DON'T HOLD BACK

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PASANNO BHIKKHU

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A	Aṇguttara Nikāya
Dhp	Dhammapada
M	Majjhima Nikāya
S	Saṁyutta Nikāya
SN	Sutta Nipāta
Vism	Visuddhimagga

Chapter 1

CONTENTMENT: the Way of the Noble Ones

> Just as a bird, wherever it goes, flies with its wings as its only burden; so too is a monk content with a set of robes to provide for his body and alms-food to provide for his hunger. Wherever he goes, he takes only his barest necessities along. (D 11)

I am delighted to be here for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chithurst and the opening of the new Dhamma hall. This space is very beautiful; everyone can spread out comfortably. On the other hand, some people sitting in the back may not be able to hear me so well, if at all. Isn't this an excellent example of the unsatisfactory nature of existence? Even in the midst of such uplifting circumstances, a certain amount of dukkha is unavoidable.

Although I've visited Chithurst many times, I'm still an outsider. From that perspective, it's been interesting to watch it from a distance, to see Chithurst grow and

become a refuge, a very important place of spiritual practice. Back in 1984, I accompanied Luang Por Paññananda[1] to the Kaṭhina ceremony here, and a lot of things were happening. I was still living in Thailand at that time and I often wondered, "What am I doing in Thailand?" Once we arrived in Britain, the wondering shifted to, "What am I doing in England?" The nature of the mind is to wonder, "What am I doing?" out of discontent. Discontent doesn't just disappear by flying to another part of the world.

There has been a tremendous sense of integrity and caring that both the monastic and lay communities have brought to the practice and to every corner of the monastery. I was wandering around in the forest this morning, looking at little shrines and the spots where trees have been planted in honor of loved ones. These are all places of care and recollection. Over these past twenty-five years, so much attention has been put into the forest—developing trails and building dwelling places, places for sitting, and paths for walking meditation. One of the benefits of being an infrequent visitor is that all of these expressions of faith, effort, and integrity can be seen with fresh eyes.

When you live in a place or you're very strongly connected to one, you may not see the most inspiring and wholesome aspects of it. Instead, you notice things that still have to be done or you remember the difficulties: the

1 A highly respected Thai monk, well known for his teaching skills and integrity (1911-2007).

squabbles and altercations it took to get something accomplished or the endless meetings that were involved. It is amazing how skewed perceptions can get, but as a visitor I don't have these associations.

I think it is important for everyone to recollect the tremendous positive energy, care, and integrity that have gone into every part of this monastery. That's what holds us as practitioners—all of us, whether we are monastics or laypeople. We are practicing within a sphere of merit; we rely on faith and blessings that sustain us and support the practice as a whole. From that understanding, we also have the opportunity to be part of that, to rely on that and to benefit from all of it. Whether offerings are material, monetary, or physical in nature, each one is a gift; all of it has been given to us in some way. Giving and helping provide a sea of blessings to float on and to be lifted up by.

At the fiftieth anniversary of Chithurst, most of the old duffers will be gone, but then the next generation of practitioners dedicated to the Dhamma will be supported by the legacy of offerings made by everyone in this current one. The interdependent nature of our lives doesn't just connect us to future generations. There is a continuous cycle of giving and receiving that has been going on since the time of the Buddha that is very beautiful.

As we practice and develop the foundations of the holy life and the Buddha's teachings, it is always good

to reflect, "What are we doing this for?" Are we here to increase our suffering and the suffering of others? I hope not! Life without spiritual practice or a world without a spiritual presence is quite abysmal. On the other hand, life with spiritual practice and a world with a spiritual presence provide the possibility of liberation, of freedom, of an end to suffering. If we forget this perspective, we can flounder around, tread water, or put a tremendous amount of energy into things that aren't crucial or essential to the goal of practice.

THE WAY OF THE NOBLE ONES

Sometimes we separate out our aspiration for freedom or liberation from what is practical. We can idealize it to such a degree that it seems distant and separate from us. So what does the Buddha mean by freedom? How does he actually describe it?

There is a discourse in the Aṅguttara Nikāya that I find quite inspiring. The Buddha describes the qualities and skills of a Noble One and what it means to stand in his noble lineage. Most of it focuses on contentment and the non-holding of self:

> There are these noble lineages—pristine, of long standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated and never before adulterated, which are not being adulterated and which will not be adulterated, not despised by the wise.

> [A] monk is content with any kind of robes (the same repeats for alms-food, lodging, and meditation) and he speaks in praise of contentment with any kind [of requisites], does not engage in wrong search in what is improper for the sake of these [requisites]. If he does not get these [requisites] he is not agitated with it, not blindly absorbed in it, seeing the danger in it, understanding the escape. Yet, because of this, he does not extol himself or disparage others.
>
> Any monk who is skilled in this, energetic, clearly comprehending, and mindful, is said to be standing in an ancient, pristine, noble lineage. (A 4:28)

I don't think these criteria are beyond any of us, monastics as well as laypeople. Everyone needs clothing, food, and lodging to survive. If freedom is our goal, we need to learn how to relate to these in noble ways. These ways are simple, humble, and dignified. Each day we can choose to live with contentment, in service of the holy life, rather than in service of the ego.

Chasing after the requisites of existence, trying to build an identity around them and relying on them as enduring sources of satisfaction, creates suffering. Pressures from the external world make it easy to look for something in the material world for our sense of gratification. We can

see that even if it's not gratification we seek, there is still that sense of longing to search for something new, better, different, or more. We need to make contentment a conscious quality. When we realize that our basic needs are satisfied, it is much easier for contentment to arise. Actually, what we have is enough. The food that we have, the lodging that we have, the clothing that we have is enough.

This doesn't mean that we can't receive anything or that we must live in some sort of extraordinarily austere, impossible way. It is about having the quality of contentment threading through and underlying our lives. That's freedom, the way to stand in the noble lineages.

There's a story about a brief exchange between the Buddha and a samaṇa from another sect (M 77). The samaṇa admires the Buddha and praises him for adhering to strict standards of austerity, to what he perceives as the Buddha's preferences for offerings small in quantity and poor in quality. The Buddha responds to the wanderer with a few simple facts: "I have disciples who are far more austere than I am...I sometimes eat the full contents of my alms bowl or even more...I sometimes wear robes given by householders, robes so fine that pumpkin hair is coarse in comparison" (M 77:9). This is how the Buddha teaches the way to enter the noble lineage. The Buddha speaks in praise of contentment. He is satisfied with a lot, a little, or with nothing at all. The question is, can we be?

It all comes down to our willingness to reflect: "What is enough? Is this enough? Is this appropriate? How am I relating to this? Are my basic needs being satisfied? Is my behavior being guided by noble restraint rather than being engaged in an unworthy or ignoble search?" If that is the case, we need to return to a quality of recognition, a place of contentment, and speak in praise of it. This is the way of the Noble Ones.

Before I came to England for this celebration, several highly respected monks visited Abhayagiri: Ajahn Liam, the abbot of Wat Pah Pong; Ajahn Jundee, the abbot of Wat Ampawan; Ajahn Nyanadhammo, the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat; and Ajahn Uthane, Ajahn Liam's secretary. I arranged a road trip so they could visit a small affiliated monastery in Canada. The group spent the night at Shasta Abbey, a Zen Buddhist monastery located in a rural part of Northern California.

Just as they were leaving the following morning, one of the Abbey's lay guests mentioned a nearby shop that he claimed "had the best cinnamon buns in the world." The laypeople got very excited about making these presumably special buns part of the meal offering and decided this would be their destination for the morning meal. They set off in search of this shop, and, as it turned out, the driver got lost. Time was running out, as it was a very rural area with little habitation, and the laypeople were getting really upset, even a bit panicked. Eventually, they found a tiny "greasy spoon" truck stop. But it had only

one hot plate for cooking. So there they all were, out in the middle of nowhere, putting together a very odd meal offering to these very senior monks. For the laypeople, what began as a seemingly benign desire for the "best cinnamon buns in the world" ended with a certain amount of discontent and without a cinnamon bun in sight! In contrast, the senior monks received the offerings with gratitude and contentment, standing firm in the pristine, ancient, original tradition of the Noble Ones.

The spiritual quality of contentment is something that we need to be attentive to in our own search: How do we manage to live as the Noble Ones do? We can practice these standards every day. When we get drawn into desire and discontent with the requisites, we can recognize that, and then return to a place of contentment.

Oftentimes we may measure contentment in misguided ways: "Do I have insights and wisdom? Do I have jhānas or one of the sublime meditations?" When we use these kinds of attainments as measures of contentment, we usually come up short. Then we feel even less content or even more discontent. Whatever way we put it, how could anything peaceful, sublime, or clear come from that? Bring qualities of gratitude, ease, and acceptance into daily life, relating them both to the world around you and to your spiritual practice. Keep things simple: can we be happy with just sitting and watching the breath?

After arriving in England a few days ago, I went for a long walk, tramping around Hampshire Hangers for

about four or five hours. During the evening meditation, I was feeling jet-lagged and wasn't very alert. Could I be content with that experience, just sitting and watching the breath? The mind moaned and groaned for a while; it was not one of my most brilliant meditations, but I was content with it. No matter what kind of state the mind is in, contentment is possible. We can grumble and complain about how we would like things to be, but how do we come back to contentment or allow attention to arise from it? I think that's the more dynamic sense, since the quality of attention arises out of the mind that is content and settled. It's not about forcing the mind into that quality. A relationship of contentment with robes, food, and lodging, and speaking in praise of these, are really wholesome things to encourage.

RECOGNIZING THE PULL OF DESIRE

I've noticed in America, and I'm sure it is similar here in Britain, that the economy functions on credit card debt. Without people overspending and trying to keep up with their accumulating debts, the economy would grind to a halt. When there is discontentment, there is seeking and searching. Advertisers know that and are paid handsomely to alert us to things we "need" but currently lack. We go out and purchase things—shaving creams, vacations, cars, and computers—that advertisers imbue with images of power, prestige, glamour, and so forth, hoping to satisfy those perceived lacks and perceived

gains. All is well...for a while. Eventually, boredom and discontent set in. To cheer ourselves up, we buy the new and improved model or the bigger size and the images that go along with them. When that buzz wears off, the cycle starts over, again and again. It is a futile and expensive search for satisfaction, just as it's meant to be. A while ago, the advertising slogan of one of the major credit card companies was: "Take the waiting out of wanting." As a company, they are doing very well, thank you. Who would want to wait, when you can immediately fulfill your desires? But there are repercussions to being engaged in an unworthy search, out of discontent.

In the discourse about noble lineage, the Buddha talks about how to respond when one receives the material requisites. He says not to use them with infatuation, not to become totally fascinated, delighted, and overwhelmed with them. At the same time, the Buddha says, if one doesn't receive the material requisites, then one neither feels dejected nor thwarted, feeling somehow diminished as a human being.

It is interesting to watch desire and the feelings that arise. The material realm is just a mirror to highlight the nature of desire, whether it goes towards the material realm of clothing, food, and lodging, the other realms of sensual desire or to the mental realm. If we don't have it, we need to get it, possess it, or be it. The feeling is that somehow we are lacking something, but as practitioners, we can recognize when the heart is pulled by desire. We

don't have to become seduced and infatuated by it, to rationalize its pursuit. It's a matter of anchoring ourselves in the present moment with an object of meditation, watching desire, being present with it, and allowing it to pass. Then, returning to the quality of contentment, we can recognize that we are not diminished as human beings when we don't get what we want. It's just that we didn't get what we want. That's all—it's not a big deal.

On the other hand, when we get what we want, we should try not to be shaken by that and try not to create an identity around "me" being a person who gets what "I want." What's important is the mind not moving. The fundamental movement of mind comes with liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting. We need to be able to establish awareness and attention so that we recognize that movement of mind. If the mind starts to wobble or drift from its abiding place of clarity, we recognize that movement. Although wanting and not wanting is quite ordinary, there's no real noble result to it. In other words, one doesn't slip into the noble lineage by following likes and dislikes, wanting and not wanting. It's the ability to be free from discontent and to dwell in contentment that allows entry into the noble lineage, into the family of the ariyas.

RELINQUISHING THE "SELF" POSITION

The appropriate way to relate to the requisites concerns the non-holding of self. This is very important in

terms of Dhamma practice. When you receive what you want, don't create an identity around it by saying, "Oh, look how great I am. I can rest in contentment." If you are truly content, there is no need to prop up a false sense of "me" as being someone special. The same applies to discontent. Don't waste time being critical of yourself or feeling deprived—thinking that some great injustice has occurred just because you didn't get something.

Desire and ignorance are the double whammies that bind us in saṃsāra, and who wants that? We need to be able to undermine those two qualities. There are the different ways that desire manifests, and there is the fundamental ignorance of not knowing the true nature of things, that there isn't an abiding place for "self." This "self" position is a fabrication, a fundamental delusion. And of course, the way that the mind tries to establish a "self" position is that it either tries to prop itself up or put others down, by disparaging or seeing the faults in others. These are some of the ways that we sustain our discontent. Just remember that the sense of "self" is always trying to establish itself in things that are completely unstable and unreliable. The true nature of things is that there isn't an abiding place for "self."

Another noble quality the Buddha talks about is that one does not extol oneself or disparage others. I think that is the other piece that is important in terms of Dhamma practice—it's not just trying to eliminate desires or trying to limit one's capacity for grasping and clinging. It is

recognizing that which is beyond where the self establishes itself, where one isn't trying to lift oneself up or diminish others. It's not about trying to prop up our sense of "me" being special, "me" being something, or "me" being somebody who has some unique quality. We come to a place of relinquishing a "self" position.

The last quality the Buddha talked about was contentment for developing meditation—bhāvanā—the internal qualities of goodness, clarity, and peace. There is contentment to relinquish the defilements—the unskillful and unwholesome qualities in which we engage. Our defilements are so painful. We watch ourselves doing things out of habit; it is really pathetic. We need to recognize how we can come to a place of contentment by developing meditation. The practice the Buddha taught, neither to extol nor disparage others with respect to the three requisites mentioned in this sutta, also applies to meditation. We need not create a sense of self with this training, with this basic foundation of turning away from the unskillful and untrue, or with developing and abiding in those qualities of the wholesome and what is in accordance with truth.

This completes the Buddha's instructions on the wisdom of incorporating contentment in relationship to the basic requisites of life and the development of mind. This brief description of the noble lineage is an important tool for helping us get a handle on how to live and taking us into the realm of the ariyas. It is not so distant or far away.

Contentment is essential for sustaining practice. Sometimes we can put out a burst of energy or idealistic enthusiasm, but such conditions are difficult to sustain. Whether it's in the material realm of alms-food, lodging, and robes or the internal realm of meditation, draw on the quality of contentment. Make the effort to recognize when discontent is warping perception, warping practice, or marring the opportunity to delight in the Buddha's teaching.

This gathering for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Chithurst and the opening of the Dhamma hall provides an excellent opportunity for reflection, both as a community and as individuals. What are the wholesome and beneficial things that have been accomplished in the past, that are going on now, and that you are planning for in the future?

It also provides the opportunity to reflect on qualities of the noble lineage and to follow the Buddha's guidance on how to enter into the realm of the ariyas.

Practice these ways that the Buddha taught. Set goals that you can attain, goals that are realistic and within reach. Recognize the power of contentment and draw strength from it. Your efforts will benefit everyone, including future generations of Dhamma practitioners who will be sitting right here, long after we are gone.

I offer these reflections in honor of this auspicious occasion.

Chapter 2

ARE YOU WILLING TO TRAIN?

In preparation for the upcoming ordinations, I've been reviewing the chanting parts of the ceremony. For the novices, there are the three refuges and the ten precepts, which are sikkhāpada, the foundation of training. For the bhikkhus, there are the admonition and recollection that emphasize the purpose of going forth—to establish oneself in the training of higher virtue, higher mind, and higher wisdom.

Sikkhā or sikkhāpada, the basis of training, is what the Buddha's path is all about. Virtue and wisdom cannot be conferred through some special relationship with a deity or a higher being. One can't inherit these qualities just by being born into a certain religion or dispensation.

The Buddha's teachings are entirely different from these approaches. We have a human birth that provides the opportunity to enter into and reap the benefits of training, but to take advantage of this opportunity, we

need to do something more than just be born. The natural result of birth is death; it isn't enlightenment or awakening. We must train ourselves to awaken—no one else can do it for us. The choice is ours.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR OURSELVES

The tendency for most people is to create more problems and difficulties for themselves. That habit is one of the reasons the Buddha was reluctant to teach. He could see that most people are "obstructed by ignorance and ensnared by craving; hurrying and hastening through this round of rebirths." But the Buddha also recognized that there were those beings with "little dust in their eyes," those who are willing to train and who would be lost without the opportunity to manifest the teachings.

So what category do we want to fall into? Do we want to cultivate sīla, samādhi, and paññā, the qualities and practices that lead to freedom, or do we want to neglect inner development and just muddle along, entangled and bound in ignorance? It's our responsibility to make that choice.

Ajahn Chah used to tell the sangha that he was giving us a suitable environment to develop our own practice: "It's like providing a pasture for your cows. If there's a pasture that's fenced in and has plenty of grass, then the cows can eat the grass and also be safe. If they are cows, they will eat the grass. If they don't eat the grass, then they aren't cows. In the same way, it's the nature of

practitioners to practice and train. If they don't, maybe they're not practitioners." It's up to us to train and make some effort.

We need to make clear in our own minds what we want to be doing. This cannot be emphasized enough. Training the mind requires a great deal of discipline and effort; it's not always easy to keep that up. The mind gets clouded with frustration, boredom, laziness, and all sorts of defilements. It's so easy to slip into wanting to ignore the training or feeling forced to carry it out because the ajahns keep pestering us. Training the mind is not about trying to fulfill some duty perfunctorily. It's not an obligation to the precepts or training rules, to some standard within a monastery or a particular place. Such inclinations and approaches don't get us anywhere; they miss the point.

So what is the point? The point is to take responsibility for ourselves. We need to recognize when the mind feels oppressed and resistant to training; we need to notice when the commitment to training feels overbearing or not worth the effort required. That awareness helps raise the energy in the mind and helps create a sense of spaciousness and ease. We can remind ourselves that training the mind is a rare and precious opportunity; we can reflect on our own good fortune to meet the dhamma in this lifetime. We can then recommit to making good use of this opportunity.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR FREEDOM

When the mind is consumed by feelings of defeat and discouragement, it's also helpful to reflect on the teachers in our own lineage. Every morning throughout our winter retreat, some of Ajahn Chah's teachings were read to the community. The direct cause of our access to his teachings can be traced back to Ajahn Sumedho and others who trained under him. Ajahn Sumedho in particular is a wonderful example of someone who is always reflecting, investigating, and training himself and who has been doing so for years.

Without knowing the Thai language, Ajahn Sumedho went to live in the northeast of Thailand with Ajahn Chah. In those days, there weren't even many Thai monks living with Ajahn Chah. The circumstances were quite difficult. The courage, discipline, and fortitude of Ajahn Sumedho didn't just change his own life. Think about how many other lives have changed and have moved in the direction of dhamma, all because of Ajahn Sumedho's relentless commitment to training. I find this a truly inspiring reflection.

I remember a time when Ajahn Sumedho was having heart problems. He was close to sixty and had been a monk for thirty years. He was strapped up to a gadget so that his heart rate could be recorded for a week or so. When the doctors reviewed the results of the test, they noticed a pattern that they found bewildering. At

the same time every night, Ajahn Sumedho's heart rate went up extremely quickly and stayed fast for about an hour, before returning to normal. It turned out that he was getting up at two in the morning to exercise for an hour on his rowing machine. He then showered and sat in meditation for two hours. This is another wonderful example of Ajahn Sumedho's commitment to training.

Ajahn Chah used whatever circumstances he encountered for training. When he was either sixty-two or sixty-three and considered one of the greatest living Buddhist masters in Thailand, he had to have a brain operation. The doctors put a hole in his skull and inserted a pump. After the surgery, a nurse came to give him painkillers, which he refused. His reason? "I want to feel how much pain there is and try to understand it more clearly." He had a constant interest in examining situations, pleasant or unpleasant, wanted or unwanted. He always wanted to know how virtue, clarity of mind, and discernment could be developed, supported, and refined.

Ajahn Chah's approach to training is a wonderful guide and standard. For the mind to let go, we pay close attention to whatever situation we are in and notice our reactions. We need to investigate the circumstance and penetrate it with wisdom, so that there's an inclination toward freedom.

The teachings don't say that letting go and freedom happen because we want them to happen. Nor do they say that these qualities show up on their own without

any nurturing and encouragement. We have to be willing to train, to put forth effort and intention constantly. As we gain confidence and skill in particular areas of training, we need to then turn our attention to those other areas where we are still weak, where things are still difficult and where there are still obstacles.

There are no magic wands to wave away all of our difficulties so that we can coast along into Nibbāna. Liberated or not liberated, the world is still the world. We have bodies that are subject to pain, discomfort, and illness. We have minds filled with moods, feelings, perceptions, and thoughts that are continually changing. This is just the nature of saṁsāra.

The good news, as I keep saying, is that we have a choice. We are not relegated to being ordinary, unenlightened beings just because of one circumstance or another, but we have to be willing to train with everything. We have the option to complain or to become infatuated; we can fill up with resentment or joy when things change. I don't recommend these options—they're all hopeless and full of dukkha.

The opportunity for freedom is in the readiness to be disenchanted and dispassionate toward the pleasant and the unpleasant. When there is clear understanding, there is no negative reaction and aversion to anything. There is enough space in the mind for things to fall and drop away on their own. The process is all very natural and so much easier than grasping, since it's all going to change anyway.

RELINQUISHING THE UNSKILLFUL AND SUPPORTING THE SKILLFUL

One of the early recorded discourses of the Buddha is often overlooked. It is a teaching the Buddha gave to his son, Rāhula, who had been recently ordained and was still quite young. After Rāhula paid respects to the Buddha and washed his feet with a dipper of water, the Buddha used a series of similes to teach his son about Right Speech.

The Buddha pointed to a bowl with a little bit of water in it, and asked, "Rāhula, do you see this bit of water left in the bowl?" Rāhula answered, "Yes, sir." "So little, Rāhula, is the spiritual achievement of one who is not afraid to speak a deliberate lie." Then the Buddha threw the water away, put the bowl down, and said, "Do you see, Rāhula, how that water has been discarded? In the same way one who tells a deliberate lie discards whatever spiritual achievement he has made." Again he asked, "Do you see how this bowl is now empty? In the same way one who has no shame in speaking lies is empty of spiritual achievement." Then the Buddha turned the bowl upside down and said, "Do you see, Rāhula, how this bowl has been turned upside down? In the same way one who tells a deliberate lie turns his spiritual achievements upside down and becomes incapable of progress." Therefore, the Buddha concluded, one should not speak a deliberate lie even in jest (M 61).

It was after this teaching on Right Speech that the

Buddha spoke on the importance of mindful reflection. Are the actions of body, speech, and mind wholesome or unwholesome, beneficial or unbeneficial? If there is a plan to engage in unskillful actions, we relinquish them. If we are currently engaged in unskillful acts, we stop immediately. When unskillful or unbeneficial actions are already complete, there is acknowledgement and the firm determination not to repeat them. The Buddha is teaching us that we need to be able to apply the brakes, to relinquish our actions at whatever point we recognize them as inappropriate, unbeneficial, or unskillful.

On a certain level, the Buddha's advice seems simple and very basic, but the reality is that most people do not live their lives in accordance with his teachings. We tend to just stumble along and keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again, or we come up with new ones.

There is a particular training tool that the Buddha advises to help support the skillful determination to practice restraint. It involves regularly reporting any unskillful and unbeneficial actions to a kalyāṇamitta, a good friend or peer in dhamma. Then we make the determination to practice restraint in these areas in the future. The peer in dhamma is also given that same opportunity. This tool is a great gift. We are not alone in our efforts to transform the defilements, the kilesas. We are also not alone in our determination to incline the mind toward freedom.

Another important part of training is making the effort to counteract unwholesome habits by engaging in wholesome ones. Especially in the West, we're not conditioned to pay attention to the things we've done right. There is a fear that we might get too caught up in feeling proud or conceited. That's true sometimes, but when our intentions are wholesome, we need to be able to rejoice: "My actions were skillful; they brought well-being and happiness." Acknowledging our wholesome intentions and actions fosters the arising of the kusala citta (wholesome qualities of mind): calmness and clarity, steadiness and peacefulness. So be consistent in developing and building on these very wholesome states of mind.

Intrinsic in akusala cittas, the unwholesome mind states, is a lack of tranquility and clarity. There's a movement, an agitation inherent in the akusala cittas when subtle or blatant feelings of greed, hatred, or delusion are in the mind, so we need to learn how to minimize dwelling on the unwholesome and unskillful and at the same time support and encourage a dwelling place in the heart that is skillful, wholesome, and beneficial.

Without a foundation of insight, liberation is a fantasy and a pipe dream. These fantasies and pipe dreams may be for a noble cause, but they are still absolutely useless. There must be a firm commitment to training. Otherwise, a peaceful mind is just another dream. The willingness to train is what makes the goal imminent and the Dhamma manifest.

Training is a distinguishing mark of the Buddha's teachings. We have the tools and the rare opportunity to train the mind. Put attention and effort into this training and the results will come.

I offer these reflections for this evening.

Chapter 3

MEDITATION BASICS

Today is New Year's Day. As I started to meditate, I thought, "I feel awful. I have a terrible headache and I feel nauseous." There are probably many people, all over the place, who feel the same way! That's how I always used to feel on New Year's Day before I became a monk.

I've just returned from travels in Thailand and Canada, so I still feel somewhere out over the Pacific Ocean, certainly not here. I was thinking that the New Year is about to begin and that for us here at Abhayagiri, we are about to begin our Winter Retreat. It's a time to collect ourselves, to return to the roots of our meditation practice, and to devote our time to as much simplicity and contemplation as possible.

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE POSTURE

For all of us—both monastics and laypeople—I think it is important to review the fundamentals of meditation.

Even if you have been practicing for a long time like most people here, it's easy to get into habits. Obviously, some habits are good and some are not so good. What do we do when we sit down? It's good to take note of our posture and to pay attention to it. When we sit down, cross-legged or on a bench or chair, try to sit in a way that is both relaxed and as upright as possible—just the basics.

Sometimes we might feel this is a contradiction—to sit relaxed and to sit upright. But for meditation, it is very important that these two aspects work together: we are both as relaxed as possible and sitting as upright and straight as possible. The back is straight, the spine is gently extended, being lifted from the pelvis, the shoulders are straight, and the chest is open so we can breathe comfortably. The abdomen is relaxed, so that when we breathe, the breath comes right down into the abdomen—we are breathing with the whole body. As we breathe out, the abdomen relaxes, the breath comes out. The chest is nice and open, arms are relaxed at the side. The head and neck are straight on the shoulders, not leaning left or right, not going back or forward. (The head needs to tilt a little bit forward so we are looking down, about two or three feet ahead, if we were sitting with our eyes open.)

In terms of posture, the placement of our hands is also important. For me, as a monk, I have a double-thickness robe over my shoulder. It's a handy meditation device. First, it helps keep my robe on! Second, it also gives a

little bit of extra height to my hands, so that my shoulders are able to relax. When the hands are a bit too far forward, the body pulls forward, which creates some strain. Getting the hands in a nice even spot where they're supported but where we're still able to relax the shoulders helps the posture and breathing. Some people put their hands on their knees or on their thighs, so that there is a sense of being able to open the chest.

It is easy to forget the role that posture plays in meditation. If you are not sitting comfortably, restlessness may arise. If you don't notice that connection, you finish meditating and conclude, "Gee, my mind was really restless." But was it actually the mind that was restless or was that feeling there because the body was uncomfortable? Start to pay attention to body and mind; we have to meditate with both of those things.

There is the potential for meditation to turn into a cerebral process. We think too much about what we should or shouldn't be doing as meditators. It is quite helpful to bring attention to the body—relaxing the body, softening it, energizing it, paying attention to it. Mindfulness of the body is the first foundation of mindfulness. The body is the most solid material element that the Buddha instructs us to be attentive to—at least the body is in the present moment, which is a big thing! So often our minds wander off into the future or back into the past, or spin around in the present. We want to anchor attention in the body: "Okay, here I am, sitting in meditation. This is

what I feel like right now. This is the bodily experience in this moment. This is the posture I am in." Actually, attention to the different types of postures is one of the foundations of mindfulness. We know when we are sitting, standing, walking, lying down, moving, talking, going through the calls of nature, whatever. There is attention to the bodily experience of what we are actually doing.

ATTENDING TO THE BREATH

Then we bring attention to the breath. The meditation object the Buddha most often advises us to use is the breath because the breath is primary in terms of our existence. Without the breath, we are dead; it's that basic. The breath is the obvious sign that we are alive. Bring attention to the life force of the breath. The way the Thais speak about the breath is not just the physical breath, but also the breath energy. We breathe energy into our life, and we breathe energy into our meditation.

It's easy to get into the habit of going about meditation in a perfunctory manner. We meditate as a duty, out of faith, or based on the belief that somehow it's going to be "good for me." Wake up to these habits—make an effort to breathe energy and life into the meditation with full attention, and pay attention to each in-breath and out-breath.

According to the Buddha:

> Mindfulness of breathing, developed and repeatedly practiced, is of great fruit, of great

> advantage, for it fulfills the four foundations of mindfulness; the four foundations of mindfulness, developed and repeatedly practiced, fulfill the seven enlightenment factors; the seven enlightenment factors, developed and repeatedly practiced, fulfill clear vision and deliverance. (M 118:15)

Clear vision and deliverance or direct knowledge and the bliss of liberation are the highest fruit of the application of mindfulness. So bring life to your meditation and to your spiritual practice by being attentive to and taking note of your experience as the breath comes into the body. Take note. Attend to the breath. Attend to the sensation of the breath as it touches the tip of the nose, as it comes into the body, as it passes through the chest, as it reaches the abdomen. Attend to the abdomen rising as the breath comes in. Then feel the abdomen fall and the movement of the breath coming out of the body, past the chest, out the nose. There is this rhythm that we experience each time we breathe. If we are mindful of "bringing a full mind to what we are doing," then it has this sense of "awakening" us.

We awaken to the experience of our physical being, to what's going on in our own mind and in our own heart. We start to be able to view the experience of thoughts and feelings from a perspective of awareness and knowing, using the breath as the basis for establishing that attention. We start to connect the breath and the attention

to our physical being. These are all working together.

As the body starts to feel comfortable and the mind begins to settle, pick one point on which to settle the attention with regards to the breath. There are options of where to settle attention. For example, we can settle attention at the tip of the nose or at the top of the lip. Or settle attention further back into the nose cavity, since the breath comes up into there. We settle attention on a place where the attention is drawn and where interest can be sustained. If there is no interest, then the mind will start to wander, because the breath is a neutral sensation.

A neutral object such as the breath is like an empty sheet of paper. Take a pen, write on an empty sheet of paper, and the words can be easily read. Similarly, the breath is a neutral object. When we rest our attention on it, we can start to recognize, "Right now, this is what I am experiencing." We don't fill up our mind with conjectures and philosophizing of what meditation or spiritual practice should be, could be, might be, or would be, "if only blah, blah, blah..." We see: "That is the mind moving. These are moods and feelings, projections of desire, fear, or aversion." When we keep returning to that neutral base, we can see these tendencies for what they are.

We do not try to force the mind into concentrating. Actually, that trying and forcing can be a problem. What does concentration even mean? What that conjures up in the mind—for me, anyway—is a sense of trying to

stop the mind from thinking and wandering. From the Buddha's perspective, it is more important to cultivate clarity and awareness.

Obviously, if the mind is thinking, proliferating, and wandering all over the place, we will be unable to see things clearly, as they truly are.

To help settle the mind, we sustain attention and awareness on the breath as it comes in, and on the breath as it goes out. As we build awareness and attention, we are able to recognize what is going on within the mind—what it's doing, its mood, its underlying feeling. You don't have to force the mind to stop because that sets up a certain tension. There may be an underlying aversion as well—an aversion to thinking, an aversion to feelings, and an aversion to anything that's arising in the mind. We are unable to see things as they truly are. By returning to a place of awareness, of attending to the breath, and breathing life into the quality of awareness, we give ourselves the opportunity to learn from our experience. What is it that we are actually experiencing? What is the body feeling? What is the mood of the mind? What is the overarching view or perspective that we're holding? What are the habits and conditions that we are carrying?

We are giving ourselves the opportunity to learn through this simple act of paying attention to one in-breath and one out-breath. When the mind starts to get scattered, just release that with the out-breath. Breathing in is a new start; return to *attending* to the breath in its

simplicity. We can tie ourselves up in knots by trying too hard. Just relax. Notice once again that the posture helps give us a tangible feel for our experience. Am I relaxed? Am I comfortable? Return to the body and be present for one in-breath and one out-breath.

In the same way, we bring in what we experience. Take what is skillful, beneficial, and conducive to our well-being and wisdom, and let go of anything else. Breathe it out and let it go. We use that basic function of breathing to teach ourselves, so that we are able to experience a sense of physical well-being and relaxation, and then a mental well-being and equipoise that comes from a place of balance. Just seeing, "This is the way things are. If I hold onto that, I'm going to suffer. But if I develop *that*, if I allow *that* to stay in consciousness, it would be really beneficial." Just tune in on these basic levels.

The Buddha reiterates, "I teach only two things: suffering and the end of suffering." The cultivation of awareness that we develop through meditation is useful for understanding more clearly: "This is suffering, this is unskillful. This is not conducive to well-being." Breathing out, we can understand the cessation of suffering: "Ah, that feels good. That feels more balanced and peaceful. How do I sustain that? How do I work with that?" The foundation is the simple act of breathing: breathing in, establishing attention; breathing out, establishing attention.

I offer that for reflection this evening.

Chapter 4

SĪLA AND SANGHA

When Ajahn Chah came to America back in 1979, he taught a retreat at Insight Meditation Society (IMS) in Barre, Massachusetts. One of his talks was on sīla, a Pāli term that refers to virtue or moral conduct. About halfway through, Ajahn Chah paused for a moment and said, "I know you don't want to hear about this, but the Buddha told me to tell you!"

Morality isn't a popular topic. To be fair, sīla is a difficult word to translate into English. It refers to virtue and integrity regarding actions and speech. Probably what drew many of us to Buddhism was our interest in meditation. This was certainly true for me. But when we compare the amount of time spent meditating every day with the amount of time spent engaging with others, there is a significant difference. We spend an overwhelming amount of time interacting with others in community and much less time meditating. When we see these

proportions accurately, it makes a great deal of sense to pay attention to sīla—if not for ourselves, then certainly for others!

This is why the Buddha gave the precepts, the guidelines for how to live together in harmony and safety: we refrain from taking life and engaging in aggression; we are honest and do not steal; we respect relationships in terms of sexuality; we behave with integrity and honesty in terms of speech; and we refrain from intoxicants that dull the mind. What is really contained within the principles of the five basic precepts, and within the monastic training of 227 major precepts (plus a whole bunch of minor ones), is the opportunity for training in body and speech.

These precepts help us to learn how to train ourselves, how to apply the brakes—in actions, in movements toward our unskillful habits, and in how we relate to each other. We have that ability. It doesn't mean that the negative mental state isn't there or that the emotion isn't charged, but at least there is that bit of restraint, being able to apply the brakes. Anyone who drives a car knows how brakes function: they help slow us down and stop us from spinning out of control. Even with a brand-new Mercedes or Porsche, brakes are still necessary: without them, the driver puts himself and others in danger.

I think it's important for us as Westerners—taking on something as new and as different as Buddhism—that we get comfortable with the fact that Buddhism has many

facets. It is going to take a while to get a clear sense of the big picture, of how different aspects of it fit in and how they work together as tools for liberation. After all, that's what Buddhism is: a set of tools for liberation. Part of the expertise of being a carpenter is learning how to use all of the different tools, learning what value they have and how each tool fits in with a particular job. Right now, Abhayagiri is in a building phase, so I'm somewhat preoccupied with tools and with construction and carpentry—I guess that's why I like this kind of imagery. Luckily, it works surprisingly well within this context.

Everything can't be accomplished with just a hammer or a saw. If a carpenter showed up with just a measuring tape, we would quickly suspect that the carpenter doesn't know much or isn't going to get much accomplished. The same principle applies to the Buddha's teachings. Liberation is a big job! There are different tools that are part of the path of liberation. Sīla and the precepts are part of the whole picture of Buddhist practice. We are learning to see how each one fits in and how each one is and is not applied, examining its benefits, usefulness, drawbacks, and when one has to apply caution.

Ajahn Chah was very strict about keeping the precepts, but he could also see that holding them too tightly—declaring who is right and who is wrong—could set the conditions for dissension within the community. So he taught us to be flexible. He said there are times when we need to be very strict and hold ourselves to the

highest standards. Yet there are other times when upholding these standards and then using those standards to judge others would be completely inappropriate.

There are many benefits to keeping the precepts. One immediate benefit is the feeling of well-being, clarity, and lack of remorse. When we live with integrity, we trust ourselves and are trusted by others. Integrity and trust enable us to let down our defenses. Many of our defenses are built around a false sense of self—our desired self-image or particular anxieties and fears. When we trust ourselves, we can start to let go of all of that. This is especially important when we live and practice together in community. Trust provides a foundation for spiritual growth both personally and within community.

There are three different types of gifts one can give. The first is the gift of material things, of money, or of service. The second is the gift of dhamma, the gift of truth or providing guidance in the truth. The third is the gift of fearlessness and of security, abhayadāna—which is why we chose the name "Abhayagiri" for our monastery. It means "Fearless Mountain." Whether the gift of fearlessness occurs within a physical space or a psychic space, it is a place where a person can feel trust and where one doesn't have to feel on guard.

The precepts lay a foundation for this kind of space. When we have that quality of trust and fearlessness in our meditation practice, we can start to go more deeply into the heart. We can work with feelings of chaos,

confusion, anxiety, and fear within a safe container. When there is that safety, there's an opportunity to let go. And that's what the whole path of Buddhism is about. The precepts provide the foundation and the container to make relinquishment possible. This is how practicing with the precepts fits into the path of liberation and into one's personal day-to-day practice. The sense of community is where the precepts and sangha come together. The Buddha spoke about two interconnected factors that are conducive to the arising of Right View: wise reflection—an internal quality—and good spiritual friends—an external quality (M 43:13).

THE INTEGRITY WITH WHICH WE LIVE

Earlier today, someone asked me many questions about Ajahn Chah. He was in awe of the amount of respect and love that countless people all over Thailand had for him and asked me why I thought so many people had that depth of devotion. My response was, "Well, actually, sīla and sangha."

As much as we would like to have blazing insights all the time, that's not what daily practice is all about or how it unfolds. Ajahn Chah knew that, which is why he was so committed to emphasizing sīla and sangha. We need to have a supportive community and a wholesome place to practice. People committed to walking the path of liberation, practicing and upholding the precepts, training the mind, all within day-to-day life—that is what it is all

about. Sīla and sangha are two different words that refer to the integrity with which we live.

When I went to Thailand, I was a traveler. I had no inclination to ordain as a Buddhist monk; I was interested in meditation. In Thailand, it's part of the culture to take temporary ordination, so that's what I did. I thought, "I can handle this for three or four months." I was living in a meditation center on the outskirts of Bangkok and I saw the limitations of being in a busy place. Then I heard about Ajahn Chah practicing in the forest out in the countryside near the border of Cambodia and Laos, out in the sticks. It sounded romantic.

When I went there, I saw the impact that he had. There was a vibrant community of monks, nuns, laymen, and laywomen of many different levels of society practicing together. He created community. On weekly observance days, there would usually be a couple of hundred laypeople meditating, chanting, and listening to Dhamma talks throughout the night. It was awesome to see the possibilities. But I do remember thinking, "I don't know if I can handle this!" It was also awesome to see the strength of this community supporting each other in practice, and that has continued to grow. There are about three hundred branch monasteries in Thailand and about fifteen monasteries in the West. As can be seen, Ajahn Chah has affected many people.

Ajahn Chah died in 1992. We arranged for his funeral ceremony—his cremation. We had a practice period

in which the sangha and the laypeople practiced meditation for about ten days. There were over five thousand monks, close to a thousand nuns, about a thousand laymen, and about ten thousand laywomen meditating together on a daily basis. There was an extraordinary feeling of focus and dedication to practice. On the seventh day of the practice session, we had the cremation, and there were between 300,000 and 400,000 people, including the king, the queen, and the prime minister. Usually the king lights the fire and leaves, but on that day, he didn't leave. He must have been thinking, "I like this," and he hung out and stayed longer.

Creating community and providing a vehicle for other people to be involved is very important. It is a support to us and an offering to others, but for that to happen—for community to develop and thrive—there has to be a foundation of integrity. So it all comes back to how we live our personal day-to-day lives. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we don't, but that's also an aspect of virtue in the sense that the precepts are not moral injunctions that we are trying to force upon ourselves.

In Pāli, we are not given the precepts; we affirm the intention to undertake them. For example, in the first precept—pānātipātā veramaṇī sikkhāpadaṃ samādiyāmi—sikkhāpada is usually translated as "precept" or "training." But pada is foundation, and sikkhā has the connotations of "training, practice, or learning." The first precept is a basis for practice in "refraining from

taking the life of any living creature." We train with the precept as a standard; we see what benefits it has, what difficulties there are, how it affects us, and so forth. This is not meant as a formula. The precepts are foundations for training ourselves to see the truth, and this practice fits into the path of freedom. We need to explore the function of the precepts and how they work. This is also not a theoretical exploration; this training is a living laboratory for investigation and contemplation of the ways in which the results affect our lives, the lives of others, and the world at large.

MIRRORS FOR REFLECTION

The Buddhist teachings are frameworks for reflection. We undertake to live by a precept and start investigating how it works, what results from it, and what its implications are. With speech in particular—but actually with all the precepts—it comes back to the mind itself. The Pāli Canon contains the conditioning factors for speech. What fabricates speech is called "initial and subsequent application of mind" or "thinking and reflection"—in Pāli, vitakka vicāra, the initial movement of mind and then the thoughts around that. After the mind has moved and it has come out in speech, we can turn attention inwards and look at the intention, at where it has come from.

There are three dynamics or causes that bring about proliferation in the mind. The first cause is sensuality. The second cause is the sense of self, the sense of "I" in

terms of "I'm inferior to somebody," "I'm equal to somebody," or "I'm superior to somebody." The third cause is strong views and opinions. As soon as we notice the movements of the moment, we can ask ourselves, "What am I holding onto and refusing to let go of?"

Ajahn Chah taught that training in the precepts is about understanding intention. Once we understand intention, there is a strong degree of independence and freedom. As long as intentions are not clearly seen, we're still subject to our internal and social conditioning. We need to look back into the mind itself and see what it is reflecting. The precepts are mirrors—they reflect back and help us see what is going on. In the same way, members of the community help us see ourselves more clearly. We see both the encouragement and support they offer as well as the irritations and frustrations.

When we start to build community, we can't just have pleasant, well-mannered, lovely people who are always nice to each other all the time; it just doesn't work like that, even in monasteries—contrary to popular belief! We would prefer to attain liberation on our own: messing with others can sometimes be a drag. But when we practice on our own, we take our own perspective for granted. Maybe I'm just speaking for myself—everybody else might be different—but I don't think so: having community for support and perspective is very, very helpful.

For laypeople, the five precepts provide a framework for creating a foundation of trust, clarity, and well-being.

The Buddha understood that people need standards in order to live in harmony. Sīla has a bigger context than just the precepts.

FOUR KINDS OF VIRTUE

In the commentarial traditions there are references to four different kinds of virtue. One is "virtue according to precepts or moral conduct." Another is "virtue according to restraint of the senses" (Vism 1:16-18). This is a much more internal training, dependent on mindfulness and clear comprehension. One who has this training in mindfulness and clear comprehension won't act out of greed, hatred, and delusion when seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or perceiving anything. Freedom from remorse is the fruit of moral conduct. Happiness is the fruit of sense restraint.

The third form of virtue addresses the use of requisites—how we relate to the things we depend on: clothing, shelter, food, and medicines. It is knowing what is enough, what is appropriate, what is not harmful—especially in this day and age and in this culture, which consumes about 40% of the natural resources of the planet. A great deal of consumption is based on the desire to make things comfortable, interesting, fascinating, or exciting. This means we need to learn how to develop contentment and satisfaction in relationship to the basic necessities of daily living.

The fourth virtue is "the virtue of livelihood."

Generally, for people in the West who are interested in Buddhism, this aspect is not usually a problem. Part of the reason many people are attracted to Buddhism is because they want to live in ways that do not create problems for themselves, their communities, or for the world community. This is part of the bigger picture of virtue—it concerns the ways we interact with others.

Integrity is a word that's very helpful when one thinks of the precepts and training—living with an integrity to the extent that no sense of remorse comes into the heart. When we live with integrity, the quality of non-remorse naturally arises. There's a discourse in which the Buddha says that with virtue as a foundation, one doesn't need to create non-remorse; it arises naturally. In the same way, with non-remorse as a foundation, gladness arises naturally, without an act of will. From gladness arises joy. From joy arises tranquility. From tranquility arises happiness. From happiness arises concentration, samādhi, the firm establishing of the mind (A 10:2). Samādhi is not just trying to establish the intention or, through an act of will, making the mind firmly established or concentrated; rather, it is a natural condition arising when the mind is happy. The Buddha makes this point in many places: "The happy mind is easily concentrated."

This is a key: really pay attention to what the Buddha is telling us. As meditators, we have a tendency to think: "If only I could get my concentration together—then I'd be happy!" Pay attention to the happiness part—actually

allow yourself to be happy. What a radical concept! The Buddha goes on to say that it isn't as if we need to establish the intention or through an act of will try to see things as they truly are; rather, it is a natural condition arising from concentration. In the same way, with knowing and seeing things as they truly are, it's natural that we experience a sense of turning back from the world—a disenchantment or disengagement from the world—because we see clearly that it is not that compelling.

According to the Buddha, our experience of the world consists of body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness—the aggregates of being, the things that constitute a human being, what we call "me" or "self." They are the whole foundation of how our sense of self is created. It's not just an external world out there; it's also an internal world. The practice is to step back from the habits of perception and of the conditioned mind, which flip-flops back and forth between liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting, or approving and disapproving. We need to be able to see the extraordinary range of what the mind tosses out and to be able to step back with the quality of disenchantment, dispassion. The Buddha says that when there is dispassion, we don't need an act of will or the intention to liberate the self; liberation happens naturally.

I offer these reflections for your consideration.

* * *

For one who is virtuous and endowed with virtue, there is no need for an act of will: "May non-remorse arise in me!" It is a natural law, monks, that non-remorse will arise in one who is virtuous.

For one free of remorse, there is no need for an act of will: "May gladness arise in me!" It is a natural law that gladness will arise in one who is free from remorse.

For one who is glad at heart, there is no need for an act of will: "May joy arise in me!" It is a natural law that joy will arise in one who is glad at heart.

For one who is joyful, there is no need for an act of will: "May my body be serene!" It is a natural law that the body will be serene for one who is joyful.

For one of serene body, there is no need for an act of will: "May I feel happiness!" It is a natural law that one who is serene will feel happiness.

For one who is happy, there is no need for an act of will: "May my mind be concentrated!" It is a natural law for one who is happy that the mind will be concentrated.

For one who is concentrated, there is no need for an act of will: "May I know and see things as they really are!" It is a natural law for one with a concentrated mind to know and see things as they really are.

For one who knows and sees things as they really are, there is no need for an act of will: "May I experience disenchantment and dispassion!" It is a natural law for one who knows and sees things as they really are to experience disenchantment and dispassion.

For one who experiences disenchantment and dispassion, there is no need for an act of will: "May I realize the knowledge and vision of liberation!" It is a natural law for one who experiences disenchantment and dispassion to realize the knowledge and vision of liberation.

Thus, monks, disenchantment and dispassion have knowledge and vision of liberation as their benefit and reward...(continued in conformity with the above, back to)...virtuous ways of conduct have non-remorse as their benefit and reward.

Thus, monks, the preceding qualities flow into the succeeding qualities; the succeeding qualities bring the preceding qualities to

perfection, for going from the near shore to the far shore. (A 10:2)

* * *

Just as, bhikkhus, when rain pours down in thick droplets on a mountain top, the water flows down along the slope and fills the cleft, gullies, and creeks; these being full fill up the pools; these being full fill up the lakes; these being full fill up the streams; these being full fill up the rivers; and these being full fill up the great ocean; so too, with ignorance as proximate cause, volitional formations [come to be]; with volitional formations as proximate cause, consciousness; with consciousness as proximate cause, name-and-form; with name-and-form as proximate cause, the six sense bases; with the six sense bases as proximate cause, contact; with contact as proximate cause, feeling; with feeling as proximate cause, craving; with craving as proximate cause, clinging; with clinging as proximate cause, existence; with existence as proximate cause, birth; with birth as proximate cause, suffering; with suffering as proximate cause, faith; with faith as proximate cause, gladness; with gladness as proximate cause, rapture; with rapture as proximate cause, tranquility; with tranquility

as proximate cause, happiness; with happiness as proximate cause, concentration; with concentration as proximate cause, the knowledge and vision of things as they really are; with the knowledge and vision of things as they really are as proximate cause, disenchantment; with disenchantment as proximate cause, dispassion; with dispassion as proximate cause, liberation; with liberation as proximate cause, the knowledge of destruction of the taints. (S 12:23)

Chapter 5

CHANTING: BENEFITS OF AN ANCIENT WAY

Earlier today I was talking to one of the monks about chanting. I said that at some point maybe I'd give a talk on this topic. Well, there's no time like the present. I thought that this evening would be a good time to give a few reflections on chanting before I forget about it.

THE TRADITION OF CHANTING

This tradition dates back to the time of the Buddha. In ancient India, memorization and recitation were the primary methods used to pass on the teachings to future generations. That is how the scriptures were preserved for quite a few hundred years before they were written down in Sri Lanka.

Most Westerners do not chant as a means of disseminating knowledge, and it is difficult for us to trust this method: "It was never written down in a book, so it must have gotten corrupted and been changed along the way many times." But in India, chanting texts was a highly

developed skill. Even today, in the Vedic tradition, the Brahmin caste continues to value it highly. Scholars have compared several generations of ancient texts that came from many places hundreds or even thousands of miles apart. They discovered tremendous consistency among the scriptures. So in fact, it is a very accurate way of passing on the teachings.

In ancient Buddhism, there were periodic councils or gatherings of monastics. The different communities would come together and recite the teachings as they knew or remembered them. They would chant together and there would be various learned monks who would listen for disparities. It is fairly easy to hear when somebody is chanting phrases that are completely different—the voices don't meld together.

Now that we have written texts, chanting has become both a devotional exercise and a way of recollecting the teachings. To this day in Burma, there is still a strong tradition of memorization. There are monks who can recite the entire forty-five volumes of the Tripitaka in the Pāli language, which is an astounding feat of memory. To be recognized as Tripitaka masters, the monks have to recite the entire texts. They also have to know them so thoroughly that they can start and restart them at any point within a particular discourse in the Canon. In our own chanting, it's easy to start from the beginning and chant through to the end, but to start in the middle is not so easy.

INTEGRATING CHANTING INTO PRACTICE

It's important to recognize there is a sense of purpose to integrating chanting into practice. Once we learn the chanting and it becomes familiar, it's quite common that different themes or phrases will pop up in the mind that remind us of either some aspect of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, or of a particular recollection of a teaching. When the theme or phrase pops up in the mind, it's really helpful to clarify it or stick with that theme.

Different themes are part of the morning chanting: the impermanence of the five aggregates, the aspect of not-self, or the qualities of the Buddha. There can be phrases that are very helpful that remind us of the teachings. We can use these for contemplating the dhamma or our meditation object. For example, "sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā"—all conditions are impermanent; there is no self in the created or in the uncreated. These are useful recollections. We can also bring up loving-kindness as a theme. We do not need to recite the entire discourse, but as we become more familiar with it, certain phrases might be helpful for focusing the mind. A phrase that has worked for me is: "Wishing: In gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease."

There's a very lovely sutta (Ud 5:6) about Mahā Kaccāna, a senior disciple of the Buddha, noted as the foremost in his ability to take short sayings and expound on them in detail. He was living with a student in the

back country who wanted to pay respects to the Buddha, so Mahā Kaccāna gave him his blessings and sent him off. When they met, the Buddha asked him to recite the division of the eights, a collection of teachings in the Sutta Nipāta, one of the older strata of the Pāli Canon. After the recitation, the Buddha praised him: "It is well remembered by you, well recited, well considered. You've been able to recite it in a clear voice; it's very articulate, not hoarse. The sound is very good, and it's good in the meaning as well."

Students and disciples of the Buddha were expected to learn the teachings, paying attention to how to recite in a way that was smooth, to be fluid in repetition and enunciation. These are actually mindfulness exercises. Because it's a different language, we are able to develop mindfulness around the wording and the pronunciation. In the time of the Buddha, the language was a spoken one. Today, many of the teachings and chants have been translated into English. We can use this as a point of mindfulness, developing awareness around the pronunciation.

We also need to learn how to chant with others. This involves learning how to pay attention with the faculty of hearing. We need to hear the rhythm and pitch and then harmonize with it. This is actually quite energizing—another benefit of chanting. Listening requires energy and effort; the result is something quite pleasant. Also, as we develop the skill of harmonizing in this context, it can be

extended to learning to harmonize our interactions with others in our actions and speech.

I remember growing up and my mother hearing me sing along with a song playing on the radio. She painfully exclaimed, "You're not listening!" I didn't understand what she meant by that until years later when I came to a monastery and started to learn how to chant. Then I realized what my mother meant: "Oh, that's how you do it; you actually have to listen, and then you can harmonize."

I find chanting here in the West enjoyable. Generally, people put effort into the chanting. It is actually helpful to have a meditation hall that has good acoustics. Chanting at Wat Pah Nanachat could, at times, be painful and torturous. We chanted in a very big hall with big windows and big doors, and the sound just disappeared. Chanting was something to put up with. There was another hall where the chanting sounded much better, but we didn't use it very often. When chanting goes well, the experience is very satisfying.

As we develop and become familiar with the different chants, our energy goes into the attention that we use. We try to harmonize and enunciate clearly and make the meaning of it clear to ourselves as we chant. The application of energy is not just physical—trying to be enthusiastically voluble. It is an inner attention.

Chanting prior to sitting meditation is a very good preparation for the mind. Attention and energy establishes devotion and other wholesome qualities. Devotion

is a way of underscoring and embodying the commonality of faith and purpose for a group of people—it unifies our hearts as well as our voices. When we begin the sitting with that tone, the mind tends to settle down more quickly. Sometimes the mind can be restless and doesn't want to settle. Chanting in a group or silently on one's own can be a good way to refocus the mind. When there's dullness and drowsiness, we apply energy to chanting, which helps brighten the mind. Chanting can be a way of cultivating skillful means.

Chanting is also a valid way of establishing concentration. It's not uncommon for monastics and laypeople to allow the mind to absorb into chanting and generate samādhi that way.

I knew a woman who was a very skilled and diligent meditator. I remember her saying, "Now that I'm getting older, it really takes me quite a bit longer to finish chanting." She would chant the Dhammacakka Sutta on her own, on a daily basis. "I keep forgetting my place and I have to start over again. But I keep going at it. It's one of the disadvantages of getting older—you forget things so easily. But it's really helping me to get concentrated and settled." That's taking something that is normally a disadvantage and turning it into an advantage.

Many principles of the dhamma are embedded in the chanting, such as the contemplations, "I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond aging; I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness" (A

5:57). Those contemplations are recollections of impermanence, death, and the responsibility we have of being very clear because we're the owners of our kamma, of our actions. These are all very necessary and beneficial contemplations. They're a helpful support for the development of wisdom and discernment.

The Buddha points to the five spiritual faculties of faith, effort, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, which, when balanced and cultivated, will ripen in liberation. This goal to which we aspire has causes. These causes need to manifest. Traditionally, chanting is one of our tools. It's not just something that we put up with until we can move on to the real practice—a vestigial limb, like the appendix or tonsils, that doesn't have a function. Some people believe, "Chanting is an ancient part of the tradition, but let's get on with the real thing." I think that all of the practices have their place—different people will find benefit in different things. It's helpful to be able to reflect on how to use these different skillful means that have been passed on, so that we're able to utilize them.

TAPPING INTO THE TRADITION

Chanting and recitation also help us to tap into something that's been going on for a long time. This has been cherished, protected, and given to us as a gift. We can derive great benefit from it. Some of the chants that we do, whether in Pāli or translated into English, go back to the oldest texts of the Buddha's teachings. One can safely

assume that the Five Recollections (A 5:57) were taught by the Buddha.

Bhante Gunaratana is very fluent in the Pāli language. I've heard him say that the Discourse on Loving-Kindness (SN 1:8) is one of the most beautiful uses of the language; every single word and phrase is moving. The Highest Blessings (SN 2:4) is another chant based on one of the Buddha's early discourses. It gives a sense of how the Buddha could elucidate the dhamma extemporaneously. He was asked the question: "What's a real blessing in the world?" The Buddha spontaneously articulated the thirty-eight highest blessings, in a progressive sequence—ranging from not associating with fools, up to the blessing of complete liberation. It is a beautiful overview of the whole path.

Before His Holiness the Dalai Lama gives teachings, he always invites representatives of the different lineages—Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana—to give a blessing chant. He explains that the Pāli tradition is the eldest and asks the Theravadans to chant first. He consistently requests the discourse on The Highest Blessings. I asked His Holiness if we could chant it in English so that people could understand. He said, "No, chant it in Pāli; chant it in the original." This is why we should know the Pāli. Even if we do not know all of the phrases, it is still a reference to the original.

As you become more and more familiar with Pāli, many of the words and phrases start to stand out, and

you begin to know their meaning. Sometimes the English translations can be quite lame—you just don't get the flavor of what the Buddha was expressing. Chanting is a very helpful support for the practice, both in the study of the teachings and in the implementation. In the end, knowledge, meditation, devotion, and practice work together. They support faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

That is my plug for chanting. Please take what is useful. If none of it was—you can leave it.

Chapter 6

TECH SUPPORT FOR REAL LIFE

The monastic community has just finished chanting for the recently deceased mother of one of the lay practitioners. This ancient tradition is an aspect of our meditation practice that helps us contemplate the Buddha's teachings on death and separation. We need to practice allowing these teachings into the heart because the nature of the mind is to lean towards acquiring that which is pleasing, comfortable, safe, and secure. This inclination is necessary at times, but if it's not balanced or understood with the appropriate perspective, we are likely to be blown off course or feel shaken when we experience the inevitability of death and separation.

It's never pleasing or delightful for the heart to look at these realities. Yet, we need to have an understanding, an awareness that allows the inevitability of separation and death to be a part of our lives. Whether we like it or not, these already are. Learning how to embrace or surrender to reality is a large part of the practice of meditation:

how do we stretch our willingness to be mindful of things as they are, rather than the way we want them to be?

Most people consider the time of death or the day of a funeral to be an unwanted or inauspicious occasion. For this reason, the traditional blessing chants are not offered at these events. The chants that are considered to be more appropriate at the time of death are from the Abhidhamma[1] and point to the different aspects of experience that we have to face and penetrate with understanding. The first chant begins: "Kusala dhamma, akusala dhamma, abyākatā dhamma," dhammas that are wholesome, dhammas that are unwholesome, dhammas that are imperturbable. The entire range of dhammas, "things" or "phenomena," is covered in these three phrases. The whole chant focuses on the truth of our existence. This is a very interesting perspective. The tradition doesn't pull any punches; it is willing to lay out the facts of life.

WORKING WITHIN THE CONDITIONED REALM

We are always looking for reassurance, safety, and security in the conditioned realm. Whether we look for them in the material conditions of the world, the material conditions of the physical body, or the immaterial conditions of thoughts, feelings, emotions, ideas, and ideals, they are all within the realm of conditions. If we

1 The Abhidhamma is part of the Buddhist Pāli Canon, and is a systematic classification and analysis of principles that are associated with processes of body and mind.

don't understand the nature of conditions, then we become disappointed, frustrated, or confused when they don't behave as they should! And of course, we think they should behave the way we want them to behave, but that's not their nature. Conditions behave according to their own nature.

We cultivate meditation, precepts, and daily reflections in order to gain stability and clarity so that we can start to be present for conditions as they are. Meditation and mindful, composed actions and speech are also conditions, but they are very wholesome ones that lead us in the right direction. Commitment to cultivating these practices helps us develop the ability to sustain attention with a pleasant and peaceful object of meditation so the heart becomes settled and clear.

Working within the realm of conditions is absolutely necessary and cannot be avoided. To a large extent, we have to rely on conditions, in the same way that we have to rely on the physical requisites of clothing, shelter, food, and medicines, which are also part of the conditioned realm. We can't pooh-pooh them away and say, "They're all empty and don't matter." We do have to recognize their conditioned nature. If we get lost in unrealistic expectations that conditions are safe, satisfying, and within our control, disappointment and suffering are destined to follow.

The process of becoming attached to expectations begins at a very early age. Our parents or caretakers feed

us when we're babies, and we expect that to happen all the time. When our stomachs grumble and growl and we start crying and get upset, our mothers or others pick us up. When they hold us in their arms, we feel secure and comfortable. Then they put us down, and the world falls apart: "Wah, it's such an awful universe." That is the let-down from having expectations.

A few of us were able to see aspects of this process in action when we were staying at the home of one of the lay supporters. They have a newborn daughter. To keep an eye on her, there's a monitor in the nursery. We were in the kitchen, watching the baby sleep and her mom said, "Oh, look, she just moved her leg!" That level of attentiveness is quite all-encompassing—as is the sense of security it brings. This baby is quite willful; when she doesn't get her way, she definitely lets people know. Yet someone can't always be ready and available to satisfy her every desire: that's the real truth.

That last chant that we did is a very important one and comes up through the suttas and the Dhammapada: "Aniccā vata saṅkhārā, uppāda vayadhammino, uppajjitvā nirujjhanti, tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho." The translation: "All conditions are impermanent. Having the nature to arise, they pass away, they cease. Their calming, cessation—happiness." Actually, conditions are ceasing all the time, but the pacifying of them is where happiness lies. Pacifying (vūpasamo) isn't just making them end; pacifying them through understanding and awareness brings

them to a place of non-complication.

The word that's used for "ceasing" or "ending," nirodha, is an interesting word. It is usually translated as ceasing or ending, but it can also be used in a way that means non-arising or non-complication. When conditions no longer arise to create complications, that's when the mind comes to a place of peace or happiness. That's where bliss arises.

This is where we need to be attentive to how things close and cease so we begin to be at peace with that. A lot of the practice involves becoming increasingly attentive to impermanence. Observe how we usually work from a place of expectation that conditions will be one way or the other. Whether they will cease, will be stable, or will arise again—recognize all desires and expectations that we project onto them. Take something very simple, like the breath—just watch and be attentive to impermanence. Notice it arise and cease. That is a simple phenomenon of saṅkhāra, in the same way that the body, feelings, the mind, and all beings are just saṅkhāras.

It's a matter of making ourselves very familiar with that simple process. We can access it and be in constant contact through the breath or whatever object of meditation we choose. Whatever we start paying attention to, we start recognizing change. And whether it's the actual change of the phenomenon itself, or whether it's the change of the knower, we can start recognizing impermanence, change, uncertainty—the unsure nature

of conditions. We live in the conditioned realm, dependent on conditions, but in terms of the Buddha's path, we need to be able to understand conditions in order to truly be at peace.

A while ago, I listened to a Dhamma talk given by Ajahn Sucitto. He spoke about the nature of conditions and how, within the conditioned realm, there is always something unraveling, something that is not quite right. Then he gave a great example about a dripping water tap in his kuṭi. He put up with it for quite some time and dealt with it by turning the water off, but the water couldn't always be turned off. So he mustered up the energy to fix it by asking one of the monks to come and look at it. He showed up with some tools, evaluated the situation, and reported, "It's very simple to fix; I just need to take out this little thing and replace the gasket." So the monk tried to undo the tap, but the screw was unyielding. So off he went back to the shop for another screwdriver and then back to Ajahn Sucitto's kuṭi, only to discover that he still didn't have the right tools. Both monks tried wrestling and fighting with the tap, and it still wouldn't budge. They finally decided that the only thing to do was to put some penetrating oil into it and leave it for a while: "And thus endeth the first day of the Dripping Tap Saga."

On the second day, the monk returned with more tools, and the two monastics continued the wrestling match with the dripping tap. The day ended with the decision that the only way to actually fix the tap was to

remove the sink. On day three, they managed to take the sink off, pull it apart, and put in this little gasket. On day four, they remounted and re-caulked the sink. Finally, everything was in place, including a certain level of expectation that their efforts would pay off. When they turned the tap back on: "drip...drip...drip." The tap was still dripping.

This is what conditions are like. We expect things to work, but the reality is, sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. There will come a time when members of our immediate family, relatives, friends, and teachers will no longer be able to function, and they will pass away. The same is true of us. That knowledge and perspective is essential. This doesn't diminish the feelings of love and respect we have for others, particularly for our parents. From the Buddha's perspective, it's very difficult to repay the debt of gratitude we owe our parents. The Buddha always encouraged disciples to be attentive to those we are responsible for or are affiliated with—for example, our parents, family, relatives, friends, teachers, or fellow practitioners.

DEALING SKILLFULLY

The teachings on impermanence and the conditioned world are not a way to shut things out—not at all. They actually give us a much greater capacity to approach and deal skillfully with our lives. We look and see, "This is the way things are." We don't need to complicate our

lives by chasing after habits based on attachment.

A layman and his wife were the first merchants from the city who started coming regularly to Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's monastery, in the late 1950s. He and his wife were very supportive and encouraged their friends to do the same. As a result, a broader community was created. At one point, the layman took a temporary ordination, and so his commitment and connection to the monastery grew even deeper and stronger.

After a full life, he got older, became seriously ill, and was dying. Ajahn Chah would visit him from time to time. One day, the family came to the monastery and asked Ajahn Chah to come and do some blessing chants before he died, but for some reason he didn't go. The family came back the next day and reported to Ajahn Chah that his condition was rapidly going downhill. They implored, "Please come to see him." Ajahn Chah thought a bit and replied, "Tomorrow I'm going in to the army camp for the meal invitation—I'll come after that." The family was quite upset with Ajahn Chah and said, "Oh, I don't think he's going to last."

The next day Ajahn Chah went to the army camp, had the meal with a group of monks, and chanted the blessing. Afterwards, the commander of the camp asked if there was anything he could offer. Ajahn Chah requested a truck. The monks were then driven to the house of the dying lay supporter, who was still alive, although not very conscious. As soon as Ajahn Chah arrived, the man

brightened up. Ajahn Chah spent some time giving him advice and instructions. And then the man died. Ajahn Chah said, "Put him on the truck. We'll take him to Wat Pah Pong for the funeral ceremonies." The family had been hoping that Ajahn Chah would chant and give blessings that would prolong his life and make him happy and well. But Ajahn Chah had a very different idea of what was going to unfold. When we see the world according to Dhamma, we have a much broader perspective.

Impermanence, the uncertainty of the conditioned realm, and death are very important reflections. They are not meant to be morbid or to create a sense of fear. They're meant to help us understand what we inevitably face in the human realm. How do we work with these facts of life? How do we come to a place of peace with it all? That's what the teachings are really for. Applying the teachings to ordinary circumstances is a very skillful approach to practice.

A lay friend visited today, and he noticed the hand-held computer on my desk. He had offered one just like it to Ajahn Sumedho and wondered how Ajahn Sumedho was doing with it. I told him that for me, the hand-held computer requires tech support from other people in the monastery. I can do simple or basic things, but I don't have great knowledge or understanding of how it works. If something goes wrong, I need help.

In terms of living in the world, most of us can do simple or basic things, but we need help to deal with the real

problems. The Buddha's teachings provide that tech support. The question becomes how do we get through life without creating too many problems or tripping over the difficulties? We need to take the teachings and put them into practice. We need to be willing to look at the things that may be unsettling. Impermanence is unsettling; suffering is unsettling. Death and separation are unsettling. When we use the tech support that the Buddha has given us, we have the opportunity to deal with the gritty problems of existence. Death and separation are never going to change; problems and pain are unavoidable. How are we going to deal with them?

Every morning in our chanting we reflect on the fundamental teachings. Birth is suffering; aging is suffering; sickness is suffering; death is suffering; separation from the loved is suffering; association with the disliked is suffering; not getting what we want is suffering; the emotional realm, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering.

These are timeless teachings. What was true in the Buddha's time is still true now and will be true in the future, but our delusion that things are otherwise is so strong—the repetition of these reflections is absolutely essential. Eventually we may actually get it.

We have the rare opportunity to put these teachings into practice and come to a place of settling, of peace: vūpasamo sukho. The recollection of peace is one that the Buddha encourages. What is it that is actually peaceful?

Where is true peace found? How do we enter and abide in that which is truly peaceful? The Buddha is pointing to the peace of freedom, of not grasping to anything or to anyone anymore. That's the purpose of our training and the tech support we need to accomplish it.

I offer this for reflection.

Chapter 7

APAṆṆAKA DHAMMAS

In the van this morning on our way to almsround, we talked about the apaṇṇaka dhammas. It was a fruitful discussion, so this is the theme I will address tonight.

Apaṇṇaka dhammas are ways of practicing that the Buddha described as incontrovertible. By practicing them, we can be sure of being on the right path and that they will lead to awakening. These teachings are: indriya saṃvara, restraint of the senses; bhojane mattaññutā, moderation in eating; and jāgariyānuyoga, devotion to wakefulness.

Once we start working with the apaṇṇaka dhammas, we begin to see how they highlight the challenging aspects of the mind: aspects associated with greed, hatred, and delusion. This is exactly why the apaṇṇaka dhammas are such excellent practices to bring up for reflection and investigation when we are on retreat and there are fewer distractions.

The apaṇṇaka dhammas, however, are not extreme or ascetic practices. It is all about balance, the middle way. These practices are based on skillful restraint and application of energy. We need to learn when to pull back and when to push forward. Ultimately, the apaṇṇaka dhammas help free us from compulsive behaviors that lie at the root of suffering.

INDRIYA SAṂVARA: RESTRAINT OF THE SENSES

Restraint of the senses is recognizing that all phenomena are just sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and mental events, and that these arise and pass away. They arise and they cease. When seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking, we maintain equanimity. This is the training.

These are the instructions by the Buddha on how to develop restraint of the senses:

> [A] monk, on seeing a form with the eye, does not grasp at any theme or variations by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the eye—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He practices with restraint. He guards the faculty of the eye. He achieves restraint with regard to the faculty of the eye.
>
> On hearing a sound with the ear...
>
> On smelling an aroma with the nose...

> On tasting a flavor with the tongue...
>
> On feeling a tactile sensation with the body...
>
> On cognizing an idea with the intellect, he does not grasp at any theme or variations by which—if he were to dwell without restraint over the faculty of the intellect—evil, unskillful qualities such as greed or distress might assail him. He practices with restraint. He guards the faculty of the intellect. He achieves restraint with regard to the faculty of the intellect. This is how a monk guards the doors to his sense faculties. (A 4:37)

It's not so easy to sustain awareness and clarity of attention, to be restrained in the senses, but these are ideal things to be doing. Having this kind of reflection, of consistency of attention, means that the mind doesn't get drawn into things to which we are attracted, or find irritating or offensive, distracting or exciting. What is it that draws us into that sense of engagement, becoming, and being? What is it that draws us out of the clear space of awareness?

It seems quite fundamental, a seemingly simple practice—just to have restraint of the senses—but the practice is much more than that. It starts to open up into more refined levels of the nature of mind. We begin to notice how the mind gets drawn in. By making these movements of mind conscious, we can see how the mind

gets drawn into that which is unskillful, unwholesome, and associated with aspects of greed, hatred, delusion, liking, disliking, desire, and attachment. We see, "Wow, my mind just keeps moving there and getting drawn in."

The practice of sense restraint highlights the mind that goes out: the mind that seeks rebirth, seeks becoming. We "become" the things that are interesting and exciting, but we also "become" the things that we dislike, are averse to, or are irritated by—that's a becoming as well. So this practice is a helpful mirror to see clearly what the mind tends to do and what it wants to become. Steadiness of attention in general helps strengthen the mind. Restraint of the senses helps us from becoming entangled in getting or becoming.

It takes a resilient mind to resist the onslaught of one sense desire after another, to fight the forces of delusion. Skillful restraint frees us from mindlessly slipping into the grasping, deluded mind; we are able to see that sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch, and mental formations are just that. All it is, is sense contact. The senses are not good, bad, or ours to own or control. Restraint of the senses helps us get a feel for the contented mind.

As challenging as this practice is, restraint of the senses also yields powerful results. Steadiness of attention helps strengthen the mind; it cuts through the habit of getting caught by experiences that are irritating, offensive, distracting, or exciting. A steady mind is the gateway to seeing more refined levels of the mind, which is

naturally content and free of sense desire. I encourage you to get familiar with and to learn the mechanics of what draws you out of that clear space of contentment and entangles you in becoming and getting. This practice is guaranteed to yield significant results.

BHOJANE MATTAÑÑUTĀ: MODERATION IN EATING

Moderation in eating is a mirror of the mind with its attraction to tastes and flavors—the stream of desire that goes out, seeking that which is pleasurable and gratifying. The practice begins by cultivating an awareness of what the body actually needs, not what it wants based on excitement or boredom. What is within the bounds of keeping the body healthy, strong, and energetic? When we overeat it saps energy and makes us a bit duller—it's important to keep a balance where we are neither eating so little that there's not enough energy nor eating so much that the mind is heavy and slow.

The Buddha experimented with extreme fasting and found that the extremes—austerity and indulgence—did not work. To end craving and dwell in contentment, we practice "the middle way." As monastics, we can eat every day, but we keep it to a simple breakfast and the basic midday meal. Or, for those following the dhutanga practices, we just eat once a day.

These are the Buddha's instructions on moderation in eating, which the monastics at Abhayagiri recite in English each day:

> Wisely reflecting, I use alms food: not for fun, not for pleasure, not for fattening, not for beautification, only for the maintenance and nourishment of this body, for keeping it healthy, for helping with the Holy Life; thinking thus, "I will allay hunger without overeating, so that I may continue to live blamelessly and at ease." (A 4:37)

Pay attention to the relationship between the food you eat and the amount that keeps the mind bright and the body feeling light. If you've tired yourself out lugging a stomach full of food up the hill and your first thought at the door of your kuṭi is, "I think I will have a rest," then ask, "Well, where's that desire coming from?" The tiredness that can arise after eating the midday meal usually comes from overeating—in this case, just eat less.

Ajahn Chah was quite proud of the fact that Wat Pah Pong was renowned for being one of the monasteries with the worst food. As a monk, that certainly made it hard to get caught up in the enthusiasm to overeat; in that sense, the worst food was the best training. On Wan Phra, Ajahn Chah would deliberately make sure all of the small alms-food offerings were mixed together into one big pot—fish, chicken, pork, curries, rice, noodles, desserts, and beverages—so that all the flavors were mixed together and nothing was distinguishable. Try that sometime and see what it does to your craving for food beyond what you need for energy and well-being. It's an interesting practice.

We're quite fortunate at Abhayagiri; we're exceedingly well looked after. Yet, there's also a downside to having an abundance of tasty and beautifully prepared alms-food. It requires much more attention, restraint, and responsibility. There are all sorts of opportunities for the mind to stream out in search of pleasure and gratification. So be mindful and ask yourself, "Am I eating moderately? What amount is helpful for my practice? Am I just feeding desires and preferences, that insatiable hole that can't be filled anyway?"

Be attentive to all of this because there is more energy in practice when there are no worries or thoughts about food. There is a quality of being, a sense of nourishment, which is far more satisfying than physical food. It arises from within, when we don't engage in compulsive actions like mindless eating. We have the opportunity to experience a different kind of nourishment when we apply ourselves to practicing like this.

JĀGARIYĀNUYOGA: DEVOTION TO WAKEFULNESS

The classic definition of devotion to wakefulness is practicing in the nighttime, which is divided into three watches.

> And how is a monk devoted to wakefulness?
>
> During the first watch of the night, sitting and pacing back and forth, he cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the

> mind in check. During the second watch of the night, reclining on his right side, he takes up the lion's posture, one foot placed on top of the other, mindful, alert, with his mind set on getting up [either as soon as he awakens or at a particular time]. During the last watch of the night, sitting and pacing back and forth, he cleanses his mind of any qualities that would hold the mind in check. This is how a monk is devoted to wakefulness. (A 4:37)

We incorporate this way of practice here at Abhayagiri. Ajahn Chah trained us in the same way. He would say: Do not go to bed before 11 at night; just keep alternating between walking and sitting meditation. Rest and sleep on the right side in the lion's posture between 11 p.m. and 3 a.m., but do so with the firm determination to get up and continue walking and sitting meditation.

Ajahn Chah's instructions to practice continuously weren't based on a theory from the suttas or on a sentimental fable about the Buddha's teachings. Devoting effort and energy to wakefulness is what makes it possible for the mind to become clear and bright. Without unshakeable devotion, awakening can't and won't evolve.

The energy that we bring to practice and the amount of sleep we think we need are usually generated by different forms of desire and attachment. Vibhava taṇhā is generally connected with negation—sleep is an easy way to annihilate ourselves and not have to deal with being

alive or being ourselves. This is a common way to do that, and we can recognize that that is also suffering.

When the mind brightens, we realize it doesn't need to have all of the props of sleep and rest that it demands. We see that when we bring wakefulness to the present moment, the mind brightens. There's a sense of well-being, and it's that kind of well-being that lays a foundation for meditation. There's a joyful quality—the opposite of vibhava taṇhā, that sense of dullness and aversion: "I don't want it to be this way. I can't deal with this; I don't want it." Living life this way is exhausting.

Bringing the quality of wakefulness into the present isn't something that we do at 11 at night. It's something that we bring into both the day and night time. When we wake up in the morning, there's a quality of alertness we bring into the moment, into the practice of sense restraint, into the things that we engage with. The cumulative effect of that devotion to wakefulness is that there tends to be less need for sleep. It's not that we crunch down and try to keep from sleeping; rather, there's not the same need for sleep. There's more time available for meditation, reflection, and investigation. The mind has a buoyancy and lightness to it. The mind is easily settled, easily concentrated, and stays with its meditation object. The meditation takes on much more steadiness; the mind becomes brighter when there's that consistency of wakefulness.

We do not accomplish sense restraint by trying to

keep our eyes down and ears plugged up. Moderation in eating isn't accomplished by forcing ourselves not to eat. Devotion to wakefulness is not a manifesto against sleep. The apaṇṇaka dhammas involve the appreciation of the quality of being that arises when we are free from complications, that compulsion to get what we want through pursuing mindless eating or seeking annihilation in sleep. It comes from applying ourselves to the practice in a very positive way.

The buoyancy of the mind comes also from a consistency of wholesome mental states—kusala dhammas—arising in the heart. Ordinary activities take on a quality of luminosity, as do objects of meditation. We are not trying to force the mind into a cramped and constricted box we consider "meditation." We're just allowing the mind to open into that opportunity for luminosity and expansiveness that we realize is there all the time.

We have this extraordinary opportunity to practice the Buddha's teachings in our life. It is a great gift. All of the circumstances and conditions during the time of the Winter Retreat are facilitating and supporting our practice. There is nothing holding us back from cultivating the qualities of faith and devotion. We have examples of the Sangha, both in the Buddha's time and in the 2,500 years of the teachings that were passed on. We have examples of the Dhamma being realized by many beings. Recollect that we are able to participate in and be part of this: the opportunity is there for us to realize the teachings.

Where do our nagging doubts come from? What is our lack of confidence based on? How valid are any of these? Such doubts may seem very valid, but we can still set them aside and put our attention onto the qualities of confidence and faith. It's a simple turning of the mind, and we realize that much of the teachings become clear when we're willing to do that. On a certain level, we'll never figure things out completely. We're not going to be able to logically think through every aspect of the teachings. Rather, as we apply them and put ourselves into the midst of the practice, they become clear.

I will end as I began. The apaṇṇaka dhammas are ways of practice the Buddha described as incontrovertible. They include: indriya saṃvara, restraint of the senses; bhojane mattaññutā, moderation in eating; and jāgariyānuyoga, devotion to wakefulness. By practicing them, we can be sure of being on the right path and that they will lead to awakening.

They are very simple and basic practices, but they have many implications. Apaṇṇaka dhammas don't just illuminate habits that keep the mind ensnared by desire; they also give us the opportunity to retrain the mind and liberate the heart. So take these fundamental practices and make excellent use of them.

I offer that for reflection this evening.

Chapter 8

TWO ASPECTS OF WISDOM

During the last couple of weeks, I've had the opportunity to spend time alone in my kuṭi and not deal with anything in the monastery. While on retreat, I fasted. This is one of the best ways for me to be in solitude, but it's certainly not one of the best ways for me to feel comfortable. The degree of discomfort I experienced on this retreat was quite strong, but the many benefits that emerged from it were even stronger.

At times like this it's helpful to have strong motivation, to actively reflect on Dhamma, and to recognize very clearly where our true refuge is. There really isn't a suitable refuge anywhere other than in a clear perception of truth, in the way things are.

We spend time either hoping for something to ameliorate dukkha (discontent and dissatisfaction) or to at least assuage it, but fundamentally the Buddha pointed very strongly to the experience of dukkha as the underlying baseline of experience. The untrained mind doesn't like

to accept or face that truth. Instead, it likes to keep itself busy looking for all sorts of alternatives, in the hopes of finding a way out of dukkha. The Buddha taught that the end of dukkha comes from turning toward it, from tuning in to the direct experience of its discomfort and dissatisfaction. This effort and exploration helps stretch the heart so that there is room to experience something that is much deeper. Embracing something much deeper than dukkha is a necessary part of the training and is what separates those who practice the teachings of the Buddha from the general stream of the world.

The Buddha does not say that everything is miserable, pathetic, and hopeless. Rather, he is pointing to the truth: there is an underlying inability for any kind of experience to satisfy, gratify, or make us feel complete. Dukkha is in the nature of things; it is an aspect of the truth to be used for reflection.

TRUTH AND PRACTICE

The Buddha taught two ways that the Dhamma is expressed: one is the way of truth; the other, the way of practice. Practice and truth rely on each other and are never separated.

In the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha begins by addressing dukkha—suffering—as the core problem of the human condition. All conditioned phenomena—the body or the mind, external or internal, refined or coarse—are unsatisfactory, impermanent, and empty of an abiding

self. Their nature renders them incapable of offering an enduring sense of wholeness. The way of truth sees this clearly.

The way of practice involves the cultivation of the Noble Eightfold Path: the cultivation of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. This path provides a roadmap to freedom from dukkha. The cultivation of the path is always grounded upon qualities that lead to brightness, clarity, stillness, and happiness. There's a certain interface here that is intrinsic to the nature of the teachings and the nature of truth: there is dukkha and there is the capacity to apply wisdom to overcome dukkha. So we take those two aspects, truth and practice, to investigate and see what works for the overcoming of discontent and dis-ease.

The Buddha refers to these two different elements of the truth. The first element, the way things are, isn't the way we live our lives: we don't take the Buddha's First Noble Truth and say to ourselves, "Everything is suffering, so it's all hopeless and totally pathetic, and that's the end of it." Embedded in the teachings is the way of practice, the second element of truth, which relies on cultivating that which is completely harmless and wholesome. That cultivation, in turn, leads to the quality of stillness and brightness within the heart, the quality of concentration—then aspects of wisdom can arise. We are able to see what is appropriate or necessary, what needs to be let go of, and what needs to be cultivated. That's the

function of wisdom and the appropriate response to the fact that all phenomena are fundamentally unsatisfactory. Both elements of the truth are necessary to create an abiding place of peace and freedom.

This teaching comes up in many ways. There is a verse from the Dhammapada that Ajahn Chah quoted frequently, as do many teachers in the forest tradition: "The self is the refuge of self; what other refuge could there be? (Attā hi attano nātho ko hi nātho paro siyā)" (Dhp 160). If we just look at this statement of truth, the teaching is incomplete. Taken literally, it's easy to misinterpret: "Well, I am totally independent; nobody is going to look after me. I'm going to have to look after myself and get what I need or want because that's what the Buddha taught." Actually, what the Buddha taught is more a statement of truth regarding the condition of things. We can't rely on anybody else. When somebody else eats, we don't get full. When somebody else experiences one of the sense doors, we don't hear, taste, or smell it. In that sense, we are independent and separate. In that way, "One needs to take oneself as a refuge, there is no other self."

However, the teaching is not yet complete; the couplet goes on to describe the way of practice: "Being well trained, well practiced, well cultivated, is what leads to a true refuge or a rare refuge (Attanā' va sudantena nāthaṃ labhati dullabhaṃ)" (Dhp 160). It is the synergy between the two aspects of wisdom that completes the picture.

In order to find our true refuge, we need to train and be well trained. That's where the cultivation of that which is skillful and grounded in the wholesome is needed. The Buddha taught many times over that it is through association with the wise and those who are steeped in goodness that we grow in Dhamma. It is in this regard that we are actually independent, and where it's appropriate to say, "the self that is not reliant on others." We can examine the teachings and look at experience with the eyes of the Buddha and ask, "What is true? What is the best way to practice with it? What is the most skillful way to live with it?"

So much of Ajahn Chah's teaching was about seeing things as uncertain, not a sure thing. He was always reminding his students to see conditions as uncertain, but he also warned against using impermanence as an excuse: "Why should I have to do anything or bother with anyone? Everything is uncertain and it is all going to change anyway." On its own, the way of truth has the potential to increase ignorance, rather than illuminate wisdom.

Ajahn Chah also encouraged us to be very careful in how much care we gave to looking after things. He liked using the image of a glass already being a broken glass, but just because a glass is destined to break or is already broken doesn't mean that we use it negligently or recklessly. It's the same way with the teachings: things are impermanent, unsatisfactory, and not self, but the

appropriate response according to the Dhamma is the response of caring, diligence, and a foundation in very wholesome qualities. And that takes real wisdom.

That's the function of wisdom: directing attention. We know when it is appropriate to direct attention to the way things are and when it's best to find the appropriate response, based on practice. If we do not hold these elements correctly, we get stuck. Sometimes we are ready to let go and pack it in because "it's all suffering anyway"—it takes a certain wisdom to see that, but again, if it's not informed by the path of training, the heart that is free doesn't display itself. Similarly, if we're always trying to gain benefit and it's not informed by the truth of things—the truth of impermanence, dukkha, or non-self—then we spend all of our time trying to perfect qualities, trying to do, keeping ourselves busy with practice. And it's not liberating the heart.

We need to see the truth of things in all situations, and the wholesome response appropriate to Dhamma, in a way that creates benefit and is grounded in freedom. There needs to be a real questioning within the heart. If truth and practice are not informing and supporting each other, then the whole path of freedom doesn't manifest. That balance is very difficult to actualize. The teachings give us tools to investigate more clearly—to strike a balance, with wisdom. We need to learn to utilize wisdom to cut through and relinquish defilements, biases, and prejudices rather than to support them.

THE ROLE OF FAITH

Every spiritual tradition, of course, has its drawbacks. One of the drawbacks of some other religions, especially for those of us who come from a Christian background, is an overemphasis on faith. At the same time, one of the difficulties with Buddhism is its emphasis on wisdom. Defilements and prejudices can be intelligently figured out with the logic of the dhamma, but that does not mean we are free or that we have the kind of insight that leads to relinquishment. To be complete, wisdom needs to be nurtured with faith. We take faith in the Refuges: the qualities of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, in the enlightenment of the Buddha. Within and around the qualities of the Refuges are positive qualities of wholesomeness, goodness, and states of well-being. When faith informs wisdom, we can start to let go.

It is easy to use the wisdom faculty to discern, "This is the way things are," and still be stuck. We can still be caught in the negative assessment of situations, oneself, and others, and it can all seem true and supported by Dhamma—"everything is dukkha"—but this logic is not freeing us. In fact, it is getting us more stuck.

That misuse of wisdom is in direct opposition to the Refuges and to awakening. Wisdom that is informed and grounded by faith cuts that tendency for it to be self-centered and unable to recognize its own lack of skillfulness. The basis of faith is in the awakening of the Buddha—Tathāgatabodhi saddhā. It is possible for a human being

to truly awaken from the stream of saṃsāra, free from greed, hatred, and delusion and from every kind of suffering. When the mind and the heart really rely on the Refuges with wisdom as the basis, then they constantly turn to letting go, to relinquishing, to awakening.

It is a balance of wisdom and faith. We need to recognize these different elements of the teachings because the way the mind works, we logically support our biases. As long as we keep doing that, we keep the mind oppressed by suffering. The path of liberation has to be there for it to be complete. There needs to be recognition of the two ways Dhamma is expressed and experienced, both in terms of truth and a path of practice. The function of wisdom is to see the truth and to see that which is leading to the creation of skillfulness, of benefit—understanding the value of things. We also have to support the faith that allows us to implement that skillfulness.

The value of our human lives is not in physicality. The true value of a human life is the ability to create goodness, to develop understanding, to penetrate the truth—learning how to tune in to that and keeping that as our focus.

That focus is so easily lost, so this is what our practice is about. We need to be reflecting and mirroring back to ourselves always: "What is it that allows us to be established in a true refuge? What is it that brings us to a place of rare refuge?" Of course, it is the training, maintaining ourselves.

I offer that for reflection this evening.

Chapter 9

PREPARING TO DIE

Tonight is our full moon vigil; the first month has already gone by in our summer retreat. Some of us have been on silent retreat, having spent time at our dwelling places, while others will soon have the opportunity to remove themselves temporarily from community life. We do this in groups throughout the summer to help bring a focus back to formal aspects of practice and really investigate the basis of why and how we practice. We should be practicing this way all the time anyway, but it's good to have periods of time when we turn our attention to doing this more exclusively.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama was once asked, "What's the point of your practice?" He answered, "I am preparing to die." What a wonderfully succinct response. He didn't go through a detailed explanation of all of the philosophical schools—Vajrayana, Mahayana, Theravada—or the whole history of Buddhism. Instead, he cut straight to the chase of what spiritual practice is for and a human

life is all about. We're in this condition of having taken birth and find ourselves asking, "What is it for? What do I do with it?" That recognition of birth and death, particularly in terms of Buddhist practice and Buddhist teachings, is about having Right View. It is the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path.

MUNDANE AND SUPRAMUNDANE RIGHT VIEW

The Buddha spoke about two aspects of Right View: the worldly, mundane perspective and the transcendent, supramundane perspective. Understanding both aspects is essential to practice.

The worldly, mundane aspect of Right View involves a clear understanding of cause and effect: whatever causes we put in, results will follow. It states that there are results of good or wholesome causes and of bad and unwholesome ones, that there's this life and rebirth into another life, and that this life is not a one-shot deal where we are born, die, and are annihilated without rhyme or reason to any of it. That life is a random, one-shot deal is not the Buddhist perspective. An understanding of kamma, the fruit of kamma, and rebirth is a key component of the worldly, mundane aspects of Right View that the Buddha taught.

Other aspects of mundane Right View include faith that there are beings toward whom we have a particular affinity, including parents and teachers, and faith that there are beings who have been able to free and purify

themselves—in other words, that liberation is possible. The mundane aspect of Right View is important to take on and consider. No one is required to accept it without questioning, but take it as a perspective, recognize the implications of it, and see if it has any relevance.

The Dalai Lama is extraordinarily revered for his purity, candor, humor, humanness, and wisdom. By the system in which he lives, he has taken rebirth as the fourteenth Dalai Lama from a lineage of thirteen previous Dalai Lamas. These incarnate beings come back in the same way that basically everybody comes back, but his particular goal is to be reborn to bring benefit and help sow the seeds of goodness for other people. So we can reflect on that goal for ourselves, and, if we wish, take it on in terms of how we use our practice.

At the end of teatime, I was asked a question in Thai, so hardly anyone understood the exchange. One of the Thai women meditating here had an insight into the quickness of the mind. Even meditating with the wholesome desire to bring the mind to a place of peace, tranquility, and clarity, she could see the mind go out to the sound of a dog barking. Then there was some other sound or distraction, and the mind went out to that. The mind doesn't stay still, even when we have the intention to train the mind. It's just so quick. She wanted to know if that insight, according to the Buddha's teachings, is what constitutes becoming and birth. I explained that it does. In terms of analyzing the movement of the mind,

when the mind moves, there is a becoming, and when it becomes something, it fastens onto an idea, a concept, a sound, or a place—it takes birth there.

Given that the mind moves so quickly, she also wanted to know, "Is there any hope?" Yes, obviously there is hope. Otherwise, the Buddha wouldn't have taught us how to train our minds—to find that point of stillness where there is no birth and no death. But it's about learning to understand how the mind moves like it does and what it fastens onto. We need to see what it's drawn to and what it's repelled by, because that in itself is a becoming as well. We take birth on a moment-to-moment basis according to our likes and dislikes.

That same process generates birth at the death of the body. Even though the overwhelming tendency of the mind is towards goodness, we still need to incline and condition the mind in that direction. During the death process, the senses naturally start to break down, and attention turns inward to the heart itself. A strong practice carries that momentum of attention so that we are focused on that which is clear, steady, and peaceful. We naturally relinquish the things that create dissonance and discontent within the mind.

This kind of letting go is what the Buddha referred to as Right View from a supramundane or transcendent perspective.

The supramundane aspect is couched in a more visceral, experiential mode. The foundation of one's entire

being is on a moment-to-moment basis and embodies the Four Noble Truths. There is a natural, unshakeable recognition of the nature of dukkha, its cause, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation.

I think it's important to reflect on both of these perspectives and to recognize that they work together and inform each other. If we hone in too closely on the experiential mode of the supramundane, transcendent perspective, we run the risk of losing touch with our actions. So it's important to stay aware of the worldly, mundane mode, recognizing cycles of birth and death, in order to help maintain a sense of urgency and motivation in practice.

CULTIVATING APPAMĀDA

There are questions to which we still don't know the answers, like how confident and comfortable we are at the thought of our own death. That question is about as primal as it gets in terms of things that are most conducive to insecurity and fear. We can work up a great deal of concern about not getting our coffee at the right temperature, but it pales to the thought, "I am going to die." We put off thinking about that.

Whether we are living a lay or monastic life, we are extraordinarily adept at distracting ourselves. We can do that anytime, anywhere: on retreat, at home, at work, in the car, or even under ideal conditions. There is always some project to do; even stuck on a desert island with

nothing to do, somehow it becomes essential to count the grains of sand on the beach. I remember one monk who was living in solitude for a year in a cave. Food was brought to him, so he didn't go on almsround. He became obsessed with trying to remember the names of all fifty states in America. The cave was completely dark; he had to light a candle. He kept losing track so he had to write them all down. And this monk is not even American. It is a great example of how the mind gets obsessed. To be able to draw back to what's important and necessary is a big part of training.

The statement by His Holiness, "I'm preparing to die," is brilliant; it's very simple and hones in on the essence of practice. We need to come back to what is necessary and practice with mindfulness. It is all the basic principles, getting that sense of urgency and a quality the Buddha refers to as appamāda, translated as heedfulness, circumspection, care. Of all the qualities that we need to cultivate on the path from the beginning to the end, the one that stands out most is this quality of appamāda. It gives us the opportunity to keep drawing attention back to what is important and necessary in life. In the Dhammapada, the Buddha says, "Heedfulness is the path to the deathless; those who are heedful do not die. The heedless are as if dead already" (Dhp 21).

Cultivating the quality of appamāda is not about becoming anxious, trying to fix things and get everything right, because that is suffering right there. It is about

feeling alive and fully present to the practice and with what we are doing.

Of course, one of the things we have to do is recognize the things that distract us. We need to examine the nature of dukkha in order to relinquish its causes. The Buddha points to three different types of desire that cause suffering: kāma taṇhā, desire for sensual gratification; bhava taṇhā, desire for being or becoming; and vibhava taṇhā, desire for non-becoming or non-being.

When sensual desire, kāma taṇhā, is present, we need to explore the functioning of the mind that seeks pleasure, gratification, and comfort, in order to work with and get beyond this—how does this process work?

With bhava taṇhā, we want to examine the sense of being and becoming, that sense of "me" being something. We also need to pay attention to the attraction to becoming a certain type of person or to attaining certain states. And there is even a spiritual becoming, that sense of trying to become the peaceful and perfect meditator.

All of that is doomed to failure. We can't ever achieve the goal of "becoming" because the nature of desire is that it can't be fulfilled. We are always going to be seeking another state that's more refined and pleasant, more peaceful. So we have to watch this tendency, especially when we're in retreat. The desire for meditation states is so easy to justify and is true in the sense that we need to cultivate the practice to develop states of peace, clarity, and stillness. But ultimately, it is the identification with

these states and the identification with desire itself that is the problem.

In terms of vibhava taṇhā, we need to be looking at the internal experience of rejection of ourselves and others, the experience of holding back or pushing away and the sense of self that arises from that—not wanting to have to be in this situation, deal with that person, or participate in a particular responsibility or chore. We see that coming up frequently. Sometimes we get so bored just having to be with ourselves—there's much vibhava taṇhā there. We spend most of our life just waiting for things to end: "When is the morning chore time going to be over so we can have the meal?" When we are not really present with what we are doing because we are fed up with it, we look to something else, generated by that desire for non-becoming.

INCLINING THE MIND TOWARDS FREEDOM

Investigate the pushes and pulls in the mind because it is that movement that takes us away from a central core of stillness and clarity that is possible to realize. We need to incline the mind toward the whole purpose of the practice and the promise of the Buddha: it's possible to free the mind, to liberate oneself, to be peaceful and happy. This kind of happiness is not dependent on gratification or on getting things the way we want. It is just the happiness that is there within the heart. As the Buddha teaches, "If it weren't possible to be liberated and to be

free, and if you weren't capable of doing it, I wouldn't teach it. But it is because you are capable of doing it and because there is this possibility that I teach it." That's the encouragement that the Buddha gives.

With mindfulness we attend to the ability of the mind to be aware and to sustain awareness. In formal meditation, we attend to the breath, refining and clarifying how we attend to the meditation object because we may be trying too hard. If that is the case, we squeeze and crush that clarity, that spaciousness and stillness. We try so hard, and that's a becoming, isn't it? Or we disturb the mind by wanting it to be completely pleasant and free of discomfort, whether the discomfort is physical or mental. Meditation is the practice of allowing ourselves to dwell in awareness rather than trying to get anything out of it. We nurture and dwell in awareness, sustaining mindfulness rather than trying to make the mind be a certain way—how we conceive it, want it, desire it, or fear it. Nurturing the awareness, sustaining the mindfulness.

The meditation object is just a vehicle for supporting that. The breath is the most common object that we teach, but there are many different ways that we can do it. The same principles apply to walking meditation. Take the simple act of walking and pay attention to the movement, to the simple act of lifting, moving, setting down: the right foot, lifting, moving and setting down; the left foot, lifting, moving and setting down. We can also be attentive to the bodily postures and sensations

in the body. We nurture that awareness and allow it to stand up and become clear. And we carry that developed sense of awareness into whatever else we are doing, as much as we can.

During this period of retreat time for the community, we will all have our opportunities for solitary retreat. But when we are practicing within community, we need to bring this sustained attention into as much of our daily lives as we can. The more we can bring that into everything we do, the more momentum there will be in the formal meditation.

Part of cultivating and sustaining awareness is recognizing what pulls the mind out into becoming and birth. What allows the mind to turn to non-becoming, to not being born into anything? As we explore that, the mind can become very still and very silent. Allow that sense of spaciousness and silence to open up and create a wedge in the habit of movement.

Rather than allowing attention to be hijacked by that movement into becoming and birth, start recognizing stillness and silence and then allow the mind to rest in it. Allow the mind to be very comfortable and the heart to be at ease. Ask, "What do we need to get? What do we need to become?" By asking these questions, we are able to put things down and make putting down a skillful habit. We realize that taking them up is just a habit; it has no intrinsic stable base. The nature of the mind is changing all the time, and yet we have convinced ourselves that

there is some need to always be thinking, desiring, gratifying, fearing, and worrying. But as we question the nature of mind, we realize there is no enduring substance to any of that at all. We don't have to believe in it; we don't have to identify with it. We can let that go.

The more we're willing to let go, the more wedges of stillness and silence start to open up. We can attend to that and delight in that—that is where our real ease and happiness come from. Even when there is physical discomfort and the mind resists it, ease and happiness is possible. Once we start questioning the mind and allowing it to be open, we realize that stillness, silence, and the sense of spaciousness are actually there all the time. So question the practice and explore the ability of the mind to settle and relinquish.

Even question the quality of knowing. Luang Por Tate, one of the disciples of Ajahn Mun, was asked, "What do we do when knowing and awareness becomes really steady and still?" He replied, "Start looking at what's behind that. Don't rest in the idea that you've made it to the 'one who knows': look behind that." What that does is allow us to turn to relinquishing and letting go.

Not long after Ajahn Chah's death, Ajahn Mahā Boowa[1] came to offer encouragement to the Wat Nong Pah Pong community. Ajahn Dtun was one of the monks assigned to attend him. A few monastics, including me, were there when Ajahn Dtun told Ajahn Mahā Boowa about a doubt

1 Ajahn Mahā Boowa was one of Ajahn Mun's senior disciples.

he was experiencing in practice. Ajahn Dtun began with an observation: "Once you are trained, it seems like certain mental formations can be wholesome, skillful, and beneficial." Then he asked, "Am I supposed to let go of that, too?" Ajahn Mahā Boowa's immediate response was: "Don't keep anything. Don't try to save anything at all. Let go of everything." It was a wonderful teaching that came from such a pure space.

It isn't as if letting go of everything turns you into a zombie or a dysfunctional human being. It's just the opposite. Letting go is actually how you become an extraordinarily functional human being and how you are able to function with no suffering.

The end of suffering is the encouragement and the promise of the Buddha. Take this path and practice it. Take these teachings and live by them. It is a gradual training. It is a gradual path. Then pay attention to the different areas of training. We have this opportunity to do it: don't hold back.

I offer that for reflection this evening.

Chapter 10

VEDANĀ: A ROADMAP TO EMPTINESS

There are many aspects of method and experience that can be used as the basis for investigation and focus. Regardless of which one we choose, it is important to stay within the bounds of the four foundations of mindfulness. These sets of practices and trainings—mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of feeling, mindfulness of mind, and mindfulness of phenomena—are the ones the Buddha laid down as the path to freedom, purification, and liberation from suffering.

Vedanā, feeling, is one of the clusters of experience the Buddha instructs us to observe. What the Buddha means by "feeling" is not the range of emotions that is encompassed by the English language term. Rather, the Buddha refers to the feeling tone of experience, which is classified as pleasant, painful, or neutral (neither pleasant nor painful).

There are many reasons to be attentive to feeling tones. One of the most important is the integral role that

feeling tones play in every mental state. We are usually not quick enough to recognize where thoughts, emotions, and reactions come from. The Buddha points to feeling tone as what conditions the mind. Whether we experience a bodily sensation or a mental sensation, we feel it on a certain level as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. That feeling tone then conditions what we proliferate about or how we conceive the experience.

In the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, the Buddha gives instructions on developing mindfulness of feeling. He points to both the experiencing of the citta saṅkhāra, that which conditions the mind, and the calming of the citta saṅkhāra. He instructs us to work with the breath to help us see that feeling (vedanā) and perception (saññā) create the conditions for the mind to move, proliferate, and build more complex emotions and reactions (M 118).

In terms of the practice, it is very useful—essential, really— to understand how this complexity is created. It reveals how we respond to the world, to outer circumstances, to ourselves, and to the people around us. The Buddha's instructions are to keep coming back to the underlying feeling tone and also to be attentive to the quality of perception, both in terms of the perceiving and of the memory that we have around how we discern the importance that we place on something. We rank things in terms of the memories that we hold. This ranking is intermingled and interdependent with the feeling tone that

is associated with it. These aspects of mind are not disjoined; they are conjoined—we experience them together. We need to be mindful of the classifications in order to start to investigate and tease them apart. Otherwise, we get dragged into the reactions of the mind, into what the mind spins out as the story. Without mindfulness, we fail to trace the movements back to the feeling tone that underlies them.

The good news is that we do not have to be dragged along by the mind. We can get a handle on it by using the breath to stay with and be present for experience as experience and then investigating the underlying feeling tone. We also pay attention to the quality of perception, again, with perception meaning both the perceiving and the memory that we have around the importance that we place on something.

The Buddha describes the particular underlying tendencies associated with the different feeling tones. Pleasant feelings have the underlying tendency of desire, while painful or unpleasant feelings have the underlying tendency of aversion. Neutral tones are associated with the underlying tendency of delusion. The mind is primed to desire, to seek gratification whenever something pleasurable is happening. Similarly, the mind is conditioned to drift into aversion, negativity, and dislike when something unpleasant or painful is happening.

It all comes back to being attentive to the different ways feeling tones create proliferation in the mind, and

in particular, to how a feeling tone kicks into the underlying tendency that is typical for the heart, and particularly for the mind, that is unliberated and unenlightened.

I received a wonderful email from a friend who went to the doctor to have some moles burned off. In jest, he wanted to know whether we heard him screaming. What was so amazing is that he started screaming before the doctor actually touched him! In other words, there was already an association and feeling tone created by aversion. His mind kept spinning out to the point of screaming based on that association, but it was just an underlying tendency.

Even if the underlying tendency is there, we don't have to follow it or get caught up in it. It's a tendency, not a demand. Neutral feeling presents a similar pitfall. Either we space out and don't even notice it, or we try to escape it by creating something pleasant or even unpleasant. Again, these are just tendencies. Have you noticed that even unpleasant feelings are perversely more satisfying to the mind? At least we feel something! But trying to wring out the pleasant or unpleasant out of nothing is actually very unsatisfying.

You can see why delusion creates so much confusion. When we've got three choices and we don't go towards one of them, we avoid one of them. We have to prop up or negate a third of our experience.

In fact, there are whole ranges of neutrality encompassed in our experience. Just sitting here right now, I

experience the feeling as neutral more than anything else. But the mind can't bear to stay with that very long, so it creates a story to fill it in, which is citta saṅkhāra, the conditioning factor. It is backed up by the underlying tendency of delusion rather than of awareness and wisdom. It is no wonder the world is in such a mess. But actually, the world is just fine; we're the ones in a sorry state.

We have to search quite hard to find anything more neutral than an in-breath or an out-breath, which is why we tend to dismiss it. But when we take the time to investigate the breath, it becomes a doorway into how the mind proliferates and conditions itself. We need to use awareness to cultivate a steadiness of attention as a foundation for insight. The vast majority of meditation objects are also quite neutral, unless we consciously cultivate the brahma vihāras, the sublime mind states, which are intrinsically very pleasant. Yet when we take loving-kindness or compassion as a meditation object, we quickly recognize how much aversion can come up while practicing either of them.

As I keep emphasizing, it is important to take the feeling tone as a doorway for understanding the experience. It's fairly simple, but it gets complicated quite quickly.

There is a discourse (M 59:5) about a discussion between two disciples of the Buddha. One disciple said that there were three different kinds of feeling tones. The other disciple said, "No, I've heard the Buddha talk

about two different kinds of feeling tones." They consulted the Buddha to find out who was right. The Buddha said, "Well, actually you both are right. Sometimes I talk about the two kinds of feeling tones—other times, three, five, six, or eighteen types. But there are still other times when I refer to thirty-six or 108 feeling tones."

As you can see, this feeling realm gets complicated quickly! I will try my best to unpack it for you. The two types are bodily feeling and mental feeling. The three types include feelings that are pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. The five types are a combination of pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral in the bodily or mental sense. Dukkha vedanā is the Pāli for painful bodily sensations; domanassa refers to painful mental ones. Sukha vedanā is the pleasant bodily feeling, and somanassa is the pleasant mental feeling. Upekkhā is the impartial or neutral feeling.

There are six different types of feelings that arise through the six sense doors—eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, and mind. The eighteen kinds of feeling arise from the different modes of sense contact. Taking those eighteen factors, there are thirty-six feelings depending on whether the feeling is worldly or spiritual. Taking the thirty-six feelings, there are 108 feelings depending on whether the feeling is past, present, or future.

THE WORLDLY AND THE SPIRITUAL

Of particular importance is the recognition of the

difference between the worldly and spiritual realms. Āmisa is the material, associated with the world: the senses and sensual realm. Nirāmisa is the opposite. The feeling that kicks us into pleasure, pain, liking, disliking, wanting, agitation, or excitement is worldly. And whether it is a pleasant, painful, or neutral feeling doesn't really matter. Just by experiencing things in a neutral way doesn't necessarily mean that it has an exalted quality to it.

But that which takes us out of the worldly connection of suffering, in a dhammic sense, may have this exalted quality.

We still experience the feeling, but we experience it with the recognition of its limitation or boundaries. Ajahn Chah taught us to note this as "just that much" or "only this much." As pleasant as something can be, the quality of nirāmisa sukha turns it into a pleasure that has a spiritual quality to it. When there is a natural understanding of characteristics and limitations—of the insubstantial and changing nature of things—it does not shake, proliferate, or confuse the mind.

Whether we are worldly beings, puthujjana, or enlightened, noble beings, ariya puggala, we still experience pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral feelings. Feelings are inherent in the nature of contact with the world around us and in the nature of having a body and a mind. The difference between worldly and enlightened beings occurs on the level of response. If unenlightened beings

are struck by arrows or their skin is pierced by needles, they react in a worldly way. They experience both the unpleasant sensation of the contact and the unpleasant sensation of suffering and dislike that they feel attendant on that unpleasant contact. Enlightened beings, on the other hand, experience the identical situation with wisdom and clarity. They experience the unpleasant sensation of contact, but they do not create an unpleasant, negative state of mind. Enlightened beings don't create suffering out of anything, out of any contact with different kinds of sensations or feelings. Feelings are not a cause for the mind to proliferate or to condition the mind in a way that is conducive to suffering.

In terms of practice, we need to be able to start making those distinctions. Recognize where the mind moves and what we create around the different sensations, contacts, and feelings that we experience. Cultivate and develop the awareness and attention that recognizes and catches the movement of mind. Then, we need to consciously develop those qualities conducive to well-being and happiness, those that are associated with the spiritual, which lead out of worldly entanglements, both internally and externally.

Again, reflecting on the Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing, in the first two instructions the Buddha gives on the tetrad on mindfulness of feeling, he says, "Experiencing joy (pīti), the meditator breathes in; experiencing joy, the meditator breathes out; experiencing

happiness (sukha), the meditator breathes in; experiencing happiness, the meditator breathes out" (M 118). He is telling us that pīti and sukha are to be cultivated. We do not need to push them away, shut them out, or say we shouldn't experience anything at all. There is a very useful function of these pleasant feelings: allowing the mind to settle.

The Buddha says, "The worldly person does not know of any escape from painful feeling other than sensual pleasure." (S 36.6) As meditators, or people who are cultivating the path of the Buddhas, we are developing the qualities of heart and mind that arise from our spiritual cultivation, meditation, reflections, and virtue. These qualities are commensurate with the path of the Buddhas and are the ways to take us out of the habit of suffering. Relying on sensual gratification as the only alternative to painful feelings is quite limiting. We've all experienced that—otherwise we wouldn't be here.

There was a very good article by Jon Gertner in The New York Times called "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness," in which the author discusses some interesting research on how we predict what will make us happy. It turns out we're not very good at it. We think that a new BMW or winning the lottery will make life perfect. In fact, they won't be as exciting as we anticipated; nor will they excite us for as long as we predict. It's not that they don't make us happy, but it's not for very long. These experiences always fall short. This kind of "miswanting," as

the researchers call it, keeps the credit card companies and the psychotherapists in business but does not make human beings very happy.

The researchers found that we also tend to miscalculate our resources and what we believe is going to be unbearable. For example, if you ask participants, "What would you rather have, a broken leg or a trick knee?" they are likely to say, "Trick knee." In reality, a trick knee adds up to more pain, difficulty, and inconvenience than breaking a leg. In other words, we think bad events are going to be worse than they really are, just like we think good events are going to better than they really are. We overestimate the difference both positive and negative events are going to make; none of them make the difference that we think. All of them are less intense and more transient than we predict.

INVESTIGATING PLEASANT, UNPLEASANT, AND NEUTRAL FEELING

It always comes back to the three fundamental feeling tones and our awareness of them. We can learn a great deal from feeling tones and how they affect us. What makes it possible is turning our attention to the realm of feeling and using it as the object of meditation. The Buddha instructs us to take pīti or sukha and experience it fully and clearly, to really make it conscious. He says to allow the pleasant feelings so that the mind absorbs into the feeling and enjoys the meditation.

Sometimes a guilty feeling arises, that "I shouldn't have too much pleasure while I'm meditating—it should be hard work." Or we have the "no pain, no gain" syndrome: the belief that all meditation has to be painful to make progress on the path. These are beliefs we need to recognize; they're not necessarily true. The mind receives pain with aversion and after some time that pattern becomes oppressive. The mind needs to be capable of enlivening the meditation by experiencing other realms as well. Experiencing the mind that is delighting in its object is also important to make progress on the path.

We talked the other day about the factors of jhāna: pīti, sukha, ekaggattā, vitakka, and vicāra. These factors allow the mind to really focus and settle on one point and to become stable. One can't just disregard them.

Ekaggattā means one-pointedness, unification of mind. Vitakka refers to the lifting up of the mind to the meditation object, and vicāra is staying with and exploring, mingling, and working with it. Pīti, as we've discussed, is the quality of joy; sukha is the quality of happiness.

These jhāna factors are all very important and need to be cultivated. On the other hand, being obsessed with pīti and sukha, desperately trying to hold onto them and fearing any twinge of possible unpleasantness is not going to work either. But as a natural part of the mind that is taking interest, relaxing, settling, and becoming composed, we make these factors very conscious and allow them to inform the meditation. That's how the mind

really comes together and settles. As pīti and sukha are present, the qualities of agitation can or will drop away, so pīti and sukha have their role, their necessary part in the cultivation of the heart of steadiness, of samādhi.

Similarly, when painful feelings are present, investigate them. We don't need to be running away from them constantly. Hone in on the pain. Be attentive to it. Ask: "Is this a painful bodily feeling or a painful mental feeling?" Sometimes what we experience as pain is not just the bodily sensation. Much of it is the mental holding: the aversion, fear, and distaste for anything unpleasant or remotely associated with pain. Can we separate the bodily feeling from the mental feeling? Can we drop or relax the hold of the mind around a particular painful sensation that we're experiencing? Can we investigate what's left? All of this is a very rich area of investigation that helps allow the mind to settle in and relax.

Working directly with the body and consciously relaxing it is really important when we experience something we dislike or do not want to experience. The tendency is to tense up, hold in, or clamp down somewhere. That physical reaction then becomes a knot of discomfort, in the back, neck, or butt. These aren't just figures of speech: when we say something or someone is a "pain in the neck" or a "pain in the butt," those are quite literal feelings that describe our reaction to how we are holding, experiencing, or perceiving. So go to the body first, and work with relaxing it, softening it, being very gentle

and kind with it. The underlying tendency to experience pain with aversion needs to be countered with the qualities of softness and kindness. And then see how these feelings affect the mind so that it doesn't spin us out towards the underlying tendency of dosa: aversion, ill will, and negativity.

With neutral feelings, the underlying tendency is delusion, confusion. Really try to clarify this. We need to be very present and clear with that which is neutral, and to experience it consciously as a neutral feeling. It's okay: we don't have to sink into it and go into dullness. If we're not being stimulated, then the tendency is to sink or seek some other feeling, to change that or to get restless. Bring awareness and attentiveness and clarify the investigation: "This is a neutral feeling." And then start to investigate the different neutral feeling tones—investigate what is happening in there because we tend to want to go to that which is clearer. But then the clearer is either the pleasant or painful, and that has its own problematic nature. When delusion is the conditioning factor, it's going to perpetuate that cycle. So we bring a quality of clarity into that moment; we reflect on those aspects of patience, contentment, or wise investigation so that we are not just blindly reacting or sinking. Work with that in the meditation by taking the feeling as the doorway, as the key.

One of the main aspects of vedanā is recognizing impermanence in the different feelings we experience. The

Buddha uses the image of bubbles of froth during the monsoon season. Heavy rains come down, hit the water, and create bubbles. But the bubbles don't last very long; they pop, turn into bubbles and pop, turn into bubbles and pop. A flow of bubbles is exactly how we experience feeling tones. But each of the bubbles—every single one of them—is empty. The pleasant feeling bubble, the unpleasant feeling bubble, and the neutral feeling bubble pops. It's empty; when it pops there's nothing left. It isn't there anymore. Another bubble arises. We recognize the impermanence, the instability, the changing quality, the transient nature of feeling, so that we are not blinded.

When I say it's empty, I don't mean it isn't there. The feeling is very real, but it's not substantial; it's a feeling that arises, establishes itself for a period of time—usually a short period of time—and deceives us. We can really notice that when we're working with the breath: the feeling tones keep changing. Then the mind keeps trying to crank out a story, filling in the gaps, and making something more of it. But the reality is that the feeling is impermanent. As we stay with the quality of knowing, of awareness and discernment, then feelings can be experienced in a very different way: from a place of stability and wisdom, of knowing and relinquishing.

So I offer this for your reflection.

Chapter 11

THE NOBLE TRUTH OF CESSATION

I have recently returned to Abhayagiri after having been away on a fifteen-month sabbatical retreat in Thailand. The opportunity to have an extended retreat without any responsibilities was very precious. Other than giving a Dhamma talk once a month, I didn't go to many places or do many things. The majority of my time was focused on practice, reflection, investigation, and study. The situation was very quiet— the conditions were quite ideal.

Before I left, I thought a lot about where I wanted to spend my time. I had invitations from people all over the world offering me places to stay, but I decided to go to Thailand, where I had lived for twenty-three years. One of the reasons why I chose to spend time in Thailand after having been in the West for nine years was to change the environment completely—to return to a place where being a Buddhist monk is nothing special. I could be just an ordinary monk walking almsround and living in retreat.

There is no need to explain yourself or to be anything or anyone—there are literally thousands of other monastics around.

It was very nurturing to be back in that environment again. On a certain level, the Thai culture is based on an almost pre-verbal relationship to Buddhism. Their depth of faith and devotion is so strong. These qualities enable one to relate to practice in ways that are entirely aligned with the culture. It all feels very natural; the rhythm of daily life as a monk is familiar to almost everyone. For myself, just doing the practice and letting it carry me helped to allow the Dhamma to appear on its own.

I think that for us as Westerners, there's a strong sense of wanting to figure things out and get everything right, but this approach is not particularly helpful. It is, rather, about really giving oneself to the practice and then giving up to that. Everything we need to attend to is reflected in the Four Noble Truths: in the Noble Truth of suffering, the Noble Truth of the cause of suffering, the Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering, and the Noble Truth of the path to the end of suffering.

In the Buddha's first discourse (S 56:11), he describes the four qualities that provide the foundation for the cessation of suffering. We are quite skilled at focusing on the truth of suffering and may sometimes think about its causes, but when it comes to the actual cessation of suffering, we usually don't give it much attention. The tendency is to wait for the end of suffering to happen:

"Perhaps it will disappear in a flash of insight or manifest in some glorious way, with bright lights and clear portents of having attained something." These are misguided habits that increase suffering rather than end it. While we are waiting for suffering to cease in the future, we miss the opportunity to be free of it, right here, right now.

The Buddha, in that first sutta, points to four aspects of the Third Noble Truth—cāgo, paṭinissaggo, mutti, and anālayo—that are the direct cause of the cessation of suffering (nirodha).

CĀGA AND PAṬINISSAGGA: GIVING AND RELINQUISHMENT

Cāga, the first quality, is a term that is used synonymously with giving and generosity. We give ourselves to the practice, to the qualities of generosity, kindness, and commitment. Cāga also has an element of giving up and relinquishing things. There is a sense of giving ourselves to the practice and of being able to fully relinquish the things that are obstructing us. The capacity to relinquish allows non-suffering to arise. So it's that dual ability of giving and giving away that allows non-suffering to arise. We are able to recognize, "This is an obstruction that is not helpful. Why hold on? Why sink our teeth any further and keep chewing on it? Just spit it out."

The Pāli word paṭinissagga is similar and refers to relinquishment, but the essence of it concerns honing in

on the sense of self, of me and mine. We tune into the "I want, I need, I have to have" constant chatter in the mind and recognize all of it as stifling and oppressive. We let go of selfish and petty habits, and as a result, we feel peaceful, happy, and content.

Quite often, relinquishing narrow-minded or selfish attitudes is painful and difficult. It can be hard to give up an opportunity to be self-righteous or to want praise, based on how special or deserving we think we are. The untrained mind delights in giving great importance to these types of fixations. Sometimes, it is obvious when the sense of "me" and "mine" takes hold: it feels like it arises from the pit of the stomach and grabs us by the throat. At other times, it's more subtle, disguised under the cloak of reason. There are endless ways to justify feeling offended, insulted, or rejected. That's when freedom from suffering seems hopeless: "Does any of this add up to anything?"

We need to practice relinquishing the sense of self that coalesces around what the Buddha calls the five khandhas: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness. The whole sense of self is pinned on these aggregates.

Ajahn Buddhadāsa, a highly respected teacher in Thailand, used to say that the problem of human beings is that we tend to be thieves and thieves tend to get caught. He wasn't referring so much to the material realm; he was referring to appropriating or misappropriating elements

of nature and seeing them as "me and mine." We concoct a sense of self, which we then carry around as if it were true. The body is not really yours, so carrying it around as if it was, and claiming to all and sundry that you are the genuine owner, makes you a thief, or at least a cheat and a swindler. "Getting caught" is displayed when we experience the discomfort of aging, illness, or having the body not obey our wishes for ease and well-being.

Everyone has a body, feelings, thoughts, impressions, and memories, but we need to recognize them for what they truly are. The aggregates are elements of nature that arise and pass away on their own. It makes no sense to become entangled with any of them. Think about it. Is it a problem to have a dumb thought? No, the thought is not a problem.

The problem is that we believe thoughts and see them as who we really are. We judge ourselves according to the words that run through the mind: "Oh gosh, I'm a terrible person" or "I'm a really good person." In fact, they are thoughts, feelings, and impressions—arising and ceasing. We create the story, and the story always ends with suffering.

The effort to see through the aggregates doesn't mean we are trying to achieve a state of void, without any feelings, impressions, or emotions—that's not the goal. It's about recognizing, "This is the way things are. This is the way nature is." In that moment of recognition, we are free. That giving up doesn't leave us bereft; it enriches us

and puts us in a place of non-suffering.

MUTTI AND ANĀLAYO: FREEDOM AND NON-REACTIVITY

Mutti, the third quality, refers to the freedom that comes from letting go within the realm of changing phenomena. We have the choice to attend to things in a different way. There is an understanding that we can actually be free within any experience, whether it is pleasant or unpleasant. The habitual pushing and pulling in the mind, the approval of one thing and the disapproval of another is, in itself, an opportunity for the quality of freedom and letting go to arise within that experience. Do we want to create more suffering or to allow it to end?

Anālayo refers to the quality of non-reactivity that arises from clarity and steadiness of mind. Desires, moods, impressions, and attachments just don't stick. The absence of stickiness doesn't arise because the mind is in some sort of blissful ignorance; it arises because the mind is ready to relinquish. The worldly winds—praise or blame, pleasure or pain, gain or loss, fame or disrepute—all become irrelevant. The mind is not interested in getting caught up in believing moods, impressions, and feelings. The mind recognizes, "This is the way things are. This is the way nature is." Why initiate a battle that we're destined to lose?

To remove the unconscious and painful patterns that obstruct the cessation of suffering, we must pay close

attention to the steadiness of mind. By bringing this quality to the forefront of our awareness, suffering ceases on its own. There is no place for the sense of self to even gain traction.

We need to pay attention to how we approach practice. The underlying qualities of faith and devotion are very important—not in a soppy way but in a way that allows the dhamma to flourish. These qualities do not arise from the kind of fierce training that happens in a boot camp. They arise because of our commitment and respect for the training.

That means applying ourselves—we need to be willing to experiment, learn, and investigate. We need to pay attention to when the heart is spacious. When is it content? When does it feel free? How do we do that? How do we tune into that, rather than absorb into the myriad ways of creating more complications in the mind?

The Dhamma and the Four Noble Truths unfold when we open ourselves to the practice and give ourselves fully to it. Abiding in non-suffering is our real refuge. It's these four factors, cāgo, paṭinissaggo, mutti, and anālayo, that comprise the Third Noble Truth of the cessation of suffering and allow us to truly experience it.

These are a few reflections on the cessation of suffering I offer this evening.

Chapter 12

DISENCHANTMENT

There is just one week left of our winter retreat. As the end looms large, exercise restraint, particularly around speech. Most people don't even have the opportunity to attend a seven-day retreat—this is a special time.

It's so easy to get swept up in the idea that the end is in sight; we forget that we are still here, in retreat. The mind spins out to what we imagine is going to happen when it's over. We may conjure up images and spin out stories of how interesting that time will be, with anticipation of excitement or novelty. We can also conjure up a sense of dread about going back to the daily grind, to the point where we feel simply wretched. Even though on a certain level these possibilities are valid, they're still proliferations. What purpose do they serve? Projected pleasures and projected misfortunes are equally pointless. Our experiences at the end of the retreat will be

what they will be. At the same time, if projections are happening now, they are precisely what we're supposed to be watching and investigating. Whatever your mind is doing in each moment, know that. Suffering and the end of suffering occur in each moment. The end of suffering is what the whole body of the Buddha's teachings is geared to accomplish.

The readings throughout the retreat focused on the importance of waking up to the habitual patterns that we have set for ourselves, patterns we tend to believe or justify. Projections about "the future" are part of those habitual patterns.

TURNING ATTENTION TO THE MIND

Bring your attention to the momentum of mindfulness and clarity that has been generated thus far. Use that momentum where it will be most useful and effective. Turn your attention back onto the mind itself; this is the way to unravel suffering. The mind is constantly leaning into and getting trapped in what the Buddha calls the four biases (agati): desire, aversion, delusion, and fear. We keep running away from or after them. The whole point of mindfulness is to stop being pushed around by, impinged upon, and falling for those particular biases. None of them are necessary, useful, or beneficial. They are not what is intrinsic to the mind.

This is the time to bring your attention back to what is intrinsic to the mind. I am referring to qualities of

mindfulness, of wisdom, to that which is upright and inclines to dhamma, to truth. Attention needs to be anchored within these qualities. Then it's quite easy to notice the mind inclining in different directions. But we don't have to follow it; we don't have to believe it. We've been doing that for how long? We have been influenced by these biases for most of our lives and for who knows how many lives before this one. This all gets wearisome.

We want to be turning attention to the quality of nibbidā, disenchantment. The quality of nibbidā is not to bring up aversion for the tendencies of desire and ill will, but to have the attitude that sees, "I don't want to keep repeating these patterns. Being driven by desire, ill will, fear, and delusion brings no benefit to my heart or to the world around me." We see that this is the point at which we get caught in the world, through these particular tendencies. Disenchantment, nibbidā, actually reveals a deep understanding and an inner knowing.

THE WORLD WE CREATE

Notice that saṃsāra, the world, is not just an external place, but an internal wandering on and on. We keep wandering through landscapes of desire and excitement, of aversion and ill will, of fear and anxiety, and of confusion, doubt, and uncertainty. But what we fail to recognize is that this is the world we create out of perceptions (saññā) and mental formations (saṅkhāra). Saññā and saṅkhāra are the basis of proliferations. Perceptions

arise; we label them. Then we immediately proliferate, following the mental formations of intention and volition; there's hardly a gap.

On a certain level, saññā is much more primal than saṅkhāras. Most of everyday life is governed by saññā; we don't notice it. We simply assume we know what's going on, but actually we do not. Saññā is largely responsible for *creating* what we take to be real. According to the Buddha, saññā presents us with a world that has meaning. It does so on the basis of our habits of perception that we have built up over time.

With saṅkhāras, there is a bit more leeway in terms of how they affect us, how we relate to the perceptions. And that is why we need to be developing mindfulness, so that a particular perception doesn't pick us up and carry us down the habitual path of our reactions and proliferations that are affected by biases.

Use the mindfulness and clarity we've been developing and direct it toward cultivating saṅkhāras that are wholesome, skillful, beneficial, and lead to a sense of well-being. Wisdom is a saṅkhāra. Loving-kindness and compassion are saṅkhāras; mindfulness is also a saṅkhāra. Allow these wholesome saṅkhāras to start to shape perceptions. The more that we step back from habitual proliferations, the more we are able to cultivate those skillful qualities. Then our perceptions also start to change; we're creating new karmic patterns. Eventually, we receive the results of this new kamma, based on an

entirely different set of qualities.

On the level of dependent origination, consider feeling (vedanā), which is vipāka, a result of kamma. We can respond to it through a desire-delusion vortex that spins off into suffering and perpetuates the cycle of karmic entanglement: for example, "I'm in pain; it's terrible. It is always going to be terrible and unbearable. I have pain because I'm a worthless person." Or, instead, we can allow new wholesome mental formations to start to shape perceptions by responding with wisdom: "There's pain. Pain is like this." Responding with wisdom and skillfulness, we receive the results of that, which are more pleasant and clear, more aligned with non-suffering.

We need to recognize that we have the opportunity to shape experience because vedanā and saññā, and saññā and saṅkhāra, are so closely linked. We can passively receive the fruits of kamma and perpetuate delusion. Or we add something to the mix, by actively engaging in karmic formations in a skillful, positive way that brings results that are aligned with non-suffering. There is a choice.

The typical feeling is that suffering is being foisted on us: we're helpless victims of saṃsāra; life is just a cruel joke. We don't really take responsibility to put forth the effort to establish a base of freedom, non-bias, and non-entanglement. That is what the teachings are for; there is an option that they give us. We have that opportunity, right at the experience of saññā and saṅkhāra.

Within that present moment, we need to exercise the

option to bring forward the mental formations of awareness and attention, the mental formations of investigation and discernment, the quality of stopping. "Stopping" is still a mental formation; this is stopping in terms of being able to rest in awareness, to rest in a place of stillness and of peace. As I just said, stopping is still a mental formation, but it's one that relies on mindfulness, discernment, and clear seeing, and on relinquishing and letting go. And it's the basis for being able to unravel the habits of just blindly reacting.

We bring our attention into the present and ask, "What are the perceptions? What are the mental formations? Where are they taking me? What am I agreeing to here? Where do I want to go with this? Am I recognizing that I am complicit in the karmic results?" Often we don't recognize the complicity—we just complain!

I encourage you to put your attention, effort, and energy where they will be most useful. It's not useful to suffer. Acquiescing to that propensity creates a feedback loop that keeps these biases in motion and keeps the mind inclined towards following them.

These are the qualities of one who is ujupaṭipanno, one who practices directly. "Uju" means straight, upright, direct. It's a powerful and skillful image. Rather than spending our time being swept along, tumbling after the biases of the mind, we can actually straighten ourselves up and put attention on the dhamma. We can dwell in the dhamma of non-clinging, the dhamma of non-attachment, the

dhamma of non-confusion. Moment to moment, we can straighten the mind and incorporate the views that lead to sources of making merit or creating blessings. The Buddha considers the straightening of one's views as the greatest merit and benefit—so that sense of directness, straightness, and uprightness is essential.

We always fall for the view of self, of me, the world around me, whom I perceive myself to be, what I perceive the world to be. Everything looks so solid and real—desirable or worthy of aversion. We need to take responsibility for that and understand that it's not necessary, beneficial, or even real or true. It doesn't mean there isn't a world out there, but why create a world that is a place of suffering? The internal self-view has the same dynamic. We can view ourselves as something that is similarly desirable, aversive, confused, or fearful, but that's just saññā and saṅkhāra. This is how we entangle ourselves in the world outside and the world inside.

Mindfulness and wisdom are the tools that help us see clearly and establish a foundation of being attentive to the dhamma, ujupaṭipanno: practicing directly, practicing uprightly, practicing straight. Straight to the way that is the dhamma of non-suffering, the dhamma of peace.

And that takes a certain disenchantment. Nibbidā helps break down the sense of self that believes it's so fascinating to suffer. The habit of clinging to the sense of self does provide the vestige of a sense of meaning, even

though it's a false one: "My life has meaning because I can suffer and be somebody." The endless round of following the habits of perception and mental formation, conditioned by ignorance, doesn't give any possibilities of hope, just the illusion of hope. When there is disenchantment, we lose the taste for this kind of repetitive suffering: it's no longer interesting or fascinating. And it's not aversion; it's not even weariness. We can put it all down—finally, we cannot be oppressed by it. It opens up a lightness and brightness, a possibility of a way out.

But each moment, we need to be willing to bring back our attention and to try to sustain our attention, that point of non-entanglement with agati, the biases. Realize that we have a whole other realm of possibilities: wisdom, mindfulness, awareness, peace, clarity, non-suffering, and non-confusion. At least in that moment, live that fully and plant the seeds to sustain that. Engage in this process of liberation, the process of seeking the way out. As we do, we recognize that the way out of suffering is the whole point of the Buddha's teachings.

So I offer that for reflection this evening.

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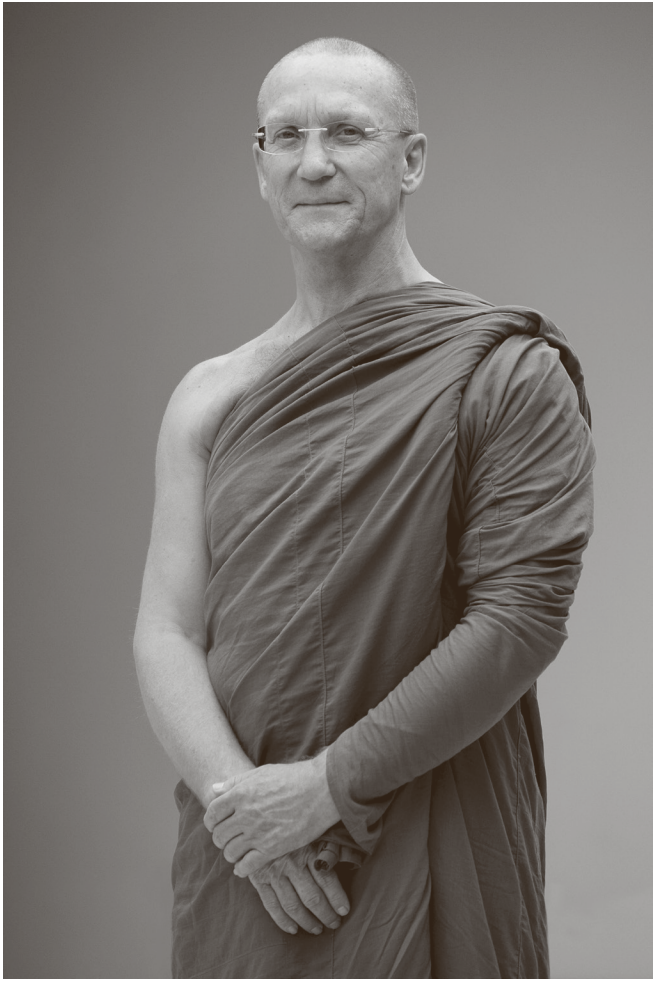
This book is the product of many people's efforts. In order for this to manifest, talks needed to be transcribed, edited, re-edited, refined again and then brought into book form ready for the printers. Many people involved have requested to be anonymous. The results, however, are tangible. I wish to express my appreciation to all those who have been both patient and diligent in order for this to come into being, particularly to Hisayo Suzuki and Sumi Shin who were able to shape this into its final form.

The talks here were given over a period of many years, and various people, having taken an interest in the topic, transcribed them. In order for them to read smoothly, there has been a lot of editing done. I could not have given an extemporaneous teaching as coherent as appears here.

Don't Hold Back started as an enthusiastic idea quite a few years ago. Despite procrastination and protracted dithering, we have finally managed to bring this to completion. I hope that it is beneficial. Any goodness arising from these efforts I would dedicate to the well-being of those who helped in this project, as well as to my parents and teachers, particularly Ajahn Chah.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajahn Pasanno took ordination in Thailand in 1974 with Venerable Phra Khru Ñāṇasirivatana as preceptor. During his first year as a monk he was taken by his teacher to meet Ajahn Chah, with whom he asked to be allowed to stay and train. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Pasanno became its abbot in his ninth year. During his incumbency, Wat Pah Nanachat developed considerably, both in physical size and reputation. Spending twenty-four years living in Thailand, Ajahn Pasanno became a well-known and highly respected monk and Dhamma teacher. He moved to California on New Year's Eve of 1997 to share the abbotship of Abhayagiri with Ajahn Amaro. In 2010 Ajahn Amaro accepted an invitation to serve as abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England. Ajahn Pasanno is now the sole abbot of Abhayagiri.