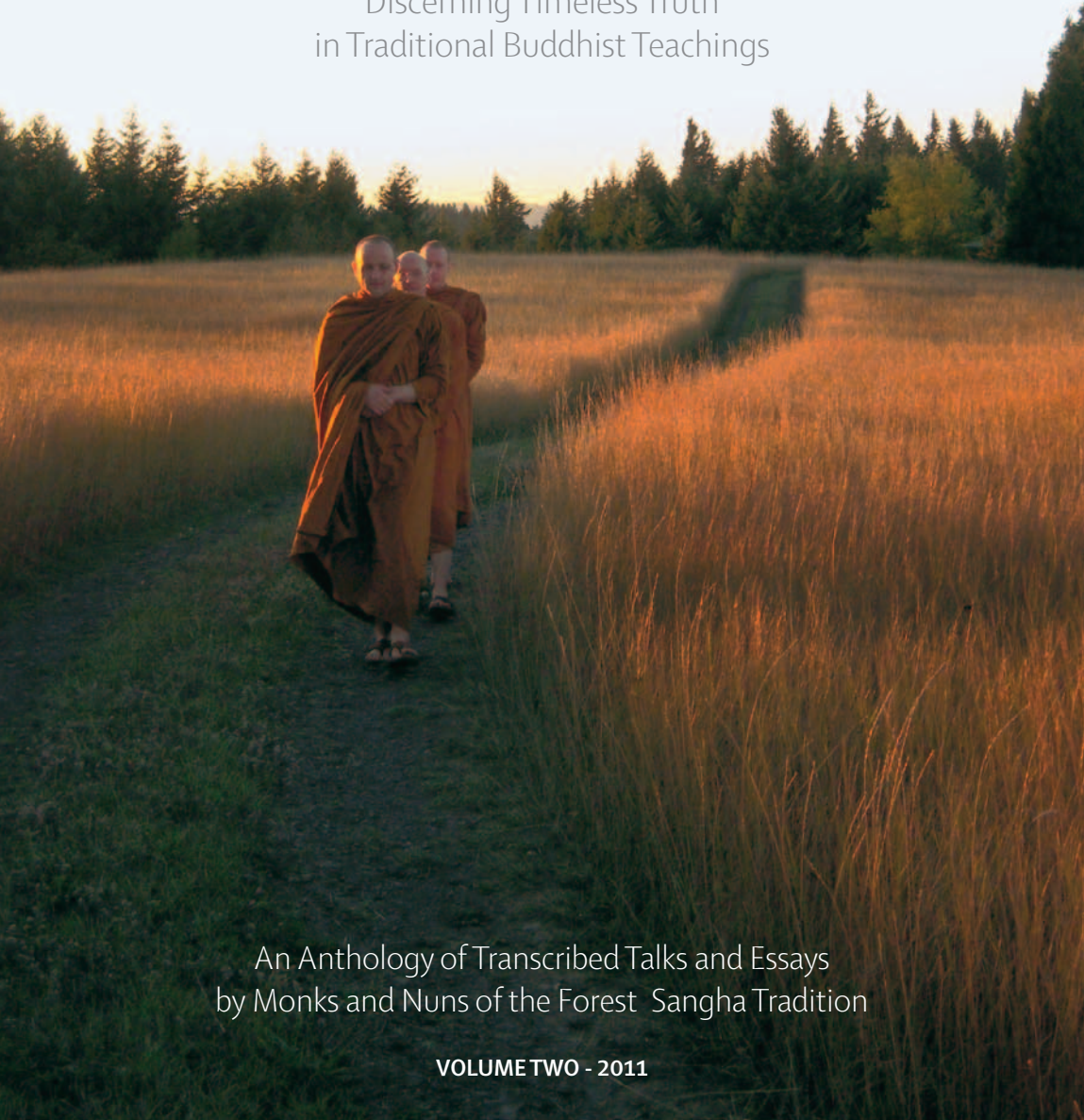


Seeing the Way

Discerning Timeless Truth
in Traditional Buddhist Teachings



An Anthology of Transcribed Talks and Essays
by Monks and Nuns of the Forest Sangha Tradition

VOLUME TWO - 2011

Seeing the Way

Discerning Timeless Truth
in Traditional Buddhist Teachings



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Dedication

We would like to acknowledge the support of many people in the preparation of this book, and especially to the Kataññuta group of Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, and the Sukhi Hotu Sdn Bhd group, for bringing it into production.

shpj@sukhihotu.com

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Preface

THE FIRST VOLUME OF 'SEEING THE WAY' was printed in 1989. Our teacher, the Venerable Ajahn Chah, had been seriously ill for a number of years. Publishing this collection of Dhamma talks in English was one way of expressing our love and gratitude to him.

Numerous requests to reprint that original anthology have been made over the years. The two decades that have passed since that time, however, have found the shape and size of our community change considerably. Hence, rather than reprinting, I decided to offer a 'Seeing the Way', Volume Two.

During Ajahn Chah's visit to Europe in 1978 he asked his senior Western disciple, Ajahn Sumedho, to accept an invitation to establish a Theravada Buddhist monastery in Britain. No one knew how things would unfold but Ajahn Chah's recommendation was to simply live the bhikkhu life and wait to see what happened.

Now, as we begin the year 2011, Ajahn Sumedho has returned to live in Thailand, and we reflect on what happened during those intervening thirty-four years. Not only was a Theravada training monastery well established in the UK – Cittaviveka in West Sussex – but Ajahn Sumedho further initiated and supported the building of seven other monasteries around the Western world: another three in Britain, and one each in Italy, Switzerland, the United States and New Zealand. So this book also honours the dedicated commitment of Ajahn Sumedho to the renunciate life and the many precious gifts he has given us.

This new collection of transcribed talks and essays by eighteen monks and nuns aims to present a snapshot of the community of Western disciples of Ajahn Chah as it is now, in 2011. Included among the contributors are many of those whose talks were in Volume One of 'Seeing the Way'. Also included are senior monks and nuns who are currently serving as leaders of this family of monasteries. The layout of the chapters is determined by geographical location, a structure that I hope will give a picture of the world-wide community. But readers should feel free to read the chapters in whatever sequence they wish.

However they are read, I expect that you will recognize Dhamma threads connecting all of them. One of the most evident threads is that of relinquishment. Perhaps in the context of the modern consumer culture – it's Western and Eastern variations – there is a risk of Buddhism becoming another expression of self-seeking: doing 'my' practice, developing 'my' attainments, gaining 'my' insights.

Ajahn Chah leaves us no room for doubt. In the question-and-answer session that forms the introduction to this book he makes it very clear: there is nothing at all we can cling to; everything must eventually be relinquished, including our most precious ideas about practice. I chose to reprint this piece called, 'What is Contemplation' from the first 'Seeing the Way', so readers might glean a sense of the way in which Dhamma is taught in this tradition. From studying suttas we recognize the importance of solitude. Yet somewhat paradoxically it is *Sangha*, or spiritual community, that shows us how to truly benefit from solitary practice. In the company of the teacher we intuit a right relationship to the inner life, with its joys and sorrows, successes and failures. Ajahn Chah was ruthless in his encouragement to us to surrender ourselves into practice, holding nothing back. He did it, however, with a warmth, and often a smile, that made all the

difference. In the following pages I trust you will sense something of this generosity of spirit which naturally shines forth from those who, with commitment, have developed this way.

In the first discourse Ajahn Sumedho inspires us towards awakening in his talk 'The Dhamma is Right Here' by focusing directly on the power of a purified awareness. He speaks of the escape hatch through which we can enter a new level of understanding, free from the undermining habits of clinging. Later on Ajahn Sucitto discusses the wisdom that knows how to release out of our life-story, with its tragedies, heroes and villains. He emphasizes that such letting go is not an unwillingness to respond. However, that steadiness and completeness can be found in a quality of awareness of what is, when we cease clinging to opinions about how things should be. Ajahn Khemasiri in his talk 'Right Orientation' reflects on the first two factors of the Eightfold Path. He points out that renunciation practice is for everyone; not just for those 'gone forth.' And that the essence of renunciation is found in what we do on the heart level, not just on the outer aspects or forms of practice.

Ajahn Pasanno in his contribution considers spiritual friendship and comments on how bringing mindfulness into all areas of life – formal practice and daily life practice – equips us with the skill to make wise choices. He discusses how cultivating mindful relationship leads to a tangible increased ability in taking responsibility. Ajahn Viradhammo directs our contemplation towards the value of community and the way practice of precepts supports letting go at the same time as we maintain empathy. We will all face obstacles as we travel along this path to freedom but wise companionship can protect us from becoming too distracted or lost.

Ajahn Tiradhammo highlights some of the causes for becoming lost and shows us how to recognize warning signs. And both Ajahn Sundara and Ajahn Candasiri speak about equipping ourselves well for the journey ahead with conscious appreciation of the blessings

we have already received. Timely reflection on these blessings shows us we have more than enough to fully give ourselves into this training.

If we hadn't heard wise teachings or if we didn't live in a benevolent and tolerant society we wouldn't have the freedom to investigate as the Buddha taught. Yet even though we are indeed blessed with good fortune at this time, out of heedlessness we can create obstructions for ourselves and others. Complacency is one of them. We might gain some tranquillity and initial insight from our meditation efforts but this is not yet the heartwood of which the Buddha spoke. Relinquishment, letting go, abandonment is the goal. In his talk, 'The Real Practice', Ajahn Jayasaro again offers clear guidance on where our priorities must lie if we really do long for liberation.

It is hoped that readers will find within these offerings instruction and encouragement relevant to a personal seeing of that which the Buddha saw, 2550 years ago. As Ajahn Sumedho emphasizes, this teaching is, '... not just a nice idea, or Buddhism *per se*. It's actually a clear pointing in a specific direction – at your heart.' If your interest is in studying *about* Buddhism you might not find these teachings helpful. When we first encounter these teachings, it is true we need to find confidence in our conceptual understanding of what the Buddha taught. But learning a lot about Buddhism can also become a distraction. If we fail to look in the right direction our efforts find us becoming even more entangled in the myriad outer distractions; we lose our way. Thankfully though Dhamma friends are on hand to help us once more to find this way.

Considerable variation in perspectives and style among the teachers and teachings represented in this anthology is noticeable. Within this mix there might even appear to be contradictions. On some points the contributors almost certainly do not agree with each other. But tolerance of diversity is surely a hallmark of a healthy community and is worth nurturing and sustaining. Ajahn Chah manifested

considerable skill in this area; while emphasizing the inner practice, at the same time remaining alert and sensitive to our surroundings.

Obviously without the commitment and effort of these good friends this book could not have been made available, so for that we are truly grateful. Gratitude is also due to all the transcribers and editors of these talks. Considerable skill is needed when converting a talk into the written word, too much editing and it ceases to sound like the person who gave the talk; not enough and the reader feels challenged to find any meaning. I wish to make particular mention of Ron Lumsden whose rigorous and subtle assistance has been a major element in bringing this project to fruition. May I also express sincere appreciation for the Kataññūta Group in Malaysia whose generosity was the initial inspiration for this printing.

May all beings see the way clearly.

Munindo Bhikkhu

16th January, 2011



Introduction

The following session of questions and answers with Ajahn Chah is reprinted from 'Seeing the Way' Volume One. It is included here by way of an introduction to this new compilation as a tribute to our teacher. Also, quite simply, because it is such a clear and direct teaching it is worth reading again and again.

Rare in this world it is to find a being who has so completely arrived at unshakeable peace and remains so consistently true to his tradition. From the day he 'went forth from home to homelessness', as it says in the traditional Buddhist scriptures, Ajahn Chah lived a life of simplicity and discipline. Although he became well known throughout Thailand, and later around the world, he was uncompromising in his respectful adherence to the modest ways of the Theravadan forest tradition of which he was a part. Throughout, he maintained a dignity that was at the same time beautiful and inspiring. This orthodox approach did not mean he shied away from making radical decisions if they were called for, or that he would avoid unfamiliar situations just because they were uncomfortable. His years of austere, solitary, forest practice attested to his ability to turn frustrations into fuel for progress towards the goal. Once when Ajahn Chah was asked what made him different from so many other monks he said it was that he was daring. He dared to go against habits that didn't accord with Dhamma, while others simply went along with the status quo. Even if at times the path appeared overgrown, if he saw that it led to liberation he followed it.

This was how he practised and this was how he taught. He didn't offer a doctrine or technique and insist we go with it. Truly he

didn't mind if we agreed with him or not. He had nothing to sell and nothing to advertise. On one occasion he spoke about how the sangha should only advertise itself by way of inner stillness. On another occasion he referred to himself as a grand old tree that still produced some berries. The birds that came and ate of these fruits gossiped about whether they were sweet or sour, agreeable or not, but for him it was all just the chattering of the birds. What mattered was how to help beings be free from suffering, not whether he was approved of. He sought to open the hearts and minds of those beings still caught in the vortex of self-perpetuating delusions. His words and his example consistently pointed in one direction: the heart of clarity and kindness.

What Is Contemplation?

The following teaching is an extract from a session of questions and answers that took place at Wat Gor Nork monastery during the Vassa of 1979, between Venerable Ajahn Chah and a group of English-speaking monks. Some rearrangement of the sequence of conversation has been made for ease of understanding.

Question: When you teach about the value of contemplation, are you speaking of sitting and thinking over particular themes – the thirty-two parts of the body, for instance?

Answer: That is not necessary when the mind is truly still. When tranquillity is properly established the right object of investigation becomes obvious. When contemplation is 'true', there is no discrimination into 'right' and 'wrong', 'good' and 'bad'; there is nothing even like that. You don't sit there thinking, 'Oh, this is like that and that is like this' etc. That is a coarse form of contemplation. Meditative contemplation is not merely a matter of thinking – rather it's what we

call 'contemplation in silence'. Whilst going about our daily routine we mindfully consider the real nature of existence through comparisons. This is a coarse kind of investigation but it leads to the real thing.

Q: When you talk about contemplating the body and mind, though, do we actually use thinking? Can thinking produce true insight? Is this vipassana?

A: In the beginning we need to work using thinking, even though later on we go beyond it. When we are doing true contemplation all dualistic thinking has ceased; although we need to consider dualistically to get started. Eventually all thinking and pondering come to an end.

Q: You say that there must be sufficient tranquillity *samādhi* to contemplate. Just how tranquil do you mean?

A: Tranquil enough for there to be presence of mind.

Q: Do you mean staying with the here-and-now, not thinking about the past and future?

A: Thinking about the past and future is all right if you understand what these things really are, but you must not get caught up in them. Treat them the same as you would anything else – don't get caught up. When you see thinking as just thinking, then that's wisdom. Don't believe in any of it! Recognize that all of it is just something that has arisen and will cease. Simply see everything just as it is – it is what it is – the mind is the mind – it's not anything or anybody in itself. Happiness is just happiness, suffering is just suffering – it is just what it is. When you see this you will be beyond doubt.

Q: I still don't understand. Is true contemplating the same as thinking?

A: We use thinking as a tool, but the knowing that arises because of its use is above and beyond the process of thinking; it leads to our

not being fooled by our thinking any more. You recognize that all thinking is merely the movement of the mind, and also that knowing is not born and doesn't die. What do you think all this movement called 'mind' comes out of? What we talk about as the mind – all the activity – is just the conventional mind. It's not the real mind at all. What is real just *is*, it's not arising and it's not passing away.

Trying to understand these things just by talking about them, though, won't work. We need to really consider impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality *anicca, dukkha, anattā*; that is, we need to use thinking to contemplate the nature of conventional reality. What comes out of this work is wisdom; and if it's real wisdom everything's completed, finished – we recognize emptiness. Even though there may still be thinking, it's empty – you are not affected by it.

Q: How can we arrive at this stage of the real mind?

A: You work with the mind you already have, of course! See that all that arises is uncertain, that there is nothing stable or substantial. See it clearly and see that there is really nowhere to take a hold of anything – it's all empty.

When you see the things that arise in the mind for what they are, you won't have to work with thinking any more. You will have no doubt whatsoever in these matters.

To talk about the 'real mind' and so on, may have a relative use in helping us understand. We invent names for the sake of study, but actually nature just is how it is. For example, sitting here downstairs on the stone floor. The floor is the base – it's not moving or going anywhere. Upstairs, above us is what has arisen out of this. Upstairs is like everything that we see in our minds: form, feeling, memory, thinking. Really, they don't exist in the way we presume they do. They are merely the conventional mind. As soon as they arise, they pass away again; they don't really exist in themselves.

There is a story in the scriptures about Venerable Sāriputta examining a bhikkhu before allowing him to go off wandering *dhutanga vatta*. He asked him how he would reply if he was questioned, ‘What happens to the Buddha after he dies?’ The bhikkhu replied, ‘When form, feeling, perception, thinking and consciousness arise, they pass away.’ Venerable Sāriputta passed him on that.

Practice is not just a matter of talking about arising and passing away, though. You must see it for yourself. When you are sitting, simply see what is actually happening. Don’t follow anything. Contemplation doesn’t mean being caught up in thinking. The contemplative thinking of one on the Way is not the same as the thinking of the world. Unless you understand properly what is meant by contemplation, the more you think the more confused you will become.

The reason we make such a point of the cultivation of mindfulness is because we need to see clearly what is going on. We must understand the processes of our hearts. When such mindfulness and understanding are present, then everything is taken care of. Why do you think one who knows the Way never acts out of anger or delusion? The causes for these things to arise are simply not there. Where would they come from? Mindfulness has got everything covered.

Q: Is this mind you are talking about called the ‘Original Mind’?

A: What do you mean?

Q: It seems as if you are saying there is something else outside of the conventional body-mind (the five *khandhas*). Is there something else? What do you call it?

A: There isn’t anything and we don’t call it anything – that’s all there is to it! Be finished with all of it. Even the knowing doesn’t belong to anybody, so be finished with that, too! Consciousness is not an individual, not a being, not a self, not an other, so finish with that – finish with everything!

There is nothing worth wanting! It's all just a load of trouble. When you see clearly like this then everything is finished.

Q: Could we not call it the 'Original Mind'?

A: You can call it that if you insist. You can call it whatever you like, for the sake of conventional reality. But you must understand this point properly. This is very important. If we didn't make use of conventional reality we wouldn't have any words or concepts with which to consider actual reality – Dhamma. This is very important to understand.

Q: What degree of tranquillity are you talking about at this stage? And what quality of mindfulness is needed?

A: You don't need to go thinking like that. If you didn't have the right amount of tranquillity you wouldn't be able to deal with these questions at all. You need enough stability and concentration to know what is going on – enough for clarity and understanding to arise.

Asking questions like this shows that you are still doubting. You need enough tranquillity of mind to no longer get caught in doubting what you are doing. If you had done the practice you would understand these things. The more you carry on with this sort of questioning, the more confusing you make it. It's all right to talk if the talking helps contemplation, but it won't show you the way things actually are. This Dhamma is not understood because somebody else tells you about it, you must see it for yourself, *paccattam*.

If you have the quality of understanding that we have been talking about, then we say that your duty to do anything is over; which means that you don't do anything. If there is still something to do, then it's your duty to do it.

Simply keep putting everything down, and know that that is what you are doing. You don't need to be always checking up on yourself, worrying about things like 'How much *samādhi*' – it will always be

the right amount. Whatever arises in your practice, let it go; know it all as uncertain, impermanent. Remember that! It's all uncertain. Be finished with all of it. This is the Way that will take you to the source – to your Original Mind.

1

The Dhamma is Right Here

Adapted from a talk given at Amaravati
Monastery, in 2010



Luang Por Sumedho was born in Seattle, USA, in 1934. He received ordination in Nongkai, NE Thailand in 1967. For ten years he trained under Luang Por Chah and moved to the UK where he established Cittaviveka Monastery in 1979. In 1984 he founded Amaravati Monastery and was there for 26 years. Luang Por Sumedho now resides in Thailand.

'As we develop the practice of mindfulness, we begin to operate from spontaneity and from wisdom rather than from personal views'.

WE ALL HAVE THE ABILITY TO REFLECT, to observe and watch the mind: to be the observer of mind states rather than becoming lost in them. All these mind states we experience can teach us. This is an important message. We live not only with the results of our own kamma but also with the character tendencies of those around us. Until we learn how to watch the mind in the right way we suffer unnecessary fear and anxiety from the endlessly changing conditions within and around us.

Soon after I joined the Sangha I was taken by Ajahn Chah to meet a very senior monk, Luang Por Khao. Somebody had given Ajahn Chah

a Philips tape recorder. This is back in the 60s, when there were only reels, not even cassettes. Ajahn Chah loved gadgets so with his tapes we visited all these old Ajahns in the North-East and Ajahn Chah would record them. At this time I still couldn't understand the Thai language very well. So on this occasion I didn't understand much of what was being said and just sat there until it was time to leave. Eventually Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Amorn who was with him, got up to leave, but Luang Por Khao, who was sitting in a wheelchair beckoned for me to come over. He couldn't speak English, but he gave me a profound sermon. He said, in Thai, 'The truth of Dhamma is here', and he pointed to his heart. It was a brilliant teaching. I couldn't understand the language very well, but I could understand that. It has stayed with me ever since. That message is the way of reflective observation of suffering, its causes and the absence of suffering. You see and know the Dhamma in your heart, not from what people tell you or by reading about it in books.

Buddho

Over the years, in various ways, all of us have at times been caught up with and carried away by our feelings and reactions. Take a moment to observe how these things affect us; whether it's in reaction to the people you live with or the society you live in, the way people look or what they say or their tone of voice and so forth. All of this has its effect on you – you feel something coming from them. The awareness of feeling is *Buddho*, the Buddha knowing Dhamma. When we don't observe it, we're caught up in reaction to feeling. We're helpless victims of our feelings. When things are going well, pleasing and pleasant we feel one way. When people are insulting or abusive then we feel another way.

Ajahn Chah always emphasized reflecting upon the eight worldly dhammas¹. We investigate these eight worldly dhammas and see that in each case one is the positive and one is the negative. Take success and failure: we want to be successful and we dread failure.

Ajahn Chah, however, would say that both success and failure are of equal value when you're contemplating from *Buddho*, rather than from personal preference. Consider praise and blame; when people say you're a wonderful teacher, and they'll do anything for you, it feels one way. When they say you're hopeless, and they can't understand anything you say, it feels another way. That's *Tathātā* (the way it is). Things are as they are. Both forms of feedback are of equal value. Because your attention is such that, on a personal level, you want people's praise, respect, appreciation, gratitude and love. And you don't want their blame, disappointment, aversion or resentment. That's the ego manifesting by way of inclination towards the pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. In terms of *Buddho*, *Dhammo*, *Saṅgho*, awareness embraces everything. *Buddho*, through awareness, is observing the pleasantness of being praised and the unpleasantness of being blamed.

The Middle Way – Majjhimā Paṭipadā

To some people, the Middle Way sounds like a mediocrity, in that you just compromise with everything – no extremes, just living in a way which is pusillanimous. I like the word 'pusillanimous'. It means 'small-minded' or a cowardly person that doesn't have much presence, just trying to get by. Is that really the Middle Way? In terms of dualistic extremities, like praise and blame, or success and failure, does the Middle Way mean that we shouldn't delight in success or praise and we should just ignore blame or failure? On that level, one is opposed to the other. In the Middle Way, it's *Buddho* – the way of looking at the extremities through the cultivation of awareness, rather than a way of promoting oneself as a person trying to succeed in the world, or just drifting out of it, fearing it, getting lost in pusillanimity.

Harmony

Ajahn Amaro recently referred me to a note by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu, on the Pali word *sammā*, as in *sammā-dīṭṭhi*, *sammā-saṅkappo*. The

word *sammā*, spelt in this note, means ‘on pitch’. It’s like a word for harmony or sound which is ‘on pitch’, and *visammā* is ‘off pitch’. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that throughout ancient cultures, the terminology of music was used to describe the moral quality of people and acts. Discordant intervals or poorly tuned musical instruments were metaphors for evil, and harmonious intervals and well-tuned instruments were metaphors for good. *Sammā* also means ‘even’. There is a passage where the Buddha reminds Sona Kolibisa, who had been over-exerting himself in the practice, that a lute sounds appealing only if the strings are neither too taut nor too lax, but evenly tuned. This simile also adds meaning to the term *samana*, which is translated as monk, or monastic, or contemplative. So the true contemplative is always in tune with what is proper and good.

Right Understanding

Using the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, in relation to ‘right understanding’ and ‘wrong understanding’, is too strong I think. They’re too fixed – ‘this is right and that’s wrong’. If you say that one thing is right and another is wrong, and you want the middle point between them, you get a bland mixture – it is mediocrity. With *sammā-ditṭhi*, you see right and wrong, not from trying to blend them together, but through seeing them from this position of awareness; one is in harmony. One can relate to actions, speech, livelihood and to responses to life, through wisdom and through being aware of the appropriateness of time and place. This comes through wise intuition, through harmony, through seeing things with a sense of balance and transcendence, with the unconditioned awareness of the conditioned.

Transcendent Reality

The word ‘transcendence’ sounds like you’re above it all but that’s not what I mean. When I use that word, transcendence is more like seeing both the unconditioned and the conditioned, which go together and are not opposed to each other. In this moment – here

and now – as a conscious entity, we have to deal with the conditions of the physical forms, with the senses, emotions, memories; our kamma and our habits. If it is said that we shouldn't be attached to the conditioned, it sounds like we've got to get rid of the conditioned, and then what we're left with is the unconditioned. Does that mean then, that if I let go of the body, it disappears? Or do I just go into a trance and no longer feel anything? Or, is it that the unconditioned mindfulness includes the body, the feelings, the reactions that I experience through praise and blame, success and failure?

The conditioned and unconditioned are not opposed – that kind of dualism doesn't apply. Our practice offers a paradigm of wholeness, completeness. It's developing a harmonious balance, where we can respond to contingencies in various ways that are appropriate to the particular situation in the moment. It is not narrowly defined in terms of moral conduct as 'right livelihood, right understanding, right action, right speech', which is what we read in books. It's about having the ability to respond to the conditions in the present, through discernment; that is right understanding, or *sammā-ditṭhi*.

It's very important to see how we tend to absolutize the extremities of experience. Take heaven and hell: heaven becomes an absolute, hell becomes an absolute. True and false, right and wrong, good and bad are the same. Religious terminology can do this also: 'my religion is right and if you don't agree with me then your religion is wrong'. This is one of the problems we face in the world: each person fixes, absolutizes the extremities or the conditions.

Practising The Middle Way

The Middle Way is important, but really it's the practice or the *paṭipadā* that is the point. *Majjhimā paṭipadā*, being present here and now, with the conditions that you're experiencing. That is, watching here, being aware here. This can sound like becoming a cold observer. So that, when people say 'you're wonderful' or 'you're

terrible’, you abide in a superior indifference to both praise and blame. Practising mindfulness, however, does not involve thinking we are immediately beyond all the worldly dhammas and have nothing to do with them any more.

As we develop the practice of mindfulness, we do find we begin to operate from spontaneity and from wisdom rather than from personal views about right and wrong or what someone else says or what society wants. For example, we might begin to observe how we become self-conscious about what the neighbours think; if they praise or blame us. We try to act in a way that is praised by the society, out of fear, rather than out of understanding or wisdom. We worry about offending people or of saying something wrong or of ‘rocking the boat’. It’s a continuous experience of dis-ease, to always be worried about what other people think. This can be recognized as we learn to watch our minds.

When we’re truly aware of our own sense of worry about what people think, we can discern that what is aware of this is not the worldly dhammas. Awareness knows the worldly dhammas, the ego and the sense of ‘me’, right and wrong and good and bad. This insight into the Noble Truths, then, gives us *sammā-ditṭhi*. Mindfulness brings us into a harmonious relationship with all conditioned phenomena, and this means that everything we experience through consciousness can be seen for what it is. Our response, then, is appropriate to the time, the place and the people we’re with.

The Escape Hatch

The escape from the born, the created, the formed, the conditioned, therefore, is mindfulness. It is the escape hatch to the unborn, uncreated, unformed, unconditioned. It has no quality – it isn’t something a scientist can prove – you have to know it yourself. It is an intuitive awareness. The third of the Four Noble Truths is the recognition of the cessation of conditioned phenomena. In other

words, to let conditions cease, we have to let go of them, because all conditions are born or created, they arise and, if we just leave them alone, they do their thing and subside. In other words what arises, ceases. We're the observer of its presence and absence. That is a level of awareness that is not blocked or obstructed by attachment and ignorance.

Awareness is a discerning ability; it sees how not to create suffering around the conditions that we experience in the body and in the conditioned mind. The unborn, uncreated, unformed, unconditioned, and the born, the created, the formed, the conditioned are not opposed to each other – one holds the other. Without this paradigm, we'd just be helpless victims of conditioning with no possible way to deal with it. We'd just be programmed early in life and continue to operate like a computer, until somebody changed the program or the batteries wore out.

Desire

With mindfulness we can see desire. This realm is a desire realm. This is a desire form – its nature is desire. It's *taṇhā*, it's always seeking rebirth. This is where, when we investigate *paṭicca-samuppāda* (dependent origination), we begin to see how the desires are such that, as long as there's *avijā* (ignorance), then we tend to be caught up in desires, and always seeking rebirth. When we are bored or disillusioned, we want something pleasant; we desire to be reborn again in a pleasant or exciting sense, whether it's mental or emotional. This is a form of rebirth; a desire moving towards a womb of some sort, something to get born into.

The Buddhist teaching is to get to know desire. It's not about getting rid of it. It's not condemning desire as something bad, or that we've got to conquer or get rid of it. As human individuals, we have desire forms, and this is a desire realm. This is the way things are. Desire, for example, is the conditioning that motivates us to seek to procreate

the species, or to do many other things. The only possible way we can recognize the deathless reality is through mindfulness. We can't create *the* deathless, and it's not something separate from us which is to be found. Practice means recognizing it, waking up and observing. Just by trying to imagine deathless reality and looking for it, we miss it, because we're not aware of it yet.

Realizing The Dhamma

When we cultivate mindfulness, we begin to discern in ordinary situations – not just when we are on meditation retreats. This discerning ability, as we recognize it and appreciate it, becomes self-sustaining. The rigorous volition involved in structured practice begins to fall away. What's left is awareness, and the relationship to the *vipakka-kamma* (the result of previous intentional action) that we're experiencing in the present, whatever it might be.

When the Buddha realized the Dhamma at the time of his enlightenment he initially thought, 'Nobody can understand this, because it is intuitive knowledge'. How are you going to teach intuition to somebody? How do you formulate it? Words themselves are so limited; they're about extremities. You get tangled up in your thoughts and views, and we're all highly conditioned to see things from cultural attitudes and personal kamma. In the film 'The Little Buddha' there were fantastic scenes of the Buddha (before his enlightenment) sitting under the bodhi tree as various beautiful, frightening and monstrous temptations, running the whole gamut of fear and desire presented themselves. The forces of *Māra*, were saying, 'Who are you, sitting under the Bodhi tree, who do you think you are? Get out of there!' Then *Tarani* the Mother of the Earth came forth and said, 'He has my permission to be in this place of enlightenment.' Then out of her hair came a flow of water. She washed away the conditions, and the ascetic Gotama could reflect.

On becoming enlightened, another deity appeared, urging the Buddha to go forth and teach the Dhamma, as there are those with only a little dust in their eyes. This is quite significant, because trying to teach the Dhamma is not an easy thing to do; it's so easy to get caught in the intellect and to hold on to dogmas and religious positions. So when you read the Buddha's first sermon, which is the Four Noble Truths, notice the skilfulness of that teaching. I have a great respect for this brilliant teaching, but it does take *paṭipadā* – it takes sincere practice. It's not just a nice idea or Buddhism *per se*. It's actually a clear pointing in a specific direction – at your heart.

Watch your heart, observe. Be the observer, be the knower, not the condition. Mindfulness is the escape hatch.

So I offer this for your reflection.

¹ *Eight worldly dhammas: praise/blame, gain/loss, happiness/unhappiness, fame/insignificance.*

2

Invincibility

Adapted from a talk given to the monastic community at Wat Pah Nanachat in 2011



Luang Por Khemadhammo was born in England in 1944. He became a samanera at Wat Mahadhat in 1971 and was ordained as a bhikkhu at Wat Pah Pong in 1972. He accompanied Luang Por Chah to London in 1977 and has been active in prison chaplaincy over the years. In 2003 he was appointed OBE for services to prisoners. In 2004, he was appointed Chao Khun with the ecclesiastical title of Phra Bhavanaviteht.

“You get fit by learning restraint and learning to rely on simplicity.”

NORMALLY I AM TO BE FOUND LIVING IN A SMALL FOREST HERMITAGE in the very Heart of England, not far from Stratford-upon-Avon. I live my life there as a forest monk much as I learnt to live it many years ago under the guidance of Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong but with a difference. While we were together during his stay in London in 1977, with his agreement I accepted and began what turned out to be a long standing commitment – some have called it a long sentence - to enable Buddhism to be available to prisoners in British prisons. Years ago I observed that while most people could easily come to the temple if they wanted to, prisoners could not, so we

must take the temple to them. And that mission has over the years grown to where now it takes up a great deal of my time, not only in visiting prisons and prisoners, but in advising prisons and the Prison Service on Buddhist matters, and in leading *Aṅgulimāla*, the Buddhist Prison Chaplaincy with its team of Buddhist chaplains. But once a year I leave all this behind and I go back to my monastic roots, to Wat Pah Pong, to join the grand occasion on the 16th January, the anniversary of Ajahn Chah's passing, when we gather to pay our respects and to process around the Ajahn Chah chedi where his relics are enshrined and where his body was cremated at a State funeral in 1993.

I do that and I maintain a determination to do that every year because I value enormously the contribution that Ajahn Chah has made to my life and the lives of thousands, perhaps millions of others. I am very grateful that I was able to go to Thailand and ordain and practise and live with him at Wat Pah Pong. I took myself there, I wasn't invited, but I was accepted and allowed to stay and I was fed and cared for. The people who supported Wat Pah Pong and its branch monasteries were extremely generous to me, to all of us from overseas. They welcomed us, they supported us, put food in our bowls every day, and enabled us to live the life of a Buddhist monk and to practise meditation. We were so lucky: we had a marvellous place in which to develop ourselves and we were in the presence of an extraordinary teacher, although as he became more famous, being close to him became increasingly difficult. But I was especially fortunate. For almost a year I stayed at Wat Keun, a place where he used to come on occasions, usually without any warning, to have a few hours rest and stay the night and then we would have him to ourselves. Later on in 1977, when he was invited to England, I went along as well and for two months lived particularly close to him. That was a great time, especially when you reflect that he hasn't taught now for thirty years: the last 10 years of his life he was bed ridden and could neither walk nor talk nor do anything for himself

and now it's almost twenty years since he passed away. Those then were special times that won't come again; the generations move on and time and tide waits for no one, neither man nor woman, monk nor nun.

Now as I am getting older I am anxious to keep alive the example and the tradition that he established. What he taught was not just practical but revolutionary in its impact. He made the whole business of being a monk really work. In many monasteries and temples, as can easily be seen, the disciplines and the traditions are not upheld and no one seems to care or to see much point in them. Neither the monks there nor the laity seem to grasp how the monastic discipline and traditions relate to practice and development. But Ajahn Chah understood and he made it all work. He was of course an extraordinary character. He was very kind, epitomising *metta*, but firm and unyielding in his principles, and he could be very fierce, turning in an instant into the most terrifying species of monk-eating tiger you can imagine! He expected a good and proper standard to be maintained and accepted nothing less. We had to do our best to fit in but as foreigners from the West we were often privileged, and certainly he enjoyed our peculiarities and was amused by our clumsiness and mistakes, but still he was determined to push us and stretch us and often it felt more like being thrown in at the deep end and expected to swim. He was unique. There have been very few teachers of his stature and very few traditions that have had anything like the impact that he had, especially in such a relatively short time.

Of course, walking round the chedi every year, making offerings and bowing isn't that difficult. Really it's the easy bit. Didn't the Buddha say that the best way of reverencing him was by practising what he taught? And the same ought to be said of any great Buddhist teacher or of any teacher at all worth the name. But that's always the difficult bit, especially when it's a Buddhist teacher of the stature of Ajahn Chah.

To call yourself a Buddhist implies following what the Buddha taught, endeavouring to practise as he did and trying to go where he led. Buddhist monks ought to be practising the *Vinaya* and a lifestyle designed and purpose-built for the realisation of Nibbāna. Well, that's what it ought to be but I'm afraid that nowadays for monks and for all sorts who call themselves Buddhist it's not like that. For many the real purpose in being a Buddhist or Buddhist monk has been lost or perhaps never really understood or even known at all. And that's why the big beasts of the Thai Forest tradition, the likes of Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah, have been so important. I'm not sure whether you would call Ajahn Chah a reformer for he was in many ways deeply conservative and traditional but he understood the super-objective of those traditions, those Buddhist teachings and disciplines and he made them work.

When I first arrived in Bangkok I met a friend whom I had known when we'd both attended the old Wat Buddhapadipa at East Sheen on the outskirts of London. He had set off before me and having travelled in India had fetched up in Thailand and I'd heard he was already a forest monk. I'd done India and the Holy Places and now I was in Thailand, a newly ordained novice not quite knowing where to go or what to do and suddenly, quite unexpectedly, this friend and I were face to face on a Bangkok pavement. I remember his saying to me, "If you want to be a real monk then there's only one place to go, Wat Pah Pong." Well, that was it, what could I do after that, where else could I go! But when I did eventually get to Wat Pah Pong and had been accepted and allowed to stay, I just couldn't at first grasp what was so special about Ajahn Chah, which didn't make me exactly popular with some of the foreign monks who were already there and who had developed a strong faith in him. But then, even before I'd begun to fall under his spell, I did catch on to what he had created: a formidable opportunity, a suitable place and supportive environment equipped with the effective and powerful tools of the bhikkhu life.

For those younger ones just beginning, just setting out on this path, my advice is to do the memorising and learn the skills of monastic life while you can. You might not believe it now but later in life a lot of things become more difficult. I can remember when Luang Por Chah became a Chao Khun and was made an *upajjhāya* he had to learn the ordination chanting, especially the long sermon in Pali that is given at the end of a bhikkhu ordination, and he couldn't. And I was surprised that he of all people could only with great difficulty learn something new. Further back when I was an actor and at the National Theatre, my boss was Laurence Olivier, in his early sixties and at the time probably the most famous actor in the world, and he couldn't learn his lines. For one play he had to have a copy of the script, open at the appropriate page, ready with his glasses, on a lectern and placed in the wings by every entrance so that he could have a quick look before he went on. Then I couldn't understand it, but I do now. So don't put off establishing yourselves firmly in the Vinaya and the skills and traditions of the bhikkhu life. Learn them well while you can and they will stay by you and serve you through all manner of trials and difficulties.

And there will be difficulties. Practised well, this monastic life will make life difficult for you and then will make it easy. Why? Because it will show up your kilesās in technicolour and with nowhere to go to avoid them, increasingly you'll have no alternative but to face your defilements, live with them, watch them, understand them and learn to let go of them. That's why, having made life difficult for you it ends up making it easy.

Ajahn Chah made the bhikkhu life work by keeping things simple. We have the Vinaya, we have traditional ways of doing things, we have meditation practice, and years back we had few books. He saw our dependence on books and tried to break us of it. I remember him saying to us that we should try not to read for at least a year. In fact we had hardly anything in English to read and that did make

it quite difficult for us to learn the details of the Vinaya. We had copies of the *Pāṭimokkha* and the *Vinayamukha* (The Entrance to the Vinaya) volumes one and two, but that was about it. The rest we had to work out or struggle to find out from other monks. And that did keep it all pretty simple, which I have realised as the years have gone by is the best way. Don't complicate things, keep it all simple and straightforward. Learn to just do what has to be done, observe the rules, go out to do whatever work there is when it is time to work, sit and meditate when it's time to meditate, and do your bit and play your part in the life of the community. Then it all works well and you can reflect on yourself, watch yourself, and know yourself. Living and practising like that keeps your mind relatively clear and you don't think too much. Thinking too much you can really get yourself in a terrible tangle, your mind turning and twisting this way and that. Don't do it: keep your mind clear and confront your *kilesā*.

Interestingly, in the West, it seems to me that Buddhists don't want to know too much about *kilesā*. They love reading and talking about compassion and all that inspiring stuff, but discipline, even the five precepts, isn't popular and *kilesā* hardly gets a look in. But really in order to do something about our lives we need to understand what it is that is spoiling our minds and coming between us and real peace and happiness. This Buddhist life leads you, well it doesn't lead you anywhere else but a direct confrontation with these difficulties and a chance to understand them and be free of them. As time gradually removes us further and further from the days when Ajahn Chah was alive and active, we see some of the practices and disciplines he maintained slipping. Of course there's always a good reason not to sit up all night on the Observance nights or keep the various dhutangas that have characterised the tradition established by Ajahn Mun and his disciples. But honestly, aren't those good reasons really *kilesā*? That's why these disciplines are important, they show up our shortcomings and help us to go against them.

When we abandon these practices we are in danger of giving in to our defilements. Dropping them can be a slippery slope that ends with you having no practical tools left with which to develop and shape yourself. So be careful.

The defilements that spoil our minds are essentially greed, aversion and delusion. When you watch yourself, you see variations on these themes all the time. Linked to your delusion is this strong attachment to self, ego, and all the trouble that brings. It is invaluable to be watchful, to begin to see these inner attitudes, and then as it progresses your practice takes you past that to observing the nature of these attitudes, how they come and go, rise and fall. It is important that you are able to watch and see all this for yourself, we are not interested in just learning what the Buddha taught. Yes, he advised the contemplation of whatever is experienced as impermanent, suffering and non-self. But you have to do it, you have to see it for yourself; and to experience it. Buddhist teaching and practice is about experience, it is not about theory. It is not some comfort tale or story, or view or opinion. It is about living: living experience. It is guiding us to investigate our experience and begin to understand it. With that understanding comes this priceless ability to let go. One of the things Ajahn Chah became famous for was talking about letting go. Now it's easy to parrot that, but you have to try to understand what it means and how to let go. You let go of attachments by understanding, by seeing and knowing for yourself what you do, your habits and what your life is about. Yes, this practice is about calming and concentrating the mind, but it is also about doing that for a purpose, not just 'blinking out', which people often associate meditation with. It is about sharpening, and learning to investigate, turning your attention inward, watching and being increasingly honest about what you see. It is a fabulous approach to this problem of life. All the techniques and all the traditions are there to draw you to look closer at yourself and to be able eventually to let go, and to be at ease, to be free from your suffering.

I can remember vividly listening to Luang Por Chah and watching him as he told us to not feed the *kilesā*. The *kilesās* are like tigers, he said, and if you feed your tiger he gets stronger and stronger, he roars and he dominates your life and is really dangerous. But if you gradually withdraw his food, if you stop feeding that tiger, then what happens? I remember Luang Por Chah acting it out for us, “He gets weaker and weaker, and eventually he will die.” So it is with your *kilesā*. I am afraid that if you ignore the disciplines you end up feeding *kilesā* and then your defilements gather strength. So be careful, disciplines help us, they help us to see our *kilesā* and to confront them. That is why those great monks, in whose shadows we walk, kept these *dhutaṅga* practices very strictly and very carefully.

Disciplining yourselves and denying yourself a few things builds up your ability to endure. You build up your strength. And that is important too, you have to exercise to stretch yourself, to make yourself tougher and better able to cope. Nowadays in England, I am of a generation that worries a bit when we see children taken to school by car, taken here and taken there. When I was a kid I walked to school from the age of five. I was taken to school once, and after that I walked. We were taught to look after ourselves and be independent. If we were bullied then we soon learnt how to handle it. But nowadays it is all safe and everyone has to be nannied and looked after, and of course people are not fit. Ajahn Chah used to say that good monks are like good soldiers, they can care for themselves. You need to be like that but you don't get like that by being sloppy or having to have something to stick in your mouth at all hours of the day and night. You get fit by learning restraint and learning to rely on simplicity. It will stand you in good stead later on, as you grow you will be tougher, you will be able to stand it anywhere. But if you are afraid of the cold, afraid of the heat, afraid of mosquitoes, afraid of bugs and one thing and another, it won't help. So be prepared to stretch yourself, then as you grow you will be able to cope with almost anything. In my *kuti* in England I have

a photograph of Luang Por Chah, one he gave to my parents when they visited me in Thailand in 1974. Ajahn Manapo has commented that in that picture Luang Por Chah looks like he could handle anything. That is what you need to be like. You are not making yourself precious and special and in need of special treatment. You have got to get to where you can handle anything and anyone. You do that by following the discipline, tightening up on yourself, pushing yourself, being a real warrior. By and by, it won't all come at once, you will become that invincible sort of person because your mind won't be troubled by anything and that's where you have to get to. So be careful of all these luxuries that come your way and the special care and attention you get. Once a year when I'm in Thailand it is very nice not to have to carry anything for myself, it's jolly nice to be fussed over, and I admit I quite enjoy it. It doesn't happen when I get back I can tell you, although Ajahn Manapo is very caring and has been absolutely brilliant to me in the ten years he has been with me. But apart from that, when I go out to the prisons I don't get any special treatment. I have to carry my own stuff and put up with people shouting out at me, sometimes rude, sometimes witty. And in a way I welcome it. Life is a bit more difficult but that's all right because it keeps me sharp. I don't want to get flabby. This is a kind of warning. You are in forest monasteries to train yourselves. You are here to free yourselves, to develop that invincible mind. So keep things simple, just do what you have to do each day. Do your duties. Keep it all simple, direct. You will benefit. Add a little bit of hardship, it will do you good. That will enable you to reap the rewards of Ajahn Chah's legacy. And you will also be adding to the merit of what you are doing by maintaining that legacy.

One last point, when I visited Somdet Buddhajahn recently, his advice, which he repeated several times, was for us not to change anything and to keep together.

Tan Chao Khun Bhavanaviteht (Luang Por Khemadhammo) OBE

3

What You Take Home With You

From a talk given at Insight
Meditation Society, Barre,
Massachusetts in 1999



Ajahn Sucitto was born in London in 1949. He received bhikkhu ordination in 1976 in Thailand, came to Britain in 1978 and was part of the original group that established Cittaviveka under Ajahn Sumedho in 1979. Ajahn Sucitto helped establish Harnham Vihara in 1981 then Amaravati in 1984, and in 1992 became the third abbot of Cittaviveka, where he remains today.

“When you handle the present with mindfulness, the future will be conditioned by awareness and joy.”

WHEN IT'S TIME TO LEAVE THE RETREAT or the monastery, you have to leave the situation and the structure. You're going to have to put aside the silence, support and companionship. You can only take with you what is yours – the awareness, the skills and the understanding. That's why we use routines and stillness without attaching to them – because you can't take them with you. It's fine to cultivate them during retreat, but the silence itself is not the main benefit. Rather, the main benefits are mindfulness and wisdom. We are involved with meditation in order to realize that our psychological space can change radically for the better. And we also practise just for the beauty of practice, for the skills and the

happiness that arise. These can stay with you if you carry them with the wisdom of right understanding.

You Can Take Mindfulness with You

Mindfulness, the ability to bear witness, is a tremendously powerful and skilful factor of mind. The Buddha called mindfulness the flood-stopper. It stops the floods of greed, hatred, and delusion. With mindfulness, we give ourselves a choice with regard to following what arises in the mind; and keeping that choice available is something you want to go on doing because the mind almost longs to get trapped – and there are plenty of sights, sounds, flavours and ideas that can sweep you away out of aware responsibility. So as we carry a body with us all the time, we can use that as a base for mindfulness; a place where we can stop the floods. We can turn our attention to the body and just refer to the body in the body, as it is – that is, as sensations, energies and form rather than the impressions of beauty or ugliness that identification imposes upon it. With those impressions, the body is always a source of anxiety and agitation. But we can know that that's just how the body is. It's a thirty-year-old body, a sixty-year-old body, or whatever. It behaves this way. It gets ill; it loses vitality. That's what it does. We don't have to make that a source of pain or horror. The body is the home base, the place where we learn to refer to the body in the body, not as a source of vanity or desire, but just as it is. And we can refer to other people's bodies in the same way.

It's much the same with mind-states; they don't have to be burdened with agitation, shame, defence or conceit. With mindfulness we bear mind-states in mind, but not in a hypnotized way. Instead mindfulness is to be conjoined with full awareness. Full awareness tunes into the ethical nature of our current mind-state; also, it is alert to the changing nature of whatever we experience. So when mindfulness and full awareness come into play, they guide us towards letting go of the bad and affirming the good, without

making a drama out of them. Without this skilful way of relating, we just identify with the mind states and relate to them with shame, conceit and build up programs of needing to control everything, impulsiveness, fault-finding or self-pity. These relational programs become our thumbprints – so close that we don’t even see them – yet we can stamp them on everything and everyone we come into contact with. The check-point is whether we can relate to mind states with responsibility but without making a big thing out of them. Can we relate without attachment, without sticking our thumbprints onto what arises, and allow a state to be as it is? Mindfulness and full awareness make it possible to do so. And amazingly enough this gives us clarity to let the state pass, learn from it, or engage – whatever is appropriate.

So as you leave here take a mindful way of relating with you. Notice when meditating on breathing, how we put demands onto a simple thing like the breathing. ‘I need to get concentrated!’ We can get into aversion as well. ‘I’m useless because I can’t be with the breathing.’ But there is a release from relating in these ways. We can learn to trust, to allow, to be content with the way it is. Then the mind can rest in that contentment, and let that natural calm support mindfulness of your body’s breathing. Then *samadhi* arises – not out of forcing the mind onto the breath but out of a relationship of ease, contentment, trust, and steadiness.

Our entire lives are about the possibility of right relationship. As we learn this, everything opens up. There will always be something to relate to – from the most intimate to the global, from one other person to a community, group or nation, from the living to the dead. True relationship is a dynamic experience, isn’t it? It’s not a fixed or static thing. It’s a way of being that involves the openness and the skill to be present with the way it is. If we don’t do that, the relationship becomes distorted with projections. Consider, for example, how many human relationships get distorted because they

follow the wrong impulses. ‘I want you to be this way. You’ve got to be like this for me.’ As long as we’re coming from self-interest we’ll always see things in terms of how we want them to be, and this can only be a very limited perspective. Follow it, and there’s disappointment, bitterness, and betrayal.

But there’s a way out of that, through Dhamma practice. This brings us more clearly into life. It’s not about latching onto a particular feeling, mood, perception, or situation. Dhamma practices like mindfulness, patience and clarity help us to relate to what’s going on with more spaciousness and less demands and pressure; one can even learn about one’s stickiness in a light way. ‘Oh, I see what’s happening. The mind is doing this.’ We can let go of it. Then life is based on clarity. It’s interesting. It’s something you can empathize with. When we get stuck in our self-perspectives, we get cranky and stubborn and defensive, rigid or inflamed. So we need to keep using mindfulness and full awareness to learn not to take our own perspectives as ultimate. Then we can grow in terms of empathy, clarity and ease.

If we can cultivate in this way, we arrive at what is called *atammayatā*, which means ‘not making out of it.’ Things are happening as they are right now. *Atammayatā* is the wisdom that relinquishes making things out of arisen phenomena. But it’s not an unwillingness to respond. It means that we don’t keep running our habits and compulsive programs through life. We leave our life-story, with its tragedies, heroes and villains behind. This wise relinquishment comes through mindfulness and awareness. That is, the mind tunes in to the way things are right now, and finds that it feels steady and complete. And it feels more in touch this way, than when it goes into judgments and opinions and tries to make things happen in accordance with them. A wiser response can then arise, as and when and how it fits.

So mindfulness supports wisdom, the wisdom to recognize the difference between how things are going and the habitual

impressions and reactions that we construct around that. And as we begin to see things as changing events rather than fixed realities, the mind comes out of its own frozen or compulsive states. In that awakening, the mind's centre shifts. It feels steady yet light. Once there is access to this lightness, this non-attachment, it can progressively deepen. We stop getting so intense about our habits, and accordingly approach them more skilfully. We approach them from the non-attachment that defuses and discharges them.

Living the Dhamma requires a skilful handling, a gentle unravelling of our tightly-held complexities. When we can handle our mind's views and energies, then we can share its rich potential with one another. Rather than constantly intensifying me and mine, we can live lightly, share, and enjoy. We can act without making a big deal out of it. And a basis for action with non-attachment to praise, blame and self-imagery is a great thing to take with you.

You Can Take Understanding with You

You can take understanding wherever you go, by looking out for three signs. These signs may not sound very attractive, because they are the qualities of unsatisfactoriness, impermanence, and not-self that can be discerned in our experience. In terms of conditioned reality, these three signs are true markers that run through what we see, think, taste, feel and do.

Think about these. There is 'unsatisfactoriness' (*dukkha*). This doesn't mean that everything is miserable and wretched; it means that there is a sense of incompleteness. We'd like things to be consistent and ordered, but they rarely are. Unsatisfactoriness occurs in different ways. First of all there is the natural law of things breaking down, or being inconsistent. This is called '*sabhāva dukkha*': the way that nature is. There is pain. The world is always unresolved. Life isn't fair and doesn't have straight edges. Relationships keep going in and out of kilter. We can conceive of

life as if it should run in straight lines, but you won't find a straight line in the universe. Even light bends.

We can however be upright! In terms of morality, and of how we relate to what we're with, we can be that balanced uprightness that witnesses the wobbly nature of experience and makes peace with that. And we can contemplate any unsatisfied feeling that comes into our minds. This form of *dukkha* (*sankhata dukkha*) is something that our minds compound; and it's an experience that we can do something about. In this sense *dukkha* is a feeling that occurs as a consequence of wanting things to be full, complete, reasonable, steady.... Most poignantly it occurs around physical pain, or the sense of separation from the loved. This is where we're really tested, as to whether we go into frustration, depression, or denial; whether we react and compound an unsatisfactory mind-set around the *dukkha* of being alive – or whether we use Dhamma to meet and come out of all that.

To come out of those reactions is the crux of Dhamma practice: through this practice we develop the capacity to meet the *sabhāva dukkha* with patience, compassion, and equanimity. And to generate these qualities in ourselves at this very important meeting-place is what mindfulness and full awareness are about.

The sign of *dukkha* is not a cause for despair, but rather a pointer to where we need to let go of naivety and grow mature in life. Through meeting *dukkha* we come fully to life. Life is flowing, rhythmic and comes with forces that we can't control. To pass then through *dukkha* to a serene centre in ourselves there has to be the development of great strengths, great faith and great heart. Therefore we should take the exhortation with us to practise with whatever *dukkha* arises; it's this that makes us grow.

The second sign is that of impermanence, inconstancy or uncertainty – *anicca*. Consider the way that expectation establishes things in the future, how it sets up the wish for things to be this way or that

way. The sign of impermanence challenges that: *anicca* also carries the implication of complete uncertainty. From moment to moment, things are shifting and changing. You can't anticipate what's going to come up. You don't know. What does that do to your plans and sense of security? It can feel scary, but this sign, like that of *dukkha*, catalyzes the development of great heart and great freedom.

Anicca is very good for helping us break out of our sense of time. Time is an abstraction. We create it as a linear thing, something that moves forward. But contemplate that. How long has this week been? Ten days? Someone said that yesterday felt like forty-eight hours. And yet, what's ten seconds of pain? How long is a shower? How long is a cold shower?

Time then is a measure of desire – desire for continuity, desire for a certain outcome. It paralyzes us into expectation and anticipation or dread and worry. We skip over the present moment and get lost in something we imagine is out there in the virtual reality we call the future. One can spend one's life thinking about the future – for example, 'When I get home, I'll...' But in the purest sense, there isn't any future. We are only ever here.

How good is having a future anyway? It's a burden when it makes you think, 'Oh, I've got to do this. I've got to do that' or, 'It's going to be like this and like that,' or, 'maybe there's something I should be or could be...Well maybe I could, or perhaps I'll never be able to...'
What do these things feel like? We can spend quite a lot of time in meditation trying to put aside the past and the future because we've become so attuned to that way of experiencing things – the past and the future. That's our conditioning. Meditating, trying to get into the present moment, can take quite a bit of skill. But the more that one can abide in the present, the easier the meditation will be.

In this respect, the capacity to live in uncertainty can help. We can develop the capacity to live free from the pressure of time. But it's

not about imagining that there will be no future ... that's another expectation about the future. No, the skills that you develop in being fully tuned in to the present and meeting and managing what arises will support a future based on clarity and balance. The future arises out of the conditions in the present, so when you handle the present with mindfulness, the future will be conditioned by awareness and joy rather than by anxiety and bias. Joy comes from the initiative and the courage to meet the inconstant and the uncertain. Take those with you too!

The third sign, 'not-self', *anattā*, is for the psychological context. If you look at any way in which you sense yourself, you see that it also depends on an inferred other-than-self. Because of this sense of 'me' there is also 'the other', the 'what I should be, what I might be seen as' and so on. The two facets go hand-in-hand. Things only exist, are notable or recognizable, because their opposites also exist. 'This is me, this is mine. I end at the edge of my skin. Other things exist, too, and they are out there, somewhere else.' Whenever there's an experience of 'mine', there's an experience of 'nothing to do with me'. There's a place called 'away' which is somewhere else. 'I don't want this so I throw it away.' 'Nothing to do with me.' On a global level, you can see the results of this kind of thinking. This is what all the pollution is about, isn't it? We're always trying to find a pit in which to bury things, dump them over the side, or look the other way. It's gone! It's gone away. But there isn't any 'away.' We have ways of switching off from what we can't bear. But really there aren't any final 'aways.' The dark side lives with us, doesn't it? And it only gets darker if we don't meet it with wisdom and compassion.

There isn't any getting away from your mind either. As long as it's experienced in a way that suggests that you are a self who can get away from your thoughts, emotions and memories, then you haven't developed the right relationship. When you learn to relate appropriately to the things that you don't like about yourself ...

when you stop trying to get away from yourself ... then you begin to experience yourself from a different basis. You relate to these experiences as they arise, rather than denying them as 'not me' or get stuck in them as: 'This is what I am.' And it's the same thing when relating to others: if other people are always 'getting in my way' and 'taking up my time' and 'bothering me', it's time to consider: 'What does this show me about my mind-set? What makes the otherness of "other people"?' Isn't it the view that imagines separate selves at the centre of it? And aren't all these selves tinted by our biases and reactions? But with mindful awareness of the experience of self and other, we see that it is these tints and assumptions that really form self. It is this 'self-view' that clogs up our ability to relate.

We can colour life with the darkness of our own ignorance, bias or inability to be with what arises. But how lonely it is when we follow this self-view! There's a lack of trust, a lack of ease, a lack of sharing. People can feel dreadfully alone and that experience of aloneness is even more conscious in groups of people. You may not even experience it when you are on your own. Aloneness is a sense of alienation from the others who I sense around me. Some of the loneliest places are cities or railway stations or airports. There are thousands of people milling around all being 'other'. One can feel quite confused, threatened, even frightened. There's nothing more frightening than a crowd of people being 'others'.

With understanding, we can work with the mechanisms that make it that way. We can look into our psychology and relax the activities that reject, dismiss, screen out, or push away the 'other'. If you're a little speck in an indifferent or hostile universe then you've got to get something and have something and be something. You become the only place of safety and control in the cosmos. That's a tough job description to live up to, but that tightness, that sense of alienation is what 'self-view' does to you. So take the exhortation to look into 'self and other' with you; it can unfold into great compassion and freedom.

Let Great Heart Take You

Dhamma-practice can give you the boundaries of morality and the buoyancy to allow you to be with, but not overwhelmed by, the ups and downs and uncertainties of life. You feel yourself being lived, breathed in and out. And when you open into this sense of an uncontrolled ease, you can experience the great heart. This is the sense that can feel unconfined by separation. It can widen to embrace the hurt, and in that widening sense be a still, serene centre. From great heart come *mettā*, the inclination towards well-being for oneself and others, *karuṇa*, the capacity to receive and empathize with another person's suffering, *muditā*, a sense of enjoyment at another's success or happiness, and *uppekḥā*, the even-mindedness to serenely be with the ocean as the 'way it is'.

If you can maintain this Dhamma cultivation, you can pass more easily through the loss, the grief, the pain, and the illness that comes up in life. You get to trust the Dhamma of your heart rather than being clenched, holding on, fearing, or resisting. You may not know the future but you can know that mindfulness, awareness and calm are better than fear. You know that living in a self-absorbed way is hurtful and renders you confused, clumsy, and eventually impotent. We can know this and stay with that knowing. And for a moment, when you feel a quality of joy and opening that comes through that, then stay with it. This is the heart of the practice.

So Dhamma practice is about being fully alive and staying alive. It's about the brightness and the vitality that come from connecting to a living system. It doesn't mean it's always going to be a comfortable ride. But once you begin to understand and lighten up about the comfortable and uncomfortable, then you experience the balance that enables you to ride, to float, to connect, to share in this great Way. This is what life is about. This is being alive rather than just existing.

4

Radiant Non-Belief

Adapted from a Sunday night talk given at Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery in 2010



Ajahn Munindo was born in New Zealand in 1951. He received the going forth from Somdet Nāṇasaṃvara in 1974 and spent his first Rains Retreat with Ajahn Thate. In 1975 he was reordained by Ajahn Chah in Wat Nong Pah Pong. In 1980 he joined Ajahn Sumedho at Chithurst, later becoming abbot of Aruna Ratanagiri in 1991 where he resides today.

“Those who are energetically committed to the way, pure and considerate in effort, composed and virtuous in conduct, steadily increase in radiance.” THE BUDDHA

THIS IS VERSE 24 FROM THE DHAMMAPADA. It comes from the *Appamāda-vagga*; ‘the section on heedfulness’. The Buddha gave this particular verse specifically in the context of the teachings to lay people – but principles of Dhamma apply equally to those who have gone forth to live the renunciate life and to those who live the householders’ life.

As I read this text, the word that stands out for me is ‘radiance’ – the last word of the stanza. What is it that makes a person radiant?’ My first teacher, Venerable Ajahn Tate had leukaemia for 20 years and he was already quite old and quite ill when I was there. The doctors had said he wasn’t going to live very long, but he remained well and

was in his nineties when he died. He was certainly a radiant being. And he was somebody you would say was ‘pure and considerate in effort and composed and virtuous in conduct’ – one of those people who, as soon as you meet them, fill you with admiration.

But one also meets radiant individuals from time to time who are not considerate and composed; people who can be characterized as fundamentalists. I’ve met some radiant people who go on about this or that Archangel or about Intergalactic Beings. Some of the stories these people tell are definitely weird. Yet they’re very radiant with bright shining eyes and full of energy! So it is worth thinking about how one can be radiant and bright and energized yet not understanding Dhamma, not moving towards liberation from suffering.

Letting go of attachments is what the Buddha was talking about. Fundamentalists cultivate attachments – they access radiance from clinging. Clinging can indeed lead to accumulating power. Religious fundamentalists and also political fundamentalists have a charisma that can attract a large following of believers. There are environmental fundamentalists, medical fundamentalists. Fundamentalism is a condition of the mind where the consciousness constricts and contracts down to a very few possibilities and gives the believers a strong sense of certainty. Fundamentalism doesn’t tolerate ambiguity or diversity or complexity. It’s a simplistic approach to life, very firmly held. It rejects and feels threatened by uncertainty. Within my own family, I’m very familiar with fundamentalists’ belief systems and with people who are radiant and positive and full of energy. But it’s not a path that leads to respect for different approaches to life.

The path of practice to which the Buddha pointed to – the path exemplified by Ajahn Tate and Ajahn Chah – is not a path of finding radiance or energy, well-being or strength, in ‘grasping’, but in ‘letting go’; including letting go of beliefs. If we grasp at beliefs we can find radiance, but it won’t shine light on the path to purity and unshakeable peace. When we grasp and become identified with a

belief or a view we impose a constriction on our hearts resulting in the force of conviction which can be impressively energizing. But that is not the approach the Buddha was encouraging. In one sense he encouraged disbelief; or perhaps it is more accurate to say he encouraged us to withhold belief. Crafting our practice along the lines of withholding belief, along the lines of letting go of beliefs is truly beneficial and safe for ourselves and for others. And if we can see how this brings openness of heart, freedom, energy and aliveness and also possibly radiance, then we will want to bring it into all aspects of our lives.

Wise Choices

It's important that we see how this works in meditation. There we are, sitting on the cushion, focussed on the meditation object. We have the sensation of the body breathing, and exercise the discipline of staying with this. There's a sense of ease and presence – an awareness of this moment, not getting lost in the past or in the future – being present without taking sides 'for' or 'against'; 'right' or 'wrong'. We do this for a while and then something arises in our consciousness, like: 'I'd like to think about something else: that movie I wanted to see...' So, what are we going to do now? We've got a choice at that point. Are we going to follow the impulse to think about wanting to watch that movie? Or are we going to come back to the meditation object? That's the point where we can choose to exercise restraint and if we understand – if we do this with mindfulness – we equip our heart with the skill of abiding in openness and uncertainty. We come to see that we don't have to cling to ideas; we don't have to be certain about life or certain about the future.

The fundamentalist within, or the clinging mind, demands to be sure, wants to know straight away. It's like what tends to happen when you get a letter from the doctor – you maybe had some tests done – and the doctor says you've got to come in to talk about it, and you start thinking: 'Oh my goodness, I had these tests and maybe something is wrong or...' The truth is we are not sure, we simply

don't know, and what happens is that we go into worry, into fear and anxiety. How do we pull out of that? How do we not believe in the conditions that arise in our mind: worry, anxiety, desire, ill will? These are the conditions that disturb our meditation, these are the conditions that ruin our lives; how do we not 'become' them? This is where formal practice and meditation are so important.

In daily-life practice we exercise skilful restraint and that is necessary. In formal meditation practice we work with restraint on a different, more subtle level. What we learn at this deeper level can have a profound and life-changing effect on our everyday life. As we patiently and consistently observe the tendency to become caught in the movements of mind, like desire and ill will, a new understanding emerges, naturally. We simply see for ourselves the sanity of choosing not to follow distractions. We see the consequences. We're not just doing it because the teacher said to do it or because we're trying to develop some special state of mind. We are exercising restraint – we choose not to follow the conditions – because we're interested in freedom, not constriction; when these conditions arise in our mind we learn to not believe what they tell us. It's about growing up.

It can feel so tempting to follow a desire like, 'How can I get to watch that movie?' or: 'How can I get my own back on that person who took advantage of me.' Or to feel worried: '...when I said that, I wonder if they thought I was saying this instead....' But in truth we are not obliged to believe in the stories our mind tells us. We can choose to exercise discernment; to exercise mindfulness and discover the very real power that comes from letting go with understanding. When our minds are conditioned by habits of following sensual desire – gratification through grasping at sensuality – then that's what we do, we grasp at it. Sensual desire comes up and we grasp at it and we believe it's going to give us what we want. And then, if we get what we want, we feel momentarily happy and pleased with ourselves,

or if we don't get what we want we feel disappointed and try to forget about it. From a practice perspective we don't stop there but we study it. We think, 'Well, believing in desire got me into a lot of trouble last time, so ...' But usually we don't do that if our desires are frustrated, we just say, 'OK, I'll just go for something else and try harder to gratify it next time.' We are addicted to distraction.

When desire arises during meditation, the wise thing to do is to come straight back to the breath. If it's too strong a desire and that pulls at us, we might need to turn attention and actually look at it. Choosing to restrain the mind from following the desire, still aware of the whole body/mind, not getting pulled into 'right' or 'wrong', 'should' or 'shouldn't'; it's judgement-free, here-and-now, whole body awareness. We choose to investigate the desiring thought. We practice like this until we see through it and can see it's a 'con': 'It's a "con" and I do not believe in it.' This is not because we have grasped at disbelief. Grasping at disbelief is just the same as grasping at belief. Rather we consider: 'What is the reality of this desire? Desire appears to be telling me I've got to grasp at it, believe in it and follow it. But does doing so really produce well-being? What happens if I grasp it? I get fired up; I feel agitated and restless. It doesn't make me peaceful.'

If we persist in this practice of mindfulness enquiry, then we understand how we don't have to 'believe' to get energized; we don't have to 'believe' to feel good. In fact, we're choosing to not believe. Not because we're forcing ourselves to not believe in it. We're choosing to not believe in desire; to not believe in that particular movement of the mind, not believe in the apparent reality. Or in the case of ill will: we've seen through the 'con,' 'Yes, it definitely does feel that way but I do not believe or trust in that feeling; in the wish to hurt somebody.'

Creativity or Compulsion

Initially we understand conceptually, or even intuitively feel for, how wise restraint works but that doesn't mean to say we will fully

appreciate the benefits immediately. But if we don't fall into the trap of trying too hard or in being too hesitant or lazy, hopefully one day we will see through it. Over and over again in our meditation, we must willingly come back, willingly restrain ourselves from following the apparent realities – the stories. It might feel terribly creative to follow our fantasies. Indeed in meditation it often does feel that way. But if we can't choose to not follow them then they're not really creative, it's a compulsive regurgitation of old stuff. We are merely caught up in – and therefore defined by – the old worn-out conditioning of our mind.

Compulsive proliferation is very different from creative engagement. If you are being driven, that's compulsive proliferation. You may manage to get a lot of things done by being totally caught up in compulsive proliferation. You can be productive and get paid a lot of money. A lot of the world is like this but how much wisdom comes from this approach? How deep do we go in our investigation of reality and how much genuine contentment comes from it?

If interest in reality – *dhammachanda* – is alive in us then even compulsive proliferation is something we can choose to investigate. With mindfulness we notice the compulsive thinking and we choose not to merely follow it. Sitting in meditation and these compulsive thoughts come up. It seems like an obsession but we don't just dismiss the obsession, it is something we choose to investigate. We can learn from these thoughts: 'What is this feeling that I'm feeding on? What is it that I'm convinced by? What is it that I seem to believe in?' We can really simplify a lot of our practice just by seeing what it is that we're convinced by and then looking at it until, one day, we realize: 'I don't have to do that anymore'.

Remember, it's not grasping at disbelief – but finding we can let go of belief. We get a feeling for this and all sorts of limitations and obstructions in our life become more workable. You still let feelings feel the way they feel – you can still let them feel really ugly and

irritating and offensive, but you don't believe what they tell you. 'I should really be afraid of this, I should be terrified by this, but no, I just don't believe it.' This also is a way towards radiance. The great beings who have practised for a long time are not radiant because they're attaching to belief; if anything they're radiant because they don't believe in the way *saṃsāra* appears to be.

There is a talk Ajahn Chah gave that has been called *Not Sure! - The Standard of the Noble Ones*. Some of you will be familiar with it I expect. Here he's talking about what happens if the thought occurs to you: 'Oh, I'm a *sotapāṇna*, I've attained the state of being a Stream Enterer.' Ajahn Chah tells us to go and ask the *sotapāṇna* and what they will tell you, 'It's not sure. Everything is not sure.' The way of being fully, radiantly 'not sure' is very different from the radiance that comes from grasping at being sure.

Heeding these words of Ajahn Chah helps when perhaps we come across other teachings and other traditions; we might feel, 'Well I'm not sure about things and I'm not confident,' and you start to doubt about your practice. Be careful and let interest guide you. If you believe the apparent reality that says you are pathetic and hopeless then you just made yourself pathetic and hopeless. The feeling of 'I'm not sure ...' can be observed. It is perfectly fine to feel not sure. We are not obliged to believe the way the world of the senses appears.

And so what we start to discover is that there's an increased capacity to live with being 'not sure'. If we want to look at our progress in practice, we don't look at how much more certain we're becoming, we look at our capacity for accommodating uncertainty. If you want a barometer for progress in practice, look at how skilful you are at holding 'not sure'. It's very different from what most spiritual disciplines teach. Exercise the skill of being mindfully 'not sure', apply it and try it out. Remember this is not just another technique or position we grasp in our search for security. Really try it out in your

formal practice and in daily life. Start to experiment with the result of restraining the mind's tendency to grasp at wanting to be sure.

Subtle Effort

We need to be very subtle in applying mindfulness because our habits of engaging experience wilfully are such that even when we hear a talk about restraint, the tendency can be to become wilful about it. That's not what is meant by being 'composed and virtuous'. That's not what is meant by being 'considerate and pure'. 'Pure and considerate' is about a careful investigation. 'Composed and virtuous' is about a sensitive receptivity of the conditions for the sake of enquiry. We aren't just trying out a technique here. Rather it is our interest in reality that motivates us.

The tendency to take up the practice wilfully is one of the things that keeps tripping us up. And it is often directly related to ill will. Maybe this is just a 'man thing' and so women will have to translate it into their own experience. But, for men, there is so much competitiveness; we get into this 'argy-bargy' – this ongoing competitive feeling of, 'I've got to win. If I don't win who knows what's going to happen – the world's going to come to an end? I'm going to die!' That's what our chemicals are telling us. Saying it like this can sound like an exaggeration but if it weren't this extreme, why would we behave the way we do? It sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Losing an argument – well, so what? But men argue in this kind of way because of believing in the appearance of the movements of their minds, 'I am sure that something terrible is going to happen if I lose this argument.' Once the hormones get activated, 'I've got to fight, I've got to win. If I don't, it's a disaster, there'll be serious consequences.' If we allow ourselves to believe in it, that's how we behave. Unawareness has serious consequences.

When I was growing up my older brother was bigger and stronger than me, but I had a sharper, smarter tongue and I'd exercise my speech on him in an unpleasant way. Not 'pure and composed'

or ‘considered and virtuous’ – just *kilesā*, defilement, compulsive behaviour. So out of unawareness of reality, through not seeing the truth of hurtful speech, I cultivated a harmful habit – harmful for me and for others. But with wise restraint and careful enquiry, we can start to learn from our habits; that *that’s* not going to get us what we’re looking for. It doesn’t lead to peace and contentment.

Believing in the movements of the mind is being a slave to the world. In reality we are not obliged to believe in ill will. We don’t have to win an argument. We can lose an argument and it is not a disaster. The opposite of the way it appears is the case, in fact; once we know we don’t have to fight, we feel safe. Knowing we can lose is another good barometer for practice. If you’re getting caught up in an argument see if you can just say, ‘Oh well, OK, maybe.’ But again be on the watch though for the trap of turning this effort into taking a fixed position: ‘By refusing to play this game with you, I’m going to win.’ That’s not it either. We remember ourselves in the moment: this is *sati*; the self-remembering. We remember ourselves and reflect: ‘I don’t need to believe in having to win this argument.’ Once again, choosing to not believe is different from getting energized by grasping at disbelief.

Steady Practice

Coming back to our verse, it talks about ‘steadily increasing in radiance...’. I think in today’s world, the age of the microchip, it’s helpful to ponder on the value of being steady in our practice; not too fast, not too slow. Today it’s all about speed, many people have become frantic with the electronic age – the latest Apple gadget is some phenomenal, powerful and extraordinarily beautiful piece of electronic wizardry. Part of our nervous system might be able to relate to this wizardry but not all of our being works like that. The whole body/mind does not operate at that speed. The promise of the electronic age appeals to only one part of who and what we are. Without appreciating the value of steady cultivation and

wise restraint we can become intoxicated by the myths that these modern wizards tell us and be manipulated by desire, forgetting that our flesh doesn't function at that speed; our bones don't behave like a touch-screen monitor. A large part of who we are operates according to gentler rhythms. If we forget ourselves and focus on one powerful portion of our being, ignoring other dimensions, we lose our way.

So over and again the Buddha gave us these images of 'steady' development. There is the teaching of the imprint of the hand on the tool of a craftsman: a carpenter using a chisel for a long period of time and eventually you can see the imprint of the craftsman's hand on the handle of the chisel that he's using. Another image is of water slowly dripping into a water barrel: 'drip ... drip... drip...', gradually, gradually, one moment at a time the barrel becomes filled. The world at the time when the Buddha walked in it wasn't driven by the microchip. Yet there was greed and ill will as there is now. People suffered from unawareness as we do now. In our time the consequences of allowing our unruly, uncultivated nature to dictate how we live, are potentized by technology. Perhaps our suffering is more severe as a result. But we need not be disheartened, because truth is still true. Dhamma is timeless. We can have confidence that by being energetically committed to the way, by gradually realizing a radiance borne out of letting go, by not believing in the way the world appears, we can still receive the same benefits of practice. With right restraint and skilful investigation we steadily approach what the Buddha called *asokaṃ*, *virajam*, *khemam*: a life that is free from sorrow, free from obstacles, unshakeably secure. I would like to leave you here with this inspiring image.

Thank you very much for your attention.

5

Forgiveness

Adapted from a Sunday afternoon talk given at Amaravati in 2010



Ajahn Amaro was born 1956 in England. He was ordained as a bhikkhu by Ajahn Chah in 1979 and trained in England from 1979-1995 with Luang Por Sumedho. In 1996 he became co-abbot at Abhayagiri Monastery with Ajahn Pasanno and stayed until 2010 when, on Luang Por Sumedho's retirement, he took over as abbot of Amaravati.

"When we are always ready to forgive others and let go of carrying around any kind of grudge, then no one needs to be afraid of us."

IN MOST HUMAN CULTURES, THERE IS A LONG HISTORY OF VENGEANCE. When we experience some kind of hurt, we feel an instinctual urge to cause harm in return to that which has hurt us. It's a reactive habit: we want our revenge. We may also believe we have some kind of 'official' sanction to punish someone. The Bible is frequently misquoted as saying, 'Vengeance is mine, sayeth the Lord.' Or we may feel a duty to restore our honour. That's the basis of so-called honour killings, in which the family honour or the spiritual honour has been defiled and the right response is to kill the offender. If we just forgive and forget, we may think, we're not doing our duty.

Even reflecting on this in terms of the Buddha's teachings on kamma and *vipaka* (action and its results), we may believe that wrongdoers should be punished. Or we may ask, if we all receive the results of our actions, why do people who behave in terrible ways often seem to get away with it? Murderers, robbers, politicians who rip everybody off left and right – many of them seem to be enjoying very comfortable lives, thank you very much. And some people who live very virtuous and beneficial lives seem to be suffering a lot, or at least their lives are not any easier or better than the rest of ours. So where are the results of their actions?

Side-by-side suttas in the *Majjhima Nikāya* (numbers 135 and 136) address these questions. In the first one, the Shorter Discourse on the Nature of Action, the Buddha describes how there is a corresponding result for every kind of action or disposition. If we're very generous or moral, then we'll be reborn looking beautiful. Or if we live harmlessly, then we'll be gifted with a long life. He lists the matching consequences to many different actions. But then in the next discourse, the Longer Discourse on the Nature of Action, the same common questions come up: Why don't people who live an immoral life experience some kind of immediate negative response? How come they seem to go 'unpunished'? And why do terrible things happen to good people? The Buddha then explains that, while there is an inexorable law of action and result that function together, we can't predict exactly when or how or where the results of a particular action will ripen.

This teaching can be hard to accept. Most people want to see immediate results. If someone has broken into our house, we want to see him taken to court and charged. We are eager to see justice done. It's not enough to say, 'Well, maybe in a future life, this person's going to lose all his belongings. No, I'd rather see him go to jail now.' That's a very natural response. But when we carry around that kind of resentment and negativity – the model of 'an eye for

an eye, a tooth for a tooth' – we may not realize that we are actually harming ourselves.

I recently heard a good story that illustrates this point: once upon a time a man was walking along a path. He happened to catch his foot on a lump of dried mud and tripped and hit his nose on the ground. His nose bled, and he felt a sudden rage at the Earth that had hurt him. He stood up and shook his fist at it. 'What have I ever done to you?!' he shouted. 'You stub my toes, you make me dirty, you make me tired walking up your hills, and you make me fall going down. I've had it with you!' He stomped off home and got his shovel. 'I'll show you,' he growled. 'I'll shovel you away, if it takes me the rest of my life!'

The man viciously jabbed his spade into the ground, scooped up some earth, and flung it into the air. 'That's one shovelful gone, and here goes another!' he grunted to himself as he tossed up a second scoop of dirt. He worked and worked, digging furiously, trying to shovel the Earth away, once and for all. All afternoon he dug up earth and threw it into the air, paying no attention to anything else. He never noticed that he was digging himself into a hole. We might hear that story and laugh, meanwhile forgetting the last time we did the same thing: 'He really did me wrong, and I am going to carry around my resentment forever!' We can really dig ourselves into those holes.

In considering forgiveness, on the other hand, we both acknowledge the harm that's been done and we look for a way forward that can help us all. We ask, 'What's going to be of benefit both to myself – so that I don't have to carry the burden of aversion, hatred, negativity – and to the other person or people?' It's important to understand that forgiveness doesn't mean glossing over the harm that's been done, pretending that it doesn't matter. It means finding the most skilful response.

In the 'Sharing of Blessings' chant is the line, 'Those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile; may all beings receive the blessings of my life,

may they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the Deathless.' On an instinctual level, why would we want to share the blessings of our life with someone who is hostile towards us? Why would we want to share our limited amount of good kamma, to offer up the goodness of our lives, to evil-doers? Wouldn't that be condoning their actions?

What makes this practice so powerful is the recognition that, yes, this person's actions are harmful, but more negativity is only going to make things worse. Similarly, just because I love you and respect your nature as a living being doesn't mean I approve of all of your actions. It can be very easy to conflate other people with their actions: if I don't approve of what you do, then I should feel badly towards you. In practising Dhamma, we realize that those are two different things. We can cultivate loving-kindness, respect and forgiveness towards another being but at the same time heartily disapprove of their actions. This is an extraordinarily important principle to bring into our culture. The act of wishing well to even those who do us harm is a recognition of our common humanity, our common nature as living beings. It is a recognition that carrying around resentment only creates greater division, greater disharmony, and greater discord and sows the seeds of greater suffering in the future.

We can contemplate this many times during the course of a day. Say we encounter somebody in our family, at work, or in the government whose actions we disapprove of, and then we think, 'I can't stand that person' or 'That's really upsetting.' Notice that, see that reaction, and consider, 'Their actions seem harmful and destructive, but that's not cause for me to cultivate negativity and aversion towards that other person.'

The Buddha talked in terms of wholesomeness and unwholesomeness but never in terms of an absolute evil. This is another helpful principle to digest in terms of cultivating forgiveness, compassion, and loving-kindness towards other beings. The discourse called the

Rebuke to *Māra* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 50) tells of an encounter between the Buddha's secondmost senior disciple, *Mahā-Moggallāna*, who was gifted with psychic powers, and *Māra*, the Buddhist version of Satan and the embodiment of all unwholesomeness. *Māra* is trying to cause *Mahā-Moggallāna* trouble, but *Mahā-Moggallāna* immediately recognizes him. *Mahā-Moggallāna* then tells him, 'You know, in a past life I was a *Māra*, too. My name was *Dūsī*, and my sister *Kālī* had a son, who was you. I used to be your uncle.'

Here's one of the great saints of the Buddhist tradition who used to be an embodiment of evil in a previous life. Eventually, he pulled himself out of an extraordinarily dark way of living and reached full enlightenment as the Buddha's second-highest disciple. What this story points to is that no being is unredeemable. Whether it's the harm done on a family level, on a local level, on a national level, in terms of the Buddhist understanding of things, no wrongdoing is irreparable.

This is also a really important principle if we are someone who suffers a lot from guilt or from feelings of imperfection in ourselves. It's often easy to forgive the wrongdoings of others while our own shortcomings are the ones we're most critical and negative about. We may have a lot of self-criticism: 'There's that one thing I did that was irrevocably bad, that terrible mistake I made, the unforgivable deed people keep reminding me about. I really don't deserve ever to be happy.' When that sort of thinking arises, bring in a sense of sceptical doubt, a suspicion that perhaps even the most ghastly wrongdoing, the worst mistake, the gravest harm is forgivable.

I'm reminded of a very poignant dialogue I recently had with a woman. One day years ago she had taken her children and some of her nieces and nephews to the seaside. One of the nieces got into trouble in the water, and the aunt didn't realize that her niece was struggling until she drowned. This woman was the responsible adult and she hadn't been paying attention. Her niece's death was her fault. Ever since then she has carried around that guilt, haunted by a

feeling of responsibility and grief at the loss of her niece. Part of her mind said, 'I can't be forgiven; it was my fault.'

It's important to recognize that, yes, we do feel regret. But that's not all of who we are. We don't brush aside the harm that's been done, but we also don't create self-view around it, making it into an identity. We recognize the transgression and then move on from there.

Another story comes to mind. One day a friend of ours called Julie was tidying up in her living room and noticed that a little glass horse was missing from its place on the windowsill. She asked her young daughter, 'Sophie, do you know what happened to the little glass horse?' The little girl froze and, with a blanched look of terror, gasped, 'Don't know.' Her mother, being very astute, asked, 'Shall we try that again? Why don't you go out of the room and then come back in, and I'll ask you the question one more time.' So Sophie went out and came back in again, and Julie asked, 'Sophie, what happened to that little glass horse that sits on the windowsill?'

'I broke it! I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!'

'Oh, that's a shame. That was a sweet thing. I wonder where the pieces are. Maybe we can stick it back together again.'

'Oh, do you think so?!'

They found the pieces of broken glass that Sophie had tried to hide away and created a little task of gluing the horse back together again. Rather than scolding her daughter for breaking the ornament or for not telling the truth, this mother found a way to recognize a mistake without creating more difficulty and pain out of it.

In our world there are many such ways we can deal skilfully with wrongdoing and harm. On a much grander scale, one of the most powerful examples is the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created by Nelson Mandela and the post-apartheid South African

government. People who had been responsible for extremely harmful and destructive acts – security forces, the police and army, government officials as well as the rebel agitators – came forward to talk through what had been done, to account for their actions, and to ask for forgiveness. There were some very, very intense exchanges, but the overall result of these efforts has been extraordinarily helpful. Many people can hardly believe that South Africa transitioned to a democratically elected governmental form involving the black African community without there being a huge amount of military conflict and bloodshed. Obviously, there are still many struggles in South Africa even today, but theirs was a very powerful and public example of how we can acknowledge our own wrongdoings and how we can forgive.

The act of recognizing our failings and asking for forgiveness is also central to the Buddhist tradition. When we part company at the monastery, one of our customs is to formally ask for forgiveness. Say we've been on retreat together or spent time together with a group of people or a particular teacher. Part of saying goodbye to each other is by performing a simple forgiveness ceremony. We recite a verse in Pali. It means, 'For whatever I have done that is heedless by body, speech, or mind, whatever I have done intentionally or unintentionally, that might have been harmful, upsetting, or distressing in any way, I ask for your forgiveness.'

One of the most beautiful aspects of this ceremony is that the teacher or the person being addressed also says, 'I forgive you, and please forgive me too.' This reciprocal process takes place even when an extremely junior person, someone who is very young in the training, is talking to an extremely senior person, even someone regarded as a fully enlightened being. Yes, it's true: an arahant can annoy others! In asking for forgiveness, we're recognizing that we affect each other. Even though we might have very good intentions and a quality of conduct that feels absolutely harmonious and

pure, we can still annoy other people. Our goodness itself can be really irritating; that we do everything so well can be extremely upsetting to other people. So this ceremony is a very beautiful way of clearing the slate when you part company.

Although this form of asking forgiveness is ritualized and can be seen as a rote exchange, it's important that we mean what we are saying. Ironically, the ceremony is powerful even when we don't really mean what we're saying. We might be thinking, 'Well, you really are out of order, and I don't want to forgive you.' The very fact that we're hanging on to that attitude is revealed at the moment when we put our hands together and say, 'Please forgive me, and I forgive you also.' When we recite those words, we recognize, 'Oh, there's something here that doesn't want to let go and forgive. Why do I want to carry that red-hot iron ball? This is harming me, and it's harming the other person.' Even though the ceremony might be formulaic in some ways, it holds up a mirror to our narrow-mindedness and our self-cherishing. If we are able to acknowledge that, then we know that the thing to do next is to let go and be humble enough to let our grudge dissolve.

The Buddha had a variety of other ways to sort out disputes, conflicts, and difficulties in the community. We recite a list of seven every fortnight with our rules of training. The last of these is called 'covering over with grass.' Basically, this means agreeing to disagree. The Buddha was an amazing judge of human nature. He realized that sometimes we just can't agree. In that case, since we still have to live together, we can 'cover things over with grass.'

The quality of *abhaya*, or fearlessness, is also related to the quality of forgiveness. When we are always ready to forgive others and let go of carrying around any kind of grudge, then no one needs to be afraid of us. The monastery where I lived in California is called Abhayagiri, or Fearless Mountain. In Pali, *abhaya* means 'fearless' and *giri* means 'mountain.' But visiting Thai people would often see

the name Abhayagiri and think it means ‘Forgiveness Mountain,’ because in the Thai language *apay* means ‘forgiveness.’ This slight drift of meaning is really not so surprising, since nobody needs to be afraid when we forgive them.

Giving fearlessness, or *abhayaḍāna*, is one of the superior qualities of generosity. Forgiveness is not just something that benefits ourselves. It’s not just freeing our own heart from a burden of negativity, resentment, or the desire for revenge. It’s also a gift to others. We’re offering a freedom from fear. Forgiveness means letting people know that we haven’t got anything against them even if they’ve done something worthy of criticism, that we’re not going to blame them for some kind of harmful or negative action. We’re able to say, ‘No, I have no ill will towards you. I’m not carrying any resentment.’ When someone realizes that they don’t need to feel threatened by us, there’s a tremendous relief and happiness.

I read a story about this recently in one of Malcolm Gladwell’s books. He described how a woman wrongly identified a man as her attacker in an identity parade, and he was sent to jail. Twenty years later further evidence appeared, and it became clear that she had been mistaken. When the man was finally released, she went to see him – with incredible anxiety and trepidation – and apologized, ‘I’m terribly sorry, I really made a genuine mistake.’ To her astonishment, he had no negativity towards her. He said, ‘You know, we all make mistakes.’ So she replied, ‘But you’ve lost twenty years of your life. Your entire youth was spent in the jail.’ But he said, ‘Well, you didn’t mean it, so I hold nothing against you.’

The two of them had a wonderful encounter. They became firm friends, and they now travel around telling their story and doing workshops on reconciliation and restorative justice. His freedom from resentment and the beneficial relationship that has come from that is something they are giving as a gift to society.

We may think that once we've forgiven someone or been forgiven ourselves, then we'll be back to some kind of neutral point. But letting go of a sense of negativity also allows powerful positive forces to come through. That woman experienced great gratitude to this wonderful man who'd been locked up for so long. When we develop the quality of forgiveness and letting go of any resentment we may have towards people who have harmed or oppressed us in some way, then we open up to compassion. We can recognize what a terrible state they must have been in, in order to have carried out those actions.

As a teenager I used to have a lot of negativity towards my father. We had very intense differences of opinion and I would scream and write him off as narrow-minded, bigoted, and so on. I carried around this terrible negativity and criticism of him. Then when I got to the age of forty or so, I started to see things differently: Why on earth should he have known what to do as a parent of a flower child in the '60s and 70s? His father was born in 1863. He grew up in an Edwardian family in the 1920s, going to a ghastly boarding school. Why should I expect him to be completely loving and understanding? He lived in a totally different universe from mine.

When I began to think this way, what came forth were a tremendous sense of forgiveness and an enormous brightness and compassion. I thought, 'He did a really great job! Well done Dad!' Part of me couldn't believe I was thinking this way, because it bore such a striking contrast to what had been there before. But I found a real cherishing and rejoicing, a real quality of appreciation, even for someone who I'd once felt had done me such harm.

Thus the act of forgiveness, when it comes from a genuine spiritual place in the heart, is more a sign of strength rather than being any kind of weakness. Furthermore, it can bring forth great joy and a delight, a brightness within us and in those around us as well – it is a real for-giving, a giving forth, imbuing great blessings upon all.

6

Asubha Practice

Adapted from a talk given at Amaravati Monastery, in 2010



Ajahn Vajiro was born in Malaysia in 1953. He met Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho at the Hampstead Vihara in 1977. He became a samanera and received upasampadā from Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong in 1979. Ajahn Vajiro returned to England in 1984, and assisted with the establishment of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery where he presently resides.

“This contemplation leads to being ready to give back to nature that which belongs to nature; to not taking our body so personally.”

I WOULD LIKE TO OFFER SOME THOUGHTS ON THE CULTIVATION OF ASUBHA *kammaṭṭhāna* or ‘Reflection on The Unattractive’. We have a standard practice in the monastery of regularly reciting the *asubha* chant. This is recommended particularly for all samanās, all renunciates, but I would encourage everyone to consider it. It is one of the few practices for which I received personal instruction directly from my Preceptor, Luang Por Chah. It is certainly useful. Like any practice however it requires repeated application of effort to be effective. Often people do not particularly want to do *asubha* meditation yet it is a powerful and effective tool. It is

worth noting as we consider this subject that traditionally this practice is to be combined with the cultivation of *mettā-bhāvanā* or meditation on the heart of loving-kindness.

Asubha kammaṭṭhāna is about seeing things as they really are, in a balanced way. The form the meditation takes offers an antidote, a contrast, to the usual way of viewing things. Usually we see a body as a whole thing; we look at people and see them as blobs. We tend not to notice that the body we are looking at is actually made up of many bits and pieces coupled and cobbled together. One particular aspect of *asubha* practice, which forms an early part of the *pabbajjā* ceremony, or the ‘going forth’ for the renunciant, is the consideration of the five external things which we immediately observe when we look at a body. The encouragement is to learn to imagine these five elements of the body separately in our hearts and minds: the hair of the head, the hair of the body, the nails, the teeth and the skin. During the *pabbajjā* ceremony the preceptor initiates the applicant into this meditation by having them recite the five objects forwards and backwards: *Kesā, lomā, nakhā, dantā, taco*; then *taco, dantā, nakhā, lomā, kesā*. It is unfortunate that for some this is their only encounter with the practice; they never think about it again. There is great benefit to be found in developing this practice.

Hair of the head. Usually people make a big deal of their hair and other people’s hair – they invest a lot in it and identify with it. When we look at somebody, our conditioned way of viewing is to see the whole body joined up together as a person. When we think of somebody, we have an image of the whole of them; something like a photograph. But if we just saw a pile of hair, would that bring up an image of the person concerned? And think about it; when does the hair cease to be part of the person?

From one perspective this way of seeing the parts of the body is quite obvious, but how often do we recollect that this is how

they really are? Or isn't it the case that we prefer to dismiss this awareness and move on to something else more attractive? And yet it is really a kindness to not identify the hair of the head as being the person; to not take it as anything more than it is, just hair, hair of the head.

The hair of the body includes facial hair and the other less visible patches of hair, all of which regularly comes loose, gets caught in plugholes and stuck on cakes of soap, floats around the bathroom and sometimes around other parts of the building. When are they yours, and when are they not yours? How much, and for how long is the hair on your body truly yours to own?

And the nails – when you clip your nails, at what point do they cease to be part of you? Do you pay attention to what you do with them, and if you see nail clippings somewhere, do you take the time to notice them? Or do you think that only the beautiful bits on your fingers are you? The teeth are the closest we get to seeing a skeleton. When we look at someone's teeth, we are actually looking at their skeleton. People are sometimes scared or upset by skeletons, but we all can realise that the teeth are the visible part of the skeleton. And that is something we can reflect on when looking at our own teeth or other people's teeth. And the skin, of course, is the largest organ of the body and the part which covers up all the other parts; the muscles, the flesh and the fat and under them the wriggly bits and the slimy bits of the internal organs and the guts. Once again, the skin is an area we do not particularly like to consider as a separate piece. But we can recognize the toughness of the skin as a complete bit, a part of the body. It is interesting to see or imagine 'our' body with skin removed. We see this partially or in bits when there is a graze or other injury.

And those five are just what we see: the hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. Of course, the practice that the Buddha suggested was more complete than that, because it dealt with all

the other parts of the body as well – flesh, sinews, bones, lungs, heart, spleen, liver, bowels, entrails – all of it.

The approach Luang Por Chah recommended was to make it part of our walking meditation, but it can be done in other ways as well. As many of you will already know, walking meditation is the practice particularly recommended in our tradition for cultivating wisdom, *paññā*. Luang Por Chah suggested for the practice of *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* to walk in meditation, and at the end of the path to start imagining separating off and throwing body parts down – hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, and all the other parts of the body – and leaving those piles thrown away at each end of the walking path, as a means of not taking the body and its parts too personally.

It is said to be a kindness to give all of this body that we carry around with us back to nature. The body keeps oozing from nine holes, and as it oozes, anything that comes into contact with it, such as clothing, of course becomes soiled. This is why we wash our clothes – at least, I hope we do – and keep things clean. Even the bodies of insects and other animals soil the things with which they come into contact. The stuff that comes out of the body – from the ears, the eyes, the nose (think of tissues), the mouth – oozes and soils. And what about food that comes into contact with the mouth? And there are all the pores of the skin, many millions of pores, which all ooze too. The body is oozing all the time, producing sweat, grease and gunk and the rest, and messing things up. Of course, looked at in one way, the fact that it does all this and manages to function so well is marvellous. Know that *asubha* contemplation is not meant to cause stress. When I practise it, what happens is that a sense of calmness comes over me, a sense that this is how it is now. The reason the practice is encouraged for everyone, not just renunciates is because all bodies are the same. My body is no different from any other body: we

all share this experience of oozing all over the place and making things dirty when we come into contact with them.

There are indeed many aspects of the body which are wonderful, but we can find inspiration by often dwelling on its less attractive aspects. This contemplation leads to being ready to give back to nature that which belongs to nature; to not taking our body so personally. This is just the way it is, quite marvellous and just part of nature. The practice is about learning to switch from seeing a body as a whole person to seeing things in another way that is also true; a new kind of awareness. None of this is untrue or made up. It is just a way of viewing which we might not particularly wish to dwell in because it arouses feelings which make us uncomfortable.

But the Lord Buddha and other teachers through the years have encouraged us to dwell in this awareness: to view the body as just a collection of parts. Hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone marrow, spleen, lungs, heart, kidneys, all the big parts. Bowels, entrails, undigested food, excrement, bile, blood, sweat and tears, fat, grease. Strange stuff – oil of the joints, synovial fluid, whatever that is – and finally the brain and urine. We carry all this around with us and use it for different purposes. The way it all works seems like magic, but it's just the way that it is. It's just this much. We give it so much importance; generate so much excitement about it. And since we have attached to such a worldly way of viewing it, a lot of repetition is required before the shift to the other way of perceiving, an *asubha* awareness, is established.

In developing this practice some people choose to take one particular aspect of the body. I think one monk takes bones – recollecting: bones, bones, bones – looking at people but seeing skeletons, so that when looking at someone at first the mind does not really notice much more than just skeleton.

What do you usually notice when you look at somebody? We dwell on the whole, give it a name. And of course this body that I carry around all the time is like everybody else's body. You can notice how it grows a little older from one year to the next, develops bags, no longer works or holds together so well. You can see it starting to sag a little here and there, to wrinkle a little more, to become a little less taut. You can also give time to noticing how and when the body comes into contact with things, and when things drop off it. Pause for a moment to notice how, as it moves through life, the body makes things a little dirtier; because that is its nature. You might make a special effort to keep things clean, but even as you are cleaning, something is oozing and making something else dirty. Contemplation of the body in this way is peaceful. It may not be particularly exciting but I have found it very interesting.

Remember that throughout the practice our intention should be grounded in a sense of well-wishing, of kindness, a sense of ease and happiness, independent of conditions. How much of the pain and stress in your life has come from the way you view your body; your self-image? Observe the tendency to identify with the body and your thoughts about it – too tall, too short, too fat, too thin, not toned enough. All of this is a mistake, an error of perception in some way. The body can also be viewed in another way that is more peaceful. There is just this to it – hair of the body, hair of the head, nails, teeth, skin. When these parts are seen separately, the body's personality evaporates, and that is peaceful – at least, it is for me. The body is just this much; it is not supposed to be any other way. This is the way it works, what it shares with all animal bodies. All other creatures, from dust mites through to elephants and whales, the smallest to the biggest, do the same sorts of things and have the same basic components; they all move and interact with the environment and leave traces.

You might feel you do not want to do *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*. And I can remember disliking certain recommended practices. However, seeing clearly the not-liking or not-wanting to do a particular practice can also be a source of insight. Being aware of the sense of resistance can lead to insight; that liking or disliking is just another habit.

For those who really see the value of renunciation practice, developing *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* can bring joy and be truly helpful. But to mention again, this practice is not only for full-time renunciants. I once taught a retreat for about 60 lay people in the US, where I was with Ajahn Puṇṇadhammo from the Arrow River Forest Hermitage in Ontario. He suggested I teach *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*. I think he may have been trying to tease me, but I did it anyway. I gave the retreatants the instruction as I had received them from Luang Por Chah, and suggested that if they wished they could try it. Afterwards reports came back – maybe they were reluctant to give negative reports, but everybody who reported said they found it was extremely helpful. People commented that they found it a great way of practising with the body image in terms of pulling it apart and not taking it so seriously; discarding it. So I think it works, it can work for everybody. I have enjoyed it many times and found it very helpful – the sense of relinquishing the bits of what I usually think of myself as being, and imagining them as just a pile of stuff. The body is just a pile of stuff: a sealed bag of skin filled with unattractive things. In fact it is not even quite sealed, because it leaks. It is really valuable examining in this way.

Any sort of awakening which we may experience will be within this body. It won't happen elsewhere, so we might as well use what we have, what we live with, and learn to be flexible and alive, and see things differently from our merely habitual ways of seeing them. This requires practising being enlightened. So I encourage all of us to practise this aspect of enlightenment – seeing things as

separate parts rather than just as an apparent whole; as the bits, rather than the way the bits are put together.

If *asubha kammaṭṭhāna* is practised in the right way I trust that it will lead to a wholesome sense of disenchantment, *nibbidā*, which is liberating. *Nibbidā* can be translated as disgust, and for some this carries a sense that it is somehow bad. But consider, ‘gusto’ is to do with ‘flavoursome’. Disgust is what arises when things lose their flavour, lose their enchantment or attraction, or capacity to hook and pull. When things are no longer tasty there is a sense of easefulness. That ease, that easefulness, that peace is an indication the practice is working.

May such a state be the result of your practising *asubha kammaṭṭhāna*.

7

Radical Purification

Adapted from a talk given at the 25th anniversary of Harnham Monastery, 2006



Ajahn Chandapālo was born in England in 1957. He entered monastic life in 1980 and took upasampadā with Ajahn Sumedho at Cittaviveka in 1982. He has stayed at all the European branch monasteries as well as spending one year in Thailand. In 1993 he was invited to Santacittarāma in Italy and has been the abbot there since 1996.

‘Some important insights seemed to occur in those first years; fully realizing these insights comes as we gradually learn to integrate them into everyday life.’

THE MONASTERY HERE AT HARNHAM IS CELEBRATING ITS TWENTY-FIFTH anniversary. In geological terms, twenty-five years may be just a blink of an eyelid but the fact that some of the younger members of the community today were not even born when this monastery started gives us some idea of this span of time. My part in the early development was very small. Back then in 1981, I was here for about six months only, but since then I’ve been able to visit regularly and as I’m a Northerner I do have a special interest in the development of this monastery. For me it’s been about twenty-five years also, in monastic life, so this has given me occasion to look back today at

those first beginnings and reflect on how things have developed since those early times.

I did my first ten-day retreat as a layman with Ajahn Sumedho at Oakenholt, near Oxford, in Easter of 1979 and that's when a group of meditators from Newcastle first expressed their interest to Ajahn Sumedho in offering a place in Northumberland where monks could come and practice meditation. It was this that eventually led to my joining Ajahn Sucitto, as an *anāgārika*, and our travelling together to Harnham to help establish what was to become our first branch monastery in Britain.

Building a Monastery

We came here in March of that year. Ajahn Sucitto had said we were going to occupy a small, simple cottage on a hill – quite basic, but the lay people were planning to do the renovation work. All they wanted us to do was to live here and practise. Well, it didn't turn out like that exactly. The cottage was indeed simple: four rooms, two up and two down, with a kind of extension out the back which had a dirt floor; that which is now the kitchen. We had one cold-water tap with a bucket underneath; eventually someone came and plumbed in a washing basin which seemed at the time like a major development! There was a toilet, but it didn't have a proper wall yet, just a screen you could pull around. They had made a hole in the wall but no window. I recall that one day at the end of April, there was a snow blizzard and Ajahn Sucitto found about two inches of snow on the toilet seat. We got together some polythene and bits of old carpet and tacked them up over the hole in the wall so we could use the toilet without freezing to death.

Although it was pretty basic we were young and felt like pioneers so we willingly endured the hardships that came our way. At the same time there was a lot of positive energy around. We were inspired to be starting something new. I would get up first thing in the morning and

light a fire in the room where we'd do morning puja. I'd go into the byre – now where the monks sleep; then it was the coal shed – and get some wood and coal to get the fire going. During the sitting I would get roasted on one side with the other side freezing cold and there was something in me that wanted to get up and turn around to warm the other side – but you were not supposed to do that. Eventually Ajahn Sucitto decided it was better not to light the fire at all, that way we could be uniformly cold which he thought would be better.

In those early days there were no Asian Buddhists participating, only a small group of local people who came out at the weekend. They'd do some work and bring food and were really interested in Dhamma. For the most part Ajahn Sucitto had to rely on me to do all the cooking. I remember studying cookery books before going to bed at night, worried about what I could cook the following morning. Certainly I couldn't count on finding all the ingredients in the larder. But with a bit of ingenuity we managed.

I offered to stay on to assist during the three months Rains Retreat (*vassa*) that year so it couldn't have been too bad. As it turned out, however, instead of it being a retreat in the way one might expect, for at least the first month we had a huge amount of building work to do. We put a damp-proof course all around the building which involved drilling hundreds of holes into the granite walls with a drill we borrowed from Chithurst (and ruined) which was not powerful enough for the job. And then in what is now the reception room we uncovered an old inglenook fireplace. We plumbed in a stove and installed a flue which involved getting up the chimney and getting covered in black soot. At one stage we moved a doorway, knocking a massive hole in one of the main walls. I can't remember what the real point was, there was a plan. The next abbot changed it back to how it was originally.

Eventually we stopped all the physical work and went into a month-long, very intensive retreat. We'd get up at three in the morning;

meet at three-thirty, then after morning puja alternate sitting/walking meditation through the day – an hour sitting then an hour walking. We didn't have breakfast in those days; just a cup of coffee then continued meditating. The meal for the day was at ten-thirty and we would start again at midday. There was an hour's break in the evening, five till six, and then continue formal practice until eleven at night.

In preparing the meal I was instructed to mix everything together in a large plastic bucket – one of those ones that is usually used for mopping the floors. I was told to simply offer this to the Sangha at the mealtime along with a ladle. This came to be known as the 'bucket practice', a story some of you may have already heard! The first couple of days I felt a bit queasy as a result of eating this mixed-up food, but after a while I got used to it. It was, in fact, very straightforward. You could get a sense of how much you needed – just two and a half ladles – you weren't thinking, 'well I'll take a bit of this and a bit of that'. No, just two and a half ladles and pass the bucket down.

Understandably, however, the lay people who were generously offering this food, weren't so happy about it. And in fact it didn't really accord with the spirit of our Training Rules (*Sekhiya-vatta*) which set out how we must accept almsfood appreciatively. So eventually, after a subtle intervention from Ajahn Sumedho, the 'bucket practice' was dropped.

Talking About Practice and Doing It

Meanwhile the retreat was going on. There were certainly physical hardships, but the really difficult part was the psychological aspect. The way I had been living as a student prior to my joining the monastery hadn't exactly prepared me for this. But some of the early insights I had had when I first started practising did stand me in good stead.

At university I had a friend and we enjoyed talking about Buddhist concepts and the practice of meditation. Then one time we just decided to stop all the talking, to stop what we were doing, and sit and be still. We didn't have any formal meditation exercise in mind, just stopping and being still and turning attention inwards. This experience gave me a significant insight into the potential of the mind. I sensed a kind of untapped potential. It was an intuition about the mind itself – not just the contents or the activity of thinking – but an inner awareness or spaciousness; the mind itself. I had a sense of the source of things and how maybe this was the key to answering all the questions I had about what was really important in life. There was a sense of discovery, like opening up another dimension. And with it came a strong intuition that developing this different perspective on life, this spiritual dimension, was something really worthwhile. It was then I had the feeling that maybe meditation was the key; a way of actualizing this potential of the mind. It was after this experience that I applied myself to learning about, and being instructed in, meditation techniques. Eventually I did the ten-day retreat with Ajahn Sumedho which I mentioned.

There was another significant discovery during the period when I was doing my Master's degree. It was the day before the final exams and one of the other students came to ask me to help him with his preparation. This fellow was one of those types who manage to irritate absolutely everyone. And he irritated me. He hadn't made effort to attend lectures or do his course work and now he was interrupting my preparation time. After a while I got rid of him, without being rude, but I was left in a state of emotional turmoil. I felt intensely frustrated and annoyed, at myself and him, and was not at all in a fit state to prepare for the exam. I ended up lying down on my bed, curled up into a kind of fetal position. Then something came to me that Ajahn Sumedho had been teaching about *metta* practice. It wasn't following the formal technique of spreading loving-kindness to this person then that one and so on. Rather it

was simply relaxing and allowing things to be; accepting and being at peace with things as they are in the moment. I found I could relax and let the mind be at ease, allowing that state to be there. In what seemed to be a very short space of time the whole mood was transformed; I found myself feeling lighter, so much more peaceful. I felt an inner glow that was quite miraculous. And I was now in a much better frame of mind to prepare for the exam. I realized that before having started practising meditation I'd probably have dealt with the situation by going down to the pub for a few drinks, ending up in not such a good state at all.

At the time I didn't pay too much attention to those early experiences in practice. But as I reflect back now on my years of monastic life, it seems much of what I have been doing over these years is applying those insights – integrating them into everyday life. The training offers a routine for a daily-life practice of developing awareness as we attend to the ordinary activity of body, speech and mind. It can take a lot of time and skill to learn how to deal correctly with the issues that come up and obstruct us.

The mind is very tricky. For instance, when we have experienced some initial insights we tend to assume we can use these insights to deal with whatever comes up: next time we're feeling rotten, we'll just apply the technique. But it doesn't work. That original experience was spontaneous; without expectation. We weren't doing it as a strategy. When we do it as a strategy it is not the same thing. But nevertheless, having had such an experience means we know it's possible to access this kind of inner state of 'allowing'. We are aware that the mind has habits and strategies and we learn how to gradually purify our approach.

Intolerable Intensity

So, on that first retreat at Harnham, those initial experiences in practice gave me the ability to work on some of the emotional and

psychological turmoil I had gone through. I was faced with events and occurrences that were quite new to me. One day I found myself full of rage, really in a state of fury about something. At first it was quite frightening because I'd always perceived myself as somebody who was easy-going, quite a placid character, and here I was in a total rage. What was wonderful, however, about encountering myself on that level of passion was that I found I didn't have to act on it. Eventually the mood fizzled out on its own. Then, looking at it afterwards, I realized I hadn't acted out of that rage; not with body or speech. And I hadn't suppressed it either. This brought a great sense of freedom and of trust. I had allowed myself to experience something intense and powerful yet not be caught into it or overwhelmed by it.

The first week of that retreat felt like an emotional roller-coaster. I recall thinking I must have experienced the whole range of states possible for a human being. It's an exaggeration of course but it felt like that. There were times when I was really inspired and full of joy and at other times I'd be miserable and despairing. I saw how undependable the mind can be, how changeable.

For a while during one meditation sitting I began to dwell in nostalgia. I remembered a really nice group of friends I used to hang out with at university. Suddenly the thought came to me that all these people had moved on and I could never have the past back again. A tremendous wave of sadness came over me and then just that moment the bell rang to end the sitting. It was time to go outside and do walking meditation. I came out into the back-yard and just fell in the grass and burst into tears; a really good cathartic weeping session – right here where the Dhamma Hall is now. Afterwards I had a sense of relief and things felt lighter. We continued with that same routine for several weeks after that and the whole thing was somewhat easier. However my practice had taken on a feeling of discouragement; so much physical pain and emotional turmoil,

meditation had become an ordeal. I just couldn't bring myself to do it for more than a few minutes. I felt really hopeless, as though I'd lost the best possible opportunity.

After the Rains Retreat I went back to Chithurst and there I threw myself into serving. I felt hopeless in terms of meditation; I was just glad to be able to help out with the chores and all the work there was to do. As an *anāgārika* I would get up and light the wood-burning stove and then make the gruel – we had started having breakfast by then.

Gradually I began to feel a bit better about myself and slowly regained some confidence. It was at this time that Ajahn Sumedho was appointed as an *upajjhāya* (preceptor) which meant he could conduct the first bhikkhu ordination ceremony. That ceremony of three anagarikas 'going forth' really inspired me. I felt uplifted, to the extent that even though I had been through some serious difficulties, I saw how strengthening they had been. Besides, something in me felt it couldn't get much worse than it had been anyway. So when I asked Ajahn Sumedho for ordination he accepted and the following year I took *upasampadā* (full acceptance into the community as a monk).

For quite a number of years I didn't have an opportunity to come and visit Harnham. There was one period in 1985 when Ajahn Tiradhammo was the abbot, I was supposed to come here for a winter retreat. I'd been helping at Amaravati with the plumbing, installing a heating system and putting in the showers. The first winter at Amaravati had been exceptionally cold and we had a lot of problems with burst pipes – I'd been busy with that until June. When I was offered an opportunity to come up to Harnham for the winter retreat I was keen to go. My room was tidied, my bags packed and everything was ready. But that evening the temperature started to drop sharply. I was aware there was only one other monk there who was able to do plumbing, Tan Subato, and I felt I couldn't leave him to cope on his own. So I offered to stay on and continue to help

– a lot of my practice in those days was crawling around under the floors mending burst pipes.

Finding Inner Resources

Even though I've not been a resident here at Harnham since that time, my parents live nearby in York so I take the opportunity to come back for a visit every year. It's been very gratifying to see how things have developed, not only in terms of the beautiful buildings but also in terms of the community. I appreciate being able to look back to those first six months of my life in the Sangha. And I find that most of my memories are quite happy. It was during that time I realized that this is what I wanted to do with my life; despite all the difficulties and being challenged in many ways. Such experiences can show us where our inner resources lie. The insights of those first years provide the foundation for our practice. After that, right effort in practice means engaging our inner resources as we learn to more fully realize the truth of those insights. Gradually our perspective becomes clearer.

Now, after twenty-five years, I feel an immense sense of gratitude to the lay people who have supported me through these years and to the Sangha here and all the other monasteries I've lived in. This last year I've been away on a sabbatical; having some time free from the responsibility of running the monastery where I normally live in Italy. It is a joy to be able to dwell in appreciation for the good results of having lived this way for this period of time. I realize that these last few years have been the happiest of my life. It's been a gradual process, of course; there have been times when it's been difficult to see light at the end of the tunnel. Interestingly though, I have found that at times it's been easier to practise when things are difficult. When we feel challenged, we are forced to be more present. We are obliged to make an effort to deal with the situation and there is no time for indulging in distraction. When things are more comfortable and we have more time, it's easier to get distracted. There's no end

to what we can be pulled out into. So it's essential that we develop and maintain a sense of direction. This is what the teaching on committing ourselves to *Dhammavinaya* is about.

Just as we, in our individual practice, go up and down, over the past twenty-five years this monastery has likewise been through its difficult times; but that original vision and aspiration have been realized. If you think about what this place offers and how many people have visited or stayed here, learned to practise meditation here, heard the Dhamma, joined the Sangha here. Its effect has certainly been disproportionate to its size. Its parish is almost as large as mine; the whole of Italy! It is difficult to quantify the effects, but I'm sure thousands of people have benefitted from the rippling effect of the practice done here.

So, best wishes for the next twenty-five years. I wonder who'll be here for the fiftieth anniversary. Some of us might still be around, you never know, and we might get together and reminisce about the twenty-fifth anniversary? So thank you for your attention and for this opportunity to share these reflections.

8

Right Orientation

Adapted from a talk given at La Retraite,
France in 2010



Ajahn Khemasiri was born in East Germany in 1950. He became a novice in Amaravati Buddhist Centre in 1984 and was accepted into the Bhikkhu Sangha in 1986. In 1993 he moved to Dhammapāla Monastery in Switzerland and in 1995 went to Thailand and Burma. He returned to Dhammapāla in 1999 and since 2005 has been the abbot of the monastic community there.

*‘The kilesā are not at home in our hearts;
they’re merely visitors.’*

SOMEBODY ONCE ASKED A WELL-KNOWN INDIAN SPIRITUAL TEACHER, ‘What is renunciation?’ He replied, ‘Renunciation is the giving up of any sense of self’. ‘And for that do you have to give up all your possessions, give up all that you own?’ The teacher answered, ‘Above all, you have to give up the owner.’

The act of renunciation is, of course, an important principle in Buddhism too. It is often associated with people who are in a very obvious way practising a way of renunciation, such as monks and nuns and holy men walking the streets of India. But this is only the outward form: giving up worldly possessions as an act of

renunciation. More important is the inner sense of renunciation, giving up any impulses, thoughts, feelings or emotions which are coming from a sense of 'self', from egoic identity.

We all know we can't just stop these impulses as an act of will, or by making a vow or statement like, 'I renounce all negative impulses. I'll never give in to any negative feeling from now on.' In fact if we make such bold statements, it is likely that very quickly a wave of passion or aversion will come over us with a force we never have experienced before. This seems to be like a law of the universe. It's as if it is saying: 'See ...?' Or it might also be asking us, 'Have you really *seen* yet; have you really seen this state of mind, this negative impulse for what it is; have you seen it with wisdom?' This is the direction our contemplation needs to be heading: to see how gestures of renunciation have to be based on wisdom, rather than on a bold statement or an act of will or merely as an act of external renunciation.

I remember in the 70s and 80s there was a famous guru around, who owned a hundred Rolls-Royces. And, of course, he was often questioned, 'What does a person need so many Rolls-Royces for; wouldn't one be enough?' And the answer he gave was that he wanted to demonstrate to the world how attached we are, as observers, to external appearances, to possessions – whereas he was totally unattached to worldly possessions. He was indicating that we are the ones having the problem – not him with his hundred Rolls-Royces. Of course we can't know how attached or unattached this person was but something there seems to be a bit off; the interior and exterior did not seem to be in harmony. As Ajahn Chah often said, a case of, 'Right but not true; true but not right'. The real state of non-attachment is non-attachment to all egoic impulses.

Asking the Right Questions

So in this context, we're looking at our inner attitude. In the Buddha's teachings on the Eightfold Path, the second link is

Right Intention or Right Thought, or what I like to call Right Orientation. It has to do with our fundamental approach to life; the way we approach our experience. In the texts there are three aspects mentioned: renunciation, compassion or non-harming, and *mettā* or benevolent attention – kindness. The Buddha gave emphasis to these three aspects of Right Orientation by placing them right up front; just following after the very first aspect, Right View.

One does not necessarily have to become a monk or nun and completely renounce the household life; that is not what is demanded. The monastic path is especially recommended for those who, in this life, find they have a particular leaning towards it. Or you could say, their inner development over a long period of time – their kamma – has brought them to the position where they can do this; they are free, or have the courage and yearning to live this life in that particular way. But the Eightfold Path is not devised for monastics only; it's devised for everybody. So, if we are actively trying to practise the Buddha's Eightfold Path we're all in the same boat.

We have to ask ourselves, inwardly, what does renunciation mean for me? What kind of relevance and significance does it have for me personally? Sometimes we notice a sense of aversion when we even hear the word 'renunciation', particularly as people from Western countries. We don't like it because we feel afraid that somebody wants to take something away from us. There is this Buddhist monk up there, or the Buddha or whoever, and he wants to take something away from me which I really like; something that I don't want to give up. Actually, I certainly wouldn't want to take anything away from you, but I would like to encourage you to ask yourselves, what would be a worthwhile thing to give up. If it was something along the lines of giving up greed, aversion, delusion, I think everybody would agree and be happy doing that.

On an ideal level, this all sounds very nice. But when it comes down to the details, then it gets a little tricky. We are a little bit hesitant about certain things because we do have our structures of wanting, of desiring, things we like, things we've become accustomed to. We have certain patterns we feel very in accord with; we get used to certain personal preferences. Those are the more difficult things to give up: the particular habits of heart and mind. That's the more challenging aspect for us. Even if we have seen and felt that it is detrimental to our well-being to follow angry or impulsive tendencies, at times we don't seem to be able to do much about it. It's not really under the dominion of our will – our will does not go far enough. We need to have another way to deal with things we would like to renounce.

The first part, however, is that we have to acknowledge, personally, how painful it is for us to follow the impulses of aversion and holding on. Suppose we have something particularly agreeable; something we really like and we hold onto it with yearning. We can see how unpleasant and how painful grasping is, and yet at the same time how hopeless our holding on is: by their very nature these things are beyond our control. But manipulating experience is what egos like to do. You could say that the whole structure of our self – of our personality or what you could commonly call 'ego' – is a structure for controlling experience. And if it's not modified by a sense of ethical value, ethical integrity, it's going to have very harmful results. The untrained mind has no limits concerning what it wants; endlessly going after any impulse of wanting. Nowadays even the whole planet looks a bit like a manifestation of wanting without limitations.

Considering the external changes of the world many people have doubts about the validity of the kind of inner work we are doing here. They find that just to sit and meditate and watch one's own mind is not enough. 'You should be out there doing something about the

greed and the aversion and the delusion out there.' I'm not saying that it's inappropriate or unsuitable to do anything on the external level of our lives. Don't get me wrong. But speaking as someone who views the cultivation of the heart as a priority orientation, I am very much aware that it's in 'here' where things arise; in 'here' where things start; in our own hearts. That's where greed, hatred and aversion take their beginning. The good news however is that this is also where they find their end.

Getting to the Root

We've heard in the Teachings, the Buddha has spoken about it numerous times: the *kilesā* or the passions of the heart, they're not at home in our hearts; you could say they're merely visitors. The 'blind' or ignorant mind cannot see the reality that the Buddha taught. There is not enough personal awareness or reflective ability. Hence the assumption that any state of mind which arises 'belongs' there, is at home there. That's how it looks at a glance; that's how it looks superficially. But if our reflective ability is a bit more switched on – which is what we are developing in our effort to be more careful about our experience – then we can see that there are laws governing the arising and passing away of these disturbances in the heart.

If we really look within a more spacious mind, we can see that these things just tend to arise: suddenly aversion is there; suddenly fear is there; suddenly jealousy is there. In the West our tendency is towards being analytical about their causes: 'Why do I have this jealousy? Why do I have this anger?' In traditional Buddhist countries people would perhaps prefer to think, 'Oh yes this is because in previous lives I must have done really horrible things.' Both these explanations are all right to a certain extent, they are partly satisfactory, but they don't really go to the root of the problem.

So how do we deal with negative states of mind? How can the purity of heart which the Teachings often speak about reveal itself? Is

there something we can do? The indication seems to be that if we are in the stance of resistance and control, then these mental states tend to stick to us like glue – they reoccur all the time, again and again and again. Often we identify with a particular state, or whole group of states, and then characterize ourselves accordingly; we act the part and judge ourselves as an angry person or a jealous person or a fearful person, for example. This is a big mistake. In truth all that was happening was just various states arising and, if we had looked closely, we would have seen also, they stay for a while and then disappear. It's always like this.

We must carefully investigate the tendency to become angry or jealous or afraid. Notice for instance how you can't stay angry forever, or be jealous or afraid forever. When these potentially harmful states of mind arise in us, we can learn to be right there with them. Take them out of the domain of the thinking mind – the thinking mind cannot really help us. It only creates more problems – especially if we go into commentaries and sub-commentaries about our experience. And these commentaries are often not very kind, not very friendly.

This is where the other two aspects of Right Orientation come in: kindness and compassion – directed towards ourselves, towards our own experience. Remember this person here, 'me', is the person I am closest to. If I am honest, I can say that I want this person here to be absolutely, unconditionally happy and content. And so it's the same for you; just the same. We are all in the same boat: we all want that contentment and freedom of heart and unconditioned happiness. Meanwhile however, we have a few things to deal with before we can arrive there.

Letting Go of the Good

That holding on to negative states of mind and heart leads us into trouble is pretty obvious. But even the good states, the wonderful

states, we need to let them go too. It is not right to hold onto them either. The Buddha warned us not to hold onto the refined states of our meditation. The analogy is that of heavenly beings, who enjoy the bliss of their own minds. They just have to think of something wonderful for it to be right there. One of them, *Brahmā*, lives in the top storeys of the Heavenly Realms and is free from any kind of aversion and anger – even in the most subtle way. Imagine, it is so refined: you don't have to go to the toilet, you don't have to eat; you don't have to bathe; you don't have to wear clothes. But *Brahmā* is still not free. Why? Because it's a transient state, it's not permanent. And once it dawns on these heavenly beings that their life span is about to come to an end, they get very sad. It felt absolutely, almost unconditionally, wonderful before they realized it would come to an end. It is said that these high beings realize that their heavenly condition is coming to an end when their armpits begin to give off an unpleasant smell. Whether such refined ethereal bodies are even able to give off such coarse odours is questionable. But it is expressive enough for us to get the message.

When time in one realm ceases, according to Buddhist cosmology, you get reborn into some other state of existence. Apply this directly to our own experience and we can see how we get reborn into another state of mind. We may try to hang on, even after our wonderful state ends and we don't know where that'll lead. Sometimes we can just go on and on for days, weeks even or longer, dwelling on thoughts about some wonderful experience we had in the past. We are so absorbed in our memories of a pleasant past; perhaps we don't ever realize that we are surrounded by so many kind and gentle people, or that the sun is shining, the birds are twittering in the trees. We are walking in beautiful surroundings but don't notice it because we are absorbed in this feeling of, 'Oh, wasn't it wonderful, ten days ago, or ten years ago....'

Daring to Look Closely

So these are the tendencies we all have. We tend to push away that which we don't like, which we find disagreeable; that's one stance we can take. Or the other stance is that tendency to hold on, the inability to let go. This letting go can only happen through insight, through understanding. The word '*vipassanā*' means 'insight'. *Passanā* means to see, to look. And the prefix '*vi*' makes it stronger – precisely seeing, precisely looking. It's not just looking from the outside in, so to speak. We need to be bold enough, daring enough, to go very close to our experience – fully aware and switched on.

It's not some kind of artificial distancing from our experience where we observe our experience 'over there' in order to feel detached. That estranges us from our experience; we become alienated and lose touch with what is really happening. We might think 'I'm very detached, you know', because I'm looking at it 'over there'; I've got rid of all attachments because it's 'over there'. Notice how there's still an element of control involved; there's resistance; keeping things at a distance. This is not *vipassanā*. The true understanding of *vipassana* is that we dare to look closely; willing to stay present. Even when challenging experiences occur, we're willing to stay there in the present.

So, we're renouncing the tendency to believe in our egoic voices and impulses. If we experience fear, for example, the egoic impulse tells us to run away; get away as quick as we can, and that's quite natural, of course. In certain situations this would be the right thing to do. If you meet a dangerous animal out in the wilds it might be a good idea to run away as quick as you can and climb a tree. You also have to be quick to assess which animal is which, and whether running away or climbing a tree is the safest thing to do. However ninety-nine point nine percent of all the fears we experience have nothing to do with situations like that. It is usually feelings and emotions or thoughts that we find fearful and impulsively want to

get away from. That's what I mean by renouncing the impulse, the egoic impulse to run away. We learn to stay there, and of course it takes conviction and determination to be able to do that. This is why I recommend you don't start with the big challenges; start with the little ones so you can try it out and build up an inner confidence. Then you are properly prepared when the big ones come along.

Some years ago in America, at the time of the Cold War, a questionnaire was designed to find out what human beings feared most. You would have expected that people would be most afraid of the nuclear threat; that we'd all get exterminated. But it wasn't. The biggest fear for most people was public speaking. It sounds strange, doesn't it? Giving a talk? It doesn't kill you, does it? However, the way we perceive it internally, can be extremely threatening. So what is it that is being threatened here? And we come again to this little word 'ego', and with it to a strong sense of 'me' vs. 'them'. One wants to appear in a particular way, perform in a particular way in front of others. One wants to be appreciated, wants to be liked, to be loved. Egos like all these things. The 'other' out there in front of us is the threatening thing, say five hundred people, who in our mind's creation could potentially give us the 'thumbs-down'.

Finding our Spiritual Buttons

Luang Por Chah used to ask his monks to give very long Dhamma talks. It was a test of how they would deal with the particular states of mind arising in the situation of giving the talk. And I remember Ajahn Sumedho telling us that Ajahn Chah once asked him to give a Dhamma talk in front of the whole assembly during which he kept nudging him to go on and on and on. The talk lasted for three hours. He had to watch his own mind all the way through the periods when he had no ideas any more about what to say; resisting the inclination to come out with some Buddhist platitudes. Meanwhile people in the audience were yawning and even lying down in the back to snooze. Or they'd just get up and walk out. You can imagine it was quite

challenging. You want to be appreciated by your audience but your audience disintegrates in front of you. So it brought out this very strong sense of self: 'me', nobody likes me, nobody appreciates me. Ajahn Sumedho only came to see this after the situation. He didn't know before, that that's why he had to give this very long talk.

This is a sign of a really good teacher. He has a way of putting you in a situation where you come to see this very strong sense of self or ego as it arises. It is especially important to watch out for the 'spiritual' self that arises when you have been meditating for a few years. There you are, living in a monastery for a few years, and a 'spiritual self' shows up: you only have 'pure' mind states arising until your teacher puts you in a situation where suddenly not so pure states arise. I remember Ajahn Sumedho saying he could at times be very angry with Ajahn Chah. He had an incredible amount of devotion and love for his teacher. Of course Ajahn Chah would not do anything harmful or unethical; perhaps just a slight shift of rhythm in the monastery or a recommendation that Ajahn Sumedho do something against his preferences, and it would immediately press his buttons. That is another sign of a good teacher: he is not concerned if his disciples are angry about him. In fact he finds it quite amusing. Those like Ajahn Sumedho who are truly interested to train are willing to take it. They see the point.

Your teacher will press your buttons. However, most of us don't have such a teacher to do that for us. Our buttons get pressed by our husbands or wives, or people we work with, or the children or grandmother or whatever. And we tend to think, 'I have a right to be angry, this is awful.' Because we think they are not our spiritual masters. Well, that's an assumption, isn't it? To assume that our husband or wife is not a spiritual master. Maybe this person is just the spiritual master we need right now. It's much better to adopt the attitude that the people you work with, or you live with, are your spiritual teachers, rather than going around blaming them; and

telling them what's wrong with them. 'You're wrong! If you hadn't said that to me I wouldn't have felt angry.' If we're beginning to take responsibility for our own life then we are more careful and not so likely to follow tendencies to blame.

Then again, things do happen. Our spouses, our children or the people we work with provide a trigger. But that's all they are; they're only the triggers. They are not the cause for our anger. The cause for our anger is somewhere else – the cause for our anger is in 'here'. These are latent tendencies we have: to explode with anger, or contract in fear, or go around with raging desire.

To round off, be careful not to avoid the real issue. If we want to be free from feeling oppressed, then we really have to investigate. We must first investigate the nature of experience: what is it like? How solid is it? What is responsible for its arising? What is responsible for it staying, or the impression that it is hanging around? Then, of course, what is it that allows it to cease, to end? This is what is being asked of us – not very much actually – we just need the right mixture of the right form of attention, based on Right Orientation. Also the Right View, how the law of kamma works; kamma in the sense of how our actions – mental, verbal and physical – influence us. Where and how we can meet that. Where we can meet our kamma and direct it in such a way that it moves towards the wholesome, the beneficial, rather than reinforcing old negative habits.

So I'd like to offer that for this evening.

9

Benevolence

Based on a talk given at Amaravati
Retreat Centre, in 2010



Ajahn Sundara was born in France and was one of the first four women to have joined the monastic community in 1979 at Chithurst Monastery. In 1983 she took precepts as a Siladhara with Luang Por Sumedho as preceptor. She moved to Amaravati Monastery in 1984. From 1995 she spent several years practising in a forest monastery in Thailand. Today she is living at Amaravati Monastery.

“When you’re not attached, you are creative, fearless; you’re fun to be with.”

THE CULTURE IN WHICH WE LIVE IS PRIMARILY FOCUSED ON INTELLECT. We may not fully recognize this but our education is of the mind, of the intellect. We are very much into playing around with concepts and ideas. Logical reasoning and making deductions from cause and effect are things we’re quite good at. We’re also good at making sense of things – we know how things work. This way of functioning has its usefulness – up to a point. But obviously if you really believed your intellectual, conceptual mind was the only tool you had, you wouldn’t be here listening to this talk, investigating your mind, contemplating thoughts, in terms of *anicca-dukkha-anattā*. You’ve seen the limitation of thoughts, the limitation of concepts and ideas

and the logical mind. Now you may not think very much of that, but that's already quite a step. It's an enormous step to be able to see your thinking mind as an object rather than believing in it all; forgetting the subjectivity of our thoughts

This is our predicament: we live in a very subjective world. We have what we need, unlike many countries where famine is going on all the time. We might be quibbling about the best organic brown rice while, say in Africa, people are just surviving with barely enough clean water to drink. But I'm not saying this to make you feel guilty – it's just to bring you into the picture – these are your blessings. We live in a country that is benevolent. It's relatively peaceful. We're not put in jail because of what we say; there is still room for views and opinions and room for our mind to think what it wants.

We have good energy all around. Yet we might forget these good forces and instead dwell a lot on thoughts like: 'I'm a bad meditator. I don't have enough patience. I'm hopeless. I'm not good enough. This is *dukkha*! I can't get rid of it. I haven't had my favourite cake; my favourite coffee.' We need to remember the benevolent nature of the world we live in; recognize the context in which we live. This realization grows as we develop our practice because developing the practice is already a blessing in itself. Develop your practice and you find that the blessings are more apparent; you feel held by more blessings. It may sound a bit far-fetched, since we do tend to talk a lot about *dukkha* but we need to bring this *dukkha* into a context that makes our practice sustainable.

If you just focus on *dukkha* with a mind still sticking and believing and not free yet, it's easy to recreate a whole universe of these miserable, obsessive thoughts going on and on and on through the day without stopping; these aches and pains of the body; the memory of miserable times and the dramas in your life; difficult relationship, difficult work, lack of work, lack of money, the children get difficult. It's the endless *dukkha* realm. We don't

have a proper context for looking into these things, so we are pressurized to find a reason for this *dukkha*, and if we were wise to it, we would go in the right direction; we would look in the right place. Unfortunately, because of this constant restlessness and agitation of the heart we keep looking in the wrong direction. Instead of looking ‘in here’, we keep looking ‘out there’. There is *dukkha* because of this, because of that, because of him, because of her. It’s the job, it’s my parents. This is the net of *dukkha* that we are part of when we look in the wrong direction.

We live in a world in which we so easily forget the blessings of our life. And with terrific determination we perpetuate the causes of suffering. If you haven’t got the latest car, you’re just not good enough. Endless reminders from the world outside that *dukkha* starts out there. It’s your mother’s fault, your father’s fault or your fault, yourself (of course). So, it’s not a bad idea to remember our context of blessings – we can be here at Amaravati, we’re in good health, we are fed and we’re with a benevolent group of people. So in this context of benevolence we can start looking at *dukkha*.

What is the *dukkha* that the Buddha talked about? There is the obvious *dukkha* when you’re sitting on the cushion and feeling restless. *Dukkha* is going to change if you move your leg. You have this amazing relief for about twenty seconds ‘Ahh...’, and the same pain returns – a little paradigm of our whole life. Every time something just doesn’t go quite right, we move away from it, ‘turn around to the right, lift the foot a little bit, now to the left and that feels a bit better.’ But we get stuck again and the same old ache returns. We all go through this. This is the main *dukkha*, this inability to stay with it and constant desire for change, for moving away, a constant kind of wriggling on life’s seat.

You have an idea of how you should be all the time. Upright, bright, with strength, vigour, clear mind, thoughts should be loving and sweet and kind, caring for all sentient beings till the last blade of

grass.... And all these images and ideals in our consciousness are creating stress for us. This is another aspect of *dukkha*. Living with a mind that's been educated to conjure up beautiful ideals. They are useful. That's what makes the world move on. But if there is no wisdom in these ideals, it creates stress.

The Ideal and the Real

There is reality and there are ideals – two forces working against each other. The ideal is to be really bright and joyful in the morning; jumping out of bed, starting my yoga, no obstacles, everything smooth. But it doesn't work like that at all. We are working with very powerful forces of resistance. That's another *dukkha*. Enormous resistance, we talk about good and evil; evil is a big word, isn't it? It's a loaded concept. A Sufi master said that if you are looking for the devil you don't need to go very far. Just look at yourself. That's the devil. The devil is ignorance. This is *Māra*, the one that blinds you to knowing. Not knowing is *Māra*, delusion. We are not enlightened yet and we're working with these forces. There's a part of us that knows and a part of us that doesn't. And until we are liberated from our attachment, we are with the not-knowing mind.

However, the fact that we have the capacity to take refuge in awareness is already having this knowing mind within oneself – in the midst of not knowing anything – looking at the benevolent context again – it's a blessing, isn't it? Consider carefully what that means in your daily life. You can tap into, at any moment, this knowing mind, the mind that knows.

This habit of clinging to the thinking mind, and imagining that because we cling to good thoughts, things should work out. The idea that, if I take refuge in mindfulness that means that I must be mindful all the time. It is quite extraordinary that even as a practitioner we can increase our *dukkha* through the practice itself. We cling to the ideal of being a good meditator and spend a whole

hour trying to find this good meditator. We can't find it and get really frustrated with this person that we're looking for that's not us. A good meditator is not the same thing as an ideal of a meditator. A good meditator is somebody who is at peace with what is now, seeing clearly what is now, able to be patient with what is now, able to accept *dukkha*, able to see *anicca*, impermanence.

Being a good meditator is not about clinging to good states of mind. The scriptures refer to a meditator having bright and radiant states of mind. Does that mean we should cling to that ideal? No.

I am not getting my concentration. I get frustrated. I am not getting my painless body. I get frustrated. The thing is if you are able to be mindful, in that moment you experience the peace that comes with letting go of attachment to that desire. Awareness can be a frustrating experience for the ego because it's constantly undermining our attachments. Well, isn't it what the heart is yearning for? Now you are capable of bearing with the frustration, the *dukkha* that comes from not following desire, the extremes – the wanting and not wanting, becoming and not becoming, getting and not getting.

But you do have to be brave. *Māra* is going to put a lot of pressure on you when you don't follow it any more. A little warning, it will pressurize you, like the pain I have in my hip joint. So, it's about being able to see the real pain that's there, and to see the impulse to want to change it; not necessarily because the pain has increased but because the mind cannot take it any more – and the wonderful thing about the mind is that it's actually unreal. It doesn't have substance, or solidity of itself. So you can actually transform the mind forever. You may not be able to change the pain in the physical body but even that can change dramatically if you allow it to change. The beauty of this practice is that the mind can be seen for what it is – pretty empty. Once you stop minding your mind there's not much there that you need to worry about. This doesn't mean it disappears; you just don't need to go along with it. When you're not so attached to

anger or aversion, it doesn't mean that aversion or anger disappear, you just don't get swept away by them. If you have pain in some part of your body, it doesn't mean the pain is going to disappear; you just don't need to run away from this aversion to the pain.

So when you stop running away you discover that actually the mind has the ability to bear with things very peacefully. The greatest pain is not the physical pain; it is mostly a mental pain. I knew someone who went through open heart surgery, and she was completely at peace through the whole thing; everything went very well. Then at a later time she noticed her eyesight was failing; she could become blind. The fear of not being able to control her life in the way she was used to brought on panic, 'Oh my God! What's going to happen to me?' Open heart surgery she could handle, but the fear of losing her faculties was something else. It's interesting how subjective life is.

So, let's go back to *dukkha* – without ever forgetting the context of benevolence. Bring the insight of *dukkha* into the world of goodness that you are part of as well. You might not be the healthiest person in the world, but you still have enough good health to be able to sit on a chair, still, and listen to the teaching.

Why am I sitting here, doing this practice? What's the point? We may have a lot of reasons: our desire to alleviate the misery that we are constantly bombarded with. The human realm, let's face it; it's a pretty *dukkha*-ridden realm. You may think you're the only one, unique in your particular predicament, but every single human being has their dose of *dukkha*. This is not an isolated phenomenon, it's very much the texture of this world in which we are born. Six doors to connect with – we see things, we hear things, we can taste, we can touch, we can think, and we can smell. It is pretty complex. The smell doesn't fit right with the hearing; the thinking and the tasting just don't match. All those different sense doors are not even in agreement – 'I'd love to be liberated, but I really like having a bit of a fun life as well. I want to do what I want! But I really want to

be liberated as well.' Or 'I want to be liberated, but I want to keep everything I like because it's important for me...me!'

So let's be realistic. We love practising meditation. We love practising the Dhamma. But if we look at ourselves, how much of our self really is in it? It's important to recognize the illness, our own mental illness in the context of Dhamma. The symptom – remembering that the Buddha is like a physician, and delusion is like the cancer of our life. Fortunately it's not such a bad cancer because it's actually curable! We can cure ourselves from delusion. But if we are really realistic with ourselves, and often we are not, we tend to want things without really noticing the kind of material that we are working with, the material of our desires, the conflicting aspects of our lives. And we need to be very gentle in that. We don't force our 'self' to become the person that we want to be. But just patiently know this and with a sense of compassion for the predicament we are part of, patiently know that we can't die to all our worldly desires so easily.

Living Without an Image of Ourselves

It's important to deal with one's self not as a kind of object that you've read about in a book, but as a real person. Not some kind of image. So to be able just to know that much: a lot of 'myself' is a representation in my mind, rather than 'just what is'. And at that moment, when you look at the representation, then that's what it is, that's how it is. There's not a certain way it 'is'. It's just whatever is here 'is'. That's it. So this is another *dukkha*, isn't it? In our life – to live as a representation in the world, rather than in a connected, confident, and loving way. Being who we are without having to hold on to an image. Without an image, the world out there is a pretty hard place to live in. Go to your boss with an empty mind, relaxed, easy-going, be your mindful self with your boss and he probably won't know how to deal with you. We have to play the part so that he realizes that you remember him.

So we live in a world of subjectivity, of representation, of ideas and ideals, and get miserable because we lose that connection with the real thing: just what 'is'. This is so difficult to accept sometimes, because to be with the way it is, we can't really hang on to a lot of a future agenda. It's not easy. There is a tendency to try and turn Buddhism into some kind of lovely self-improvement path. Of course, increasing wholesomeness has its place as well – we work to become a better person by being more careful and attentive with our actions, with our speech, with what you think and how you think those things, what you cultivate in your heart: patience, loving attention, acceptance.

There is a lot of improvement in all that, but the insight practice manifests when you lose all these agendas, all these representations, or see representations for what they are – just an image in the mind. One has to be very careful how to deal with what goes on in the mind, because it can be very confusing. Sometimes we don't come to the point of insight in practice because we are so scared of seeing the images or representations that just don't fit with our system of logic or what we like.

It's pretty random what goes on in the mind. Once you stop holding on to an agenda, to an idea, to a manifestation, to a representation, it's pretty random – anything goes, really. That's very freeing, because the more you see how random and not very controllable the mind is, the more you will find that there is a yearning in the heart to find a true refuge in all this. It's like a natural yearning. You yearn to find your 'real home', as Ajahn Chah called it. Because the rest of it is pretty unstable, unsatisfactory and *dukkha*. So don't be frightened by the difficult things because if you really bow to this, and are humbly willing to learn from what you see, then you will find help coming your way.

By 'help' I mean suddenly you get interested in the new part of yourself, or you get interested in studying what you have in front of

you. There's an energy that comes up, an energy to really examine what's happening and maybe deal with your fear. When fear comes up you are able to examine fear. You realise that fear comes and goes, it's random. It's not necessarily attached to anything exterior. It's quite a turning point when you can see this clearly, because it's very freeing. Basically you are in charge. I don't mean 'You' are in charge, your awakened mind is in charge.

Applied Intention

Also you can help your awakened mind. There is intention, *cetanā*. You can think consciously – you don't have to just attach to random thoughts that lead you nowhere. You can think consciously, 'intend' consciously. You can use the material of your mind and body in a conscious way. For example develop loving-kindness – you can conjure up a lot of loving-kindness out of nowhere.

Some people have trouble getting started with developing loving-kindness. 'How can I be kind and loving without getting into all that messy emotional "stuff." Love? Ha!' So I ask if they are a pet lover and if so, I say, 'Just think of your pets.' And suddenly there's a kind of glowing energy around them that happens just like that. It's amazing. For most human beings the only time they have this is when they fall in love. That feeling of adoration and total acceptance, no matter how they look, what they look like, how stupid they are, how clinging and grasping and horrible – they're just wonderful for a few days. That is just what we experience with a pet. I'm just giving this example to show how quickly we can conjure up something out of nowhere.

Reflect on the blessings of your life, reflect on the goodness of your life, so that you are able to create in yourself a context of ease and relaxation and spaciousness, to observe life as it is – which is pretty unsatisfactory, let's face it. But it's only unsatisfactory because we've had expectations about it. We have added to life-as-it-is so

much that all these things have to die. What has taken birth needs its own span to die. So all the things that you have attached to, all the things you have created, all the things you have hoped for, all things you have wished for, all the disappointments, all those things have to have their lifespan be seen until you let them go. Often we don't have the patience to let things go, so we are back to this kind of restless activity to change – like the ankle, twisting to the left, twisting to the right, to find out whether the pain is less on the right or more on the left. And the relief comes then suddenly the pain comes back.

So instead of trying to move around when you have discomfort – I'm not saying you must damage your body in any way, and if you need to stand up, if you need to move your posture around, just do it – but before you do this just check how much your mind is contributing to the intensity of any physical discomfort that you are experiencing. Just discover how the mind is contributing to that, and how your mindfulness can help you to gain confidence, gaining independence from what your mind feels all the time as a result of simple reactions. See that in yourself when things become uncomfortable. It's not just the physical pain, but also the mental pain, like the anguish maybe about losing something you love – losing your health, losing your partner, losing your life, losing your wife, losing your status, or whatever.

One of the beauties of the Buddha's teaching is that the thoughts themselves just become another object. Not something we identify with any more, but an object. This is why it's important to find a new refuge in one's self. A refuge that's based more on the understanding of the practice of Dhamma, of understanding through your practice and your confidence in the goodness of yourself, confidence in your ability to manifest the good, confidence in your ability to not mind losing things, confidence in the ability to bear with suffering and difficulties, with fear and so on.

This comes little by little as you face fear in small doses – there comes your basic remedies. You get a little bit of fear and you deal with that, and you can get a little bit more fear, and the next time a little bit more, and the more you get familiar with fear and your system starts integrating it without any problem then the next time it's not a problem – it becomes less and less a problem. The more you are able to accept, receive, and bear with any *dukkha* in life, not as an ideal but just where you are now.

The first noble truth of *dukkha* teaches that not getting what you want is *dukkha*, getting what you don't want is *dukkha*. Pretty straightforward, isn't it? Don't need a PhD to understand that. But then the subtlety is to begin to apply and to distill this understanding through the experience of your mind and body as you see it from moment to moment. Being separated from loved ones is *dukkha*. Somebody was sharing with me today about when you become more aware of yourself, suddenly you realize there's something in you that just knows this self is not you. Scary, isn't it? Who am I then? If I'm not this person here, who am I?

You can get this sense of being frightened. This sense of separation, the grief of separation, from an old self, an old personality. 'The old man' as they say in Christian teachings. It's funny, isn't it? Often I heard this expression, 'shedding the old man'. We go through this experience of separation. Even internally. There are some thoughts we are habitually caught in. And we can go through the grief of losing a whole train of thought that made us happy for a while. We are remembering somebody and suddenly they just lost their substance, you know? Their solidity is gone, and you feel like a different person. You think that maybe because you're not obsessing about your loved ones, suddenly they're not loved anymore by you. You might just be relieved not to be constantly bombarded by your obsessive thinking.

We think that when we stop obsessing about things, those things disappear as well – but they don't. If you've come from a place

of wisdom and understanding, then what happens to the other person (or to the things) is that they just share your peace of mind, peace of heart. And that's much much more empowering than your attachment. Your non-attachment is much more wonderful for somebody, because when you're not attached, you are creative, fearless; you're fun to be with.

If you're clinging, grasping, whinging because you're frightened to let go of the thing you think you absolutely need, then life is truly *dukkha*. Again, one doesn't learn this as an ideal, but just where you are, little by little. Like a big tangled ball of wool that's just completely caught in so many things, completely tied up, and you pull the thread little by little. Little by little, moment by moment, you pull the threads gently. Then you realize how nice it feels not to be completely entangled in this tight knot of 'me'. The 'me' is like this entangled knot, and the *dukkha* is just that, this grasping mode, holding mode, that's the *dukkha*. That's the basic *dukkha*. Don't forget the loving context. Remembering one's blessings.

10

The Way of Being Contented

From a talk given at Chithurst Monastery, in 2010



Ajahn Candasiri was born in Scotland. In 1979 she was one of the first women to be given the anagarika precepts. For most of her monastic life she has resided at either Chithurst or Amaravati Monastery, helping with establishing the communities there, particularly the Siladhara Sangha.

“Contentment is not so much to do with how much you have, it’s more an attitude of mind.”

NOVEMBER AND DECEMBER IS A VERY SPECIAL TIME OF YEAR AT CHITHURST. Obviously it is cold, but what I find interesting is that we have a choice as to whether we suffer about it or not. I notice sometimes I can feel very chilly and miserable. But if I’m mindful – if I prepare myself – I can really enjoy the crisp cold weather, the feeling of the clear air, and the fragrance of wood smoke from wood-burning stoves, this wintery time.

The theme of choosing to suffer or not feels to me like a very important topic. We have that choice throughout our lives: to suffer or not to suffer. Many people don’t realize this, and so they’ll tend to suffer. But those of us who’ve had an opportunity to contemplate

the Buddha's Teachings will realize that we do have a choice. We can complain about things as they are: complain about the cold, complain about the people we live with, complain about the food, the drinks, the monastic routine and the way things are done We can always find something to complain about. We don't have to look very far: it may be some physical ailment – painful knees, or a cold, or a headache, or something. Or maybe we don't get what we want, or we make a mistake about something and feel bad about it later – life is just *full* of things to complain about ... but, we can also choose not to complain.

There's a verse in the Dhammapada where the Buddha says that contentment is the greatest wealth. I find this an important contemplation because if we really cultivate an attitude of contentment, we actually enjoy life much more. But it's not a quality that's widely recognized or appreciated. In fact the whole economy would probably collapse if people became too content. Nobody would ever want to buy anything new or improve on things; they'd always just be content with what they had. There are so many pressures in our society to *not* be content. I remember the advertisements from when I used to watch TV; they were all trying to make you feel you have to get something 'better', more delicious, the 'latest' model. When I go to teach at the Buddhist Society in London I see advertisements and enormous posters everywhere – even on the sides of buses – that make you want all kinds of things you never really thought about before: more exotic holidays or better insurance deals. And suddenly I'd find myself wondering if maybe I should insure my life, or insure against getting sick. So it's very difficult to avoid the feeling of discontent, because all day long you're being told that there's this thing that's going to be 'better' – and that you should get it, otherwise you might miss out.

Daily-Life Practice of Contentment

This is just the way the world is. Certainly, even in the monastery, we can notice things that can lead to discontentment – wanting

something that somebody else has. We can feel envious because somebody's alms bowl is better than ours or she's got a better jacket, or a better pair of sandals, or a better clock. I remember when everyone was getting digital alarm clocks; I didn't have one, and felt a bit envious of other people's digital clocks. It seemed to be the sort of thing to have.

However, the monastic training encourages us to cultivate contentment consciously; *samanas*, monks and nuns, are encouraged to cultivate a sense of contentment: with the robes – we reflect that they are simply something to cover the body to keep us warm, and for modesty. We reflect on the basic standard of what we need. Similarly with food, it is truly a privilege as a monk or nun to be able to go into the town with our bowl, and walk for alms. In the monastery food is prepared each day, so we know that we are going to get plenty of hot food for our meal – but it's different when we go for alms round in the local town. We stand there in the street with our empty bowl, and wait, and see what happens.

I find this an excellent contentment practice. No matter what we receive, we're genuinely glad – because it means we're going to eat that day. There have been times when I've been absolutely delighted to have just a loaf of bread, or an apple, or a banana. A loaf of bread is the best, really, because that way you know you're not going to be hungry; your belly is going to be full. Whereas, in the monastery, if we went into the kitchen and found there was just a loaf of bread for the meal that day we would probably feel very disappointed.

So it's interesting that contentment is not so much to do with how much you have or how wonderful it is – it's more an attitude of mind. We can consider this in relation to the whole of our life; we can notice whether we are somebody who is frequently not contented. If our habit is to not be content, then it can be a useful practice just to notice this – rather than say, 'I *should* feel contented, because the

Buddha says I should' or 'because Sister Candasiri said in that talk that we should be content....' That doesn't work so well, I find.

I have listened to talks where I've been told I should be content and grateful. Maybe that's true, maybe I *should* be content and grateful. However, I find that merely dwelling on how I should be doesn't work so well. What seems to work better is if I step back, and notice the effect on my mind of being discontented. It is actually not a very nice state to be in. We can notice how it is to always be complaining, always finding fault with things and with other people. How does that feel? Does it make us happy to think like that? Or to think critical thoughts about ourselves as being not good enough? Maybe we don't have to look very hard to find good reasons for being self-critical: 'I haven't done enough; I'm not handsome enough – not thin enough – not fat enough.' There are always things that seem not OK, and then we can begin to notice that dwelling on those things makes us miserable. It seems to me that the way to be happy is much more about deliberately counting our blessings, about trying to turn things round to see them in a positive way – cultivating a basis of contentment with things as they are.

Years ago when I was in India, I noticed how incredibly poor many people were, but that often they had a brightness and a joy about them. It seemed that they knew how to enjoy life. I remember watching a little kid one day. He had no toys, but had found a brick and a piece of string; he'd tied the piece of string round the brick and was dragging it along, obviously seeing it as some kind of fabulous toy. He was really pleased with it. We can see how being able to make much of even the very simple things of life is what brings contentment – rather than being fabulously wealthy or having the best of everything.

I've known people who are wealthy, yet who never seem to have enough. They'd always be wanting something better – things would never be quite right, They'd go to fancy restaurants, and always find

that the food was just not quite right; it would be exquisite food and beautifully prepared, but still there'd be something just not quite right about it. Whereas when we start out with nothing, we can experience great delight with just a loaf of bread. So in some ways we are much wealthier when we can really be content with what we have.

Limitless Contentment

There's a story in the *Suttas* about a monk who decided that he wanted to go and live in a faraway place. When he asked the Buddha about going, the Buddha asked him some questions to make sure that he was really prepared, 'The people who live there are rough, and they might just give you very coarse food. What will you think if all they offer you is really coarse food?' And the monk replied, 'I shall just celebrate the fact that they feed me at all. I shall feel glad about that.' And the Buddha continues, 'Supposing they don't feed you at all? Supposing they insult you, or abuse you? Supposing they throw clods of earth or stones at you? Supposing they beat you up with heavy sticks?' And, eventually, 'Supposing they stab you with a knife and kill you?' The monk's response to this, 'Well that'll be very good because then I won't have to kill myself. My life will end and I'll be able to put down this body – I won't have to worry about feeding it or looking after it any more.' This convinced the Buddha that the monk had the qualities necessary to find contentment in any situation, and he allowed him to go.

I remember being here at Chithurst in the very early days in the first winter. We lived in a cottage down by the stream (the smaller one – it's now the guest house). There was no central heating, no carpets, hardly any furniture and no mains electricity either at that time. We did have a generator but it was quite noisy and was always breaking down, so we used candles. I remember one evening during that first winter, sitting upstairs in the room I shared with Sister Rocana, all wrapped up with my gloves on trying to write a letter by candle light. It was absolutely freezing. But I don't remember grumbling or

complaining about it, it was just a matter of trying to get this letter written with my gloves on. In those days we were just so excited to be here; to be a part of this incredible adventure of establishing this monastery – and with that came a sense of contentment.

However, having said that, I have to say that, right now, I have no trouble celebrating the fact that we have this wonderfully warm Dhamma Hall! I just love walking round in this Dhamma Hall with its under-floor heating; it's just so great that we can sit here without shivering. And down in the Rocana Vihara, where the nuns stay now, we have a wood-burning stove in the kitchen. It's wonderful to have a warm place to go to. And so now I do celebrate that, the warmth and the comfort of our lives.

Yet if I'm not mindful I can still become miserable. Earlier this evening I was in my room reading Ajahn Sucitto's pilgrimage book, *Rude Awakenings*. I was getting towards the end of the book, the really exciting chapter where they get robbed, and I was so utterly gripped by this story that I hadn't noticed that I had become very cold. Then I did feel rather miserable. So I went down to the kitchen and warmed up and had a cup of tea by the stove, and felt very much better.

What I'm pointing to here is the need for mindfulness. When it's cold like this we need to stay tuned to our bodies; if we get too cold we'll get sick. So there are basic things we can do. We need to make sure we've got enough clothes on, and have warm drinks from time to time – things like that – rather than thinking, 'How wretched, how miserable, it's so cold, how can I get warm?' We can actually transform the business of taking care of ourselves into an exercise of mindfulness.

Ocean-like Compassion

So there are ways of cultivating contentment around the material things of our lives. We also need to give attention to cultivating

contentment around the immaterial things of our lives: our relationships; our place in the grand scheme of things; the sense of ourselves, and of who and what we are; our meditation practice I used to suffer terribly about my meditation practice, because I was completely certain that it was never good enough – and probably it never *was* good enough, when I was being so negative about it. What helped was realizing that, first of all, there needs to be a sense of well-being – a sense of self-respect – as the very foundation of our practice. If we start off with our meditation practice from a sense of being unworthy, hopeless and no good, we easily lose track. It's like a vicious circle. There can be a sense of tension, of frustration around the whole practice – a sense that it's no good, and we need to try harder. So we try harder, and end up feeling completely miserable and discouraged about our meditation. But it's really important to remember that the Buddha offered these Teachings and way of practice, out of compassion for our welfare, *for our happiness* – not to make us feel miserable and discouraged.

There is a phrase in morning chanting that I love to refer to, where it says that the Buddha is filled with 'ocean-like compassion' – reminding us of the incredibly broad, compassionate heart that wants only the best for us ... and here I was, using these teachings, this way of practice, to create a sense of misery. Well, actually, I wasn't totally miserable – I've always felt glad about being able to be a nun, and am still mildly amazed that this has been possible – but there was a lack of any deep joy in my heart. Eventually, I realized that I hadn't properly understood that in some sense it was up to me to find contentment and self respect. It was up to me to care for this being, rather than always looking for affirmation and approval from outside.

I was very good on the 'duty' side of things – very good at serving, always doing things for other people and for the community. I enjoyed this, but I hadn't realized that I needed

to find ways of really caring for myself: cultivating kindness for myself, *metta* towards this being here – directing *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *uppekkhā* towards *this* being. For example, I had absolutely no *mudita* for this being – it just never occurred to me to think about the good qualities, to think about the sense of my own worthiness – cultivating a sense of self-respect, and the capacity to appreciate even the little successes in meditation. Even if I couldn't do all the *jhanas*, anything like that, just to be able to really enjoy one breath, to feel good about the fact that I was living according to precepts – living at least with the intention to not cause harm. Then I could extend this to making the effort not to cause harm through all that negativity towards myself.

Some of us are so self-critical; we almost see that as a virtue. We think that it's good to find fault with one's self, almost as though we are afraid that if we don't, we might end up becoming complacent. However, if we are to progress at all in practice, there needs to be a basis of well-being, a sense of our own worthiness. So, as a basis for practice, the Buddha encourages *bhāvanā* (mental cultivation), *sīla* (virtue) and *dāna* (generosity). When we reflect on our cultivation of these, we can see that we've done something positive, 'I've been kind – to others, as well as to myself.' 'I've been careful, I've been responsible.' We can reflect on these, as a way of generating happiness, well-being – instead of always being so concerned about our shortcomings.

I speak to many people about their meditation, and often they say something like, 'Oh yes, I meditate – but I don't do enough,' or, 'I don't do it well enough.' I'd like to suggest that it's a good idea to not even think like that – and just *do* it! If we allow ourselves to dwell on such thoughts, we start off on the wrong foot. It's much better just to do it, and to celebrate our small successes, daring to just celebrate the little things that we do, and to enjoy them. We can also celebrate the fact of having been born as a human being, having

come across this teaching, having come across this monastery and this community of people who are committed to practice in this way – we have good companions on the Path.

Once we have this basis of well-being, then we can reflect and look into ways that we may need to adjust the balance in our practice. But first we need that sense of well-being; first we need that sense of dignity and self-respect. It may be a matter of deliberately encouraging ourselves so as to find contentment with this being here. ‘This being here is perfectly fine. This being here is worthy; this being here is practising according to the teachings of the Buddha.’ Nobody’s asking us to be perfect right now. Even the Buddha himself began life as an unenlightened, suffering human being. Even his most wonderful disciples had their difficulties, had their problems.

There is a wonderful story from the victory poem of one of the enlightened nun disciples. In it she says that for twenty-five years she’d struggled with her practice and never had a moment’s peace. For twenty-five years she struggled! And eventually she had the insight that enabled her to arrive at the place of unshakeable calm, the place of freedom.

All of us have areas of difficulty, but as the sense of well-being and joy increases we’re able to take more of an interest, to be curious about these difficulties and to cultivate skilful means for working with them. Each one of us can begin to find ways to be more mindful and to respond more skilfully to the difficulties that arise. We can take an interest and learn from the mistakes we make, rather than becoming totally discouraged when we get it horribly wrong.

Finding Fearlessness

There’ll be times when all of us will feel pushed and stressed. But then we can take time to consider, ‘Well, I didn’t do that very well. How can I adjust my practice, and do it better next time?’ Of course

maybe we make the same mistake again, so then we can begin again, and again – just keep coming back, keep beginning. If we keep taking an interest in what is happening, little by little we find we are more mindful, more present. This is when we might also notice that we are less afraid. Recently, I discovered that a lot of our difficulties come because we are frightened that somebody's going to take something away from us. It can be a material thing, or it may be an idea. For example we can be very attached to ideas about what should happen. Then if someone comes along and says, 'I don't think it should happen like that' or, 'you're totally wrong', we can become very defensive!

But it's possible to meet even such a reaction with a willingness to patiently, humbly, keep coming back. We can keep coming back to this moment as it is, finding contentment with this body as it is, with this breath. We can breathe in a sense of ease and well-being, we can breathe out with a sense of ease, relaxing. Over and again we can re-establish ourselves with a sense of contentment, one breath. Celebrating that ... and that's free. You don't have to pay for the breath!

We are fortunate here we can simply go outside, and look up at the stars in the bright clear sky. Breathe the fresh air. Enjoy the hint of the wood smoke on the air.

I'd like to encourage everybody to look around for things that they can do to bring joy – outwardly and inwardly – to look for ways that we can shift our attitude to be more loving, to be more generous with ourselves, and with each other.

So I offer this for your well-being and happiness.

in Thailand

11

The World Fares According to Kamma

An extract from a translated publication
in Thai.



Ajahn Gavesako was born in Japan in 1951. He moved to Thailand, initially to Bangkok then to Wat Pah Pong where he was ordained as a bhikkhu by Ajahn Chah in 1975. He spent long periods looking after Ajahn Chah in the later years of his illness. Ajahn Gavesako is currently abbot of Sunantavanarāma Buddhist Monastery in Kanchanburi Province, Thailand.

“The days and nights are passing; how are we spending our time?”

THE BUDDHA

IN THE MORNING AND EVENING CHANTING, the chant for spreading goodwill *metta* concludes with a consideration of kamma. This means that when we understand kamma, goodwill will arise. To develop goodwill it is important to understand kamma.

The chant that includes the contemplation of old age, sickness and death, *abhiñhapaccavekkhaṇa*, concludes with a consideration of kamma.

The required benefit of examining kamma is to develop heedfulness. When we do the morning chanting we chant about kamma on two occasions, and then two more times in the evening. That’s four times

in a day. We are encouraged to examine it frequently, repeatedly, until goodwill and heedfulness, which are proper and important conditions, arise within us. We are encouraged to consider kamma in various aspects according to the five considerations: *kammasakkā*, *kammadāyādā*, *kammayonī*, *kammabandhū* and *kammaṭṭisaṇṇā*.

Kammasakkā

Kammasakkā translates as ‘Kamma is our possession’. ‘*Sakka*’ means ‘belonging to one’. There is an interesting story I’d like to tell you. I went to Japan in 1989 and was staying at a temple in Tokyo. One day a doctor brought along a woman and a boy who would have been about thirteen years old. He was a fine-looking child, but he couldn’t speak. His behaviour was like that of a mentally retarded child. He was extremely active, running all over the temple and all over the room, poking his fingers through the paper screens. This child could only sit still for two or three minutes. I had never seen such a case, but the doctor invited me to talk to the boy. He said it looked as if the child wasn’t listening but in fact he was. He liked to go to temples and liked Buddhism. I talked about letting go of enmity and anger and developing goodwill and compassion. I don’t know how much benefit he got out of it.

In mid-April of the year 1989, I had gone on a walking tour (*tudong*) from the airport at Narita to Hiroshima, a distance of about 1000 kilometres. It took me seventy-two days. I didn’t accept or use money, but only food on my alms round. I slept wherever I could find places to sleep, sometimes at temples, sometimes on the side of the road. If it was late at night I might sleep in a shopping-centre car park or under a bridge, in all kinds of places. When I reached Tokyo, about a week out of Narita, a Japanese television company asked permission to make a documentary about my journey, because some people felt that it would not be possible to walk all the way to Hiroshima. The documentary was televised and this boy had seen it, and that is why he wanted to come and see me.

He was able to write on the computer and the doctor was able to find out how he felt and thought. He discovered that this child was resentful about his mother. When he was nine months old, his mother became pregnant again. His mother and father discussed this and decided that they would have an abortion. The child heard them and was so upset that his mother was going to kill his younger sibling that he developed a strong hatred for her.

The doctor surmised that the hatred the boy felt for his mother was so strong it had had an effect on his nervous system. The mental kamma he created was the cause of his not being able to talk. *Kammasakkā*: our kamma is truly our own, and it can have dire consequences.

If we consider our speech over a period of time we will clearly see the good and bad results. When speech leads to suffering, it is possible to easily trace back and find the cause of that suffering. Thus we can know that the things we say have both good and bad results and can create all kinds of problems. Verbal kamma really does exist, and it has a lot of significance. Mental kamma, verbal kamma and bodily kamma do exist and carry a lot of meaning. They have a big effect on our happiness and suffering. We must guard and compose our thoughts, speech and actions.

Kammadāyādā

Kammadāyādā means ‘kamma is our fruit-bearer’. *Dāyāda* is an heir, the one who receives the fruit of kamma. There really is a kamma result *vipāka*. When we do good and evil actions, whether by body, speech or mind, we receive the fruit of those actions.

There was a middle-aged woman who regularly came to give offerings at a forest temple. She didn’t come to the monastery for a few months. And when she did come back and bowed in the temple, I could see that she had a prosthetic arm. After the meal a man related to me that her husband worked in Bangkok, and kept

a mistress there. One morning she had a bitter argument with her husband and abused his mistress, saying 'I'd love to cut her arms off.' After her husband went off to work, she got into her car to do some business with three friends but had an accident, the car overturning and landing on her left arm, amputating it. Apart from that, not much damage was done, and no one else was injured. This event caused her and many of her friends to believe in the results of kamma.

That lady was probably full of hatred for her husband's mistress and was constantly thinking 'I'd like to cut her arms off,' since if she had no arms she would no longer be attractive to anyone. The result was that the thinker of those thoughts received the result herself. This is probably a result of both mental and verbal kamma.

In the time of the Buddha, there was a monk who asked the Buddha what to do about a person who gets very angry, who readily abuses and criticizes anything that doesn't agree with them. The Buddha taught that anger is like food you have made for someone: if they don't eat it you have to eat it yourself. You make it yourself and you eat it yourself. If you don't like it, just don't take any interest in it, just be indifferent. Clapping only one hand makes no sound. If they are angry and abuse us, and we suffer, then that's like we're eating the food they have prepared for us: the result is suffering on both sides. If we eat their food, then we have to make something for them to eat too: that is, since they were angry at us, we have to be angry at them and abuse them in return. It just goes round and round like this for many lifetimes without end. This is the life of animals and humans.

We create the cause, and we receive the result, which is suffering, in this way and the result may be twice, three times or even ten times greater than the cause. If we consider carefully we will see that abusing or doing something to someone to the value of 1 does not necessarily give a result to the value of 1. It depends on the conditions. The result may be two, three or ten times greater. One

papaya seed, planted and well cared for with supportive conditions, can in the following year yield hundreds of fruits. In two or three years it gradually gets depleted, and in the end dies.

Therefore the Buddha taught to first give up evil actions, to have shame and a fear of wrong-doing, to develop mindfulness and wisdom, and to be inspired in the giving up of evil, to generate faith in the doing of good actions. Good results and bad results of kamma really do exist. Good actions truly lead to good results and bad actions to bad results.

Kammayonī

We are instructed to reflect on *kammayonī*, meaning ‘We have kamma as our birthplace.’ *Yoni* means ‘to lead, to lead to birth, place of birth’. Bad actions are born at oneself and have oneself as the place of birth.

An example of this is Mahakāla the layman. Mahakāla was a stream enterer *sotāpāṇna*¹. He kept the Eight Precepts² eight times a month and listened to teachings throughout the night at the temple. One day some bandits entered a village close to the temple and raided it at midnight. When the house owners woke up, the bandits fled, scattering in all directions. One of the bandits ran into the temple and threw some of the stolen goods down in front of Mahakāla, who was listening to a Dhamma talk. When the house owners followed the bandit into the temple they found the stolen goods lying in front of Mahakāla, so they caught him and abused him soundly, saying ‘You steal our things and then pretend to sit and listen to a Dhamma talk.’ Then they beat him to death then and there. The young monks and novices found Mahakāla lying dead there, and how could it be that Mahakāla, listening to a Dhamma teaching in the temple, should die in such a way, since everyone knew that Mahakāla was a good person, a stream enterer who had never committed any bad kamma. They asked the Buddha about this, and he said, ‘Truly, for Mahakāla to die in this way is not fitting for him in this life, but it is a fitting death for

the kamma he had committed in the past.' And the Buddha told the following story about Mahakāla's previous kamma.

In the past there was a group of bandits who lived in a forest within the domain of the king of Varanasi. The king appointed an official to take people from one end of the forest to the other, to protect them from the bandits. One day a man came with his beautiful wife on a small cart. The royal official was infatuated with the woman and insisted that it was too late to go through the forest, they could spend the night with the official's men and he would take them the following day. In the officer's house there was a precious jewel. The official took the jewel and hid it in the cart of the man and his wife then, just before dawn, the officer ordered his men to search for the jewel. It was found where he had hidden it, in the small cart belonging to the man and his wife. 'You have stolen my jewel!' he cried, and abused the man and beat him to death. The Buddha did not say what happened to the beautiful woman, but did explain that the official was none other than Mahakāla.

Kammayoni: the bad kamma you have made arises within yourself, has the self as birthplace and oppresses those who are of little wisdom.

Bad actions done by oneself arise within oneself, they are produced within oneself, and are called *kammayoni*.

It is our own kamma that leads us to be born in our mother's womb; our parents do not produce us. Our mind has travelled throughout *samsara*, through large and small births, from the distant past, but there is a connection from the past between our minds and those of our parents. That is why we have been born into this world through our parents. We may not be happy with our conditions – parents arguing, no warmth; a bad environment; being poor – but we do not have a right to criticize our parents. It is our own kamma that has led us to become their children in this life. We must take the responsibility ourselves.

In our lives we must deal with society through our parents or elders. We have to go to school or university, and even in the subjects we study, the work we do and the person we marry it seems as though we are forced to do this by a guide or leader. If we are disappointed in our lives, we can't help thinking that we have to endure these states because our parents or this or that person forced us to do it and we develop hatred; we want to get back at them, but in fact it is our kamma that has led us here. We must consider properly, think correctly, and not think in a harmful way, wanting to get back at others. We must accept responsibility for the results of our kamma ourselves, and not blame others.

Why is society these days so confusing? Why are our lives confused? Even the monks' minds are confused! It is because we do not clearly see that good actions lead to good results and bad actions lead to bad results. Instead we ask, 'Where do good actions lead to good results? Everywhere we see good actions leading to bad results. Where do bad actions lead to bad results? Everywhere we see bad actions leading to good results.'

The Buddha said that as long as bad actions *pāpa* have not yet given fruit, bad people see their actions as good, but as soon as the actions produce results, that's when they will see the poison of their actions. As long as good actions have not yet produced results, good people do not yet see the benefit of good actions, but as soon as the goodness produces results, then they see the results of good actions.

So let us examine *kammayonī*, until our minds are unshaken by events. All things in this world are perfect in cause and result; good actions lead to good results, bad actions lead to bad results – that is a fixed law. Accept the truth with a mind that is brave and firm. May we all establish ourselves in goodness and what is proper at all times.

Kammabandhū

Kammabandhū means 'we have kamma as our retinue.' *Bandhu* means 'associates', 'siblings'. It is our kamma, our actions, that binds our minds.

The Buddha said that the beings that we see with our eyes, such as ants, frogs, cats, dogs, cattle and people, have all been our parents or family at the very least for one lifetime within the endless round of *saṃsāra*. We have loved and hated each other until the present lifetime, and will do so onward into the future for many lifetimes, as long as we have not yet attained the Path and Fruit of *Nibbāna*.

Since this is the case, we should not be heedless. We should make our minds peaceful and look within, examining ourselves to see whether there is someone that we hate. If there is, we should quickly forgive them right now, at least before we die. We should not continue to be kamma-adversaries. Do not think that we can just mind our own business and have nothing to do with each other; even if we live in different provinces, or different countries, there is a chance that we will meet in a future life, and a very great chance, as long as there is clinging and attachment, *upādāya*. Look at your own mind until you see it clearly. Who are you thinking about? Who are you resentful of? With whom do you want to get your revenge? That is what you should be wary of. In the future they will be reborn as your close relatives! And then there will be trouble for endless lifetimes.

Therefore, do not harbour hateful thoughts. Cultivate forgiveness, do not harbour thoughts of vengeance or harming others. Think only good thoughts of each other. Try to do only good actions, such as acts of generosity, giving and giving again; having kindly speech, speech that is pleasant to the ear and worth listening to; do what is useful, help society; conduct yourself appropriately, being fair and sincere.

Treating each other like this, we will be happy in the present moment and also create good relations for the future. If we meet in

future lives, it will be as family members and friends who help and support each other.

Kammaṭṭisaraṇā

We are taught to examine *kammaṭṭisaraṇā*, which means ‘kamma is our shelter’.

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

Saṅghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi

‘Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are my refuges’. We also have our kamma, our actions, as our shelter. The way we are in the present depends on past things, both physical *rūpadhamma* and mental *nāmadhamma*, from the body, our possessions, our environment, our country and the people we meet to the mental states, the virtues and qualities of our minds, known as our perfections, *pāramī*.

Bad kamma is like a debt; good kamma is like wealth that can be used in the future to ward against difficulty. There are said to be seven kinds of goodness. Simply put, they are the seven noble treasures:

Saddhā: believing in what is worthy of belief; believing in kamma, the results of kamma, that good actions bring good results and bad actions bring bad results.

Sīla: ensuring one’s actions and speech are good;

Hiri: shame of wrongdoing;

Ottappa: fear of evil actions;

Bāhusacca: having heard much teaching and committed it to memory; having much learning

Cāga: giving and sharing with those worthy of it

Paññā: fully understanding what is of benefit and what is not

These seven noble treasures are better than external treasures such as money. No one can steal them and they are treasures you can rely on, not only in this life but for many lives to come. These seven noble treasures can be summarized as three things: generosity *dāna*, morality *sīla* and mental cultivation *bhāvanā*.

Generosity, Morality, and Mental Cultivation

Everything fares according to causes and conditions and has a causal relationship. Whatever result we desire, we should create the conditions for that. Human beings have many aspirations, but they can be summarized into these three categories: If there really is a future life, how would you like to be reborn? Everyone without exception wants to be born into a wealthy status. No one wants to be born into poverty; everyone wants economic stability and to have all life's conveniences. Generosity (*dāna*) is the cause and condition for having a solid economic position.

Everyone without exception wants to be born with a good physique; no one wants to be born deformed, sickly, ugly. Everyone wants to have the full thirty-two parts of the body, to be healthy and strong, long-lived, and of good appearance. Keeping the moral precepts is a cause for being born with a healthy body.

Everyone without exception wants to be born as an intelligent person; no one wants to be stupid. All people want to be clever and learned. Mental cultivation is the cause and condition for being born as an intelligent person.

Dāna, *sīla* and *bhāvanā* are causes and conditions for having wealth, a good appearance and intelligence. Look at your life here: forty years from today how old will you be? Most of you will be eighty to ninety years old. From this moment on, if you are not stingy and share things with those worthy of your generosity, such as your parents, your spouse, your children and brothers and sisters, helping each

other in accordance with your position, you won't have to be afraid of starving when you get old. Even though you might not be able to walk, and have difficulty going to the toilet, and may not be able to do things for yourself, no one will abandon you. Your children and grandchildren will look after you well. This is a benefit of generosity or giving. It means your economic position is good.

From this moment on if you are not complaining and angry and maintain your body and speech properly, when you get old, even though you won't have the beauty of a young person, you can grow old gracefully. Sometimes you see old people who have a pleasant appearance, good complexion and good temperament. There are old people who are pleasant to look at, and they are those who have 'good physique'. This is a benefit of morality.

From this moment on, if you cultivate and practise meditation, knowing what is right and what is wrong, what is of benefit and what is not, knowing yourself and knowing others, and knowing how to solve problems, the older you get the more benefit you are able to create for your children and grandchildren, because you have bright wisdom. The teachers, those who practise well and are virtuous, are a good example: the older they are the more faith in them the people have. It is the same for householders: if they have wisdom and know the Dhamma, even if they live to a hundred years, they do not become a burden to their children and grandchildren but instead become a refuge for them. This is a benefit of *bhāvanā* known as intelligence.

The practice of generosity, morality and mental cultivation has these kinds of benefits. If you practise it now, it generates benefit from this day onwards for the rest of your life, and also in the next life. It is truly *kammaṇaṭṭharaṇā*. Take generosity, morality and mental cultivation as your refuge. Practise generosity, morality, mental cultivation and all kinds of goodness as if your life depended on it.

When we live with others it is normal that there will be matters that are disagreeable to us. No matter how much we love them, problems can arise simply through living close together with others. The more love there is, the more problems arise. To solve problems in our lives, we should always solve them within ourselves first. Our relationship with others will then gradually improve. Give up your own bad actions and make good actions within yourself. You may feel that others are wrong or not good, but you should leave their badness alone for the moment: use the principle, or skilful means, of awakening your own mindfulness.

When I was in Japan, a woman came to see me one day to have a chat. She was depressed over one of her daughters. This daughter was always finding fault with her mother, saying for example that she didn't eat properly, that she walked too loudly, that she closed the doors too loudly or put things down carelessly. She kept track of all the tiny little things to complain about. The mother was so disturbed by it that she didn't feel like entering the house at all. She was hurt to have such an ungrateful daughter. She shouldn't be complaining like this. I sat and listened to her story until she had finished.

I had met her for the first time that day. She had seen the television programme about me walking in Japan and had been inspired by it. Judging from her mannerisms, she was a very proper person, very tidy and perhaps one who tended towards a critical nature *dosacarita*. I asked her 'When your daughter was very small, you were always nagging her, right?' She admitted that this was true. I guessed that, be it through her own good wishes for her daughter or because of irritation, the mother had nagged her daughter too much, with no consideration for the nature of children. Whatever the daughter did the mother complained about it. 'Don't do it like this, don't do it like that.' Whatever the daughter did was wrong. The daughter had been feeling repressed for a long time, so once

she became an adult she was angry at her mother. ‘Mother, why do you do this, why do you do that?’ The daughter’s words were none other than the words the mother had used to berate her. She had made the cause herself and it came back to her from her daughter, who was the condition.

If the mother understood this, she would have had to make up her mind to practise and try not to have a bad reaction when she heard her daughter’s words. She would make her mind firm and unshakeable, maintain her mind in a state of normalcy and calm that has morality. She should not display displeasure through her facial expressions, her speech or her physical mannerisms, but control her feelings, her actions and her speech as if nothing had occurred, and there was nothing unusual. In short, she should make herself like the one hand clapping, which makes no sound. Don’t be like the temple bell: whenever it strikes, we strike back at it every time, and say the sound is annoying. Let’s stop first, and then the sound will gradually get softer until it eventually stops. When we understand properly, we will feel goodwill, *mettā* and compassion, *karuṇā*.

Apart from this we must train to keep our minds in a normal state, and maintain our speech and actions in a state of normalcy and propriety. Generosity will be a force for supporting the rapid solution of problems.

Give with kindly eyes.

Give with a smiling face.

Give with kind words.

Give the gift of forgiveness: forgive each other.

Give even small things; things that people like, such as sweets or fruit. The recipients will change their feeling immediately. They will feel gladdened and happy, or they will feel love.

This is not a heavy problem. If we understand cause and effect and practise properly according to the principles of Dhamma, the problems will gradually decrease.

Summary

We should examine the principle of kamma in various ways.

Kamma is our own.

Kamma is what gives fruit.

Kamma is our birthplace.

Kamma is our retinue.

Kamma is our shelter.

In short, whatever kamma we do, whether good or evil, of that we will receive the fruits. Good actions bring good results, bad actions bring bad results: this is truly a fixed law.

¹ A sotapāna or stream enterer is someone who has experienced transcendental insight and has entered onto the path of enlightenment.

² The Eight Precepts are an extension on the normal Five Precepts observed by practising Buddhists everywhere. The Five Precepts are to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and taking intoxicants. In the eight precepts, the Third Precept becomes sexual abstinence, and a further three are added: refraining from eating after midday, from music, entertainments, perfumes and beautification, and from luxurious sleeping and sitting places.

12

Walking Meditation in the Thai Forest Tradition

Adapted from a publication



Ajahn Nāṇadhammo was born in 1955 in Australia. He received novice ordination from Somdet Phra Nāṇasaṁvara in 1979, received full ordination with Ajahn Chah in 1980, and went to Bodhinyana Monastery in Western Australia in 1994. In 2002 Ajahn Nāṇadhammo moved to Wat Nanachat and was abbot there for 6 years. He then took up residence at Wat Ratanawan where he is today.

“Walking meditation is a way of simplifying what were doing when we are doing it.”

Preparation for Walking Meditation

The place where the Lord Buddha did walking meditation at Bodhgaya after his Enlightenment still exists to this day. His walking path was seventeen steps long. These days the Forest Monks tend to make their walking meditation paths much longer. They can be up to thirty steps long. The beginner may find thirty paces a bit too long because mindfulness is not yet developed. By the time you get to the end of the path, the mind may have been ‘around the world and back’. Remember, walking is a stimulating posture, and initially the mind tends to wander a lot. It is usually better to start off on a shorter path; fifteen paces would be a good length.

If you are going to walk meditation outside, find a secluded place that is slightly enclosed. It can be distracting to walk in an open area where there is a view, as you may find that the mind is drawn out to the scenery. An enclosed area is especially suitable for speculative personalities who like to think a lot; it helps to calm the mind (Vsm,III,103). If the path is closed in, it tends to bring the mind inwards, into one's self and towards peace.

Once you have chosen a suitable path, stand at one end. Stand erect. Put the right hand over the left in front of you. Don't walk with your hands behind your back. I remember a Meditation Master who visited the monastery, commenting when he saw one of the guests walking up and down with his hands behind his back: 'He's not walking meditation; he's going for a stroll'. He made that remark because there was not enough clear determination to focus the mind on walking meditation, by placing the hands in front – to differentiate that from just walking.

The practice firstly is to develop *samādhi*, and that takes focussed effort. The Pali word *samādhi* means focussing the mind, developing the mind to one-pointedness by gradual degrees of mindfulness and concentration. To focus the mind, one has to be diligent and determined. This firstly requires a degree of physical as well as mental composure. One begins composing oneself by clasping the hands in front. Composing the body helps to compose the mind. Having thus composed the body, one should then stand still and bring awareness and attention to the body. Then raise one's hands together in *añjali*, a gesture of respect, and with one's eyes shut reflect for a few minutes on the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha (*Buddhānussati*, *Dhammānussati* and *Sanghānussati*).

On the walking meditation path you can contemplate having taken refuge in the Buddha – He who Knows and Sees, the Wise One, the Awakened One, the Fully Enlightened One. Reflect in

your heart on the qualities of the Buddha for a few minutes. Then recall the Dhamma – the Truth that you are striving to realize and cultivate. Finally, bring to mind the Sangha – especially those fully Enlightened ones who have realized the truth by cultivating meditation. Then bring the hands down in front of you and make a mental determination on how long you are going to walk meditation, be it half an hour, one hour, or more. However long you determine to walk, stick to it; you are nurturing the mind, at this initial stage of the meditation, with zest, inspiration and confidence.

It's important to remember to keep the eyes cast down about a metre and a half in front. Don't be looking around distracted by this or that. Keep awareness on the feeling at the soles of the feet, and in this way, you develop more refined attention, and clear knowing of walking – while walking.

Basics of Walking Meditation and Choosing an Object

The Buddha taught forty different meditation objects (Vsm,III,104) many of which can be used on the walking path. However some are more suitable than others. I'll discuss a number of these meditation objects here, beginning with those most commonly used.

Awareness of the Walking Posture

In this method, while walking, place all your attention on the soles of the feet, on the sensations and feelings as they arise and pass away. This is assuming that you are walking bare footed, as most monks do. Although light soled shoes can be worn if necessary. As you begin walking, the feeling will change. As the foot is lifted and comes down again into contact with the path, a new feeling arises. Be aware of that sensation, as it is felt through the sole of the foot. Again, as the foot lifts, mentally note the new feeling as it arises. When you lift each foot and place it down, know the sensations felt. At each new step, certain new feelings are experienced and

old feelings cease. These should be known with mindfulness. With each step a new feeling is experienced – feeling arising, feeling passing away; feeling arising, feeling passing away. With this method, we place mindfulness on the feeling of walking itself, on each step taken, on the *vedanā* (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral sensations). We are aware of whatever type of *vedanā* arises at the soles of the feet. When we stand, there is a sensation of the contact with the ground. This contact can produce pain, heat or other sensations. We place our mindful attention on those feelings, knowing them fully. When raising the foot to take a step, the feeling changes as soon as the foot loses contact with the ground. When we place that foot down, again a new feeling arises as the foot comes into contact with the ground. As we walk, feelings are constantly changing and arising anew. We mindfully note this arising and passing away of feeling as the soles of the feet lift off or touch onto the ground. In this way we are keeping our full attention just on the sensations that arise through walking.

Have you ever really noticed the feelings in the feet as you walk? They happen every time we walk, but we tend not to notice these subtle things in life. When we walk, our minds tend to be somewhere else. Walking meditation is a way of simplifying what we're doing when we're doing it. We're bringing the mind to the 'here and now,' being one with walking when walking. We are simplifying everything, quieting the mind by just knowing feeling as it's arising and passing away.

How fast should you walk? Ajahn Chah recommended walking naturally, not too slow or too fast. If you walk fast, you might find it difficult to concentrate on the arising and passing away sensation of feeling. You may need to slow down a bit. On the other hand some people may need actually to walk faster. It depends on the person. You have to find your own pace, whatever works for you. You can begin walking slowly at first then gradually come to your normal pace.

If your mindfulness is weak (meaning your mind wanders a lot), then walk very slowly until you can stay in the present moment with each step. Start by establishing mindfulness at the beginning of the path. When you arrive in the middle of the path, then mentally ask yourself, ‘Where is my mind? Is it on the feeling at the soles of the feet? Do I know that feeling, the contact here and now, at this present moment?’ If the mind has wandered off, then bring it back to the sensations at the feet again and continue walking.

When you get to the end of the path, turn slowly around and re-establish your mindfulness. Where is the mind? Does it know the feeling at the soles of the feet? Or has it wandered off? The mind tends to wander elsewhere chasing different thoughts : anxiety, fear, happiness, sorrow, worries, doubts, pleasures, frustration and other thoughts that can arise. If mindfulness of the meditation object is not present, re-establish it on the simple act of walking, and then begin to walk back to the other end of the path. When you get to the middle of the path, you should note, ‘I am now at the middle of the path,’ and check again to see if the mind is with the object. Then, once you arrive at the end of the path mentally note, ‘Where is the mind?’ In this way, you walk back and forth mindfully aware of the feelings arising and passing away. While walking, re-establish your mindfulness constantly – pulling the mind back, drawing the mind inward, becoming aware, knowing the feeling at each moment as it is arising and passing away.

As we sustain mindfulness on the sensations and feelings at the soles of the feet, we will notice that the mind gets less distracted. The mind is less inclined to go out to things that are happening around us. We become calmer. The mind will become tranquil as it settles down, the walking posture becomes too coarse an activity for this quality of mind and you will just want to be still. So stop and stand to allow the mind to experience this calm and tranquillity. This is known as *passaddhi*, it is one of the factors of Enlightenment. The

mind may be very refined and it's actually impossible to continue walking meditation. Walking involves the mental volition to move. Your mind may be too focused on the meditation object for that, so stop on the walking meditation path and continue the practice in a standing position. Meditation is about the work of the mind, not about any particular posture. The physical posture is just a convenient means to enhance the work of the mind.

Concentration and tranquillity work together with mindfulness. Combined with the factors of energy, investigation of Dhamma, joy, and equanimity, these are the 'Seven Factors of Enlightenment'. When in meditation the mind is tranquil then, because of that tranquillity, a sense of joy, rapture, and bliss will arise. The Buddha said that the bliss of peace is the highest happiness (MN,1,454), and a concentrated mind experiences that peace. This peace can be experienced in our lives.

Having developed the practice of walking meditation in a formal context, we can use the walking activity as meditation when we are walking around in our daily lives: going to the shops, walking from one room to the other or even walking to the bathroom. We can be aware of just walking, simply being with that process. Our minds can be still and peaceful. This is a way of developing concentration and tranquillity in our daily lives.

From Sitting Meditation to the Walking Path

If you are doing sitting meditation and the mind becomes tranquil with a certain meditation object then use that same object in walking meditation. However, with more subtle meditation objects, such as the breath, the mind must have attained a certain degree of stability in that calmness first. If you begin walking meditation focusing attention on the breath and the mind is not yet calm, it will be difficult. The breath is a very subtle object. Usually it is better to begin with a coarser object of meditation, such as the sensations of feelings arising at the feet.

There are many meditation objects that you can transfer well from the sitting posture to the walking posture, for example, the Four Divine Abidings: Loving Kindness, Compassion, Appreciative Joy and Equanimity. As you pace back and forth, develop expansive thoughts based on loving kindness, ‘May all beings be happy, may all beings be at peace, may all beings be free from all suffering.’ You can use the walking posture as a complement to the sitting posture, develop meditation on the same object but in a different posture.

Choosing a Mantra

If you are walking meditation and find you’re getting drowsy, activate the mind rather than calm it. Make it more focused and awake with the use of a mantra like *Buddho*, repeating the word quietly to yourself over and over again. If the mind is still wandering, repeat the *Buddho* more quickly, and increase the speed of your walking up and down the path. As you walk, recite *Buddho, Buddho, Buddho*. In this way, your mind will soon become focussed.

Tan Ajahn Mun, the famous forest meditation teacher, was in the hill tribe region in North Thailand and the local people didn’t know anything about meditation or meditation monks however they are very inquisitive. They saw him walking up and down on his path and followed him in a line. When he got to the end of the path and turned around, the whole village was standing there! They had assumed he was walking back and forth with his eyes cast down searching for something. ‘What are you looking for Venerable Sir?’ they enquired. ‘Can we help you to find it?’ He skilfully replied, ‘I’m looking for *Buddho*, the Buddha in the heart. You can help me to find it by walking up and down on your own paths looking for the Buddha.’ And with this simple and beautiful instruction, many of those villagers began meditating and Tan Ajahn Mun said they obtained wonderful results.

Contemplation of the Way Things Are

Investigation of Dhamma (*dhammavicaya*) is one of the Factors of Enlightenment, and is a type of contemplation on the Teachings and the laws of nature which can be used while walking up and down the meditation path. This doesn't mean thinking or speculating over any old thing, it is constant reflection and contemplation of the Truth (Dhamma).

Investigating Impermanence

For example, one can contemplate Impermanence by observing the process of change, and seeing how all things are subject to change. One develops a clear perception of the arising and passing away of all experience; 'life' is a continual process of arising and passing away and all conditioned experience is subject to this law of nature. Contemplating this Truth, one sees the characteristics of existence. One sees that all things are subject to change; all things are not satisfactory; all things are not self. One can investigate these fundamental characteristics of nature on the walking meditation path.

Recollecting Generosity and Virtue

The Buddha continually stressed the importance of generosity (It,26) and virtue (SN,V,354). While on the walking path, one can reflect on one's virtue or on acts of generosity. Walk up and down and ask yourself, "Today, what acts of goodness have I done?" A meditation teacher I stayed with used to say that one reason meditators cannot find peace is that they haven't created enough goodness during the day. Goodness is a cushion for tranquillity, a base for peace. If we've engaged in acts of kindness during the day – a kind word, a good deed, we've been generous or compassionate – then the mind will experience joy and rapture. Those acts of goodness and the happiness that comes from them will become conditional factors for concentration and peace. The power of goodness and generosity

leads to happiness and it is that wholesome happiness which forms the foundation for concentration and wisdom.

The recollection of one's good deeds is a very appropriate meditation subject when the mind is restless, agitated, angry, or frustrated. If the mind lacks peace, recollect your past kind actions. This is not for the purpose of building up one's ego, it is a recognition of the power of goodness and wholesomeness. Acts of kindness, virtue and generosity bring joy into the mind, and joy is a Factor of Enlightenment (SN,V,68). Recollecting acts of generosity; reflecting on the benefits of giving; recalling one's virtue; contemplating the purity of harmlessness, the purity of honesty, the purity of propriety in sexual relations, the purity of truthfulness, the purity of non-confusion of mind by avoiding intoxicants, all of these recollections can serve as meditation objects on the walking path.

Recollecting the Nature of the Body

We can also meditate on death and dying or on the non-beautiful nature of the body, on the *asubha* contemplations: corpses in various stages of decay. We can visualize taking this body apart, as a medical student would dissect a body. We 'peel off' the skin and 'see' what's underneath: the layers of the flesh, the sinews, the bones, the organs. We can mentally remove each one of the organs from the body so it can be investigated and understood. What's the body made of? What are its component parts? Is this me? Is it permanent? Is it worthy of being called a self?

The body is just an aspect of nature, like a tree or a cloud – no different. The fundamental problem is the attachment to the body; the mind clings to the view that this body is my body; the mind delights in 'my' body; it delights in other people's bodies. This is 'me'. This is self. I own this. We can challenge this attachment to the body through contemplation and investigation. We take up the

object of the bones of this body. As we are walking meditation we visualize a bone, seeing it bleach, break up and return to the earth element. Bone is calcium and is absorbed into the body through the consumption of vegetable and animal matter; it comes from earth. Chemicals come together to form bone, and eventually that bone will return to earth.

Calcium just is calcium; there is no quality of it being ‘my’ calcium or someone else’s calcium. Earth just goes back to earth and each element returns to its natural form. This is not ‘me’; this is not worthy of being called a self. We meditate on and break down a bone to its elements and return them to the earth. We re-establish it again and break it down again and we carry on this process continuously until clear insight arises.

If you are meditating on the body and you haven’t yet completely broken down the object of meditation into the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) and then re-constituted it, the work of the meditation is not yet finished. The mental exercise is not yet complete; the work is not done. Keep at it. Continue walking. Walk up and down and investigate until you are able to establish the perception in the mind of seeing the *asubha* in the *subha*: see the non-beautiful, the non-delightful, and the non-attractive in what is assumed to be beautiful, delightful and attractive. We break this body down and return it to its natural elements, in order to see it as it really is.

The training of the mind to investigate nature leads to wisdom. By repeating these exercises of breaking the body down into its four elements, earth, air, fire and water, the mind sees and understands that this is not ‘me’, not ‘mine’, not self. It sees that the four elements that constitute this body are just aspects of nature. It is the mind that attaches to the view that the body is self. So we challenge that attachment; we don’t blindly accept it, because it is that attachment which causes all our suffering.

Other Contemplations

Another meditation object the Buddha recommended was to reflect on peace, and the nature of peace (Vsm, 197). Yet another is to consider the qualities of Enlightenment. Alternatively one can walk up and down reflecting on the qualities of the Buddha, the qualities of the Dhamma, or the qualities of the Sangha. Or one can recollect heavenly beings, *Devas*, and the qualities needed to become a heavenly being (Vsm,III,105).

Wise Use of Contemplation

There are so many meditation objects in the Buddhist repertoire of meditation. Your meditation object should be chosen carefully. Select a meditation object that stimulates the mind when the mind needs stimulating, or pacifies the mind when the mind needs calming. But a few words of caution are needed when using these contemplations on the walking path so the mind doesn't go into speculative thought and drift off – this is very easy to do. We have to be very mindful and to note at the beginning of the path, the middle and the end of the path, 'Am I really with my meditation object or am I thinking about something else?' If you are walking up and down on a meditation path for four hours, but there is only mindful awareness for one minute during that four hours, you have only meditated for one minute.

Remember it's not how much meditation we do, it's the quality of that meditation that counts. If you are walking and the mind is wandering off elsewhere, you're not meditating. You're not meditating in the sense that the Buddha used the word meditation, as *bhāvanā* or mental development (AN,III,125-127). It's the quality of mind rather than the quantity of meditation that one does that is most important.

Conclusion

Throughout the history of Buddhism, many monks and nuns have attained insight, wisdom and enlightenment while on the walking

meditation path, engaged in the investigation of the Truth. In the Forest Monastic Tradition, every aspect of our life is treated as an opportunity for meditation. Meditation is not just for the time spent seated on the meditation cushion. All processes of life provide opportunities for us to investigate reality. We strive to know things as they are, that things arise and pass away, to understand reality as it actually is.

In this discussion of walking meditation, I hope to have given you something that will extend your repertoire of meditation techniques. Walking meditation is something that you can use in your daily life when you are active, as well as when you are doing formal meditation. Walking meditation can be another mode for developing the mind. Walking meditation gives work for the mind to engage in. If you have problems with drowsiness, don't just sit there nodding; get up and put the mind to work. This is *kammaṭṭhāna*: the fundamental work of the mind.

In the Forest Tradition whenever a meditation teacher visits a monastery, one of the first places he goes is to the monks' meditation paths, to see how many footprints there are. And if those meditation paths are well worn, it is considered to be a sign that it is a good monastery.

May your walking path be well worn.

13

The Real Practice

From a talk given at Wat Pah Nanachat,
in 2007



Ajahn Jayasaro was born in England in 1958. He spent the Rain Retreat of 1978 with Ajahn Sumedho at Oakenholt before travelling to Thailand. He was a novice for a year, then received full bhikkhu ordination in 1980 with Venerable Ajahn Chah as his preceptor and from 1997 until 2002, was the Abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat. Ajahn Jayasaro now lives alone in a hermitage at the foot of the Kow Yai mountain range in Korat, Thailand.

“Repetition is not the same as monotony.”

IT WAS QUITE A REVELATION TO ME THAT THE VAST MAJORITY OF AJAHN CHAH’S Dhamma talks were not about meditation, or *jhanas* and *ñanas*¹. They were not about how to be a *sotapanna*² and what it is like to be an *arahant*. They were very much more down to earth. They were about things like *korwat* and *od ton*.

What do these words mean? ‘*Korwat*’ refers to the monastic regulations, conventions and the guidelines on how we live our lives together in a community. ‘*Od ton*’ is patient endurance. Those were major themes in the way that Ajahn Chah set up his monastery and in the way that he taught his disciples. And they were the founding

principles on which Wat Pah Nanachat itself was established. In fact, from the very beginning of Wat Pah Nanachat, attitudes to that kind of training and that kind of emphasis have varied in their appreciation of the use of *korwat* as a means of training or the relative importance of the use of *od ton* in spiritual development of patient endurance. And for all the Western monks, particularly, this was very much bound up with the question: 'What is practice really all about? What's the real practice?'

There have always been monks who say: 'Well, I don't want to stay at Nanachat. It's good here, when you start out, but it's not where you can do the real practice. The real practice is there, or somewhere else, or the real practice is in this place or that place, or in a cave in Chiang Mai – not at Wat Nanachat.' This has been a constant point of discussion over the years and, in the process, the very real benefits of training at this monastery are overlooked or have been downgraded. And in the 'hierarchy of wholesome qualities' (*kusala-dhammas*) that we often develop, there is the idea that a certain kind of virtue is very high and very inspiring, but in the case of patient endurance people say '...aah, I didn't get anything from it at all, except for patient endurance. I guess that's better than nothing.' Whereas the Buddha himself, of course, taught that patient endurance is the supreme incinerator of defilements. This is a phrase that we perhaps don't give as much importance to as we might.

Many years ago when I was researching the biography of Ajahn Chah which was produced for his funeral, I interviewed Luang Por Sumedho, the first Western bhikkhu to train at Wat Pah Pong and the first abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat. Luang Por Sumedho was talking about what he really received from Ajahn Chah, and I remember him saying in particular that Ajahn Chah provided the most conducive environment for development. It's not the kind of answer that you'd expect from a disciple of such a great teacher. He didn't say anything like: 'Oh, once we were on alms round and Ajahn Chah said

something and suddenly I looked at the world in a different way – like in the books we read. It was not the high-points or special teachings or profound words of wisdom that he stressed, but more the ability of Ajahn Chah to create a system; a way for monks to live together which was of most benefit to them in the gradual reduction and elimination of the unwholesome dhammas, the development of wholesome dhammas, and the purification of mind.

Living together as a community of monks is not comfortable. In the old days we used to say: ‘Catholic monks, have their hair-shirts and other forms of self-mortification. We just live together as bhikkhus. The discomfort and hardship of that has the same kind of effect.’ The fact that it’s not comfortable is the point of it. I have experienced various types of training environments and have quite a good grasp, I think, of the advantages and disadvantages of these. For the last few years, I have been living a more solitary life – the kind of life, perhaps, that many of us would characterize as ‘the real kind of practice’. I can see that living in solitude, with the lack of demands upon one’s time, the lack of tension, the lack of stress and conflict and the continuity, and so on, is very conducive in a way. But there are certain very important aspects of practice that are difficult when living alone. In a communal environment these can be developed much more easily.

For example, just recently, at a meeting of the senior monks, I made a certain statement and, very skillfully, another monk said to me, ‘Well, no, that’s not right.’ So I carefully rephrased my statement. The monk smiled a bit and said, ‘Well, no, that’s not right either.’ He was definitely correct and I was incorrect. I was just silent – then all of a sudden I realised that this is what I’m really missing: living alone these days I don’t have the experience of being told that I’m wrong. When I make a mistake, when I’m looking at things in the wrong way or I’m lacking the necessary information or get the wrong information, I don’t have somebody there to point it out. This is what’s so helpful about living in a community of good friends.

The kind of things which are difficult to see, living alone in the forest, are one's own *ditṭhis* and *manas* – views and opinions, the conceit and the ideas about who you are. These are not arising and passing away in consciousness like moods and thoughts and things, which in solitude you may have a much more subtle and clearer grasp of. If you were to compare it with a painting; the *ditṭhi* and the *mana* are more like the canvas or the particular mode of expression – whether it's an oil painting or a water-colour. The particular medium of expression is more like the *ditṭhi mana*. They're not so easy to see, or to immediately cognize as the particular forms that are arising in consciousness.

In many ways, one of the most important aspects of living in a community – so mundane and obvious that we tend to overlook it – is the daily schedule. This is what Ajahn Chah would teach us so often and what has been passed down to us through Luang Por Sumedho, Ajahn Pabhakaro, Ajahn Jagaro, Ajahn Pasanno, myself, and Ajahn Ñāṇadhammo: look at your mind, look at your body, and see what comes up when you have a steady, stable kind of environment. See what comes up in the situation where every day is more or less the same. Repetition is not the same as monotony because there are always subtle differences. How do you feel when the bell goes at three in the morning? How do you feel about that; what happens? How easy is it to get up in the morning; how difficult? Is it the same every day; does it change? Why does it change; what's the difference? What are the causes; what are the conditions? How does it feel going to the sala every morning? What is your attitude to morning chanting? Do you like it; do you dislike it? Do you feel indifferent? Do you like it when some people lead the chanting and not when other people lead the chanting? Do you like this or that chant? How do you feel about going on alms round? How do you feel about this alms route rather than that alms route? All these kinds of likes and dislikes are coming up and becoming very clear to you because you have a stable background of *korwat*. You're not doing things the way you want to do them.

When you have an opportunity to live alone, the first thing you think is, 'Ah, this is what I want!' You can sit as long as you want, walk as long as you want. There are so many things you can do in the way you've always wanted to do them. It feels good – no question about that. But that feeling of relaxation and enjoyment is not necessarily a wholesome thing in the long run. What I think is wholesome is when you don't have that much control over things. Of course you have control in the sense that you've volunteered to come here. Nobody forced you to enter this monastery; to take on the training. You committed yourself to it, you took dependence from the Ajahn, and that means it is like a contract. 'Okay, I signed up for this now. And I'm willing to give up a certain amount of my freedom with the confidence and faith that this training will have a beneficial effect on me'. And then – when we're in that safe environment, where everyone's conduct is conditioned and determined by *Vinaya*³ and we all have that sense of spiritual friendship: we're all following the same path towards the same goal and we can feel that confidence that people are living within the boundaries of the *Vinaya* and no one is going to hurt us and harm us – then we give ourselves up to the daily schedule. And we learn to look at what happens.

In the course of daily life in the monastery, some of the stuff that comes up may seem quite ridiculous. Take the example of getting very irritated about someone who has spilled water on their seat and doesn't wipe it off. Think how this would sound if you were to explain it to someone outside the monastery: 'I got angry about water that had been spilled on the seat and not wiped off'. Or you get irritated because someone makes such a loud noise coming into the *sala*. Or maybe somebody else is always sneezing – I could go on. This is what we call the 'rubby-up'⁴, because it 'rubs you up' the wrong way. This kind of thing is going on all the time and it's not really inspiring. You'd be embarrassed to tell somebody about these instances when emotions are brought up in your mind. But that's not really the point; let's look at the meaning of it.

Let's say someone takes something you think is really yours; you feel you had a right to it, maybe. Or another monk is a bit greedy and takes too much of something, like sweets for example. Normally you'd not get involved in such a petty thing but suppose the situation is that there was just a tiny amount there in the first place and that other person has taken too much of it. In such a case, as we are monks, we could live with it, thinking: 'So what?' But here we are saying: 'It shouldn't be like that. It's not right. It's not fair'. To do such a thing just seems to shake the whole foundation of what a monastic community means; what it means to live together.

Our experiences are always filtered through a certain lens, a framework. And this is the whole realm of *ditṭhi* or 'framing': we always see things through a particular frame. And in the early years of monastic life, what we were really concerned about more than anything else – apart from developing a real sense of sense restraint, and skills in using the tools of the *Vinaya* and *korwat* as a means to enhance and firmly ground ourselves in the present moment – what we were really concerned about was the way to straighten up our *ditthis*; to create correct frames. There are so many things in life that bring up unwholesome dhammas, just because of the particular frame through which we're looking at the world; the expectations we have, the wishes we have, the desires we have.

Ajahn Chah's teachings come down again and again to the Four Noble Truths: the foundation of all of our practice. First Noble Truth: *dukkha*. Second Noble Truth: *samudaya*, the cause, *taṇhā*, craving. So what we are facing is this: wanting things and not getting them; not liking people, not liking things, but having to put up with them; liking things, wanting things, and not being able to be with them. And this is the nitty-gritty of monastic life in a community. Maybe you look at the person next to you and think: 'I became a monk to get away from people like that. I never thought I would meet someone like that in the monastery,' (some of these monks can actually later

become great friends, by the way, but that's another story). So what it's about is conforming to the monastic schedule. In this context, we're looking at things that, in conventional Buddhist terminology, are the five *khandas*, or the four foundations of mindfulness and so on and being given periodic reflections that enable us to develop some kind of perspective so we are able to see all kinds of difficulties coming up.

It is common for bhikkhus to develop blind spots in the practice, which become more and more embedded and more and more difficult to get rid of – to the extent that we tend to shy away from the community. This is why spending a five year period of apprenticeship in community life before going alone on extended periods of meditation is a basic principle in our monastic life. Right Speech, for example; you cannot develop right speech living alone. We all have to deal with unwholesome habits of speech that we carry into monastic life. Right Speech is one-eighth of the Eightfold Path – it's not a minor consideration. It is only in community life that you can really understand right speech. Wat Nanachat is a good place for developing right speech, even though it might seem that there are so many people here, so many social contacts it stirs things up. That's a particular frame; just a way of looking at things. There is conceit, there are views; there is confrontation if you come up with something ridiculous, or you act in an obnoxious way; somebody takes you up on it. In Thai monasteries usually people just turn away, they don't want any kind of hassle. In Wat Nanachat you often get pulled up for it and that is why a lot of people don't like it here.

There is a real value in the *korwat*-training that I saw very clearly during the period that I was running the monastery. I don't have the psychic powers to just sit and see who is doing what in their *kuti* or who is practising well – most abbots don't! But one of the ways we, as leaders of communities, can have a very good idea of who is going off the rails, or who is going a little bit strange, is this whole idea of

keeping the *korwat*. Who is coming out for morning chanting? Who misses alms round or comes out late? Who doesn't sweep in the afternoons? All these aspects of the daily schedule, are very clear indicators of where people's minds are at.

The relationship between the inner and the outer is an interesting one. *Sīla* and the way we live together is something that is constantly modifying us and changing the way we look at ourselves, our self-image. So, as young monks, we're trying to develop what is called '*samaṇa-sañña*' (the perception of being a *samaṇa*⁵) and I'll give you a non-monastic example concerning this change of attitude that is quite interesting. They did an experiment in America where they took some signs, promoting road safety, knocked on people's doors in two suburban areas and asked if they could put a sign in their front garden. The signs were really big and ugly, they would obscure the view and look totally awful. In the first suburb, 80% said they didn't want the signs. In the second suburb, 70% said they wouldn't object to having the sign in their front garden. What was the difference? Well, three weeks previously, the people in the second suburb had been given a small sign, just three inches by three inches, promoting road safety and asked if they could stick it on their front door. That was just enough to change their perception of themselves. Now they had made this commitment by having a small sign on their front door, their sense of themselves had changed: they had this specific concern for road safety. So, three weeks later, when they were asked to put the big sign in their front garden, they had a feeling that they should be consistent with this new idea of who they are and 70% said yes to these big ugly signs.

Now, the comparison with monastic life is this: to keep the *Vinaya*, to be restrained, to follow the *korwat* – these are not merely external things that have nothing to do with the real practice. They have a very subtle effect on our sense of who we are. The *samaṇa-sañña*, the conventional sense of being a bhikkhu; of being a *samaṇa*; of

being someone who has left the world, is gradually developing through the simplicity of morning chanting, evening chanting, alms round, sweeping, sitting, walking. All these repeated actions are contributing. In the words of that famous simile of Suzuki Roshi: it is not like going out in the rainstorm and getting wet; it is like going out in the fog and gradually getting more and more wet.

I think it works and it is effective, provided that you're able to look at it and see exactly the value of it and give yourself to it. Wat Pah Nanachat is not an isolated Western or non-Thai enclave in the Thai monastic world. We are part of something much bigger; we are one branch of 200 branches. We are part of the lineage of wonderful teachers. One of the greatest was in Wat Pah Nanachat today, the *upajjhāya* of many of you here, Luang Por Liem. And so, as Wat Pah Nanachat monks, our understanding is that we are part of the Ajahn Chah tradition. The training here is not one that is restricted to this one place; we will have the opportunity to live at Poo Jom Gom and Dtao Dum, and all the other branch monasteries. Or we'll have the opportunity to live in Thai monasteries, where we can learn the language and the culture more easily. We have Poo Jom Gom and Dtao Dum where we can live more in solitude. The idea is that of a rounded training.

Please keep in mind that even the greatest teachers are not always competent in every area. There is a case, quite recently, where one of the most respected of our teachers had a real problem with a ghost in this monastery. He wasn't able to deal with it and had to invite another monk who is an exorcist to come and help. Every monk has his strong point and his weak points. They are not completely brilliant in everything. The idea of living with a great enlightened teacher is very attractive to all of us. Fortunately, in our monastic life, we will have that opportunity at some point but it is not a shortcut to spiritual progress. Often there is a lot of politics around great teachers, a lot of jealousy, and monks who are close to great

teachers can easily become heedless and conceited. In monastic life there are all kinds of different challenges. But there is always something else to learn.

I have spent many years in this monastery and feel a great affection and connection with it and, like all the previous abbots, I still feel I'm a part of Wat Pah Nanachat and support it very much. We're all living together as *kalyāṇamittā* (good friends in the Dhamma), which means that we are trying to help each other to overcome unwholesome dhammas and help each other to develop wholesome dhammas. Every one of us here is in training and we are all learning about Buddha-Dhamma and developing slowly and gradually or even rapidly. My feeling is that the framework here is solid and the community here has a lot of potential. I would like to wish Ajahn Kevali, the new abbot, every success and happiness and great benefit for all of you who are committing yourself to the training here.

¹ special knowledges

² stream enterer, the first of four stages of enlightenment

³ the monastic code, discipline, the monks rules

⁴ play on words: the Thai word 'rubbiyab' (often transliterated as 'rabieb') means standards, and is used in the monastery for the rules and regulations the monks follow in their daily activities

⁵ recluse, contemplative, monk, literally: a peaceful one

Chanting as a Practice

Adapted from a talk given at Wat Pah Nanachat, in 2010



Ajahn Kevali, born in Germany in 1968, became a novice at Wat Pah Nanachat in 1997. He was received into the Sangha as a bhikkhu in 1998. After several years training under his teacher Luang Por Liem, he was asked to take up the position of abbot at Wat Nanachat where he is currently resident.

“Chanting is something that connects us with the timeless quality of the Buddha’s teachings”

THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISE OF CHANTING THAT WE OFTEN DO TOGETHER has many beneficial aspects: the cultivation of mindfulness, the building of concentration, the development of wisdom, the spreading of loving-kindness and also simply being present with a sense of timelessness. I have found that all these aspects of our training can arise from chanting; particularly when we are reciting these traditional, archaic verses in the ancient language of Pali. Most of us don’t fully understand Pali, however an atmosphere is created from all the goodwill we generate. Putting our hearts into the chanting does have an effect, subconsciously or consciously.

I'm thinking here of the times when we are chanting the *parittas* together, (the protective verses) and how, over the years in the monastery, all of us have been exposed many times to these verses – these same verses that have been passed down to us from the Buddha. And despite our not being fluent in the language, we do understand the meaning of many of the individual words. These words have certain dhammas captured or encoded in them. As we recite them, the meaning can be a trigger – something we can wrap our consciousness around. Chanting the *parittas* is definitely a meditation. It creates a sense of peace and harmony and at the same time cultivates understanding.

Applying Mindfulness in Two Ways

Chanting as a practice comprises the two aspects of cultivating mindfulness in the way it is traditionally taught in Thailand. First is the awareness-aspect of mindfulness (in Thai: *kwam roo dtua*), which captures the quality of being in the present moment, letting the atmosphere and the all-round-experience of the practice that you are doing take over all your heart and feelings in a way that is fully aware, just like when you consciously immerse yourself in the flow and atmosphere of the words you are chanting (without paying much attention to their particular meanings).

Second is the aspect of mindfulness as recollection (in Thai: *kwam ralueg dai*), which definitely means that you are applying your mind, referring to some specific task in which you do have a slight choice of attention; where to focus on, such as when you are bringing the teachings to mind.

These aspects we know well from our meditation practice of reciting the meditation word 'Buddho'. When we recite 'Buddho' along with the rhythm of the breath, we set ourselves a simple task which, as a technique, doesn't require specific skills; it is something repetitive, something that works by itself. So we can allow ourselves to be fully

in the present moment, following what is happening. The simplicity of the task maintains itself.

Conversely, an example of having mindfulness with a more elaborate task is when you are applying your focused attention to solving a certain mathematical problem like adding some numbers in your head, or doing counting meditation techniques. This is more of a complicated task than repeating a single word such as '*Buddho*'. Memorizing and recalling a whole sequence of words when reciting the *parittas* can go in the same direction.

Connecting with the Buddha

Usually when we recite the single meditation word '*Buddho*' we combine this with the breath, letting the breath flow the way it is already flowing naturally by itself. We simply follow. Yet, when things get too easy, too repetitive, our thinking mind, our proliferating mind likes to go off, go astray and wander away from what we were actually doing. Then the second aspect of mindfulness – the recollection aspect – comes into play. We consciously give ourselves a little hint at the meaning of what we are actually repeating. What is it – '*Buddho*'? What is the meaning of this word? Just this little application of thought about what we are actually doing, a little bit of wisdom applied at the right time, can take us out of the hindrances of just letting things slip away without awareness, and enables us to come back to what we are actually doing, seeing the preciousness of it and making it meaningful.

Let us recall the meaning and the beauty captured in the word '*Buddho*'. '*Buddho*' means: the one who knows, who is aware, who is fully awakened, who is radiant, blissful and at peace. We can recollect some of the aspects of those great qualities of the Buddha, which resonate within the word *Buddho*, and start emulating those same qualities in our mind as we meditate, feeling connected to them. Then we are being true to what we're actually doing in our

practice, or true to what we're actually saying with the words that we are repeating.

So even the simple recitation of the meditation word '*Buddho*' can capture both aspects of mindfulness – the first one, where you just completely let go and immerse yourself in the present moment experience and just let the awareness of the atmosphere take over your mind, feeling your mind expanding, widening and broadening, becoming radiant and all-encompassing towards anything that happens. And there is the second aspect of mindfulness, where you are putting everything down to a certain particular task and exercise, giving rise to a specific meaning, that then fully captures your mind.

Doing this practice of sitting silently meditating on the two syllables 'Bud-dho' can bring up a lot of joyous, blissful feelings – an experience of elevation. By reciting and correctly focussing attention we fill our hearts with faith and devotion. In so doing we begin to sense a connection with something beyond 'I', 'me', 'mine'. Meditating on the name of the Buddha can lead us to a connection with an aspiration shared by many practitioners through the centuries; something very broad and universal. Previously we had studied about the Buddha and reached a good enough cognitive appreciation; now we are including feelings of devotion in our practice.

Invoking a Timeless Energy

We may encounter hindrances of restlessness, worries, doubts or agitation in our meditation, and just two syllables might not be enough. We might need more before we find a feeling of connection or relationship with the Buddha and the life he lived in the middle Ganges Valley 2550 years ago. This is when we can turn to chanting the *parittas*. It is like putting on our favourite album – the 'Greatest Hits' of the Buddha's timeless teachings. These verses have been popular from the time of the Buddha until now in the 26th century.

They have been recited regularly throughout this time by many beings, both enlightened and unenlightened. They too were uplifting their hearts through recitation. While they were reciting these very same words they put all their mindfulness and wisdom, devotion and loving-kindness into the chants, building up a sense of using them as a blessing; as something very wholesome that manifests an atmosphere of well-wishing, of peace, of *kusala* dhammas. When we move away from the cognitive aspect of making an effort to keep all those words in mind, we can quite literally feel this.

Having the opportunity to chant together we can actually be aware of the atmosphere or vibration present in the air while these meaningful words and sentences are being heartfully recited in unison. Letting go of hesitation one can allow the sound of the teachings to fill the room, fill the air, fill the cosmos and expand. It is a great power that we are creating together as a group and we can feel its presence: how literally the energy of the heart comes with the sound each chanter is putting into it. And I believe it isn't just something that we as a group are creating now, but it connects with the timeless quality of these teaching, and the long history of all the disciples of the Buddha chanting them throughout the ages in the same way as we are doing it now.

For example, when we recite the '*Itipiso*'-chant: we are going through the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha in exactly the manner as we find recorded in the ancient texts. In the original Pali or in the English translation you can read how these are the words used by the kings of the time and the devotees: *bhikkhus* (monks), *bhikkhunīs* (nuns), laymen and women. These very words of homage and praise were used to greet the Buddha and pay homage to him. We are expressing devotion by performing the same salutations as is found in the canonical records referring to King Pasenadi of Kosala for example and of many of the senior disciples like Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallāna.

The Teachings: Tags for Mindfulness

We know how the profundity of the Buddha's teachings on an intellectual level can uplift our hearts and minds as we see the meaning and the necessity of applying oneself to what the Buddha taught. Now we are chanting the actual unembellished original words that were used in delivering these teachings. We can easily see this in the *Karaṇīya-metta sutta* (the discourse on Loving-Kindness). As I mentioned, even though we are not familiar with all the linguistic details of the traditional language, we do know a lot more than we might think.

There are many individual words in these chants that we are totally familiar with; we do know the meaning of them; we do understand what they are pointing to. We can see these as hinges or tags for mindfulness. These words can bring up a particular feeling of knowing, here and now. In our hearts we can be applying those teachings at the same time as we recite the words. It becomes a skill worth making much of: staying with the words of the chant, attending to the meaning and at the same time being in touch with the blissful atmosphere. We can feel the energy that is generated while chanting the *parittas* at the same time as applying ourselves to the particulars of the teachings. We have awareness and a quality of recollection at the same time.

In the *mahā-maṅgala sutta* (the discourse on Greatest Blessings), thirty-eight blessings are mentioned; each one is a tag for mindfulness. While we are reciting these words we can actually relate to them. We can be very quick in our mindfulness to absorb the meaning. We can generate the spirit of these teachings as a reality right here and now. For example in this *sutta* we find verses on gratitude mentioned. We have heard Dhamma talks on this virtue many times, often quoting from the *mahā-maṅgala sutta*. So we have accumulated an understanding that easily unfolds when we consciously recall it. Or take the teachings around loving-kindness found in the *Karaṇīya-*

metta sutta: so many guided meditations that we have heard over the years have quoted exactly from this discourse. It isn't difficult while we chant these original words to actually follow the instruction that the Buddha was giving.

Chanting the Buddhist texts is not a technical or mental exercise or something that is practised merely as a tradition or cultural ritual. Rather it is devotion and recollection with mindfulness and awareness that we are developing. It offers a tangible sense of uplift for those who are chanting and also for those listening. I am sure many of us have had such an experience when we first heard these chants. Sometimes at Wat Nanachat here in the morning and evening meetings the Ajahn decides not to do the usual chanting with translations, and the Sangha instead chants the *parittas* in Pali. A very inspiring feeling comes out of that. I can definitely recall many faith-inspiring occasions when I first arrived here and was getting to know the Theravada tradition; times of sensing intense happiness and bliss during the chanting, even though I didn't understand a single word of what was being recited – transported by an atmosphere charged with those chants. All those individuals putting their conscious awareness into those ancient words; all those people in a wholesome state of mind reciting these wholesome dhammas created a blessing in the air.

Generating Blessings

It is this tangible energy of blessing which comes from chanting the *parittas* that inspires our faithful supporters to invite us into their homes. Maybe they have anxieties or worries; or perhaps something 'inauspicious' has happened, so they ask us to come and chant. I remember once we were invited to chant in a house where a particular snake had appeared three times. The monks were invited to chant to create an auspicious energy. As a result, on a heart level, people didn't have to suffer fear but could feel the place had been blessed; there was a sense that obstructions had been cleared away. Dhamma was in the air because the monks had been reciting the Buddha's teachings.

This also applies for ourselves when we are perhaps overwhelmed by fear and worries. Maybe we even fear death. Many of our Thai friends struggle when going into a dark space where their imagination brings up fear of malevolent beings threatening them. Or if we take up residence in a new kuti (hut), or sleep without protection at the root of a tree, we can skilfully turn to reciting these teachings to generate a wholesome feeling which drives away unwholesome mind states. This is how we can practice when ordinary mindfulness is not strong enough to let go of the hindrances that have arisen; when we can't simply dwell peacefully in the awareness of the present moment. At such times we need something more tangible to work with.

We can use the teachings and the accumulated feeling of charged devotional energy to overcome unwholesome states and be at ease in troubled situations. I have many times found myself in uncomfortable situations where, without any conscious planning or even understanding exactly why, words or extracts of these old chants have spontaneously come into my mind; these same words that the Buddha used and recommended his disciples use. When faced with anxiety, doubts or when confronted with an accident for example, I have found accessing the accumulated blessing of these chants has been a great help. Their appearing in the mind at such times changed how I related to the situation. Without this tangibly present energy I could well have been overwhelmed and lost mindfulness and behaved foolishly or heedlessly.

All of us who have spent time in Dtao Dam Monastery, in the dense jungles on the Thai-Burmese border, know the value of spreading loving-kindness to all beings. There we occupy a place where we are not automatically entitled to protection. It is a dangerous situation – surrounded by various animals that could easily become irritated, seeing us as having intruded into their realm, their habitat. So we consciously choose to make known, and spread around, our good intention by way of reciting these chants. We invest wholesome

energy in these words and use them as an anchor, as tags for wholesome dhammas.

Building up Concentration

So this traditional form of chanting that the Theravada tradition has maintained over the centuries can help us develop many different practices and it is good to be aware of this. These are not merely rites and rituals; this is not an empty procedure.

In addition to cultivating mindfulness, faith and devotion, chanting can also be used to build concentration or *samādhi*. We have lots of views and opinions about how to develop one-pointedness of mind, the *jhanas*; we certainly have heard lots of talks on the subject. Well, we can also use this ancient practice of chanting the *parittas*. Learn to be really precise with your chanting, to do just one thing, to not doubt at all. Learn to recite the words that are correct for each stanza. Work with finding a feeling of being in the flow of the chant and at the same time being present with the details. Don't allow mindfulness to slip and drift into the past or the future. Be concentrated.

It definitely takes skill to recite the teachings precisely. It requires maintaining a quality of mindfulness that knows what you are doing and why you are doing it, without wavering. We need enough concentration to sustain half an hour of attention without the mind wandering off; having enough presence to chant fully without losing energy; to remember the correct words and the correct pitch. And while we are aware of those pegs of mindfulness, at the same time we immerse ourselves in the atmosphere generated – maintaining this over an extended period of time, not just for a few syllables. Sustaining the applied energy of focus and application of mindfulness, and wisdom for thirty, forty, fifty or a hundred minutes; however long the chanting may take.

I remember how fascinated I was the first time I heard the recitation of the monks rule (*pāṭimokkha*). As novices we would quietly come

into the back of the ordination hall towards the end of the chanting, to be part of the communal exhortation afterwards. I was so struck by the precision of the recitation. I thought at the time, ‘This is the application of a concentrated mind. It is certainly a skill to be able to hold to one object, to keep to a certain mode of mind for fifty to sixty minutes without doubting or wavering.’ It was a beautiful chant but also exquisitely precise; the rhythm, the pronunciation. It reminded me of a Japanese form of martial art where the power of a concentrated mind produces tremendous energy. It had me thinking how, in this old Theravada tradition they definitely knew what they are doing: to be able to chant from memory, with sustained attention for that period of time, without wavering; being totally present.’ I don’t know what the technical term for this kind of *samādhi* is – *khaṇika*, *upacāra* – but it is definitely *samādhi*. It is mindfulness, concentration, wisdom; all in there together. Notice how in this practice we are also developing another factor from the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Effort (*sammā vāyāmo*): we are increasing wholesome dhammas, making much of them so they fill the air, so they spread.

We can see, there are many benefits of having the skill to recite the teachings like the *parittas*. When our mind won’t settle on something as lofty and subtle as the breath we can use these ancient chants – tags for mindfulness, tags for concentration – and find a tangible link to the Buddha’s teaching on both the devotional and wisdom level. This applies whatever shape or rhythm suits our mode of practice at any given time. At the same time, as we recite these traditional chants we are generating blessing within our own hearts and blessing that benefit all beings in all directions: human beings, non-human beings, those in happy states and those in abodes of suffering.

May all beings benefit from our practice of reciting the Buddha’s teaching.

in North America

Spiritual Friendship

From a talk given at Abhayagiri Monastery, in 2010



Ajahn Pasanno, originally from northern Canada, took ordination in Thailand in 1974. During his first year as a monk he met Ajahn Chah, and asked to be allowed to stay and train with him. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, he became its abbot in his ninth year as a monk. In 1997 Ajahn Pasanno moved to Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, where he is currently the abbot.

“It’s our actions of body, speech and mind that designate our well-being or our suffering.”

RECENTLY, I CAME ACROSS A *SUTTA MN 97, the Dhānañjāni Sutta* that illustrates the themes of *kalyāṇamitta* (spiritual friendship) and making choices. The *sutta* begins with Venerable Sāriputta walking with a group of monks in the hills south of Rājagaha. He had been away from the main community of monks for some time and a monk who had spent the Rains Retreat in Rājagaha at the Bamboo Grove came down to that region and met with Venerable Sāriputta. Because the Buddha had been living in the Bamboo Grove, Venerable Sāriputta asks the monk,

‘How is the Buddha – is he well and strong?’

‘Yes, the Buddha is well and strong.’

‘How is the Sangha faring?’

‘The Sangha is faring well. It’s well and strong.’

Venerable Sāriputta then asks after a layperson that he had known:

‘How is the brahman Dhānañjāni?’

The monk replies, ‘The brahman Dhānañjāni is well and strong.’

‘Is he diligent?’

‘Oh, how can he be diligent? He has been dishonest and corrupt within society. He has been cheating the king and using his influence with the king to plunder the lay community. His wife – who was a woman of faith and came from a clan that was established in faith – has passed away, and he has now married someone else who doesn’t have faith and comes from a clan who doesn’t have faith.’

And Venerable Sāriputta says, ‘Hmm ... okay. Well, maybe when I get back to Rājagaha, I’ll have to talk with him.’

Conventional and Transcendent Realities

That incident highlights one aspect of *kalyānamitta* – how Venerable Sāriputta, a fully enlightened *Arahant* – asks questions on a very conventional level. Just because he’s an *Arahant*, it doesn’t mean he speaks only in transcendent modes. He speaks on a human level. The Buddha is his teacher and the Sangha is a community he has many close relationships with. When the Buddha states that spiritual friendship is the whole of the holy life, it’s not just a theory; that’s how it’s lived, even among the members of the Sangha who have done their work, who are completely liberated. When someone like Venerable Sāriputta, whom the Buddha declared as foremost in

wisdom, recognizes the importance of spiritual friendship, then for the rest of us it's a very good reminder of how essential that quality is.

The *sutta* goes on with Venerable Sāriputta wandering by stages back to Rājagaha and staying at the Bamboo Grove. When he's there, he takes the opportunity to visit the brahman Dhānañjāni. He asks him,

‘How are you – are you well?’

Of course, Dhānañjāni says, ‘I'm well.’

Venerable Sāriputta just asks innocent questions: ‘And are you diligent, brahman?’ in the sense of, ‘Are you keeping up with your practice, are you maintaining your training?’

‘Oh, how can I be diligent? I've got to look after my parents, my wife and my children. I've got to look after my family, friends and workers. I've got to perform all of the functions of my duties toward the king, and then I have to maintain my own physical body, so it's difficult to be diligent.’

Then Venerable Sāriputta asks a question again: ‘If one is neglectful of the Dhamma, is not living in accordance with the Dhamma and is living unskillfully, when one dies and is faced with the wardens of hell, and you try to tell them, ‘It's because of my parents that I've been living unrighteously and have not been living in accordance with the Dhamma,’ what do you think they'd say to that?’

‘Well, I don't think that would make much of an impression with them.’

‘And what if your parents tried to convince the wardens of hell that you've been living unrighteously and not in accordance with the Dhamma because you've been looking after them?’

‘I don't think they'd listen to me.’

Then Venerable Sāriputta goes through the whole list of people after the parents and asks the same questions – your wife and children, circle of family and relatives, workers and associates, the king, and your body. Of course it's all the same answer. These are not convincing arguments when it comes down to the particulars, especially if one takes it as a reflection upon the impersonal nature of kamma. When one comes to the end of one's life, that kamma is still ripening in a particular fashion, despite the different excuses and rationalizations. And saying, 'I was too busy to be doing this or doing that, I was too busy to practice, I was too busy to be keeping the precepts, I was too busy to develop – it doesn't wash. One of the chants that the Buddha has us use as a daily reflection is, 'I'm of the nature to age, I've not gone beyond aging, I'm of the nature to sicken, I've not gone beyond sickness, I'm of the nature to die, I've not gone beyond dying. All that is mine that is beloved and pleasing will become otherwise and will become separated from me.' The last part, on kamma, says, 'I'm the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma. Whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for evil, of that I will be the heir.' So that is the fundamental truth of nature – that we receive the fruits of our actions, and it's our actions of body, speech and mind that designate our well-being or our suffering, that designate our rebirth as well as the quality of being from moment to moment. This is just a fundamental principle of nature, despite the various excuses or rationalizations that we come up with.

Skilfully Offering Support

Venerable Sāriputta's way of teaching is quite interesting to me because he doesn't just go to the brahman's house and upbraid him. He just asks questions. Of course, they are skillfully placed questions, very pointed questions, and the brahman has a foundation in faith. Venerable Sāriputta wouldn't ask after him if he hadn't had a good association with him and if Dhānañjāni didn't

have a fairly good foundation in his perspective, views, beliefs and training. Venerable Sāriputta is concerned for him, which is another aspect of *kalyāṇamitta*. Asking questions is like holding up a mirror; the brahman answers very honestly, and he reveals the truth to himself.

Then Venerable Sāriputta continues: ‘Brahman, which is better, a person who looks after his parents in an unrighteous way, not according to Dhamma, or one who looks after his parents in a righteous way and in accordance with Dhamma?’ The brahman answers, ‘Well, it’s a better person who looks after his parents in a righteous way and in accordance with Dhamma.’ Venerable Sāriputta then says, ‘There are ways to live that are blameless; one can avoid what is unskillful and unwholesome, still do one’s duty and also bring benefits and blessings into one’s own life and into the life of one’s parents.’

Then he goes through the whole list of people again. And Venerable Sāriputta leaves it there. He doesn’t push the brahman at all; he just leaves the brahman to figure it out for himself. One assumes that the brahman took it seriously and changed his ways.

The *sutta* continues on at a later time when the brahman becomes ill. He sends one of his servants to inform Venerable Sāriputta that the brahman Dhānañjāni is ill, afflicted, in great pain, and may not live much longer and to request Venerable Sāriputta to visit him, which Venerable Sāriputta does. He arrives and asks the brahman quite directly,

‘How are you faring? Are you in comfort or in discomfort? Are your painful feelings increasing or decreasing? Are you able to bear this?’ And the brahman answers, ‘Basically, I’m doing awful. It’s getting more painful and more uncomfortable. I don’t think I’m going to survive this.’

Again, as a *kalyāṇamitta*, as a good spiritual friend, when somebody is sick, one goes to visit them to give them encouragement and support but also to be quite direct and open.

Sometimes, somebody can be on his or her deathbed and looking awful, and the relatives show up from time to time and say, ‘Oh, you’re looking good today,’ and so on. They try to keep the banter upbeat and get out as quickly as possible. I don’t think that’s particularly helpful. Instead, to actually say, ‘Yes, you’re in a lot of pain and discomfort, this disease is progressing like this and that, and are you able to deal with it? How can you work with it?’ – that’s honesty as to the reality of the situation, which is something that we generally avoid in society. It doesn’t even matter whether it’s American society or Asian society – there’s a tendency to live in denial of old age, sickness, and death. It’s a common thread that goes through the human condition.

There’s something really refreshing about the Buddha’s teachings, as he looks quite directly at things – at aging, sickness, death, and suffering in different ways, in terms of being in a difficult situation, being blamed or criticized, or feeling overwhelmed. When one is willing to look directly at the feeling or the situation, the circumstances, and the way the mind responds – the more directly one is able to look at them, the less threatening and difficult they actually are. Or looking at one’s own defilements, one’s own greed, desire, lust, aversions, irritations, fears, views and opinions – if one is able to look directly at them, they tend to have less power. It’s when we skip over them or aren’t willing to look that they’re too intimidating, too threatening. That’s where the actual strength of the Dhamma comes from – from our willingness and ability to apply mindfulness and awareness at the very root of the experience, at its arising, at its establishing, to be really present. So that’s what Venerable Sāriputta is doing by being quite forthright and saying, ‘What’s the experience? How are you doing, really?’

Then Venerable Sāriputta asks, ‘Well, which is more desirable, the hell realms or an animal rebirth?’ And the brahman replies, ‘An animal rebirth.’ ‘And which is more desirable, the animal realm or the realm of ghosts?’ ‘Actually the realm of ghosts is better.’ Then Venerable Sāriputta goes through the ascending cosmology of Buddhism in Indian culture, recognizing the desirability of the human birth, the *deva* realms and then the realm of the *Brahma* Gods. Venerable Sāriputta thinks to himself, ‘These brahmans hold rebirth in the *Brahma* realms and union with *Brahma* as the highest rebirth.’ He asks, ‘Do you want to know the way to union with the *Brahma* Gods?’ and of course, the brahman says yes.

Venerable Sāriputta then teaches the *brahmavihāras*: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity – how to develop them and establish the mind in these refined qualities. Then the brahman passes away and is reborn in a *Brahma* realm.

Making Conscious Choices

Again, it’s interesting how Venerable Sāriputta teaches in terms of questions and making choices, because often the choices that we make are not very conscious. By asking questions, one starts to recognize, ‘I’ve got a choice whether I let my mind go towards wholesome or unwholesome states.’ And whether one believes in the cosmological structure of the universe or one perceives it in psychological terms, we still choose how we direct the mind. Do we let the mind go towards suffering and misery, which is equated to a hell realm? Do we let our minds be overwhelmed by the base qualities of fear and desire, which is more like an animal realm? Do we get caught up in *asura* states of mind, which are indulging in anger and ill will, seeking power, and functioning from fear? Do we make choices going toward the human realm, establishing the human qualities of empathy, responsibility and effort? Or do

we direct attention to the heavenly realms of bliss and unalloyed happiness?

These can be depicted and conceived of as psychological states or as actual realms. But however one conceives them, they're still choices that we make. Do we take responsibility for those choices or do we just drift into the choices out of habit and conditioning? Are we blindly led by others? Even if we're taking responsibility for them – are those choices wisely informed? Are they clearly considered? By seeing those aspects of making choices, we realize that our lives are confronted with making choices all the time. The result of the choices that we make has implications. When we choose to get angry and upset at something, it has a result personally and it has a result for the people around us. When we're able to restrain ourselves and make a choice to train ourselves in particular ways, particularly towards that which is virtuous and peaceful, it has results and implications. We need to recognize that we're making these choices all the time.

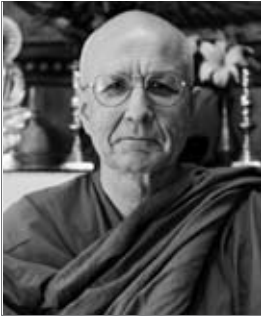
As the *sutta* finishes, the Buddha is in the Bamboo Grove teaching and says to the community 'Sāriputta has let this brahman be reborn in a *Brahmā* realm and has shown him the inferior path of the *Brahmā* world.' We see the Buddha's ability to know the mind of his disciples and to recognize that if the brahman Dhanañjani had been encouraged to reflect on the Four Noble Truths or some particular essential teaching, he could possibly have realized stream entry. But Venerable Sāriputta hadn't taken it to that level. When Venerable Sāriputta comes back, the Buddha relates that to him; it was a bit of a rebuke and an encouragement that if there is the opportunity to bring somebody to an understanding of the Dhamma rather than a lesser spiritual attainment, that's the duty of a *kalyāṇamitta*. One reads the *sutta* and here's the Buddha knowing the thoughts, mind, and states of mind of other beings, even while he's sitting and giving teachings. It's 2500 years ago and it's utterly fantastic. Is it possible? These are abilities that come with a purified mind.

I think of Ajahn Mun's biography, when Ajahn Mun is sitting in his cave in Saraburi and he turns his attention to his friend Chao Khun Upāli. He recognizes that Chao Khun Upāli is reflecting on dependent origination and is tripping himself up with a particular perspective on it. The next time Ajahn Mun sees his friend in Bangkok, he says, 'On such and such a day ...' and lays out what had happened. Chao Khun Upāli says, 'That was exactly it,' and Ajahn Mun gives him a teaching on the nuances of dependent origination. And just thinking of dependent origination reminds me of when Ajahn Chah was sick. By that point he wasn't able to help himself or to speak. A monk came and sat in meditation to see how Ajahn Chah was doing. He came out of his meditation and said, 'You don't have to worry about Ajahn Chah; his mind is really bright. But he likes reflecting on dependent origination, so it'd be nice for you to chant the *Vipassanā Bhūmi*.' It's a chant on the basis of insight and dependent origination forms a part of it. The monk said that he'd really appreciate that. And we did – we ended up going every week and chanting for many years.

So these teachings are illustrations of *kalyāṇamitta*. Venerable Sāriputta acts as a spiritual friend by encouraging the brahman not to be dishonest and corrupt and to instead live a skillful life. The refinements of insight and encouragement towards awakening all rely on spiritual friendship. But in the end, they also rely on the individual to make skillful choices and to take responsibility for those choices.

Acceptance & Responsibility

From a talk given at Bodhinyanarama Monastery, in 2000



Ajahn Viradhammo, originally from Toronto, Canada, took ordination at Wat Pah Pong in 1974. In 1977 he joined Ajahn Sumedho at the Hampstead Vihāra in London, UK. Subsequently, he took up the role of senior bhikkhu at Bodhinyanarama in New Zealand for 10 years. He is presently the senior monk at Tisarana monastery near Ottawa.

“Our sense of acceptance and our commitment to good ethics are always underpinned by the heart of loving-kindness.”

RECENTLY I WAS SPEAKING ABOUT ACCEPTANCE AS A SPIRITUAL QUALITY. Acceptance can be misunderstood if it’s taken as an absolute social philosophy. It might then imply a state of apathy or complacency with no urge to act for the good of our society. Instead, I am speaking about acceptance as a quality of the heart. This quality of the heart exists in the social contexts of a society, a community and a family. The social context defines what is socially acceptable and unacceptable. I like to compare the social commitment of being a Buddhist to that of being a member of a guild.

If you have a guild of master builders and belong to the crafts-people in that guild, you have certain obligations, certain skills

that you have to develop before you are accepted and accredited by that guild. Your work has to be maintained at the standards that all the members agree upon; you have to have a certain ability to do your craft; you have certain obligations to fulfil and standards to uphold. If you do not meet those standards, the guild will strike you off its books. But the guild will also protect your interests and it will encourage you to sustain good standards or use better designs or whatever might be the case.

Monasticism or any kind of Buddhist culture is like this. It is an association of people who undertake to live according to certain values, who undertake a lifestyle commitment. They undertake the responsibility of being a Buddhist. This kind of responsibility or commitment gives form to our participation in community and supports all of us in our spiritual work.

Supportive Structures

Our monastic community recently observed ‘*pavāraṇā* day,’ the last day of the Rains Retreat. We are together for the three month period of retreat, practising meditation and sharing in the goodness of this sanctuary – all of which has been made possible through the generosity of our lay community – and on our ‘*pavāraṇā* day’ we perform a ceremony handed down to us from the time of the Buddha. All the monks and novices come together in a circle and each of us individually repeats a phrase in the Pali language which roughly translates as, ‘For anything that I have done which is against my obligations as a Buddhist monk, which is contrary to the training I am undertaking, please admonish me or please offer me some reflection or feedback.’ This creates an opening, an invitation to hear how we are seen by our peers.

In our daily formal practice we also use reflections such as, ‘Have I used my time wisely? Have I honoured the alms food of the lay people and have I honoured my monastic rule? Have I been sensitive

to my fellow monastics?’ All of these are healthy reflections which help us to remember our heart commitment to the path of peace and our commitment to helping each other on this journey. Our life in community is thus a training in body, speech and mind which encourages us to let go of selfishness and yet also encourages us to do our own spiritual work.

The Buddha and his disciples were unable to design as detailed a code of life for the laity as they did for the monastics because the lifestyles of the lay community were too diverse. Thus the various teachings on ethics and social commitment were given in the context of social structures that already existed in the societies of those times. For example, if a couple got married, it was a marriage relationship with another person and it was also a marriage that brought the couple within the community of married people. They weren’t an isolated couple; they were a couple who had joined a ‘guild of married people’. And that implied an obligation. It implied a moral obligation, a familial obligation and a communal obligation. The whole community understood that obligation. And so the whole community could support marriage, through encouragement, through admonishment, through helping in times of sickness, and so on. These kinds of supportive structures are harder to find in modern urban society. Today we might ask, ‘What is a partnership? Is there a guild of partners? What are the obligations in a partnership? How is that defined and are there like-minded people who support such obligations?’ There are no clear answers and this is a very real difficulty in our culture.

The monastery is a vehicle for creating a supportive social environment for our Dhamma work. People come on a Sunday and meditate and reflect on Dhamma. We, as a community, as a group of human beings, can uphold certain traditional values; we can honour these values, and we can give each other feedback when traditional values are not honoured, when behaviour becomes unacceptable. If we see someone who comes to the monastery and is abusive, if

we see a monastic who is not living by agreed monastic standards, then that is unacceptable. We need to express our disagreement in an appropriate manner. At the social level some kinds of behaviour are unacceptable. Our duty as members of this spiritual community is to go to the person who we feel is not living according to our agreed-upon standards, whether it is a lay person or a monk, and say that we have to talk about this, and try to resolve the issue. Inner acceptance allows for clarity of action. If we are not aware of our inner world, the results will be confused. We need to awaken to and honestly accept our own passions and defilements of mind. This is an inner obligation and commitment. Self-righteous indignation is a destructive energy which can be used to justify anger, hatred and jealousy. We need the courage to speak out when necessary but we also need the honesty to know our own feelings and intentions.

Reflecting on Sensuality

In a Buddhist community the accepted ethical framework is the five precepts. The third precept, for example, encourages moderation with regard to sensuality. This is a very broad precept which asks us to reflect on the way we conduct ourselves around sensual experience. Specifically, it encourages us to be sexually faithful to our partners. Adulterous relationships are thus clearly outside the boundaries of this precept. It is a precept which draws very clear boundaries so that anyone in a marriage or in a permanent relationship, or anyone who is engaged, or anyone who is under age, or anyone who is a monastic, or anyone who is living under the eight precepts – all of these people are out of bounds in terms of sexual relationships. In observing this precept, our responsibility and our obligation is to promote the harmony of existing social contracts and to care for those who are not of age or who are living under renunciant precepts.

Those who are committed to a religious life based on Buddhist principles have these kinds of obligations to each other. If anyone in our community, be it a monastic person or a lay person, is

not fulfilling this principle of impeccability in relationship, or if someone is being in any way promiscuous or abusive, it is our duty as a community to talk about that, to reflect on that. Not in a gossiping manner but in a way which honours the precepts. This requires courage and compassion. It is a kind of social activism. It means speaking about things which are important. This kind of honesty can be very helpful if it is done correctly, not from self-righteousness, not from anger, but from the fact that we have an obligation to the well-being of our community and its individuals. The one quality the Buddha could never go against in his spiritual journey was the quality of truthfulness. Truthfulness is the heart of the religious life because enlightenment is about truth.

Freedom is about truth and suffering is about ignorance, about not understanding. If there is someone in our community, be it in the monastic community or in the lay community, whose mind is justifying immoral behaviour – it's dangerous for that person. Unfortunately we humans have the ability to rationalize our delusions. We can be very clever with knowledge and ideas. Perhaps we have all seen occasions when one person is trying to admonish another and the other person is cleverer with language and twists it all around. So cleverness ends up winning the day rather than truthfulness. Words and language are manipulated to suit the desires and fears of the ego. It is a cleverness which has the potential to do great harm to a person's spiritual life. Precepts and moral guidelines are a common body of knowledge, a common agreement of obligations. When someone is acting in a way which is breaking apart existing relationships and they are using some kind of clever language, we can say, 'Perhaps, but what about the third precept...?' It is important that we have a common body of knowledge so that there are references beyond personal preferences.

For instance, our monastic rules are a body of knowledge, available not only to the monks and nuns but also to the laity. In a non-Buddhist

culture most lay people don't understand the monastic rules but in Buddhist Asia people tend to be familiar with them and everyone knows the monastic and lay boundaries. When the boundaries are transgressed then there is a skilful reference point, a body of common agreements. This helps both those in positions of authority as well as those who seek guidance and leadership. Sometimes teachers step outside the boundaries, outside of the constraints and obligations that help them reflect on their responsibilities. This can lead to situations where a teacher gets lost in selfish delusions and gets burnt out. Teachers and leaders will sometimes lose the plot and blunder into areas of confusion. They get lost in their own over-estimations. If, however, there is a cultural knowledge of boundaries, roles and expectations, it is more difficult for teachers to follow self-deceptions. They need protection too, don't they? We all need protection, we all need help because delusion is there, and it deludes us into doing unskilful things.

Cultivating Harmlessness

Contemplating the first precept, the precept on not harming living beings, we see how difficult that is, here in New Zealand. To create the *Karori* and *Kapiti* bird sanctuaries many possums, rats, cats and stoats end up being killed. If these animals are not killed, the native birds die off. What to do? One thing we can do is to make sure we don't throw out the first precept. If someone feels they have to transgress the precept they must think long and hard, reflecting on the necessity and value of taking life. Then they must be responsible for their decisions. If, however, the precept is completely thrown out, it is easy for attitudes to arise that dismiss certain forms of life. The animal and plant realms are then considered purely in terms of human desires and human economies rather than in terms of compassion and care.

Have you ever perceived a spider as a pet? Children do this easily. Have you ever changed your perceptions from 'this is a useless thing'

to actually looking at an animal with empathy, seeing it is a sentient creature that is trying to be happy in its own interesting way? This creates an entirely different relationship. It is quite beautiful. It can sound very utopian and impractical but the Buddha's teaching encourages us to cultivate a heart of love and turn away from the heart of alienation. Yes, we need to protect the environment from noxious weeds and so forth but let's not brutalize our minds with insensitive and violent attitudes.

Standards of Impeccability

The second precept is about non-corruption: I undertake the training rule to refrain from taking that which is not given. In our monastic rule we have various refinements around this basic principle of not stealing. For instance, if someone gave a monk a valuable object here in New Zealand worth \$1,000 and then the monk went to Canada, by Canadian law that article would have to be declared and customs duties paid on it. But if he were to take that object, put it in his carrier bag and walk through without declaring it at the customs desk, fully knowing that he was trying to evade taxes, the monk would have committed an offence of 'defeat'. This is known as a *pārājika* offence. When a monk has committed a *pārājika* offence he has to disrobe – very serious. That kind of cheating would be an impediment to his spiritual life, so the rule helps him to be very careful. Being careful in this way leads to a mind which is free from remorse and self-hatred and free of the fear of blame.

These precepts point to a sense of impeccability as the standard of the spiritual life. The ethical teachings encourage us to understand the laws of the land and to support those laws, because if we don't, who will? This is our commitment to community. It is not just taking the easy way out or just going with the popular mood of the day, 'Well, everyone else is taking things off the back of the lorry, why not? The office has lots of stationery.' A mind which follows dishonesty becomes a mind which is afflicted by guilt, fear or arrogance. It is

not an impeccable mind, not a mind that is going to experience the beauty of a peaceful heart.

Benefits of Right Speech

The precept on speech is a useful mirror to help us notice the motivations and intentions that lie behind our words. Wrong speech is lying, swearing, destructive gossip, and stupid talk. Right speech is speech which is truthful, speech which is beautiful, speech which is harmonious rather than divisive. It is speech which accords with Dhamma. When the Dalai Lama came to New Zealand his words were tremendously inspiring for so many people. On the other hand, when we hear someone speaking with a heart of hate and cruelty it can be very disturbing. Speech is very powerful either for the good of our society or for its detriment. With the precepts themselves, we can't always get it right, but speech which is truthful, speech which is beautiful, speech which is harmonious, speech which is according to Dhamma – Right Speech – we can take that into our hearts and minds.

By reading and contemplating a precept every day for some extended period of time, that precept begins to echo in our minds. And if we are talking with someone and discover ourselves distorting the truth, exaggerating it or covering it up, the precept awakens us with the questions: 'Why am I doing that? Why am I lying? Why do I need to distort the truth?' It awakens us to the truth of our motivations. But if we have no clear ethical boundaries or moral standards, we can slide into unwholesome and unskilful behaviour that is harmful to both ourselves and others. The precepts thus become a way to protect us from the inner urges of insensitivity and selfishness, urges which we all experience but which only become harmful when we believe in their voices. Using the precepts in this way we are able to ask ourselves, 'What are my intentions?' If I am being manipulative with someone or I am trying to cover up something that I've been doing or I am just exaggerating to make myself look better, where is that coming from? Is it coming from fear, from greed, or from some

other unskilful place? And what's the result of that? Is the result good? Is the result peaceful? Is the result happy? When I speak in this way, is my mind confused?

On the other hand, when we encourage people, when we are sensitive to them, when we tell the truth, when we are able to own up to our mistakes, what is the result of that? Is that a good result or a bad result? Right speech thus becomes part of the path to freedom. This is not easy. Most people find it difficult. We can easily believe deluded projections and dismiss someone with insensitivity and unkindness. Or we can believe in some petty complaint and then poke someone in a heartless manner. Or we might feel jealous of someone's success and tear them down behind their backs – so many ways to close the heart and get lost in wrong speech. The empathy and love in the heart get smothered and we end up feeling more and more alienated.

The Way Requires Focus

The precept on drugs and intoxicants is obviously very important, because a truly religious and spiritual life requires intelligence and focus – both of which are harmed by alcohol and various recreational drugs. We are not asked to adopt a puritanical attitude. Rather this precept helps us reflect on why we turn to these things and what effects they have on our lives. Do these things make us better people and more responsible members of our communities? And what about our poor old bodies? Is it a kindness to fill the body with various chemicals for the sake of momentary pleasure or for the need to escape?

So the framework for a Buddhist guild, a religious guild, is the five precepts. Each one of us is slowly refining and deepening our use and understanding of the precepts. For example, the precept on harmlessness not only encourages us to live a life of non-violence but also a life of compassion. We work towards a deepening of that

possibility. Much of Buddhist social philosophy is based on empathy, which helps lift us out of selfishness and self-obsession. When we have a chance to give to someone and we feel the joy of helping and caring for someone, then they are actually giving us a lot. It's an irony, isn't it? I have sometimes said to couples who have adopted a baby that the baby is very fortunate. They invariably answer, 'No, no, we are the lucky ones.'

Giving Life Meaning

We only have about 100 years to live on this planet, 80 to 100 maximum. What is the purpose of life? If we can do something good for our society, for our planet and the beings on it, that gives life meaning. If that is the basis of our social philosophy, we can see more clearly our own manipulativeness or the rationalising of our actions to justify selfish ends. When harmful impulses arise we learn to be patient and not follow these energies. But we also cultivate wholesome states of mind, encouraging compassion and kindness to blossom in our hearts. This is a lovely process in the spiritual life.

The advances in science in terms of medical and agricultural technologies have created a complicated array of moral dilemmas that didn't exist at the time of the Buddha. For instance, what is the Buddhist position on genetic engineering? Where is that covered in the five precepts?

It is important that our hearts and minds be freed from personal agendas based on greed and arrogance. Part of Right Speech might then be the ability to debate the issues that arise, to participate in the process of education that our whole society is undertaking. This would imply a personal commitment to become informed about the issues – and then to think very carefully how one feels about them in the light of one's own ethical standards. We would have the requisite qualities of heart and intelligence to enter into discussion and make a meaningful contribution to the moral direction of our society.

In a guild of craftspeople there are responsibilities to uphold the standards that are encouraged by the guild but also there are the joys of creating something of beauty that is an expression of one's craft. In the same way, our Buddhist community has standards that we should live by and encourage in each other – but there is also the expressive part of our being which is a part of the craft or art of living. To give something of oneself for the benefit of other beings is truly marvellous.

At times our Buddhist emphasis on the practice of awareness can sound as though we are constantly thinking about ourselves; a very uninspiring way to live this life. If I've got nothing to give to, nothing to serve, no one to love, no one to care for, life isn't balanced. The other extreme, of course, is to be so out there, so caring, so loving that I end up in hospital with a nervous breakdown. We need the balance of love for ourselves as well as the love of others.

Perhaps then, the deepest standard that our Buddhist community can encourage is quite simply love for one another. Our sense of acceptance and our commitment to good ethics are always underpinned by the heart of loving-kindness.

in New Zealand

Context of Meditation

Adapted from a talk given
Bodhinyanarama Monastery,
New Zealand in 2010



Ajahn Tiradhammo was born in Canada in 1949, took upasampadā at Wat Meung in 1973 and stayed at Wat Pah Nanachat until 1982. He was at Chithurst Monastery for two years and then in charge of Harnham Vihāra until 1987. He then helped establish Dhammapāla Monastery in Switzerland and stayed there as abbot until 2005. Ajahn Tiradhammo is currently the abbot at Bodhinyanarama, NZ.

“A true sign of stability in practice is a heightened sense of personal and social conscience.”

THESE DAYS IT APPEARS THAT MORE AND MORE OF US are becoming interested in Buddhist meditation. While this is a good sign in itself, it is important to understand that meditation is only one aspect in the wider context of Buddhist spiritual practice. Many people in non-Buddhist countries, fascinated by meditation, may leap into intensive meditation without realizing the long-term effects of a wrong approach to practice. The result of an ‘out of context’ approach to spiritual practice is that it can lead to an unstable, disintegrated or disembodied spirituality where only a small area of oneself is being (over) ‘spiritualized’. We can

become too fixated on meditation exercises as an end in themselves or become over-focused on meditation techniques. After some time, practice 'dries up' as it is not being invigorated by deeper understanding, re-adjustment of aspirations or integration with our normal behaviour.

It should be recognized that spiritual practices, and especially concentration exercises, can have a strong effect on our psyche. Thus we need to be vigilant in how we notice the various twists and turns required along the way. Fortunately, as interest in meditation increases, there is also an increasing amount of personal experience available from those who have been meditating for decades.

Stability

It should be clear that spiritual practice is not the magical remedy for emotional distress or mental disorder. In some cases it can lead to psychological disintegration and may even be a catalyst for latent psychosis. A good grounding in spiritual practice is probably the best prevention for serious mental disorder, but no absolute guarantee. Thus a reasonably stable emotional and mental life is an important foundation, especially for undertaking some of the intensive spiritual exercises. If serious issues do arise then assistance by mental health professionals can be helpful, or sometimes just lowering the intensity or changing the meditation object can allow for a more whole-some working through.

Unfortunately, many of us imagine 'enlightenment' to be some exceptionally ecstatic experience of truth-revealing bliss. However, the purpose of spiritual practice is not about experiencing special or unusual mental states but rather seeing reality as it really is. While altered states of consciousness may occur as a result of meditation exercises they can also be a source of mental distress and emotional imbalance if they arise intensely, suddenly or unexpectedly. In meditation we set up the mindful, observing faculty. Thus, whatever

arises, be it attractive or repulsive, rapturous or terrifying, we view as simply passing, ephemeral ‘mental phenomena’ (*sabhāva dhamma*).

Mindfulness exercises, firmly grounded in the immediacy of direct experience, are relatively safe to develop unsupervised. Concentration exercises, however, should only be seriously undertaken within the context of a relationship to a teacher. The mind can become very centred and sharp as a result of spending many hours focusing upon a meditation object. However this focused attention can also slip away from the meditation object and become preoccupied with whatever is most prominent in the mind. Distressing thoughts, memories or moods can appear intensified or amplified, and one can easily be pulled into their power.

Also, since the apparent calm and peace which can arise from concentration exercises is an experience conditioned by the time and effort we put into that exercise, the feeling of peace can very easily evaporate as soon as the exercise is over. This can leave us feeling unfulfilled, disappointed and despairing, sometimes doubly compounded from having the old raging mind back as well as having lost the deep calm!

Our fascination with altered states of consciousness can thus be a recipe for emotional instability. We are tossed about by our moods – elated when we are ‘high’ and distressed when we are down. A sign of maturity in practice is when we can patiently observe the passing show with a degree of disinterest and equanimity – these are all just changing moods.

The best way to achieve stability is to cultivate a skillful way of life. Formally this comes under the category of ‘skillful living’ (*sīla*). Although usually translated as precepts, *sīla* literally means ‘habits’. Following precepts or ‘guidelines for skillful living’ is a helpful beginning, however, transforming guidelines into wholesome habits requires deep self-knowledge or, in everyday parlance,

‘character building’. We need to be able to humbly acknowledge our digressions, make honest adjustments, then wisely and patiently re-align ourselves with skillful standards. In the process we not only learn about the nature of our waywardness but also come to appreciate the benefits of uprightness, integrity and freedom from remorse. As Ajahn Chah succinctly expressed it: ‘Do what you say, say what you do, otherwise they call you a corrupt sage.’

It is through regarding spiritual practice as a skillful way of life rather than a ‘quick fix’ that we prepare ourselves for the long haul by working on a stable, well-grounded foundation for the whole project. If spiritual life is not built on a solid foundation then it is not only unstable but also in danger of toppling over into mental distress. Life is intrinsically spiritual so integrating spiritual practice into life allows a fertile nourishing and awakening of the fullness of our being. A true sign of stability in practice is a heightened sense of personal and social conscience (*hiri-ottapa*), an evenness of temperament and an increased interconnected compassion for all beings.

Integration

The correct attitude to practice is most important. Many people new to meditation bring with them ego-based, high-minded ideals and principles. And, while this is often the best we can do, the most helpful attitude is to see this as an opportunity to transform those idealistic concepts into direct experience. Rather than always weighing up experience in terms of ‘how it should be’, we can begin to relate to experience as ‘how it is’ or ‘just this’. Our neat, shiny ideals can thus be tempered by the bump and grind of ordinary reality. The direct experience of ‘just this’ also brings us into the immediacy of the present, whereas ideals are always in the future.

The most pernicious ideal is, of course, attaining awakening. The ‘right attitude’ for spiritual practice is one of relinquishment, giving up, surrender, and letting go. Any attempt to attain or gain is more

fuel for selfhood, and thus subject to failure. Instead of chasing some image of awakening, we awaken to the suffering of grasping at selfhood.

A less lofty ideal is practising to 'feel good'. While perfectly understandable, wanting to feel good is not only unrealistic but also dangerous, as it inevitably involves a good deal of repression, avoidance or denial. Thus, following this strategy is really just a spiritualized form of sensual indulgence and leads to a spiritual dead end. The irony is that in order to feel well in the highest sense we must mindfully engage with suffering to uproot its source.

A subtle but very important attitude to be vigilant about is dissociation. A dissociative attitude results from conceiving spiritual practice as simply some form of direct escape from suffering rather than a means to awaken to the truth of suffering. Thus we may try to 'space out' in meditation, 'blank out' disturbing thoughts or somehow transcend, transpose, supplant our painful sense of self with some higher reality – the Ultimate Truth, the True Self, Awakening, etc. While it sounds exceptionally noble, without careful direction it can easily become a means of simply dissociating from our self rather than awakening to it; just a means of temporarily numbing away the painful dysfunction under the guise of high-minded spiritual concepts.

The real purpose of spiritual practice is to create a conducive internal environment in order to relax the grasping of self-identity and expose its fundamental conditioned nature. This requires the ability to carefully associate with it, not dissociate from it. Many times spiritual practice is seen as something quite the opposite of normal, everyday life resulting in a disintegrated sense of self. We try to be 'spiritual' to deal with our troubles but, in the process, create a 'spiritual self' at conflict with the old self.

‘Spiritual’ means ‘wholeness’, rather than defining some exalted, higher realm hovering beyond the clouds. This wholeness thus needs to include every aspect of our being, every part of our self, and most particularly those parts which we normally define as the least ‘spiritual’. It is the darkness which needs ‘enlightening’.

A particular expression of this attempt at ‘spiritualizing’ is an attitude of ‘disconnection’ from the mundane world. This can be a de-sensitizing from sense impressions, a belittling of normal human communication (and retreat into a ‘critical silence’), disregard for appearance or cleanliness, over-emphasis on solitude, and creating a persona of unworldliness. While quite impressive to some, it is usually indicative of a ‘tuning out’ or disconnection from reality rather than a heightened awareness of life.

One of the biggest mistakes in taking up spiritual practice is trying to get rid of some aspect of ourselves. A common question is: ‘How can I get rid of my anger?’ Everything we become conscious of is part of ourselves, and any attempt to get rid of it can lead to a splitting off or disintegration of that part from the whole. Spiritual practice is really learning how to be truly whole or wholly true, learning how to integrate all the aspects of self and non-self, which can only be accomplished on a ‘higher’, more inclusive level of consciousness.

The paradox is that by trying to get rid of anything we actually confirm it, grasp it and empower it. The attitude of rejection confirms that it is some ‘thing’ we have to confront and, in order to push it away, we must first grasp hold of it. Thus, in actuality, denying becomes affirming, pushing away becomes holding onto – all fundamentally self-affirming, ineffectual activities. The way of Buddhist spiritual practice is to mindfully investigate and open up to these disturbing influences to discover what they really are – ephemeral, insubstantial, conditioned processes. In fact, we really only begin to understand the Buddha’s teaching when we shift from object-oriented consciousness to process-oriented consciousness.

Another point to watch out for is over-reliance on our strengths. Of course we get some pay-off from our strengths and successes, and we have an inherent desire to ignore and avoid our weaknesses. However, over-dependence upon our strengths, in the long term, ends up with an imbalance of spiritual qualities. I have seen individuals very talented in one area being undermined by their weaknesses in others. There are those who can be very energetic but lack tranquillity; some may be gifted at concentration but not skilled at investigation of phenomena. It is thus important to recognize the value of balancing spiritual qualities and put some energy into levelling out our strengths and weaknesses.

Embodied Spirituality

Perhaps as a result of early conditioning many of us think that the body and its passions are the opposite of spirituality, and should be suppressed, ignored or side-stepped, giving rise to a 'disembodied spirituality'. This tendency is compounded by the fact that most of us are so preoccupied with mental activity and have an aversion to physical pain that we have a latent bias towards disembodiment. This is supported by an attitude that 'It's all in the mind', so we can forget the body.

It is a fact, however, that human life is dependent upon this earth-bound body. It is necessary to live with it in a wise way rather than think that we can simply bypass it. The body is actually one of the doors to Awakening through which we can have a profound realization of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. The Buddha recognized this when he designated the first of the exercises in the development of mindfulness as body awareness. Spiritual practice which is not well grounded in the body is not anchored in this world. It is thus mind-heavy and in danger of floating off into imagination, fabrication and supposition with no means for an integrative reality check.

Some of these spiritual wobbles may arise only after years of practice as the lack of stability, integration and embodiment starts to take effect through years of neglect, ignorance or denial. Some individuals may have years of meditation practice, profound meditation experiences and even some sort of 'enlightenment', and yet be seriously blind to the darkness which still pervades large areas of their psyche. Sometimes, therefore, it can be quite helpful to have these tendencies pointed out for us.

Spiritual Sidestepping

In the beginning stages of practice one of the most common symptoms is 'Spiritual Sidestepping'. One mode of this occurs on occasions when, if our own practice is not going 'according to plan', then it is obviously the fault of the teacher, teaching, or tradition rather than anything to do with 'me'. We then pack it in and look elsewhere, anywhere except within ourselves, 'What, me wrong?' Thus we can lay blame for our lack of success on the absence of 'conducive influences'. And while there is something to be said for 'shopping around' for some form which suits our temperament, the work really begins and ends with ourselves. It is best to take responsibility for our practice and not blame outside forces or abdicate our power to teachers.

A more refined example of this is putting all our hope in some particular practice or technique. Techniques can be helpful at certain times and for certain purposes, however, they are still conditioned phenomena, something which 'I do'. And eventually this will be co-opted into the service of 'doing I'. Once this happens the technique becomes a self-serving, mechanical ritual convincing us that we are spiritual. Becoming an adept at some spiritual exercise as an end in itself misses the purpose of spiritual practice.

Perhaps the most dangerous and damaging display of spiritual sidestepping is the 'Charisma Charade'. Someone may have a gift

for teaching or giving retreats or exhibiting great compassion. It is then naively assumed that they must be a greatly-attained being, when in fact they are merely expressing some particular talent, a well-honed skill or a special technique. Because of our tendency to eschew responsibility, we are inclined to invite others to do it for us, and easily fall for the hook of charisma. It is only when we actually live with them day-in and day-out that the 'charade' is finally exposed. This usually entails much disillusionment, disappointment and possibly serious distress. We then direct our frustrations at the teacher rather than humbly acknowledge that we, more-than-likely, were giving away our spiritual power through false projections. An early sign of this tendency is excessive devotion to or enthusiasm for a teacher. This can quickly sour into rejection and criticism. Whereas if we are able to merely appreciate their special abilities or what they can teach us, then we can still feel a sense of gratitude, even when cracks do appear in the façade.

Another phenomena common in Buddhist circles is what I call the 'Anattā shuffle'. This can be seen in those who are either (too) well-read in Buddhist teachings or who are well-practiced, but not wholly-practiced. They know about the principle of Anattā as non-self, however, have not fully integrated it. Thus they often exhibit some very strong and pronounced self traits, such as rigid views and opinions, yet 'shuffle' it off with high-minded concepts: 'Its all empty', 'There is no self,' etc. Others can plainly see the ego-display, yet the actor remains oblivious to it! And all in the name of profound spiritual teachings.... 'Yes, there is non-self, but what about that very pronounced self expressing it'? This sort of shuffling between relative and ultimate truths whenever it suits our fancy, which is the same thing as ego needs, not only produces much confusion and spiritual dishonesty, but can delude one into a false sense of accomplishment while the ego grasping is still being generously nourished.

Spiritual Bypassing

A very significant phenomena which is becoming increasingly recognized, and has been articulated by John Welwood and others, is the phenomenon of ‘Spiritual Bypassing’. This is where underlying psychological issues are ‘bypassed’ through the use of spiritual practices. These ‘ego issues’ are not actually resolved and inevitably begin to surface, often after years of advanced spiritual practice, and sometimes even more empowered by that practice.

The Buddha tells us that the right purpose for spiritual practice is to understand the Four Noble Truths of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path to cessation. This advice directs us to look at the very things distressing us rather than distract ourselves with spiritual diversions. Much of our suffering has roots in our early developmental years and thus practices like cultivating gratitude to our parents and friendliness towards family and friends, may help to buffer some of the more extreme expressions of early disturbances. Most important, however, is the attitude of opening to our suffering rather than taking a spiritual bypass.

Often there is some predominant tendency which forces us into spiritual practice through its disrupting effects. As we work with it in some form or other we may be unaware that there are actually a number of ‘latent tendencies’ still lurking within the psyche. Thus, for example, we may be developing friendliness (*mettā*) to help us work with anger, but then this falls into the lap of lust, and we find ourselves struggling with attraction. There are those who have tried meditating on the unattractiveness of the body (*asubha*) to help counter strong lust but subsequently created aversion towards the body rather than dispassion.

Another very important point, which has taken many years to recognize, is to learn to work with our tendencies rather than against them. Although at first glance this may seem like affirming

our tendencies, in fact it is clearly acknowledging their existence, then finding the relevant means to harness their energy with wisdom. What we recognize as unskilful is actually just 'life force' gone toxic. Through tapping into their root source we can then channel or transform this energy in a more skilful way.

Spiritualized Dysfunction

A phenomenon which Ajahn Chah referred to is 'Dhamma crazy'. This happens when someone has some initial insights into Dhamma and then, in their enthusiasm, begins a teaching crusade to spread the message. If spiritual insights are not well integrated then often they can be taken over by the habitual self-affirming tendencies. This messianic zeal is thus driven by ego-activity and comes across as too exuberant, forceful and excessive. Ajahn Chah's advice if one has this ailment is 'Don't teach'.

A more well known phenomenon is where a teacher with some gifts of presentation can charm others with their performance. Because they are praised for this ability, the teacher can mistake this projection for some form of affirmed spiritual accomplishment and consequently become self-inflated. This then develops into a codependent relationship where the teacher charms the students and the students laud the teacher. Where some (dependent-types) hear self-awakening, others hear a very big, inflated ego.

Some indications of this inflation are speaking in absolutes or over-simplifications, entertaining the masses, an over-extolling of one's own virtues, and an excessive need to be acknowledged. In high gear it becomes self-righteous defensiveness, irrational logic, fear-mongering and paranoia.

The Complete Path

The Buddha articulated the way of spiritual practice as the Eightfold Path, sometimes grouped into three parts: understanding (right

purpose and right attitude), skillful living (refining behaviour in speech, action and livelihood), and meditation (energy, mindfulness and concentration). The right purpose of spiritual practice is to clearly and deeply understand suffering in order to see and release its underlying cause. The right attitude is one of relinquishment, non-ill will and harmlessness. Buddhist spiritual practice only really happens when all these parts harmonize. If they are not complete or well-integrated then there is the possibility of a disintegrated spiritual life and even potential psychological problems. Thus we need to be very vigilant and adaptable to our changing spiritual environment.

Lotus on the Highway

From a published account of a *tudong* in New Zealand in 2008



Ajahn Chandako was born in 1962 in Minnesota, U.S.A. He was ordained as a Buddhist monk in 1990 in the lineage of Ajahn Chah and eventually settled at Wat Pah Nanachat. In 2005, Ajahn Chandako was invited to start the Vimutti Buddhist Monastery in New Zealand, where he is now the abbot.

“As a sweet-smelling and beautiful lotus, pleasing to the heart, may grow from a heap of rubbish discarded along the highway, so a disciple of the fully awakened one shines with wisdom among the rubbish heap ...”

Dhammapada 58,59

NESTED IN PILED BALES OF HAY AND WRAPPED IN THE BROWN CLOTH of their aspirations, their cross-legged postures of upright silence reflected the stillness of the day’s golden birth. It was not necessary to ring a bell to end the meditation. Without a word they stirred, shifted and made preparations for tea. This was a ritual every bit as well-worn and comfortable as the patched and faded cotton weave of an old forest robe dyed with the heartwood of a jackfruit tree.

The day offered near infinite possibilities. Golden Bay was ostensibly our goal. On a *tudong* with no fixed plans, Golden Bay was the goalless goal. Neither of us, however, had ever seen it directly. We didn’t know

for sure that it existed. It seemed reasonable that it did. Others had spoken of seeing it themselves, praised its unique, serene beauty and described it as great happiness. The maps that had proven reliable in the past indicated that it lay to the north. Golden Bay was the kind of place that people travel for long distances in order to see. There was a certain fascination, a mystique and a promise that once you were there, everything would be alright. It was a shoreline beyond the problems of the world, and there human suffering came to an end. It was a symbol. It was an archetype. And in that sense it neither existed nor non-existed, but it manifested as a conceptual reality of hope and human potential where the fruits of a hundred thousand obstacles overcome along the way could be savoured in the quiet victory of sober release. Golden Bay was a direction in which we could orient the compass of our wholesome intentions within the dizzying landscape of incomprehensible kammic possibilities. And our path was leading irreversibly in that direction.

We might take the long way. We might have to backtrack to Westport and follow the hard paved road of predictably neat white lines, the easy and roundabout route of highways, fossil-fuel vehicles and good-natured tourists – the only sensible way. Or we might take the wilderness route. That decision was beyond our control. We were absolutely open. Even if we never reached Golden Bay in our lifetime, we were willing to accept that. But our motivations were clear.

We packed. We respectfully returned each bale of hay to its original position. We left no trace. We began to walk and our stomachs were empty.

Three kilometres passed: kilometres of farm fields, cows, a guest house and the odd person. The kids behind the windows of the school bus offered us their enthusiastic faces and waves of curious appreciation. It was a beautiful morning.

We were the first customers of the day at the Karamea information

centre. We read the relevant pamphlets, found the descriptions of the possible trails ahead and committed to memory the details of important topographical maps, at least as thoroughly as our middle-aged brains allowed. The direct route to Golden Bay was the Heaphy Track. Traversing Kahurangi National Park at the northwest corner of the South Island, the Heaphy was 82 kilometres long and required four to six days to complete. Furthermore, it was 15 kilometres from Karamea to the trail head and 28 kilometres from the end of the trail to the nearest tiny town of Collingwood.

As monks we could carry no food. Our monastic discipline, the *Vinaya*, clearly prohibited storing food overnight. Whatever food was offered to us in the morning had to be renounced by midday. The Heaphy track was devoid of towns, private homes, places to buy supplies or even the slightest aroma of a café to provide a focus for an almsround. For monks to even entertain the thought of that route as a possible option would normally be seen as outside the scope of reasonable consideration.

The warm-hearted local staff at the information centre answered our questions graciously. They allowed us to stow our bags behind their counter, freeing us to walk unburdened on what was most likely the first almsround of Karamean history. There were no supermarkets to choose from in Karamea. There were no Thai restaurants, meditation centres or discernible Asian communities. It was a small, slow, weather beaten, one-story sprawl of a relaxed township at the end of the road. The few funky tourist cafes were sleepily unresponsive. We knew the likelihood of getting anything to eat that day rated from slim to unpredictable, but we had known that all along, and the thought didn't bother us greatly.

With measured pace we walked the town's few streets and eventually arrived at the playing field of the Karamea Domain. On one side was a small campground, and the only vehicle in that campground was the van that had given us a ride the day before. In a moment we found

Jules and Karina, and they invited us into the campground's homey common room. One of the two proprietors, a vibrant elderly woman, discovered us straight away.

'My Tai Chi teacher was a Buddhist monk!' Pippi exclaimed with the type of excited enthusiasm of someone who was about to show you some large-hearted kindness and care. Jules and Karina quickly clued in to the meaning of almsround and thoughtfully offered us coffee and toast. Pippi alerted her partner Joe, who after all these years in New Zealand had never lost his Scottish accent. Joe offered us the much needed use of the communal showers. Although our toiletries were back at the Information Centre, we were able to find some dish washing liquid to squirt on our bodies and an old tea towel to dry them.

They offered more toast and we didn't refuse. Jules and Karina inquired of our plans. We said we didn't have any fixed plans. We asked them of theirs. They said they were thinking to drive to the trail head of the Heaphy track to do a day hike. Tan Mettiko and I looked at each other.

'When are you leaving?'

'We'd like to get going soon, as it's already late in the morning. You can join us if you want.'

Mettiko and I looked at each other again.

'I guess we're doing the Heaphy track.'

That decided it. When we explained that our intention was to not merely do a day trip, but to hike the entire trail, J & K were keen to take us to the trail head and join us for the first leg of the tramp. When we explained that our intention was to hike the entire trail without taking any food, Pippi and Joe had a look of dubious concern. They gave us more toast. Mettiko and I weren't naïve about what we were getting into. We knew that hikers would be carrying just enough food for their own needs, so it didn't seem fair to expect or even hope that

anyone would feed us along the way. We agreed that we would not go on almsround while on the trail, not sit by any of public huts with our obviously empty bowls in our laps, not stand holding ‘starving monks will chant for food’ signs and not even hint to other hikers that we were short of physical nourishment.

We had a reasonable assessment of our capabilities and limitations. A sprained ankle I’d sprained near the beginning of the trip had still not healed, but I knew if I stepped mindfully and placed my weight properly it would hold up. Our footwear only offered modest support. Tevas with neoprene scuba booties were the lightweight compromise that had served us well in a wide variety of *tudong* situations. Although we didn’t have the burden of food, we had the added extra weight of our unusual low tech monastic paraphernalia: large steel bowls, heavy wooden and bamboo *glotes*¹ and outer robes of dense and weighty cotton. We were keenly aware of the challenges ahead, but we were also realistic about our strengths and inner fortitude. Truth is, we were looking forward to testing ourselves.

Neither of us had any real doubt that we would eventually make it to the far side of the track. The big question was how long it would take and the ratio of pleasure to pain that would be experienced in the process. And this was a big unknown. And for us this was what *tudong* was all about. This fear of an unknown, uncontrolled future and the accompanying projections of insecurity are the self-imposed jails created within a mind bound by the world. But seeing through the cement blocks of worry and dissolving the bars of limiting thought constructions were major reasons why we were monks.

Committed and incarcerated by the confines of our seen, unrecognized or unacknowledged fears, we may never know true freedom. We can easily justify not stepping out from the safe ground of the familiar and the socially accepted into the wide forest of potential growth. We can easily rationalize playing it safe and not taking risks. Fear can stop us from following our hearts. Fear can lead to wheel-spinning

stagnation as years pass until our inspiration to follow our dreams has been replaced by a heart full of regrets. In the process we can miss out on the best life has to offer and end up forsaking altogether the further shores of Golden Bay.

If we were going to face our fears, there was only one time to do it.

Pippi and Joe's well placed concern manifested in encouraging us to eat whatever food we found in the communal refrigerator as our last foreseeable supper. What remained in the refrigerator consisted of white bread, peanut butter, lettuce, a tomato, margarine and a small cube of cheese. As the J & K van was ready to roll, we quickly and gratefully took up the offer and hastily prepared a few very weird sandwiches. Pippi made us promise to email her from the far side of the track, if we survived.

On our way to the trail head we picked up our packs, and as it was nearing midday we ate our peanut butter, lettuce and tomato sandwiches in the back of the van. With a couple of apples tossed to us by Jules, our fast food happy meal was sufficient to satisfy half our appetite.

The trail head was a well kept park of windswept Pohutakawa trees. By the Kohaihai shelter, an unknown hiker who had completed the trail in the opposite direction had kindly left behind a good walking stick. I asked the stick if it wouldn't mind accompanying me on a reverse journey, and it agreed. How many times this particular stick had been carried back and forth the length of the trail was another imponderable.

We plunged into the lush native bush of Karaka and ubiquitous tree ferns. The wide, well maintained trails encouraged enjoyable Dhamma dialogue fuelled by Jules and Karina's thoughtful questions. After a good couple of hours, crossing the Kohaihai River and stopping at an occasional bluff lookout providing extensive views of the coast ahead, we arrived at long, broad beaches of inviting white sand. This

promised to be a perfect place to reflect contemplatively by the waves as J & K had their picnic before turning back. In certain scenic New Zealand locations however, it is prudent to reflect contemplatively at a rather rapid clip and remember that all promises are subject to fleeting conditions. After a 90 second grace period the airborne divisions of the tiny sand fly moved in for their aerial strike.

At the information centre in Karamea, among the many dozens of pamphlets on various subjects, we found one lamenting the environmental demise of the endangered West Coast Sand fly. Admittedly, I was halfway through reading it before I caught on that it was actually a craftily written, tongue in cheek, rogue pamphlet that had been snuck in among the bona fide literature. Alarmed that surveys of sand fly numbers indicated a drop in their population to approximately 10 billion, the witty authors offer information on sand fly natural history, sand fly spotting, recognizing the markings of sub-species, proper medical treatment should you get bit and what we can all do to ensure that this sociable and friendly New Zealand icon with such a strong affinity for people will be around for future generations to enjoy.

Tan Mettiko and I decided that contemplative reflection could happen just as effectively in a mobile posture. With great appreciation for their help and kindness, we bid farewell to Jules and Karina and continued up the coast.

We passed through magical forests of Nikau Palms, New Zealand's only native palm tree. The forest to the side of the trail was a bursting green mat of thickly woven subtropical lushness. Large glossy leaves, intertwining vines and damp conditions revealed an environment bursting with life. We drank water and sat at Katipo Creek shelter. As we continued, the coast became increasingly rocky and wave pummelled. Gentle stretches of sand gave way to the hard and jagged edges of a coastline that regularly endured a pounding from cold waves and winds that had gained momentum from some distant origin.

At a particularly beautiful cove of craggy rocks and swirling currents we came upon a bronze plaque placed in memory of a group of young hikers who had been swept out to sea decades before. Visualising the range of emotions that those youthful travellers must have felt – from the initial excited playfulness and natural joy of their entry into the water, to the refreshing coolness of the surf, to the terror of being dragged and pushed out of their control and to the final moments of a life cut so unexpectedly short – was a teaching that encapsulated so much of what our existence has to offer. We chanted a short blessing. Continuing north with the beautifully vibrant and pulsating fecundity of ungoverned growth to our right; with the equally stunning, bare starkness of rock and water's veiled threat of death to our left; we walked a silent narrow path of balance between the two.

By late afternoon we were nearing our 20th kilometre on foot. The fuel garnered from our peanut butter, lettuce and tomato sandwich half meal was wearing thin and no energy was wasted on speech. The sky looked threatening, and it began to rain here and there. We had been told that camping was free and allowed if one was 500 metres from the trail, but as we searched, we found little opportunity to enter sideways through the dense thickets of bush.

At dusk, with heavy dark clouds overhead, we emerged from the rain forest at the mouth of the Heaphy River. There was an official Department of Conservation hut with bunks, wooden stove and sink, but as we had no money for a hut pass, we had no right to make use of the hut. However, we did find a small wooden structure nearby with covered benches. There were no people to be seen except for an occasional silhouette walking the distant sandy banks. The benches were plenty wide for sleeping, so we strung our lines through the beams and boards for hanging our *glotes* and drying our wet clothes. Within our mosquito nets we made our beds and neatly arranged our gear. It was finally time for tea.

We then walked to where the Heaphy River met the Tasman Sea. In

another of nature's battles of conflicting forces, the fresh water of pure mind was determined to flow out to the freedom of expansion, while the salty waves of defilement did their damndest to force it back into the hills. Dark storm clouds were approaching from the west. Fierce winds cut through our robes and fuelled ever-larger waves, but the movement of the pure water refused to be discouraged or to stop.

Following us back to the covered bench, darkness then encompassed us completely.

We were sore and tired but pleased to be where we were. We both had been on *tudong* in the past with monks or novices, sometimes half our age, who would complain and worry and whinge at every encounter with discomfort. For a long time I had appreciated Tan Mettiko's fortitude in maintaining equanimity and acceptance – or at least silence – in the face of hardship, and it seemed to be the right time to express my appreciation.

'We have been on *tudong* for many weeks now, experiencing a variety of conditions. Thank you for never complaining. I appreciate that.'

'Thank you for your example in upholding the forest *tudong* tradition. I appreciate that.'

Mutual appreciation established and confirmed, we meditated in the windy darkness until the time was right for sleep.

Afterword

After four days of walking, rain, ice, a wide array of human encounters and no alms-round, the pair of tudong monks did eventually arrive at Golden Bay.

¹ *glote: an umbrella with a mosquito net that traditionally served as a temporary dwelling for forest monks.*

BRANCH MONASTERIES

Western disciples of Ajahn Chah

The portal page for this community worldwide is: www.forestsangha.org

UNITED KINGDOM:

Amaravati Buddhist Monastery
Great Gaddesden,
Hemel Hempstead,
Hertfordshire HP1 3BZ.
Tel. Office: +44 (0)144 284 2455
Fax. +44 (0)144 284 3721
Retreat Centre: +44 (0)144 284 3239
www.amaravati.org

Aruna Ratanagiri
Harnham Buddhist Monastery
Harnham, Belsay,
Northumberland NE20 0HF.
Tel. +44 (0)1661 881 612
Fax. +44 (0)1661 881 019
www.ratanagiri.org.uk

Cittaviveka
Chithurst Buddhist Monastery
Chithurst, Petersfield,
Hampshire GU31 5EU.
Tel. +44 (0)1730 814 986
Fax. +44 (0)1730 817 334
www.cittaviveka.org

Hartridge Buddhist Monastery
Odle Cottage,
Upottery, Honiton,
Devon EX14 9QE.
Tel. +44 (0)1404 89 1251
Fax. +44 (0)1404 89 0023
www.hartridgemonastery.org

SWITZERLAND:

Kloster Dhammapala
Am Waldrand,
CH-3718 Kandersteg.
Tel. +41 (0)33 675 21 00
Fax. +41 (0)33 675 22 41
www.dhammapala.ch

THAILAND:

Wat Pah Nanachat,
Bahn Bung Wai,
Amper Warin,
Ubon 34310.
www.watpahnachat.org

AUSTRALIA:

East Warburton,
Vic 3799.
Tel. +61 (0)3 5966 5999
Fax. +61 (0)3 5966 5998

NEW ZEALAND:

Vimutti Buddhist Monastery
PO Box 7,
Bombay, 2343
(South Auckland).
Tel. +64 (0)9 236 6816
www.vimutti.org.nz

Bodhinyanarama Monastery
17 Rakau Grove,
Stokes Valley,
Lower Hutt 5019.
Tel. +64 (0)4 5637 193
www.bodhinyanarama.net.nz

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA:

Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery
16201 Tomki Road,
Redwood Valley,
CA 95470.
Tel. +1 (707) 485 1630
www.abhayagiri.org

CANADA:

Tisarana Buddhist Monastery
1356 Powers Road, RR #3 Perth,
Ontario K7H 3C5.
Phone: +1 613-264-8208
www.tisarana.ca

ITALY:

Santacittarama
Localita 'Le Brulla',
02030 Frasso Sabino
(Rieti).
Tel. +39 07 6587 2186
Fax. +39 06 233 238 629
www.santacittarama.org

The first volume of 'Seeing the Way' was printed in 1989. Our teacher, the Venerable Ajahn Chah, had been seriously ill for a number of years. Publishing that collection of Dhamma talks in English at that time was one way of expressing our love and gratitude to him.

This new collection of transcribed talks and essays by eighteen monks and nuns, aims to present a snapshot of the community of western disciples of Ajahn Chah as it is now, in 2011. Included among the contributors are many of those whose talks were in 'Seeing the Way' Volume One. Also included are senior Sangha members who are currently serving as leaders of this family of monasteries.

from the Preface



ARUNA PUBLICATIONS

This book has been sponsored for free distribution.