

THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH OF THE BUDDHA

MIND IS WHAT MATTERS

AJAHN AMARO

See how the orient dew,
... in its little globe's extent,
Frames as it can its native element.
...
And recollecting its own light,
Does, in its pure and circling thoughts, express
The greater heaven in an heaven less.
...
Congealed on earth: but does, dissolving, run
Into the glories of th' almighty sun.

ON A DROP OF DEW
ANDREW MARVELL (1621-78)

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AJAHN AMARO



AMARAVATI
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This book is dedicated in appreciation of Edmund Husserl,
philosopher and early articulator of the principles
of phenomenology in the Western world.

That in the world whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world, that is called 'the world' in this Dhamma and discipline. And what is it whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world? The eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind - this is the way through which one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world.

(S 35.116)

The Tathāgata has abandoned that material form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... consciousness, by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from being reckoned in terms of material form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... consciousness, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean.

(M 72.20)

A story must be judged according to whether it makes sense. And 'making sense' must be here understood in its most direct meaning: to make sense is to enliven the senses. A story that makes sense is one that stirs the senses from their slumber, one that opens the eyes and the ears to their real surroundings, tuning the tongue to the actual tastes in the air and sending chills of recognition along the surface of the skin. To make sense is to release the body from the constraints imposed by outworn ways of speaking, and hence to renew and rejuvenate one's felt awareness of the world. It is to make the senses wake up to where they are.

DAVID ABRAM

THE SPELL OF THE SENSUOUS:

PERCEPTION AND LANGUAGE IN A MORE-THAN-HUMAN WORLD

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EVERY BOOK THAT IS PUBLISHED involves the goodwill, skill and efforts of many people, and this one is no exception. First of all I would like to express my appreciation to Ven. Nisabho who went to heroic lengths (involving making a compilation of my entire written oeuvre) in sorting the material appropriate to the theme of this book.

The transcription of the talks that form the majority of the text was organized under the efficient and energetic auspices of the Lotus Volunteer Group. The swiftness of their response to tasks such as this, and the flexibility with which they work, is always greatly valued. The bulk of the transcription itself was carried out by Annelies Wouters with speed and precision, which was very welcome.

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logical and philosophical leaps in the text, as well as spotting typos and missing commas, and confusing modes of expression, is a precious gift and this book has been substantially benefitted by his careful attention.

Lastly, I have quoted a number of passages from works of physics and philosophy in this text and I would particularly like to express my gratitude to Prof. Steven French, Professor of Philosophy of Science in The School of Philosophy, Religion and History of Science, at the University of Leeds, as he kindly gave permission for a lengthy quote from his work to be included as part of this book.

May all those who have lent a hand in the development of this small volume be blessed with the peace and freedom that comes from realizing the nature of mind and its relation to the world.

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AMARAVATI MONASTERY
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THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK, *Mind Is What Matters*, brings attention to attitude. It points to the enormous difference our attitude makes as the mind receives and processes experience, and it points to that aspect of Dhamma practice of making everything our teacher.

In 2017 at our open retreat at Amaravati Monastery, there were over 400 people attending. Ajahn Sumedho gave teachings every evening, and other visiting ajahns offered instruction and led question-and-answer sessions daily. For some of us, it was a very inspiring time. There were a lot of illuminating and imaginative teachings; for me it was a truly encouraging and beautiful event.

But what if someone else's attitude had been different? Even though they were hearing inspiring teachings, they could have begun to think they were not enough. Or they could have compared one teacher to another, judging who was better. Even something as noble, beautiful, and wholesome as hearing Dhamma teachings could have become a cause of suffering, disappointment or discontent if the person had taken hold of the experience in an unskilful way.

Our minds can easily get caught in judgment: 'this' is not as good as 'that', or 'now' is not quite as real or good as 'that prospect off in the future' or 'that great time back in the past'. If this is what our mind is doing, we can look at it. This feeling of disappointment, this comparing mind, can become our teacher in this moment. If we are wise, *everything* will teach us: the weather, our memories, our physical condition, the environment, the people around us.

For everything to be our teacher in this way hinges on our attitude; it all depends on how our mind holds the experience of the present moment. Many years ago, when I was a teenager, I noticed that even in an idyllic situation – sitting on a riverbank enjoying a picnic with good friends – my mind could be completely miserable. Over and over again I noticed a sad, wretched, insecure, unsatisfied quality and more importantly there was nothing I could find to blame for this feeling, no place where I could find fault. Everything was picture-book perfect. That really annoyed me, because as long as I had something to blame, my mind had an excuse for its misery. But when there was nothing to blame, I realized, then the only thing responsible for my misery must be my own mind.

So in an attempt to understand myself better, I decided to do a degree in psychology and physiology at London University. But at the end of three years of study, I still didn't feel much happier. I had learned a lot about rat and pigeon behaviours and statistics and experimental design, and I could reel off the names of significant experimenters and psychologists, but I hadn't seemed to learn much about my own psychology.

By this time I was about twenty years old, and I had become quite caught up in my unhappiness, I wished I could find a relationship and to be totally happy in it. Or that I would be able to get a job in London and be content with a career working in a diamond merchant's – or even making chestnut palings and fixing fences back in my home county – for the rest of my life. But something in me

just couldn't be satisfied with any of those ideas. Instead, to handle my misery, I pretty much became alcoholic and drank myself numb in order not to feel it.

As I approached the end of my time at university, I looked back at all my many opportunities and blessings. I'd had a good education at the kind of school that teaches you to speak with a posh accent, just like Prince Charles, and I could carry on in the academic life if I was interested. My godfather, a partner of De Beers diamond corporation, had long ago promised me a job at the company. Or I imagined I could follow my own ambitions to become a great novelist or an actor. I thought, 'I have many open doors.'

Even so, I still had the feeling that whether I wrote the great novel, had a dazzling career in academia, made piles of money at De Beers – or got married, went off to live in the Cotswolds in a thatched cottage with roses round the door and curly-headed kids running around on the lawn in the summertime – I might still be really miserable. I thought to myself, 'I've already lived in one of those cottages with roses round the door, and I was that curly-headed child, but I'm still not happy.'

I finally came to the conclusion that it was my mind that made the difference. I told myself, 'I've got to do something about this mind.' This became really clear to me. So, my twenty-first birthday present to myself was to stop drinking and go to Asia in search of a spiritual path. To make a long story short, about four

months later I walked into a monastery in North-East Thailand. I had arrived at Wat Pah Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery founded by Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho.

By the time I walked into that monastery, understanding my own mind was my key interest – and, much to my good fortune, the focus of people’s attention at the monastery was also directly and completely on the mind. It wasn’t in reference to learning more facts about the mind, or reading a book on it, but in getting to know this mind directly. I felt very blessed to have come across the Buddha’s teaching.

For the first time, I was living with people who had had similar experiences to mine, what we would call ‘world weariness’. In exactly the same way, they had seen the hollowness, the lack of value and substance in worldly goals, how one could be in a totally perfect situation and still be miserable. On the other hand, one could be in a really difficult situation – where things were uncomfortable, painful, or troublesome – and, if the attitude was skilful, feel completely fine, fully at ease, content, that everything was right with the world.

In understanding the nature of mind, essentially, we see that happiness doesn’t lie in having a comfortable house or published book or perfect relationship or children attending a prestigious college. Happiness lies not in the object but in the subject. Everything hinges around the attitude. Attitude is arguably the core of insight meditation. The mind is what matters.

We all think of ourselves: ‘I am a person. I am a woman. I am a man. I am such-and-such an age. I have this body. I have this mind. I have my life story.’ We feel as if we are an independent being moving around in a fixed world. Even as we develop meditation, there is the sense that ‘the mind’ is watching ‘the world’, including the ‘inner world’ of thoughts and memories, intentions and emotions. There is the dynamic: ‘me in here/world out there’. For most of us this is an unquestioned reality. However, in a short but deeply significant teaching the Buddha said:

That in the world whereby one is a perceiver of the world (*lokasaññī*) and a conceiver of the world (*lokamānī*), that is called ‘the world’ in this teaching and this discipline. And what is it whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world? The eye ... the ear ... the nose ... the tongue ... the body ... the mind is that in the world whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world ... this is called ‘the world’ in this teaching and this discipline.

(S 35.116)¹

The Buddha is saying that ‘the world’ is the world of our experience. That is not to say that reality is all just a dream and that we individually have made it up in our minds; it’s to say that all we have ever known throughout our entire life is our mind’s representation of the world. We can’t really know the world. We can only know the world as this *mind represents* it.

1. See Appendix, §1 for full quotation.

Every single thing we've ever experienced has been known through the agency of a specific mind. Even before we could think or speak, we knew the world through our mind. From the heartbeat of our mother when we were in the womb, to our birth, to all the experiences of our childhood, adolescence, adulthood, every single feeling and perception – whether pleasant or painful, conceptual, emotional, whatever it might be – has been known through the agency of this mind.

We can talk about 'the world' in all sorts of different ways. Generally, for those of us coming from a Western, European background, we tend to be theoretical or scientific. We talk about the world in terms of the cosmos, the galaxies, the stars, the planets, life here on Earth with its oceans and continents, mountains and rivers, human beings and animals. But the Buddha's approach is different. It's very direct and personal. He teaches that we can only meaningfully talk about the world as we *experience* it. What we call 'the world' is actually an experience the mind puts together through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking and remembering.

In terms of Western philosophy, the Buddha's approach could be called 'phenomenological'. Of course, the Buddha was not exactly (and certainly was not merely) a phenomenologist, according to a strict definition of the philosophical term, but his approach is very similar: the only world we can meaningfully talk about is the world we experience. We can theorize, we can ask, 'What would the world be like if it wasn't *me* experiencing it or if it wasn't

seen from a human perspective?’ But we can’t meaningfully answer such hypothetical questions because all we can truly know is our sensed experience in any moment.²

The Buddha’s approach to understanding life is through noticing the patterns of experience *as we know* them rather than through some sort of would-be unbiased or objective viewpoint. ‘The world’ is the world of our senses and not an object ‘out there’ that can be perceived from an impartial perspective. It is also interesting that, in the domain of quantum physics, it has been observed that, ‘No elementary quantum phenomenon is a phenomenon until it is an observed phenomenon,’³ and that, ‘The universe does not “exist out there” independent of all acts of observation.’⁴ This interrelationship was helpfully summarized by the physicist Fritjof Capra:

The fact that all the properties of particles are determined by principles closely related to the method of observation, would mean that the basic structures of the material world are determined, ultimately, by the way we look at the world; that the observed patterns of matter are reflections of patterns of mind.⁵

2. There is a fine piece written by the philosopher Thomas Nagel on this theme, entitled *What Is It Like to Be a Bat?*, first published in *The Philosophical Review*, (October, 1974). Reprinted in Daniel Dennett & Douglas R. Hofstadter (editors) *The Mind’s I: Fantasies and Reflections on Self and Soul*, Basic Books, (1981).

3. John A. Wheeler, Warner A. Miller, *Foundations of Quantum Mechanics in the Light of New Technology*, pp. 72-84, *Delayed-Choice Experiments and Bohr’s Elementary Quantum Phenomenon*, (1997).

4. John A. Wheeler, *Beyond the Black Hole*, in H. Woolf ed., *Some Strangeness in the Proportion: A Centennial Symposium to Celebrate the Achievements of Albert Einstein*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass., (1980).

5. Fritjof Capra, *The Turning Point: Science, Society and the Rising Culture*, Bantam Books, (1982).

A few other statements by Western academics, past and present also helpfully refer to this area. Firstly, following Edmund Husserl, founder of modern-day phenomenology, it has been stated:

Mind and world are not distinct entities, rather, they are bound constitutively together.⁶

The contemporary philosopher Steven French has also looked deeply into this area – that is of the role of the ‘participator’ in quantum mechanics and the application of a phenomenological approach – and, in a recent article⁷, he made the following comments:

London and Bauer⁸ dismiss ‘classical’ objectivity as useless and should be replaced by a new phenomenological conception according to which the ‘objective world’ should be understood as ‘the objective world-as-it-has-meaning-for-us’.

[O]n this picture, the world is what it is only as the correlate of an experiencing consciousness, but both the world as it is experienced and that consciousness are constituted by their inter-dependent relationship.

6. S. Gallagher, & D. Zahavi, *The phenomenological mind. An introduction to philosophy of mind and science* (second edn.), Routledge, (2012).

7. Steven French, *Phenomenology solves quantum puzzles – Bringing consciousness back to the quantum table* IAI News, Issue 90, (21st July, 2020).

8. Fritz London & Edmond Bauer, *La théorie de l’observation en mécanique quantique*, Hermann & Cie, (1939).

Carlo Rovelli's 'relational' interpretation of quantum theory, [was] originally developed to help smooth the path to a form of quantum gravity. This approach takes the states of systems to be essentially relational in nature: just as velocity is not a property possessed by a system alone but only relative to some other system, so the state of 'cat alive/dead' [in Schrödinger's famous thought experiment] is not one that the cat is in, in and of itself, but only in relation to the state of the other system in the measurement interaction - in this case the observer. Rovelli's interpretation obviously meshes nicely with the 'correlational' aspect of a phenomenological stance, but what the latter brings to the table is the role of consciousness as a fundamental 'pole' of Rovelli's relations. The other 'pole' is the system being observed and so, on this picture, *the world is what it is only as the correlate of an experiencing consciousness, but both the world as it is experienced and that consciousness are constituted by their inter-dependent relationship* [emphasis added].

This is a very significant principle. The world that can be known is not *the* world, it is our *version* of the world; this being the conclusion of the Buddha as well as contemporary scientists and philosophers. And our version of the world is dependent on many factors: the language we speak, whether we are a woman or a man, 10 years old or 80, an artistic type or a mathematical type, a pessimist or an optimist. All these different influences play into the way we

experience things. The mind doesn't just do a bit of filtering of the world, the mind *fabricates* our experience of the world moment by moment. Ironically this principle is also borne out in the very word 'fact'; despite it customarily being taken to mean 'an indisputable reality', the word comes from the Latin *facere*, meaning 'to do' or 'to make'. Even 'facts' about 'the world' are thus recognized as mind-mediated constructions. Similarly, the Latin word for 'thing', *res*, comes from *reri*, meaning 'to think', hinting that we think things into existence. This phenomenological understanding of the Buddha's teachings is worthy of exploration and contemplation – and can be profoundly liberating.

REFRAMING EXPERIENCE

When we experience the ordinary flow of activity – walking from one place to another, talking with a colleague, checking the time – we can notice and reframe experience. Instead of, ‘I am walking. I am talking. I am checking the time,’ we can change the framework to, ‘There is walking. There is talking. There is checking the time.’

In a sense, we can retrain the mind to see the experience of the world in a different way. As we sit down for lunch, lunch is happening in our mind. We might think, ‘I’m putting food in my mouth,’ but our mouth is ‘in’ our mind. We might think, ‘I am sitting in a room,’ but the room is in the mind.

Our inner world includes thoughts and emotions, liking and disliking, approval and disapproval. Rather than getting caught up in these experiences, there can be the bare awareness: ‘This is a perception of liking,’ ‘This is a perception of disliking.’ This reframed perception can be applied to seeing, tasting, feeling, hearing ... the whole gamut of experiences: ‘This is hearing. This is seeing. This is reflecting. This is what’s going on.’

We also habitually perceive what we experience as ‘wanted/unwanted’, ‘liked/disliked’, ‘good/bad.’ Instead, we can take a step back and cultivate a different framework. For example, when we get something we want, we can reflect: ‘I was anticipating this. Now I’ve got it.’ We can notice anticipation changing to gratification. Then we can notice the experience of change itself rather than getting lost in the experience of, ‘Hey, I got what I wanted! Hooray!’

The world is happening in our mind. This is not just a mind game; it is a reframing of experience. So, what is the effect of that? How does that change the way the world is felt? How does that change the way the world is appreciated?

This reframing is not just a matter of learning behaviours or obeying instructions. The whole point of following instructions or advice is the internal effect it might have. What really matters is the change of heart. When there is this shift of view, this change of perspective, how is it felt?

Let that really soak in – the world is happening *here*, in the mind. We recognize the world as patterns of perception. Arising and passing. What is the felt sense of that in the heart? Is there a quality of freedom? A quality of ease? Is there a way that the sense of stress (*dukkha*) ends?

Experiment with this and see if it can be sustained. Of course, we may forget or become distracted. It is natural to get lost. We may realize that an hour has gone by and that we were completely absorbed in our own projections, our loves and hates and dramas. But then there is the reframing: ‘Oh yes, this is the experience of getting lost in a drama. It feels like this. This is the mind getting lost in stories. Aha!’

NOBODY GOING ANYWHERE

Ajahn Sumedho used to talk about this theme frequently. He would say, ‘The world is in your mind.’ While on one level it is true that the world is ‘out there’

and we're moving around in it, on another level the world is experienced only in our minds. Similarly, as Ajahn Sumedho reminded me when I'd once become caught up in planning a *tudong* walk: 'In actual fact, there is nobody going anywhere, there are just conditions changing.'⁹

That was a really wonderful reflection for me. On my journey, I noticed a series of perceptions: a perception of putting on a rucksack, a perception of waving goodbye, a perception of the rain falling down, a perception of walking along the country lanes. And, when I remembered, I saw that all of those perceptions happened 'here'.

Whenever we are travelling or moving from one place to another, it's just a perception happening in the moment: a perception of the car, a perception of the motorway, a perception of the towns passing by, or a perception of arriving somewhere. But wherever we go, it is always 'here'. Have any of us ever been in a place that was not 'here'? Wherever we've been during our entire life, it has always been exactly 'here'.

Therefore, when we remember that there is really nobody going anywhere – that there are only changing conditions of mind – it shifts our perspective on life. Even though we may be moving vigorously, driving or walking or running, when the mind remembers that it's all just happening 'here', there is a profound restfulness within the movement. A peacefulness. A sense of 'nobody going

9. A full account of this walk is found in the author's book *Tudong – the Long Road North*, (1984).

anywhere.’ The heart is freed from urgency. This spaciousness is what we call ‘freedom from becoming’.

Ajahn Sumedho also frequently pointed out that if we start out with the view that we are an unenlightened person who has to do something now in order to become enlightened in the future, then we are starting out with ignorance (*avijjā*) and will end up with suffering (*dukkha*). But if we begin with awareness (*vijjā*), then we will end up with peacefulness (*Nibbāna*).

Of course, we might think, ‘But I *am* an unenlightened person! And I *do* want to take action to reach enlightenment. After all, isn’t Buddhism about doing spiritual practices to make ourselves better?’ But we must pay close attention to the phrasing ‘I *am* an unenlightened person who has to do something now in order to *become* enlightened in the future.’ In that phrasing, in the forming of that attitude, a ‘person’ is being created and ‘time’ is being created. We are unconsciously approaching the practice of Dhamma from the position of self-view: ‘I *am a person*.’ Right there the mind is grasping self (*attā*).

If we change our view from ‘I am an unenlightened person who needs to do something now to become enlightened in the future’ to ‘Be awake now,’ then we use the capacity of the mind to be aware and awake without creating any position of self-view, without establishing notions of ‘I, Me and Mine’.

The more the mind is awake, the more we then recognize that awareness is not a person, the mind is not a person. We also see that the personal qualities

– being a woman or man, old or young, healthy or sick – arise and pass away. Those qualities are known by awareness, which is not itself male or female, old or young, tall or short. It has no nationality, no shape, no age.

That which is true with respect to ‘time’ and ‘self’ is also true for ‘location’ – awareness is unlocated – so when Ajahn Sumedho said, ‘In actual fact there is nobody going anywhere, there are just conditions changing,’ it punctured the self-based attitude of ‘me going somewhere.’

Furthermore, even though what we experience is ‘this mind’s version of the world,’ it is never truly ‘I’ or ‘me’ or ‘mine’. When figures of speech are used, such as ‘The world that we experience is our version of the world,’ (as above) they should always be understood in the light of this insight into ‘not-self’ (*anattā*).

IDENTITY, TIME AND LOCATION

The mind creates images of past and future, perceptions of ‘me’ passing through time and space. I have been ‘here’ for the past week; I will go ‘there’ in the future. Past, present, and future – the sense of ‘I’, the sense of place or location – the more we reflect on the nature of experience, of the arising and passing of the world as it happens (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, feelings, thoughts, imaginings), the more clearly we see that it all happens HERE and NOW.

Where is the past? Where is the present? Where is the future? Where is ‘here’?

They all take shape within the space of awareness. Wherever we have been throughout our whole life, it has always been exactly 'here' – whether it was Malaysia, Sri Lanka, America, England, Thailand. Wherever we have been, whatever the date was on the calendar, it was always 'now' as it was being experienced. This mind is the nexus, the centre of experience. The universe is known in the mind; this mind is intrinsically the centre of the universe. There are perceptions of a 'me' passing through time and space but those perceptions arise, take shape, and are known here and now.

Memories, ideas, emotions, decisions – they are all known here and now. But, most of the time, we don't realize that all our everyday assumptions, all our ideas about where we are and where we are going, are based upon habits of perception, self-view, attachment to experience, identification with the body and personality: with identity, time and location.

Ajahn Chah used to present people with the riddle: 'If you can't go forward, can't go back, and can't stand still, where can you go?' People would be a bit bewildered, their thinking minds frustrated: 'What a weird question!' As long as the mind identifies with the body, with the personality, with time and space as absolute realities, there is no solution to the puzzle. But when the mind lets go of identification with individuality, with time, with place, then the puzzle solves itself. When the mind awakens to its own quality of selfless, timeless, unlocated awareness, then that knowing – the awakened awareness – is clarified. The conundrum is solved as the mind stops identifying with

time, individual identity and three-dimensional space – it is simply awakened knowing, *buddho*. As Ajahn Chah would explain:

The Buddha-Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This ... is your place of non-abiding.

AJAHN CHAH, QUOTED IN *THE ISLAND*, P 164, (2020)

In the collection of Suttas called the *Udāna*, the Buddha likewise says:

There is that *āyatana*, that sphere of being, where there is ... neither a moving forwards, nor a moving backwards, nor a standing still. Neither an arising, nor a disappearance This, indeed, is the end of suffering.

(UD 8.1)¹⁰

This is the principle Ajahn Chah was pointing to.

The mind is present, it is awake, it knows. This knowing is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable, and aware, but it is not a person, not within a realm of time, not situated in a location. This awake, aware quality is an attribute of Dhamma. As is recounted in the daily reflections on Dhamma: *Sabbe dhamma anattā* (Both the created and the Uncreated are not-self); the Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhiko* (apparent here now), and *akāliko* (timeless).

10. See Appendix, §2 for full quotation.

The mind, in its essence, is Dhamma. It is not a person, although it knows personality, and all personal qualities, as they arise and pass. It is not female or male, although it knows femininity and masculinity. It is neither agitated nor calm, although it knows those feelings. It is not outside or inside, liking or disliking, but it knows those perceptions. The mind is Dhamma, aware, awake. The Buddha arises from the Dhamma. If Dhamma is the substance of mind then Buddha, awakened awareness, is its function. Ajahn Chah also described the relationship thus:

At present, the Buddha, the real Buddha, is still living, for he is the Dhamma itself, the '*saccadhamma*'. And '*saccadhamma*', that which enables one to become Buddha, still exists. It hasn't fled anywhere! It gives rise to two Buddhas: one in body and the other in mind.

'The real Dhamma,' the Buddha told Ānanda, 'can only be realized through practice.' Whoever sees the Buddha, sees the Dhamma. And how is this? Previously, no Buddha existed; it was only when Siddhattha Gotama realized the Dhamma that he became the Buddha, if we explain it in this way, then he is the same as us. If we realize the Dhamma, then we will likewise be the Buddha. This is called the Buddha in mind or '*nāma dhamma*'.¹¹

11. *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, p 485, Aruno Publications, (2011).

THE INTERSECTION OF TIMELESSNESS AND TIME

When the mind, the heart, awakens and embodies its own nature, then there is a profound peace. This peace does not arise from ‘something’ that has been agitated and then stops being agitated. This peace is of a whole different order – a peace based on selflessness, timelessness, freedom from location. The Buddha taught, ‘*Bhavanirodho nibbānaṃ*’ (A 10.7), which means, ‘The cessation of becoming is Nibbāna.’ Or as Hui Neng said:

In this moment, there is nothing that comes to be.

In this moment, there is nothing that ceases to be.

Thus, in this moment, there is no birth and death to be brought to an end.¹²

‘Cessation of becoming’ doesn’t mean stopping in our tracks. It doesn’t mean that we stop breathing or that we freeze while moving, as if we were playing ‘grandmother’s footsteps’. This ‘cessation’ doesn’t mean the ceasing of something that exists in time. Rather, it is the recognition of the timeless presence, the suchness (*tathatā*), that underlies the flow of perceptions, the recognition of the space within which all perception, feeling, thought, choice and action take place.

Even as the body breathes, that which knows the breath is not moving. Even as the body moves, that which knows the body is ever-present, totally ‘here’,

12. Hui Neng, as quoted by Alan Watts in *The Way of Zen*, p 201, Vintage Spiritual Classics, (1999).

outside of the world of movement and time. The ‘cessation of becoming’ is the heart attuning to the ever-present, selfless, timeless, non-located quality of Dhamma. In his *Four Quartets*, TS Eliot called it ‘the point of intersection of the timeless with time.’¹³

This is what the Buddhist meditator is doing, attending to the point of intersection of the timeless with time.

As the body moves, there is a stillness.

As thoughts and words arise and pass, there is a stillness.

As sounds are heard, there is a silence behind them.

As forms arise and pass away, there is a space in which those forms appear.

That said, it should be understood that this kind of stillness is not just referring to a moving thing that has frozen in its tracks; this silence is not merely an absence of noise; this spaciousness is not simply a gap between objects – rather these are figures of speech to indicate qualities of the Dhamma, which is Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed.¹⁴ It is the noumenal, transcendent reality that is the integrative principle underpinning the experience of all phenomena. Dipping back into the realm of theoretical physics for a moment, I feel this timeless, measureless reality is exactly what David Bohm is referring to when he spoke of ‘the implicate order’ and when he wrote:

13. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets, The Dry Salvages V*, ll 201-2, Faber & Faber, (1941).

14. See Appendix, §3 full quotation.

So we are led to propose further that the more comprehensive, deeper, and more inward actuality is neither mind nor body but rather a yet higher-dimensional actuality, which is their common ground and which is of a nature beyond both.¹⁵

Bohm also has some helpful comments to make about the nature of measurement and the immeasurable quality of reality:

Thus in Sanskrit (which has an origin common to the Indo-European language group) there is a word 'matra' meaning 'measure', in the musical sense, which is evidently close to the Greek 'metron'. But then there is another word 'maya' obtained from the same root, which means 'illusion'. This is an extraordinarily significant point. Whereas to Western society, as it derives from the Greeks, measure, with all that this word implies, is the very essence of reality, or at least the key to this essence, in the East measure has now come to be regarded commonly as being in some way false and deceitful. In this view the entire structure and order of forms, proportions, and 'ratios' [the Latin word from which our modern 'reason' is derived] that present themselves to ordinary perception and reason are regarded as a sort of veil, covering the true reality, which cannot be perceived by the senses and of which nothing can be said or thought.¹⁶

15. David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, p 265, Routledge Classics, (1980).

16. David Bohm, *ibid*, p 29.

As the realm of action becomes more apparent as a known quality in the space of the mind, we develop a sense of timelessness as the context of experience. We attune to a present that is undisturbed by movement or by the arising and passing of perceptions, objects, feelings.

We often conceive of the present as an insignificant little line between an infinite past and an infinite future, an unimportant sliver of time. In the context of the 'Big Bang' thirteen billion or so years in the past, and with the future stretching out infinitely ahead, how could this tiny moment we call 'the present' matter? In terms of individual experience, however, the present moment comprises all of time.

Likewise, the mind, awake and aware in the present moment, is everything. Perceptions of past and future, self and other, here and there, are all patterns known in the mind, now, in the timeless present. The world is a world of mind. The degree to which this can be realized, embodied, and fully known is the degree to which the heart can be fully at ease, fully at peace, fully responsive to the flow of perceptions, thoughts, moods, feelings, to the actions of the world, people and things.

Conversely, the unawake mind chases after likes and dislikes. It identifies with self and other, gets caught up in wanting, fearing, hating, hoping. The degree to which the mind is unawake is the degree to which peace is obscured and

inaccessible to the heart. The unawake mind ties itself to the agitated, the turbulent, the divisive.

So we're invited to open our heart to the world and realize the quality of awakened awareness and timeless presence. Even as we go places, take on personæ, engage in activities, and make choices, the mind, the heart, doesn't need to be doing these things in order to be fulfilled, complete or actualized. Fulfilment comes from the mind knowing its own nature. The heart is already the Dhamma, so what more is there to get or to do in order to complete the Dhamma? The only truly desirable thing is to be what we are already.

During each day, as the minutes tick by and the sun rises, peaks and descends, the moon comes and goes, we can explore the feelings of becoming someone, going somewhere, doing something. We can awaken to the stillness within which all movement occurs, hear the silence that permeates all sound, be aware of the space within which all forms take shape. There is movement but nobody going anywhere. There is action, but no 'thing' being done, no 'one' who is doing it. There are choices and decisions, but no person who is deciding. There is the heart, responsive to time, place, situation; there is the ease of peacefulness embodied in awareness.

ROHITASSA

It is quite natural for us as human beings to search for some kind of completion or fulfilment. We steer our lives towards particular goals and various kinds of worldly achievement: possessions, *curricula vitæ*, destinations visited, even retreats attended. But as Ajahn Chah would often say, 'If you're looking for finality in what is endless or for security in that which is insecure, you are bound to be disappointed.'

The Buddhist scriptures tell the story of a *deva* called Rohitassa, who came to see the Buddha one night. He said to the Buddha, 'In my last life I was a yogi and a meditator. I developed great spiritual abilities and made a vow to walk in search of the end of the world. But even though I kept on walking for many years, I never reached the end of the world and died on the journey. Now, having been reborn in the *deva* world, I ask you, "Is it possible to travel to the end of the world, where one is not born, does not age or die?"'

The Buddha replied to Rohitassa:

It is impossible to reach the end of the world by walking; but if you don't reach the end of the world, you won't reach the end of *dukkha*, you won't reach the end of suffering.

(S 2.26)¹⁷

17. See Appendix, §4 for full quotation.

The Buddha then goes on to say:

It is within this fathom-long body, with its thoughts and perceptions, that there is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world. And one who knows the world reaches the end of the world. Having reached the end of the world, they do not hanker after this world or another one.

(IBID)

It's worthy of note that the eminent translator Bhikkhu Bodhi has commented that: 'This pithy utterance of the Buddha ... may well be the most profound proposition in the history of human thought'¹⁸ – and Bhikkhu Bodhi is not one who speaks in a hyperbolic way.

Here the Buddha is equating the world (*loka*) with dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) in direct alignment with the formulation of the Four Noble Truths: there is dissatisfaction (*dukkha*), the origin of dissatisfaction, the cessation of dissatisfaction, and the way leading to the cessation of dissatisfaction.

In his previous life, Rohitassa had thought, 'I am going to walk to the end of the world,' with the aim of reaching the end of the road, the end of everything. Well, just try walking till you reach the horizon. No matter how far you walk, the horizon will retreat, again and again and again. This is an important reflection about the world and the nature of the world.

18. See *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Note §182, p 393, Wisdom Publications, (2000).

In a similar passage, the Buddha is quoted by some of the Sangha members at that time as saying, 'One cannot reach the end of the world by walking, but it is only by reaching the end of the world that one reaches the end of suffering.' The Sangha members asked venerable Ānanda, the Buddha's attendant, to explain this, and Ānanda said, as recounted above:

That whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world, that is called 'the world' in this Dhamma and discipline. And what is it whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world? The eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, and the mind - these are the means whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world.

(S 35.116)¹⁹

Once again, 'The World' is the world of our experience. It is within this very life - within this body and this mind, with its perceptions and thoughts - that we experience the world. Our version of the world is known *here*, originates *here*, and ends *here*, and the way leading to its end is *here*.

When we think about 'the end of the world', we may imagine planet Earth exploding or being swallowed by the sun in a supernova or being crushed when the whole universe collapses. But in Buddhist terminology 'the end of the world' refers to the place where the substantiality of the world

19. See Appendix, §1 for full quotation.

comes to an end. It is within this very awareness of life as we experience it. The world ends *here*, in this awareness.

Now, that might sound a bit mysterious, but the Buddha was very gifted at tweaking a phrase just a little bit to shift the perspective so that it becomes more meaningful on the level of our own experience: 'You can't reach the end of suffering unless you reach the end of the world.' That is the kind of statement that gets your attention.

CONVENIENT FICTIONS

We all seek satisfaction, completion, and wholeness – then we become disappointed because we are seeking these things where they can't be found: in the approval of other people, in the glittering prizes society offers us, in the warmth of relationships, in the achievements of our children, even in tallying the number of hours (or years) we've sat in meditation or the number of ajahns we've visited. Yes, even we meditators can easily look down our noses at 'those poor fools chasing worldly possessions' whilst blithely pursuing equally worldly, superficial goals that have been labelled spiritual. That sort of arrogance is just as misplaced as taking pride in our academic degrees, the beauty of our children or the size of our house. Spiritual materialism is as disappointing as worldly materialism.

In a way, the Buddha's teaching to Rohitassa – that the mind creates the world – is also about seeing the empty, insubstantial nature of the world, or 'my version'

of the world. Things that we experience acquire names and designations. We call this place 'Amaravati' because that's the name Ajahn Sumedho gave it: 'I want to call this place Amaravati: The Deathless Realm.' So we all agree to call it that. Someone who had been a schoolteacher here prior to that would have called this place 'St. Margaret's School'. So really, there's no 'Amaravati' here. That's just a human agreement, a 'convenient fiction'.

When we say 'the world ends' we're talking about recognizing these human agreements, these convenient fictions. Calling this place 'Amaravati' or this day 'Tuesday' are just relative truths, suppositions, determinations, ways of designating things. They're our conditioned, relative, subjective perspective, not the whole story. The mind that clings to this perspective is the mind that creates suffering. And the mind that recognizes this process and lets go of it is the mind that is free of suffering. With this understanding, we stop looking for finality in that which is endless, for security in that which is insecure, for satisfaction in that which cannot satisfy.

NO FOOTING FOR DUALITIES

In the *Kevaddha Sutta* (D 11), the Buddha recounts the story of a meditating monk in whom this question arises in his mind: 'Where is it that the four great elements – earth, water, fire and wind – fade out, cease without remainder, come to an end?' This monk visits the various heavenly realms, asking the *devas* for the answer to his question, finally ascending to the realm of Mahā Brahmā,

the 'All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Maker and Creator of All That Has Been and Shall Be', according to his self ascribed title. But even Mahā Brahmā does not know the answer and says to the monk, 'You are a disciple of the Buddha. Why are you asking me this when you could ask the Master yourself?'

So the monk returns to the earth and asks the Buddha his question. 'Where is it that the four great elements – earth, water, fire and wind – fade out and cease without remainder? Where do they come to an end?' The Buddha replies, 'You are framing the question in the wrong way. Rather than asking where earth, water, fire and wind fade out and cease without remainder, you should have asked, "Where is it that earth, water, fire and wind can find no footing, no landing place?"' The answer is: In the awake mind. Here also long or short, coarse or fine, pure or impure, all dualities can find no footing.' This is the same quality that was described above, awakened knowing, *buddho*. It is also what is meant by the word *vijjā* and the phrase 'seeing with the eye of Dhamma'.

In Pali, in the *Kevaddha Sutta*, this 'awake mind' is described as: '*viññānaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*,' which means 'consciousness that is non-manifesting, limitless and radiant in all directions.' In the mind, the awareness – which is formless, infinite, radiant – this is where earth, water, fire and wind can find no footing.²⁰

Rather than telling him a geographical or celestial place where the world ends, the Buddha points the monk to the awakened awareness, which is where the

20. See Appendix, §5 for full quotation.

world is understood or known, where worldly perceptions and thoughts – long or short, coarse or fine, pure or impure – can't find any footing, can't gain any traction, don't stick, aren't given any value, solidity or meaning. The Buddha said to Rohitassa:

The world's end can never be reached
 By means of travelling [through the world].
 Yet without reaching the world's end
 There is no release from suffering.

Therefore, truly, the world-knower, the wise one,
 Gone to the world's end, fulfiller of the holy life,
 Having known the world's end, at peace,
 Longs not for this world or another.

(S 2.26, BHIKKHU BODHI TRANS.)

By knowing the world, one reaches the end of the world. This is the understanding that sight is just sight, sound is just sound, taste is just taste, smell is just smell, touch is just touch. Thought and feeling, memory and imagination: these things arise and cease. We do not look for a sense of completion or wholeness in the field of perception. Rather, it is by embodying the awake mind that the world is known. This consciousness – which is non-manifesting, limitless, radiant, formless, infinite, all-illuminating – is what the Buddha is pointing to. Or as Ajahn Sumedho has said many times

in his teachings: 'The world happens here' or 'The world happens in the mind.' Reflections such as these help the mind to awaken to its own nature.

BUDDHA-WISDOM AS A REFUGE

Finding the quality of completion or wholeness in our own heart and mind is what the Buddha calls a 'Refuge' or a 'Jewel'. When we speak of 'taking refuge in the Buddha', we are speaking of the capacity we all have to know, to be awake, to experience the present moment. Likewise, a jewel is precious, beautiful, symmetrical, solid, relatively imperishable – a symbol of that which is truly valuable in and of its own nature. In a sense, a jewel embodies those precious aspects of our own nature that are revealed by insight.

Saying 'taking refuge in awareness' or 'being the knowing' may seem hard to grasp. But in this very moment we can experience it directly. There is seeing (colours, shapes, forms); there are sounds (traffic noise, birds, a plane flying overhead, people speaking); there are the feelings of the body (sensations of weight and temperature, the texture of clothing on skin, aches in our legs, back or shoulders); there is smelling, tasting and thinking. Where is all that happening? The world as we know it is fabricated through sight, sound, smell, taste and touch, thinking and language. For instance, when we close our eyes, the visual world disappears. When we open them again, the visual world reappears. It is known 'here', in our own mind.

We may say that our bodies are in the room, but we could just as easily say that the room is in our mind, no? Everything that we know about what we call 'room' or what we call 'home' is known in this mind. This isn't to say that everything is a dream or that our mind invented it from scratch. Instead, it's to say that our version of the world is put together through our particular mind, which has been conditioned by our life experiences, language, feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity. The experiences of seeing, hearing, touching something vary greatly amongst us.

When there is this recognition that the world is happening in the mind, we can then reframe our moment-by-moment experience. When there is the recognition of the world being pieced together as a collection of patterns of consciousness, then to some degree the heart is taking refuge in the quality of knowing, the quality of awareness. At that moment of awakened knowing, the heart recognizes the fabricated nature of experience. There is a letting go, a separation, a disentangling of awareness from the patterns of experience. Aha!

That awareness is not intrinsically limited or coloured or shaped by what is experienced. It is bigger than that, it is more spacious, it is more all-encompassing: 'formless, infinite, radiant'. This terminology describes that quality of awareness, this transcendent knowing, that is undisturbed and unconfused by whatever pattern of experience takes shape within it. This is

the essence of insight meditation – training the heart to embody the quality of awareness, to be able to receive and to know the flow of perceptions – pleasant or painful, interesting or boring, familiar or unfamiliar. Whether we call an experience a sight, a sound, a thought, or a feeling, the heart abides and embodies that quality of awakened knowing; the different patterns of experience arise and pass away within that knowing.

So, in a sense, the essence of insight meditation is cultivating an attitude of non-entanglement. It is not a rejection of the world; instead, it is a letting go of identifying or grasping or entangling with the world.

Ajahn Chah used the image of oil and water. There is the heart which knows and there is that which is known. They are separate, like oil and water. But if you put oil and water together in a bottle and shake it up, for a time it seems like one liquid. That is what we do all the time. We shake up the bottle and the quality of awareness becomes mixed up with our experience of the world: 'I like this, I don't like that. This is mine, that is yours. I am a man, I am a woman. I am young, I am old. I am clever, I am stupid. I am a success, I am a failure.' When we shake up the bottle, there seems to be a solid and dependable 'me' who is having all those experiences.

But as Ajahn Chah would add, if we put the bottle down, we don't have to tell the oil and the water to separate or make them do it somehow. No. They will separate on their own; they are inherently immiscible. In the same way,

awareness, the knowing and the objects of experience separate on their own if we let them. The more we put the bottle down, the more we learn not to identify with what we perceive. We stop taking our own lives and minds personally. Rather, we see the whole field of experience as patterns of nature arising and ceasing, taking shape and dissolving. There is then a freeing of the heart. The qualities of limitlessness, spaciousness, clarity and peaceful awareness become apparent.

The process of meditation is not about acquiring something that we don't yet have, or becoming something that we aren't already. Rather, meditation is taking advantage of the capacity of the mind to awaken, to disentangle and cease identifying with what we are not, to stop looking for satisfaction in what cannot satisfy, to stop wishing for finality in that which is endless, to stop seeking security in the inherently insecure. In that stopping there is the realization of the ultimately precious jewel of the ever-present Dhamma.

THREE PRIMAL QUESTIONS

Most religions have some sort of creation story. ‘In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth,’ so begins the Old Testament of the Bible. It is a natural human tendency to try to figure out how the world began – where we humans came from and how the stars, the sun and the moon all came into being. Different religions and cultures also have equal numbers of stories about the future, trying to provide answers to questions like, ‘Where will we go when we die? If we are well-behaved, will we go to heaven? If we are badly behaved, will we go to hell? What is our ultimate destination?’ Lastly, every human culture and religion also addresses the question: ‘What is the right thing to do? How should I act and make choices in order to live skilfully as part of the human family?’

All this enquiry seems to boil down to three primal questions, about the origin and fate of the human race, that appears to be persistent across many cultures:

- 1) Where do we come from?
- 2) Where are we going?
- 3) What are we supposed to do now?

These sorts of questions have a powerful effect on the way human life is lived and on our individual intentions and actions.

THE HANDFUL OF LEAVES

The Buddha mentioned a creation story a few times in the scriptures but he didn't really make much of it, in terms of a focal point for his message. The mythology of physical creation is not that important in the Buddha's teaching.²¹ He essentially said that we should not be concerned about it. He focused instead on the mind and the experience of the present. He addressed exactly the same pattern of questions but scaled down the field from the cosmic and intangible to the personal and immediate.

When the Buddha was walking through a forest outside of the city of Kosambi, he picked up a handful of leaves and asked, 'What is greater in number, monks, the leaves in my hand or the leaves on all the trees in the forest?' They answered that the number of leaves in his hand were very small, while the number of leaves in the forest was very great. The Buddha then said, 'Even so, the things that I know can be compared to the number of leaves in the forest, while the things that I teach you are comparable to the leaves in my hand' (S 56.31)²².

This principle is echoed in the Buddha's discourse to the monk Mālunkyaputta who had asked the Buddha a number of questions about metaphysical issues.

21. For example, there are a few accounts of how a universal cycle begins in the *Dīgha Nikāya*, such as in the *Aggañña Sutta*; however he also spoke of the indescribability of any first beginning. See Appendix, §6, §7 & §8 for full quotations.

22. See Appendix, §9 for full quotation.

The Buddha, as was his custom, declined to answer any of these and gave an analogy as to why. He said it was as if a soldier had been shot with a poisoned arrow on a battlefield but, when the field surgeon came to help him, he refused treatment until the surgeon found out what was the caste of the man who shot him, what village he came from, what kind of wood the arrow was made of, what bird the fletches came from and so forth... The soldier would have died of his wounds long before the doctor had managed to gather the information, which would have been mostly irrelevant anyway. The point is to get the arrow out and to treat the wound as soon as possible (M 63.5).²³

The Buddha expressly and deliberately limited his teachings to what is directly liberating to the mind, to the heart. On the same occasion he told those assembled with him, 'I have taught you suffering, the origin of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and the way leading to the cessation of suffering. Why? Because it leads to peace and to liberation. That which does not lead to liberation and enlightenment, I do not teach about.' It was a conscious choice, to narrow the focus of his teaching, in order to attend principally to that which is non-speculative and which can genuinely make a difference to an individual's life. When I first came across Buddhism, I thought that his withholding all that he knows was very stingy. I figured there must be some special book, with his secret esoteric teachings on the mechanics of the universe, like Madame

23. See Appendix, §10 for full quotation.

Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine*, but much more comprehensive. However, as time went by, I realized that this was a foolish perspective and that the Buddha was a genius in realizing that it would be unhelpful, unnecessary and too much of a waste of time to explain such things. What truly matters is how the mind works and what we can do in the present moment to harmonize our lives with reality.

So instead of answering those three primal questions about the origin, fate, and meaning of humanity and the material cosmos, he scaled down and limited his teaching to these three questions:

- 1) Where does *dukkha*, the experience of dissatisfaction, originate?
- 2) Can that disharmony, discontent, and dissatisfaction come to an end?
- 3) If so, what can be done to help make that happen?

This is precisely what the teaching of the Four Noble Truths addresses. Rather than providing a large-scale map of the cosmos, the Buddha confines his map to what is tangible, immediate and accessible for us: how disharmony arises and how to get in tune. That's all. To play in an orchestra, we don't have to understand mathematical equations describing every type of vibration within every instrument. Instead, we learn our own instrument, listen to the musicians around us, follow the score and pay attention to the conductor.

It's the same when paying attention to whether or not there is *dukkha*. Am I in tune or am I out of tune? That is essentially all we need to know. We don't have

to define what harmony is because our heart already knows how to recognize it. We don't have to describe *dukkha-nirodha* (the ending of *dukkha*) conceptually or in detail because our heart is already aware of the quality of integration and fulfilment. There is rhythm and centredness, equilibrium and presence. The heart *knows* these qualities in a non-conceptual, intuitive, natural way.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

The Four Noble Truths distill things down to essentials. The First Noble Truth is that there is the experience of *dukkha*. The Second Noble Truth is that there is a cause, an origin of *dukkha*. The Third Noble Truth is that *dukkha* has an ending, it can cease – there can be an ending of discord, disharmony, discontent. The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a way to establish that harmony; the Buddha points to a practical path to be developed.

In respect to the question, 'Where do we come from?' the Buddha teaches instead *dukkha-samudaya*, the origin of *dukkha*. Where does *dukkha* originate? It originates from clinging, from craving – the Second Noble Truth.

That then leads to the Buddha's response to the 'Where are we going?' type of question; that is to say, 'Can dissatisfaction come to an end?' He tells us, 'Yes, indeed it can' – the Third Noble Truth.

Then, in response to the question, 'What should we do now?' the Buddha's answer is to let go of craving, 'When one lets go of craving, this relinquishment

brings about the cessation of *dukkha* (*dukkha-nirodha*).’ To help get us there, he spells out the Noble Eightfold Path – the Fourth Noble Truth.

As the Buddha told the *deva* Rohitassa, you can’t get to the end of the world by walking but unless you get to the end of the world, you can’t get to the end of *dukkha*. The Buddha said that ‘the world’ is to be found in this body, with its perceptions and thoughts, ‘Here is the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.’ The journey happens *here*. If we know the world of our own experience, we see how the quality of discord arises within that world. That very seeing will enable the heart to reach the end of *dukkha*.

DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

When you open the user’s manual for a car or a computer, there is usually a one-page synopsis that describes the basics: where the controls are and how to switch them on and off. The next many pages of the manual go on to provide the details. The Four Noble Truths are the one-page synopsis. The Buddha’s teachings on dependent origination are the detailed explanation, a description of a ‘chain’ of (usually) twelve causally related links through which dissatisfaction (*dukkha*) arises from ignorance (*avijjā*).²⁴ According to dependent origination:

24. See Appendix, §11 for full quotation.

When the mind does not see clearly, this gives rise to the perception of subject and object, a me ‘here’ and the world ‘out there’.

When there is belief in this subject/object duality (‘me and the world’), then the mind imputes a solidity to the objects of the senses: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. The mind that is not fully awake believes its own thoughts. While it might be a strange proposition, consider this: Just because we think something does not mean it is true. You might be saying to yourself, ‘What do you mean, Ajahn?! All my opinions are perfectly correct.’ While this is a common belief, it is an aspect of ignorance, of not seeing clearly. This ignorance then leads us to take our perceptions – of beauty, ugliness, pain, pleasure, and so forth – as absolute truths. The mind believes the sense-world to be solid, accurate and real.

When there is belief in the senses, this leads to the world of *vedanā*. *Vedanā* is usually translated as ‘feelings’, which in this context means pleasant, painful and neutral sensations rather than moods such as happiness, sadness, anger, etc. These sensations are conditioned by belief in the reality and reliability of the senses.

Feelings of ‘pleasant’ or ‘painful’ rapidly turn into ‘I want’ or ‘I hate’. Then ‘I want’ rapidly escalates into ‘I’ve got to ...’. So feelings condition craving (*taṇhā*), which in turn conditions grasping (*upādāna*).

Next, grasping conditions becoming, which means the mind becomes absorbed into the object it is chasing or, in the case of aversion, the object it is trying

to get rid of. The mind decides either ‘I’ve got to get more of’ whatever is bringing me so much pleasure or ‘I’ve got to get rid of’ whatever is bringing me so much discomfort.

Becoming then conditions birth, the point of no return, and finally *dukkha*. We suffer when we are unable to obtain the object we are chasing or unable to escape the object we are averse to. And even if we do obtain the object of our desire, the gratification will be only momentary, usually followed by the feeling ‘that wasn’t really worth it’ or ‘that wasn’t quite good enough so I need another one’ or indeed, ‘that was great! I need another one!’

It is ignorance (not seeing clearly) that leads the mind to buy into the thought ‘I’ve got to ...’, not understanding that the ‘I’ve got to ...’ feeling can never be permanently satisfied. Beginning with ignorance, this process goes on and on. However, when the mind *does* see clearly and is not in the grip of ignorance, then *dukkha* will cease. We still experience the body and senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking) and feelings (pleasant, unpleasant, neutral). All of that operates in the same way. But when there is wakefulness and awareness, the recognition arises ‘This is liking.’ That leads to, ‘Just because I like something, I do not have to chase after it. Just because I dislike something, I do not have to contend against it or turn it into a problem.’ Liking is just liking; disliking is just disliking. In this understanding, there is peace, spaciousness,

and clarity. We are not inert, we still make choices. But those choices are based on mindfulness and wisdom rather than on reactivity.

FEELINGS - TO RESPOND OR TO REACT?

The more the qualities of awareness, alertness and clarity are established, the more there is the ability to respond to life rather than to react. That is a big difference.

Much of the process of liberation – of ending *dukkha* and realizing life's fulfilment – hinges on how the mind relates to the realm of *vedanā*, the feelings/ perceptions of pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. The Buddha names *taṇhā* (craving) as the cause of *dukkha*. Within the chain of dependent origination, the mind/body complex inherently experiences feelings. Feelings can then lead either to craving or not craving. If the 'craving' bridge is crossed there will be trouble but, if there is sufficient wisdom and strong mindfulness, then the 'craving' bridge is not crossed and there is no trouble. Even though the mind/body complex experiences feelings, the feelings do not condition craving.

The Four Noble Truths hinge on that link between craving and *dukkha*. Once craving has arisen, we very quickly experience dissatisfaction. But if craving is not formed, we live very contentedly. We still see, hear, smell, taste and touch. We function in the world, but we do not live in a reactive, compulsive way; rather, we live in a responsive way.

How many of us have had the experience of seeing something so beautiful, so interesting, so lovely that it drove us to crave it? And then, when we became so caught up and determined to ‘get it’, we didn’t actually enjoy the experience itself? With wisdom, we can experience something we really like – ‘Ah! So delicious. Absolutely beautiful!’ – and enjoy it without trying to own it or keep it.

LIVING IN ETERNITY'S SUNRISE

He who binds to himself a joy
 Does the wingèd life destroy,
 But he who kisses the joy as it flies
 Lives in eternity's sunrise.

WILLIAM BLAKE, *ETERNITY*²⁵

When we bind to ourselves a joy – ‘Yes! This is it, the perfect place. I am not going to let anyone else get it!’ – then we destroy the ‘wingèd life’, so precious, so perfect. Or as in John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, when Lenny loves the puppy so much that it gets crushed by his too-tight, too-strong hug – life gets destroyed when we hold on too fiercely, too possessively.

‘But he who kisses the joy as it flies’ – instead, can we say, ‘Yes. This is delightful but I do not have to try and keep it. I don’t have to make it *mine*. I don’t have to

25. William Blake, *Notebook*, (c. 1793).

ever have it again... aha!' Of course, it takes a lot of effort and time and energy to learn how to kiss the joy as it flies. Our habits are incredibly strong.

With the practice of meditation, the Buddha gives us tools and encourages us to learn to know the world of feeling in a clear and mindful way, how to respond rather than to react. When we notice that we like something, we can reflect, 'This is liking.' We can pick it up and follow it if appropriate, or we can *not* pick it up and *not* follow it if appropriate. Similarly, if something is painful or awkward or difficult, we do not need to feel burdened or stressed or bothered by its presence. We can simply recognize: 'Oh, that is the unwanted, the painful' and then respond to it accordingly, as needed.

When we begin to use this approach – of understanding the nature of mind and getting a perspective on it – we see a huge difference in our lives. The attitude of mind makes all the difference. We are able to experience 'liking' without 'chasing after' and 'disliking' without 'getting rid of'. Life becomes a lot more spacious. We are much more at ease, not continually searching for happiness by rearranging our circumstances.

Within the monastic tradition, the *dhutaṅgas*, or austere practices, are allowed by the Buddha as another tool to challenge the mind's dependency on food, sleep, comfort, personal space, property – all those deep-tissue, reptilian brain areas. They are not obligatory practices for the monastic community; they're for those who want to 'up the ante', to raise the stakes a little bit. Some of the

thirteen *dhutaṅgas* include not lying down to sleep, eating at only one time during the day or living exclusively on what's been received in one's bowl during the alms-round through the village. These practices are all designed as a deliberate way to challenge the mind; not to torture oneself but to help the heart become more robust. I did the practice of not lying down for about three years and discovered that, after a time, no comfort was possible. When everything is uncomfortable, one eventually stops trying to get comfortable. There is a wonderful kind of peacefulness in that letting go.

I'm certainly not expecting the lay community to adopt this practice but it points to the fact that we are all adaptable in attitude. Sometimes we forget that. You might never take a vow not to lie down for a week, let alone a year or more, but you may someday find yourself stuck on a crowded train, hot and squashed, shoulder-to-shoulder with a couple of hundred strangers. You could stand there and complain, grumble, and moan; or you could realize, 'I can stand here and *not* suffer. Wow!' You could say to yourself, 'Well, here we are, this is what's happening right now, these are the feelings of discomfort.' If we adapt our attitude, then we can be content and free in all circumstances. What a fine and wonderful thing that is.

PEACE DOES NOT MEAN PASSIVITY

The Buddha did not equate peacefulness with passivity. Being content or adaptable in all circumstances does not mean that we don't make the effort to improve things when we can. It's not about being numb to social injustice or not going to the student counsellor when we are overburdened with studies. When we cut our leg and are bleeding we don't just say, 'Oh, that's the sensation of blood running down my leg.' No, we get that leg in the air, call the doctor, get to Accident and Emergency and have it patched up. We're not foolish. Our capacity to act and the fact of making a choice are part of the way things are.

That said, at other times when there is nothing that can be done – when we're stuck standing up on a crowded train or feeling hungry or thirsty and haven't got anything to eat or drink – we can establish the attitude of mind that says, 'OK, this is fine too.' Similarly, when things are really delightful, when we're relaxing along the riverbank under the weeping willows, enjoying a picnic with good friends, we can remember not to hang on to this 'perfect' moment, not to make anything special out of it. We can simply enjoy it as it is; I see the patterns of early autumn sunshine rippling across the wisteria, across my ceiling, reflected from the fountain in the pond. It's beautiful to the eye and mind. It's like *this*; no need to make anything of it.

This shift of attitude enables us to deal with difficulty. Our practice teaches us adaptability and enables the development of a robust nature that is peaceful

in all the different circumstances we encounter. Happiness is not tied to being comfortable or to things going our way. When they do, that's sweet and delightful, but when they don't, that's quite all right, too.

We have strong impulses: we desire things, we are annoyed by things, we are afraid of things. Our minds are conditioned by instinctual yearnings and urges. We feel strong emotions. When we are attracted to someone, we think, 'Oh! That person's really attractive.' When we are repelled by someone, we think, 'Oh! They're awful.' These are not just thoughts; there is an emotional surge accompanied by physiological changes. Therefore, the capacity to recognize, 'This is just my mind wanting or not wanting, my mind fearing, my mind hoping,' gives us a perspective on our emotional nature. I do this kind of practice myself a lot and I encourage others in it as well.

THE DOPAMINE FLUSH

There is a regular visitor to Amaravati Monastery who loves the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. He once said to me, 'Listening to it, I have such a wonderful feeling. Bach's music is so beautiful, so balanced and precise, so perfectly arranged. It's absolutely exquisite. It is perfect, it is not *dukkha*.' Although he has great faith in the Buddha's teaching, he professed his conviction that Bach's music is a condition that is completely satisfactory – it is not *dukkha*.

I'd like to propose that with Bach, as well as with every other experience that delights, it's not actually the music that we love, it's the place the music takes us to. What we love is the mind-state that arises with the 'exquisite' experience. The quality of beauty depends on the mind that is aware, the subject, not solely on the object of that awareness.

The same principle applies with respect to all sensory pleasures. Take, for example, the taste of our favourite foods. I'd suggest we don't actually like the food but that we like the feeling which arises in the mind when the taste is there. The same is true with the other senses. What we really love are the feelings that arise when we see pleasing physical forms, hear melodious sounds, taste delicious flavours, or smell exquisite fragrances. 'The perfect rose in its freshly opened glory. Ah! What a fragrance.' We don't actually like the smell – even though, gentle reader, you might declare, 'Yes I *do!*' – I'd like to suggest that, phenomenologically speaking, we like the mind-state that arises from the experience. To make it even more prosaic, in terms of neurophysiology, we love the dopamine flush that happens when we experience something that our brain is programmed to 'like'.

I would propose that this is a principle that it is extremely important to reflect on, to examine. When we say, 'I love that shape, that fragrance, that food,' challenge that idea. Is it the food? Or is it the mind-state? Is it that image? That face? Or is it the feeling that arises in the mind when that face

is seen? Is it getting rid of that painful experience? Or is it the feeling that arises in the mind when that irritant is gone? What is actually going on? How does that work?

The answers may be radically disappointing, to our ego-centred thinking at least, because our energies are often heavily invested in getting certain objects or opposing others, acquiring certain experiences and avoiding others and ascribing value accordingly.

In addition, this process does not solely relate to pleasant and unpleasant sense contacts; if it is explored a little more deeply it can be seen to relate to the inner glow of achievement when we have succeeded at something, and to the bitter desolation that comes with a perceived failure. We are glad, proud or pleased about such accomplishments when they are positive – the ego feels validated by achieving particular results. Therefore an insight such as ‘This is just a dopamine flush!’ challenges the value system on which our self-view is based. It can feel frustrating or disappointing, taking the wind out of our sails.

It could be that a lot of things we have invested years of love or hate in have now been devalued by reflecting in this way, that it was ‘just the dopamine flush’ we loved. With wisdom this shift of view can be appreciated with a wry smile and a sense of relief, an unburdening: ‘How could I have wasted so much time and energy on something that was really so circumstantial? I didn’t really care about that issue, I just liked being indignant!’

How many millions of pounds get spent annually pursuing a specific look, a long-term hobby or following a sports team? Certainly there is the gratification (*assāda*) that comes with the affirmation of belonging and participation in an activity or a group, but its partner is the inevitable downside (*ādīnava*) that eventually disappoints us, because the team lost, the fashion changed or we can no longer sculpt with precision since our hands are shaking. The blessing comes with the escape (*nissarana*) that arises on account of this change of view (e.g. at M 102.25). We realize we were a big fish but it was a very small pond. Those times of gratification were indeed sweet but it was just that much – that’s all. What remains is the peace of relief, *dukkha-nirodha*.

From an ego-centred perspective we might feel that, in such instances, the Dhamma has ruined our life – popped our bubble – but, with wisdom, it is realized that the blame for any suffering really lies with self-view.

Self-view leads to frustration and disappointment. The actual pleasure that the brain experiences is just a dopamine flush – that’s all it is. But self-view leads to the mind articulating that flush in a self-referencing way: ‘I’m going to keep that one. I’m fond of that. That is my favourite.’ In that same breath, wisdom can instead recognize, ‘That is a feeling. That is a pattern. That is a chemical reaction in the brain.’

Perhaps this sounds too mechanistic. ‘Are you saying that the joy I feel when I see my beloved garden – my precious space that I have cherished and worked

on for so many years – is just a dopamine flush? How dare you?! ‘The heartfelt pride I feel when surveying the shelf of my collected writings – you are calling that a chemical reaction?! Who do you think you are?’

When such a thought arises, notice also how the charge that arises from the ‘How dare you?!’ feeling can also be enjoyable. It too can be viewed in the same way. Righteous indignation can be very invigorating but it’s also deeply conducive to self-view. It’s not a coincidence that the media pays more attention to the controversial politicians, flamboyant or unstable film stars, outrageous sports personalities – the ones we love to hate. The dopamine flush they arouse sells products and papers – ‘If it bleeds, it leads’ – it’s the engine of clickbait.

If we can understand the experiences of liking and disliking in this way, then we can save ourselves a lot of grief and make ourselves much more effective in the world. Don’t just take my word for it; explore it for yourself.

KNOWING HOW THE MIND WORKS

The Buddha teaches us to understand that the world is *here*, in the mind, and this teaching is helpful in terms of the development of mindfulness. In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the ‘Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness’ (D 22, M 10) the third foundation of mindfulness (*cittānupassana*) points to the mind and its moods. The mind can be full of anger, and it can know, ‘This is an angry feeling.’ Or the mind can be free of anger, and it can know, ‘The mind is free

of anger.’ The mind can be full of agitation, and it can know, ‘The mind is agitated.’ Or the mind can be free of agitation, and it can know, ‘The mind is free of agitation.’²⁶

That which knows anger isn’t angry. That which knows agitation isn’t agitated. That which is aware of experiences is not tied up with them. There is a freedom, a lack of entanglement. This is the development of mindfulness. This is a particularly helpful teaching to cultivate and understand. A great blessing comes from knowing how the mind works. This is the way of real happiness, real freedom.

With mindfulness, in our best moments, we can recognize an impulse as it takes shape; for example, the thought arises, ‘That’s outrageous! That’s unacceptable!’ If we feel such negativity and intolerance, how do we then ‘tolerate’ that intolerance? The most helpful approach is to look directly at our own intolerance and reflect on it with the attitude, ‘OK, a strong emotion has come into being, it’s the “that’s unacceptable!” feeling.’ That energy can then be known directly, can be felt and understood. ‘I have a body and a mind, and impulses arise. Impulses can be recognized rather than suppressed. They can be known but they don’t have to be followed.’

In developing this more skilful attitude, this disentanglement, it helps to pause for a moment, to take half a second to recognize the feeling – ‘Oh! That’s a

26. See Appendix, §12 for full quotation.

strong one!’ We give ourselves a bit of space around the feeling before we come out with a comment or before we jump in. That’s often all that’s needed. It doesn’t have to be a complicated approach; it’s just knowing our own feeling of intolerance, seeing that it’s natural, and remembering we have a choice to follow it or not. When we give ourselves space, we can relate to our feelings skilfully and we find we can give that same kind of space to others.

Next, we can reflect, ‘Now that the “That’s unacceptable!” impulse has arisen and is known, what is the best way of responding? Is there a way to communicate what is felt so that it can be received?’ Communication depends on a transmitter and a receiver. If there is just a transmission, a proclamation, and the receiver is switched off there will be no communication. So, in order to have benefit, we have to consider how to address a feeling of indignation in such a way that the other person will be able to hear what is being said, to receive it.

When there is this kind of wise reflection, we usually find ourselves much more able to communicate effectively with others – and sometimes it doesn’t even require words. When someone expresses themselves in a way that is ‘unacceptable’, we can say to ourselves, ‘If they want to carry around that attitude, that’s their business. I don’t have to make it my mission to stop them thinking that way. I don’t see things quite that way myself, but how you think about things is totally your business.’ When we give somebody that kind of

space they're pushing against an open door, and their attitude can more easily change for the better. Whereas if we respond, 'You can't think like that! That's totally wrong! How dare you!' then we're giving them something to push against and we'll have a fight on our hands.

When we give someone space, not in a condescending, patronizing way but in a sincere way, that often changes the dynamic. The person may gain more perspective on what they're thinking, what they're carrying around within themselves. Not always; it can take a long time. But that extra little bit of spaciousness is a gift to others and to ourselves.

THE TERROR OF UNDEFINED BEING

If we explore the nature of experiencing any phenomenon, we may notice that when the feeling of identity arises – a 'me' who is frightened, a 'me' who is in love, a 'me' who has a problem to solve – something in the heart 'likes' that feeling. Even in an uncomfortable state such as anger or fear, the feeling of 'I am', of a defined being, is something the mind locks onto and relishes. A feeling of deep gratification arises even if the experience is, on its surface, ostensibly 'unwanted', like a problem, a difficulty, or a struggle. Something in the heart says, 'Phew! Now I've got something to *be!*'

Whether it is in relation to sense pleasures, excitement, aversion, indignation, fear, doubt or bewilderment, the mind works in the same way. It may be that

we get a thrill from transgression, doing something we are not supposed to. It may be that we feel most alive when we are afraid of being caught or when we are angry with someone, or when we are in a state of jealousy, or simply complaining. On the surface these might seem to be unappealing states – who would want to feel that way? – but the fact is that these are not uncommon experiences. Some people make a career (or at least a lifestyle) out of finding fault with others, being enraged about injustices, or hating themselves for an unforgivable wrongdoing or pursuing vengeance for a perceived wrong.

The mind tries to find a way of sustaining, feeding or repeating that feeling of defined being. You might wonder, ‘Why do I keep getting into arguments?’ or ‘Why do I keep finding things to worry about?’ From having watched my own mind, I would say it is because of that sense of defined being. People often habitually fight and complain because they feel most alive when they are letting somebody have it. They look for an argument just so they can sustain that thrill. We may constantly put ourselves into certain situations because that’s when we feel most alive.

Here is an example that may be familiar: You are wrapped up in some kind of task and when you finally complete it, there is a moment of relaxation. You plunk yourself down on the sofa and say, ‘Thank goodness that’s done!’ But after a few seconds a deep disquiet arises and you start looking for something new to do, or someone new to be, or something to exist in relationship to. You

then realize that you have other problems or tasks to tackle – ‘That’s right, I’ve got ten emails to answer’ or ‘I’ve got that lawsuit with my neighbours!’ – and a somewhat bizarre feeling of relief arises. The ‘pleasure’ chemical in the brain gets released. ‘Ahhh! Fantastic! I have a problem. I have another genuine *thing* to worry about – there’s a *me* and a *thing* for that to push against. Phew.’ When we look closely, we may discover that what we are terrified of is undefined being. We feel we need to *be* something.

In terms of wanting this sense of defined being, the more unsatisfiable the aim, the better. A love that can never be requited, something broken that can never be repaired, a goal that’s always just out of reach – these are experiences we can get really obsessed with. We feel a perverse relief in this because we are guaranteed to always have a goal that can never be reached. Having that goal is enough to define us and, if it is unobtainable, we will never be betrayed by that yawning chasm of ‘so-what?’ As Marilyn Monroe sang in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, ‘When you get what you want, you don’t want it anymore./ If I gave you the moon, you’d be bored with it soon.’

For myself, I have found it very interesting and liberating to look at my various obsessions and fears. I spent a huge amount of my life being worried. I was an Olympic-class worrier. It was so normal to me, I didn’t even realize I was doing it. I only later realized that being worried was something I did to make myself

feel like I was someone, that a worried ‘me’ was much more desirable than an undefined ‘me’. This was a big revelation.

So, examine your mind, the field of experience – the things you fear, the things you hate, the things you love, the things you think you are. Test your mind to see if what I have been saying has any validity or not. Notice the effect of that examination; what is the value of that exploring? How does it change the way the mind relates to sounds, sights, tastes, ideas, memories, fears, visions, obsessions, unrequitable loves, unforgivable wrongs?

Maybe there’s a particular obsession that has been precious to you but, when the grip on it is released, the heart is instead encouraged to delight in that undefined quality. With that relaxation the heart says, ‘Oh! What a relief!’ Allow that change into the heart. See what a difference it makes, because that kind of spacious relief is completely different from the superficial gratification that comes with clamping onto some defined sense of being. It is the profound relief of the heart free of grasping, free of identification with anything – natural, limitless, selfless, bright, *viññānaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbato pabhaṃ*. You may discover that in a heart free of such obsessions and self-view the world is a lot more spacious.

THE DISCOURSE ON 'NOT-SELF'

The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, or the 'Discourse on Not-self' (S 22.59), is one of the most helpful and significant teachings in the entire Pali Canon. In a way, it encapsulates the development of wisdom according to the Buddha's approach. Traditionally, this teaching is considered the second of the Buddha's discourses, following his first teaching on the Middle Way and the Four Noble Truths. The result of the first teaching was that one of the Buddha's five former companions entered the stream of enlightenment, but the result of his second discourse was that all five of them achieved full, complete enlightenment. This was a deeply significant moment in Buddhist history, and it prefigures the centrality of this teaching in the centuries that have come after.

A bit of the back story: These five companions had been fellow ascetics with the Bodhisatta Gotama before he became the Buddha. They had all been practising self-mortification, eating very little food, enduring various kinds of painful, self-imposed austerities as a way of developing spiritual strength. But the Bodhisatta eventually went off on his own, where he realized that enduring the limit of pain a human can experience (he had reached the verge of death) was not in itself liberating. He thought there must be another way to enlightenment and ended his austerities, eating ordinary food again and living in such a way as to restore his strength. The Bodhisatta followed his insight and

intuition, discovered what is known as the ‘Middle Way’, and realized full and complete enlightenment.

He decided to return to his five companions to introduce them to the truth he had awakened to. When they saw him approaching, they thought, ‘Gotama used to be so tough. Now he has gone soft and is eating again. What a scoundrel!’ But as he got closer, they became impressed with his demeanour. ‘Something has changed about our friend Gotama. He is not the same as he used to be. He is very peaceful, very bright and very confident!’ When he gave them the teaching on the Four Noble Truths, one of them, Koṇḍañña, understood what he was talking about and realized the initial stage of awakening, Stream Entry. The others thought, ‘Oh, it looks like Koṇḍañña has got the point and seems greatly benefitted by that. Maybe we should keep listening.’ So the Buddha continued with what’s been passed down to us as the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*.

The quality of *anattā* (not-self) is the central aspect of this teaching. The discourse describes the essence of mind training, particularly the use of insight meditation. Rather than making a declaration – ‘This is the truth and you should believe me’ – the Buddha uses an analytical method to help his five companions arrive at the same insight he realized. In this discourse, he walks us through a way of exploring our own experience of body and mind.

He starts off by saying that material form (*rūpa*) is not-self. If material form were self, then it wouldn’t lead to affliction. But because material form is not-

self, it *does* lead to affliction. The principle here is that if something were ‘self’ (*attā*), then it would be blissful, reliable and stable; but since form is *not* blissful, reliable or stable then it is necessarily not-self. Then the Buddha repeats this statement for each of the five divisions of experience (*khandhas*). ‘Feeling (*vedanā*) is not-self. If feeling were self, it wouldn’t lead to affliction and it would obey our commands. Perception (*saññā*) is not-self ... Mental formations (*saṅkhārā*) are not-self ... Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is not-self.’

If our knee is aching, we can’t command our knee, ‘Stop aching!’ and expect the painful feeling to go away. Or if we’re feeling angry when someone cuts us off in traffic, we can’t simply command our mind, ‘Be happy!’ and expect that afflictive emotion to magically disappear. If our bodies and minds were completely ‘self’, they wouldn’t lead to any kind of affliction, they would not be disappointing or unsatisfying. They would be reliable and would respond to our personal will. But as we all know, that’s not the way it is.

In the discourse, the Buddha follows up by asking his friends, ‘Is the body, material form in a state of change (*anicca*)?’ ‘Yes, it is’, they answer. He then asks, ‘Can that which is changing be permanently satisfying (*sukha*), or is it unsatisfying (*dukkha*)?’ They respond, ‘It is unsatisfying.’ Finally, the Buddha asks them whether it is accurate to say of something that is in a state of change and unsatisfying that, ‘This is me, this is what I am, this is myself.’ ‘No, it is not,’ they reply. Again, if something were *attā* (a true self), it would be permanent,

reliable, and blissful. The Buddha asks the same questions with each of the five groups of experience: material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. ‘Is it in a state of change or not? If it is changing, is it satisfying or unsatisfying? If something is changing and unsatisfying, can it be said to be who and what we are?’

The Buddha is helping his five companions (and us) by using exploration to look at our habits of mind: ‘This is *my* body. These are *my* feelings. These are *my* thoughts. *I* am feeling warm. *I* am feeling hungry. *I* remember. *I* think. *I* want. *I* don’t want. *I* like. *I* don’t like.’ The Buddha is pointing to those feelings of ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘mine’ and encouraging us to examine them. When we make statements involving ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’, are they true? Is that ‘I’ substantial? Is it something solid and reliable? Is it dependable? In teaching *anattā*, the Buddha is not giving us something to believe in, he is not making a declaration. Rather he is helping us to walk through the field of our experiences so we can explore for ourselves.²⁷

THE WAY OF ANALYSIS

We look for satisfaction in the sense of self. But that ‘self’ is not really who and what we are; it can’t be permanently satisfying. When we say something is *dukkha*, or unsatisfactory, that doesn’t necessarily mean it is painful or unpleasant or that there is something ugly about it. *Dukkha* is a subtler term.

27. See Appendix, §13 for full quotation.

It is easy to understand how something unpleasant, like a sore knee, can be *dukkha*. But how can something beautiful, like the music of Bach, be unsatisfying or unpleasant? Well, for one thing, when we begin to lose our hearing, that change – the new reality that Bach’s lovely music is no longer accessible to us – can become a cause of distress. As we chant at the monastery, ‘All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.’ Clinging to experience as ‘I’, ‘me’ or ‘mine’ is a real source of *dukkha*.

There is a famous story in the Forest Tradition from the life of Ajahn Mahā Boowa, a contemporary of our teacher, Ajahn Chah. When Ajahn Mahā Boowa was a young monk, he trained under Venerable Ajahn Mun. Back in those days, when there weren’t so many permanent forest monasteries in Thailand, monks would gather around a teacher to receive instructions for a period of time, and then they would go off by themselves and practise meditation in the wilderness. A few months later they would take to their wanderings again, find where the teacher was now living, and check in with them to assess how they were progressing.

After receiving teachings from Ajahn Mun, the young Ajahn Mahā Boowa went off into the jungle for a few weeks or months. He was very keen and determined, and he was able to develop extremely refined, very bright and deep states of concentration. He became quite pleased with himself, thinking,

‘Previously I was a study monk. I’ve only been meditating intensively for a little while and already my mind is able to absorb into profound and wholesome states. I should go tell the teacher.’

So he went back to see Ajahn Mun, expecting the Ajahn to say something like, ‘Well done, lad, well done! You’ve only been doing this for a few months and you’ve already really cracked it.’ To the young monk’s surprise, Ajahn Mun said, ‘Don’t waste your time with all that stuff. Those mind-states may be pleasant but they don’t lead to liberation. It would be far more useful to reduce the degree of focus and sustain your concentration at the level of watching the arising and passing of thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Otherwise, you will just get lost in those blissful states. They will become your favourite abiding places and you will never develop any wisdom.’

The young Ajahn Mahā Boowa famously took exception to this. ‘No, you are wrong! These states are beautiful, wholesome, bright and blissful. There can’t be anything wrong with them.’ According to the stories the argument waxed hot. All around the monastery in that little forest you could hear Ajahn Mun and the young Ajahn Mahā Boowa going at it at full volume, so all the other monks made themselves scarce.

Ajahn Mahā Boowa refused to take his teacher’s advice and went off by himself again to pursue those deep meditative states. But something about the chemistry of having argued with his beloved and revered teacher had caused

an obstruction in his mind. No matter how hard he tried, he wasn't able to get his mind back into those beautiful and blissful states. They were lost to him. Years later, Ajahn Mahā Boowa commented, 'If anyone other than Ajahn Mun had been responsible for depriving me of those states, I would have killed him.' Clinging to those beautiful, wonderful, wholesome, bright states as 'mine' had become the cause of homicidal feelings in the young monk. Now that's what I call *dukkha!*

There is no place in the teachings on not-self where the Buddha says, 'The *real* self is *this*. What you *really* are is *that*'; interestingly there is also no place where he states categorically that, 'There is no self' either. Instead, he offers a way of analysis based on observing how we identify with experience, using a process of elimination based on inarguable knowledge, encouraging us to be like a spiritual Sherlock Holmes: 'When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains ... must be the truth.'²⁸ Most significantly, he teaches, if we stop identifying with what we are *not*, then what is real will become apparent. When the mind awakens to the Dhamma, the ultimate reality, it is liberated – it is Dhamma knowing its own nature.

The last lines of the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* describe how the Buddha's five companions heard his teaching and understood it. 'Thus spoke the Blessed One. Delighted, the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced. Moreover, while this

28. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Sign of the Four*, Spencer Blackett, (1890).

discourse was being delivered, the minds of the five bhikkhus were freed from the defilements.’ Hearing the discourse on the characteristic of not-self, they became fully enlightened, their hearts were liberated. That is the result of the teaching on *anattā*.

The Buddha presented this analysis in various Suttas throughout his many years of teaching. He taught that the main obstruction to liberation was buying into that ‘I-me-mine’ feeling – in its coarse form this is called ‘self-view’ (*sakkaya-ditt̥hi*) and, in its refined form, ‘conceit’ (*māna*). He pointed to this basic method for developing insight and wisdom: recognizing the ‘I-me-mine’ feeling in order to see its empty nature, to let go of it, and to allow the mind to awaken to its own nature.

Of course, if we say ‘I am at peace’ or ‘I am free from clinging,’ the presence of an unchallenged ‘I’ declares that the clinging is still there (M 102.23-4). We must then ask, ‘Who is it that is without clinging? Who is it that has this peaceful feeling? Is there a person that this feeling belongs to?’ In this method of analysis and exploration, the more clearly the mind knows and understands that feeling of ‘I’ as a convenient fiction, the more it can let go, the more the heart can be genuinely liberated. This is not a matter of merely understanding the concept of ‘I’. Wisdom (*paññā*) refers to a specific, transcendent way of seeing things.

EMPTINESS - THE 'LUMP OF FOAM'

The Buddha teaches us how to look skilfully at the body, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, sensations. For example, we can say, 'There is a sound.' Then, when we reflect further, we can ask, 'Who is the "I" who is understanding these words? Does that sound have an owner? What is the "I" that hears it?' Or we can ask, 'When I feel the weight of my body, what is the "I" that experiences the feeling? What qualities does that "I" have? Is it tall or short? Large or small? And with respect to the idea of "my" body, what is it that owns anything?'

Usually, the mind invests feelings with solidity. When we think, 'This is good' or 'This is awful,' those feelings seem so genuine. But when we use meditation to explore the nature of experience, we begin to see the insubstantiality of feelings. For instance, when we look at 'liking' something, we see it is just an experience, a pattern of consciousness. There is experiencing – shape, form, taste, memory, colour – but there is no essence, no fundamental substance, and no 'me' that is truly the experiencer.

In the Southern Buddhist teachings, when the Buddha talks about this quality of 'emptiness' (*suññatā*), he usually means 'empty of self and what belongs to a self'. In the 'Lump of Foam' Sutta (S 22.95), the Buddha describes the five divisions of experience, the five *khandhas*, in terms of their empty qualities. In this Sutta, he was sitting beside the River Ganges with members of the Sangha. As a lump of foam floated by, he said, 'Do you see that lump of foam floating on

the river? *Rūpa* (form) is just like that lump of foam. There is a shape and a form, but there is no substance.’ He went on to compare *vedanā* (feeling) to a bubble that forms when a drop of rain strikes a puddle – it appears for a moment and then vanishes. *Saññā* (perception) is like a mirage in the desert – it shimmers in the air but it has no essence. *Saṅkhārā* (thoughts, feelings, emotions, memories, ideas, intentions) are like the trunk of a banana tree – when the leaves are peeled back layer by layer, like an onion, there is no essence, no core, no heartwood to be found. *Viññāṇa* (discriminative consciousness) is like a conjurer performing a trick – something magical seems to be happening but it is just the speed and dexterity of the conjurer’s hands creating an appearance. Nothing genuinely magical has happened.²⁹

Some people may not understand the Buddha’s teachings as he meant them to be appreciated. They may dislike this teaching on the nature of experience as ‘empty’, thinking it will rob them of joy in life. If this is the case, I suggest looking at this disliking, rejection itself as a pattern of experience to be explored. Disliking takes shape in a certain way and leads to certain thoughts, like, ‘Bad. Wrong. It shouldn’t be this way.’ Just as the mind labels a certain shape a ‘branch’ or a certain sound a ‘Bach sonata’, the mind bestows a particular meaning to concepts and experiences.

Similarly, insight into not-self and emptiness is not meant to belittle the moral quality of actions that cause pain, difficulty or distress for people. We cannot

29. See Appendix, §14 for full quotation.

just do as we please to people and then say, ‘If you don’t like it, tough luck, it’s all empty. Just get over your attachment to yourself and your disliking.’ That would be called ‘a wrong grasping’ of not-self and emptiness. Instead, we can recognize that the way we experience things is not the same as the way others experience things. We might be able to recognize a painful experience as empty, whereas somebody else might find that experience genuinely painful, difficult or distressing. With this understanding, we can cultivate a compassionate wish to reduce the level of suffering or difficulty that we and all other beings experience.

This particular point is another outcome of the teaching mentioned above in the Introduction (S 35.116), and the phenomenological insight that all we have ever known throughout our entire life is our mind’s representation of the world. We can’t really know *the* world. We can only know the world *as this mind represents it*. When this is appreciated then it is recognized that others will *necessarily* see the world differently – in effect it is not the same world – therefore wisdom inclines the heart to be compassionate and to make space for these many and various ways in which other beings experience their version of reality.

Another way we can go astray is to become enamoured solely with the *idea* of these teachings. We can get very excited about concepts – ‘Form is like a lump of foam, feeling is like a water bubble, perceptions are like a mirage. Yeah!

That's great! I understand it!' But without a deeper comprehension, when we are faced with challenges, the teachings seem to disappear. There are certain experiences we find easy to see as empty and not-self, and there are other experiences that seem very solid, real and important. It is helpful, then, not to let these Buddhist principles become merely inspiring ideas but to put them into practice so as to explore the areas where they are difficult to apply: 'Why did I just feel offended? What just touched a raw nerve?' Minute by minute, day by day, we bring attention to the areas where we get really stuck.

'WHO AM I?'

In the *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, the Buddha taught us to consciously use the framework of the five divisions of experience (the *khandhas*) as a tool for reflection, to bring attention to uncertainty, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. We use this tool to challenge the habits of self-creation and to meet and receive the flow of experience. We tend to think, 'I am the body. I am the personality. This is my story. This is what I am. This is all that I am.' Such beliefs are usefully explored and countered using the teachings on *anattā*.

One of the ways we can cultivate this exploration, this change of view, is to ask questions in meditation. In the space of the mind, when the attention is quite steady and focused, a question can be placed. When we hear a sound, we can ask, 'Who is it that hears?' When we feel a sensation in the body, we can ask,

‘To whom does this feeling belong?’ Or with memories, ‘Who remembers? Does this memory have an owner? What is it that recalls and labels this “mine”?’

When we ask questions like this, we are not looking for explicit, verbal answers. In fact, there aren’t any ‘right’ verbal or conceptual answers. Rather, posing these questions in a sincere and direct way is intended to illuminate the presumptions the mind makes. In that moment of posing the question, ‘Who knows this experience?’ something in the heart knows that the mind is not a person, that the awareness isn’t an individual. This awareness doesn’t have an age, gender or nationality. The labels we give ourselves – ‘I am a man, I am a woman, I am English, I am Sri Lankan, I am old, I am young, I am healthy, I am sick’ – are all just markers, conventional designations, convenient fictions. While the mind may identify with such characteristics, we come to see them as habits of mind but not the *essence* of mind. This mind, this heart is not a person, not an individual, not an ‘I’.

This method of enquiry, of asking a question in meditation, is a very direct and straightforward exploration into the nature of experience. We bring the mind to as much quietness, stillness, and steadiness as possible and then drop a question into that open space: ‘What am I?’ When that kind of question is posed, we can notice a small gap, a hesitation before any conceptual answer arises. The wordless ‘answer’ to the question is what is realized in that gap, in the moment before a new ‘me’ has been conjured into being with an idea, a belief,

a judgment, an assumption. That gap – that unformed, awake, open quality – is the point of this practice. In that moment, there is alertness, spaciousness, no sense of self. The mind is awake to its own nature: bright, radiant, pure, peaceful, perfectly simple.

We can also develop this practice throughout the course of our daily activities. As we are eating breakfast, we can ask, ‘Who is eating? What owns this flavour?’ When we speak with others, ‘Does that sound belong to someone?’ Or when we’re driving, ‘Where is there to get to (because wherever I get to, I am always *here*)?’ Even decision-making, ‘Who chooses?’ We can cultivate a quality of enquiry and investigation throughout the flow of the day, whether we are walking, standing, sitting, lying down, being quiet or being active. ‘Who is tidying the garden? Who is washing the dishes? Who is lying down for a nap?’ Even the simple activity of brushing the teeth can uncover our assumptions of ‘me’ and ‘mine’. When you’re brushing your teeth, ask, ‘Do these teeth have an owner? What makes this toothbrush mine? What happens to my ownership of this tube of toothpaste when the tube is empty?’ All around the planet, countless empty toothpaste tubes are buried in landfills, floating in seas and decaying in forests. Where is all the ‘my’-ness that once belonged to those tubes of toothpaste? Once they were ‘mine’, now they are not. As an empty toothpaste tube leaves the hand and enters the rubbish bin, how does it change from ‘mine’ to ‘not mine’? What happened? Did anything happen?

Beyond toothpaste tubes, we can reflect on other items that are much closer to home. Perhaps top on the list is our own body. We give it a name and we think of it as ‘mine’. What do we discover when we question the assumption ‘This is my body’? Consider the breath. If we are in a room together, you breathe in the carbon dioxide that I breathe out, and I breathe in the carbon dioxide that you breathe out. My out-breath, which was partly your out-breath, is then absorbed by the trees, grasses and other creatures. All the carbon dioxide that was once ‘me’ is now part of countless other living beings that have absorbed it.

We shed, we acquire. This body is in an incessant state of change. The process never stops. So the statement ‘This is *my* body’ can really only be a convenient fiction. When we enquire more deeply, we realize that the labels ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘old’, ‘young’, ‘tall’, ‘short’, ‘healthy’, ‘sick’, ‘Buddhist’, ‘Christian’ don’t truly apply. They are all convenient fictions. Cultivating this change of view is one of the ways to support the breakthrough to reality that the Buddha pointed to.

A SAGE AT PEACE

As we develop this kind of investigation, this reflection – ‘What am I? Who is walking? Who is eating? Who is doing?’ – the point is not the repetition of these questions. The questions are just the means. The point of the enquiry is the resulting change of heart, that ‘Aha!’ when the transparent and empty nature of self-view is recognized. When the heart sees through the conceiving

‘I am’, that is when one is called a ‘sage at peace’³⁰. The heart is free of agitation. It knows genuine coolness, freedom, peacefulness. There is nothing that can agitate or confuse it.

The Buddha teaches *anicca* (change, uncertainty, transiency), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness, incompleteness, unreliability), and *anattā* (not-self) as the basis for wise reflection. They are not articles of faith or concepts to believe in. Rather, they are tools we can use to examine the way our experience is held and understood. These reflections are ways of meeting the habits of the mind and helping to shift and reshape them.

In meditation, when the mind is steady, we can pay attention to the present and open the field of awareness, not focusing on a particular object. Awakened awareness can simply receive the flow of impressions – thoughts, sounds, smells, tastes, textures, shapes and colours – within this mode of reflection, this mode of exploration, and ask, ‘Is this changing? Is it satisfying? Does it have an owner?’

As each form, each feeling, each perception takes shape within the field of awareness, watch what happens when those investigative reflections are applied. What happens when the illusion of a permanent, satisfying, personal identity is seen through, when the ‘I’ feeling is recognized as transparent and void of substance? ‘Aha!’ There is a change of heart, a freeing, a disentangling.

30. See Appendix, §15 for full quotation.

This is the point and purpose of insight practice (*vipassanā*) – seeing into the genuine nature of all things; seeing that everything (every ‘thing’) is simply a pattern of consciousness, a pattern of mind taking shape and dissolving. There is form but no substance, shape but no essence – it is a bubble, a mirage, a conjuring trick. When that recognition is actualized, watch what happens in the heart. What is the experience of the present reality when that illusion is seen through? There is a simplicity, naturalness, freedom, limitlessness – and a quality of ‘of course!’

THE UNANALYSABLE TATHĀGATA – AWAKENED AWARENESS

This kind of practice helps the mind to see through and thus shed its sense of identity. But shedding identity can then leave us with doubts: ‘If I’m not a person, what am I? If I’m not a man or a woman, a monastic or a lay person, what am I? If my nationality, age and personal story are not real, *who am I?*’

When this happens, it’s important to remember that the practice is to let go of identifying with what we are *not* and let ‘what is’ just be what it is – awake, aware, peaceful, radiant, limitless, natural. As soon as we fall back into trying to define who or what we are, the thinking/conceiving mind creates limitation once again. Even identifying with highly exalted states – ‘I am suchness, that’s what I am,’ ‘I am the Dhamma,’ or even ‘I am nothing’ – any kind of ‘I am’ creates a false limitation.

In another of his deeply significant teachings on this theme, the Buddha said:

The Tathāgata ('The one thus come, thus gone') has abandoned any material form ... feeling ... perceptions ... mental formations ... consciousness by means of which one trying to describe the Tathāgata would describe him. He has cut it off at the root, made it like a palm tree stump, deprived it of the conditions for existence and rendered it incapable of arising in the future. The Tathāgata is liberated from being reckoned in terms of material form ... feeling ... perceptions ... mental formations ... consciousness ... He is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the great ocean.

(M 72.20)³¹

'The Tathāgata' is the term the Buddha used to refer to himself, and this Sutta is one of the few instances in which he talks about his subjective experience. I consider the term '*tathāgata*' to also mean 'the awakened awareness of our minds', just as 'Buddha-wisdom' was described above (in Chapters 1 & 2). The quality of *tathāgata* ('thus come, thus gone') here refers to the nature of the 'transcendent knowing' attribute of our hearts as embodied in each of our lives.

SO WHAT EXACTLY IS IT?

It *is*. And there is no need, indeed no possibility, to define exactly *what* it is. That said, notice that the Buddha uses the adjectives 'profound, immeasurable,

31. See Appendix, §16 & §17 for full and related quotations.

unfathomable, like the great ocean' to describe its presence. The analogy is apposite since, when we stand on some sea-shore and look out to the horizon there is for many people an apprehension of vastness, wonderment, power and mystery. What lies beneath the surface? What's beyond the horizon? The mind goes quiet in a state of natural awe, that is potent yet peaceful. The great ocean definitely *IS* yet the conceiving mind cannot fully define *what* it is; its presence is immeasurable, both dangerous (to the ego) and intimately familiar (to the heart), our origin and yet beyond us... these are the qualities of the awake, aware heart that the Buddha evokes with these words.

Any definitions would have to borrow nouns and adjectives from the world of sound, sight, smell, taste, touch, conceptual thought, time, three-dimensional space, individuality. None of those qualities fully apply but we are offered that analogy of the ocean as a tiny hint. Even the best adjectives in a mythical grammar designed to refer to the numinous, the transcendent, will never be able to do the job completely. Words and concepts simply do not have enough dimensions to represent ultimate reality.

In the above passage, the Buddha is talking about his own nature, but he is also talking about the nature of the awake mind, the quality of awareness at the very heart of experience for each one of us – 'the Buddha in mind' as Ajahn Chah put it.

In addition, we don't have to define what we are because we already are it. The practice is simply about learning to be that, to embody that awakened knowing, which frees that heart from all limitation. As in the statement by the Buddha to Rohitassa that was quoted above:

One who knows the world reaches the end of the world. Having reached the end of the world, they do not hanker after this world or another one.

(S 2.26)

This passage is an illustration of one of the Buddha's chief attributes, *lokavidū*, 'knower of the world'. And when the Buddha in mind sees the world, in this way, this is the Dhamma knowing its own nature. As Ajahn Chah expressed it:

Where is the Buddha? The Buddha is in the Dhamma.

Where is the Dhamma? The Dhamma is in the Buddha...

Whether a tree, a mountain or an animal, it's all Dhamma, everything is Dhamma. Where is this Dhamma? Speaking simply, that which is not Dhamma doesn't exist. Dhamma is nature. This is called the '*saccadhamma*', the True Dhamma. if one sees nature, one sees Dhamma; if one sees Dhamma, one sees nature. Seeing nature, one knows the Dhamma.³²

32. *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, pp 484-5, Aruno Publications, (2011).

'JUST BECAUSE YOU THINK IT, IT DOESN'T MEAN IT'S TRUE'

The Buddha teaches that we can only know the world as our mind represents it. This isn't just a dry philosophical observation. Understanding this teaching makes a huge difference in how we relate to our minds and the world it represents.

If we are ignorant of this truth, we believe we are seeing the world with no biases, that we are wise, knowledgeable. If we are ignorant, we believe our thoughts are 'true', that our opinion is 'fact'. If we are ignorant, we see people who think differently from us as 'wrong'. When we assume that everyone is experiencing the same world as us, we are amazed or irritated that people have different opinions. Then we clash over our different perceptions, different religious beliefs, different political views, different versions of our family history. People can become extremely divided and conflicted. That is how we often function.

I got a glimpse of this sort of ignorant thinking shortly after I arrived at Wat Pah Nanachat, in 1978. I'd be having a discussion with a monk and make some sort of authoritative statement. Typically, the monk would reply, 'Well, that's your opinion,' to which I'd get annoyed and retort, 'No, it's not an opinion; it's a fact.' One day I found myself vigorously defending a point when I suddenly realized it was the opposite point to what I'd stated just a few weeks earlier. I thought, 'Well, if I'm right now, I must have been wrong then. Or if I was

right then, I'm wrong now.' It dawned on me that 'facts' and 'opinions' are not reliable; they are just something the mind happens to believe to be true at a given point in time. And if we believe we're right just because we think something, then we will inevitably be in conflict with others.

The more we recognize that what we experience is only *our version* of the world, the more we are able to accept that other people's versions of the world will not be the same. What I experience is not *the* world, it is *my* world – and my world might not be the same as your world.

This understanding is meaningful because, if I recognize that my world is necessarily different from your world, then I won't expect you to have the same perspectives or opinions as me. The world as we each experience it is unique. The more we appreciate this, the fewer our mistaken assumptions. We begin to appreciate that our world is not the same as another's world, and we are able to make space for differing opinions and see that judgments that are valid in one person's mind are not going to be the same for everyone else.

The more this insight is developed, the less we judge people on their opinions, preferences or priorities. This then creates a greater breadth of heart, a greater adaptability and a greater capacity to harmonize with others. What is important to me might not be important to you. The greater our appreciation of this truth, the greater our capacity to see the broader picture. When we can see that the world is just *my version* of the world, then we can harmonize with each other in a respectful and substantial way.

When we see that the world arises, does its thing and passes away within the field of our awareness, the way we relate to our thoughts changes. This is why the mind matters.

THE CRAZY AND THE SANE

I like to point out that there's a Buddhist principle stating that we're not genuinely sane until we're fully enlightened. Anyone who is not an Arahant has some degree of insanity. We are all patients in a global psychiatric ward and we suffer when we expect 'insane' people guided by greed, hatred and delusion to be acting like Arahants. When somebody is selfish, we cry out, 'How can she do that? That's really awful!' or we incredulously exclaim, 'A politician lied to get elected! I can't believe it!' We forget that this sort of behaviour has been going on since human tribal life began tens of thousands of years ago.

I'm not excusing bad behaviour but, if we consider that we are sharing a psychiatric ward with our fellow inmates, then we will be a lot more forgiving of each other. We won't expect everyone to behave like the hospital director. Of course we're going to be erratic and a bit confused and selfish and chaotic and greedy and wild.

This perspective is very beneficial when we're having struggles in our relationships, families or in our workplace. By seeing things in this way, we create less of a sense of outrage or indignation. We feel more compassion, including compassion for our own shortcomings and failures. The moral outrage

(especially in online ‘comments’!) that often follows contentious things that happen in the world, or even innocent artistic expressions and sports failures, is usually not that helpful. Even though we often try to do better, if we are endeavouring to be a decent human being, we can still (usually) make more space for each other.

It seems to me that people expect too much from each other. We’re amazed that a married person might look with hungry eyes at somebody other than their partner. Or that somebody who has taken on the *brahmachariya* precepts of a nun or a monk hasn’t completely ended sexual desire. I can tell you, when you shave your head and put on a robe, celibate inclinations are not automatically switched on and all sexual desire switched off. Actually, a very large portion of the monastic Vinaya discipline is about dealing with sexual desire and how to negotiate that energy. And an equal amount of the Vinaya is about dealing with acquisitiveness: stopping monastics from deceiving people to acquire property, money, power and influence.

When he was a young monk, Ajahn Sumedho once said to Ajahn Chah, ‘I’m too impure. I have all these greedy thoughts. I’m seething with jealousy. I shouldn’t be a monk because I’m corrupting the robe!’ Ajahn Chah responded, ‘Sumedho, the robe is for people who are not yet Arahants. Don’t think that just because you shaved your head and put on a robe, you are never again going to feel jealousy or irritation.’

When we shift our perspective like that, we become much more compassionate. Without excusing unskilful behaviour, we recognize that people are people – and that we’re all guided by selfishness, greed, hatred and delusion a lot of the time.

RINGFENCING THE REPTILES

Along with teaching this sort of mental approach – recognizing and feeling compassion with the arising of emotions such as wanting, fearing, hating – the Buddha established the Precepts as part of the training. *Sīla* (ethics, morality) with respect to our behaviour is very supportive of the mental side of practice.

In its simplest form, there are the Five Precepts: refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying and using intoxicants. When we have an impulse that says ‘That’s something really great. I want to take it for myself!’ *sīla* reminds us, ‘No, that doesn’t belong to you. You can’t just go ahead and grab it.’ When we’ve become annoyed that someone just sat down in our chair, or cut us off at an intersection, we restrain our aggressive and violent impulses because there is a precept against killing. It might sound like I’m joking but even on meditation retreats people can get homicidal feelings towards someone who moves their cushion.

When we understand that ‘the world’ is in our mind, there is a change of attitude. The Buddha established the Precepts as another way of helping us

gain that perspective. It's one thing to understand the concept of not reacting blindly to impulses of greed or aversion, fear or jealousy, but it's another thing to actually refrain from acting on those impulses.

In the film *Jurassic Park*, a huge electric fence keeps all the dinosaurs and prehistoric creatures inside the boundaries of the park. The trouble starts when one of the creatures knocks a hole in the fence and they break out. The Precepts are like that fence. Taking the Precepts is what I call 'ring-fencing the reptile brain'. The reptile brain says, 'I like, I take! I don't like, I *kill!*' It's the part of the brain responsible for all of the chthonic urges, the basic, instinctual impulses that are part of our evolutionary inheritance, such as violence, greed, sexual desire, territory. Our reptile brain is part of nature and therefore part of *our* nature as animals.

So the Precepts serve as a fence that holds the reptiles back. When we don't keep the Precepts, then the fence is breached and the reptiles get out, wreaking all kinds of havoc, like the velociraptors wandering through the kitchen causing all kinds of chaos. The Fifth Precept (refraining from using alcohol and intoxicating drugs) is particularly important, because becoming intoxicated easily knocks holes in the fence and lets the reptiles out.

Part of recognizing the importance of the role of attitude in the mind is a deep respect for the Precepts. They highlight the areas of greatest vulnerability and, at the same time, align us with what can be called 'the better angels of our

nature’, also known in classical philosophy as ‘synderesis’, the love of the good; in Pali this heartfelt virtuousness is called *guṇadhamma*. The Precepts support a change of attitude by giving us a little extra breathing space to recognize impulses like jealousy, rage, fear, craving, etc. Respecting the Precepts and living by their principles equates with keeping the fence in good repair so that the velociraptors and tyrannosauruses don’t escape. The Precepts keep the walls strong and assist us in living harmoniously and respectfully with each other.

We’re not trying to suppress or destroy the unskilful forces of the heart but merely to contain them so as not to harm ourselves or others. Then, the more those urges are understood, the more the mind can evolve to a state where they lose the ability to dominate our actions.

Of course, sometimes, even with the best of intentions, the walls are breached and the reptiles get out. Or maybe there are a lot of gaps in our neighbour’s fence. We can’t expect everyone to behave like Arahants, after all. So there might be times when our family members’ or friends’ behaviours are causing harm to themselves or others. It can be tricky in this kind of situation to know what to do.

A therapist once commented to me that, even though they were not allowed within the bounds of their profession to instruct their patient in how to behave, they found that their own practice of *sīla* helped them. They were able to receive the patient’s life in a more awakened way and teach them to observe

their mind. That in itself made a big difference. In a roundabout way, *sīla* was having an influence. The therapist was not instructing people to practice *sīla* (because they'd lose not only the interest of their patient but also their licence to practice!), but they were able to use the Buddha's teaching on the Precepts to benefit both themselves and the people they were responsible for. This principle is called *abhaya-dāna*, 'the giving of fearlessness' and it is also why the Buddha referred to the Five Precepts as 'the Five Great Gifts' or *mahā-dāna*. By keeping the Precepts yourself you grant '... to an immeasurable number of beings, freedom from fear, enmity and affliction. In turn, the noble disciple enjoys immeasurable freedom from fear, enmity and affliction' (A 8.39).

This underscores the point that the attitude of the mind – and how we function on the human level – can convey itself in beneficial ways, both verbal and non-verbal. The standards we keep for ourselves have an effect, to a greater or lesser extent, on the people we interact with.

Over the years, I've spent a lot of time with people recovering from alcohol and drug addiction. When somebody is trying to get off the addiction to alcohol, being with someone who is sober and who doesn't need to drink conveys something exceptionally helpful to them. I say this as someone who drank a lot between the ages of 15 and 21! It shows that you can live as a free, independent person away from those habits. Being face-to-face with a living example has a profound effect. It is deeply encouraging.

PHENOMENOLOGY AND RIGHT MINDFULNESS

Recognizing the nature of the mind and the subjective nature of experience – ‘this is my mind’s version of the world’ – is particularly helpful in getting a perspective on thought. If we believe all our thoughts to be true, then it can get really depressing, right? When we get a mindful perspective on our thinking and our opinions, it brings us a great deal of peace and clarity.

It is important to recognize that the word ‘mindfulness’ refers to various different qualities applied at different levels and to different degrees. The first level of mindfulness is *sati*, which means paying attention to the present moment. Basically, with *sati* the mind is not caught up in distraction but is attending to the present and attuned to a degree to current actions and feelings and attitudes. I would call this ‘functional mindfulness’ or ‘mechanistic mindfulness’.

Functional mindfulness is not connected to *sīla* at all. Ajahn Sumedho has described this as the type of mindfulness that a squirrel needs to jump through the branches of a tree or that a cat needs to hunt a mouse. Since there is no moral element, the benefits are less profound and it can even be destructive in its results. In fact, Ajahn Jayasāro has made the point that mindfulness without *sīla* could be more accurately referred to as ‘*micchā-sati*’, that is ‘wrong mindfulness’ or ‘a travesty of mindfulness’.³³

33. ‘Travesty’ literally meaning ‘dressed as its opposite’ or ‘a grotesque or debased imitation’ (OED).

The second level of mindfulness is what I would call *sammā-sati*. This is what I would call ‘simple mindfulness’, as represented in the Noble Eightfold Path, which is the act of paying attention to the present experience of reality with a thoughtful awareness of the consequences of action, speech and attitude. That is to say, knowing what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. This is where *sīla* comes in. Even in academic psychology programs, where they avoid talking about behaviour in terms of morality – it’s almost considered a dirty word – compassion has become an important area of study, which could be recognized as *sīla* being brought in through the backdoor. If our motivation towards mindfulness is interwoven with compassion, it brings *sīla* with it by way of respect for the feelings, perceptions and experiences of others as well ourselves.

The next level I call ‘informed mindfulness’, or *sati-sampajañña*, which means mindfulness together with clear awareness or comprehension. If mindfulness is going to be truly comprehensive and effective, then it must be attuned not only to the aspect of *sīla* but also to time, place and situation.

Ajahn Sumedho began using the term ‘intuitive awareness’ as a translation for *sati-sampajañña* because he found ‘mindfulness and clear comprehension’ not very accurate. We can be fully mindful of something that we don’t comprehend, like being fully aware we are in the dark yet not knowing where we are. The word ‘intuitive’ represents mindfulness not as a cognitive or conceptual

understanding but as a quality of attunement to and sensitivity with respect to a situation. Mindfulness can be well-established even if you can't understand or explain or describe what's going on.

The fourth level of mindfulness is *sati-paññā*. I call this 'holistic mindfulness' because it takes in the whole picture. It is mindfulness based on complete attunement to the present reality, not influenced by self-view or the biases of greed, hatred and delusion. *Sati-paññā* is mindfulness taken to its ultimate fulfilment, a kind of Olympic-standard mindfulness. It ties back into the realization that 'The world is in our mind'.

With *sati-paññā*, in any moment there is the awareness of what is happening together with the recognition: 'This is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching; these are patterns of thought, concepts arising and passing away within awareness; this is called *my mind*, and that's just a convenient fiction.' There is the moment-by-moment awareness of the particular content of experience together with the recognition of the phenomenological nature of experience. In addition, the flow of experience is all realized as *anicca-dukkha-anattā* - changing, unsatisfactory, selfless.

This fourth level, holistic mindfulness, is much harder to establish and sustain. The practice of insight meditation is particularly geared to the development of this kind of acute, Olympic-level mindfulness. It's often when we've got supportive meditation conditions that we find the richest opportunities to

develop *sati-paññā*, like being on a meditation retreat – no responsibilities, noble silence, a daily schedule and routine, a safe environment with everyone around us keeping at least the Eight Precepts, no decision-making required. But the point of retreats and practising insight meditation is to develop the strength to be able to apply mindfulness more and more consistently and fully in everyday life. Then, when we’re being crushed by the crowd on the Tube or standing face-to-face with our greatest fear, we can recognize, ‘Oh, this is just *anicca-dukkha-anattā*; it’s just feeling, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching arising and passing away. That’s all.’

In a mysterious way, by adopting this phenomenological approach and allowing all patterns of experience to be known as empty phenomena arising and passing known by this awareness, it allows the ‘oil’ and the ‘water’ to naturally separate – to use Ajahn Chah’s analogy – and it enables the presence of the noumenal, the transcendent, timeless, non-personal, unlocated reality to be fully known simultaneously. To borrow David Bohm’s nomenclature, it allows the explicate order of time and place and things to be distinguished from the implicate order that is timeless and immeasurable, and in that distinguishing they can function freely in relationship, in a ‘mutual enfoldment’³⁴ with each other.

34. ‘We introduced the notion of a higher-dimensional reality which *projects* into lower-dimensional elements that have not only a non-local and non-causal relationship but also just the sort of mutual enfoldment that we have suggested for mind and body.’ David Bohm, *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, p 265, Routledge Classics, (1980).

In Buddhist terminology we would say that when *vijjā*, ‘awakened awareness’, is perfectly attuned to the field of experience, it results in consummately harmonious and beneficial *caraṇa*, ‘conduct’.

Another one of the Buddha’s chief attributes was ‘*vijjācaraṇa sampanno*’, meaning ‘impeccable in awareness and conduct’. I like to call such perfect transcendence of attitude embodied with perfect immanence of engagement ‘unentangled participating’.

UNENTANGLED PARTICIPATING

It is important to have a heart that is profoundly forgiving and patient, to cultivate the attitude of being ready to begin again. When we sit in meditation and establish the intention to focus on the breath, and the mind races away and absorbs into a sound or an idea or a memory, we practise patiently letting go. Forgive the habits of ceaselessly grasping, of like and dislike, fear and desire, excitement and irritation – whatever habits there might be. Recognize the distraction, forgive and let go. We practise patiently and compassionately, ever-ready to begin again.

A clear focus of attention is most helpful when cultivating this attitude of patience, kindness and a radical acceptance. Establish the quality of concentration, and notice: stories arise, regrets arise, achievements arise; they well up, do their thing and then dissolve. That is all.

When the heart lets go and disentangles, there is still a participation, an attunement with the world. There is a knowing but without a feeling of being burdened or limited by the world. As the musician John Cage put it in his *Lecture on Something*:³⁵

If you let it, it supports itself. You don't have to. Each something is a celebration of the nothing that supports it. When we remove the world from our shoulders, we notice it doesn't drop. Where is the responsibility?

35. A lecture given at The Artists' Club, USA, (1951).

The heart is not restricted by perceptions. There is an ease, a freedom in the heart that is not grasping. Let yourself notice that there is a moment of letting go, even if it is only a second or less. It is a hands-on letting go. When the grasping stops, also notice how that feels – the moment of non-clinging, non-grasping, disentanglement. What is the texture of experience when knowing the world, participating but unentangled, attuned but unlimited and unbounded? How does that feel? What is its quality?

We let the naturalness, the simplicity, the ease speak for itself. We do not have to tell ourselves it is a good thing: 'This is great; more of this, please.' Let that knowing of peace, ease and freedom have its own effect.

'WHAT IS THE "RIGHT" THING TO DO?'

As a Buddhist teacher, I'm frequently asked, 'What is the right practice for me? What should I do? Please tell me, Ajahn.' Beneath this question is often the presupposition that there is a single 'right' thing that 'I' should be doing and that if I just did it, then all would be in order. We hunt for that right thing as if it were a hidden golden thread that we could follow as it twisted and turned on its way to 'happily ever after'.

To this question, I typically respond, perhaps disappointingly, that there is no single 'right' thing for anyone to do, to practice, and that the very concept is not in accord with the Buddha's teachings. The answer to 'What is the right thing

to do?' is like the answer to 'What is the right sized pair of shoes?' – it depends on what size your feet are! In each moment, an infinite variety of actions can be taken, and they change second by second, millisecond by millisecond. In one moment, the right thing to do may be to tighten the focus and, half a second later, the right thing may be to relax.

When the heart is attuned to the present reality, there is the ability to sense what will be for the best: what will be for the greatest benefit for this being and other beings, and what will conduce to finding a state of balance and integration. By listening to the musicians in the orchestra, we let our own voice adjust and attune. We participate in an attentive, relaxed, spacious, non-personal, unentangled manner.

I encourage an experimental approach towards Dhamma practice: Which practice feels right? Which practice is comfortable? Essentially, which practice works? This approach is not based on a theory of what *should* be helpful or what the Ajahn says. It's based on trying things out and observing the results. That should be the deciding factor. This is called *vimaṃsa*, or 'reviewing', looking at the results of the efforts that have been made.

In practice, we can ask, 'If I put more attention into mindfulness of breathing, what is the effect? If I am very focused and precise with the walking meditation, what is the effect? If I am more relaxed and open with the walking meditation,

what is it like then?' *Vimamsā* is part of a feedback system. We see the results of what we have done, and that informs our choices.

When a question arises – 'Should I just stick to one specific practice or is it OK to mix mindfulness of breathing with loving-kindness; or what about using a mantra together with insight practice?' – try different options and see for yourself. Does a practice lead to greater ease, comfort and clarity? Or does it lead to confusion and doubt? What is the effect? I have always been comfortable using different approaches to Dhamma practice simultaneously. Others find that very confusing or stressful. See what works for you. Fundamentally, the measure of whether or not something is helpful is the question, 'Does it increase the feeling of distress, discontent and dissatisfaction, or does it reduce that?' That is the one measure we can rely on.

When we explore our practice and see the results for ourselves, our own experience is what guides us. We don't have to accept or rely upon the authority of another. We get to know *this being here*, this particular pattern of conditioning that is here.

This type of reviewing can also guide us in all the life choices we make during any given day: where we live, how we work, where we travel, what we choose to focus our attention on. This process helps to guide us, helps illuminate the possibilities, and helps us make choices informed by mindfulness and wisdom rather than by compulsion, habit, obedience or blindly following a system.

FLAVOURS OF DESIRE

In the Buddha's Fourth Noble Truth, he teaches the Eightfold Path, consisting of eight 'rights' – Right View, Right Intention, Right Concentration, Right Mindfulness etc. So if the practice is a path, then doesn't it require moving in a 'right' direction? And doesn't the action, effort and energetic engagement required to follow the path also require the desire to embark on the journey and reach the destination? This poses something of a problem, since isn't desire also the cause of suffering and something to let go of? People have been asking this question ever since the Buddha's time.

In this respect it is helpful to understand that there are different kinds of desire, different kinds of directing of the mind. The desire that causes suffering is called *taṇhā* (thirst, craving) in Pali. But the desire required to follow the path is called *chanda* (interest, enthusiasm). It is the first of what the Buddha described as the Four Bases of Success (*iddhipāda*). In order to realize any particular goal, whether it is skilful or unskilful, lofty or mundane – whether cooking a meal, robbing a bank, or becoming enlightened – first of all we need to be interested in the idea. *Chanda* is that interest.

Ven. Ānanda explained to the brahmin Uṇṇābha (S 51.15) that we can use desire to reach the end of desire. We can use the capacity to wish, to direct the mind, to choose, to engage, in order to reach the end of *taṇhā*, to reach the

end of *dukkha* (*dukkha-nirodha*).³⁶ The quality of *chanda* can be completely in accordance with reality (Dhamma) and isn't necessarily personal. When *chanda* is applied skilfully, there is no sense of self involved. It is not based upon 'I want to, I must, I should.' Rather, it arises from an attunement to the time, place, situation and needs of the present.

In meditation it is important to distinguish between skillful *chanda* and 'I-me-mine' based *taṇhā*. We can be very sincere, committed and dedicated to meditation practice, putting in many hours, weeks, months and even years with great sincerity. We might feel that we are following the teacher's instructions while, unconsciously, casting the whole process in the framework of self-view. 'I've got the hindrances of sense-desire, ill-will, dullness, doubt and restlessness, and I've got to get rid of them.' 'I haven't got concentration or insight or the *jhānas*, and I've got to get them.' Self-view slips in the backdoor and takes over the whole program very easily.

This desire to 'get' or 'become' is called *bhava-taṇhā*, and the desire to 'get rid of' is called *vibhava-taṇhā*. In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha outlined these desires as being amongst the causes of suffering, along with sense-desire. The desires to 'become' and 'to get rid of' always have feelings of 'I-me-mine' woven through them, colouring them, flavouring them. All this 'getting', 'being' and 'getting rid of' tangles up the heart in more stress, alienation,

36. See Appendix, §18 & §19 for full and related quotations.

difficulty, frustration and goal-oriented obsessiveness because it is based on the delusion of self-view. Our sincere and noble desire to practise meditation and end suffering can lead to creating even more suffering than before.

This is tragic and unfortunate – but also avoidable. We don't have to operate that way. It is therefore essential *not* to think of our practice in terms of 'me working with my problems' or 'me developing my potential'. Rather, 'here is the awake mind seeing the way things are; here is the Buddha seeing the Dhamma; here is awareness attentive to the quality that is called obstructive and difficult; here is awareness attentive to the quality that is called wholesome and beneficial.' Non-personal, unbiased desire can then direct us to let go of the unwholesome and turn towards the wholesome.

When we reach a crossroads, if we intend to go south rather than north, we don't have to hate or fear or resent the north. It's simply not the direction we want to go. We just recognize our desire to go south and turn south at the junction instead of north. We don't attach to our southerly progress and take it as a personal achievement. Similarly, when the heart meets aversion, sense-desire, restlessness and doubt, we don't have to hate it, fear it or take it personally. When the heart's desire inclines in a skillful direction, it is not a personal attainment, glorification or acquisition. It is just knowing where we intend to go and then turning, following the road and letting it take us there.

EASEFUL EFFORT

With *chanda*, or wholesome desire, we then learn to apply Right Effort (*Sammavayāmo*), which is effort in accord with reality, in tune with Dhamma. We apply *virīya*, or energy, which is the second of the Four Bases of Success referred to earlier. Without applying energy, there is no way we will reach our goal.

The Buddha teaches four aspects to Right Effort, called the *sammappadhānā*:

1. *Samvāra* involves restraining unwholesome qualities from arising, or setting the intention not to give rise to aversion, sense-desire, ill will, etc.
2. *Pahāna* is the letting go of any unwholesome qualities that have already arisen. We recognize, 'Here is aversion. It is unskillful. I don't need to turn that way. Let it go.' Or 'Here is sense desire, another fantasy. No need to follow that. Let it go.'
3. *Bhāvanā* involves setting the intention to give rise to or cultivate the wholesome: for example – the development of concentration, radical acceptance and wakeful awareness.
4. *Anurakkhana* is making the effort to sustain or maintain any wholesome qualities that have already arisen. If there is loving-kindness, if there are qualities such as concentration, clarity, focus and wisdom, we maintain them.

In the application of Right Effort, there is no sense of self, that's what makes it 'Right' – once again, there is a heartfelt participation, engagement, attunement to the field of experience and potential for liberation, yet it is wholly easeful, unentangled, stressless. There is a recognizing of the unwholesome and the wholesome. And there is a doing, a directing, a choosing. But those choices are not coloured by self-view. They are not influenced by 'I-me-mine'. They are guided by mindfulness and wisdom, attunement of the heart, the recognition of what is skilful, what is beneficial, what is harmful, what is confusing. There is no 'self' involved in any way. This is the type of effort we apply in order to carry out our wholesome intentions, our journey towards what is liberating, clarifying, fulfilling.

If the mind is guided by self-view, then our effort gets corrupted, taken over by 'I-me-mine'. This then leads to more *dukkha*, more distress, more alienation and more insecurity. Self-view in practice creates deeper attachment, entanglement and confusion.

Right Effort in Dhamma practice is recognizing the unwholesome and letting go of it. Right Effort in practice is recognizing, developing, and maintaining the wholesome. When our effort is guided by mindfulness and wisdom rather than self-view, there is a vast spaciousness, a liberality, a freedom in the heart. We are not imprisoned by either the longing for success or the fear of failure. Instead, we are guided by what brings benefit to ourselves and others, which

is what the heart naturally cherishes, nurtures and maintains. And with that which causes difficulty, struggle and pain for ourselves and others, the heart naturally lets go, allows it to fall away and doesn't strengthen it. This is being guided by Right Effort (*Sammā-vāyāmo*).

When the quality of effort is free of self-view, there is the recognition that the mind itself is not a person ('me') and its activities are not personal ('mine'). Every aspect of our being – physical, mental, spiritual – is an attribute of nature. Dhamma is nature. Therefore, in its essence, this mind, this heart is Dhamma itself. In awakening, the heart is simply awakening to its own nature. Nothing is being 'got' and nothing is being 'got rid of'. What we are doing in our practice is allowing Dhamma to know itself. We are allowing the reality of what we are to fully know its own nature. That knowing brings with it peace, simplicity and freedom.

Therefore, it is profoundly helpful to distinguish between effort guided by self-view and effort guided by mindfulness and wisdom. It makes all the difference in the world.

ATTUNEMENT INFORMS INTUITIVE ADAPTABILITY

When we talk about Right Effort as 'restraining the unwholesome from arising' or 'cultivating the wholesome', it can sound like a mechanical process. But when we practice with Right Effort, it is not a rationalistic, heartless procedure.

To the contrary, it is heartfulness itself: the heart attuning to the present reality and responding. It is a process of self-adjusting, just as the universe is a self-adjusting system.

Our formal meditation can be a wonderful time to explore this. When sitting, take a moment to notice how the body is being held. Through the power of that awareness and through knowing the body, let the posture adjust itself. If it is slumped over, let the back straighten, let the spine lengthen, let the body become more upright. If the abdomen is tense and the solar plexus has a knot of anxiety, notice that and let awareness have its effect – don't *do* anything – *allow* it to soften and dissolve rather than *make* it. When the body has returned to a more balanced quality of ease and alertness, when the posture has rebalanced itself, notice the difference it makes.

In this way, we are working with the mind and the body; we are learning about the relationship between them, how they affect each other. Notice how the body breathes on its own. The body has its own rhythm. Breathing is not something that 'I' have to 'do'. Breathing has been happening our whole life so how could it be exhausting, strenuous or stressful? The body breathes on its own, it adjusts itself. Mindfulness of breathing is not a 'thing that I am doing', it is simply training the mind to be aware of what is already happening, of this particular rhythmic pattern of nature, the in-breath and the out-breath, rising and falling.

When adjusting the posture, notice when there's a sense of 'me' straightening 'my' back. Does it feel forced and awkward? Or when we suddenly realize the mind has become sleepy and the body has slumped over, do we react, 'Uh oh! Fallen asleep! Tighten up! Straighten up!' Who is this 'me' who has got to sit up straight, who *should* be awake, who needs to meditate properly? That is suffering right there. Instead, in that moment of recognizing that we've dozed off, we can bring awareness to that slumped posture. We don't have to *do* anything other than let awareness have its effect.

Try this as an experiment: before *doing* anything as 'the meditator', let awareness be brought to bear on the posture. Let that slumped nature be fully known. Then notice the back straightening by itself. There is no 'me' who is 'doing' anything. The system is adjusting, guided by mindfulness and wisdom. Awakened awareness has its own effect. The body straightens without it being 'me' sitting up straight. The body finds a balanced, easeful posture not because 'I' have done something, but because awareness has had its natural effect. It is an effortless effort, or a diligent effortlessness – effort is being made but without any stress.

We can bring the quality of awareness to anywhere we feel things to be out of balance. Let awareness have its own effect. If there is tensing in the hips or shoulders, bring awareness to that spot and feel it. Then, if we let it, awareness attunes to the areas of stress and tension and the body relaxes, straightens,

softens on its own. It is a self-adjusting system. The quality of mindful awareness helps the adjustments occur in harmony with nature, in tune with Dhamma.

As we develop the practice, we gain a greater sense of this self-adjusting quality. More and more, mindfulness and wisdom, the capacity for attunement to the present, guides our actions and choices. When we contemplate, 'What is the right thing to do?' the quality of attunement becomes the guiding principle. What we call a 'decision' or 'me doing something' becomes guided by awareness in a selfless way. Slowly the mind gets a feel for how that works. And what is more important, this process that has been witnessed and developed in formal meditation can then evolve naturally to inform the rest of our day-to-day lives.

EXPERIENCE AND OWNERSHIP

We explore the nature of mind – its fabric and its field of experience – by looking inwards and thus develop the quality of insight. As we reflect upon the nature of experience and how it works, *anattā* (not-self) slowly becomes a bit more understandable and meaningful.

With perceptions – the sound of a bird chirping or the sight of a cloud floating by overhead – it is easy not to have a sense of ownership. We don't feel that we own the song of a bird or that a certain cloud is 'ours'. With feeling it's usually trickier. When there's a physical sensation in the body, like an ache or a pain, we usually experience it as 'mine': an ache in 'my' back or a pain in 'my'

knee. Yet when that is explored, insight deepens. There can be moments of revelation, a clear knowing that the sense of 'my-ness' (*mamaṅkara*) has been added onto the bare sensation of pain arising, abiding and passing away. We see that very feeling of ownership as merely another mental impression, like a sound or a sight or a taste.

Mental formations (thoughts and emotions), in a similar way to feeling, may seem even more personal at first: 'my' story, 'my' memories, 'my' ideas, 'my' fears, 'my' excitement, 'my' love, 'my' hate. As insight deepens, this is explored as well. The selfless nature of thoughts and emotions can also be revealed and experienced. Remembering our story is simply 'remembering'; it is a mental image from the past. It too arises and passes away. Emotions then are another layer to be examined. Eventually their empty nature becomes clear as well: 'This regret, excitement, jealousy... is just a pattern of perception, a pattern of consciousness. It arises, abides for a while, and passes away.'

It is as if we are digging down, deeper and deeper – from sensations to perceptions to thoughts, then emotions – through layer upon layer of experiences that seem more and more personal, more totally 'who and what I am'. And when the nature of sensations, perceptions, thoughts and emotions are recognized as empty of self, awareness continues beyond into the exploration of decision-making and choosing.

Yet even if these other experiences are seen as not-self, *somebody* seems to be making a choice. Someone seems to be saying, 'Go this way, don't go that way.' It feels like a person. It feels like an 'I' who decides. After all, isn't there a 'me' creating karma? But we can dig deeper into that, too. What happens when a decision is being made? Is it really an 'I' who is doing the deciding, the choosing, the intending and the acting? What is the stuff that choosing is made of? These are questions we can ask ourselves as we explore this mind.

THE ANATOMY OF DECISION

Let's take a look at the process of making a decision, for example, when we're driving to reach a destination. First, the mind is aware of arriving at a crossroads. Then there is a perception of possibilities – left, right or straight ahead. Next there is the memory of a plan ('need to go south'). The memory ('need to go south') maps on to the perception ('this is a crossroads'), and intelligence is engaged. The idea arises: 'turn right to go south.' With that thought, the hands and arms move, turning the steering wheel to the right.

As we watch this process unfold, we can ask ourselves, 'Who is deciding?' We reflect, 'Perception is not-self. Memory is not-self. Thinking is not-self. Physical action is not-self.' So there we are, turning right at the crossroads. Someone seems to have made that decision. It certainly looks like 'I' am the one who chose to go right. But when the process is separated out into its constituent parts, that 'I decided' is only an apparent reality. Each of its elements is not-

self – no 'I', no 'me', no 'mine' – can be found. Thus even decision-making is not-self. Right at its very core, there is no person; there is just mind, awake to the present.

When there is a strong influence from *avijjā* (delusion, not seeing clearly), choices are guided by desire, craving, compulsion, fear, aversion, unconscious habits. Those apparent choices are guided by 'me' chasing after what 'I' like, or 'me' running away from what 'I' am afraid of, or 'me' opposing and attacking what 'I' don't like, or me opinionating about the world. Such actions are reactive, acquisitive, conflicted, afflicted and lead easily to *dukkha*.

With *avijjā*, when it is not recognized that the mind is what matters, then the world is the locus of all our hopes and is blamed for all our suffering. As Jean Paul Sartre famously wrote, through the voice of one of his characters, 'Hell is other people,'³⁷ although I'm not sure if he meant that ironically or literally. The crucial relevance of this mind, and how its attitude can be changed for the better, is not recognized and the only way that any happiness can be found is taken to be by rearranging the world: by getting what we like and getting rid of what we don't like. This is a sorry prison; no exit indeed.

But when there is *vijjā* (awakened awareness), choices are guided by mindfulness and wisdom (*sati-paññā*), attunement to the time, place and situation. There is no 'self' involved. If an action is taken and it works well, there is no 'self' to get

37. Jean Paul Sartre, *No Exit, and Three Other Plays*, (Paris, 1944), Vintage International edn. (1989).

drunk on it. And if an action doesn't work, there is clear comprehension: 'This road is closed. Let's take a detour.' There is no sting of failure. The experience is that of freedom and ease in all circumstances, 'wide open, free as air,' as the Buddha put it. When the mind learns to consider, choose and act based on mindfulness and wisdom rather than on self-view and blind habit, the heart is freed. It is no longer imprisoned by the traumas of longing for success, fear of failure, desperation for approval, fear of criticism. Rather, we do what we do, based on mindfulness and wisdom, and let the world make of it what it will.

When there is success and things go well, we can enjoy it but not take it as a personal achievement, carrying it around like a big prize. There is just the sweet taste of things going well. And when things go badly and fall apart, we often learn deeply significant lessons from the experience. We can remind ourselves, there is just the bitter taste of things going badly – it's just a taste, empty and ownerless. We don't have to take it personally. Besides, something that might seem like a 'success' may lead to all kinds of trouble, while a so-called 'failure' may provide unique, precious and wonderful opportunities.

In the final analysis then the nature of the subject – the feelings of 'I' the experiencer, 'I' who remembers, 'I' who thinks, 'I' who plans, 'I' who decides, and 'I' who acts – is revealed as completely empty, like a lump of foam or a water bubble or a mirage, like the layers of the onion or a conjuring trick – there is a shape but it is empty, void of substance.

THE MIND IS WHAT MATTERS - PHENOMENA AND NOUMENA

The thread of this book has followed an arc – attending first to the nature of the object, ‘the world’, *loka*, the field of sensory experiencing, and then later addressing the nature of the subject, *vijjā*, awakened awareness, *tathāgata*, that which has gone to suchness/come to suchness, or ‘Buddha in mind’ in Ajahn Chah’s terminology. Along the way it has been pointed out that, since the object is Dhamma and the subject is Dhamma, the essence of the practice of Dhamma is thereby in Dhamma fully knowing itself – the knowing is Dhamma, the known is Dhamma, everything is Dhamma. Again, in the words of Ajahn Chah, the consummation of the practice is in ‘being Dhamma’³⁸. Lastly it has explored the ways in which such ‘being Dhamma’ can be embodied in our day-to-day actions, intentions and experiences.

Perhaps a relatable way to speak of the fundamental arrangement of things is in terms of the Triple Gem, as was touched on in Chapter 1. This is to say that whereas the Dhamma can be regarded as the substance, the Buddha is then the function and the Sangha (symbolizing wholesome action, that which loves the good) is the manifestation.

The Buddha (awakened awareness, *vijjā*) thus is the bridge, the channel of connection between the conditioned and the Unconditioned. It is the link

38. Ajahn Chah, *Being Dharma: The Essence of the Buddha’s Teachings*, translated & edited by Paul Breiter, Shambhala Publications Inc., (2001).

between the Unborn, Unoriginated, Unformed Dhamma and the world of people, actions and things. It is the medium of mutual enfoldment between phenomena and noumena – the latter word meaning ‘that which can only be apprehended by intuition’.

The Dhamma, in its essence, cannot be described in terms of concept or language. As the Buddha said to Upasīva:

One who has reached the end has no criterion by which they can be measured. That which can be spoken of is no more. You cannot say, ‘They do not exist,’ but when all modes of being, all phenomena are removed, then all means of speaking have gone too.

(SN 1076)

Dhamma embodies that domain where time, space, identity, number and language do not apply:

There is that sphere of being (*āyatana*) where there is no earth, no water, no fire nor wind ... there, there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution and no support.

(UD 8.1)³⁹

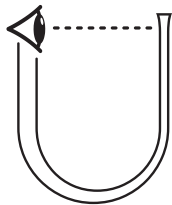
39. See Appendix, §2 for full quotation.

However, that numinous, noumenal quality can be directly intuited, it can be realized.

By establishing the Buddha's fundamentally phenomenological approach to the activity of the six sense-spheres, specifically saying, 'This is only your mind's version of the world,' it stops the mind from looking for finality in that which can only be limited.

In a mysterious way, through having done this, it thereby frees the mind up to take a broader view, which can then intuit the nature of the mind that is doing the knowing. By letting go of the objects and seeing their empty, conditioned quality, the nature of the subject, as awakened awareness, can be realized. This then leads to the further realization that both subject and object are of fundamentally the same nature, which is Dhamma. This process of awakening thus culminates simply in the Dhamma being fully aware of its own reality.

This direct realization, awakening to the Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed Dhamma, could be called a noumenological approach to the practice. It represents, in a way, the universe directly knowing its own nature.



In the physicist John A. Wheeler's well-known U diagram, depicting the participatory, self-observing universe, it shows the process of evolution from the Big Bang to the point where human consciousness can look back at its own origins.

He spelled out his reasoning for the idea of the participatory nature of the known universe thus:

It from bit. Otherwise put, every *it* - every particle, every field of force, even the space-time continuum itself - derives its function, its meaning, its very existence entirely - even if in some contexts indirectly - from the apparatus-elicited answers to yes-or-no questions, binary choices, bits. It from bit symbolizes the idea that every item of the physical world has at bottom - a very deep bottom, in most instances - an immaterial source and explanation; that which we call reality arises in the last analysis from the posing of yes-no questions and the registering of equipment-evoked responses; in short, that all things physical are information-theoretic in origin and that this is a *participatory universe*.⁴⁰

To my mind this indicates that, as the philosopher Steven French pointed out, there is a deep connection between the phenomenological approach to knowledge and the 'facts' of the physical world, from the Western point of view. As French recently observed, '[T]he phenomenological interpretation of

40. John A. Wheeler, *A Journey Into Gravity and Spacetime*, Scientific American Library, New York: W.H. Freeman, (1990).

quantum physics deserves to be rescued from history and considered on its own merits.⁴¹

From the Buddhist perspective, these observations are brilliantly perceptive but they only go so far in helping us to live happier lives, and to experience genuine freedom and fulfillment. The Buddha's teaching echoes the principle that it is a participatory universe and that the means of observing it directly fashions the nature of what is observed (S 35.116). However, it then takes the principle a step further, through the processes of meditation and wise reflection, as well as the disciplines of virtuous behaviour and generosity.

It is perhaps unfair to generalize but Western, non-theistic thinking of the type described here largely says, 'We can only meaningfully speak about what we know through the senses and that is defined by language, number, concept and the means of sensing,' and then stops with that as the boundary of knowledge.

In contrast, the Buddha's teaching says, effectively, 'That is true but that which is *most* important cannot really be spoken about.' This is not because it is forbidden for some esoteric religious reason but rather because, as was quoted above, 'One who has reached the end has no criterion by which they can be measured,' and, 'The Tathāgata is liberated from being reckoned in terms of material form ... feeling ... perceptions ... mental formations ... consciousness.

41. Steven French, *Phenomenology solves quantum puzzles - Bringing consciousness back to the quantum table*, IAI News, Issue 90, (21st July, 2020).

He is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable, like the great ocean.'⁴²

In Buddhist practice then, the appreciation of the limited, subjective nature of all phenomena is merely 'Part 1', which leads to letting go of the conditioned and then to 'Part 2', the awakening to and realization of that which is not conditioned: 'The Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed,' the noumenal, the Dhamma. It is only in this latter sphere (*āyatana*) that fulfilment, freedom and true peace are to be found.

Buddhist practice is thus a liberative science which ripens in a heartfelt, spacious unentangled participating of awareness in the world of people, actions and things. *Vijjā* and *carāṇa*, transcendent awareness and immanent action – being distinct aspects of the same actuality – are easefully, seamlessly harmonized as a result of this effort. Fully knowing and loving the world, the heart is not limited by it.

AND THE DEW...

In order to embody the Dhamma in this way let awareness have its effect upon the field of experience, like the sun evaporating the dew of a grassy meadow in

42. Having said the above it should be acknowledged that David Bohm ventured into this territory in his writings on the implicate and explicate order largely, it seems, inspired by his insights gained from collaborating with J. Krishnamurti.

In addition I once read an interesting comment about Ludwig Wittgenstein and the famous dénouement of his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, which reads: 'What we cannot speak about, we must pass over in silence.' Whereas that statement is (reportedly) taken by most of his readers to mean, 'If you can't talk about it, it is not worthy of attention,' the author was reputedly deeply aggrieved by this regular misreading since, apparently, what he had meant by it was rather the opposite. That is to say, 'Only that which is unnameable, non-conceptual, is really worthy of attention.'

the morning, opening up the daisies that had closed at for the night. When the sun appears, the daisies open; it is a natural response. The dew doesn't have to decide whether it is going to evaporate today or not. The daisies don't have a committee meeting to decide if they are going to open.

Bring awareness to that stiff neck, that clenched jaw, that professional jealousy, that family conflict. Watch the effect of awareness on your tight shoulders – softening and relaxing. See how awareness affects your social situations, your work life, your relationships. There is no 'I' doing anything. The universe is self-adjusting; that is the natural effect of awareness itself.

We can align the heart with this organic process both in meditation and in our daily lives – business decisions, family crises, wedding planning, funeral planning, getting to the airport, meditation retreats. It can all flow and grow in the same way.

The Dhamma is the integrative principle of the universe; it is a homeostatic, self-regulating system. No 'I' or 'me' or 'mine' is really fundamentally necessary and harmonious well-being for the individual is the result of the conscious embodying of this reality. As a natural but by no means guaranteed consequence, the well-being of the whole eco-system is thereby supported and all beings will benefit in some way.

Don't take my word for it.

Explore for yourself.



ON THE END OF THE WORLD - 1

1.

Friends, when the Blessed One rose from his seat and entered his dwelling after reciting a synopsis in brief without expounding the meaning in detail, that is: 'Bhikkhus, I say that the end of the world cannot be known, seen, or reached by travelling. Yet, bhikkhus, I also say that without reaching the end of the world there is no making an end to suffering,' I understand the detailed meaning of this synopsis as follows:

That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world (*lokasaññi*), a conceiver of the world (*lokamānī*) – this is called 'the world' in the Noble One's Discipline. And what, friends, is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world? The eye is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. The ear ... The nose ... The tongue ... The body ... The mind is that in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world. That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world – this is called 'the world' in the Noble One's Discipline.

(S 35.116)

ON THE UNCONDITIONED

2.

There is that sphere of being (*āyatana*) where there is no earth, no water, no fire nor wind; no sphere of infinity of space, of infinity of consciousness, of nothingness or even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there, there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution and no support: this, just this, is the end of *dukkha*.

(UD 8.1)

3.

There is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed and if there was not the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed then escape from the born, the originated, the created and the formed would not be possible. But because there is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed, therefore escape from the born, the originated, the created and the formed is possible.

(UD 8.3)

ON THE END OF THE WORLD - 2

4.

‘In me, Venerable Sir, there arose the wish: “I will get to the end of the world by walking.” I walked thus for a hundred years without sleeping, and pausing only to eat and drink and answer the calls of nature. Even though I exerted myself thus for a hundred years, I did not reach the end of the world and eventually I died on the journey.’

To this the Buddha replied:

‘It is true that one cannot reach the end of the world by walking but, unless one reaches the end of the world one will not reach the end of dukkha. It is in this fathom-long body, with its perceptions and ideas, that this world, its origin, its cessation and the way leading to its cessation are to be found.

‘One who knows the world goes to the world’s end,

One who lives the holy life.

With heart serene, they understand the world’s end

And do not hanker for this world or another.’

(S 2.26, A 4.45)

ON NON-MANIFESTING CONSCIOUSNESS

5.

One of the ways in which the Buddha characterized the quality of awareness was to present it as a form of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). This represents a unique usage of the term – customarily ‘*viññāṇa*’ only refers to the conditioned activity of the six senses – however, we also find that the Buddha gives us some adjectives with which to describe it when the term is used in this unique way: ‘*viññāṇaṃ anidassanaṃ anantaṃ sabbaṭṭo pabhaṃ*’ – ‘consciousness that is signless, boundless, all-luminous,’ is one translation of this expression.

It almost goes without saying that there is controversy as to the precise meaning of this enigmatic phrase (it appears in only a couple of places in the Canon: M 49.25 and D 11.85). However, the constellation of meanings of the individual words is small enough to give us a reasonably clear idea of what the Buddha was pointing at.

Firstly, we must assume that he is using ‘*viññāṇa*’ in a broader way than it usually is meant. The Buddha avoided the nit-picking pedantry of many philosophers contemporary with him and opted for a more broad-brush, colloquial style, geared to particular listeners in a language which

they could understand. Thus ‘*viññāṇa*’ here can be assumed to mean ‘knowing’ but not the partial, fragmented, discriminative (vi-) knowing (-*ñāṇa*) which the word usually implies. Instead it must mean a knowing of a primordial, transcendent nature, otherwise the passage which contains it would be self-contradictory.

Secondly, ‘*anidassanaṃ*’ is a fairly straightforward word which means (a-) ‘not, non-, without’ (-*nidassanaṃ*) ‘indicative, visible, manifesting,’ i.e. invisible, empty, featureless, unmanifest; ‘*anantaṃ*’ is also a straightforward term, meaning ‘infinite’ or ‘limitless’. The final phrase, ‘*sabbato pabhaṃ*’ is a little trickier. Here is Bhikkhu Bodhi’s comment from note 513 to the *Majjhima Nikāya*:

‘MA [the ancient Commentary] offers three explanations of the phrase *sabbato pabhaṃ*: (1) completely possessed of splendour (*pabhā*); (2) possessing being (*pabhutaṃ*) everywhere; and (3) a ford (*pabhaṃ*) accessible from all sides, i.e., through any of the thirty-eight meditation objects. Only the first of these seems to have any linguistic legitimacy.’

It is perhaps also significant that both of the instances where this phrase is used by the Buddha are in passages involving the

demonstration of his superiority over the brahmā gods. It is thus conceivable that the phraseology derives from some spiritual or mythological principle dear to the brahmins, and which the Buddha is employing to expand the familiar meaning or to turn it around. This was a common source of the Buddha’s choice of words and metaphorical images.

The longer of the two versions of this phrase comes at the end of a colourful and lengthy teaching tale recounted by the Buddha in the *Kevaddha Sutta* (D 11). He tells of a monk in the mind of whom the question arises: ‘I wonder where it is that the four great elements – Earth, Water, Fire and Wind – cease without remainder?’ Being a skilled meditator, the bhikkhu in question enters a state of absorption and ‘... [T]he path to the gods becomes open to him.’ He begins by putting his question to the first gods he meets, the retinue of the Four Heavenly Kings, the guardians of the world; they demur, saying that they do not know the answer, but that the Four Kings themselves probably do: he should ask them. He does, they do not and the search continues.

Onward and upward through successive heavens he travels, continually being met with the same reply: ‘We do not know but

you should try asking ...' and is referred to the next higher level of the celestial hierarchy. Patiently enduring the protracted process of following this cosmic chain of command, he finally arrives in the presence of the retinue of Mahā-Brahmā, he puts the question to them; once again they fail to produce an answer but they assure him that The Great Brahmā Himself, should He deign to manifest, is certain to provide him with the resolution he seeks. Sure enough, before too long, He appears and at this point we are treated to a taste of the wry wit of the Buddha:

And that monk went up to him and said: 'Friend, where do the four great elements – earth, water, fire, air – cease without remainder?' to which the Great Brahma replied: 'Monk, I am Brahma, Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All Seeing, All Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be.'

A second time the monk said: 'Friend, I did not ask if you are Brahma, Great Brahma ... I asked you where the four great elements cease without remainder.' And a second time the Great Brahma replied as before.

And a third time the monk said: 'Friend, I did not ask you that, I asked where the four great elements – earth, water, fire, air – cease without remainder.' Then, Kevaddha, the Great Brahma took that monk by the arm, led him aside and said: 'Monk, these *devas* believe there is nothing Brahma does not see, there is nothing he does not know, there is nothing he is unaware of. That is why I did not speak in front of them. But, monk, I don't know where the four great elements cease without remainder. And therefore, monk, you have acted wrongly, you have acted incorrectly by going beyond the Blessed Lord and going in search of an answer to this question elsewhere. Now, monk, you just go to the Blessed Lord and put this question to him and whatever answer he gives, accept it.'

So that monk, as swiftly as a strong man might flex or unflex his arm, vanished from the brahmā world and appeared in my presence. He prostrated himself before me, then sat down to one side and said: 'Venerable Sir, where do the four great elements – the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the air element – cease without remainder?'

I replied: ‘But, monk, you should not ask your question in this way: “Where do the four great elements – the earth element, the water element, the fire element, the air element – cease without remainder?” Instead, this is how the question should have been put:

‘Where do earth, water, fire and air no footing find? Where are long and short, small and great, fair and foul, where are “name and form” wholly destroyed?’

And the answer is:

‘Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all-luminous, that’s where earth, water, fire and air find no footing, there both long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there “name and form” are wholly destroyed. With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.’

Thus the Blessed One spoke, and the householder Kevaddha, delighted, rejoiced at his words.

(D 11.81-5, MAURICE WALSH TRANSL.)

An alternative translation renders the final verses thus:

‘Where do earth and water, fire and wind,
long and short, fine and coarse,
Pleasant and unpleasant, no footing find?
Where is it that name and form
Are held in check with no trace left?’

‘Consciousness which is non-manifestative,
endless, lustrous on all sides,

Here it is that earth and water, fire and
wind, no footing find.

Here again are long and short, subtle and
gross, pleasant and unpleasant

Name and form, all cut off without
exceptions.

When consciousness comes to cease, these
are held in check herein.’

(IBID, BHIKKHU NĀṆANANDA TRANS.)

As mentioned earlier, there has been considerable debate over the centuries as to the real and precise meaning of these verses. Rather than to try to put forth the definitive meaning that will settle the question forever, perhaps it’s wiser just to consider the elements of the teaching that are presented here and let one’s own understanding arise from that contemplation.

Having said that, there are two semantic points which are important to understand, in order to appreciate these verses better. Firstly ‘name’ and ‘form’: these are *nāma-rūpa* in the Pali – they are two very common terms and, along with the way they have been translated here, they were used by the Buddha equally to refer to mentality and materiality respectively.

There is no one correct version of what *nāma-rūpa* means and often the most accurate interpretation involves the broad spread of meanings – therefore one will find numerous translations that use mind-and-body, materiality-mentality, name-and-form: all are correct in their own way.

Usefully, in Prof. Rhys Davids' translation of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, he quotes Neumann's rendering of *nāma* and *rūpa* as 'subject and object'. This is a helpful perspective since, for some, the 'cessation of consciousness' or 'the destruction of mind and body' might seem like depressing or nihilistic phrases, whereas 'the dissolution of subject/object dualities' and the freedom ensuing from that, sounds considerably more appealing. In this light it's also worthy of note that the tangible qualities of the mind where no footing can be found for everyday dualisms include 'radiance' and 'limitlessness' – hardly uninviting qualities either.

The second point is the use of the word '*nirodha*'. In the above-quoted Sutta the verb variously translated as 'destroyed', 'cut off' and 'held in check' is *uparujjhati*, which is virtually identical in meaning to *nirujjhati*, the verb derived from '*nirodha*'. Customarily it is translated as 'cessation' as in *dukkha-nirodha*, 'the cessation of suffering'. In the

above translations it, and its derivations, have been variously rendered 'destroyed', 'come to cease' but also 'held in check'. The Pali root of the word is *-rud*, which not only implies to end, stop or quench, but also to hold in check, as an impulsive and restless horse is reined in. Thus there is a breadth of meaning in these key terms, of the last two lines of the verses ... that is easy to miss in the English. Perhaps the best way of paraphrasing them is to say that when the dualistic, discriminative process is checked then the 'thing-ness', the solid externality of the world and the 'me-ness' of the mind are seen as essentially insubstantial. There is no footing for the apparent independent existence of mental or material objects or an independent subject.

AJAHN PASANNO & AJAHN AMARO, *THE ISLAND*, PP 133-7, AMARAVATI PUBLICATIONS, (2020).

ON WORLD ORIGINS

᠆.

Bhikkhus, the round is beginningless. Of the beings that travel and trudge through this round, shut in as they are by ignorance and fettered by craving, no first beginning is describable.

(S 15.1)

7.

There are these four imponderables (*acin-teyya*) that are not to be speculated about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who speculated about them. Which four?

- 1) The range of the mind of a Buddha is an imponderable that is not to be speculated about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who speculated about it.
- 2) The *jhāna*-range of a person in *jhāna* ...
- 3) The [precise working out of the] results of karma ...
- 4) Speculation about [the origin, etc., of] the world is an imponderable that is not to be speculated about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who speculated about it.

These are the four imponderables that are not to be speculated about, that would bring madness and vexation to anyone who speculated about them.

(A 4.77)

8

Aggañña Sutta – ‘On Knowledge of Beginnings’

There comes a time, *Vāseṭṭha*, when, sooner or later after a long period, this world contracts. At a time of contraction, beings are mostly born in the *Ābhassara Brahmā*

world. And there they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious – and they stay like that for a very long time. But sooner or later, after a very long period, this world begins to expand again. At a time of expansion, the beings from the *Ābhassara Brahmā* world, having passed away from there, are mostly reborn in this world. Here they dwell, mind-made, feeding on delight, self-luminous, moving through the air, glorious – and they stay like that for a very long time.

At that period, *Vāseṭṭha*, there was just one mass of water, and all was darkness, blinding darkness. Neither moon nor sun appeared, no constellations or stars appeared, night and day were not distinguished, nor months and fortnights, no years or seasons, and no male and female, beings being reckoned just as beings. And sooner or later, after a very long period of time, savoury earth spread itself over the waters where those beings were. It looked just like the skin that forms itself over hot milk as it cools. It was endowed with colour, smell and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey.

Then some being of a greedy nature said: 'I say, what can this be?' and tasted the savoury earth on its finger. In so doing, it became taken with the flavour, and craving arose in it. Then other beings, taking their cue from that one, also tasted the stuff with their fingers. They too were taken with the flavour, and craving arose in them. So they set to with their hands, breaking off pieces of the stuff in order to eat it. And the result of this was that their self-luminance disappeared. And as a result of the disappearance of their self-luminance, the moon and the sun appeared, night and day were distinguished, months and fortnights appeared, and the year and its seasons. To that extent the world re-evolved.

And those beings continued for a very long time feasting on this savoury earth, feeding on it and being nourished by it. And as they did so, their bodies became coarser, and a difference in looks developed among them. Some beings became good-looking, others ugly. And the good-looking ones despised the others, saying: 'We are better-looking than they are.' And because they became arrogant and conceited about their looks, the savoury earth disappeared. At this they came together and lamented, crying: 'Oh that flavour! Oh that flavour!'

And so nowadays when people say: 'Oh that flavour!' when they get something nice, they are repeating an ancient saying without realizing it. And then, when the savoury earth had disappeared, a fungus cropped up, in the manner of a mushroom. It was of a good colour, smell, and taste. It was the colour of fine ghee or butter, and it was very sweet, like pure wild honey. And those beings set to and ate the fungus. And this lasted for a very long time. And as they continued to feed on the fungus, so their bodies became coarser still, and the difference in their looks increased still more. And the good-looking ones despised the others ... And because they became arrogant and conceited about their looks, the sweet fungus disappeared. Next, creepers appeared, shooting up like bamboo ..., and they too were very sweet, like pure wild honey.

And those beings set to and fed on those creepers. And as they did so, their bodies became even coarser, and the difference in their looks increased still more ... And they became still more arrogant, and so the creepers disappeared too. At this they came together and lamented, crying: 'Alas, our creeper's gone! What have we lost!' And

so now today when people, on being asked why they are upset, say: ‘Oh, what have we lost!’ they are repeating an ancient saying without realizing it.

And then, after the creepers had disappeared, rice appeared in open spaces, free from powder and from husks, fragrant and clean-grained. And what they had taken in the evening for supper had grown again and was ripe in the morning, and what they had taken in the morning for breakfast was ripe again by evening, with no sign of reaping. And these beings set to and fed on this rice, and this lasted for a very long time. And as they did so, their bodies became coarser still, and the difference in their looks became even greater. And the females developed female sex-organs, and the males developed male organs. And the women became excessively preoccupied with men, and the men with women.

(D 27.10-32, MAURICE WALSHÉ TRANS.)

SEE ALSO :

Cakkavatti-Sihanāda Sutta – ‘The Lion’s Roar of a Wheel-Turning Monarch’ (D 26.2-24); *Brahmajāla Sutta* – ‘The All-Embracing Net of Views’ (D 1.2.1-6).

**ON DELIBERATELY
LIMITING THE TEACHINGS**

9.

At one time the Blessed One was staying at Kosambi in the *Siṃsapa* Grove. Then the Blessed One, taking a few *siṃsapa* leaves in his hand, said to the monks: ‘What do you think, monks? Which are the more numerous, the few leaves I have here in my hand, or those up in the trees of the grove?’

‘Venerable Sir, the Blessed One is holding only a few leaves: those up in the trees are far more numerous.’

‘In the same way, monks, there are many more things that I have found out, but not revealed to you. What I have revealed to you is only a little. And why, monks, have I not revealed it?’

‘Because, monks, it is not related to the goal, it is not fundamental to the holy life, does not conduce to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, tranquillity, higher knowledge, enlightenment or Nibbāna. That is why I have not revealed it. And what, monks, have I revealed?’

‘What I have revealed is: “This is Suffering, this is the Arising of Suffering, this is the Cessation of Suffering, and this is the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.” And why, monks, have I revealed it?’

‘Because this is related to the goal, fundamental to the holy life, conduces to disenchantment, dispassion, cessation, tranquillity, higher knowledge, enlightenment and Nibbāna, therefore I have revealed it.

‘Therefore, monks, your task is to learn: “This is Suffering, this is the Arising of Suffering, this is the Cessation of Suffering, this is the Path that leads to the Cessation of Suffering.” That is your task.’

(S 56.31)

10.

Suppose, Mālunkyaṭṭha, a man were wounded by an arrow thickly smeared with poison, and his friends and companions, his kinsmen and relatives, brought a surgeon to treat him. The man would say: ‘I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble or a brahmin or a merchant or a worker.’ And he would say: ‘I will not let the surgeon pull out this arrow until I know the name and clan of the man who wounded me; ... until I know whether the man who wounded me was tall or short or of middle height; ... whether he was of dark or brown or of golden skin; ... from which town or village he came; ... until I know whether the bow was a long bow or a crossbow; ... whether the bowstring was fibre or reed or sinew

or hemp or bark; ... whether the shaft was wild or cultivated; ... what kind of feathers it possessed, whether those of vulture or crow or hawk or peacock or stork; ... what kind of sinew the shaft was bound with, whether ox or buffalo or lion or monkey; ... what kind of arrow head it was, whether it was hoof-tipped or curved or barbed or calf-toothed or oleander ...’

All this would still not be known to that man and meanwhile he would die ... Mālunkyaṭṭha, whether there is the view ‘The universe is eternal’ or the view ‘The universe is not eternal’ etc., there still is birth, there is ageing, there is death, there are sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair, the destruction of which I prescribe here and now ...

Therefore, Mālunkyaṭṭha, remember what I have left unrevealed as unrevealed, and remember what I have revealed as revealed ...

And what have I revealed? ‘This is Suffering, its Origin, its Cessation and the Path Leading to its Cessation,’ this I have revealed. Why have I revealed this? Because it is beneficial, it belongs to the fundamentals of the holy life, it leads to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to Nibbāna. That is why I have revealed it.

(M 63.5-10)

ON DEPENDENT ORIGINATION

11.

And what is the noble method that is well seen and well penetrated by insight?

There is the case where a noble disciple notices:

When this is, that is.

From the arising of this comes the arising of that.

When this isn't, that isn't.

From the cessation of this comes the cessation of that.

In other words:

With ignorance as condition formations come to be.

With formations as condition consciousness comes to be.

With consciousness as condition materiality-mentality comes to be.

With materiality-mentality as condition the six sense-spheres come to be.

With the six sense-spheres as condition contact comes to be.

With contact as condition feeling comes to be.

With feeling as condition craving comes to be.

With craving as condition clinging comes to be.

With clinging as condition becoming comes to be.

With becoming as condition birth comes to be.

With birth as condition, then old age and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair all come into being.

Such is the origination of this entire mass of suffering.

Now, with the remainderless fading, cessation or absence of that very ignorance comes the cessation of formations.

With the cessation of formations comes the cessation of consciousness.

With the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of materiality-mentality.

With the cessation of materiality-mentality comes the cessation of the six sense-spheres.

With the cessation of the six sense-spheres comes the cessation of contact.

With the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling.

With the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving.

With the cessation of craving comes the cessation of clinging.

With the cessation of clinging comes the cessation of becoming.

With the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth.

With the cessation of birth, then old age

and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair all cease.

Such is the cessation of this entire mass of suffering.

This is the noble method that is well seen and well penetrated by insight.

(M 115.11, S 12.41, A 10.92)

It is said in the scriptures that during the weeks immediately following the Buddha's enlightenment, he contemplated this pattern of insight knowledge; it was a pattern that was completely new to him. It describes the essence of both the central spiritual *maïaise* and its solution.

ON CONTEMPLATION OF MIND STATES

12.

How does one abide contemplating mind as merely 'mind'?

One knows a lustful mind as being lustful, a mind free from lust as being free from lust; a hating mind as hating, a mind free from hate as being free from hate; a deluded mind as being deluded, an undeluded mind as being undeluded; a contracted mind as being contracted, a distracted mind as being distracted; a developed mind as being developed, an undeveloped mind as being undeveloped; a concentrated mind as being concentrated, an unconcentrated as being unconcentrated; a liberated mind as

being liberated, an unliberated mind as being unliberated.

In this way one abides contemplating mind as merely 'mind', and both internally and externally, and both in oneself and in others. Or one abides contemplating the nature of arising and passing away in reference to mind. Or mindfulness that 'there is mind' (or 'there is this mood') is maintained to the extent necessary for simple knowledge and awareness. Thus one abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. This is how one abides contemplating mind as merely 'mind'.

(D 22.12, M 10.34-35)

ON NOT-SELF AND THE FIVE *KHANDHAS*

13.

Thus have I heard: At one time the Blessed One was dwelling at Benares in the deer park. Then he addressed the group of five bhikkhus:

'Form, bhikkhus, is not-self. If, bhikkhus, form were self, then form would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to form, "Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus." But inasmuch, bhikkhus, as form is not-self, therefore form leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in

regard to form, “Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.”

‘Feeling is not-self. If, bhikkhus, feeling were self, feeling would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to feeling “Let my feeling be thus, let my feeling not be thus.” But inasmuch, bhikkhus, as feeling is not-self, therefore feeling leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to feeling, “Let my feeling be thus, let my feeling not be thus.”

‘Perception is not-self. If, bhikkhus, perception were self, perception would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to perception “Let my perception be thus, let my perception not be thus.” But inasmuch, bhikkhus, as perception is not-self, therefore perception leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to perception, “Let my perception be thus, let my perception not be thus.”

‘Mental formations are not-self. If, bhikkhus, mental formations were self, mental formations would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to mental formations “Let my mental formations be thus, let my mental formations not be thus.” But inasmuch, bhikkhus, as mental formations are not-self, therefore mental formations lead to affliction, and one is not

able to say in regard to mental formations, “Let my mental formations be thus, let my mental formations not be thus.”

‘Consciousness is not-self. If, bhikkhus, consciousness were self, consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to consciousness, “Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.” But inasmuch, bhikkhus, as consciousness is not-self, therefore consciousness leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to consciousness, “Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus.”

‘What do you think about this, bhikkhus? Is form permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?’

‘Painful, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent, painful, of a nature to change, as “This is mine, I am this, this is my self”?’

‘It is not, Venerable Sir.’

‘What do you think about this, bhikkhus? Is feeling permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?’

‘Painful, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent, painful, of a nature to change, as “This is mine, I am this, this is my self”?’

‘It is not, Venerable Sir.’

‘What do you think about this, bhikkhus? Is perception permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?’

‘Painful, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent, painful, of a nature to change, as “This is mine, I am this, this is my self”?’

‘It is not, Venerable Sir.’

‘What do you think about this, bhikkhus? Are mental formations permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?’

‘Painful, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent, painful, of a nature to change, as “This is mine, I am this, this is my self”?’

‘It is not, Venerable Sir.’

‘What do you think about this, bhikkhus?

Is consciousness permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?’

‘Painful, Venerable Sir.’

‘But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent, painful, of a nature to change, as “This is mine, I am this, this is my self”?’

‘It is not, Venerable Sir.’

‘Wherefore, bhikkhus, whatever is form, past, future, present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or excellent, whether it is far or near, all form should, by means of right wisdom, be seen as it really is, thus: “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.

‘Whatever is feeling, past, future, present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or excellent, whether it is far or near, all feeling should, by means of right wisdom, be seen as it really is, thus: “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.

‘Whatever is perception, past, future, present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or excellent, whether it is far or near, all perception should, by means of right wisdom, be seen as it really is, thus: “This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self”.

‘Whatever are the mental formations, past, future, present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or excellent, whether they are far or near, all mental formations should, by means of right wisdom, be seen as they really are, thus: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self’.

‘Whatever the consciousness is, past, future, present; internal or external; gross or subtle; low or excellent; whether far or near, all consciousness should, by means of right wisdom, be seen as it really is, thus: ‘This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self’.

‘Seeing in this way, bhikkhus, the wise noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, becomes disenchanted with feeling, becomes disenchanted with perception, becomes disenchanted with mental formations and becomes disenchanted with consciousness. Becoming disenchanted their passions fade away; through dispassion they are freed; in freedom the knowledge comes to be: “I am freed,” and they know: “Destroyed is birth, the holy life has been lived, done is what was to be done, there is no more coming into any state of being.”’

Thus spoke the Blessed One; delighted, the group of five bhikkhus rejoiced in what the Blessed One had said. Moreover, while this

discourse was being delivered, the minds of the five bhikkhus were freed from the defilements through clinging no more.

(S 22.59)

14.

On one occasion the Blessed One was dwelling at Ayojjha on the bank of the river Ganges. There the Blessed One addressed the bhikkhus thus:

‘Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near: a bhikkhu inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?’

‘Suppose, bhikkhus, that in the autumn, when it is raining and big raindrops are falling, a water bubble arises and bursts on the surface of the water. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to

them to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a water bubble? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of feeling there is ... a bhikkhu ... investigates it, and it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in feeling?

‘Suppose, bhikkhus, that in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of perception there is ... a bhikkhu ... investigates it, and it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?’

‘Suppose, bhikkhus, that a person needing heartwood, seeking heartwood, wandering in search of heartwood, would take a sharp axe and enter a forest. There they would see the trunk of a large plantain tree, straight, fresh, without a fruit-bud core. They would cut it down at the root, cut off the crown, and unroll the coil. As they unrolled the coil, they would not find even soft-wood, let alone heartwood. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and care-

fully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in the trunk of a plantain tree? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of mental formations there are ... a bhikkhu ... investigates them, and they would appear to him to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in mental formations?’

‘Suppose, bhikkhus, that a conjurer or a conjurer’s apprentice would display a magical illusion at a crossroads. A person with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to them to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a magical illusion? So too, bhikkhus, whatever kind of consciousness there is ... a bhikkhu ... investigates it, and it would appear to him to be empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in consciousness?’

‘Seeing thus, bhikkhus, the wise noble disciple experiences disenchantment towards form, disenchantment towards feeling, disenchantment towards perception, disenchantment towards mental formations, disenchantment towards consciousness. Experiencing disenchantment, they become dispassionate. Through dispassion the heart is liberated. When it is liberated there

comes the knowledge: “It is liberated.” They understand: “Birth is ended, the holy life has been lived out, what had to be done has been done, there is no more coming into any state of being.””

This is what the Blessed One said. Having said this, the Fortunate One, the Teacher, further said this:

‘Form is like a lump of foam, feeling a water bubble;
perception is just a mirage, volitions like a plantain,
consciousness, a magic trick - so says the Kinsman of the Sun.
However one may ponder it or carefully inquire,
all appears both void and vacant when it’s seen in truth.’

(S 22.95)

ON CONCEIVING

15.

Bhikkhu, ‘I am’ is a conceiving; ‘I am this’ is a conceiving; ‘I shall be’ is a conceiving; ‘I shall not be’ is a conceiving; ‘I shall be possessed of form’ is a conceiving; ‘I shall be formless’ is a conceiving; ‘I shall be percipient’ is a conceiving; ‘I shall be non-percipient’ is a conceiving. Conceiving is a disease, conceiving is a tumour, conceiving is a barb. By overcoming all conceivings,

bhikkhu, one is called a sage at peace. And the sage at peace is not born, does not age, does not die; they are not shaken and are not agitated. For there is nothing present in them by which they might be born. Not being born, how could they age? Not ageing, how could they die? Not dying, how could they be shaken? Not being shaken, why should they be agitated?

(M 140.31)

ON THE UNAPPREHENDABLE, UNANALYSABLE NATURE OF THE TATHĀGATA

16.

[T]he Tathāgata has abandoned that material form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... consciousness, by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him; he has cut it all off at the root, made it like a palm stump, done away with it so that it is no longer subject to future arising. The Tathāgata is liberated from being reckoned in terms of material form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... consciousness, Vaccha, he is profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the ocean.

(M 72.20)

17.

The preceding statement is also found in the *Samyutta Nikāya*, in the opening entry of the ‘Connected Discourses on the Undeclared’ (S 44.1) – a rich and fascinating collection of teachings. The Sutta recounts a meeting between the arahant bhikkhuni Khemā, and King Pasenadi of Kosala. The King had been travelling between Saketa and Savatthi and, having to stop overnight in Toranavatthu, he had asked if there were any local *samaṇas* or brahmins whom he might visit and with whom he might have some spiritual discussion. The man sent out to search returns, and says:

‘Sire, there are no *samaṇas* or brahmins in Toranavatthu whom your Majesty could visit. But, sire, there is the bhikkhuni Khemā, a disciple of the Blessed One ... Now a good report concerning this revered lady has been spread abroad thus: “She is wise, competent, intelligent, learned, a splendid speaker, ingenious.” Let your Majesty visit her.’

The King opens the dialogue by asking her whether a Tathāgata exists after death or not, in the familiar quadrilemmal form of the question. To each of the four lemmas [1] exists, 2) doesn’t exist, 3) both does and does not, 4) neither does nor does

not] she replies: ‘The Tathāgata has not declared this.’

His perplexed Majesty then asks: ‘What now, Revered Lady, is the cause and reason that this has not been declared by the Blessed One?’

‘Well then, great king, I will question you about this same matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, great king? Do you have an accountant or calculator or mathematician who can count the grains of sand in the river Ganges thus: “There are so many grains of sand.”?’

‘No, Revered Lady.’

‘Then, great king, do you have an accountant or calculator or mathematician who can measure the water in the great ocean thus: “There are so many gallons of water.”?’

‘No, Revered Lady. For what reason? Because the great ocean is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom.’

‘So too, great king, the Tathāgata has abandoned that material form ... feeling ... perception ... mental formations ... consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata might describe him ... he is deep, immeasurable, hard to fathom, like the great ocean.’

AJAHN PASANNO & AJAHN AMARO, *THE ISLAND*, PP 173-4, AMARAVATI PUBLICATIONS, (2020).

ON THE FOUR BASES OF
SUCCESS AND DESIRE

18.

Thus have I heard. On one occasion the Venerable Ānanda was dwelling at Kosambi in Ghosita's Park. Then the brahmin Uṇṇābha approached the Venerable Ānanda and exchanged greetings with him. When they had concluded their greetings and cordial talk, he sat down to one side and said to the Venerable Ānanda: 'For what purpose, Master Ānanda, is the holy life lived under the ascetic Gotama?'

'It is for the sake of abandoning desire, brahmin, that the holy life is lived under the Blessed One.'

'But, Master Ānanda, is there a path, is there a way for the abandoning of this desire?'

'There is a path, brahmin, there is a way for the abandoning of this desire.'

'But, Master Ānanda, what is the path, what is the way for the abandoning of this desire?'

'Here, brahmin, a bhikkhu develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to desire and volitional formations of striving. He develops the basis for spiritual power that possesses concentration due to energy...concentration due to mind ... concentration due to

investigation and volitional formations of striving. This, brahmin, is the path, this is the way for the abandoning of this desire.'

'Such being the case, Master Ānanda, the situation is interminable, not terminable. It is impossible that one can abandon desire by means of desire itself.'

'Well then, brahmin, I will question you about this matter. Answer as you see fit. What do you think, brahmin, did you earlier have the desire, "I will go to the park," and after you went to the park, did the corresponding desire subside?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you earlier arouse energy, thinking, "I will go to the park," and after you went to the park, did the corresponding energy subside?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you earlier make up your mind, "I will go to the park," and after you went to the park, did the corresponding resolution subside?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Did you earlier make an investigation, "Shall I go to the park?" and after you went to the park, did the corresponding investigation subside?'

'Yes, sir.'

‘It is exactly the same, brahmin, with a bhikkhu who is an Arahant, one whose taints are destroyed, who has lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached his own goal, utterly destroyed the fetters of existence, and is completely liberated through final knowledge. He earlier had the desire for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding desire subsided. He earlier had aroused energy for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding energy subsided. He earlier had made up his mind to attain arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding resolution subsided. He earlier made an investigation for the attainment of arahantship, and when he attained arahantship, the corresponding investigation subsided.

‘What do you think, brahmin, such being the case, is the situation terminable or interminable?’

‘Surely, Master Ānanda, such being the case, the situation is terminable not interminable. Magnificent, Master Ānanda! ... From today let Master Ānanda remember me as a lay follower who has gone for refuge for life.’

(S 51.15, BHIKKHU BODHI TRANS.)

19.

Why is the practice so difficult and arduous? Because of desires. As soon as we sit down to meditate we want to become peaceful, if we didn’t want to find peace we wouldn’t sit, we wouldn’t practise. As soon as we sit down we want peace to be right there, but wanting the mind to be calm makes for confusion, and we feel restless. This is how it goes. So the Buddha says, ‘Don’t speak out of desire, don’t sit out of desire, don’t walk out of desire. Whatever you do, don’t do it with desire.’ Desire means wanting, if you don’t want to do something you won’t do it. If our practice reaches this point, we can get quite discouraged. How can we practise? As soon as we sit down there is desire in the mind.

It’s because of this that the body and mind are difficult to observe, if they are not the self nor belonging to self, then who do they belong to? Because it’s difficult to resolve these things, we must rely on wisdom. The Buddha says we must practise with ‘letting go’. But if we let go, then we just don’t practise, right? Because we’ve let go.

Suppose we went to buy some coconuts in the market, and while we were carrying them back someone asked:

‘What did you buy those coconuts for?’

‘I bought them to eat.’

‘Are you going to eat the shells as well?’

‘No.’

‘I don’t believe you. if you’re not going to eat the shells then why did you buy them also?’

Well what do you say? How are you going to answer their question? We practise with desire, if we didn’t have desire we wouldn’t practise. Practising with desire is *taṇhā*. Contemplating in this way can give rise to wisdom, you know. For example, those coconuts: Are you going to eat the shells as well? Of course not. Then why do you take them? Because the time hasn’t yet come for you to throw them away. They’re useful for wrapping up the coconut in. If, after eating the coconut, you throw the shells away, there is no problem.

Our practice is like this. The Buddha said, ‘Don’t act on desire, don’t speak from desire, don’t eat with desire.’ Standing, walking, sitting or reclining, whatever, don’t do it with desire. This means to do it with detachment. It’s just like buying the coconuts from the market. We’re not going to eat the shells but it’s not yet time to throw them away. We keep them first.

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<i>acinteyya</i>	Literally, ‘imponderable’; an aspect of reality that cannot be encompassed or validly represented by conceptual thought. There are four such named in the Pali Canon: 1) the range of the mind of a Buddha, 2) the workings of karma, 3) the different qualities of absorptive concentration, 4) the ultimate beginning of things.
<i>akāliko</i>	Literally, ‘timeless’; one of the attributes of Dhamma.
<i>anattā</i>	Literally, ‘not-self,’ i.e. impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person nor belonging to a person. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>anicca</i>	Transient, impermanent, unstable, having the nature to arise and pass away. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>anurakkhana</i>	To protect, maintain in being. One of the four aspects of Right Effort.
<i>attā</i> (PALI) <i>atman</i> (SKT.)	The feeling of selfhood. In the Pali this is recognized as a delusory impression; in the Skt. it is taken as the absolute reality, the fundamental nature of a being.
<i>avijjā</i>	Literally, ‘not knowing’, ignorance, nescience, unawareness. In Buddhist usage it is distinguished from the usual English meaning of ‘not having the facts’.
<i>āyatana</i>	Sphere of being; also applied to the six sense faculties, as in <i>saḷāyatanā</i>
<i>bhāvanā</i>	Development, cultivation; also a synonym for meditation in common usage.
<i>bhavanirodho</i>	Literally, ‘the ending of becoming’; a state associated with the realization of Nibbāna.
<i>bhava-taṇhā</i>	Literally, ‘the craving to become, to be, to exist’; this is named as one of the three causes of <i>dukkha</i> in the Buddha’s first discourse.

<i>bhikkhu</i> (PALI) <i>bhikṣu</i> (SKT.)	A fully ordained Buddhist monk.
<i>Bodhisatta</i> (PALI) <i>Bodhisattva</i> (SKT.)	Literally, ‘A being who is intent on Buddhahood’; one who has made the vow to realize ‘Unsurpassed Full and Complete Enlightenment’ in this or a future life. The Pali ‘Bodhisatta’ most often refers to the previous lives, or the early part of the last life of the Buddha Gotama – the Buddha of this current age.
Bodhisatta Gotama	A name used to refer to the Buddha before his enlightenment.
<i>brahmacariya</i>	Literally, ‘divine conduct’; the holy life, usually referring to the monastic life, particularly living according to vows of celibacy.
<i>brahmā god</i>	A celestial being; a god in one of the higher spiritual realms.
<i>brahmā world</i>	One of the higher spiritual realms.
brahmin	A member of one of the four main castes, in Indian society. They take their name from the myth that they were born from the god Brahmā’s mouth.
Buddha	The Understanding One, the Awakened One, who knows things as they are; a potential in every human being. The historical Buddha, Siddhattha Gotama, lived and taught in India in the 5th century B.C.E.
<i>buddho</i>	The quality of awakened awareness; often used as a mantra word for meditation.
<i>chanda</i>	Interest, zeal, enthusiasm, desire.
<i>cittānupassana</i>	The contemplation of moods and mind states.
<i>deva</i>	A heavenly being, an angel; a being that abides in any one of the seven lower heavens in classical Buddhist cosmology.

Dhamma (PALI)	The Teaching of the Buddha as contained in the scriptures; not dogmatic in character, but more like a raft or vehicle to convey the disciple to deliverance. Also, the Truth towards which that Teaching points; that which is beyond words, concepts or intellectual understanding. When written as ' <i>dhamma</i> ' this refers to a 'mind object', an 'item' or a 'thing'.
Dharma (SKT.)	
<i>dhutaṅga</i> (PALI)	Literally, 'a means of shaking off'; the thirteen ascetic practices that the Buddha allowed his disciples to use, to sharpen the focus of their Dhamma practice. The Thai usage of the word also refers to the lifestyle of wandering forest monastics, who use these practices actively, and specifically to long journeys taken on foot through the countryside by them.
<i>tudong</i> (THAI)	
<i>dukkha</i>	Literally, 'hard to bear' – dis-ease, restlessness of mind, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness, discontent, suffering. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>dukkha-nirodha</i>	The cessation of <i>dukkha</i> ; the third of the Four Noble Truths.
<i>dukkha-samudaya</i>	The cause of <i>dukkha</i> ; the second of the Four Noble Truths.
Four Heavenly Kings	The rulers of the second of the seven sensual heavens, in classical Buddhist cosmology.
Four Noble Truths	The core teaching of the Buddha. The Truth of Unsatisfactoriness; the Truth of the Origin of Unsatisfactoriness; the Truth of the Cessation of Unsatisfactoriness; the Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Unsatisfactoriness.
<i>iddhipāda</i>	The 'bases of success' or 'roads to power'; the four qualities required to arrive at fulfilment of any task, irrespective of its moral, neutral or immoral character. These are: <i>chanda</i> (interest), <i>virīya</i> (energy), <i>citta</i> (consideration) and <i>vimaṃsa</i> (review).

<i>jhāna</i>	Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single physical sensation or mental notion.
karma (ENG. & SKT.)	In popular usage its meaning includes action, habitual impulses, volitions and intentions together with the results or effects of the action. The Pali word ' <i>kamma</i> ' simply means 'action' or a cause which is created by habitual impulses, volitions, intentions. In Pali the proper term for the result of such action is <i>vipāka</i> , hence <i>kamma-vipāka</i> means the combination of an intentional act and the results that come from it.
<i>khandha</i>	Literally: 'group', 'aggregate', 'heap' or 'lump' – the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of psycho-physical existence (form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness).
<i>loka</i>	The world; meaning the planet, the cosmos or the realm of experience, according to context.
<i>lokamānī</i>	Literally: 'a conceiver of the world'.
<i>lokasaññī</i>	Literally: 'a perceiver of the world'.
<i>mamaṅkara</i>	Literally: 'mine-making', mine-ness, the feeling of ownership; it is often mentioned along with <i>ahaṅkara</i> , meaning 'I-making', I-ness, the feeling of being someone.
<i>muditā</i>	Sympathetic joy; delight at the good fortune of others; one of the four Sublime Abidings.
Nibbāna (PALI) Nirvāṇa (SKT.)	Literally, 'coolness' – the state of liberation from all suffering and defilements, the goal of the Buddhist path.
<i>pahāna</i>	Letting go, abandoning.

rūpa	Form or matter. The physical elements that make up the body, i.e. earth, water, fire and wind (solidity, cohesion, temperature and vibration). Also often used as a shorthand term for a Buddha image.
samaṇa	A renunciant, a religious wanderer; one who embraces simplicity, fewness of needs, harmlessness and a contemplative lifestyle.
sammappadhānā	The four aspects of Right Effort; these are listed as: <i>saṃvara</i> (restraint), <i>paḥāna</i> (letting go), <i>bhāvanā</i> (development) and <i>anurakkhana</i> (to protect or maintain).
sammā-vayāmo	Right Effort; one of the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path.
saṃvāra	Restraint.
sandiṭṭhiko	Literally, ‘apparent here and now’; one of the classically enumerated qualities of the Dhamma.
saṅkhārā	Formations, usually meaning ‘mental formations’, especially volitional impulses; all mental states such as thoughts, emotions, memories, fantasies, desires, aversions and fears, as well as states of concentration; the second of the links in the process of dependent origination.
saññā	Perception, the mental function of recognition.
sati-paññā	Mindfulness conjoined with wisdom; this signifies a full awareness of the nature of experiencing along with appreciation of the objects of awareness.
sati-sampajañña	Mindfulness conjoined with clear comprehension, an intuitive awareness; this signifies the full awareness of an object of experience along with appreciation of the context within which it is apprehended, i.e. the time, the place and the situation.

<i>sīla</i>	Virtue, morality; this can refer to either the formal structure of skilful behaviours, as codified into various numbers and types of Precepts according to an individual's spiritual commitment or formal adoption of monastic training, or it can refer to the goodness-loving quality of the heart itself. This latter is also referred to as <i>guṇadhama</i> .
<i>siṃsapa</i>	A type of tree native to India, <i>Dalbergia sisu</i> .
<i>sukha</i>	Happiness, gladness, pleasure, pleasant feeling.
<i>suññatā</i>	Emptiness.
Sutta (PALI) sūtra (SKT.)	Literally, 'a thread'; a discourse given by the Buddha or one of his disciples.
<i>taṇhā</i>	Craving, self-centred desire; the eighth of the links in the process of dependent origination.
<i>tathatā</i>	Suchness.
<i>Tathāgata</i>	Literally, 'thus gone' or 'thus come' – one who has gone beyond suffering and mortality; one who experiences things as they are, without delusion. The epithet that the Buddha applied to himself.
<i>upādāna</i>	Clinging; the ninth of the links in the process of dependent origination.
<i>vedanā</i>	Feeling, sensation; physical and mental feelings that may be either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; the seventh of the links in the process of dependent origination.
<i>vibhava-taṇhā</i>	Literally, 'the craving to not exist'; the desire to get rid of, to not feel or for non-being; this is named as one of the three causes of <i>dukkha</i> in the Buddha's first discourse.

vijjā	Awakened awareness, transcendent knowing.
vimaṃsa	Reviewing, examining the results of action taken; one of the four <i>iddhipāda</i> , the ‘bases of success’ or ‘roads to power’.
Vinaya	The Buddhist monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries on them.
viññāṇa	Usually means ‘sense-consciousness’ or ‘discriminative consciousness’, the process whereby there is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking; rare uses of the word, contrastingly, have it mean ‘transcendent, awakened awareness’.
virīya	Energy.

D: Dīgha Nikāya - The Long Discourses of the Buddha


M: Majjhima Nikāya - The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha

S: Saṃyutta Nikāya - The Discourses of the Buddha Related by Subject

A: Aṅguttara Nikāya - The Discourses of the Buddha Related by Numbers

Ud: Udāna - The Inspired Utterances of the Buddha

SN: Sutta Nipāta - A collection of the Buddha's teachings, in poetic form



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AJAHN AMARO
MIND IS WHAT MATTERS
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