

*The
Secret
of
Happiness*

AJAHN CANDASIRI

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THIS SMALL VOLUME IS DEDICATED TO MY LONG-STANDING
KALYĀNAMITTA, AJAHN SUNDARĀ, WHO HAS SHARED A GREAT MANY OF
THE UPS, DOWNS AND THORNY BITS ALONG THE WAY; ALSO, TO ALL THE
OTHER SISTERS (BROWN OR WHITE*) WHO, OVER THE YEARS, HAVE BEEN
AND CONTINUE TO BE FAITHFUL MIRRORS AND GUIDES.

I AM DEEPLY GRATEFUL TO THEM ALL.

*This refers to the colour of robes worn by *sīladharā* nuns (brown) and 8 precept novices or *anagārikās* (white).

Introduction and Acknowledgements

This small book came about following a day of practice organized by the Buddhist Women's Network (BWN) held at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in August 2019. Almost all of the meditations and reflections were offered that day, with the exception of 'Generosity, Contentment and Gratitude', a short essay written during the 2021 winter retreat.

The idea for the topic and title, 'The Secret of Happiness', came about after reflecting on my first meeting with Ajahn Sumedho in 1977, just a few weeks after his arrival in the UK. I had been very impressed by the sense of ease and joy that he seemed to carry with him. That, in itself, it was remarkable. What made it even more remarkable was what I had been told about the monks: that they followed an extremely exacting way of life and a discipline that required

them to rise at 4.00 a.m. for meditation, and to eat only one meal a day before noon. They had no money, no entertainment, no sexual contact of any kind. The list of things they had given up was long – and yet... and yet... they seemed deeply happy and at ease. My question was, ‘Was it *in spite of* this Rule – or *because of it*?...’ I began to suspect the latter. It became clear to me that true happiness can only arise in a heart that is not troubled with remorse or regret about unskilful speech or actions; and that true ease and contentment arise out of simplicity – from the paring away of possessions and activities simply to what is needed for survival.

Of course, for most people, such standards are unrealistic, but the basic principles still apply: living carefully and responsibly, and simplifying our lives, leads to less stress and more happiness. I’ll say more about that later on.

There are several guided meditations included and I would suggest that you make a recording, reading out the text – slowly, and with appropriate pauses. This can be used as a support for your own practice, or shared with others. If you practise with others regularly, you could also take turns to read out the text as a guide for your partner or others in the group.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge those people who have contributed their time, effort and skills to enable the teachings to be offered in this way. Firstly, the Amaravati retreat managers who organized the event at the instigation of the BWN, and arranged for the recording to be made. Their gentle support and unflappability have supported me, and countless others, through a great many days of practice at Amaravati. Adam Long, encouraging, enthusiastic and immensely skilled as ever, transcribed the recordings and provided an initial edit. Joanna Dowey took

up the daunting task of arranging and ordering the Q&A section, as well as offering numerous suggestions. Ajahn Sucitto has kindly offered to review the text in order to correct any obvious errors, and enable a presentation that can be most accessible to those for whom it is intended. Maureen Bodenbach made some extremely helpful suggestions, and Eleonora Monti brought her professional eye to proofread the text. I'm particularly grateful to my philosopher brother, David Cockburn; he took time to read it, and to make some thought-provoking comments. Finally, Nick Halliday, whose design skills and knowledge have enabled the physical manifestation of *'The Secret of Happiness'*.

May it serve as a support and encouragement for all those setting out on the Buddhist Path of Liberation – and a reminder for those already on the Path and who may have forgotten, in the scramble to arrive at the destination, to enjoy the journey!

Key to Abbreviations

- M** MAJJHĪMA NIKĀYA (WISDOM PUBLICATIONS
1995 TRANSLATED BY BHIKKHU ÑĀNAMOLI
AND BHIKKHU BODHI)
- DHP** DHAMMAPADA (A RENDERING BY AJAHN
MUNINDO – ARUNA PUBLICATIONS, 2016)
- A** ANGUTTARA NIKĀYA (WISDOM PUBLICATIONS,
TRANSLATED BY BHIKKHU BODHI, © 2012)
VIN. MV.: VINAYA PITAKA - MAHĀVAGGA

What is the purpose and benefit of wholesome virtuous behaviour?

For a virtuous person, one whose behaviour is virtuous, no volition need be exerted: 'Let non-regret arise in me.' It is natural that non-regret arises in a virtuous person, one whose behaviour is virtuous.

For one without regret, no volition need be exerted: 'Let joy arise in me.' It is natural that joy arises in one without regret.

For one who is joyful, no volition need be exerted: 'Let rapture arise in me.'

For one with a rapturous mind no volition need be exerted: 'Let my body be tranquil.'

For one tranquil in body, no volition need be exerted: 'Let me feel pleasure.'

For one feeling pleasure, no volition need be exerted: 'Let my mind be concentrated.'

For one who is concentrated, no volition need be exerted: 'Let me know and see things as they really are.'

For one who knows and sees things as they really are, no volition need be exerted: 'Let me be disenchanted and dispassionate.'

For one who is disenchanted and dispassionate, no volition need be exerted: 'Let me realize the knowledge and vision of liberation.'

Thus bhikkhus, one stage flows into the next stage, one stage fills up the next stage, for going from the near shore to the far shore.

(A.10:1)

Three Refuges and Five Precepts

I chose '*The Secret of Happiness*' as a title, both for the original workshop and for this book, because I thought that everybody would be interested and would want to discover the secret of happiness! But it's not really a secret. You don't have to look very far to see what brings happiness, and what undermines it.

In our society, there is plenty of encouragement to reach out for whatever it is that you imagine will bring happiness. People may think that once they have a successful career, lots of money, a nice house, wonderful kids – *then* they'll be happy. Unfortunately, many people who have all those things aren't very happy... It seems that getting things just leads to wanting more things. You get the most wonderful house – but then you want a bigger house, a better house. You buy the latest, most fantastic computer – and within

two years, it's no good; people say you should put it on the rubbish heap. 'You must have this computer with this system! It's much faster, and has more capabilities...' Bigger. Better. Faster. Does that make us happy? I think not.

I'd like to begin by saying something about the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts which are helpful guides; these are an important foundation for us, if we want to discover the secret of happiness. That might be a bit of a surprise to you but I think that, over time, it will come to make perfect sense.

When you look carefully into the teachings of the Buddha you'll find that they are simply what we might call 'common sense'. So I suppose the biggest secret of happiness is that it's simply common sense – but unfortunately, we're not always terribly sensible. That's the main difficulty. So, let's start with talking about the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts.

As we were doing the puja, even those of you who are unfamiliar with the teaching will have noticed that we bowed three times. You will also have heard the three words: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. Now the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are what we refer to as the Three Refuges, or the Triple Gem. These enduring qualities can be likened to a place of complete safety, or seen as most precious and beautiful jewels.

The word ‘Buddha’ refers to the quality of awakened awareness. It also, of course, refers to the historical figure of Siddhartha Gotama who became the Buddha, and who lived and taught two thousand five hundred years ago.

In the scriptures it says that the Buddha shared his understanding for the benefit, welfare and happiness of gods and humans. I often remind people of this, because sometimes we can be too intense and serious about our practice.

I managed to spend a lot of time being totally miserable, because I always thought that my practice wasn't good enough. But then I'd remember that the Buddha gave this teaching for *our welfare and happiness*, not to make us feel hopeless or guilty or unworthy. The teachings were offered to lift us up, to make us feel glad.

So now we can celebrate the opportunity we have to spend a whole day contemplating these teachings, so as to better understand how to live with well-being and joy. Remember that we do this for our own welfare, and also for the welfare of those we live with; in fact, it's for the welfare of everybody. We can't know the effect that one smile can have on somebody's day...

The Buddha is one who is awake, who is alert, who understands things as they are – one who sees things in a clear, undeluded way. This is the first Refuge, the first gem.

The second Refuge is the Dhamma. The traditional interpretation of ‘Dhamma’ is the ‘Teachings of the Buddha’. The scriptures are vast; they all point to a truth that each of us can experience directly. So ‘Dhamma’ means the teachings that point to a truth and also, more significantly, the Truth itself. Each one of us has the capacity to realize this – just by being fully present. It is not the same as any ideas you may have: about who and what you are, or what you think you should do in your life. Dhamma is Truth, or reality, as you experience it, right now: this breath, this body and mind. This is the second Refuge, the second Gem: the teachings that point to the Truth you can realize for yourself, when you are fully present and mindful.

The third Refuge is the Sangha, or the community. Sangha represents those people who are sincere in their aspiration to realize Truth. There can be enormous value in practising together in a group; we support each other in our aspiration

as we work towards what is wholesome, what is good. There are all kinds of other groups that practise together doing different things that may not be so skilful. Engaging in such activities can bring an immediate gratification but in the longer term may not make you feel so good.

After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent forty-five years teaching, guiding and encouraging others in their practice of freeing the heart from suffering. These disciples, through applying the teachings in their own lives, came to realize the Truth for themselves. Then they would teach others, passing it on to the next generation. Two thousand five hundred years is a long time – countless women and men have heard the teachings and applied them so that, right now, we can all share in this opportunity to practise according to the Buddha's teachings. In addition to the historical community, we can also think of Sangha as our own inner aspiration and sincerity.

When taking the Five Precepts, it's the custom to begin by establishing oneself in these Three Refuges.

The Five Precepts are the standard that everybody takes as a training while staying in the monastery. Personally, I like to encourage making a lifetime commitment, but I appreciate that for some people that may be asking too much. Not everyone is quite ready to do that, but here in the monastery everyone does their best to keep at least Five Precepts. You can then consider the possibility to making a longer-term commitment, if you have not already done so.

The Five Precepts are:

1. To refrain from deliberately causing harm to any living creature.
2. To refrain from taking things that haven't been given. This includes stealing, cheating – taking anything that one is not entitled to.

3. To refrain from sexual misconduct. We don't exploit others for our own pleasure; we're careful about how we relate to one another.

4. To refrain from wrong speech. This is often interpreted as lying, but it also includes divisive speech, harsh or abusive speech, and pointless chatter.

5. To refrain from the use of intoxicants. This one is important. Some very foolish mistakes can be made under the influence of alcohol or recreational drugs. You might feel wonderful at the time but with intoxication the perception is distorted, and many harmful things can be done or said.

I think this is one of the most significant precepts. It doesn't include medically prescribed drugs – and it doesn't include tea or coffee. Fortunately, these are allowed.

These training guidelines are vital supports for living happily in this human realm. It might seem that you are being

asked to give up things that you enjoy but when you look closely, you can see that those things do not usually lead to true happiness. There may often be a tinge of regret or remorse associated with simply gratifying our desires to get something we like, or to get rid of what we don't like. Whereas, if you keep the precepts with sincerity, they generate a natural sense of well-being. Living as a nun, I've kept these precepts as best I could for over forty years. As a result, I feel glad because even though I've made many mistakes, I know that I haven't deliberately done anything that seriously harmed anybody. Of course, everybody makes mistakes, and it's normal to feel some regret; the important thing is to not allow yourself to be pulled into a sense of guilt or unworthiness, or to linger in the memory of those unfortunate events. Rather, establish presence and, with wise reflection, consider: *'OK. That wasn't very good. What can I learn from it?...'*

So the precepts are a support, like a trellis for plants. You make a trellis and install it; then you plant the seeds or seedlings along beside it, so they can be supported as they grow towards the sun. In the same way, we have these precepts to help us to grow in a good direction towards perfect understanding.

Happiness, Mindfulness and Two Kinds of Thought

At the conclusion of the formal taking of the precepts, there is a final section which is chanted by the leader. The English translation of this is:

*'These are the Five Precepts.
Virtue is a source of happiness.
Virtue is a source of true wealth.
Virtue is a source of peacefulness.
Therefore, let virtue be purified.'*

Instead of ‘virtue’, I prefer to use the word ‘goodness’. You are establishing goodness as a reliable foundation for your practice. It’s a commitment to turn towards the Refuges of Wisdom, Truth and Goodness, and to live carefully and responsibly in a way that doesn’t cause harm to yourself or to others. This is a significant undertaking. It may seem simple, but it is a fundamental training for anyone who is serious about cultivating the happiness of liberation.

Mindfulness Meditation

Twenty years ago, I made a commitment to be happy. This was following a severe illness when I almost died. Nine months prior to that I had been on a pilgrimage to the Buddhist Holy Places to mark my fiftieth birthday. Early on, my companion and I had an apparently random encounter on a train which we hadn’t planned to take. At one station we stopped at, three young men boarded and sat

opposite. One of them began to look at the others' palms. They seemed friendly, so as their conversation drew to a close, my friend and I held out our palms to see what he might have to say. When he looked at mine, he made several rather pertinent comments, finishing with, '*Your life line is quite short. You may live to about fifty.*' (!)

From my point of view, this was the most significant event of the whole pilgrimage. Of course, I didn't take it completely seriously – but I couldn't dismiss it either. It got me reflecting on the fact that even if I didn't die at fifty, I was not going to continue forever. I also naturally began to consider my life, what I needed to do, and how I wanted to live... Aside from expressing appreciation or regret to people with whom I had had significant relationships, the simple thought came that the most important thing is to *enjoy* life. This may sound idealistic. How can we *enjoy* the pain, sorrows and tragedies, the ghastly things that all of us

must expect to encounter? ...I needed to find another way of conveying this sense: ‘*experiencing life*’; ‘*appreciating life*’; ‘*being there for life*’; ‘*living life fully*’ all come close.

Knowing that our life will end at some point makes everything about it precious. I don’t want to waste it – I want to be there for all of it; in other words, to be mindful. I also want to make the best use of the time that I have to learn about suffering, the ways that we struggle in our lives – and to avoid doing that any more. I became particularly interested in learning what undermines a sense of well-being; it became clear to me that hostility, ill-will, anxiety and worry are bad news – if we want to be happy. I also understood that it is possible to live free from these things. Of course, we all want to be happy but, until then, it had never occurred to me that there are things that we can consciously work on to generate well-being.

Here is a quote from the *Dhammapada*, a collection of

deceptively simple and profound teachings of the Buddha:

‘All states of being are determined by mind. It is the mind that leads the way. Just as the wheel of the oxcart follows the hoofprint of the animal that pulls it, so suffering will surely follow when we speak or act impulsively from an impure state of mind.’ (DHP.1)

The phrase ‘*An impure state of mind*’ means a state of mind filled with greed or aversion and ill-will, wishing harm either to ourselves or to somebody else. One consequence of this mind-state is that we act or speak impulsively, without considering the consequences of our action or speech. This happens to all of us, and it can be a cause for unhappiness or regret.

Then the second verse:

‘All states of being are determined by mind. It is mind that leads the way. As surely as our shadow never leaves us, so

happiness will follow, when we speak or act from a pure state of mind.' (DHP.2)

Very simple, isn't it? Of course, it's easier said than done!

This is where meditation comes in. Through meditation and mindfulness training, we learn about our minds; we learn how to be aware of different kinds of thought that arise in the mind. Gradually, we develop skill in immediately recognizing any thought that's going to undermine well-being. We begin to distinguish between those thoughts that we need to be careful about, and thoughts to be cultivated and allowed to grow.

There's one more teaching that I would like to share with you. It's a teaching that comes from before the Buddha was fully enlightened. He saw clearly that there are some thoughts that are helpful, and other thoughts that are less helpful; so he divided his thoughts into two different kinds.

Unhelpful thoughts included thoughts of ill-will, thoughts of cruelty and thoughts of lust, or greed. I think we could also include thoughts of doubt or confusion.

Reading from the text:

‘As I abided diligent, ardent and resolute, a thought of ill-will arose in me. And I understood this leads to my own affliction, to the affliction of others and to the affliction of both. It obstructs wisdom, causes difficulties and leads away from Nibbāna. When I considered thus, it subsided in me. Whenever a thought of cruelty or ill-will arose in me, I abandoned it, removed it, did away with it.’ (M.19: 4-5)

Through meditation, we learn how to recognize when there’s something that’s not helpful arising in the mind, and then to abandon it. As I said before, this can be easier said than done.

The other kind of thoughts, those that support clarity and

well-being, are thoughts of generosity and renunciation, thoughts of non-ill-will (or kindness) and thoughts of non-cruelty (or compassion).

Again, reading from the sutta:

‘The thought of non-cruelty has arisen in me. This does not lead to my own affliction or to other’s affliction or to the affliction of both. It aids wisdom, does not cause difficulties and leads to Nibbāna. If I think and ponder upon this thought even for a night, even for a day, even for a night and a day, I see nothing to fear from it.’ (M.19: 9-10)

Then in the sutta, he uses a wonderful simile about cows:

‘Just as in the last month of the rainy season, in the autumn when the crops thicken, a cowherd would guard his cows by constantly tapping and poking them on this side and that with a stick to check and curb them. Why is that? Because he sees that he could be flogged, imprisoned, fined or blamed if he let

them stray into the crops. So too, I saw in unwholesome states danger, degradation, defilement. And in wholesome states the blessings of renunciation.’ (M.19:7)

So in your own practice, when you see that an unwholesome thought has arisen, you need to prod it and poke it! You need to be constantly watchful. Don't let it take root.

With the other kind of thoughts, thoughts of generosity and renunciation, thoughts of kindness and compassion, the Buddha says this:

‘Just as in the last month of the hot season when all the crops have been brought inside the villages, the cowherd would guard his cows while staying at the root of a tree or out in the open, since he only needs to be mindful that the cows are there. So too, there was need only for me to be mindful that the states are there.’ (M.19: 12)

You see? He makes a clear distinction between the two

kinds of thought. He is extremely watchful around the thoughts of ill-will. We too need to learn to recognize such thoughts, and to abandon them straightaway. Whereas with the wholesome thoughts, mindfulness that they are there is sufficient; although there is also mention in the sutta of the need to take care to avoid excessive excitement and becoming carried away by our 'good ideas', as this can tire the mind and body. I find this helpful to consider.

Meditation

There are many techniques and schools of meditation; people use the word, 'meditation' to mean different things.

When I give a guided meditation it's an encouragement to be present, to learn how to be present. If you've never meditated, that probably sounds rather strange. You'll probably think, *'Well of course I'm present, I'm here!'* But when you start meditating, you can begin to see how much of

the time you are *not* present. I don't mean that in any critical way; it's just a fact. It is a habit of the mind to be somewhere else, to be thinking about the past or future, or vaguely worrying or daydreaming about this or that. Being fully present is not something that comes naturally to most of us. Often, we make things complicated; we become caught up with thinking about all kinds of things.

Meditation is a way of training the mind to be present, it supports presence of mind. People have spoken about the possibility of emptying the mind of thoughts; I think it's important to realize that that doesn't necessarily happen automatically. It's *possible*, and there are people who can forcibly suppress thoughts. They just decide to not think. They grit their teeth, and stop thinking for a while. But for most of us it doesn't happen so easily and, in fact, forceable suppression of thought is not a practice I'd recommend. What I would encourage is to see it more

like riding downhill on a bicycle. When you need to stop, you gently squeeze the brakes so that the bicycle slows gradually. If you put the brakes on suddenly, you tumble over the handlebars! Meditation techniques can support a gradual slowing down, coming to a state of being a little bit more settled.

It's good to remember that all of you have come from situations where you've been quite active. However, now that you're here in the monastery, sitting still, trying to quietly be with the breath, there's not much stimulation. If you've come from London, you will have had to deal with traffic and buses, and goodness knows what else, on your journey here. That's a lot of stimulation. Then there are the interactions, jobs, families – generally, the mind is constantly stimulated; that is what it is familiar with. When you come to a situation where there's less stimulation, it can take a little while for the mind to settle down.

So please don't think that your meditation is terrible, just because you've got a few thoughts in your mind. What is terrible is when people decide they can't meditate because of thinking! I'd like to encourage you by saying that the practice is simply to be present with things as they are. If the mind is thinking, know that it is thinking. That is what's going on in the present. If you're upset and angry, know that you're feeling upset and angry; there can be a quality of presence with that.

Presence is different from reacting: *'I shouldn't have these thoughts! I'm a terrible person! Getting it all wrong! I'm hopeless!'* ...Can you see how such thinking makes you tense up? It prolongs it and makes it worse – and it doesn't make us happy. It doesn't improve anything. Whereas, in meditation, we're learning to hold the mind gently – to create a gentle, peaceful container where it can develop a sense of settling.

We need to appreciate too that by the end of this day of retreat, the mind may still not be totally settled – even if you’ve practised with great sincerity. However, you’ll probably feel a little bit more settled; you may even notice a few gaps between the thoughts. That is something to feel good about. Even if you don’t have any gaps, perhaps you just *recognize* that there are many thoughts in the mind. That is already a good step. If your mind wanders, and you see that your mind is wandering, just noticing that is cause for celebration. So you can all feel good about your practice. Just being able to recognize what is happening in the mind is already a significant insight.

GUIDANCE

SITTING MEDITATION

When preparing to meditate, it's good to take time to find a comfortable sitting position. If you are on the floor and you can sit cross-legged in the lotus or half-lotus posture, that's ideal. Kneeling, using a meditation bench is also fine – and if you need to sit on a chair, that's fine too. The important thing is to find a position that works for you, a position that supports alertness, not so comfortable that you fall asleep. However, if you do fall asleep, please don't worry about it! Of course, I wouldn't encourage it, but it can happen sometimes – particularly if you are very tired.

Sit up nice and straight if you can, and take the time to find a good position for the head – holding it up so that, if your eyes are open, you are looking straight ahead. If you prefer to close the eyes, gently close them maintaining the same position so that you're nicely upright.

GUIDANCE

Take time now to set the body at ease. Relax the body, keeping it upright and as comfortable as possible. Bring the awareness to points of contact with the mat, the floor, or the chair that you're sitting on. Notice a sense of pressure there: if you sit for a very long time that can become quite uncomfortable, but to start with it's alright. Notice that. Then if during the meditation you feel it becoming uncomfortable, try relaxing a bit. If that doesn't ease the discomfort, feel free to gently change position.

Now... just be aware of the body sitting here.

Whatever the body is like – big or small, healthy or unhealthy – just be aware of it as the body that you're living with. Being here, now, aware of it from the inside. You don't need to worry about what it looks like. Just feel how it is to be fully here. Now bring awareness to the breath and its wonderful healing quality; enjoying the soothing experience of the body breathing.

Breathing in... Breathing out...

Imagine that you can direct this breath energy to release any tension from the different parts of the body; beginning with the head, the scalp. It may feel quite tight. See if you can allow the gentle energy of the out-breath to be directed as if to wash through the muscles of the scalp... soothing... softening... You may feel the skin become quite loose, quite soft, as you do this ...

Bring awareness to the face. Be aware of the face, particularly the muscles of the forehead and around the eyes; there can be a lot of tension here. See if you can allow the breath energy to soothe and soften; washing through, releasing, letting go of all the tightness so that the face becomes quite loose, quite soft with no particular expression. You don't need to be concerned about its appearance for now. You are feeling it from the inside; letting it slacken and soften.

Next come to the shoulder area where there can be a lot of tension, particularly if you have been in a stressful situation: doing complicated work, or driving. Breathe through the muscles around the shoulders; feel them drop slightly as you do this. It can be like putting down a big burden...

Notice the weight of the arms. Breathe down through the muscles of the upper arms; the lower arms; around the wrists, palms and fingers so that the hands rest, loosely, on the lap or knees – whatever's comfortable for you.

Now bring awareness into the trunk of the body, starting with the chest area, the heart centre. Imagine that you can breathe in and then out through that centre, enabling a softening, an opening of the heart centre.

Moving down to the solar plexus in the middle of the body: notice any sense of tightness or agitation there. This is where we experience the bodily feelings of excitement,

fear, anger or anxiety. Breathe gently through the solar plexus so as to allow a settling of those energies...

Now breathe down into the belly. Take a full, deep breath in – right down into the lower abdomen, expanding the whole torso. Then, when you're ready, breathe out from there, slowly and comfortably. Doing this a few times can bring a tremendous sense of peacefulness and well-being – even in the midst of a very busy day.

Attend to the legs; bring them into this gentle, kindly awareness. Breathe down through the thighs... the muscles around the knees... the calves... ankles and feet, allowing any tension, strain and stress to drain away through the soles of the feet. In this way you can bring a sense of ease and well-being to the legs. You don't need to worry about whether they are big or small, fat or thin, stiff or supple. However they are, you can use this breath to generate a sense of ease and bodily well-being.

And finally, the back part of the body, the muscles around the spine – the body is nicely supported so you can release any extra strain and tension from the muscles around the spine. Begin at the base of the skull with the neck area. Gently breathe away tension from around the neck. Bring the awareness to the back of the ribcage. Breathe away any extra tension from around the spine. Move down from the back of the ribcage to the back of the waist and right down to the base of the spine. The breath is like a gentle, kindly touch; a hand gently smoothing, soothing and softening the muscles around the spine. The body is held gently, nicely upright, with a sense of energy, poise and balance. Release the feelings of tension, strain. Let them go. Let them be. There is a sense of poise and balance – gentle, friendly alertness as you continue to breathe in and out.

Now focus on the mechanical process of breathing, noticing how the chest cavity expands with the in-breath; you can feel the movement of the ribs as they swing upwards and outwards. This allows space for the air to flow into the lungs. You are aware of that. You are aware of the out-breath as the air is compressed out. You observe this as it actually happens; here... now...

Some of you may find it helpful to link the breathing with the words, 'Bud-', as you breathe in, and '-dho' as you breathe out; or you may prefer a secular option: '*breathing in... breathing out*', or, '*here*' as you breathe in, '*now*' as you breath out.

If you prefer to simply be aware of the body breathing that's perfectly fine too.

The breath is used as a focus for the awareness. You will probably notice some thinking continuing in the mind,

but don't involve yourself with those thoughts. Instead, gently – but firmly – turn away from them, however interesting or significant they may seem. Just attend to the movement of the ribcage, or however you experience the process of breathing. You can simply enjoy the sensation of the body breathing, as it's happening here and now.

If you notice that the awareness has been highjacked by some interesting thought or plan, worry or concern, calmly return to the breath: breathing in, breathing out... You will probably find that you need to keep coming back again, and again... and again... and again... learning how to come back without any fuss or bother – seeing each breath as a new beginning. Gradually the mind begins to settle as you begin to enjoy the process of breathing, as it's happening here, now.

Breathing in... Breathing out...

Introducing Standing Meditation

There are many strategies that can be used to help the mind to settle. Remember that the mind is sensitive: it is affected by what it's exposed to. If you come from a stimulating background, it's natural for the mind to feel stimulated. This is normal; it's nothing to worry about.

In order to help the mind to settle, you can use the breath, the body – whatever you can focus on – to establish an awareness of the quality of the present moment, learning to be peaceful with whatever may be going on. For example, if there is agitation you can be peaceful with the agitation, or there may be times during the day when you feel sleepy.

This is one reason why I like to teach standing meditation. Standing meditation is an excellent support for wakefulness; you are much less likely to fall asleep while standing! It is also a good way of generating energy. Just

standing for a few minutes can bring energy into the whole system. You can also use it as an alternative to sitting if there is a lot of pain in the knees or back.

Another benefit of standing meditation is that it can help one to integrate practice into everyday life. This is one of the things that I like to emphasize. There can be the assumption that ‘real practice’ only happens when you are sitting on the mat. However, my encouragement is to understand practice as something continuous – something you do every moment of your life. There is much you can learn from standing, which is something that most of us do a lot of.

Often, we are waiting when we’re standing. For example, we may be standing in a queue at the supermarket; if it’s moving very slowly, we can feel a kind of impatience, wanting it to move faster: *‘Hurry up! Hurry up!’*. Or we may be waiting for a bus. Sometimes I travel by bus, and have

to wait for the right bus to come along. There can be a bit of worry or concern as I wait: *'Have I missed the bus?'*, or if we've arranged to meet someone and they're a little late, we can find ourselves thinking, *'Maybe they don't care. Maybe they've forgotten about our appointment to meet.'*, or *'Maybe they've had an accident.'* When we're standing and waiting there are endless thoughts that can arise and make us feel frustrated or angry, hurt, upset or worried. But rather than allowing such things to take over in the mind, it's more helpful to ask: *'Is this worry helpful?'*, and to consider an alternative strategy: *'Can I choose to not worry?'* If you find yourself waiting, you can use waiting as a time for standing meditation; it can keep you out of a lot of trouble! If you're waiting for someone, the fact is that you simply don't know what's happening (or what has happened) ...so, why imagine a worst-case scenario? Why imagine that they don't care about you, or that something horrible has happened? Why do that? Why create these unpleasant stories

in your mind? Instead, can you avoid upsetting yourself in this way, and learn to be at ease with not knowing?

So now I'm going to explain how to do standing meditation.

GUIDANCE

STANDING MEDITATION

Standing meditation is not that different from sitting. As with sitting meditation, the aim is to be present – to cultivate and maintain an easeful quality of presence.

You're standing on the Earth... aware of the ground under the feet.

The feet are a little bit apart, so that there is a sense of steadiness, a nice firm foundation.

I like to stand with the eyes closed but if you find that it makes you feel dizzy you can stand with the eyes open. Keep the gaze slightly lowered, so as to avoid being distracted by what is around you.

The awareness is with the body standing. Place the feet about a shoulder width apart, with the weight balanced evenly between the feet, and not tipping forwards or backwards.

Now bring the attention to the legs, moving the awareness up the legs to the knees which are kept slightly unlocked – not straight or rigid... then up to the hips.

We allow the shoulders to relax, noticing the weight of the arms: objects, very useful objects, dangling from the shoulders.

Then notice the neck with the head perched on top, nicely balanced.

Breathe through the muscles of the face – consciously relaxing and softening the face.

Aware of the body breathing...

Aware of the in-breath...

Aware of the out-breath...

As before, you can use the words, '*Breathing in... Breathing out...*' or, '*Here... Now...*'

Another phrase which can be helpful, particularly when there is a lot of stress is: *'May I be well...'* or *'May this being be well...'*

Now please continue to stand in this way, with a sense of easeful attentiveness.

Kindly Attention

You can see any form of meditation as an opportunity to generate kindly attention towards yourself, to wish yourself well. Often, we're so hard on ourselves – very critical, very harsh. We can give ourselves a really hard time. You might think that is being responsible, trying to make yourself into a better person. But this critical attitude doesn't support any sense of well-being. In fact, it can lead to a feeling of stress, or even desperation.

The Reflection on Universal Well-Being⁽¹⁾ is a helpful guide:

*'May I abide in well-being,
in freedom from affliction
in freedom from hostility,
in freedom from ill-will,
in freedom from anxiety.
And may I maintain well-being in myself.'*

The practice of wishing yourself well is an excellent base for generating a happy feeling about yourself and your life.

You may sometimes find yourself being hostile and mean in your thoughts about others – especially if you believe that you’re right about something, and that they’re wrong. However, the harshness in judgements of yourself can be even stronger. Of course, you want to be a good person; that’s a healthy aspiration. But it’s really important to watch how you hold that aspiration – learning to come from a place of kindness and self-respect, rather than belittling or blaming yourself. It’s particularly important to avoid the tendency to be over-critical about your practice: *‘I can’t meditate. I’m useless...’* Instead, just celebrate the fact that you’re on the Path, making that effort. You can feel glad about that.

These habits of criticism go very deep, so it’s necessary to keep coming back to the present moment supporting

yourself with kindly encouragement and the recollection: *‘May I abide in well-being, in freedom from affliction, hostility, ill will and anxiety.’*

How can this be applied in everyday life? Firstly, you need to take an interest so as to notice this unhelpful habit, and learn how to replace it with a more supportive way of thinking. Rather than endlessly doubting or criticizing yourself, try deliberately thinking: *‘May this being be well.’*

Those of you who’ve been to stay with me at Milntuim may have seen me preparing for one of our regular meditation days. I’m often a bit behind schedule, and you may have noticed me using one of my strategies for calming and settling my mind. Rather than saying, *‘Come on, Candasirī! You should have done that earlier! Useless! Hopeless!’*, I say gently: *‘Candasirī, it’s all right, you’re doing the best you can...’* I try to talk to myself as I would talk to a dear friend. *‘You’re doing the best you can...’* When you can fully accept yourself and

your limitations, you'll find that you can work out your own skilful strategies for managing those difficulties – with a sense of calm and friendliness, rather than just reacting to them in a harsh or judgemental way.

So, as you practise standing meditation (and at *all* times) I'd really like to encourage you to try to notice your attitude to yourself; bring that into awareness.

GUIDANCE

WALKING MEDITATION

When the mind feels very active, it can be helpful to do some walking meditation.

Start by finding a place where you can walk back and forth – 15 to 30 paces is a nice stretch. Walking meditation is simple, so simple that some people can't quite believe that they're doing it properly! It's very simple, but not always so easy because you are working with the habits of a lifetime; particularly those habits of negativity towards yourself and others. The practice of walking meditation can help you to become aware of those habits. Then it is possible to transform them so as to develop a more positive attitude.

Begin by bringing awareness to the body standing.

Come to the breath, gathering the awareness.

I usually have my hands clasped in front or behind; this can be a physical support for a sense of collectedness.

You're fully present.

Then, when you feel ready, start walking along your chosen path at a normal pace.

When you get to the end of the path, pause for a moment, then turn around, and walk back again to where you started from.

Stop, pause, turn around, and walk back.

It's that simple.

Try to keep the awareness gathered within the body – the feet as they touch the ground, or the feeling of the body walking.

As you make effort to practise in this way, you may begin to notice an amazing thing about the mind as it wanders:

the body can be in one place – and the mind can be somewhere completely different! You can start to appreciate the creative capacity of the mind: it can do extraordinary things. It can create all kinds of ideas, plans or memories or scenarios, just while you're walking up and down on your meditation path. It can become involved with all the problems of the world, and work out a myriad of solutions. With the practice of walking meditation you can begin to explore the possibility of taking a holiday from all that mental activity. When you find yourself beginning to have 'good ideas', you can just stop, and bring the awareness back to the reality of the body walking, now...

I like to try to maintain awareness from one end of the path to the other, rather than for a longer time. When I get to the end of the path I stop, and if the mind has wandered, I once again gather the awareness... feeling the

feet on the ground, the air on the skin. Then I turn and, having resolved to maintain awareness for the walk back to the other end of the path, I begin walking. Gradually, the awareness gathers into something more continuous.

Time may seem to pass incredibly slowly, but that's OK – just keep going...

At worst, it's harmless. Walking meditation is not going to harm anyone – and you're not going to hurt yourself... Or you may find that the time goes by very quickly.

Use this opportunity to cultivate presence. You can also cultivate an attitude of kindness or, if that seems impossible, at least notice any un-kindness. Bring the awareness into the body, then when you notice unkind thoughts arising you can just decide: *'I'm not going to think like that.'* and just carry on walking, celebrating this opportunity.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Q: Could you say something about the relationship between contentment and right effort?

A: Our practice is very much about seeing things as they are; it's also about observation, about knowing oneself, knowing one's character and habitual tendencies. Some of us are over critical: too hard on ourselves. But we can also sometimes be too soft on ourselves. As you begin to notice the results of your practice, you may realize that you need to adjust. Sometimes the sense of relaxed contentment can turn into a kind of complacency. At other times we may feel very frustrated and upset, and find ourselves running around in circles – not getting anywhere, and generally feeling discouraged about our practice. To find a balance takes vigilance.

Try to establish a basis of care, calm and presence from which to respond to the different situations of your life. Remember that there's an important distinction between a 'response' and a 'reaction'. I find that 'reacting' usually comes from a place of aversion or desire – whereas if, first of all, I establish mindfulness, I am more able to observe to the situation carefully and to respond appropriately.

So keep sharpening the awareness! There is a word in Pali, *pañña*, which means wisdom. It also refers to a quality of discernment, being able to recognize whether something is helpful or not helpful. Keep noticing the results of your practice. Is there a sense of well-being and happiness? Is there a sense of brightness in the mind? A sense of energy? A sense of willingness, a sense of goodwill, both to yourself and to others – or are you grumpy and irritated with everything and everybody? We need to notice the results of our practice so as to adjust accordingly.



Q: What if somebody says: *'I can't manage. I need to take something to help me cope.'* Should we try to make ourselves happy naturally, or is it OK to use medication to help to brighten the mood?

A: There has been quite a bit of research done on the use of mindfulness techniques for working with depression. It has been found that mindfulness meditation (which is what we are doing here) can bring about a significant improvement for some people who have recurrent depressive episodes. It works by helping them to be aware of what is happening at the start of a depressive episode so that they can take certain steps to support themselves through it – without going down too deep. However, there are also situations where having a little bit of a boost with prescribed medication can be very helpful in maintaining a reasonable level of well-being, and preventing a further dipping down.

It is important to recognize that sometimes we need help, and to see that asking for it needn't be seen as an admission of failure. Sometimes I really need help in the Hermitage; but then, when somebody offers, I often say, *'It's OK, I'm managing fine...'* But then, when I look around me, I think, *'Actually, a little help would be very nice...'* I'm still training myself to see that acknowledging that a bit of help would be appreciated is a kind of wisdom. It's not a failure.

So if you are prescribed some kind of medication – whether for a physical ailment or for some kind of mental problem – it's good to take it. Mostly, people prescribe these things to support us in feeling more balanced, and sometimes that's necessary. If, over time, you find that the medication is not bringing a good result, then you can discuss it with the person who suggested you take it.

I find it helpful to recognize that there is such a thing as sickness of the mind – just as there can be bodily injury

or disease – and sometimes medicine is needed to support coming into balance, and healing.



Q: Could you say something about the mind and the physical state? Sometimes I think I'm softening and relaxing but then something comes up and, suddenly, I feel really upset.

A: It is a very good question because the mind and the body are very closely connected. If we are worried and upset about something, we may not sleep so well. If we are frightened, the body has a kind of 'revved up' feeling. Relaxing the body can help the mind to settle, and sometimes settling the mind can help the body to settle...

There is a practice I speak about that some people call '*Soft Face Practice*'; it's simply relaxing and softening the face. If, in meditation, you notice that there is a lot of thinking, try observing what's happening to the face. One of the things

I've noticed is that the forehead tenses up, and something seems to happen around the eyes. It's almost as though I'm physically scrutinizing the thoughts. Then, rather than trying to make the thinking stop, I simply focus on relaxing the face. When I do that, the thoughts become less of a problem – in fact, usually they disappear altogether.

If they don't, you can also try studying what it feels like to be thinking: 'OK. *This is thinking. This is what thinking feels like...*' Just notice; just observe how the mental activity affects you physically – and again, relax: the face, the shoulders, everywhere.



Q: Are there any practical solutions to achieving a sense of calm and relaxation when facing extreme demands, when you are in a very active environment?

A: This can be very challenging, so you need to use whatever strategy you can immediately access to establish

mindfulness. For example, notice: are you breathing? If your toddler is screaming, notice that you are still breathing. You can't stop breathing just because your toddler is screaming... So try to be with the breath. Try to be with the body, relax the body.

We tend, habitually, to go up to the brain when we are stressed. That is a common default strategy. You go up into the head, and try to 'think' your way out of a difficult situation, or to drive away feelings of irritation, anger or upset. Or else you tumble into resentful thinking: *'It's all because of him, or her...'* The mind tends to create whole stories that are often not related to anything real, that create more stress and are generally unhelpful. It's an understandable response but not the best, wisest way of dealing with such situations – as you've probably discovered!

Focusing on the breath can help. I find the out-breath is very interesting; not the exasperated out-breath but the

long, easy exhalation. This can be a reminder and a support for letting go, just putting things down as you breathe out slowly and evenly. You can feel your face, your arms – everything – softening and relaxing. It's the opposite of what the body does naturally. Normally, when the body/mind is stressed, it tenses up; but you can train yourself to use the out-breath for letting go, breathing through the whole body and down into the Earth.

...So find a way to soothe yourself, as you would soothe a child who is upset. If you learn how to soothe yourself like this, it can break that circuit of everyone's upset: *'I'm upset because you're upset, etc...'*

By taking those lovely long out-breaths, you are establishing your refuge in Dhamma. When we are frightened by a person or situation, it can result in a very unfortunate reaction, so the more that we can establish presence, the better. That is where the Truth is, where the refuge of

Dhamma is to be found. Being fully with the breath is to take refuge in Dhamma.



Q: How long do you meditate each day, and when do you begin to see results?

A: In our monastic community, we usually practise formal meditation together for an hour in the morning and an hour in the evening... but we also try to make our whole life a meditation.

Now please don't upset yourself, by thinking: *'Oh goodness! I've got to meditate all the time!'* Instead, see your life as an opportunity – an opportunity to be aware. Think of it as your birthright: to be aware, to know what's going on.

If you are interested in establishing a daily practice of formal meditation I would suggest that you sit down at least once a day, and for at least ten minutes. Find a time and a

place where you're not going to be interrupted, somewhere you can just sit quietly and focus; using the time to be as fully present as you can, in a relaxed and friendly way.

Try not to concern yourself too much with the results of your practice. In fact, it may be someone else who notices that you have changed before you see any result yourself. We're practising to be present, not looking for results in the future – even though they'll surely come...



Q: Sometimes my son says to me, *'Mum, I don't want to do anything!'* Maybe he's helping me to understand that sometimes we don't need to DO anything, we can just be...

A: Yes. Sometimes we can learn a lot from children. For example, you can take time to be with nature, just being quiet – taking time just to be with yourself. You can take time to read your own mind, in a gentle and kindly way...

and that's not being selfish. It's actually taking care of ourselves so as to maintain a sense of well-being – as a resource for everyone.



Q: How can you deal with people who can get very upset and just keep talking on and on about their concerns? Do you have to keep listening if what the other person is saying is not wise, compassionate or helpful in any way?

A: When you can establish a sense of ease within yourself, you can be with others in a clear and kind way – and you won't need to squash down feelings of frustration, irritation or anger. It is possible to be honest about how you feel, and even to communicate that directly, in a way that does not cause harm to the other person or to your relationship.

Sometimes, the kindest thing is simply to stop the conversation. This might sound uncompassionate, but it's actually

the kindest thing you can do, because some people are almost addicted to talking. They talk and talk and talk – and usually it’s not particularly helpful for anyone.

I’ve found too that setting a mental time limit for such conversations is often helpful. You could see it as taking care of your own needs, as well as appreciating the other person’s situation.

I think this may be more of a problem for women than for men, because sometimes we seem to feel that we have to keep on attending to the needs of others until we collapse... Some people might even think that looking after their own needs is selfish; however, I see that now as being responsible. It’s appropriate to take responsibility for one’s well-being. No one is obliged to give anyone unlimited attention; it’s quite OK to set a limit. Sometimes I even say something like: *‘You’ve been speaking for half an hour, and now I’m finding it difficult to focus on what you are saying, because*

I'm a bit tired.' That can be a very helpful, and kind, action; it's a way of offering honest feedback.

Please try to avoid falling into a state of resentment, or even hatred, towards the other person; it is much more beneficial just to acknowledge the limitations of the situation.

When you act from a place of clarity and kindness, you can be honest in a way that does not undermine your own, or the other person's sense of well-being. By being honest about your own needs, you help the other person to develop consideration for others and to better understand their own needs.



Q: How can you deal with someone else's actions which may have hurt you or caused offence – in particular, when it happens within a family?

A: Again, if you are able to view a situation from a place of clarity and calm, it is easier to assess whether it might be

possible, or helpful, to intervene. Sometimes just accepting how things are is the most skilful option. However, there are also times when concerns really need to be addressed and, rather than feeling helpless or impotent, you have to find a way to deal with the situation. You also need to be aware of your intention, as far as possible.

Interestingly, when you can reach a place of acceptance, rather than continuing to react with inner fear or judgement, you'll find that you see things more clearly – and can more easily discern the best way forward. You may have a sense of whether it will be more beneficial to talk to one person, or to talk to a group – of what will lead to the most fruitful conversation. If you can speak from a place of acceptance and inner quiet, you'll find that people can listen calmly, and what you say has a chance of being heard and understood.

The Buddha established certain conditions that I find

helpful to consider. One is to create the right kind of situation. This takes care and consideration, especially if it's a serious matter. You need to make sure that the conditions are as supportive as possible for everyone involved. For example, ensure that you're not going to be disturbed or interrupted, and that you allow enough time for a suitable discussion. Secondly, try to approach the situation in a calm, even way – not filled with anger or fear, but with a sense of concern for the well-being of the other person or group; you try to speak from a place of kindness, with the intention to support. Thirdly, speak about what is happening, or has happened; avoid making assumptions about what somebody might have been thinking, or any intention they may have had. This means that you speak only from your own observation, using terms like '*I notice...; what I notice, what I've heard, what I've seen...*', and so on; you speak of facts, not suppositions. Fourthly, speak gently, don't shout

or speak harshly, using bad language. Finally, speak clearly and directly. (A.10: 78)⁽²⁾ Remember that the intention is to help, not to add to the pain of the situation but to bring clarity to it. Respond with intelligence and compassion.

I've found that when I take care of these things, the person or the people being addressed are usually able to hear and understand what I'm trying to convey.

Of course, it takes courage. Many people find it challenging to address difficult issues but, in community and in relationships, it's sometimes necessary. Over the years, I've discovered that it is invariably beneficial – if I can just take that difficult first step.

The alternative is not very attractive; it can simply lead to a build-up of frustration. Once I was co-leading a retreat and, quite early on, I began to feel upset by the way it was going. Over the hours this feeling of upset was escalating

and I was aware that I was becoming more and more angry – to the point where I became concerned that I might do or say something inappropriate, in front of a hundred retreatants! Fortunately, in the end, I remembered a technique I had learned from Marshall Rosenberg’s Non-Violent Communication⁽³⁾ that enabled me to consider what was happening in a different way. Instead of focusing on the anger and trying to control it, I looked deeper – at what was triggering those feelings of rage. I also considered what might have been motivating the other person. Immediately everything calmed down; the rage gave way to compassion – for myself, and for the other person. The next day, I was able to have the conversation that was needed, and the situation was resolved.

It’s good to remember that the other person may be completely unaware of the effect that they are having on you. You may assume that they know; you may even think that

they are doing it deliberately – but in fact, they may be completely unaware of how you are affected, and definitely wouldn't want to cause any hurt or irritation.

It can also be helpful to find someone to talk with, if you do feel trapped by a particular situation; not in a gossipy way but more as a support for understanding. Speaking with a good friend (*kalyānamitta*) can help us to appreciate how we may be contributing to the situation, and to find a way of working together to resolve the difficulty. Then it can become rather exciting! It becomes good fun, like a game – rather than a ghastly ordeal with endless problems and obstacles.



Q: What can you do when faced with people behaving in an irresponsible or anti-social manner, that disturbs the people around them? I find that it's very hard to know

what's best: whether to complain to the people concerned directly, or to write them a letter, or to send in a complaint to the authorities.

A: What I understand from your question is that there is some fear, and concern. Maybe it's good to start at that point: to take time to notice how you are feeling – then you can consider what strategy might be most suitable.

Remember that your intention is to support the other people around you. However, you also want to encourage those concerned to behave in an appropriate way, so that everyone can live harmoniously together.

Even the Buddha had to deal with all kinds of challenging situations. One time, when he was asked about giving people truthful feedback – he pointed out that sometimes you have to be quite clear and firm; even if you know that

someone is not going to like what you have to say. He said that if what you intend to say is true and beneficial, and you say it with the intention to support – then, finding a suitable time, you should say, do or write whatever is needed.

In a situation like that, it's important to have compassion for yourself, as well as everyone involved. Occasionally, it may be necessary to resort to a more formal procedure of complaint, but if you can maintain an attitude of kindness and compassion, it is most likely that the result will be beneficial for all. You, certainly, will feel happier – knowing that you have done your best.



Generosity, Contentment and Gratitude

I have always been struck by the way in which the Buddha established what is known as the Four-Fold Assembly: the monks, nuns, lay women and lay men – and the fact that it relies totally on kindness, generosity and cooperation. Each person has the opportunity to support by offering something of benefit, and to experience the happiness that can arise from such skilful action.

There's a wonderful passage in the scriptures, where a lay-woman named Visakha has asked the Buddha if she may provide significant support to the monks and nuns. The Buddha then asked her what benefit she sees for herself in making this gesture, and her response is:

'When I remember it, I shall be glad.

When I am glad, I shall feel delight.

When my mind is delighted, my body will feel settled.

When my body feels settled, I shall be at ease.

When I feel at ease, my mind will be composed – and that will maintain the Spiritual Faculties in being in me, and also the Spiritual Powers, and the Enlightenment Factors.’

(VIN. MV. 8)⁴

Generosity, or *dāna* is said to be one of the highest blessings. It can manifest in many different ways: as sharing what we have, as the offering of money or material items; offering our time and practical skills; offering our attention, care or interest; or simply the willingness to give someone the benefit of the doubt.

It's important to stay in touch, to be mindful of the state of mind, when making such an offering. Offerings made from a full and willing heart bring joy; however, if it comes from any sense of pressure or obligation, the heart may turn sour and resentful.

In my own practice, I have found that being able to offer something brings about a state of contentment – a sense of having enough. Sometimes when I am on retreat, I share a small portion of the almsfood I have received that day with the creatures that live close by. This always brings joy. Even if there is not very much food, when I do this, it always feels like enough. There are even traditions where this practice is spoken of as feeding the hungry ghosts!

In one verse in the Dhammapada the Buddha speaks of contentment as being the greatest wealth. Sadly, there is very little in present day society to encourage contentment. Most advertising is devised specifically to undermine it, and to generate desire for more. It can take a real determination to consider that what we have is good enough. In the monastery we consider what we need as basic requisites for survival: robes, almsfood, shelter and medicine. I think this reflection can be helpful for everybody; with a bit of ingenuity, you can adapt it to your own circumstances.

Such a contemplation also leads to a sense of gratitude. Feeling content, having enough, we feel grateful; when someone treats us kindly, we feel grateful; when things work out well, we can feel grateful; even when they don't, we can feel grateful for the opportunity to learn something new. Practising like this, there is a natural sense of happiness...

Sharing Blessings

Alongside the offering of time, energy, skills or material gifts, there is another practice that may be unfamiliar to some of you. It may even seem alien to those whose conditioning has been in the direction of playing down one's achievements (for fear of pride or bolstering the ego!). This is the intention to recognize and share the blessings of our life and practice with others. It's a practice that we see frequently in our monasteries, when bereaved

families come to offer a meal they have prepared to honour the memory of a deceased relative. There is always a dedication of the ‘merits’ or blessings for their welfare – a kind of wishing them well on their way. Although it is often a sad occasion, there is an element of joy that comes through thinking kindly of their loved one, and working together to offer something for their welfare. Everybody is uplifted by such a gesture.

In the case of practice on a retreat, it’s clear that usually our efforts are made primarily for our own benefit, our own personal well-being. However, any blessing arising from this practice is shared, naturally – whether we intend it or not. As we become more peaceful, more at ease and loving, those around us are affected in a positive way; they tend to feel a sense of ease around us. There is also a practice that is a more conscious dedication of our practice, of the goodness of our life. It is sometimes referred to as ‘*Sharing*

(or *'Dedication'*) of *Merit'*. It involves bringing different beings to mind, with the intention to dedicate any benefits or blessings arising from our practice for their welfare.

At the end of a time of practice together, I like to encourage everyone to bring to mind the conditions that have enabled them to participate. I see this as an opportunity to share the blessings of such time together. It doesn't matter whether it was a deep and insightful meditation, or felt like a complete waste of time, you simply share whatever blessings have been generated without any concerns about the quality, or whether there is enough blessing to share with everyone! The willingness to share is, in itself, another blessing...

Even if you end up feeling discouraged about your practice – perhaps there has been thinking, or sleepiness – by persevering and continuing to work with those conditions, you will have developed a lot of patience. The Buddha pointed

out that patience is the supreme austerity; everyone needs to be very patient with the challenging conditions that are inevitably encountered along the Way. So you could have generated a great many more blessings than you realize!

We'll sit quietly now...

GUIDANCE

MEDITATION ON SHARING BLESSINGS

Please take time to find a comfortable posture, sit nice and straight with the head held up. Gently close the eyes, and tune into a sense of bodily ease and well-being, letting go of any tension or feelings of stress.

Bring your attention to the breath, and take time to relax and settle the body.

Now bring awareness to the heart, the heart centre.

Imagine a warm light, like the flame of a candle, in your heart centre.

As you breathe in, imagine this light growing brighter; with the out-breath, feel it radiating throughout the whole of your being – gradually extending outwards to fill the space around you. This generous, kind, light energy touches and

envelops each of the beings sharing this space, infusing them with a sense of deep well-being and ease.

Now you can bring to mind others and surround them also with this light, bathing them all in the blessings that are being generated.

It's usual to begin with our teachers. Take time to bring to mind all the beings who have guided you towards what is wholesome, what is good.

It could be a school teacher, or friend, a relative, or a religious person: a monk or a nun.

Bring to mind all of those beings who have encouraged and guided you in your lives; those who have been an example for you.

Share the blessings of your life with them, dedicating your practice for their welfare.

It doesn't matter whether they are alive or no longer alive; remember their kindness towards you.

For myself, I like to think of the teachers I had before I found the Buddhist Path, as well as Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho.

It could be one person, half a dozen, or maybe many people. Visualize them, or name them – whatever feels meaningful for you. Imagine them receiving the blessings of your practice. Surround them with this beautiful light of blessing.

May they be well, may they be liberated from every kind of suffering.

Now bring to mind your parents – whether they were foolish and selfish, or good, kind and wise – remember that they have given you this human birth, with the opportunity to investigate suffering and its causes, and to experience the happiness of liberation.

So, out of gratitude, there is the wish that each of your parents may be liberated from suffering and experience peace and well-being, wherever they may be...

Bring to mind the people you grew up with, your siblings, your good friends.

If you notice that there is any resentment or negativity towards anyone, see this as an opportunity to let that go...

May they share in the blessings of your life.

May they experience inner ease and happiness...

Now take time to consider powerful, privileged and immensely wealthy people: the kings and queens, politicians, presidents and prime ministers, the billionaires.

These people may seem to have extraordinary privilege. But, in a sense, they also have great responsibility; they can use their position to do great good in the world, or great harm. As I see it, they need all the help they can get

– every possible blessing and kindness to support inner balance, freedom from fear, wisdom and compassion so that they can discern how to use their influence and resources in a way that benefits everybody.

May they be well...

May they share in the blessing of your life and find deep ease of being...

Next, bring to mind the people that you normally associate with; those who are living in ordinary circumstances, nothing extreme.

Colleagues, friends, relatives – we share blessings with them: may they also experience inner balance, well-being and happiness in their lives.

Now bring to mind anybody that you know who is sick, or experiencing some kind of difficulty – financial or domestic problems; mental tumult, fear or agitation, or any stressful or painful situation.

Visualize them, name them; share the blessings of your practice with them.

May they find inner balance, calm and happiness in their lives...

Now, bring to mind beings that you don't know but have heard about through the media – those who are living in extremely challenging situations.

People living in situations of conflict; those who are in prison.

People living in extreme poverty, struggling with unbearable losses, or in states of confusion or fear.

May these people also share the blessings of your life.

May their sufferings be eased; their hearts steadied.

Now, consider the animal kingdom: wild animals, domestic animals, animals of the land, the oceans, the air; big ones, medium-sized and tiny ones.

May they also flourish, may they be well...

We extend these blessings over the entire planet; across the continents, reaching to the tops of the highest mountains and down to the depths of the oceans...

Enfolding the plants, the earth, the atmosphere and extending out into the farthest reaches of the universe, the vastness of space.

May all beings everywhere abide in well-being.

Finally, bring the awareness back to your own body.

Just be here – with the intention:

‘May this being be well.

May she (or he) feel glad at the good that has been done.

May this being be happy, liberated from every kind of suffering.’

FINAL WORD

I wish you great happiness and joy in your lives.

Please make it a part of your practice to spend time with like-minded friends and to go to special spiritual places whenever you can.

Try to have a daily practice, at least ten minutes, of sitting quietly with yourself – and always with a kind and friendly attitude.

Be vigilant, be patient with yourself and also with others. Don't let hatred or aversion or irritation lodge in your heart. They really undermine any sense of well-being and happiness...

Above all, notice beauty in your life: a kind word, a warm smile, rain on the surface of a puddle, the sound of

birdsong, the fragrance of the earth after a shower of rain. Fill your heart with beauty – as much as you can – so that there is an ample supply that can be freely and unself-consciously shared, to make the world a more beautiful and happier abiding place for all beings.

About the Author

Sister Ajahn Candasirī was born in Edinburgh, Scotland in 1947. In 1979 she entered monastic life as one of the first four women to be ordained as anagārikās by Ajahn Sumedho at Chithurst Forest Monastery in West Sussex. In 1983 she went forth as a Ten Precept Nun (sīladharā). Since then, she has lived at either Chithurst or Amaravati monasteries and has been active in establishing a monastic training for women. Now she lives in Scotland at Milntuim Hermitage, a small monastery for nuns of the Forest Sangha tradition.

Endnotes

- (1) Reflection on Universal Well-Being. Chanting Book, Volume 1 (Amaravati Publications 2015).
- (2) This passage from the Anguttara Nikāya: Book of Tens, section 78 is taken from The Pātimokkha – Translated from the Pali by Ven Ñānamoli Thera (Published for Maha Makut Academy by the Social Science Association Press of Thailand, Bangkok 1966).
- (3) Non-Violent Communication - A language of Compassion (PuddleDancer Press puddledancer.com ©1999 Marshall Rosenberg PhD.).
- (4) Adapted from p. 155 ‘The Life of the Buddha’ by Bhikkhu Ñānamoli (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka).

The Secret of Happiness

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2021 © AMARAVATI PUBLICATIONS
AMARAVATI BUDDHIST MONASTERY
ST MARGARETS
GREAT GADDESSEN
HEMEL HEMPSTEAD
HERTFORDSHIRE HP1 3BZ

ISBN: 978-1-78432-184-0

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COVER AND TEXT DESIGN AND FORMATTING: NICHOLAS HALLIDAY · HALLIDAYBOOKS.COM

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