.

Three of the eight factors are related to ethical conduct (\(sīla\)):

- Right speech: to refrain from speech that is untrue, malicious, harsh, or purposeless
- Right action: to refrain from killing living beings, taking what is not given, and sexual misconduct
- Right livelihood: to refrain from wrong livelihood, which for a lay-person is defined as trading in weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, or poison\(^{20}\)

Some of these are the same actions described as bright karma in the discourse above. Note that the definitions of these three factors are based on *not doing* unskillful actions.

The other five factors have to do with wisdom and meditation. In the wisdom section we have:

- Right view: to understand the four noble truths
- Right intention: intentions of renunciation, loving-kindness, and compassion

In the meditation section we have:
• Right effort: to guard against and abandon unwholesome states, to develop and maintain wholesome states
• Right mindfulness: to notice our experience of body, feeling tone, mind state, and Dharmic principles
• Right concentration: to abide in states of strong concentration called the jhānas

These five factors pertain to the purification of the mind. There is not a lot of doing here, with expressions like understand, notice, and abide. Right intention specifies the proper motivation for action but does not prescribe or proscribe any particular doing. The most active factor in the meditation section seems to be right effort. However, effort is needed only up to a certain stage of meditation. After a certain point of meditative refinement based on strong concentration, unwholesome states simply don’t arise. Their absence is temporary, however, as they may return once concentration diminishes, but they are absent from the mind for some time. Meditation then takes on a quality we can call effortless.

Eradicate exertion and no more suffering is produced.
When exertion has been abandoned, there is the freedom of the effortless.21

As the practitioner develops the path factors, they are described more and more not as actions but as nonaction. These factors mature into a quality of stillness and nondoing. Ultimately the wise practice of nondoing leads to the end of karma and of suffering. We will look into this further in the next chapter on abiding.

This emphasis on nonaction sometimes gives Buddhism a reputation for quietism or passivity, even in the face of injustice. This, however, is a misunderstanding of the meaning of nondoing. Enlightened beings can act forcefully when action is needed. In his lifetime, the Buddha instructed kings on the proper ways to govern, and he intervened to stop a potential war. He established a monastic order with thousands of monks and nuns and enforced its many communal rules. In our day, the Dalai Lama has been a vigorous defender of human rights in Tibet and worldwide. The Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh was so active
in peace work during the war in his country that both sides threatened his life. Activists from many countries have been involved in social, political, and environmental work in an avenue that has been termed “engaged Buddhism,” including Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, A. T. Ariyaratne in Sri Lanka, Sulak Sivaraksa in Thailand, and Joanna Macy in the United States.

Nondoing does not mean that one no longer acts. The true significance of nondoing is that the actions of a fully enlightened being no longer come out of self-centeredness. The self has been seen through so thoroughly that I-making and mine-making have ceased to operate, so there is no longer an imaginary core that actions have to feed or protect. Without the burden of self, the mind is clear and the heart is open. When a situation presents itself, the response from the enlightened mind comes naturally and immediately, without premeditation. Wisdom and loving-kindness have become so well established that they are the intentions from which actions spring. Volition still operates but without reference to the false sense of self. It is the selfless, spontaneous nature of the action that takes it out of the field of karma leading to future results.

We might ask if this kind of action is possible for those not yet fully enlightened. Is it possible for you and me to act from a place of nondoing, free from self-centeredness? A similar question arises about the third noble truth, which says that the end of suffering is, in essence, in the end of craving. Does this truth refer only to the total and final end of suffering attained by a fully enlightened being who has reached the total and final end of craving? Or can it be understood as referring to a temporary end of suffering? Speaking pragmatically, it is useful to notice how a single episode of suffering can come to an end when one relinquishes the specific craving that has fueled it. So it is useful to contemplate the third noble truth as it applies moment by moment, even as we are still practicing toward the complete end of suffering.

Perhaps we can understand acting from a place of nondoing in a similar way. If we are momentarily free from the preoccupations of self-centeredness and the mind is rich with wisdom and loving-kindness, we can start to get a sense of the spontaneous nature of our response at that time. We can trust in the purity of our heart and in our wholesome intentions. We do not need to claim perfect purity or wisdom, just that we feel the strength of the wholesome qualities of mind that are present. We then notice how an action that comes in that mind
state is trustworthy, blameless, and appropriate. This same principle was elaborated by the Taoist sage Lao Tzu:

Therefore the Master
acts without doing anything
and teaches without saying anything.
Practice non-doing,
And everything will fall into place."

We may not have reached the final end of karma, but such “nonacts” lead us in that direction.

In the next chapter we will explore qualities of the mind that is maturing in nondoing.
AS THE FACTORS of the path mature, there is less and less to do in meditation. Due to the strength of the concentrated mind, the afflictive emotions are largely held in abeyance and don’t require much attention. Thought activity slows down. Even when thoughts arise, they are felt to come and go within a spacious field that is undisturbed by their appearance. One still knows what is present at the sense doors, which continue to function capably and efficiently, but there is no avoiding, grasping, lingering, or seeking to perpetuate what has arisen. Things come and go on their own and are seen with equanimity. There is a pervasive sense of stillness and peace.

If asked to describe the overall flavor of such an experience, the meditator might say that she is resting, but the attention is alert, neither dull nor sleepy. The peace of meditation is hard to find through other means. As Suzuki Roshi said to his Western students, “You know how to rest physically. You do not know how to rest mentally.” Meditation provides a reliable avenue to rest mentally.

12. ABIDING IN EMPTINESS

At the still point of the turning world
    . . . there the dance is.
. . . Except for the point, the still point,
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.
The inner freedom from the practical desire,
The release from action and suffering.
—T. S. Eliot

AS THE FACTORS of the path mature, there is less and less to do in meditation. Due to the strength of the concentrated mind, the afflictive emotions are largely held in abeyance and don’t require much attention. Thought activity slows down. Even when thoughts arise, they are felt to come and go within a spacious field that is undisturbed by their appearance. One still knows what is present at the sense doors, which continue to function capably and efficiently, but there is no avoiding, grasping, lingering, or seeking to perpetuate what has arisen. Things come and go on their own and are seen with equanimity. There is a pervasive sense of stillness and peace.

If asked to describe the overall flavor of such an experience, the meditator might say that she is resting, but the attention is alert, neither dull nor sleepy. The peace of meditation is hard to find through other means. As Suzuki Roshi said to his Western students, “You know how to rest physically. You do not know how to rest mentally.” Meditation provides a reliable avenue to rest mentally.
A term often used in the Pali Discourses to describe meditative states of mind is abiding. One who is strongly concentrated is said to abide in the jhānas. Jivaka, the physician to King Bimbisāra of Magadha, described the Buddha as abiding in loving-kindness. On more than one occasion, the Buddha remarked to his attendant Ānanda, “I often abide in emptiness” (Pali: suññatāvihāra). Sāriputta used the same words in describing his meditation to the Buddha. This phrase, abiding in emptiness, is an evocative description of meditation experience as the path factors mature.

The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness offers a detailed approach to a meditation for abiding in emptiness. When I first discovered this discourse, I thought it would be philosophical in nature, but it’s actually quite practical. The theme is how to simplify perceptions in meditation so there is less and less disturbance in the mind. The Buddha first encourages the meditator to let go of perceptions of the complicated nature of one’s surroundings in order to attend to a simpler perception:

[A] bhikkhu—not attending to the perception of village, not attending to the perception of people—attends to the singleness dependent on the perception of forest. His mind enters into that perception of forest and acquires confidence, steadiness, and decision. He understands thus: “Whatever disturbances there might be dependent on the perception of village [. . . or] people, those are not present here. There is present only this amount of disturbance, namely, the singleness dependent on the perception of forest.

The Buddha points out that the meditator, who is in the forest, need not trouble himself thinking about what is not there—the nearby village or its people—and simply focus on the presence (nonemptiness) of his perception of the forest.

Thus he regards it as empty of what is not there, but as to what remains there he understands that which is present thus: “This is present.” This is his genuine, undistorted, pure descent into emptiness.
What is there, he understands as “This is present.” At the same time he regards the moment as empty of what is not there. This way of seeing might be summarized as, “What is, is. What is not, is not.” This formulation, both simple and profound, points to meditative emptiness as a quality of mind that does not alter, deny, project onto, or elaborate upon the reality of what exists. Thanissaro Bhikkhu describes it in this way: “Emptiness is a mode of perception, a way of looking at experience. It adds nothing to and takes nothing away from the raw data of physical and mental events.” Abiding in emptiness is considered a deliverance of mind, because one is free from hindering or extraneous thoughts and emotions.

To abide in emptiness requires a high degree of mindfulness and meditative stabilization. Most of the time, our chaotic thoughts are reacting to the moment with likes and dislikes, leaping from past to future, and coloring the bare reality of the present with our many prejudices and opinions. This is conceptual proliferation (papañca). When we abide in emptiness, we halt the flood of this stream of thoughts. As Nāgārjuna said, “Emptiness stops proliferation.” Stopping this flow of reactivity allows us to see reality clearly.

In addition to thoughts, emotional habits and tendencies also prevent us from abiding in emptiness. For example, if our mind is strongly inclined toward fear, that mental habit will lead to our feeling unsafe much of the time. At those times, we have a mental projection onto the world that imagines it as a field full of dangers and threats, even though none may be present in that moment.

One summer in the early years of my practice, during a long retreat in England, around sundown I was doing standing meditation on the back lawn of the retreat center. For reasons I didn’t understand, fear was arising in my mind. I was not equanimous with the fear; it was a struggle just to be present and feel it. At one point I opened my eyes, perhaps to find some relief from its unrelenting pressure, and let in the experience of the garden, which at that moment was very beautiful. I was standing beside a fruit tree filled with blossoms. The grass and trees were bathed in the warm golden light that comes at the end of the day. The air was soft and enveloping in the way that only a midsummer English evening can offer. Mourning doves were cooing in the fields nearby. My senses were revealing a world that was sweet, inviting, and lovely. The difference between the reality I was actually in and the fear my mind had conjured up was startling. The
thought came to mind, “It’s really a scary world out there, isn’t it?” and I had to laugh.

In the grip of emotional habits, we see the world through that colored glass. The projection keeps us from recognizing reality the way it actually is. For many of us in the West, the world has generally taken care of our needs for food, clothing, and shelter since the moment we were born. Perhaps we could just as well learn to perceive this world as supportive and nurturing. This perception engenders a quality of trust that can be very helpful in deepening our meditation and understanding.

The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness continues with instructions to the meditator on how to further simplify his perceptions and disturbances until he is liberated. Now the descent into emptiness is called supreme and unsurpassed. The meditation at the end of this chapter offers simplified guidance for abiding in emptiness.

**GIVING NO ATTENTION TO SIGNS**

In the next discourse in that text, the Buddha explains the essence of this abiding: “to enter and abide in emptiness internally by giving no attention to all signs.”

_Sign_ (Pali: _nimitta_) can mean a sense object (like the sight of a bird), something being perceived about an object (the bird’s red wing), or the characteristic of an object by which we notice it (the bird’s speed in flight). In all these cases it points to a sense experience that can become the focus of our attention. But the Buddha’s instruction here for abiding in emptiness is _not_ to give attention to any signs that appear. We can abide in emptiness, he teaches, by withdrawing our mental energy and attention away from sense objects.

Why is this important? Because every form of suffering arises from an over-involved relationship with sense objects. When we examined the chain of dependent origination in chapter 5, we saw how attachment is born from the sequence contact-feeling-craving-clinging. That attachment, which we’ve also described as _selfing_, leads inevitably to suffering, whether subtle or gross. The root of suffering, then, is a kind of “overreaction” to the experience of sense contact. When we deliberately refrain from giving added attention to sense objects, we take away the ground that supports suffering.
When we stop focusing attention on signs, we acknowledge that sense doors and objects cannot bring lasting happiness. If we withdraw our fixation on signs during meditation, moment by moment, we turn away from constantly seeking gratification from sense objects. We make this shift not because sense objects are “bad” or unwholesome, but because we acknowledge their limitations—they cannot satisfy us deeply. We turn away from them out of wisdom. Letting go of the habit of looking for happiness in pleasurable sense experiences is a powerful act of renunciation. Shifting our attention this way is a karmic action that leads in only one direction: to the end of karma, or liberation. This practice has a powerful and onward-leading effect.

If you cease giving attention to sense objects during meditation, what would you then be aware of? That’s best left to each meditator’s own discovery, though we will revisit this question in the section on awareness. It does not, however, mean you’ve retreated from the world or into the oblivion of unawareness. In this same discourse, the Buddha points out that while abiding in emptiness, he was still able to meet and talk with people—monks, nuns, lay followers, kings, and kings’ ministers. One time Ajahn Jumnien, a forest master from Thailand, was visiting Spirit Rock in California. Although he was in his sixties, he taught enthusiastically all day and didn’t seem tired in the evening. Someone asked how he did this, and he replied, “I live in emptiness, so I don’t get tired.” Ajahn Jumnien had found that abiding described by the Buddha so that he could rest inwardly while still interacting with students and the world.

There are many references from modern masters to the importance of this approach. Ajahn Dun, another contemporary Thai master, said that the heart of Dharma practice is to not send the mind out toward objects. In fact he created an original formulation of the four noble truths based on this insight, although in a different order. The standard numbering is in parentheses. Ajahn Dun’s formulation is this:

- The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the Cause of Suffering (II);
- The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is Suffering (I);
The mind seeing the mind clearly is the Path Leading to the Cessation of Suffering (IV);
The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the Cessation of Suffering (III).13

As we practice abiding in emptiness, we strengthen the mind’s ability to see clearly its own movements, because they stand out in strong contrast to the underlying peace. When the mind sees clearly that its going out to sense objects leads to suffering, wisdom arises and the insight itself leads to the end of that tendency.

Ajahn Mun was yet another great forest monk in Thailand in the early twentieth century. Considered by many to be an arahant, he was largely responsible for revitalizing the wandering style of forest ascetic practice, known as thudong, and transmitting it to such renowned disciples as Ajahns Chah, Maha Boowa, and Lee Dhammadaro. Ajahn Mun wandered in the forests practicing meditation for over twenty years. In his day, Thailand was more than 60 percent covered in virgin forest and there was ample room for monks to practice and still be close to a village for requisite support.14 (Forest cover in Thailand has now fallen to about 13 percent, making it nearly impossible for that style of monastic life to be maintained.)15

The only known written teaching from Ajahn Mun is a long poem called the “Ballad of Liberation from the Aggregates.” In it, he reinforces the theme of not sending the mind out to objects.

Not doubting that perceptions are right,
The heart gets caught up in running back and forth.
Perceptions grab hold of things outside
And pull them in to fool the mind,
Making it think in confusion
And go out searching,
Wandering astray.16

While the Buddha spoke in terms of signs, sense objects, and contact, Ajahn Mun focuses on perception, the third aggregate, the faculty that recognizes or
names a thing. All four of these terms point to the mind’s capacity to single something out from the overall field of experience, to isolate one aspect of experience. Once it has been apperceived, there is a ground for sending the mind out toward it, taking hold, and clinging.

What connects the mind into the cycle [of Samsara]? The tricks of perception make it spin. Attached to its likes, Wandering till it’s dizzy. What gains release from the five aggregates? The heart and the heart alone. It doesn’t grasp or get entangled. No perceptions can fool it into following along behind them.

Perceptions occur as our six sense doors contact the inner and outer worlds. If we pick up a perception to dwell on an object, we become vulnerable to the changing fortunes of pleasure and pain, likes and dislikes, and so on. If we don’t pick it up, there is no occasion for mental suffering.

What do I mean by “picking up” a perception? The next time you find yourself feeling upset, stop and notice what you’re upset about. Then ask what recent contact brought this into your field of experience. It might have been a conversation, something you read, an action you or someone else took, a memory. Next, see if you can remember the moment of contact and locate the brief period of time in which you fastened on that contact, picking it out from the overall field of experience and holding it. Finally, notice how you dwelt on it, repeatedly sending your thoughts back to it. If we look in this way, we can see that we have created the upset around that contact. Once we know that the agitation, in this sense, is of our own making, we can try to refrain in the future from creating it again.

The purpose of this review is not to say that whatever happened in that contact was fine or fair or should have happened or should be allowed to continue. We may need to take direct action to rectify an injustice or communicate something important. But this investigation lets us discover that we have the power to choose whether or not we become upset and suffer over the contact. As Suzuki
Roshi said, “Nothing outside yourself can cause any trouble. You yourself make the waves in your mind.” The contact has happened. If we don’t pick it up, the mind can continue to abide in emptiness, allowing the present moment to unfold as it will. If we choose out of craving to pick it up and dwell on it, we are adding something to the present situation that isn’t required to be there. We have fallen back into self-centered doing. This disturbs the basic principle of meditative emptiness: Don’t add to reality. What is, is. Let it be. What isn’t, isn’t. Don’t create more.

Of course, living in the world, there are many occasions when we need to focus on a problem and devote some attention to its solution. At these times, we want to take care that our reflections and plans come from stillness and balance. Then even thinking can take place while resting in emptiness.

UNENTANGLLED KNOWING

Abiding in emptiness, we see clearly what disturbs our meditation. It is the movement of our own heart and mind, born from greed, aversion, and delusion. Giving no attention to signs offers us a way to rest, find peace, and practice renunciation, and it also provides an excellent base for insight. We can see which actions lead to suffering and which ones lead to peace and happiness. It is this understanding that trains and finally frees the heart.

One of the greatest female teachers in Thailand in the last century was Upasika Kee Nanayon, who was born in 1901 and taught from 1945 until her death in 1978. Her title, upāsikā, means laywoman supporter. She was not able to fully ordain as a nun, restricted by the canonical law of her time, so she practiced and taught as a laywoman—an uphill path in a patriarchal Asian society. Her teachings are deep, direct, and strong. Here she describes leaving her town to move to the forest to practice meditation:

I had never before lived in the forest. I thought it would be better to stay in the town, running a store and making enough money. But coming to the forest and living very simply, I came to feel light-hearted and free. Seeing nature all around me inspired me to explore inside my own mind.
She advises us to train in a state of mind she calls “normalcy.” I call it “naturalness,” a state of awareness that is relaxed and at peace with whatever is present. (I wish this state of naturalness were more normal in the world!)

Once the mind can stay in a state of normalcy, you’ll see mental fabrications and preoccupations in their natural state of arising and disbanding. The mind will be empty, neutral, and still—neither pleased nor displeased.

Here she uses the description of an empty mind to indicate a mind that is not preoccupied with anything at all. It doesn’t mean that nothing is present in the mind, but rather that nothing is stuck there. In the same colloquial manner, we could speak of this as abiding in emptiness. Her instructions on the central importance of not taking hold of objects are similar to those of the other teachers mentioned above:

If mindfulness slips and the mind goes out giving meanings to things, latching onto things, troubles will arise. So you have to keep checking on this in every moment. There’s nothing else that’s so worth checking on.

She points out that when we assign meaning to objects of mind, trouble begins. From the center created by self-concern, things feel important based on their ability to give us pleasure or pain. Once we assign a meaning on this basis, we give that thing power to exert sway over us. We impulsively respond to its calls of seduction, alarm, or anger, surrendering our peace and balance as we do. This is why the Buddha said, “Lust is a maker of measurement, hate is a maker of measurement, delusion is a maker of measurement.” When we operate from craving, everything that touches us gets graded on the scale from pleasure to pain. We desire the contacts that give the highest pleasure scores and fear most those with the highest pain scores. Delusion gives neutral experience a score of zero, and so we ignore it.

Abiding in a state of normalcy, abiding in emptiness, is summed up in this short passage:
An inward-staying
unentangled knowing,
All outward-going knowing
cast aside.24

“Unentangled knowing” is a lovely and evocative turn of phrase. It conveys the
quality of alert awareness that is free of grasping and the inevitable tangles it
creates. The Buddha often described the mind’s ills as a tangle: “The world is
smothered and enveloped by craving like a tangled ball of yarn.”25 At the begin-
ning of the Visuddhimagga, there is an exchange26 in which a celestial being asks
a question of the Buddha, addressing him by his family name Gotama:

The inner tangle and the outer tangle—
This generation is entangled in a tangle.
And so I ask of Gotama this question:
Who succeeds in disentangling this tangle?27

The Buddha replies that one who is well established in virtue, concentration,
and wisdom succeeds in disentangling the tangle. The Visuddhimagga goes on
to explain that tangle is a term for the network of craving “in the sense of lacing
together, like the network of branches in bamboo thickets.”28 It is easy to see
how inner conflict comes from opposing desires, such as wanting to be liked
and at the same time wanting to do exactly as one wishes. Outer conflicts arise
from one person or group wanting something that another person or group
opposes. In all these situations, the tangle persists until there is some letting
go of desire.

Abiding in emptiness, we don’t get caught in the tangle of craving. Upasika
Kee advises us to be “inward-staying,” not pulled out toward sense objects, but
to attend inwardly, to the peace of resting unentangled or to noticing when the
mind is pulled to something. Ajahn Amaro encapsulates this direction: “Rest in
the natural peace and ease that is the natural peace and ease of mind and body.
Then pay attention to whatever disturbs that peace.”

Suzuki Roshi sums this up:
When you have something in your consciousness you do not have perfect composure. The best way towards perfect composure is to forget everything. . . . Then things will not stay in your mind so long. Things will come as they come and go as they go. Then eventually your clear, empty mind will last fairly long. So to have a firm conviction in the original emptiness of your mind is the most important thing in your practice.39

When we learn how to abide in emptiness, life becomes simple and straightforward. The heart is uncluttered, allowing its natural responses to come easily and accurately.
Abiding in Emptiness

- Sit quietly and let your eyes remain open. Become aware of all the things in the room: table, desk, chairs, rug, lamps, art, books, and so on. Notice how many thoughts and emotions may arise based on these objects, any of which might cause a disturbance in the mind.
- Now let go of noticing all the objects in the room. Be aware only of the walls of the room and the space within them. Notice that many perceptions have faded along with the disturbances that could have arisen in association with them. The walls and space may still give rise to some thoughts and emotions, but they will be fewer.
- Now let go of your perceptions of the walls. Notice only the space. Now any disturbances that might have arisen from perceiving the walls have fallen away. The space may give rise to some thoughts and emotions, but they will be fewer. Abide with the simplicity of space.

At each step in the meditation, notice how the perceptions have become less intrusive and simpler. As the mind becomes empty of the more complicated perceptions, only simpler perceptions remain. This is a progression toward abiding in emptiness. For further guidance, please see Bhikkhu Anālayo’s excellent commentary on the original discourse.¹⁰
TO ABIDE IN EMPTINESS takes a leap of faith. You have to leave behind the familiar comforts of sense objects and the old habits of thinking, liking, and disliking. You set off on a wide sea with just intention as your rudder, and you don’t know what will come next. You can try paddling hard and kicking, but that only sends you in circles. Relaxing with awareness helps but does not bring complete security. The maps are encouraging, but so much of the vastness seems uncharted—and yet you have committed to the journey. You need to maintain your effort but without striving hard for a result. In such a moment, you have to trust in the journey—and you have to trust in emptiness enough to surrender to it. This expresses a deep faith in the unfolding.

A celestial being asked the Buddha how he crossed the flood of existence, meaning how he attained liberation. He replied, “I crossed the flood by not tarrying and not hurrying. When I tarried, I sank, and when I hurried, I was swept away.” Abiding in emptiness has this quality of not tarrying and not hurrying.

At this point in meditation, we are less interested in the objects of the six senses. We have seen that “picking up” perceptions leads to trouble. In the spirit

13. CESSATION AND NIBBĀNA

There is always a possibility of understanding as long as we exist in the utter darkness of the sky, as long as we live in emptiness.

—Suzuki Roshi

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At this point in meditation, we are less interested in the objects of the six senses. We have seen that “picking up” perceptions leads to trouble. In the spirit
of renunciation, we let go of those pleasures that don’t ultimately satisfy. We are not sending the mind out through the sense doors; we are resting as far as possible in a state of naturalness, empty and still. Through this meditation, we express our faith, and that faith leads beyond.

**TRANSCENDING SUFFERING**

As we begin to abide in emptiness it’s natural to ask, Where does the meditation go from here? What further steps might bring about the release the Buddha pointed to? The more we know about the journey, the more faith we’ll have. The Buddha spoke of the stages that lead up to liberation. In a famous discourse called *Discourse on Proximate Cause*, he spelled out twelve steps leading from suffering to liberation. The linkage is similar in structure to the chain of dependent origination, which begins with ignorance, moves through craving, and ends in suffering. This new chain begins with suffering and then lists the wholesome states that bring the mind to release. After suffering, the next link in the chain to liberation is faith. It is from investigating our own suffering that we find the faith needed to go beyond it. Because this sequence describes a way to overcome suffering, it has become known as the chain of transcendent dependent origination. Here are some key links:

With concentration as proximate cause, knowing and seeing things as they really are comes to be. With knowing and seeing things as they are as proximate cause, disenchantment comes to be. With disenchantment as proximate cause, dispassion comes to be. With dispassion as proximate cause, liberation comes to be.3

We’ve talked before about how stability of mind, or concentration, is needed for a meditator to know and see things as they really are (Pali: *yathābhūta ñāṇadassana*). What is revealed when we see things as they are is their impermanent, selfless nature, which makes them incapable of giving lasting satisfaction. Knowing their unsatisfactory nature, we lose our fascination with the conditioned realm of sense objects. This loss of fascination is known as disenchantment (Pali: *nibbidā*). This is the first of three key factors we’ll focus on in
this chapter. As the discourse states, disenchantment leads to dispassion (Pali: *virāga*), the second key factor. A third key factor not cited in this passage appears in many other discourses: cessation (Pali: *nirūdha*). The Buddha was once asked to express the Dharma in brief. He replied, “When you know that a teaching leads exclusively to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to enlightenment, to nibbāna, then you should recognize this as the Dhamma.”

These factors combine to lead to liberation (Pali: *vimutti*). We’ll now examine these terms in more detail.

**Disenchantment**

Disenchantment with the world of the senses should not be confused with cynicism or withdrawal. It simply means “being freed from illusion.” Thus, in the *Discourse on Proximate Cause*, disenchantment follows directly from knowing and seeing things as they are. We are no longer enchanted by the false promises of sense objects, which for years we had hoped might offer lasting happiness. Since bewitch is a synonym for enchant, we might now say, as Lorenz Hart did, that we are “bewitched, bothered, and bewildered no more.” The seductive spell has been broken, freeing us to find a wise relationship to the sense world, one we are already exploring through the practice of abiding in emptiness and not giving attention to signs.

Disenchantment is a source of strength and happiness, not of doubt or pessimism. It supports the movement toward renunciation, which is not a painful moral obligation but a wise action that lightens the burden of the heart. As the Buddha said, a wise person gives up a lesser form of happiness to find a greater one.

**The Limitations of Sense Pleasures**

At least three forms of happiness are greater than pleasant sense experiences. The first is the happiness of virtuous conduct, which we described in chapter 9 as the bliss of blamelessness. The second is the happiness of a mind temporarily free of afflictive emotions, which is accomplished through the unification of mind (*samādhi*). The Buddha said that as a bodhisattva, when he discovered the great pleasures of a concentrated mind, he lost all interest in sensuality. The third is the happiness of liberation, the unshakable peace of mind the Buddha called the...
highest happiness. When we practice for greater freedom and discover these more satisfying kinds of happiness, the central appeal of sense pleasures begins to fade.

It is not that sense pleasures are wrong or should be condemned for those of us living a lay life. In fact the availability of these pleasures is often a key motivation for choosing to live as a layperson. If one is truly uninterested in all sense pleasures, then the monastic life has much to recommend it. However, if we choose to live as lay practitioners and want to penetrate to the depth of the Buddhist path, we need to explore the power of renunciation in both our meditations and our lifestyle. We should constantly evaluate our relationship to sense pleasures to be sure they are not excessively consuming our time, energy, and money. For most of us, these resources are valuable and limited commodities that could be directed to Dharma practice, study, and reflection.

There tends to be a connection between sense pleasures and wealth. When people have money, they spend much of it on pleasurable sense experiences: a bigger home, a newer car, better food and drink, prettier clothes, and so on. The Buddha gave excellent advice on the wise use of wealth for a layperson that also applies to sense pleasures. He began by praising laypersons who gain wealth in an ethical way and share it with others. This aligns with his frequent emphasis on ethical conduct (sīla) and generosity (dāna). The Buddha went on to praise those who “use that wealth without being tied to it, infatuated with it, and blindly absorbed in it, seeing the danger in it and understanding the escape.”

We lay practitioners can also apply this principle to sense pleasures, aware of their danger as well as how to be balanced in relation to them. The danger is that sense pleasures condition the mind to constantly want more, strengthening lust and greed. The wisdom in relation to them is to exercise enough restraint that the habit of wanting does not build up. Moderation in sense pleasures is essential for realizing the depths of insight the path offers.

**Dispassion**

As we become less enchanted by the false promise of sense objects, the well-springs of craving start to dry up. The Pali word for dispassion, *virāga*, means “without lust” or “without attachment.” It points to a state of mind in which lust and craving are absent, at least temporarily. In other Pali usages, *virāga* has the
sense of “fading away,” as color starts to fade from a shirt that has been washed many times. So the meaning of this term as dispassion also carries the connotation of something fading away, in this case craving. We might say that dispassion is simply the maturing of disenchantment. The conditioned habits of mind, based on greed, aversion, and delusion, start to wither as we realize that those habits are directed toward sense objects that are only going to change, rendering moot their delivery of pleasure or pain. At a certain point on the path, all desire for sense objects is extinguished through wisdom.

Dispassion should not be confused with an unfeeling or uncaring attitude. When we are no longer compelled by self-centered passions, the heart becomes lighter and more open to the feelings of others. There is more space in the mind for the divine abidings of loving-kindness, compassion, and appreciative joy to flourish. In fact dispassion is close in spirit to equanimity, the fourth divine abiding, which is a necessary foundation for the other three. Without the balance of mind offered by equanimity, it is difficult to truly care about the welfare of others. Without equanimity, the other divine abidings easily tip over into what are called their near enemies: qualities that masquerade as the divine abidings but are actually unwholesome imitators. We might think of the near enemy as the neurotic, ego-based version of the true divine abiding. Below is a table of the four divine abidings and their “near enemies”—states which may superficially seem similar, but which in fact are very different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIVINE ABIDING</th>
<th>NEAR ENEMY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Loving-kindness</td>
<td>Attached affection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Grief from being overwhelmed with suffering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciative joy</td>
<td>Self-centered exuberance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equanimity</td>
<td>Indifference, absence of caring</td>
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</table>

**Cessation**

As dispassion strengthens, we have less and less inclination to self-centered action. What would be the point? Any gratification would be, after all, fleeting.
In our practice, it feels like something is stopping. We may resist this sense at first, because it is new and not yet trustworthy. But it is a key step in the journey to liberation, known as cessation (nirodha) or ending. In a number of discourses, the Buddha pairs the term cessation with dispassion. In response to a bhikkhu named Mālunkyāputta, the Buddha states once again that sense contact—framed here as the five aggregates—is unsatisfying and suggests he direct his attention elsewhere:

Whatever exists of form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, she sees those states as impermanent, as unsatisfactory, as disintegrating, as empty, as not self. She turns her mind away from those states and directs it to the deathless element thus: “This is peaceful, this is sublime, namely the stilling of all formations, the relinquishing of all attachments, the destruction of craving, dispassion, cessation, nibbāna.”

In this passage, the Buddha describes sense contact first as unsatisfying in ways we are already familiar with. Then he instructs the practitioner to direct her attention away from sense contact and to the deathless element, a synonym for nibbāna. This guidance may be fine for one who has realized the deathless, but what if we haven’t had a personal experience of this unconditioned state? The Buddha offers the terms peaceful, sublime, still, and so on to help us approach the deathless element, to help guide us there. He is speaking like an air traffic controller guiding a pilot toward a runway that she can’t quite see because of cloud cover. We’ll look at these descriptors in more detail in a moment. First, though, you might want to know what the landing strip looks like.

WHAT IS NIBBĀNA?

Even more than not-self and emptiness, nibbāna is the most mysterious term in Buddhism and the hardest to describe—akin to the opening of the Tao Te Ching, “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the eternal Tao.” Many commentators have explained that it is impossible to define nibbāna through concepts, because words discriminate while the nature of nibbāna transcends dualities. The Buddha
himself said it is “profound, hard to see and hard to understand, . . . unattainable by mere reasoning.”12 A few teachers have claimed that nibbāna means nothing more than the mind free of craving. But in a clear reference to nibbāna, a passage in one discourse states, “There is an unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned” that gives the possibility of release from what is born, become, made, and conditioned.13 In other words, what is referred to as nibbāna has a reality beyond the simple absence of craving. This reality, which some would say is ontological, is the basis for liberation. It is “to be experienced by the wise.”14

Many Buddhist teachers agree that nibbāna refers to a latent element within human experience that can be discovered and experienced. It is unconditioned in the sense that it is not subject to arising and passing based on other, prior conditions. The direct realization of this unconditioned element has the power to end craving and suffering. This is the goal of the Buddha’s teaching and of our practice. We will take nibbāna to mean both this latent unconditioned element and the end of suffering, which is the goal of the path.

In the discourse above, the stilling of all formations (Pali: sabba sankhāra samatho) is the explicit invitation to nondoing. All willful formations now come to calm. The relinquishing of all attachments is the invitation to let go of anything that is being grasped. The destruction of craving is the end, at least temporarily, of greed, aversion, and delusion. Then come dispassion, cessation, nibbāna. This is the direct trajectory to the goal.

**WHAT CEASES?**

What is meant by cessation? It has to do with the end of craving, as pointed to in the third noble truth: the cessation of craving (tanha nirodha) is the cessation of suffering (dukkha nirodha). In this context, cessation means the destruction of craving. However, cessation is also used in the discourses in other important ways.

As we discussed in chapter 11, the discourses often say that one who is fully liberated is not born again. For such a one, after death there is “no renewal of being.” This is sometimes referred to as the cessation of being (bhava nirodha), which could also be translated as the “cessation of existence” or the “cessation of becoming.” I will use these translations interchangeably. In the discourses of
the historical Buddha, when craving ceases fully and suffering ceases fully, then becoming in the round of samsara comes to an end as well. In this way, the cessation of craving and the cessation of being point to the same outcome.

Cessation also figures prominently in the chain of dependent origination. When ignorance is ended (avijjā nirodha), all the other links are eventually ended too. These links include craving and becoming as well as another interesting factor: consciousness, here understood as the six types of sense consciousness. The complete cessation of being can only come after the death of the liberated individual, but the cessation of consciousness (viññāṇa nirodha) can occur during this life and is a significant experience in meditation.

**CESSATION OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

What would it mean for consciousness to end temporarily while we are still alive? During deep sleep, fainting, and general anesthesia, we are not conscious of anything external for a while, as far as we know. Even if there is a thin thread of consciousness, it isn’t of much interest to a practitioner, because it is not transformative. What is of interest is when cessation of sense consciousness is preceded by a relaxed yet alert attention characterized by equanimity and dispassion. In the *Discourse on Proximate Cause* and the *Discourse to Mālunkyāputta*, this is precisely the description of the state of mind that immediately precedes enlightenment, or the realization of nibbāna.

Abiding in emptiness, the meditator does not give attention to signs. When disenchantment and dispassion are strong and formations are stilled, there is a palpable lack of interest in sense contact. When one loses interest in sense contact, one also loses interest in sense consciousness. The loss of interest in sense consciousness can bring sense consciousness to a temporary end. This can be unexpected, since we generally assume that sense contact will continue as long as we are awake. What we discover is that sense contact is fueled by interest or appetite. When appetite is withdrawn, contact and consciousness can end, for a time.

In one discourse, the Buddha encourages practitioners to discover this:

> That sphere should be known where the eye ceases and the perception of form fades away . . . where the ear ceases and the perception
of sound fades away . . . where the nose ceases and the perception of smell fades away . . . where the tongue ceases and the perception of taste fades away . . . where the body ceases and the perception of sensations fades away. That sphere should be known where the mind ceases and the perception of mental phenomena fades away. That sphere should be known.15

When asked by other monks to explain this statement further, Ānanda said that the Buddha was referring to the cessation of the six sense bases. Later, the Buddha confirmed this.

NIBBĀNA

Many meditators report experiences of cessation. Following a very alert, still, equanimous mind, moments may come in which all sense consciousness completely ceases and falls away. Without sense consciousness, there is no experience of sense objects. The six senses cease to manifest anything, so there is no sense of a body or even of mind states. Wholesome states like mindfulness, concentration, disenchantment, and dispassion become irrelevant; in fact they are nonexistent, as are all mundane mind states. What is being realized in this moment is only the unconditioned element, nibbāna, which is not of the six senses and cannot be known by the six sense consciousnesses. This is a moment of enlightenment. The great Zen master Dōgen referred to this experience as “dropping off body and mind.”16

It is impossible to say what precipitates such a moment of awakening to the unconditioned. Certainly the mind must have been developed through right effort, so the factors of concentration, wisdom, disenchantment, and dispassion are strong. But once those factors have been brought to maturity, nothing more can be done by effort. We simply abide with patience and mindfulness and without expectation. The breakthrough to nibbāna comes as grace.

When asked to describe the inner experience of an enlightenment moment, meditators respond in different ways. Based on a compilation of such accounts, enlightenment experiences are described as having no awareness present at all or having the presence of an awareness that is not based in the six senses. I once asked Mingyur Rinpoche, and he said he also has heard it described in these ways.17
ENLIGHTENMENT MOMENT WITHOUT AWARENESS

In the Theravadan world, the most influential teacher of the past sixty years was Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma. His meditation teachings were rooted in the *Visuddhimagga*, which outlines a clear experiential sequence leading to enlightenment. In the view of Mahasi Sayadaw, no awareness at all is present in an enlightenment moment when sense consciousness ceases. A number of Westerners who practiced in this system described a period of meditation with strong equanimity during which they were keenly aware of objects coming and going, moment after moment. The next thing they knew, sense consciousness was returning after having been absent for an indeterminate period of time. They reported a “gap” in experience.

This report might be describing an authentic enlightenment experience, but it’s difficult to be sure, for the student or for the teacher. A gap in experience is not enough to verify that what took place was enlightenment. Other causes could be falling asleep or an imbalance of energy and concentration. A teacher who knows the meditator’s recent practice history might make a reasonable surmise as to its validity, but even so, the teacher might not communicate about this directly with the student. So it’s up to the student to assess his own experience. That assessment could take months or years and should be based on the particulars of the experience and its associated insights, as well as on the wholesome effects in the student’s life and practice going forward.

A valid enlightenment experience is ultimately indescribable, but often the most fruitful appraisal of such an experience comes in the moments when sense consciousness is just returning after its absence. Because no mental activity or perception takes place in the direct experience of nibbāna, it is impossible to store up an adequate description or image of that experience. But when sense consciousness has just returned, it is as though the two kinds of moments rub up against each other—one is unconditioned and the next is conditioned. Then perhaps a sense of the unconditioned can come through in the aroma that lingers. This is as close as the conceptual mind can come to the unconditioned.
ENLIGHTENMENT MOMENT WITH AWARENESS

In the other type of enlightenment account, some awareness is present during the experience. This account is from a Western meditator:

It was in the middle of a long retreat. I had been following the breath at the abdomen for three weeks with continuous noting: “in, out, touching.” In one sitting there was a deep sense of calm, followed by the grasping of that calm. Immediately and without any effort on my part the note arose: “grasping.” I wondered with great curiosity: “What knew that?” Then there was an abrupt transition. A subtle vibration of unmoving peace stood out from the background. The foreground fell away: there were no mental formations, and no consciousness of the body or physical senses. But some kind of awareness continued. Because perception wasn’t operating it’s impossible to say what was being known. But some unshakable peace was revealed which had been there all along, totally uncaused.18

In this account, sense consciousness ceased, though some awareness continued. Reports similar to this can be found in the Thai forest tradition. This is Ajahn Maha Boowa’s description of his own enlightenment, abridged for readability:

At this point the mind was empty and the awareness was prominent. It fully comprehended form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. It fully let go of them. All that was left was awareness. Why is it that the mind is completely empty? A realization appeared: “If there is a point or a center of the knower anywhere, that is the essence of a level of being.” But I was simply bewildered. I let more than three months pass by in vain.

When the time came for me to know, I was contemplating just the mind. Mindfulness and wisdom kept making contact with that awareness, examining it back and forth. However radiant or splendid it might be, there was still [ignorance] (avijjā) within it. Mindfulness and wisdom realized that that state of mind should
simply be let go. Then the mind, mindfulness and wisdom became impartial and impassive. *That moment was when the cosmos in the mind over which [ignorance] held sway trembled and quaked. [Ignorance] was thrown down from its throne on the heart. In its place the pure mind appeared.*

He concludes with a boxing metaphor:

*The middle way, the truth of the path, was declared absolute winner, while the truth of the origin of [suffering] was knocked out and carried off on a stretcher, with no way of reviving ever again.*

The origin of suffering being knocked out and not revived describes the end of craving and thus the end of suffering. In this passage Ajahn Maha Boowa is essentially relating his moment of full liberation, or arahantship. It is an unusual thing for such a teacher to talk about. I appreciate his willingness to share this level of detail. The “pure mind” in his account indicates some kind of awareness at the key moment.

The presence of some awareness at the moment of realizing nibbāna, even without a functioning sense consciousness, suggests that such awareness could be an aspect of nibbāna itself. We will return to this question in part 3 on awareness.

**Sudden Awakening, Gradual Cultivation**

Sometimes the first experience of enlightenment is so strong that craving and suffering are permanently ended. It seems the Buddha’s enlightenment was like that. For most of us, though, the first direct realization of nibbāna, though a valid enlightenment moment, is not strong enough to end all craving. This was the case for the Buddha’s first enlightened disciple. After the Buddha gave his first discourse on the four noble truths, one of the five ascetics listening gained a direct insight into the unconditioned: “There arose in the Venerable Kondaña the dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma: ‘Whatever is subject to origination is also subject to cessation.” The Buddha renamed him Añña Kondaña: Kondaña Who Has Understood.
This description of Kondañña’s enlightenment is a stock phrase that appears throughout the Pali Discourses to indicate stream-entry, the first moment of directly realizing nibbāna. It may sound like no more than an insight into impermanence, but the key part of the phrase is the “dust-free, stainless vision of the Dhamma.” Dhamma is often used as a synonym for nibbāna, and it is used here in that way. Such a one has seen the ultimate truth. However, this insight, which happened quite suddenly, was not the end of Kondañña’s path.

The thirteenth-century Korean Zen master Chinul was asked whether sudden awakening meant the end of the journey. He said it was true for a few who had greatly developed the path in previous lives, but for most of us, a sudden awakening has to be followed by more work.

Although he has awakened to the fact that his original nature is no different from that of the Buddhas, the beginningless habit-energies are extremely difficult to remove suddenly and so he must continue to cultivate while relying on this awakening. Through this gradual permeation, his endeavors reach completion. . . . Hence it is called gradual cultivation.22

Chinul termed this “sudden awakening, gradual cultivation.” This is the correct path for most of us. Sudden awakening removes all doubt and shows us the way, while gradual cultivation is required to reach the final end of suffering. Kondañña had to keep practicing for about two more weeks before he reached full liberation. Most of us need longer.

The experience of stream-entry marks a significant maturing in the course of one’s Dharma practice. It is the natural outcome of the growing insight into not-self, the abandoning of self-centered striving, and the development of trust in mindful awareness. In the maturity of abiding, the three factors of disenchantment, dispassion, and cessation build and lead to the direct realization of Nibbana. Now the dharma doors are wide open for greater cultivation. Two avenues present themselves at this point for further investigation: the nature of phenomena and the nature of awareness itself. These are the subjects of the next two parts of the book.