

Robert Cusick, November 12, 2008, Challenges of Long Retreats / Eight Fold Path

Our Dhamma speaker was **Robert Cusick**, who has been practicing Buddhist meditation since 1997. He is a student of Gil Fronsdal and was trained as a Buddhist monk at Pa Auk Forest Monastery in Burma. He also trained in the Soto Zen tradition at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center in 2001. He has worked with Hameed Ali in the Diamond Approach (Diamond Heart Six) and is a certified Kripalu Yoga teacher. Robert participated in the 2nd Buddhist Chaplaincy training offered through the Sati Center for Buddhist Studies and completed the first Dedicated Practitioners Program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in 2003. He subsequently served there in the role of Retreats Program Manager.



Pa Auk Sayadwa



Pa Auk Forest Monastery

Robert spoke of the surprises encountered in a long retreat, even by long-time practitioners. Robert had completed a two-month retreat just before entering the four-month retreat, and was not expecting anything unusual to emerge. However, much to his chagrin, he found himself fidgeting. He then obsessed about the fidgeting and became so self-conscious that he moved to the back of the meditation hall so as to not disturb others. This was a totally unexpected outcome, and he found himself appreciating the value of retreats and the things uncovered.

Long, intensive retreats can be very difficult. Like Robert's fidgeting, things come up during a long retreat, and it is not uncommon for practitioners to become self-

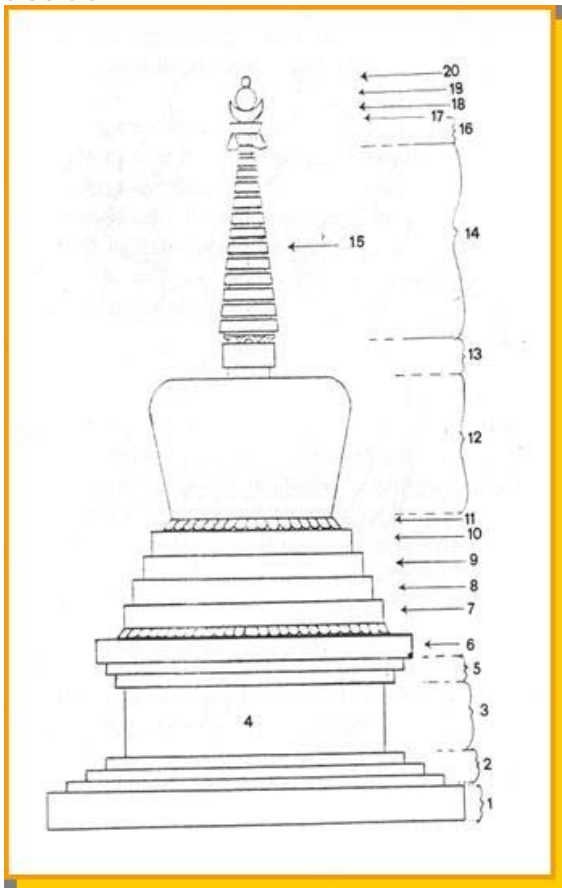
conscious and self-critical -- sometimes even to the extent that they drop out of the retreat. There are five hindrances that impede success with meditation. These are:

1. Sensual desire - Craving for pleasure to the senses.
2. Anger or ill-will - Feelings of malice directed toward others.
3. Sloth-torpor or boredom - Halfhearted action with little or no concentration.
4. Restlessness-worry - The inability to calm the mind.
5. Doubt - Lack of conviction or trust.

These can and do happen to any mediator -- unless you have achieved Nirvana, of course...

Robert also showed us a diagram of The Eight-fold Noble Path to Cessation of Suffering, given to him by Pa Auk Sayadwa. Although we do not have a copy of that diagram, I found something similar at http://www.stupa-onlus.org/stuparebuildingenglish/index_file/Page419.htm

The symbolic meaning of the individual parts of a stupa -- *According to the Gelugpa tradition*



Temple illustrating 8-fold path. (This link http://www.stupa-onlus.org/stuparebuildingenglish/index_file/Page419.htm is easier to read)

1. The platform at the basis of the stupa symbolizes the ten virtues:

Three of body:

- To protect life,
- To practice generosity,
- To have a correct conduct;

Four of speech:

- To tell the truth,
- To reconcile,
- To speak in a calm and gentle way,
- To make sensible discourses;

Three of mind:

- To have no attachments,
- To be altruistic,
- To believe in correct views.

2. The three steps above the platform symbolize the three objects of refuge, to which one commits:

- The Guru and the Buddha,
- The teachings (the Dharma),
- The community of practitioners (the Sangha).

3. The lion throne symbolizes the supremacy of a Buddha over the entire universe.

4. The vase of treasures symbolizes the eight noble riches.

5. The small and the large lotus symbolize the six perfections:

- generosity,
- morality,
- patience,
- joyous effort,
- concentration,
- wisdom.

6. The four angles at the basis of the throne symbolize the four immeasurables:

- immeasurable love,
- immeasurable compassion,
- immeasurable joy,
- immeasurable equanimity.

7. The first step symbolizes the four close placements of mindfulness:

- the body,
- feelings,
- the mind,
- phenomena.

8. The second step symbolizes the four thorough abandonings:

- The thorough abandoning which is the non-generation of non-virtues not yet generated,
- The thorough abandoning which is the abandoning of the non-virtues already generated,
- The thorough abandoning which is the generation of virtues not yet generated,
- The thorough abandoning which is the increasing of virtues already generated.

9. The third step symbolizes the four legs of magical manifestation:

- aspiration,
- effort,
- intention,
- analysis.

10. The fourth step symbolizes the five powers:

- faith,
- effort,
- mindfulness,
- meditative stabilization,
- wisdom.

11. The immovable base of the vase symbolizes the five forces.

12. The different aspects of the vase symbolize the seven branches of Enlightenment:

- correct mindfulness
- correct discrimination of phenomena,
- correct effort
- correct joy,
- correct pliancy,
- correct meditative stabilization,
- correct equanimity.

13. The base of the summit symbolizes the noble eightfold path:

- correct view,
- correct understanding,
- correct word,
- correct aims of action,
- correct livelihood,
- correct effort,
- correct mindfulness,
- correct meditative stabilization.

14. The tree of life symbolizes the ten types of knowledge:

- of phenomena,
- of mind,
- of the law of cause and effect,
- of illusions,
- of suffering,
- of the cessation of suffering,
- of the path that leads to cessation,
- of destruction,

- of nonappearance,
- the ten types of transcendental knowledge.

15. The thirteen rings symbolize the ten mystic powers and the three essential types of mindfulness. They also symbolize the thirteen Bhumi.

16. The umbrella and its support symbolize the victorious state of Enlightenment.

17. The two-part *zaraisak* symbolizes the ornaments of all the supreme qualities.

18. The moon symbolizes the elimination of all sufferings.

19. The sun symbolizes the radiance of the thousand lights of compassion.

20. The nada (the jewel) symbolizes the realization of all the aspirations.

Robert's final words of wisdom: Remember that your body is not your identity.