

Wisdom | Discernment | Panna

- *Thannisaro Bhikhu*

Because the Buddha provides many lists of mental and physical functions, there's the question of why he chose to focus special attention on these five aggregates. The apparent answer is that these are the activities involved in one of life's most basic processes: the act of feeding. This act is one of the Buddha's most pervasive images for how the mind relates to its experiences, so when he talks about feeding he's referring both to the feeding of the body and the feeding of the mind. The five aggregates are involved in both kinds of feeding in the following ways:

- Form covers both the form of the body that needs to be nourished (and that will be used to look for food), as well as the physical objects that will be used as food. When feeding takes place in the mind, "form" applies to whatever form you assume for yourself in the imagination—how you picture yourself—and to whatever imaginary sights, sounds, etc., you take pleasure from.
- Feeling covers the painful feelings of lack or hunger that drive you to search for food; the painful feelings of anxiety you feel when you can't find food; the pleasant feeling of satisfaction that comes when you've found something to eat; and the added pleasure when you actually eat it.
- Perception covers the ability to identify the type of hunger you feel, and to identify which things in your world of experience will satisfy that hunger. Perception also plays a central role in identifying what is and isn't food. This, in fact, is one of the ways we first learn to exercise our perceptions as children. Our first reaction on encountering something is to put it into our mouth to see if it's edible. If it is, we label it with the perception of "food." If it's not, we label it as "not food."
- Fabrications relate to feeding in the way we think about and evaluate strategies for finding food, for

taking possession of it when we find it, and for fixing it if it's not edible in its raw state. For example, if you want to enjoy an orange, you have to figure out how to remove the peel. If your first attempt doesn't work, you have to evaluate why it didn't and to figure out new strategies until you find one that does.

- Consciousness refers to the act of being aware of all these activities.

These five ways of fabricating are so central to our way of relating to the world—both in the way we manipulate the world and in what we get out of it—that we feed mentally off of the five aggregates, just as we feed off the food they procure. To distinguish this second level of feeding, the Buddha gives it a special name: upadana, which can mean both the act of taking sustenance from something, and the act of clinging. (The underlying image here is drawn from how people in the Buddha's time viewed fire. As they saw it, the fire element burned because it fed off fuel to which it clung; if it let go, it was no longer nourished and so had to go out.) This clinging can take many forms, but the most tenacious is using the five aggregates as the raw material from which we create our sense of who we are. We identify who we are by how we feed. In the Buddha's analysis, this second level of feeding—regardless of how we cling—is where we suffer. In fact, his short definition of stress and suffering is clinging to the five aggregates. We engage in them repeatedly because we feel passion for the food they provide, and yet the very act of engaging in them inevitably leads to stress and suffering—both in the hunger that drives the need to feed and in the anxiety that comes from trying to ensure a lasting source of food.

This gives some idea of why the skill that Ven. Sariputta saw as central to the Buddha's teaching—subduing passion and desire for the five aggregates—is so difficult to master, or even, for a beginner, to see as something positive. The Buddha is asking us to wean ourselves from the food we've been creating—the only

food we know—as well as from the identity we’ve developed around the ways in which we look for and enjoy our mental and physical food. A strong part of the mind will naturally resist.

To help us overcome this resistance, the Buddha’s strategy—the second prong of his approach—is to teach us how to use the five aggregates to create a path of practice off of which we can feed, taking us to higher and higher levels of fabricated food. In the course of developing this path, we learn for ourselves that many of the higher levels of happiness can be attained only if we’re willing to overcome our tendency to cling to lower forms of food. This teaches the important lesson that letting go leads to better pleasures than those provided by clinging. Then, as we become more familiar with the higher pleasures provided by the aggregates in the form of the path, we see that they, too, have their drawbacks. We begin to sense the stress that even they entail. Thus sensitized, we will become more willing to let them go as well in favor of something unfabricated.

Of the eight factors of the path, right concentration is the one that the Buddha cited explicitly as a type of food. It is also the only one that he cited explicitly as being composed of the five aggregates. Right concentration is defined as the four jhanas: states of strong, single-minded mental absorption in a sense of full-body awareness. There are also four formless attainments, based on the fourth jhana, that some texts cite as forms of right concentration as well. Each of the jhanas is characterized by pleasure, although in the levels beginning with the fourth jhana the pleasure is so subtle that it’s formally described as equanimity. In addition, the first two jhanas are characterized by rapture—a sense of intense refreshment—along with the pleasure.

The pleasure and rapture are the food provided by the jhanas. And just as the five aggregates are active in acquiring and enjoying physical food, they are active in acquiring and enjoying the jhanas:

- Form here applies to the sense of the body felt from within as the mind settles in concentration. If the object of concentration is the breath, that would come under “form” as well.
- Feeling here applies to the feelings of pleasure and equanimity experienced in the jhanas.

- Perception covers the mental label that identifies the object of concentration, allowing you to keep it in mind. The role of perception in maintaining concentration is so central that the Buddha calls the four jhanas and the first three formless attainments based on the fourth jhana “perception-attainments.”

- Fabrications cover the acts of intention needed to enter jhana and stay there. These acts are present in all levels of jhana. In addition, in the first jhana, “fabrications” also cover acts of directed thought and evaluation that adjust the mind and its object so that they can stay together snugly without further adjustment in the higher jhanas.

- Consciousness again refers to the act of being aware of all these activities.

When you first attempt to develop right concentration, your attention is primarily focused on the object of concentration. However, the difficulties in staying with the object begin to sensitize you more and more to the mental fabrications that either help or hinder your attempts to get the mind to settle down. As you grow more skilled in staying settled, you eventually reach a stage where you can pull out slightly from full concentration and observe the activities of fabrication—subtly arising and passing away—there in the concentration itself. Nourished with the sense of wellbeing provided by the jhanas, the mind is now in the best position to observe both the uses and the limitations of fabrication. At this point, the Buddha’s two-pronged strategy for sensitizing you to fabrication—the first track in his program for developing discernment—is now complete.

As you have been following this track, he has also encouraged you to follow a second track alongside it. This track, as noted above, focuses on evaluating the worth of fabrications. Its strategy involves fostering the two qualities needed to develop dispassion for fabrications. The first quality is samatha, or tranquility. The second is vipassana, or insight. These two qualities actually function in both tracks. For example, both tranquility and insight are needed to develop jhana; jhana, in turn, helps both qualities to grow and mature [§65] so that they can be more effective in evaluating not only the pleasure produced by jhana but also the possibility of a higher release.

As the Buddha notes, tranquility is the mental quality

that directly enables the mind to develop dispassion for fabrications [§66]. When the mind can find pleasure in growing tranquil, it's in a position to see that pleasure doesn't have to require the effort put into the activity of fabrication. This helps to undercut the passion that drives the mind to keep fabricating. However, tranquility on its own is not enough to overcome the tendency to feed emotionally or intellectually on the pleasure it provides. It's possible, for instance, for the tranquil mind to identify with the tranquility, or to interpret it as a higher reality to which you then become attached.

To overcome this tendency, insight—the quality that directly overcomes ignorance—is also required. Insight is what looks for stress and for the fabrications that cause it. As the mind grows tranquil, insight is able to see subtle levels of fabrication that are invisible when the mind is not still. Its search for the stress arising and passing away in the midst of tranquility helps to uncover levels of fabrication that might be hidden in ignorance. When the mind, seeing these levels, can grow tranquil in the face of any desire to continue participating in them, that brings dispassion to a deeper level. Without this tranquility, insight lacks the strength to bring dispassion about. This is how these two qualities work together to develop the skill central to the Buddha's teaching: abandoning passion and delight for the five aggregates.

The Buddha's primary tool for developing insight is one of the aggregates itself: perception. This is a common pattern throughout his strategy. You develop and use skillful versions of the fabrications that eventually you will abandon. Here, the perceptions he encourages are of two sorts: negative, those that focus on the drawbacks of fabrication; and positive, those that focus on the desirability of letting fabrications cease.

When contemplating the negative perceptions, it's important to remember at all times that only their form is negative, whereas their purpose is positive. They're meant to lead to an experience of the ultimate happiness.

The Pali Canon provides long lists of negative perceptions that can be applied to fabrications

[§§42, 71, 72, 78, 103], such as the perceptions of the unattractive aspects of the body and the drawbacks of having a body, to counteract specific unskillful fabrications such as lust and physical pride. But primarily it focuses on three perceptions to be applied to all fabrications: the perception of inconstancy, the perception of stress in what's inconstant; and the perception of not-self in what's stressful. Each of these perceptions requires a bit of explanation.

- Inconstant. The Pali term here is *anicca*, which is sometimes translated as “impermanent,” but that's not what it really means. Its opposite, *nicca*, describes something that's done constantly and reliably. You can depend on it. If something is *anicca*, it's unreliable. Remember that these perceptions are used to evaluate the happiness provided by fabrications, to question the extent to which that happiness is worth the effort involved in fabricating it. There are many instances in which mind can satisfy itself with things that are only relatively permanent, so impermanence is not automatically a sign that a particular happiness is not worth the effort. But if you focus on the unreliability of a particular happiness, it's easier to develop dispassion for it.

- Stressful. The Pali term here—*dukkha*—can also mean “suffering” or “pain.” “Stress” and “stressful” seem to be the best translations in this context because they can be applied even to subtle states of concentration, where blatant pain and suffering are not present. The Buddha doesn't deny that there can be pleasure in fabrications—he even recommends the pleasures of *jhana*—but he does note that focusing on those pleasures is an obstacle to developing dispassion. The purpose of the perception of stress is to draw attention to the fact that any pleasure that's inconstant is inherently stressful—like trying to find rest while sitting on a chair with wobbly, uneven legs.

- Not-self. The Pali term here is *anatta*. Note that this term is an adjective. The perception of not-self is not meant to assert that there is no self. (As shown by passage §45, the Buddha refused to get involved in the question of whether there is or is not a self.) Instead, this perception is a value judgment: If a pleasure is inconstant and stressful, it's not worth claiming as “me,” “mine,” or “my self.” This judgment holds regardless of

how you define your self—as separate or connected, individual or cosmic [§98]—because every sense that “I am this” is an expression of clinging and passion. The perception of not-self is the one that leads directly from insight to tranquility, as it induces you to let go of any participation in the pleasure you’ve identified as inconstant and stressful. From this tranquility, two other qualities grow. The first is *nibbida*, disenchantment, a sense that you are no longer hungry for that particular kind of food. When you lose interest in that food, you feel *viraga*, dispassion, toward the idea of putting energy into the fabrication of that food. These two qualities are what allow fabrications to cease. The perception of not-self differs from the other two in one important respect. The Buddha recommends applying it not only to fabricated phenomena, but also to unfabricated phenomena [§§74–75]. This is because, as passage §103 notes, it’s possible, on first experiencing the deathless, to feel passion and delight for it. “Passion-and-delight” is another term for clinging. In other words, the mind has not fully abandoned its habit of feeding, and so perceives the deathless as an object on which to feed. The perception of not-self in this instance is needed to help overcome the last traces of your feeding habit so that dispassion can be complete.

Because the Buddha offers so many different instructions on how to contemplate the negative aspects of fabrications, there is the question as to why he focused so much attention on the perceptions of “inconstant,” “stressful,” and “not-self.”

One explanation is that they form a refinement of the question that underlies the development of discernment: “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” The perception of inconstancy is meant to lead to the realization that long-term happiness, as long as it’s fabricated, is no longer good enough. You want something totally reliable. Because fabricated happiness is unreliable, it’s not really happiness. It contains elements of stress. And because it’s stressful, it’s no longer good enough for you to want to call it “my.” To discern these insights removes any motivation to do whatever is needed to keep that happiness going.

Another explanation for why the Buddha focused attention on these three perceptions is suggested by

passage §9. There, the perception of inconstancy is related to aging, the perception of stress to illness, and the perception of not-self to death. In this way, these three perceptions connect directly to the Buddha’s original search when he was a *bodhisatta*—a Buddha-to-be—for a happiness free from aging, illness, and death. They are the test questions you apply to any happiness that might be offered to satisfy that search. If any of these characteristics can be discerned in that happiness, then it fails the test.

To help motivate you in applying these negative perceptions to fabrications, the Buddha also has you develop positive perceptions toward the happiness found when fabrications cease. These positive perceptions include not only the perception of dispassion and the perception of cessation mentioned in passage §78, but also any of the statements in the Canon that speak positively of *nibbana* and of the bliss and freedom coming when fabrications are stilled [§§20–22, 111–118].

Both the negative and the positive perceptions can be developed at any point in the practice of meditation, but how you apply them depends on where you are in your practice. When your mastery of concentration is still weak, you don’t apply the negative perceptions directly to the concentration itself, for that might discourage you from developing it further. After all, in developing concentration, you’re actually pushing against these perceptions, to create a state of mind that is relatively constant, pleasant, and under your control. So at this stage you apply the negative perceptions just to distractions that would pull you away from the object of your concentration. Only when your mastery is strong should you apply these perceptions to all fabrications, even those that go into creating and maintaining concentration. As passage §103 shows, this is one of the ways in which full awakening can be attained.

DEVELOPING DISCERNMENT

The mind’s first direct experience of the unfabricated is its first taste of awakening. This experience is the result of an act of discernment. Because the unfabricated neither arises nor passes away, it’s always potentially discernible. This is why awakening occurs in the flash of a moment. But because ordinary human discernment

is weak and unreliable, it has to be trained and developed to discern for sure the subtlety of what's always there. This is why the path of practice is gradual, and why there are stages in its development [§49].

The Buddha lists three ways of developing discernment: through listening, through thinking, and through the development of the mind through meditation [§23]. He expands on this list in passage §24, where he lists four factors that lead to the first experience of awakening: associating with people of integrity, listening to the Dhamma, applying appropriate attention to what you've heard, and then practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma.

People of integrity. The Buddha places a great deal of emphasis on finding a reliable person to teach you the Dhamma. At present, most people tend to read books about Dhamma rather than learning it directly from a person, but there are at least four reasons why even reliable books are no substitute for reliable people.

- Because many of the values of the Dhamma seem counterintuitive to our normal approach to happiness, we can easily wonder if a person who no longer feeds on mental and physical pleasures could really be happy. An important impetus in the practice comes from associating with such a person and realizing that he or she is actually happy in a very profound and consistent way.
- Many aspects of the Dhamma can't be conveyed in books or verbal teachings, but can be absorbed only through the direct example of a person who has mastered the path.
- A person experienced on the path can gauge your strengths and weaknesses, and recommend the appropriate level of Dhamma for where you are on the path. In particular, because the negative perceptions recommended by the texts can, when misused, lead to depression, apathy, or unhealthy aversion, you need an experienced guide to make sure you don't mishandle these perceptions and cause harm.
- A person with experience can see where your practice is going off path and inform you about what you're doing wrong. This aspect of the teacher/

student relationship is so crucial that many teachers regard the ability to take criticism as the most important quality to look for in a student, and a sign of genuine discernment. Only fools don't want to know where they could improve their behavior [§31].

Of course, not all teachers of Dhamma are people of integrity. This is why the Buddha gives explicit instructions for how to exercise your discernment in choosing a reliable teacher [§§27–29]. In addition to being observant and willing to take time in formulating a judgment about a potential teacher's character, you have to develop the qualities of integrity in yourself if you want to recognize them in someone else. In this way, the act of judging a teacher develops your discernment not only concerning the integrity and reliability of the people around you, but also concerning your own.

Listening to the true Dhamma. In addition to tailoring teachings for your immediate, specific needs, a good teacher will provide you with an overall perspective on the path of practice so that you can begin to judge where you are on the path and to anticipate your own needs yourself.

The primary context taught by all good Dhamma teachers is the Buddha's first teaching: the four noble truths. These truths are four ways of categorizing fabricated and unfabricated experiences so that you can know how to act toward any particular experience in your quest to subdue passion and desire for all fabrications. Three of these truths—the truth of stress, the truth of the origination of stress, and the truth of the path of practice leading to the origination of stress—cover fabricated phenomena. Although all of these fabrications will ultimately be abandoned at the end of the path in the moment of awakening, your gradual progress on the path requires that, in the meantime, they be treated differently. The truth of stress is to be comprehended to the point of dispassion; the truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned; the truth of the path is to be developed.

The third truth—the truth of the cessation of stress—covers the act of abandoning and feeling dispassion for the second truth, the origination of stress. Because abandoning is an act, it's a fabrication. The dispassion, however, is unfabricated [§48]. This

means that the third noble truth straddles the line between what's fabricated and what's not.

The truth of the path is divided into three parts: right view and right resolve come under discernment; right speech, right action, and right livelihood under virtue; right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration under concentration. However, these parts are not mutually exclusive. For instance, right resolve, as it reaches a noble stage of development, translates into the resolves that develop and maintain the first jhana, the first stage of right concentration. This connection emphasizes the fact that concentration and discernment, just like tranquility and insight, need each other to grow.

Although the path eventually has to be abandoned, it first has to be fully developed. This means that you need to understand its stages—and the stages in your own practice—so that you can gain a sense of when a particular part of the path needs to be held to, and when you're ready to let it go. Your ability to discern this can come only with practice, but an important part of listening to the true Dhamma lies in being forewarned of issues of this sort that you will face in practice. In fact this is the primary way in which listening to the Dhamma exercises your discernment: You are alerted to issues and possibilities that otherwise might not have occurred to you. By giving you a new vocabulary, it alerts you to distinctions and connections that you otherwise wouldn't have seen. Appropriate attention. Once you have listened to the Dhamma, you have to think about it. This is the role of appropriate attention, which is the ability to frame your questions rightly. Applying appropriate attention to the Dhamma means asking questions about the Dhamma that focus on how to see things in terms of the four noble truths and to develop the duties appropriate to each. Applying appropriate attention also means avoiding any questions that would pull you away from actually practicing the path [§§41, 45, 76]. The Canon contains long lists of these distracting questions, which cover many common philosophical and religious issues about the nature or existence of your true self, or the nature or origin of the world. The Buddha compared an interest in these questions to a man who, shot by an arrow, refuses to have it removed until he has learned who made the arrow, who shot it, and so forth. The man would die before finding an answer to his

questions. To develop appropriate attention is to focus on removing the arrow as quickly as possible. This is an important exercise in focusing your discernment on detecting what really matters and ignoring issues that would get in the way.

Passage §30 provides instructions in how to think about the Dhamma you've listened to in a way that leads to removing the arrow. After committing the Dhamma to memory, you think it over and come to an understanding that encourages you to practice. This means, first, analyzing the teaching on its own to penetrate its meaning. Then you ponder and compare it with other Dhamma teachings to see that it agrees with what you already know. According to the Canon, this is the stage where you learn to identify what counts as true Dhamma and what doesn't. Only if the teachings new to you agree with what you already know with certainty should you accept them as genuine. To think about the Dhamma in this way exercises your discernment in noticing that what may seem consistent on the surface may, on further reflection, actually be inconsistent, and vice versa. You learn not to jump to conclusions.

Once you see that the Dhamma you've heard is in agreement with the Dhamma you already know, that gives rise to a desire and willingness to practice, for you can see that the Dhamma makes sense. The desire here is what allows the path to happen. Based on this desire and willingness, you "compare," which apparently means (1) that you compare your own behavior in body, speech, and mind to the standards set forth in the teaching; and (2) that you compare the differences in the various aspects of your behavior to see which sort of behavior is skillful and which is not. Then you exert yourself to abandon unskillful behavior and develop skillful behavior to the point where you have a direct experience of the truth toward which the teaching is aimed.

As the Canon frequently notes, it's only through exertion that you actually gain discernment of how things work. Although discernment is needed to guide your efforts, your efforts to develop skillful qualities and abandon unskillful one—as they do and don't yield results—teach discernment many lessons that it can't learn in any other way. This is why the practice plays the central role in its training.

Practicing the Dhamma in accordance with the

Dhamma means to practice for the sake of developing disenchantment for all fabrications [§73]. As we have already noted, this practice follows two simultaneous tracks. The first track is to sensitize your mind to the actual occurrence of fabrications in the present by developing the path, and by developing right concentration in particular. The second track is to apply negative perceptions to fabrications, as appropriate, and develop positive perceptions toward the unfabricated. The second track keeps your practice on course; the first track allows you to detect the act of fabrication in experiences where you otherwise might miss it.

This first track develops discernment in two major ways: by forcing you to find the point of moderation in all your internal and external actions as they affect the practice of concentration, and by allowing you to witness the stilling of fabrications as they fall away, level by level, when your concentration deepens. These two aspects of the path cooperate in refining your discernment and developing it to the point of disenchantment and dispassion.

The practice of moderation is so central to the path that the Buddha introduced the path to his first listeners as the “middle way.” In particular, the practice of right concentration requires balance in many areas: in your use of the physical requisites, in your ability to avoid excesses and deficiencies in the desire and effort you bring to your practice, and in emphasizing or de-emphasizing different skillful qualities as appropriate to your current state of mind [§§58–64]. A practice that requires you to find the point of “just right” in all your activities is much better at exercising discernment than one that simply pushes you to one extreme or another. To begin with, it requires you to monitor the results of your attempts to find balance; this sensitizes you to subtleties of cause and effect. It requires you to be quick in sensing when the point of balance shifts. It helps you to see that superior states of mind entailing less fabrication require less effort to maintain than inferior states requiring more—an important lesson in developing dispassion for fabrication. And because the point of balance in the circumstances underlying your concentration can shift so easily, it drives home the point that even the solid pleasure of concentration requires diligent effort:

another reason to look for a happiness that requires no fabrication at all.

As for the step-by-step stilling of fabrication, this is best illustrated by the Buddha’s instructions for breath meditation—the meditation technique he recommended most frequently in the Canon [§101]. These instructions give guidance in how to develop tranquility and insight in tandem, for they sensitize you to the processes of fabrication at the same time directing you to calm them. In these instructions, the Buddha analyzes fabrications into three sorts: bodily (the in-and-out breath); verbal (directed thought and evaluation); and mental (feelings and perceptions). The instructions themselves take the form of verbal fabrications that you can use to direct your attention to various issues as you breathe in and out with mindfulness and alertness. In the first four steps you are instructed to sensitize yourself to the sensation of in-and-out breathing, to its impact on the experience of the entire body, and then to calm that influence. This shows you the extent to which you have a range of choices in how you breathe, and that these choices fabricate your sense of the body, for good or ill, in the present. The more discernment you bring to the way you breathe, the more you will foster a sense of the body in which it’s easy to settle down. In the second set of four steps, you are directed to develop feelings of rapture and pleasure, to sensitize yourself to the impact of these feelings and their accompanying perceptions on the mind, and then to calm that impact as well. This shows you the extent to which there are potentials in the body and mind from which you can fabricate feelings and perceptions useful in bringing the mind to calm.

As passage §105 demonstrates, these steps lead you through the various stages of right concentration, as verbal, bodily, and then finally mental fabrications fall away. One forest master compares this process to heating a hunk of ore containing different metals: As the temperature reaches the melting point of each metal, that metal will separate from the ore on its own. Passage §102 warns that you can’t simply will yourself through these stages, for then you fall off the path entirely. Instead, you have to develop a balanced attitude of desire and skill in moving from one level to the next. The search for this balance,

of course, refines your discernment even further. As blatant levels of fabrication fall away, they reveal subtler levels that you otherwise wouldn't detect. And as you learn to see the more blatant levels as disturbances, you develop a sense of disenchantment and dispassion toward them, a process that inclines you to look for ways to divest yourself of fabrications entirely.

These two processes—looking for the point of balanced moderation in your practice and trying to bring fabrications to stillness step-by-step—come together in the moment leading to awakening, when the mind is so balanced that it feels no desire either to move forward or to stay in place [§64]. This allows an equipoise where all fabrications of every sort fall still. Even the act of discernment itself gets dropped [§106]. This is how the happiness of the unfabricated is found.

STAGES OF AWAKENING

The first direct experience of the unfabricated is the first stage of awakening, called “steam-entry” because—in the same way that the water in a stream leading to the ocean is destined to reach the ocean—you are now destined for full awakening within at most seven lifetimes. This experience is the result of completely developing virtue, but of developing concentration and discernment only to a moderate extent. The experience of the deathless at this stage cuts through three fetters that cause passion for fabrication: self-identity views, in which you identify yourself in terms of the five aggregates [§93]; uncertainty as to the truth of the Buddha's teaching; and grasping at habits and practices, i.e., holding onto certain ways of behavior not as means to an end but as ends in themselves. These attitudes are called fetters because, if they're not cut, they keep you tied to the obsession to keep fabricating again and again. However, discernment at this level can't cut through all the fetters that cause passion for fabrication, so you still have more work to do in developing tranquility and insight. After tasting the unfabricated dimension, you return to the experience of fabrication. To go to the next stage, you resume your work of applying negative

perceptions to the five aggregates so as to root out any remaining passion for them. This work is required after each of the first three stages of awakening, simply that it grows more thorough and refined with each stage.

The second stage of awakening is called once-return, for—if you gain no higher stage in this lifetime—you are destined to come back to this world only once and gain full awakening then. At this stage, your work at concentration and discernment is still incomplete, no added fetters are cut, but the level of passion, aversion, and delusion in the mind has been reduced.

The third stage of awakening is called non-return, for—if you gain no higher stage in this lifetime—you are destined to appear spontaneously in any of the high levels of heaven called the Pure Abodes, there to attain awakening. At this stage, your work at concentration is complete, and you have cut two added fetters: sensual passion and irritation. However, there is still more work to do in the area of discernment, for you can feel passion for the unfabricated, which creates a subtle sense of identification and clinging in the mind.

The fourth and final stage of awakening is called arahantship, the term “arahant” meaning one who is worthy. At this stage, your work at discernment is complete, and you have cut five added fetters: passion for form (the four jhanas), passion for what is formless (the formless attainments), conceit (the tendency to compare yourself with others), restlessness, and ignorance, i.e., you now fully know that you have fulfilled the tasks of the four noble truths. You are freed from ever suffering birth again, and the mind dwells in total freedom, with no more passion for any fabrication and no passion for the unfabricated. You may still apply negative perceptions to the five aggregates, yet this is not for the sake of any further attainment. It's simply a pleasant pastime that maintains mindfulness and alertness. The mind experiences total happiness with no hunger, no need to search for anything further, no need to feed on or fabricate anything any more.

TRUE HAPPINESS

The Canon states frequently that the happiness of the unfabricated is the ultimate happiness, totally secure. However, because this happiness is unrelated to any act of feeding, the Canon's descriptions of it can sound

strange to anyone whose only experience of happiness is through the act of mental and physical feeding— whose very sense of identity is composed of the acts of feeding. For instance, many of the passages describing the experience of a fully awakened person emphasize the extent to which such a person experiences sights, sounds, etc., and yet is disjoined from them. For anyone whose happiness feeds on a sense of connectedness, this would sound unappealing and cold. But remember that, as the Buddha pointed out [§89], the things we feed on turn around and chew on us in return: in our hunger for them, in our anxiety over the fact that they change. To stop feeding on them is to stop being eaten by them. Only by giving them their freedom can you be free. The awakened person has stopped feeding, not by abandoning any hope of happiness but by experiencing a happiness that fully satisfies your search, removing all hunger for anything at all. Because this happiness lies outside of space and time, it will never be subject to change. For someone who has yet to practice, these words will be just that: words. Only if you strengthen and sensitize your discernment through the practice will you be in a position to judge if they really point to something supreme.