

In
Any
Given
Moment



AJAHN MUNINDO

*Gradually, gradually,
A moment at a time,
The wise remove their own impurities
As a goldsmith removes the dross.*

Dhammapada v.239

IN ANY GIVEN MOMENT

Ajahn Munindo

In Any Given Moment
by Ajahn Munindo

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PREFACE

This book has been compiled in large part because dwelling on thoughts of gratitude brings happiness. Also, as I approach seventy years of age, I find myself drawn to recollecting and reviewing earlier events in my life and noticing how differently I now feel about them. As the writing of these notes progressed, it became apparent that, in addition to gratitude, I have been reflecting on two other themes: the dynamic of spiritual community and ways of supporting our spiritual life.

The title, '*In Any Given Moment*', means two things to me. One way of reading it reminds me that in any moment there is the potential to let go of our painful habits of clinging and consider the larger, spacious context in which this drama of life is taking place. This is how I understand, 'Going for refuge to the Buddha': trusting that there is selfless, just-knowing awareness.

In another way of reading it, the cover image of an open sky (thank you Chinch) together with the title, suggests that whether or not we notice the beauty of life in any given moment depends on how present we are for it. When our faculties are obscured by self-centredness, we risk becoming lost in memories of the past and fantasies of the future; as a result our attention readily settles on what we perceive as lacking or 'wrong' with life, and we fail to notice the goodness and beauty right here in front of us. If our vision begins to

clear, if the dross of unawareness is gradually removed and the gold of awareness revealed, a thoroughly different perspective might emerge.

The timeline as it is presented here should not be taken too literally. I have tried to be accurate; however, accuracy over dates and times was not the main point of the compilation. I apologize if any inaccuracies or inconsistencies cause confusion. The main point has been to reflect on gratitude, community and sustaining spiritual practice. These three themes are the foreground, with the incidents and events of my life as the background; sometimes the background is not quite in focus.

The significant moments that I reference in these pages, both the positive and the negative, are moments and events that stand out as having been helpful in my effort to be freed from the addiction to self-centredness. By no means have all the positive influences been mentioned, and definitely I have not included many of the negatives. Readers will find that the first six parts of the book read somewhat like a travelogue interspersed with Dhamma reflections. Part seven is almost entirely Dhamma reflections. It wasn't that I set out to write a book in this style, it is just that this is how it unfolded. My hope is that anyone who reads it will discover something beneficial for themselves and perhaps find something that they want to share.

Ajahn Munindo

TAKING SHAPE

1.1

THE END OF THE RIVER

Approximately eighty-five miles south of Auckland, in New Zealand's North Island, there is a small town called Te Awamutu. This is where I was born in September 1951 and was given the name Keith Morgan. The Maori name of the town, Te Awamutu, translates into English as *the end of the river*. In various online resources¹ it is explained that it wasn't that the river Manga-o-hoi actually ended there, it was just that beyond that point it became unnavigable by canoe. I'm guessing that in 1951 the town had a population of about 5000. The area had a history as a place where battles had been fought between opposing Maori tribes, where an early group of Christian missionaries had established itself, and as a settlement used by the British military during the Waikato wars. By the time my parents, Pearl and Ian Morgan, moved there, Te Awamutu had found its identity as a service centre for the surrounding farming communities.

Christianity was a defining element in our family. My father was the youngest of six children in a family headed by a Presbyterian minister, Rev. Richard Morgan and his wife

Grace Morgan. My mother was the only child of a Baptist minister, Rev. Alfred Dewe and his second wife, Sadie Dewe, or 'Nana' as we knew her. Rev. A. Dewe died young and so eventually Nana remarried another Baptist minister, Rev. Christopher Wilfrid Duncumb, after spending a number of years as housekeeper to a Presbyterian minister, Rev. Lloyd Wilkinson. Auntie Nessie, my father's older sister, was a deaconess in the Presbyterian Church, Uncle Roy was a Baptist minister and my younger sister, Jennifer, went on to become a pastor, who, along with her pastor husband Guthrie Boyd, ministered within the church of the Assembly of God. Recently I found out that my younger brother Bryan, is ministering these days as a lay preacher in the Paihia Christian Fellowship.

We lived in Te Awamutu for about two years before moving to a similar sized town, Morrinsville, about twenty miles away. I imagine my father's work was the reason for the move. Although for much of my life I have struggled to find my place in this family, this does not mean I don't value it. To be born to parents who worked so tirelessly to raise their four children in a wholesome environment was indeed a blessing. At later stages in my life it became apparent that growing up in that environment was a mixed blessing and it did take some skill and discernment to decipher which aspects were truly valuable and which needed to be left behind.

When I think back now about my father, I have huge admiration and gratitude for his integrity and kindness. Besides his Monday to Friday job working in Hawkes Motors Ford

garage, initially as a mechanic and eventually as the manager, he would spend many hours after work and on the weekends cultivating a substantial vegetable garden that he had planted out the back of our house. Always on Sunday he would drive the family to the morning church service and for some time led the Sunday School of which he was superintendent. Regularly after Sunday lunch, he would drive out to remote village halls – places like Tahuna, Ngatea, Patetonga – to conduct a church service for the farming families who couldn't manage to get into town.

Similar feelings of appreciation arise when I remember my mother's dedication and how she would spend days on end in the kitchen throughout the hot summers, bottling and preserving vegetables, apples, and peaches and pears to keep the family well fed through the year. She also sewed many of our clothes.

Bible readings and prayers at the evening dinner table were normal. The summer camp I was sent to was a Christian Youth Camp (CYC) at Ngaruawahia. Since my parents were teetotal, and drinking at the pub was a national pastime in New Zealand, we had very few visitors. The only visitors I remember coming to our house were relatives who were equally if not more devout Christians, and other families who attended our church. Devotion to religion from such an early age served to instil virtues in me which I continue to value. I can't recall my parents ever arguing and, with only one very minor exception, nor did I ever hear either of them speaking critically of anyone.

Music was another central aspect of our family life. Both my mother and father were vocal leaders during hymn singing in church on Sunday; not just singing loudly, but with fervour and enjoying the opportunity to break out into harmony. My mother sometimes played the organ in church. At home, our idea of a good time amounted to us children standing around singing praise to Jesus while Nana played the piano. Auntie Nessie spent many years working as a missionary to various Maori communities, and leading a choir of Maori singers.

David, my older brother by two years, learned to play the cello. I played the violin for a while, and I seem to remember that Jennifer, my younger sister, played the piano. Compared with what most families these days might think of as having a good time, our hymn singing sessions probably sound rather tame, however I recall them as a source of considerable happiness: the togetherness, the sheer pleasure of making beautiful music and the delight in praising the Divine. When I was old enough to have my own bicycle I would regularly ride out into the countryside to be alone. I frequented the woodlands along the banks of the nearby Piako River where I would passionately sing my heart out. Something about unrestrained adoration of the Almighty triggered tremendous joy within me: it was thrilling, even electric and exhilarating.

1.2 BEING DIFFERENT

It must have taken considerable effort on the part of my parents to be so supportive of my evolving character. New Zealanders back then seemed to proudly present themselves as a nation defined by Rugby, Racing and Beer. Despite my father's attempts to direct me towards enjoying the sport, I think I played rugby only twice during all my school years and remember on one of those occasions kicking the ball in the wrong direction. Horse racing was associated with gambling, which in the Morgan household was seen as evil. The mere smell of beer (at that early stage of my life) was repulsive to me. Walking past a pub and catching a waft of the hot, stale air that drifted out – a combination of tobacco, crisps, beer and Dettol used for cleaning up the vomit – was a powerful disincentive. For the duration of most of my early life, laws in New Zealand required pubs to close at 6 pm. That meant for many that once work finished at 5 pm, they would rush to their favourite watering hole and drink crazily for an hour before loading up with an armful of bottled beer and driving home. When the law changed, pubs were permitted to stay

open until 10 o'clock, but I think the immoderate drinking habits of Kiwis took longer to change.

The encouragement I received from those who cared for me was a gift – not only the support given by my parents but also by my Nana. With hindsight I see now there were strong undercurrents of fear and judgement around sensuality and pleasure, but I credit both my parents for daring to allow me to follow my own creative pursuits. It mustn't have been easy for them considering their own puritanical upbringing and the pressures that inevitably come with living in a small country town. Once, when I went to stay on a farm with some friends of our family, the children there had their bedroom walls lined with awards they had won on Calf Club Day. Calf Club Day was the occasion when the sons and daughters of farming families would bring their pet calf or sheep to school and parade them around the playground and be judged; I'm not sure what criteria were used for awarding points. I expect I liked it about as much as I liked the rugby matches that we watched. (Years later I developed a keenness for watching rugby, but by that time I was tuning into the spirit of cooperation, even selflessness).

My bedroom walls, on the other hand, were proudly plastered with awards I had received at the local Flower Show – a kind of Morrinsville version of the Chelsea Flower Show. These shows took place three or four times a year, coinciding with the seasons. Still I can recall the impact of a wonderfully intoxicating fragrance that hit me when I walked into the hall where the show was being held. Many of the prizes given out

at the show were for exceptional blooms or for particularly impressive pieces of fruit or vegetable; the awards I won were for flower arranging. I am thankful towards my parents for being so daring.

1.3

DOCTOR ALBERT SCHWEITZER

Around the age of fourteen I was given a copy of a book, possibly as a Christmas present, about the French-German philosopher, theologian, musician, writer and doctor of medicine, Dr. Albert Schweitzer.² I'm not sure which came first, the book or the idea of my entering into the Rotary Club speech contest that ran each year at our school, Morrinsville College. Whether it was my parents' idea or mine, I also don't know, but at some stage in my early teen years I assimilated the idea that I would grow up to become a preacher. It isn't hard to imagine how such a suggestion might have become lodged in my mind. Entering that annual contest and speaking about Dr. Albert Schweitzer, fitted with that vision. As far as I recall I made it into the semi-finals or perhaps even the finals of the competition, but I didn't win. What matters now though was the good fortune of having been made aware of this extraordinary human being. Dr. Schweitzer started out studying for, and achieving, a PhD in philosophy, then the next year a PhD in theology; he was a world renowned organist, an expert on and writer about Johann Sebastian

Bach, and that was all prior to studying and graduating as a medical doctor so he could spend fifty years serving the sick and needy in a remote medical facility in equatorial Africa. When in 1952 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the prize money went straight to the hospital. I feel fortunate to have been introduced at that formative stage of my life to such an example of selflessness. There are some who have written critically about Dr. Schweitzer, and I am sure he himself would have been critical of his failings; however the manifest goodness of this man is truly worthy of admiration.

Many years later when I read and heard talks by the Jungian analyst Robert Moore, I became aware of the power of intentional admiration. By consciously admiring a particular quality in another, that quality can be nourished within ourselves. I have no recollection whether Dr. Schweitzer's being a vegetarian impacted on me at the time, but perhaps it did. His *reverence for life*, as he referred to his commitment to harmlessness, meant that not only was he vegetarian, but he also refused to kill insects. Vegetarianism, and eventually a plant-based diet, became an important part of my life some years later.

I think it was also when I was fourteen years old that I contracted hepatitis. In the summer of that year, probably 1966, as was usual for our family we had gone away for the holidays. Almost without exception, every year we would go to a rented cottage ('bach' in Kiwi parlance) near a beach somewhere, and spend many hours swimming in the sea and playing in the sand (totally unaware in those days of the risks that come with excess exposure to UV). That year, we went

to Ohope, near Whakatane. I remember that we were eating a lot of fish at the time and when I fell ill it was assumed that somehow the fish had given me food poisoning. It was only once we returned to Morrinsville that my illness was diagnosed as hepatitis. Horrible as it was, it only meant I was bedridden for a few weeks and missed some classes at school. One of the enduring unpleasant memories of that period, however, was being visited by one of the Sunday school teachers who appeared to me to be there under duress. I can't say what her intentions were but somehow I didn't like her visiting me. Possibly by that stage I had already learnt to pretend to be virtuous in an attempt to win approval, and in the process, betrayed myself. Maybe I thought I sensed something like that in her.

A few years earlier I had made the mistake of lying to my parents about giving my heart over to Jesus. I observed how when my older brother David announced he had made such a commitment to the Lord, he received a lot of approval and affection. I wanted some of that. Unfortunately, the importance of impeccability was not something I had learned about so I wasn't aware of the painful consequences of telling such an untruth. It was only years later that I began to see how, when we lie, we create a fissure in our minds which leads to instability. We then compensate for the feeling of instability by becoming rigid, which obstructs the flow of life. We turn ourselves into someone untrustworthy: a recipe for self-hatred and guilt. For fourteen-year-old Keith Morgan, sadly, the darkness was already beginning to descend.

Auntie Nessie is mentioned several times in these notes, which indicates the special place she has in my heart. If I had shared with her back then how badly I felt about the lie I had told my parents, I am sure she would have listened carefully, looked at me with her kind eyes, and said something that would have made all the difference. It was generally understood that Auntie Nessie was a faith healer and I have the impression that she was held in high regard in various parts of society. She would never take personal credit for any ability she had, and was always quick to ascribe all goodness to her Lord. A few years later in 1973 she received an MBE from Her Majesty The Queen, by way of recognition of the work she had done in Arohata Womens' Prison. One of the favourite memories I have of her these days is, once when she had come to stay with us, we children begged her to perform a Maori haka³ for us before we would go to sleep. In my mind's eye I can still see her standing at our bedroom door, slapping her knees, with her eyes bulging. We loved it and I loved her. A heartfelt thank you to Auntie Nessie.

When I was about fifteen years old, members of our local church began discussing the possibility of replacing the church building. With my parents' encouragement I spent a lot of time producing designs for the construction. Probably this was the first time I entertained the fantasy of one day becoming an architect instead of a minister or a missionary. Over the next few years, however, I discovered that, although I took considerable pleasure in producing designs, I was utterly hopeless when it came to mathematics. Working with

numbers, and for that matter even reading books were, and continue to be, a chore (more on that later). The love of imagining, and sometimes having the good fortune to design actual buildings, remains with me. It is hard to explain the pleasure I derive from creating a space in my mind that feels right and then seeing it manifest in form. As far as I am concerned, successfully designing living spaces is primarily not about how the space looks, but how it feels when we are in it. After all, we don't live in the things, we live in the space. Many people, it seems, don't recognize this, which is presumably why they fill their living spaces with so many things. They assume that including yet another nice thing will make the place look nicer, when in fact that extra thing might well offend the space, regardless of how attractive the item in itself might have appeared.

As a present on my sixteenth birthday I was given a course of private art lessons in oil painting by a nationally recognized painter, Violet Watson. Not that I was any good at painting but I imagine it was better than pretending I wanted to play rugby. Morrinsville produced several rugby players who featured in the national All Blacks teams – Don Clarke and Ponty Reid are two names that come to mind. On one occasion, when the All Blacks had done particularly well overseas, the players were honoured with a procession down the main street, Thames Street.

Already I have mentioned that I learned to play the violin. I can't be sure now about details, but I think that this lasted for about three years. The school provided the instrument

and the instruction. As I recall, the music teacher I had at Morrinsville College was very encouraging. The most enjoyable aspect of it came when I was accepted into the Waikato Youth Orchestra. Each Friday afternoon after school, I would hitchhike, carrying a violin, the twenty or so miles to the nearby city of Hamilton. Being part of that body of people, with a shared fondness for making music, was a highlight of my week. Many years later, when a Jungian psychoanalysis friend described spiritual community as ‘a harmonious resonance of shared aspiration’, I felt like I could get what she was talking about. Perhaps my time playing in that orchestra helped with my understanding. After these sessions of practice finished I would take a train back to Morrinsville.

Thinking back about it now, it surprises me that I didn’t feel more bothered than I did by the fact that I wasn’t fitting in with the other boys. One explanation might be that because our family, for obvious reasons, was considered churchy and thereby somewhat different, I perhaps assumed that not fitting in was somehow normal. Children naively assimilate all sorts of assumptions. Another explanation could be that I was learning to hone down my skills in self-deception. I was betraying myself by not truly feeling what I was feeling and as a consequence gradually becoming more fragmented within.

1.4

DIFFICULT LESSONS

There was plenty that happened during the nearly fifteen years we lived at 81 Studholme Street, Morrinsville, that was not particularly pleasant and that left a strong impression. One of my favourite pastimes in those days was cycling with a friend to a disused quarry on the edge of town. For most of the year there was plenty of surface water which meant it was a great place to collect tadpoles and bring them home to watch as they turned into frogs. On one occasion a group of other boys were at the quarry and they were more interested in torturing the tadpoles and frogs. These days I have an impression of the group setting up our glass jars in which we had collected the tadpoles and using them for shooting practice with their BB guns. Another painful impression of that day is of those boys blowing up frogs using firecrackers. Whether these events actually took place or not, I can no longer be sure; perhaps they just spoke about doing it. However, what I do remember vividly, was speaking to some adults about it, perhaps my parents or grandparents, expecting them to sympathize with my hurt feelings at what

had happened, only to be disappointed when I found out they seemed to think nothing of it. I still feel that brutality of any kind, including that done by small boys against tadpoles and frogs, should be called out. Small barbaric acts desensitise our hearts and can lead to bigger barbaric acts.

On another occasion I was surprised and disappointed when my grandfather, Rev. Duncumb, one day took me into the living room in our house saying he had something that I would like. I imagine he knew that I was fond of collecting things like bird skeletons and dead spiders. To my dismay, the thing he wanted to show me – indeed, I think, give to me for my collection – was a handsome moth which he had skewered with a pin to the back of the sofa. How could a man of God do such a thing? Obviously I had a lot to learn about life. Thinking about it now, it might have been that he found the moth already dead and just put it there for me, but I doubt it. The idea that animals don't have souls, that only humans have that privilege, is one of the intensely regrettable aspects of many theistic religions. In my mind, the pain and distress humans have caused and continue to cause to living beings, on a mass scale, is one of the reasons why our human family is in such a tragic state. Every time we intentionally cause harm, the native kindness and sensitivity of the human heart is obscured. Not only do other living beings suffer, but we hurt ourselves in the process. Because we weren't taught this truth, or at least didn't really understand it, we go on to deny the pain and the loss of self-respect that we are

causing ourselves, and then feel confused by the gradual sense of deadening and unhappiness that is taking us over.

It should be emphasized at this point that despite the example of my being shocked at my Grandfather's actions, in no way am I suggesting that I was beyond wanting to cause harm. One day a friend invited me to go hunting rabbits with him and I agreed to go along. If I am honest I think part of me was really excited by the idea. I wasn't consciously aware at that stage of an inner conflict between very base instinctual impulses such as wanting to fight and to conquer, and the more refined impulses human beings have, such as the inclination towards compassion and humility. On that occasion I did actually shoot a rabbit, however I only wounded it, which meant that by the time we had reached it, it had crawled into a wood pile. I felt ashamed. It was similar when we used to go fishing: I liked the thrill of the challenge, but when it came to seeing the eyes of the fish as I cut its throat, I struggled. On one occasion at least I recall refusing to do it, and gave the fish I had caught to my brother. It took me many years and a lot of effort to even begin to find the right kind of strength to be able to hold the inner tension between the wild, unruly animal aspect of our nature, and the love and joy one might feel towards that which we trust is inherently beautiful, without condemning the struggle. Now I see such a struggle as inevitable for all those on the journey of awakening. It is important we understand that we do have a choice: either we struggle in a way that leads to further struggle, or we struggle in a way that leads to the

end of struggling. If we are inspired by the latter then we are obliged to train ourselves to skilfully inhibit the base impulses and cultivate the more refined. Admitting this is not a form of abdication, it is simply being honest.

When I was given my first camera I was excited at the possibilities it presented. It turned out, however, that not everyone shared my passion for photographing toadstools and fungi. It was yet another surprise to be told I shouldn't be so wasteful and ought to be photographing sensible things. I guess by that they meant family photos taken after we had come back from church.

In my sixteenth year Nana died. As with many members of our family it seems, it was cancer that took her. She was staying in our house at the time and, although I was asked if I wished to see her corpse and say my goodbyes, I said I didn't. That was another lie, as I expect I very much did want to see her. Nana was my favourite member of our family, along with Dad's sister, Auntie Nessie. The warmth of their hearts had not been overshadowed by the cold insensitivity which comes with clinging to dogmas. Sadly, on that occasion my commitment to playing the game was stronger than the impulse to be honest. I didn't feel able to allow myself to be seen in my upsetness. After the funeral, when a minister poked his head through the car window and tried to be helpful by saying to us children that, 'Never mind, Nana has gone to a better place', I thought the comment worse than pointless. In a way that I probably couldn't quite define at the time, it felt somehow insulting. He was trying to be

supportive, but as became increasingly obvious to me, trying to be good is not enough. Without matured and considered empathy we misjudge situations.

Without mindfulness and empathy we always run the risk of projecting our own ideas and needs onto others. At a later stage of life, when I came across some studies on the psychology of fundamentalism, it helped me make sense of what I have often experienced as insensitivity, even arrogance, on the part of followers of this or that religion. People of all religious persuasions, including Buddhists, run the risk of trying to impose their convictions and preferences onto others. Just because we find a belief gives rise to good feelings within us personally, does not mean that belief is ultimately true. Studying a little bit about fundamentalism helped me see how all unawakened beings are at risk of compensating for a lack of inner security by clinging to forms; that includes material forms such as drugs and patterns of behaviour as well as to beliefs. It would be very useful if a course in the psychology of fundamentalism were to be taught in schools.

I think it was also in my sixteenth year that I lost all my teeth. Probably that sounds like a serious thing to happen to such a young man, and it obviously wasn't insignificant, however I was relieved. I understand that my mother and grandmother had both lost their teeth when they were thirteen, and since I was around that age I had been in a great deal of pain. The dentist wasn't in a hurry to take all my teeth out, but by sixteen it was obviously the right thing to do. A deformity of the roots (as far as I recall) meant the teeth were going

rotten and the nerves were being pinched. My teeth looked alright from the outside but because they were rotten, I was being poisoned. Having dentures at that age was yet another piece of conditioning that caused me to feel like I didn't fit in. Somehow, though, I didn't succumb to self pity. Maybe I even thought I was special. I had been taught to think that those who believed in Jesus were special. They were saved and would be going to heaven when they died, whilst those who didn't believe were headed for a very sorry destination. Another example of arrogance born out of unwise assumptions.

By that age I think I was already becoming aware of a deep, dark sense of guilt. However, my inability to acknowledge the extent to which I was feeling guilty meant that that invidious form of pain was accumulating in unawareness, generating potential for future confusion. The more I lied to myself, the more I became divided within myself. Part of what made it so difficult to own up to was that I didn't really know where all this pain was coming from. Of course I blamed myself for the most part. Only many years later was I able to understand how as children we readily take on our parents' pain in an effort to make those caring for us appear more competent.

Despite my mother's dedication to caring for all of us, and despite her fervent love for Jesus, I sense she was deeply unhappy. I don't think she knew how to love herself or be kind to herself. In those days we never spoke about anything personal – in our family conversations were always on the level of what one was supposed to say or feel. At least that is

my reading of it; perhaps my siblings perceived it otherwise. So I am guessing when I say that I imagine my mother was carrying a huge burden of guilt for much of her life. I still feel sad when I think of it. How can people who are trying so hard to be honest, kind and generous end up being so unhappy? As I found out later when I encountered the Buddhist teachings, it takes more than goodness, it takes wisdom: it takes wise reflection to see beyond the way things appear to be to that which is real. For instance, the idea that it is somehow virtuous to hate ourselves for having made a mistake, leads to poisoning ourselves, to self-harming. While aversion is natural, when we make it 'my' aversion through clinging, it turns into hatred and becomes toxic. Guilt is a distorted form of aversion and manifests as self-hatred, obscuring any possibility of real contentment. We try to make ourselves feel better by hating ourselves for having been bad. We are taught that God casts those who have sinned into eternal hell and that looks like an act of hatred. So in an attempt to be virtuous, we play God and condemn ourselves for the things we get wrong. On a level of conditioned thinking this is sometimes how it works. With wise reflection, however, there is the possibility of letting go of such wrong thinking and arriving at an appreciation of what the Buddha said in Dhammapada verse 5,

*Never by hatred is hatred conquered,
but by readiness to love alone.
This is eternal law.⁴*

Before reflecting on the next stage of this journey, perhaps I could say something about what I mean when I use the word 'wisdom'. In 1975 I was living in a monastery called Wat Hin Maak Peng, which was perched on the banks of the Mekong River, just north of Nongkhai in North East Thailand. My translator at the time reported to me a conversation that the teacher, Tan Ajahn Thate, had had with his monks. Tan Ajahn Thate asked the question, 'Since the face uses a mirror to see itself, what does the heart use to see itself?' Apparently none of the monks replied so Tan Ajahn Thate answered his own question, saying: 'The heart uses wisdom (*pañña*) to see itself.' Wisdom in this context refers to a self-reflective capacity within awareness that is activated when other conditions are sufficiently powerful. At the very least there need to be the strength and confidence which arise out of integrity, and the steadiness which is the expression of *samadhi* or well-disciplined attention. In other words, wisdom is not an accumulation of information; rather it's a dynamic of awareness that has the function of revealing the reality of that which appears within awareness. Above I have mentioned that if we truly wish to be protected from the forces of delusion, mere goodness is not enough. It requires wisdom.

Now back to the journey.

1.5

GETTING READY TO LEAVE

It was indeed good fortune to have been born into a family that appreciated the importance of goodness, but when I was seventeen years old, which was my age in 1969 when we moved from Morrinsville to Kaikohe, I was completely unaware of the power of wisdom. I was also unaware of why we were moving. Perhaps it was because of my father's work or perhaps there were other reasons. He had been given a new job managing another Ford garage. David had already left home. For me, Jennifer, and our younger brother Bryan, it was just a case of being told that this is what was happening: a new town, a new school and of course a new church.

There are only a few things I remember about Kaikohe since I was there for less than two years. I do remember that there are thermal hot pools just outside of the town, called Ngawha Springs. It was worth putting up with the almost overwhelming stench of rotten eggs for the sake of the soak in the steaming hot water. I had my driver's license by then and although I can't be sure, I suspect my mother lent me her car so I could go out there. At the time I was also hoping that the mud we slopped all over ourselves would cure my

embarrassing acne. Usually I would go there with a guy called Guthrie whom I had befriended from school. We were about the same age and went to the same church. These days he is married to my sister.

That was the year I was admitted to hospital with mumps, meningitis and suspected pancreatitis. During the school holidays I had gone back to Morrinsville for a visit and ended up in the intensive care unit of the nearby Waikato Hospital. The condition was as serious as it sounds and there were good reasons for putting me into intensive care. As part of the regime that the doctors put in place to manage this threatening condition I was on pethidine, which possibly contributed to the fog I now think of when I try to recall the episode. Thankfully I recovered, though according to practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine, the high fevers that go with hepatitis and this latest batch of illnesses, might have done damage to my kidneys. At the time of writing this I am nearly seventy years old so the damage mustn't have been too severe.

As part of the education offered at the college in Kaikohe our class was taken to visit the nearby Moerewa abattoir. The grotesque sights I witnessed on that occasion remain etched in my mind. Now I find it takes effort to register that members of the human race of which I am a part would choose to conduct themselves in the ways that the workers at that abattoir did, and probably still do. These days, when the subject of vegetarianism comes up, I am cautious in what I say since it is easy for groups of people to become divided according to views on matters such as diet. I do, however,

sometimes subtly suggest that anyone who eats meat ought to visit an abattoir and see where what they consume comes from and take on board the implications. The hideousness of the industry, the harm it inflicts on countless animals, is only part of the story; there is also the damage the workers are inflicting upon themselves. Sadly, such conduct has been considered normal for so long that many people never stop to question it. I believe that for there to be any hope of rescuing the human race, and planet earth, from the self-destructive trajectory it is on, it will require a radical transformation of the attitude of entitlement many humans appear to have. It seems to me not feasible that we can continue to treat other living beings in such an insensitive and disrespectful manner without disastrous consequences.

It was also around 1969 that I was introduced to the thinking of the Canadian philosopher Marshall McLuhan.⁵ Through the Presbyterian church in Kaikohe I had become aware of a Christian youth conference to be held in Christchurch in the South Island. It was on the theme of communication. The poster announcing the conference quoted from Marshall McLuhan and it piqued my interest. It said something to the effect, 'I am an investigator. I make probes. I have no fixed position.' This contrasted appealingly with much of the dogma that, up until that point, I had been obliged to go along with. So thank you, Marshall McLuhan.

I attended the conference and still recall how inspired I was to learn about the process of communication. It was pointed out, as I recall, that communication is not the same thing

as expression. We can express ourselves, but that doesn't mean those who bear witness to our expression know what we are saying. If we wish to effectively communicate we need to begin by clarifying for ourselves the message we intend to get across; then there is the process of encoding that message, of transmitting the message, receiving the message and finally decoding it. At any stage in that process there can be disruption resulting in miscommunication. Whether I read his work at that conference or later on I am not sure, however I am still influenced by what Marshall McLuhan had to say in his *The Medium is the Message*. It was he who coined the term 'global village' and readers of his works these days might be surprised to find how pertinent the points he makes are in light of our current global crisis.

That period in Kaikohe was the end of my high school education and, once again, I entered the Rotary speech contest. This time the topic of my speech was, *Is the purpose of religion to be comforting or challenging?* I believe I gave a good speech and again reached at least the semi-finals if not the finals, but the judge scored me down because I argued the point that religion is supposed to be both: religion ought to equip us with well-being in order that we can meet the inevitable challenges of life, or something along those lines. He said my talk wasn't accurately addressing the topic. Never mind, it gave me some good experience so that later on when I found myself as the abbot of a Buddhist monastery I wasn't totally unprepared for speaking in public.

YEARS OF CHAOS

2.1 OUT INTO THE WORLD

A vocations advisor I was taken to see during my time at the college in Kaikohe, recommended me for a job as a trainee laboratory technician in Holeproof Mills. I was probably considered suitable because I had an eye for colours and did reasonably well at chemistry. The job involved calculating dye formulae by matching small pieces of cloth with precise colour swatches, and the 'recipes' we produced would then be used in dyeing vast quantities of fabric. So in 1970 I left home and moved in with the McLean family who we had known in Morrinsville. Dr. McLean had moved from Morrinsville to take up a post in a psychiatric hospital in Auckland and it was conveniently near Holeproof Mills.

One day my attention was drawn to a small book on a shelf in the room in which I was staying. Maybe it was the title that caught my attention, I'm not sure. It was a book by Professor Carl Gustav Jung. As I recall, as soon as I started reading that book I was taken aback by the fact that he was criticising the Christian church. In my mind the only people who would openly criticise Christianity were people of no consequence.

Yet here was someone of considerable consequence, a well respected, well published, world renowned psychoanalyst. This was the first time I felt I was allowed to start questioning the culture in which I had been raised. Thank you very much, Professor Jung and Dr. McLean.

For the next few years a depressingly dark mood dominated my life. Had I known then what I know now about depression, I might not have made such a problem out of it, and even though I didn't use the word 'depression', I did make a problem out of it. The perceptions of the world for anyone who is having to endure depression are obviously negative. However, if instead of demonizing depression and expecting those suffering from it to get over it, perhaps we could consider it as a sort of 'holding pattern' that is protecting the sufferer from an even worse state of disintegration. With such a perspective we might be able to view the condition more creatively, less judgmentally. Because our society holds up happiness as an indicator of our personal worth, we readily fail to appreciate the functional value of pain. Not all pain is pathological. If, for instance, I stub my toe and don't feel any pain, I won't inspect the wound and see if it is likely to become infected. Pain can serve a helpful purpose. It says, 'Pay attention here.' Besides, the pain of depression could well be preferable to the much worse possibility of a psychotic breakdown. During a period of so-called depression we could be building up strengths such as the self-respect which comes with cultivating integrity, the confidence associated with developing mindfulness, and

that special kind of nourishment that comes with cultivating wholesome friendships. Once those strengths are in place the depression might have served its purpose and dissolve.

Those around me back then didn't seem to notice how despairing I was. I like to think I was quite successful in acting as if everything was OK. In my case I would say that put me at an advantage, since if others had known how negative I felt they would probably have tried to fix me. (I realize that this doesn't apply to everyone). Sometimes we really need to endure through the pain of life until we get the message – and I do see pain as a message – which is one of the many reasons why I have such great faith in the Buddha. At least within the practice of Theravada Buddhist teachings there is a consistent emphasis on paying attention to suffering. It doesn't encourage practitioners to dwell too much on fantasies of possible future states of enlightenment. Many years later, when a book called *I Am That*, which records teachings by the Advaita Vedanta teacher Nisargadatta, was popular within our monastery in England, I read just one, or perhaps two pages, before I put it down. Not that the content wasn't appealing: it was too appealing. I was afraid that my mind might start trying to imitate what the teacher was saying and that would get in the way of making my own discoveries. This is not to say others shouldn't be reading Nisargadatta and the like if they find it helpful. People are different. Hearing about the realizations of others can indeed be encouraging, however we need to be careful not to feed on the good feelings that arise out of receiving such

encouragement. Suffering is what we have, what we can know here and now. Right practice means preparing ourselves so we are ready to accurately receive suffering when it impacts us, and to see beyond it: seeing in a way that leads to letting go.

2.2 JUMPING SUNDAYS

One rare splash of colour that still shows up amidst the memories I have of that drab period is the ‘happenings’ which were taking place in Albert Park. This was 1970: London had Hyde Park Corner, San Francisco had Haight Ashbury, and Auckland had Albert Park. Situated in central downtown Auckland, near the Auckland University campus, this handsome stretch of exquisitely manicured gardens, massive mature trees and a Victorian band rotunda, provided a great location for weekend get-togethers. I can’t recall for sure how I heard about these *Jumping Sundays* as they were called, possibly through some of the guys working on the dye floor at Holeproof Mills. Several of them were members of the PYM, (Progressive Youth Movement),⁶ a radical anti-Vietnam-war-and-other-things movement that was upsetting the New Zealand Establishment. I think I was susceptible in those days to feeling drawn by anything that looked like it might undermine the society that I was busy blaming for my misery. There was music, politics and probably early promoters of the ‘back-to-the-earth’ movement, also Hare Krishnas, and lots of colour. Thinking about it now, those events did serve

as a hint of potential aliveness, which was helpful. A dreadful sense of darkness and confusion was building within me. I had sought solace on a couple of occasions at local churches – one on Upper Queens Street and another at Mt Roskill – but I walked out of them both feeling more disillusioned than when I went in. It seems that that is what we tend to do when we feel pushed to our limits: we try things we perceive as having worked in the past. This time nothing was working, though those Jumping Sundays did perhaps quicken the spirit of exploration. To me they seemed to be in sync with what Professor Jung had to say and what Marshall McLuhan was about. They may not have provided the missing ingredient for which I was desperately seeking; however, I would say they were a harbinger of hope.

The Vice President of America, Mr Spiro Agnew, visited Auckland around then, very likely trying to muster support for their war in Vietnam. He was successful in garnering support for street demonstrations and generated a lot of ill-will. I wasn't convinced though that getting angry at Agnew or America was the solution.

This was also the time of Peter Fonda's movie *Easy Rider* which introduced me to the expression 'doing your own thing'. In itself those few words might not sound like much; however, for me that turn of phrase somehow symbolized the momentum that was gathering within the counterculture. On many levels, the ways of doing things that had previously been considered acceptable had had their day - the old ways were being replaced. Despite all their might, America never managed to win their war in Vietnam. Man was able to walk

on the moon, but here on earth we weren't managing very well to get along together.

Earlier I mentioned how I find reading and mathematics challenging. If that hadn't been the case back then, I might have stayed on at Holeproof Mills. Now I feel grateful for those difficulties. Of course I wasn't grateful at the time; I really did want to feel like I fitted in somewhere.

The despair I felt towards Christianity took me to the point where I formally took leave from the church. On my Certificate of Confirmation, issued by the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, it is written (presumably by me), 'Now on the Monday 6th April 1970 denounce my membership of the established church of N.Z.' (The word 'I' was missing, and it should have said 'renounce'). It seems strange after all these years that I still have this certificate. I recently found it bundled with my old school report book and other papers that I believe my mother gave me on one of my final trips back home. Surely I hadn't given her that certificate?

For reasons I can't recall I decided to take a trip to visit my uncle, one of my father's older brothers, who lived about a hundred and fifty miles south of Auckland, in Taupo.⁷ I imagine I was just trying anything to see if something would work. On the trip back from Taupo to Auckland, something did work. I was hitchhiking, which was a thoroughly normal way of getting around in those days, and was picked up by a couple of university students. In the course of the conversation we were having, I expressed an opinion about something which prompted one of the guys in the front seat to turn around and, in a challenging manner, say to me,

‘Don’t you realize that you have been brainwashed to think that way?’ It felt like something hit me. The next thing that now I can recall was arriving at my brother’s apartment in Hamilton where I was going to stay the night. At some stage I started writing down my thoughts, and I had a lot to say. They weren’t about aimless confusion or rambling resentments, rather they were observations. I felt alive again, and there were no drugs involved.

My brother was friendly with the two girls who lived next door, also university students, and somehow we met up and I shared with them my mood of inspiration. They suggested instead of using the word ‘brainwashed’ I could try using ‘conditioned’. That fitted. Just the suggestion that thinking was a conditioned process, seemed to release in me a lot of energy. At least that is how I now perceive what happened. I wrote and I sang, in particular I sang along with a record of a song called *Look Through My Window*⁸ by The Mamas and the Papas. What inspired me were the words about letting go. I seem to remember that I sang my heart out as I had previously sung hymns alone by the river near Morrinsville. Those words resonated within in a way that felt relevant. A big thank you to those university students and to the Mamas and the Papas.

Thank you also to Leonard Cohen. There was a poster on the wall in the living room of those two girls with the words of a Leonard Cohen song. What a gift. It puzzles me how some people would find his music depressing. Yes, melancholic, but so beautiful.

2.3 LIFELINES

Around 1971 I enrolled to study psychology, sociology and education at Waikato University in Hamilton. Choosing that university had nothing to do with my brother David living in Hamilton – he and I had never been close. Perhaps it did have something to do with my having heard Waikato University had a psychology department that favoured a Humanistic approach. I had felt encouraged after hearing a bit about Gestalt therapy which made it seem a more practical approach than that of the Behaviourists.

Early on, after enrolling at the university, as a result of an unexpected turn of events, I had met Professor Jim Ritchie who invited me to join in with a regular extra-curricular sensory awareness group that met at his house on Wednesday nights. I wasn't totally unfamiliar with the theory of sensory awareness exercises and encounter groups, but I had no experience of them. We were a group of about eight to ten, mostly students at the university with perhaps some ex-students, and we would experiment with techniques employed in Gestalt therapy. I suspect those meetings contributed significantly to

my beginning to find that I had my own voice: I had my own desires and opinions. Prior to that, the conventional sense of who I was had been moulded into a virtual human being: I said what I thought I was supposed to say and did what I thought I was supposed to do. In today's parlance it would be said that I was totally inauthentic. No wonder I felt so confused. I had no dependable frame of reference.

Although it is a digression, perhaps at this point I could say something about what I mean by 'the conventional sense of who I was' or about how I understand 'self'. In Buddhist teachings we hear a lot about not-self, and all of the world's major religions emphasize 'selflessness'. Contrasting that, in the world of psychotherapy, and perhaps especially so within Gestalt Therapy, there is a strong emphasis on developing 'self'. On the surface these contrasting perspectives could appear to be in conflict, however, if we look deeper there need be no problem. If we can appreciate the sense of self (or the ego or the personality) as predictable patterns of mental and emotional activity that give an individual a fulcrum or a frame of reference by way of which they can relate to the world, then we can appreciate its relative function. The problems arise when we take this structure as ultimate or as permanent – as who and what we are: we identify *as* it. In the early stages of life, if all goes well enough, a conventional sense of a separate self is configured in an individual and they get on with the various physical, mental, emotional and relational aspects of their life, hopefully without too much trouble. That doesn't mean they won't struggle with the normal suffering of loss, of

disappointment, and eventually of death that life gives us all; addressing those issues is the domain of a deeper dimension: what we might call the spiritual life. Real difficulties do appear if during the early stages of life things don't go well enough, and if the child experiences more distress than they are ready to handle. What psychotherapists can potentially do well is to help someone who finds themselves with such unacknowledged difficulties to come to terms with their past conditioning. A skilled therapist can help the individual reach a stage of having a well enough integrated sense of individuality, or self. From that stage onward, they will be better prepared to deal with the vicissitudes of life. Also, they will be more ready to take on the tasks of the spiritual journey – that is, cultivating selflessness. The cultivation of selflessness means learning to truly see that the self is not-self – it is not ultimate: what we refer to as the self, is activity taking place within a larger context.

Now back to Hamilton.

Jim, as I came to know him, had a holiday property at Whale Bay, near Raglan. He and his wife Jane and their children would often spend time there. Also some of the Wednesday group spent time there. Whether it was with them or on some other occasion, I have a strong memory of one day noticing a poster on the wall in one of the cabins on that property. All I recall of the poster was the word printed large, AWARENESS. Perhaps the text under it gave some extra meaning to the word, however, this was one of those significant moments when something registered: this mattered. There is awareness. I

can't say what it was about that moment that meant so much, but nearly 50 years later, I am still able to visualise that word on that poster and recall the moment – so thank you, Jim Ritchie.

Jim had a wide circle of friends. He and Jane were well known for their work studying child-rearing patterns in New Zealand. Also he was close to some of the local Maori communities and worked hard to get them recognition. One day when I was at his house, James (Hemi) Baxter turned up and I can recall the two of them rolling around the living room floor hugging and playing like two small boys. James Baxter was one of the best known and most highly regarded poets of New Zealand. He had made the unconventional choice of living in a commune called Jerusalem, near Whanganui.

During this period in Hamilton I was offered three lifelines. The first came from a friend, Jim Smith. Jim Smith and I had met before I came down to Hamilton and he was also studying at Waikato University. He had a child to support and I remember helping him one evening (maybe more) on a night job he had as a cleaner in a school. He gave me my first Buddhist book: *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts. What a gift! Here was a spiritual teaching that honoured the heart's yearning for insight into that which matters most in life, and it didn't demand naive acquiescence. There was one phrase from that book that stood out for me; as I recall it was presented as a summary of Zen Buddhist teachings. It said something to the effect, 'When you sit just sit; when you walk just walk; above all don't wobble!' Although it was already

quite late at night when I read that, I was so inspired I simply got up and went walking around the streets of Hamilton. Of course I was thoroughly wobbly, not just when I was sitting or walking, but here was another hint of a useful direction in which I could be seeking.

It might also have been Jim Smith who gave me a book by Krishnamurti. There was a Krishnamurti Society at our university but for some reason I was not drawn to it. What I did value though was reading in one of Krishnamurti's books where he made the observation that most people assume gratification of desire and satisfaction are the same thing, when they are not. I don't know what else he said. I suspect I didn't read more than the first page, but that much was helpful and has stayed with me. It fits with so many other teachings I have received over the years, including of course, teachings by Tan Ajahn Chah. With gratification we get momentary relief from the pain that arises from being caught up in wanting, being identified with wanting. True satisfaction is what arises in those who have let go of all identification with the movement of wanting. They know, and can wisely and compassionately accord with, the reality of wanting.

Although I have said reading was challenging, now that I think of it there were a few books that I found nourishing. RD Laing's *Sanity, Madness and the Family*, which I probably had to read as part of the psychology course, also his, *The Divided Self*, and *Knots*; Alan Watts' *The Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*; Paul Reps' *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, and

his *Square Sun, Square Moon*. None of these came close to giving me the missing ingredient, however they did provide a bit of colour at a time when my life was painfully grey.

Music was also providing some colour, though these days I am less clear about what I was listening to. I can however fondly recall *The Incredible String Band* and in particular *The Water Song*. I am happy to still have the words about flowing floating around in my head.

The second precious lifeline thrown my way came from a Canadian woman, Lynn, whom I knew from the Wednesday group meetings at Jim Ritchie's place. She generously paid for me to receive initiation into Transcendental Meditation. It might in fact have been her partner David who paid, I'm unsure. TM represented something to me. I don't know if the mantra I was given was genuine or something that the business-like gentleman who gave it to me had just made up. I confess that I failed to abide by all the 'terms of use' prescribed for TM meditators, and from time to time I continued to indulge in various forms of unwholesomeness. Nevertheless, it represented and introduced me to the discipline of attention. Thank you very much, Lynn and David. I cannot possibly estimate the value of that introduction to the world of meditation. These days Lynn and I are still in contact, although usually only once a year. She has been a dear Dhamma friend.

Just before the beginning of my second year at university I joined a group of about a dozen other friends and acquaintances in moving to live in a couple of houses on a farm near

Gordonton, a few miles outside of Hamilton. It is hard to define what it was that drew us together, probably a shared longing for something meaningful, something new. My sociology lecturer and his wife and children were part of the 'experiment'. Also there was a super liberal Anglican minister who had previously run a communal house in Hamilton. Raewyn was my best friend there and she worked in town as a secretary. It is probably safe to say that most of us were influenced by the book *The Greening of America*⁹ and maybe by *The Whole Earth Catalogue*.¹⁰ We were looking towards communal living, I expect, as a solution to the sense of there being something missing – what I have been referring to as the missing ingredient.

Around this time the New Zealand Government was experimenting with what was called *Ohu*,¹¹ a Maori word having to do with community activities. James (Hemi) Baxter had become somewhat of an inspiration for communal living in New Zealand, and this wasn't long after Woodstock had happened in America. In Nimbin, New South Wales, Australia, they had their own version of Woodstock. However, communal living in Gordonton didn't turn out to be much fun. As far as the lecturer and his wife were concerned there needed to be standards kept that were suitable for raising children. Some of our group could probably have been described as anarchists. I naively spoke in praise of Mao Tse Tung (though I knew nothing about him or the horror he was inflicting on his country). Essentially I was hoping that if we could live communally all society's problems would be manageable.

I regret speaking in praise of Mao but I don't feel overly judgemental of the naivete. How could it have been otherwise? It would have been better if we had had a modicum of humility, but we didn't. We felt frustrated and desperate to do something, anything. I had converted the hen house into my accommodation and was energized by fantasies of the study of psychology at university and finding meaning in communal living. Unfortunately, as far as I was concerned, the dominant mood in that commune was one of desperation.

Before long, disillusionment also set in regarding what was really on offer at university, combined with the difficulties I was having keeping up with the reading expected of me, which led to my dropping out at the end of the first term of the second year. That was Easter, and in New Zealand by that time winter was rapidly approaching. Raewyn and I decided we would go to Christchurch for the Easter weekend.

A few weeks after returning from that trip, it was on Raewyn's motorbike that I was riding when I had a serious accident. That morning when I borrowed her bike to ride into Hamilton without a crash helmet and without a license was to impact the rest of my life. Although it was around the middle of the day, the conditions were very foggy; the country road was narrow so I took the liberty of riding nearer the centre of the road than I should have. I had my lights on, but when I cut through an 'S' bend I ploughed into a car coming in the opposite direction. The next thing I remember was regaining consciousness on my way into the operating theatre.

On the negative side of things, most immediately it meant that I spent quite a long time in hospital recovering from the

damage done to my head, shoulder and ankle, and it resulted in many months of having a full length plaster cast on my right leg. My parents, as you would imagine, were not delighted when they heard I had dropped out of university, but were relieved I hadn't been killed in what was a serious motorbike accident. Raewyn's bike was a write-off; my lovely hen house accommodation had to be abandoned as it wasn't suitable for the winter; the insurance company of the person whose car I hit sued me and it took nearly all the money I received in sickness benefit to pay that off.

On the positive side, I received another lifeline. A few months earlier, at an encounter group-style gathering at Whale Bay that Jim Ritchie had instigated, I had met an Australian guy, also called Jim, who was currently living on a commune near Mullumbimby in northern New South Wales. While I was laid up in bed recuperating I received a copy of a book from Jim and a mutual friend Roselberry: it was *Be Here Now*, by Ram Dass. This wasn't just a gift – it was a treasure. Ram Dass was someone with bright eyes and a beautiful smile, talking about meditation, macrobiotics, chanting, pranayama, yoga and spiritual community. True, he had a strange name and wore robes, but when I read his words they were like music, beautiful music.

2.4 JOURNEYING

There is so much to thank Ram Dass for that I hardly know where to start. The inspiration I received from that book was likely one of the forces that motivated my leaving the Gordonton commune.

A few weeks before leaving, at an annual festival of devotion to Dionysus – aka Auckland University Arts Festival – I had met an Arts student from Wellington, John Vincent. We must have exchanged addresses because a few weeks later when I was in Wellington I looked him up. This was shortly before my twenty-first birthday. John was living in a typical (for Wellington) wooden house in Tasman Street, just across the road from Wellington Polytechnic College where he was doing a course in graphic design. Nearly all old buildings in Wellington are made of wood because the city is located on a fault line and regularly receives earthquakes. (New Zealand has approx. 20,000 quakes¹² each year.) There were five or six friends sharing the place and John kindly invited me to stay. The house had two storeys (actually, it was two separate apartments) and we lived downstairs.

Around that time, the government stopped providing me with sickness benefit money and instead offered me a job, which I was more or less obliged to take, working as a clerk in the Education Department of the NZ Government. The only interesting aspect of the job was that it was housed in the second largest wooden building¹³ in the world (at that time). Architecturally it was glorious. Occupationally it was tedious.

Many interesting things did happen though at Tasman Street. The occasion which shines brightest in my memory is meeting Jutta Passler. One evening, during a get-together upstairs, one of the girls who lived there returned home from an event with a German woman she had met. It was Jutta. As soon as we were introduced we started talking, almost as if we already knew each other. It turned out that we had both been at the same encounter group weekend a few months earlier. It was a weekend being run by two good friends of mine, Dr. Jack Prichard and Helen Merriman, and as I happened to be visiting them at the time, they had taken me along. The conversation with Jutta that started that evening lasted for decades. Often I would visit her in Palmerston North where she was teaching French and German at the High School. Only some time later did I discover how thoroughly out of character it was for her to have me stay in her apartment. She was about 20 years older than I and lived an intensely private life. Her neighbours probably thought her eccentric.

When Jutta was eighteen years old she had been living in Dresden. It was the time of the horrendous firebombing.¹⁴

Her mother had died in 1939 because penicillin wasn't available in those days to the public. Her father had little time for her so, for a period during her teen years, she had been homeless. In 1945 she had found a place to stay at a girls' hostel. During the day she was obliged to work at a factory and at night she would regularly help out at the railway station where large numbers of refugees were accumulating. They were fleeing from the Russians who were approaching from the north. On the thirteenth February, 1945, Jutta was staying at the hostel and had telephoned a friend to say she wouldn't be helping out at the station that evening. It was that evening that the bombing began, and along with the other girls, she hid in the basement. At one stage she came up to look outside but then the second wave of bombings began. In a record of her life that Jutta shared with me, she says that as many as 120,000 people were killed. I don't know how that accords with what was officially stated. The shock was indescribable.

She managed to survive the terror of those nights of bombing and then she had to somehow survive the hell of the aftermath. It doesn't take a lot to imagine how life might be for an 18 years old German girl when she encountered the invading Russian soldiers. Many years later when she shared her story with me I could see how skilfully she had turned her struggles into great strength and great integrity.

After the war Jutta moved to live in Paris where she worked as a housekeeper for an American family. Later on they helped her move to live in California. Having obtained her Master's degree she went on to live in Honolulu where she taught at

the University, and then eventually, to New Zealand where she settled. On three different occasions over those years she met pilots who had flown in bomber planes during those Dresden raids. Jutta didn't really mind if others thought her eccentric; she was interested not just in surviving, but in truly living. She was her own person. I am very, very grateful to have had such a fine friend. It was Jutta who introduced me to Macrobiotics, Martin Buber, Meister Eckhart, Constant Comment Tea, and Yellow Red incense – the latter still being burned today in the Dhamma Hall here in our monastery in Northumberland.

When Jutta discussed the topic of authentic being she often used the phrase, 'the bigger the front, the bigger the back', an expression she said she had learned from Macrobiotics, a discipline which focuses primarily on food but that aims at finding balance in everything. The expression refers to people who put up a big front in an attempt to hide something they haven't yet learnt how to fully receive. It reminds me of an expression I believe is attributed to Prof. C.G. Jung, 'The greater the radiance, the bigger the shadow.' Jutta had suffered terribly, but resolutely refused to play the victim. She wasn't into playing games. She wasn't into putting up fronts. Several years later I was happy when she visited me in Northeast Thailand and had an opportunity to meet Tan Ajahn Chah. He called her Toyota (rhyming with Jutta).

Now back to Wellington.

There was one occasion when I spontaneously took off to visit an actor I had met, Simon, who had a job manning a fire

lookout tower on Rainbow Mountain,¹⁵ near Rotorua. The only thing they expected of him was throughout the day to keep an eye out for fires in the surrounding forests. If he saw anything suspicious he had to call it in using the radio. Simon was an actor but was also writing plays. Being a fire-watcher seemed to suit him. During my visit there I came around to fancying myself perched up high in such a tower with nothing much to do all day long, so Simon set up a meeting with the Overseer. On the day I left to hitchhike back to Wellington, I met the Overseer at the base of Rainbow Mountain and we discussed possibilities. I let him know I was interested but he didn't appear convinced I would make a good fit. He was right: I was attempting to put up another front. What I needed in fact was community.

My job doing accounts in the Education Department didn't last long; instead I took another job driving a delivery van for a pharmaceutical company. Several of us from the house in Tasman Street moved to a place in Owen Street, near the zoo. I managed to get three months free rent since the previous occupants had left the place in such a filthy condition. The owner said they planned to eventually knock the house down anyway so we could be creative in renovating it. (That is how I interpreted what he said.)

Again it was a wonderful wooden house and this time it had generously high ceilings, at least by our standards. John lived out the back in what might have been the old servants quarters, Sally baked excellent cookies, Rob had an amazing sound system, Andrew was just a really sweet guy, and Jude

was the intelligent one. I had a lot of fun stripping back some of the walls exposing the wooden panelling, painting other walls, constructing a kitchen and designing a playroom in which there was an open fire. It was almost too good to be true. We were a harmonious bunch and appreciated each other's company. This was the time of *The Yes Album*, *Emerson Lake and Palmer*, *To Our Children's Children's Children*, and *Ziggy Stardust*.

John spent his time painting and drawing and sculpting. He is one of two people from that period with whom I have stayed in touch. Our lives went in different directions but there seems to be something we recognise in each other. Somewhere around 1977 or '78 he turned up in Thailand. Ajahn Pasanno and I both happened to be in Bangkok for some reason and were at Wat Boworn when one day John, or Bodhi as he was to be known, suddenly burst in. Clothed all in red, he had aligned himself with Rajneesh and was on his way to Poona in India. I am not quite sure how he knew where to find me though I am glad he did. These days I think he has an Advaita Vedanta teacher. Such friendships are precious. Thank you, Bodhi.

The second person from that period with whom I am still in touch, is Rob Green. In 1971 he was making money working on the Inter-Island ferry service between Wellington and Picton in the South Island. Curiously, in June 1980, almost as soon as I arrived at Cittaviveka Monastery in England, I received an unexpected phone call from Rob. He was taking part in a study program in a Tibetan Buddhist Institute in

Britain. He happened to be there when Tan Ajahn Chah visited in 1979. These days Rob lives in Russia with his partner, and teaches English and we write from time to time. My life was taking on a very different shape due to the influence of Jutta and Ram Dass. I suspect it was through Jutta that I was introduced to books written by Hermann Hesse: *Narcissus and Goldmund*, *Demian* and *Siddhartha*. The spirit of what he wrote was again congruent with what Prof. C.G. Jung and Marshall McLuhan had to say. Apparently in real life Professor Jung and Hermann Hesse were close companions. Already while living at Tasman Street I had started attending hatha yoga classes at a Centre in Aro Street. This helped get my damaged body back into working order. Maybe it was through that Centre that I also found out about a Mantra yoga group in which I began to participate. Having been inspired by Jutta's dedication to the discipline of Macrobiotics, my breakfast in those days consisted of a bowl of plain boiled brown rice with some super healthy (unsweetened) home-made marmalade stirred in. My meditation practice, however, was sadly lacking in discipline; I was very restless.

One day, on the spur of a moment, I caught the ferry from Wellington down to Christchurch. I wanted to spend time with a fellow I had met at a music festival in Whanganui, John Britten.¹⁶ The culture in New Zealand, at least back then, allowed for spontaneously turning up at someone's house totally unannounced. My visit coincided with his taking a trip down the coast to deliver a car to a friend, so I joined

him. John had a way with vehicles; not only did what he had built run well, his work was gorgeous. For instance he had converted an old truck into a stunningly beautiful caravan/mobile home, lined with kauri wood. It was a masterpiece. He was a character full of creative enthusiasm. Years later, by which time I was already the abbot at Aruna Ratanagiri, I reached out to reconnect, only to discover he had died shortly before my letter arrived. It was then that I found out about how he had gone on to create a world-famous handmade motorbike that achieved recognition at Daytona¹⁷ and other racing competitions.

Back in Wellington I was beginning to have fantasies of setting up a pancake shop. This was not about serving delicate dainties sprinkled with icing sugar: what I had in mind would be made of wholemeal flour and more likely to be served sprinkled with alfalfa sprouts. The idea never got much traction. One night several of us went to a Ravi Shankar concert and met up afterwards with friends and discussed the possibility of such a shop, but the idea stopped there. What was great though about that particular evening (besides Ravi Shankar) was that those friends had just acquired a copy of the newly released Pink Floyd album, *Dark Side Of The Moon*.

2.5 READY TO LEAVE, AGAIN

For all the fun we were having, there was still something really important missing. I felt far from contented. At some point Andrew (from Owen Street) and I hatched a plan to escape to Sydney. Whether Andrew saw it as an escape or not, I am not sure; he might have had other motivations. In my case, ongoing indulgence in heedlessness was undermining my confidence, and, perhaps similar to the way I left Auckland and left Hamilton, I now wanted to leave New Zealand.

Before departing I visited my parents who lived almost at the other end of the North Island near the Bay of Islands. After my father had a heart attack he had left his job managing the Ford garage and they went into semi-retirement running the General Store at the small seaside village called Opuā. Opuā was known internationally as a safe deep harbour where ocean-going yachts could conveniently moor long term. On one of my earlier visits to my parents, Greenpeace's boat, the Rainbow Warrior had been moored there in preparation for one of their trips to Mururoa Atoll to protest against France's testing of atomic weapons. Nobody knew at that time that in 1985 the French secret service would bomb and sink the Rainbow Warrior while it was moored in Marsden Wharf¹⁸ in Auckland Harbour.

I suspect that by now my parents had started to accept that I was going to keep behaving in ways they didn't understand. They still loved me, but there was almost no real communication between us. My visit home was not because I genuinely wished to see them; presumably I felt it was the right thing to do. That trip north also gave me a chance to say goodbye to a local potter, Peter Yeates, whose company I had enjoyed in the past. At the time he was collaborating with the artist Friedensreich Hundertwasser. Originally from Austria, Hundertwasser was well known, amongst other things, for his posters advertising the 1972 Munich Olympic Games.¹⁹ In that part of New Zealand he was known for designing the extraordinary public toilets in Kawakawa.²⁰

Also, while I was up north, I took the opportunity to visit another commune I had heard about. It was situated not far away on the other side of the island at Waiotemarama, near the Hokianga Harbour. The commune had the rather grand name of *The Foundation of Mankind*. I managed to get a ride over there on the back of a motorbike and was pleased I had the chance to see it. There was energy and enthusiasm, though, thinking back about it now, I suspect they too were finding communal living not quite as heavenly as they had hoped. As Ajahn Sumedho has said, ideals are like stars, they are useful for getting your bearings, but it is not wise to expect to actually reach the stars. Ideals are also a good way of generating energy, but if we hold them too tightly, we will end up very disappointed.

2.6 A VERY FOREIGN COUNTRY

Andrew and I arrived in Sydney, Australia, shortly before my twenty-second birthday, September 1973. One of the first impressions I had was one of being shocked at the sight of police in Sydney's airport carrying lethal weapons. The only real guns I had seen were for hunting rabbits or wild pigs; in New Zealand the police did not carry lethal weapons.

When we are shocked by something (and I don't mean merely surprised) it is a sign a bubble we were living in has just burst. The bubble I had been living in was the idea that the rest of the world was some sort of slight variation on New Zealand. Unconsciously I assumed everywhere would be as peaceful and parochial as New Zealand. Although I guess I wasn't aware we were parochial. Of course I had seen people-killing guns in movies and on television but only now realized that there are places where these guns are actually used. Eight or nine months later, another bubble would be burst when I flew from Darwin in the Northern Territories of Australia and arrived in what was then Portuguese Timor.

Besides feeling somewhat shocked at the airport I imagine I felt excited to be somewhere genuinely new. Not long before taking leave of New Zealand we had hosted a fellow, I think Canadian, at our place in Owen Street. He must have given us the address of where he expected to be staying in Sydney since, even though the address was a bit vague, we easily located the place and found ourselves being received at their apartment. An American guy called Bill Hamilton was part of the group living there and he mentioned that we could probably find work at the Darling Harbour Railway Station. He had a cushy job there spending much of the day folding tarpaulins. As it happened, I did get a job there without any difficulty; however, mine was loading beer kegs onto railway carriages.

Within a few days Andrew and I had found our own place to live in the suburb of Coogee (which is the Aboriginal word for 'stinky', because large quantities of stinky seaweed sometimes wash up on the beach there). Also, soon after we arrived in Sydney, an Australian fellow called John, took me to visit a Buddhist monastery, Wat Buddharangsee, in the suburb of Roselands. Maybe when we were staying in Bill Hamilton's place, I had mentioned that I was interested in meditation and John had picked up on that. Meeting Buddhist monks for the first time was intensely intimidating. I imagined they would be able to read my mind and see what a fake I was. I suspect part of me really did want to be seen, but there was also a big part of me that felt like I couldn't handle it. On that occasion I had the good fortune of meeting Luang Por Mahasamai who was Laotian by birth but had received his

monastic education in Thailand. He had a big scar across his face that you couldn't help but notice; he also had an even bigger and warm smile. That was the only time I visited Wat Buddharangsee until about five years later.

The next few months were spent accumulating funds so that I could travel north and join Jim and Roselberry on their commune near Mullumbimby. On one occasion when working at Darling Harbour Station there was another of those moments that stood out as significant. In truth I can't say that the moment stood out at the time: it was only later that I appreciated how something valuable had been triggered. What was quickened in me was an appreciation for inner work: psychological and spiritual work. Of course the concept of doing your inner work was not new to me, but on this occasion something clicked and a sense of the significance of being committed to doing your inner work took on new meaning. The person I was assigned to work with that day was mumbling and grumbling about something that had upset him until he suddenly caught himself and said words to the effect, 'I have to be more careful. I had forgotten that in situations when I feel let down by the tools that I am using, I easily overreact'. It was just that example of self-awareness that struck me. According to the conditioning I had received, the only things that really mattered in life were what you believed. If you professed to believe in the right things then all would be well, and if you believed in the wrong things then all would not be well. Although I would not have been able to articulate it at the time, now I see how that observation

usefully brought into relief the lazy attitude that can become established in our minds if in our early education we fail to receive wise instruction. Although I can't recall the name of my co-worker that day at Darling Harbour Railway Station, thank you.

When later on I became familiar with instructions offered by the Buddha I began to internalise faith in the law of kamma. It is not the case that anyone else can take responsibility for our actions; we alone carry that responsibility. The Buddha rarely criticized other religions but he was critical of teachings that undermine confidence in the law of kamma. What he endorsed was what he called *citta bhavana*, or cultivation of the heart, cultivation of awareness: doing our inner work.

After a few months in Sydney I packed my belongings into a backpack and headed north. I forget now how I travelled to Mullumbimby, probably by train, but arriving there felt like how I imagine Muslims must feel when they arrive at Mecca, or Christians when they go to Jerusalem.

Roselberry had told me to make my way to The Sunflower Cafe and ask for directions to the Narada commune, which I did. I seem to recall the intensity of emotions I was feeling was dizzying: joy at seeing beautiful, colourful, long-haired, bearded members of the back-to-the-earth community mingling with the local population; along with hope that perhaps I was about to find a place where I might fit in, mixed with the fear that it might not work out. A potent cocktail of expectation.

The image I have now of The Sunflower Cafe is that it was full of the fragrance of patchouli oil, beautiful smiling men, women and children, bright colours, stained glass, shelves filled with organic produce, pottery, hand-woven shawls, and walls displaying artwork for sale. The folk working there helpfully pointed me in the direction I needed to go to reach Upper Main Arm where I would find the Narada commune.

It puzzles me that I can remember almost nothing about my arrival at Narada, but this was my first experience of the Australian countryside, and probably the sun, the heady aroma of the eucalyptus trees, combined with the sounds of the otherworldly wildlife, all were somewhat overwhelming. I do however have an impression that Jim and Roselberry might have given the community members an exaggerated report of me since they welcomed me almost like family.

There were five or six couples on the commune which comprised approximately 200 acres of undulating land. It had previously been farmland but was now covered in lush, subtropical, secondary growth, mostly varieties of eucalyptus with dense undergrowth of lantana. Mount Warning was not far away to the north and there was a stream that meandered along one boundary of the property. Except for a couple who lived in the main communal house near the entrance, all the others had their own portion of the property that they occupied and their own residences. All were Australian, several from Melbourne, some ex-teachers and others artists, and most had known each other for quite some time. Clearly they were embracing ideals of cooperative living, but there

was also a decent dose of common sense. For instance, each member of the commune held shares in the company that owned the property. It wasn't automatically assumed that I would be invited to live there but they went out of their way to include me in activities. I wasn't treated like an itinerant visitor.

The thing that took time and considerable effort to accommodate was the unfamiliar wildlife. The screaming kookaburras weren't any trouble, they were fascinating; it was the snakes, the goannas, stinging ants, poisonous spiders, leeches and ticks that got to me. New Zealand bush, by comparison, is totally benign. In New Zealand you can walk out into the bush, pitch a tent and lie down almost anywhere without any bother (other than from sandflies). I was used to camping and roughing it a bit, at least that is what I thought, but here, in this very foreign land, there was always something trying to sting me or bite me. Many of the creatures and critters were deadly poisonous!

Jim took me to a location a short distance further along the ridge from where he and Roselberry lived and said it would be alright if I wanted to construct a small residence there. From that ridge it was possible to look down the Upper Main Arm Valley over Byron Bay to the ocean. I had brought a modest sized tent with me, so over the next few days, using canvas, bamboo, plastic sheeting and a variety of posts and poles, I constructed myself a dwelling. This was to be my home for the next few months.

Life at Narada was a mixture of fun and hard physical labour. The hard labour in my case mostly involved hauling water up the hill to my dwelling. This was the first time in my life I had to genuinely exercise restraint in the amount of water I used. It became clear that even here, living the beautiful life with beautiful people, took a lot of effort. Maybe I actually started to grow up at that point and appreciate that what you put in is what you get back. Also there was work assisting other community members with projects they had on the go. One of the residents was still finishing his geodesic dome and needed assistance.

Nearly all the fun times involved music. The Main Arm Valley was strewn with New Age communities of different shapes and sizes. A variety of excellent musicians passed through. There was little need for shopping other than for food. That required only a very occasional trip into Mullumbimby; once I ventured as far as Lismore to source some hardware: cooking equipment, tools etc. There was an abundance of fruit available growing in the valley, especially bananas – so many bananas! Every so often there was a barter market where members of the different communes would meet and exchange produce. As I recall, the ideal was that no money would be exchanged, though I suspect that was one ideal not held too tightly.

After several weeks of settling in, I received a visit from Danny, a very short, very jolly chap from Texas, whom I had met in Sydney. He was on his way to participate in a Buddhist meditation retreat due to take place a few miles away to

the west, at Nimbin. I think there was some connection between Danny and John who had taken me to visit Wat Buddharangsee. This retreat was to be led by an English monk, Ajahn Khantipalo, who was usually resident at that temple in Sydney. Danny wanted me to join him on retreat since a spare place had opened up. Although reading *The Way Of Zen* the year prior had inspired me, the idea of getting involved with another organized religion was as appealing as a splitting headache. Danny was very persuasive however and I did end up joining him. That seven-day silent meditation retreat turned out to be one of the greatest gifts I ever received.

THE SPIRIT OF THE
SPIRITUAL LIFE

3.1 A REORIENTATION

Previous moments of insight and reflection that had spontaneously occurred in my life were all surface level shifts in perspective compared to what happened on that retreat. They had been like a thick fog momentarily clearing, indicating that there was in fact some sort of a path worth following. The shift that occurred on the third day of that retreat was like a real signpost, and it precipitated a fundamental reorientation of my life. It indicated clearly the goodness and clarity that are potentially available. Looking back now I see this episode as representing the beginning of my learning to communicate in a new language. It was the language of the heart and not just of the head. It is not really possible to live the spiritual life if we are still trying to find our sense of identity/security in our heads, in mere approximations.

Without my knowing it at the time, this was also the beginning of my first concrete experience of the pitfall known these days as ‘spiritual bypassing’ (more on that later).

It is difficult to be objective about what happened. For some beginners in meditation such an experience might not

have seemed special at all, just a brief acquaintance with a somewhat deeper sense of contentment. In my case, by comparison with the ordeal I had been going through, it was a wonderfully significant encounter with inner potential – one I had not the vaguest idea was possible.

Ajahn Khantipalo was very enthusiastic and generous in his efforts to encourage the practice of formal meditation. The retreat I attended was just one of a series of five or maybe seven retreats in a row that he taught there at that old farm house just outside Nimbin. We began each morning sitting quietly listening to a tape recording of a group reciting one of the names of the Buddha, to the tune usually used in Pure Land Buddhism in praise of Amitabha. This was followed by alternating periods of sitting meditation, walking meditation and supportive talks by the teacher. There was a break for breakfast and another for lunch. It was my first experience with the disciplines of not eating after midday, keeping silent, and not making eye contact. I don't recall resisting the discipline. That is not to say I found the seven days easy. Perhaps I already had a degree of faith in the Buddha because I did take it seriously.

On the third day, during a period of walking meditation, having been diligent in my effort to concentrate, I noticed that my mind was quieter than usual. At that point the voice inside me that likes commenting on everything, came up with the observation, 'there is just awareness', or it might have been, 'there is just knowing.' This was almost immediately followed by an enquiring voice, 'but who is aware?', or 'who

knows?', at which point it felt like the mind dropped. That shift in perspective was the signpost. A quality of peacefulness appeared that seemed to require no maintenance: it was just there, and I fell into it. There were no drugs involved, no group therapy dynamics; the main thing seemed to be an adjustment in the quality of attention.

When thinking about it afterwards, as I definitely did, the image that came up was that our experience of existence is similar to focussing the lens of a camera. What is most important is not so much having to keep changing the objects of attention, but rather whether or not we can view those objects clearly; and that clarity, or lack of it, does not depend on anyone or anything outside of ourselves.

Great gratitude to Ajahn Khantipalo, and thank you, Danny. What would have happened in my life if I had stubbornly resisted the invitation to go on that retreat?

3.2 WHAT NEXT?

Unexpectedly, when the retreat ended, I discovered that not everyone seemed as amazed as I was at what had just happened. Most of the participants appeared keen to get back to what they were like before, doing what they did before; talking a lot, hugging a lot. Was I missing something? That initial taste of tranquillity did serve to heighten my sensitivities. When a vehicle drove past on the road, the stench of the exhaust fumes struck me as powerfully offensive. On the way back to the commune, when I stopped at a store to purchase some goods, I felt disturbed by the evident lifelessness of the staff. My first real encounter with practising the teachings of the Buddha had a profound effect on me; however, I can't say I had a very good understanding of what it meant to go for refuge to the Dhamma, to Reality. It would be a while before I understood that heightened sensitivities alone were not enough.

Once I arrived back at Narada, at least some of the community members there picked up on my enthusiasm and expressed an interest in learning meditation. It wasn't long before a retreat had been organized to take place at a dome not far

down the valley. Ajahn Khantipalo had agreed that, after the series of retreats at Nimbin had finished, he would lead one for the Mullumbimby communities. The dome in which we would be gathering belonged to a couple who ran a business bottling essential oils. He was Australian and she was Maori from New Zealand. I liked that they had made their place available.

As it happened, the joyous anticipation I felt at the thought of sharing the amazing opportunity meditation offered, was naive. The whole occasion felt like I had invited my friends to a party, only for them to all turn up late and then leave obviously underwhelmed. I didn't get it: why couldn't they see the significance of this? We all shared a sense of disillusionment with the world as it was; we all wanted to make a difference. Here was a way that could potentially make a massive difference. It didn't involve taking unemployment money from the government, didn't involve imbibing substances; all it required was upgrading our level of integrity and learning to skilfully focus attention.

The disappointment I experienced didn't deter me from keeping my own meditation practice going. Up on the ridge, in my small canvas, bamboo and plastic dwelling, I would spend hours sitting. There were periods of exquisite delight that I would never have imagined possible. I discovered an ability to focus attention on something such as the bark of a tree, and it would trigger a rush of bliss up through my body. Who would have thought that simply applying concentrated attention on the natural rhythm of breathing

in and out, or slowly walking up and down on a track in the forest, could give rise to such joy. It was totally legal and available to everyone. What a revelation! Around that time I read a copy of Alan Watts' *Nature, Man and Woman* which revealed more new, inspiring perspectives. This was not about accumulating information: this felt like recovering from an illness.

Ajahn Khantipalo had recommended that we read a book called, *The Life of the Buddha* by Ven. Ñanamoli. Somehow I managed to acquire a copy (this was very many years before Amazon, internet and mobile phones) but trying to read it reminded me of the difficulties I had at university. It was a struggle to make my mind follow the text, and that struggle got in the way of accessing the meaning. I have never been tested for dyslexia so I don't know if there is something odd about how my brain is wired, or if I am just mentally lazy. Or perhaps there are other explanations. I do know my mind seems to operate somewhat faster than some other people, and the struggle I have with reading seems to have to do with the effort it takes to slow down. I gave up trying to read that book, and emphasized instead the sitting and walking.

It wasn't long before it became obvious I wasn't going to fit in at Narada; I no longer wanted to fit in there. The fantasy that was currently occupying my imagination was travelling to Asia. I had very little money and no concrete plan – just felt drawn to travelling out further into the world. Contrary to what most spiritual seekers were advocating, I had no inclination to go to India. Yes, that is where the Buddha was

from, and it is where Ram Dass had found his teacher, Neem Karoli Baba, but it didn't interest me. I felt drawn more in the direction of Japan. Perhaps, I thought, I could get work teaching English along the way and somehow just wing it – start off hitchhiking to Darwin in the Northern Territories of Australia, get a cheap flight to Portuguese Timor, island-hop my way through the archipelago of Indonesia, and then on up via Malaysia to Thailand. Ajahn Khantipalo received his monastic training in a monastery in Bangkok so that could be a good point to head for. Then perhaps on to Japan – where if I was lucky, I might be able to rub shoulders with some Zen monks and pick up a few tips on gardening – before taking the Trans-Siberian railway from Vladivostok to Europe, ending up in England, or the Mother Country as we had been brought up to think of her.

I wasn't so thoroughly naive as to think I could do all that without some money so I went back down to Sydney to work for a few months. There I met up again with some friends I had met earlier, and made new friends. The enthusiasm that stemmed from my meditation practice gave rise to a lot of energy and confidence. I expect I might have been rather evangelical about the whole thing and could have even put potential meditators off by my exuberance.

Work which paid well enough wasn't difficult to find even though it was thoroughly uninspiring. The whole experience of living with and working with people who had no interest in spiritual matters was draining. I was learning the lesson that mindfulness and concentration were not the same thing. At least for a while I was still able to focus concentrated

attention and temporarily access an inner space of ease. I recall stopping on my way to work, and staring into a flower that was overhanging a garden wall, until once again the bliss-rush through my body was triggered. What I didn't understand was that, regardless of whatever else was going on, I was blindly indulging in pleasurable sensations.

Confusing the function of concentration with that of mindfulness is a mistake regularly made by those starting out in meditation, especially if through concentration they access a degree of happiness. Whether or not that point had been made clear enough to me when I first received teachings on meditation I can't recall. Similarly, I don't know if the importance of *sila* or integrity was sufficiently emphasized. Perhaps those aspects of the training were explained but I wasn't interested in them. Through applying the meditation technique I had developed some increased sensitivity, however I was desperately short on restraint. As time went by in Sydney, my mood deteriorated and gradually I lost the brightness and confidence I had brought with me from Narada.

At one particularly painful point I found myself making a vow that, 'if ever I find myself in a position of teaching meditation, I will emphasize precepts.' Now, forty-eight years later, I regularly speak about how utterly essential *sila* (integrity) and *indriya samvara* (sense restraint) are in practice. Without them we leave ourselves vulnerable. Too much intensity and sensitivity without the protection and stability that comes with *sila* can be very dangerous.

3.3 HEADING FOR ASIA

Before departing Australia I returned to Narada to dismantle my dwelling up on the ridge and bid farewell to friends. I think at that stage it was more excitement than trepidation that accompanied any ideas I had of what might lie ahead; truthfully, of course, I didn't know. As a way of marking the departure and moving on, and also out of gratitude, I performed a little ceremony which involved lighting a candle and saying thank you for the place, the time and the precious opportunities that the community there had given me. I was leaving Narada a very different person from the one who had arrived a few months earlier. It had been my intention to pass on the usable canvas portion of the construction to someone else living at another community nearby; however in the process of dismantling the structure, part of the tent touched the candle and immediately caught fire. I rushed inside through the flames to save my backpack and passport, managing to escape just in time to sit on a log and watch the whole thing be consumed. I was lucky to get away with only

a few burns on my forearms where molten burning plastic had landed; also, fortunately, I didn't start a forest fire.

A fellow from across the valley called Ross had expressed an interest in accompanying me at least as far as Indonesia. So, with a mixture of adolescent enthusiasm and hidden anxiety, the two of us set off for Darwin. The journey wasn't straightforward. Hitchhiking wasn't as easy as we had hoped. At one point we gave up and boarded a train for part of the journey. It was primarily a goods train but there was one passenger carriage tacked on at the end. After travelling for quite some time, in what felt like the middle of nowhere, the train suddenly stopped. There was no explanation. Then after a while we discovered that at least one of the carriages ahead of us had come off the tracks and the train engine had uncoupled and gone on without us. Eventually, after a long wait and considerable uncertainty, another train did appear, presumably one that managed to lift the derailed wagon back onto the track, and we progressed to the next town where we disembarked.

We managed to get a ride on a delivery truck. After a long and rather uncomfortable journey sitting in the back amongst boxes of fruit, we arrived in Darwin. The place was hot and dusty and was not at all like Mullumbimby. In fact it felt rather red-necked and perhaps even unsafe. Besides the regular residents of Darwin, there were tourists there to observe the interesting ways of the Aboriginal people and a large number of backpacking travellers, presumably about to depart for, or returning from, Asia. One day, to my surprise,

I spotted Bill Hamilton, the American from Sydney, sitting with a group in one of Darwin's parks. We recognized each other, however we weren't really friends, so a passing nod of acknowledgement was enough.

The cheapest flight headed in the direction we wanted to go was to Dili, the capital of Portuguese (East) Timor. West Timor was part of Indonesia as was West Papua. On arriving in Dili, as mentioned earlier, another bubble burst. For the first time I saw people who were actually poor, desperately poor. The rude awakening I received on entering Australia was on this occasion amplified manyfold; this was real culture shock. I was almost nauseous with a feeling of disorientation. This young man from Morrinsville was starting to struggle.

Not far out of town the authorities had provided a very basic shelter on the beach where backpackers like us could stay. As far as I recall it was free, or at least very cheap. Concrete floors, three walls and a roof, but it had a stunning view. Timor was the kind of location where they would film a James Bond movie: pristine sandy beaches, overhanging palm trees, sun and coral. Shopping in the open market was an adventure. Almost nobody spoke any English. It was the first time I had seen people chewing betel nut. Initially I thought they must have some terrible mouth infection and it was blood that they were spitting out. On the surface at least, everyone was smiling and seemed very friendly and accommodating.

Somebody or something had encouraged me to bring a pair of flippers, a snorkel and goggles with me to Timor – maybe because of the great diving available. I knew nothing about

snorkelling but had equipped myself with the basics. One day I wandered quite far to a lonely beach, presumably so nobody would see me, and tried on the gear. Gradually I made my way out into the water and dived under. What a treat: the extraordinary beauty of being immersed in such an environment. The water was warm and I readily took to it, quickly becoming adventurous. Possibly the benign and relatively harmless world I had grown up in meant I was susceptible to feeling more confident in the water than I should have.

At one stage I noticed a large, attractive conch shell lying on the ocean floor. It was a long way down but greed and innocence together meant that I went for it. It turns out I misjudged how far down it was and how long I could hold my breath. I reached the conch shell and was on my way back to the surface but the shell was heavy: it was huge in fact, and kept pulling me down. I reached a point where I realized I had a choice: either hang onto this lovely object and risk drowning, or let go immediately and maybe make it back to the surface. Fortunately the latter motivation prevailed and I made it to the surface. Being a complete novice at snorkelling, as soon as my head was above the surface, I breathed in, forgetting to blow out the snorkel; instead of taking in air I took in a large gulp of seawater. That unsettled me even further, prompting me to make a dash for the beach. Unfortunately I omitted to take care walking over the coral, so the soles of my feet were shredded.

During the time living in the bush on the Narada commune I had regularly used Hypercal Tincture (a herbal remedy made up of *Hypericum* and *Calendula*). I believe it was this remedy that protected me from the sort of severe infection that some of the others suffered from because of leech bites and ticks. I have carried Hypercal Tincture with me ever since, and still use it. I ascribe the rapid healing of my painfully wounded feet on that occasion to that remedy.

The loss of access to calm and ease during periods of meditation I ascribe to my wrong understanding of how to skilfully approach meditation practice. Through wilful concentration of attention I had found out how to touch into some delightful inner spaces. However the way I had approached them, and the manner in which I related to those initial experiences, meant I couldn't fully appreciate them. It is like a young person working hard at their first job, making some money, and then going out and spending most of it on getting drunk. Whatever hadn't already been spent on alcohol was then stolen while they lay unconscious in a stupor. At that time in Timor I was confused and I didn't really understand why. I hadn't been drinking alcohol. Part of what was happening, however, was that I was feeding on sights, sounds, smells, tastes etc. in a way that meant my heart was being drained. I recall keeping a journal during that period of travelling and at one stage, I think a few weeks later, noting down, 'I feel as if my eyes are locked in staring mode.' The lack of restraint meant that my heart's energy was being stolen. It turned out

that getting a rush from staring into flowers was not such a skilful spiritual practice after all!

Ross and I didn't stay long in East Timor and made arrangements to travel west, in the direction of Bali. When I think back now about how we travelled, it strikes me as rather foolhardy. We had heard or read somewhere that it was possible to hitch a ride on a military barge that would sometimes travel from Dili to a small East Timor enclave pocketed within West Timor. Incredibly (it seems now) the Portuguese military agreed to take us. So, along with a small handful of colourful fellow travellers and a barge-load of ethnic Timorese soldiers, we spent much of one day gently coasting along the north shore of East, and then West Timor, until we reached the enclave. The weather was perfect, the views stunning, the company somewhat questionable, but we made it. From there, a group of us hired a Four-Wheeler that drove us to Kupang, the capital of West Timor located at the westernmost part of the island.

While waiting at the airport for a flight out of Kupang to Bali, once again I noticed Bill Hamilton. He had a connecting flight already confirmed so we just nodded and that was that. On arriving in Bali, Ross and I headed for an area called Legian, which is a short distance west from the most famous part, known as Kuta Beach. Already back in 1974, Bali was inundated with Australians, and Kuta Beach was the most densely populated. Legian, though still relatively nearby, was much quieter. We took a room in a *losmen* just back from the beach and started to settle in. A *losmen* is like a motel and ours was very modest but more than adequate. I imagine I

was hoping that now we were somewhat more comfortable, my meditation would again give access to the clarity I had enjoyed during those first few weeks following the retreat.

One day, while I was relaxing on the porch of our *losmen*, a young Canadian fellow who was occupying the room next door, approached me and struck up a conversation. His name was Randal McCaw. He said he had noticed me sitting on the beach in the early morning and wondered what I was doing. I let him know I was meditating. He was happy to hear that and explained how he and his travelling buddy were also into meditation. In fact they had just done a course with this English monk, Ajahn Khantipalo, at Nimbin. Shortly after that he introduced me to his companion – it was Bill Hamilton. They must have been on one of the other courses that had been led around the time I was there. After all the earlier occasional meetings with Bill, it was good at last to make more of a connection.

My hope at the time was to be able to stay on in Indonesia for the full three months that were allowed, which involved a monthly visa renewal. Besides taking in the sights I might already have warmed to the idea of learning to do batik painting. Randal and Bill planned to stay for only one month and not renew their visas; they were keen to get to Thailand as quickly as possible. They might have been even more impressed than I was by what they gained from the meditation retreat. After Thailand, they planned to travel on to India. A few days later, when we parted company, I did not expect to see them again. My sights were still set on Japan.

Riding around on a motorbike was a normal way of seeing the island of Bali. After I had somehow managed to push aside the memories of the Gordonton accident, Ross and I hired a bike each. We headed off, initially to the village of Ubud. A German couple I had met during my time at Narada had lived near Ubud for an extended period of time and described it as an especially delightful spot favoured by artists. On the way there we stopped in the main town of Denpasar and bought some refreshments at the market. It wasn't long though before we were very much regretting buying those delicious-looking cold drinks.

Our time in Ubud was spent almost entirely in bed. We were both violently ill. It went on for days. As I recall the only medicine that we had access to was of a home-made variety, generously offered by our host, the owner of the *losmen*. I'm not sure what substances he chewed up in his mouth before spitting it and massaging it onto our bellies; it smelt like garlic. Only years later was I introduced to the more effective medicine Ciproflox (Ciprofloxacin) and have carried it with me ever since on any significant trip I have taken.

Once we were well enough again to travel, we departed Ubud and spent a few days exploring the island. We were not, however, in very high spirits. That illness had taken a toll. Fortuitously, we met a couple of British expats who took pity on us and invited us to stay in their very lovely home where we were able to relax and regain some strength.

3.4 DARK CLOUDS DESCENDING

Travelling further west, from Bali to Java, there was an undeniable culture change. The population was Indonesian; however, whereas Bali was predominantly Hindu, Java was distinctly Muslim. Java felt like a different country. Whilst staying in Surabaya, Ross decided he had enough of travelling and began the journey back to Mullumbimby. From now on I would be on my own. Ross was never really into meditation, which for me was more important than anything else. I liked seeing sights, sort of, but I suspect the call to the inner life was the stronger pull. By this stage of my journey it was dawning on me that I was not a traveller. However, since I was in Indonesia, and there was no pressure to be elsewhere, I decided I may as well look around.

For a brief while in Java I did toy with doing batik painting, but I don't recall if the fantasy ever progressed beyond a conversation with someone in Yogyakarta. While staying in Yogyakarta I checked out the Dieng Plateau, from which it is possible to view both the Java Sea to the north and the Indian Ocean to the south. I visited Borobudur,²¹ an ancient,

monumental Buddhist stupa originating from a period prior to the arrival of Islam. The site definitely didn't feel like a spiritual sanctuary as it had tourists scampering all over it taking photos. Somewhere I had read that a beach, a few miles south of Yogyakarta on the coast of Java, was worth visiting. Perhaps I had been spoiled growing up in New Zealand because I found the beach rather uninspiring.

Gradually I was having to admit to myself that travelling around looking at stuff was boring. What was the point if inwardly you weren't at ease. I clearly was not at ease. The calm and clarity I had known a few months earlier, now felt very remote. Not that I had lost faith in it, not at all, but I had lost sight of it.

I did find people interesting. To my surprise I had managed to pick up a functional grasp of Bahasa Indonesia²² which meant I was able to enjoy some sense of connection with many of the folk I met. Most of them were warm and friendly and seemed to want to communicate. I say, 'to my surprise', because I was not very successful at learning French in my third and fourth form years at Morrinsville College. This left me with the impression that I was without ability when it came to speaking any language other than English. It would seem that in those days New Zealand's education system was still modelled on that of the British. Why else were we not learning Japanese or Chinese? I couldn't see the point in learning French. In my Report Card for 1965 it is written, 'Half-hearted in his approach, Keith could work harder.'

It similarly surprised me to realize that the people I found least appealing, and indeed sadder, were fellow travellers. I must have assumed we were part of some sort of global community and would all view each other warmly. This assumption showed up just how wet behind the ears this Kiwi really was. We were all obviously financially better off than many of the locals, yet that didn't deter the Western travellers from becoming heated, and sometimes downright insulting, in how they haggled when making purchases. The interaction between customer and seller, I discovered, was in that culture a significant part of making any transaction. Nearly all the buying and selling I witnessed amongst the Indonesians was always amicable. At times it might have become animated but there was a civility to the engagement. Unfortunately, civility often went out the window when it was a certain kind of backpacker doing the dealing: how sad.

Perhaps the saddest thing I saw during that period was on a train trip from Yogyakarta to Jakarta. At first I couldn't understand why a young French couple in our carriage were behaving so rudely; it wasn't just disrespectful, it was revolting. They were rolling in the aisle of the carriage, moaning and thrashing about. I think it was only when another passenger told me they were going cold turkey²³ from a heroin addiction that I began to understand. They looked educated, affluent, probably experienced in the ways of the world, yet here they were without anyone to care for them. No welfare state to rescue them, no friends to support them: so tragic.

Being in Jakarta also triggered sadness in me. For the first time, in this sprawling metropolis, the disparity between rich and poor became painfully evident. I had no companions with whom to discuss the questions and concerns that were flooding my twenty-two-year old mind. Indignation and sorrow disturbed my already clouded heart. I was beginning to doubt what I was doing. Without friends, without a clear direction, and without the inner resource of centredness, I was flailing.

On the boat ride from Jakarta to Singapore, several of the group of travellers I was with helped each other cut their hair. We had heard that the authorities we should expect to meet at immigration wouldn't even allow you into the country if the length of your hair breached their strict regulations. The only other thing I knew about Singapore was that it became part of Malaysia²⁴ on my birthday, 16th September; although that arrangement didn't last long, with Singapore soon becoming independent. The other memory I now have of my stay there is of waking up one morning in the hotel to find everything was flooded. I had a room on the ground floor and it hadn't occurred to me the night before that I should put my backpack up on a chair. There had been heavy rains overnight and the city's wastewater management was shown to be seriously lacking. My old passport from that time indicates that I left Singapore on 8th September 1974.

Whether hitchhiking was actually an acceptable thing to be doing in Malaysia or not I don't know; perhaps it was another example of a naive Kiwi assuming everywhere was similar to

his own habitat. It did work though, and I received rides from the border to Kuala Lumpur and then, a day later, on to Penang. Penang was charming. My accommodation this time was a simple grass roof hut right on the beach. Lovely as the location was though my inner world was becoming darker. Meditation wasn't giving me any ease, and the distractions that other travellers seemed drawn by were unappealing. The most radical thing I did there was to treat myself to a Guinness beer and a slice of cherry cheesecake by way of marking my twenty-third birthday.

The one proper book I was carrying with me during that journey was Basho's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*.²⁵ I loved reading Haiku. Three lines of text didn't challenge me in the way a large body of text could. And something in the way Basho used words – something about how he writes about wandering and wondering and observing nature – was reassuring. Thank you, Basho. Words are so powerful. When we relate to life primarily from our heads, we readily forget that words are symbols that human beings have crafted over millennia to communicate a richness of meaning. More than 300 years after Basho died, the craftsmanship of the man is still admired and appreciated around the world.

When I was hitchhiking from Penang towards the Malay-Thai border I was again picked up by a couple of British expats. They were very friendly and even invited me to stay in their home. Later it became apparent that they needed a babysitter. I was happy to oblige, though thinking about it now, I confess it strikes me as daring on their part, almost to the point of

dereliction, for them to abandon their child to someone they had just picked up hitchhiking. I was grateful though and apparently so were they. The next day they arranged for me to be driven to the border. I was dropped on the Malaysian side of the border and walked across into Thailand.

3.5

THE LAND OF THE FREE

The name ‘Thailand’ means the Land of the Free.²⁶ Soon after entering the country I had the feeling that this country was distinctly different. Was it that the people felt safe with each other? It turned out that over ninety percent of the population of Thailand considered themselves Buddhists and they had a great love for their King. Those two factors alone would be very unifying. There was an atmosphere of strength, vitality and community; people were so ready to smile.

It also became apparent that there were lots of rules of etiquette which had to be followed, otherwise a less lovely side of the Thai character could show itself. Rules of etiquette, at least in that situation, didn’t bother me. Mindfulness around their cultural conventions seemed like a fine price to pay for the privilege of participating in such an uplifting society. It wasn’t difficult to remember to not touch somebody’s head or point your feet towards a Buddha image. I liked clarity around form; it made sense to me.

The word on the street – that is, the street that backpackers walked along – was that if you are in Bangkok, the Malaysia

Hotel was a good place to stay. So once I reached there I booked in.

It wasn't long before I had found my way to Wat Boworn (formally known as Bowonniwet) where Ajahn Khantipalo had been living prior to his moving to Australia. There I was introduced to a helpful American monk, Tan Jotamano. He mentioned he had met Bill and Randal who had arrived a few months earlier during the Rainy Season Retreat period. From what I gathered they didn't stay long in Bangkok but quickly moved on up country to some monastery called Wat Nong Pah Pong where another American monk was living along with a group of Westerners.

There were regular classes on the Abhidhamma being taught in English at Wat Boworn, led by a well-known female teacher, Khun Suchin. It was the rationality of the approach that first appealed to me. My radar was probably on high alert for any sign that I might be about to be pulled into some religious institution that was rife with meaningless rituals and hidden agendas. It quickly became apparent though that there was no need for concern. Instead of being put under pressure to subscribe to dogmatic beliefs and obligations to conform, I was received with warm-heartedness and generosity. The group didn't require anything at all of me – no conformity, no money, just interest in the teachings. This religion was different. I remained at the Malaysia Hotel for a while, helping to pay for it out of money I earned teaching conversational English at a language school.

It might have been at those Abhidhamma classes where I met another American fellow called Bruce. Bruce had been in correspondence with Ajahn Khantipalo for quite some time and had come to Thailand specifically to take up monastic training. He was staying at a newly opened private hotel near Sukhumvit Road; it seemed it would be quieter than the Malaysia, so I moved there. In conversation with Bruce the idea gradually emerged that I too might do well to spend a period of time in robes while in Thailand. Thank you very much, Bruce, for the inspiration.

The option of taking on monastic precepts temporarily was something I never knew was possible. Besides that, I imagine I was finding the friendliness of the people and sense of community very welcome. Spending a longer time in that environment was appealing; I could see the way the monks, novices and laypeople were all cooperating in a harmonious manner. At least from the outside it looked joyous – none of the dreary and dour atmosphere I was used to seeing in religious contexts.

Then there was the issue of having to travel to the border of Cambodia, near Aranyaprathet, each month for a visa renewal. As a *samanera* (novice) I would be given a one-year visa. In theory, in 1974 the border with Cambodia²⁷ was still open, but the situation there was becoming increasingly unstable.

So one day towards the end of that year, I plucked up the courage and asked what was involved in requesting *samanera pabbajja* (novice Precepts). I'm pretty sure that at that stage I was not planning on spending several years in Thailand.

I don't recall any hesitation in my being given an appointment to meet the Abbot, Tan Somdet Nyanasamvara. Wat Boworn was the Royal Temple where His Majesty the King of Thailand had spent time as a monk. Tan Somdet was his Preceptor and teacher. Thinking about it now I find it hard to imagine how accessible he was and how willingly he gave time to this somewhat scruffy traveller.

When I went for my interview I was alone. That also strikes me as strange, given the position Tan Somdet held. Part way through my explaining how I wanted to be a samanera, I heard a voice behind ordering me to squat down on the floor. Although I wanted to be respectful, I had not learned how, in that culture, one should conduct oneself in front of an Elder. The Australian monk who happened to be passing by, witnessed me standing only a few feet in front of the Somdet talking down to him. Thankfully, this unintended indiscretion didn't get in the way, and it was agreed that I would be accepted as a samanera and could stay at Wat Boworn.

Before long Bruce and I found ourselves in the grand main temple being given samanera precepts by Phra Somdet Nyanasamvara. Phra Jotamano was there assisting. The name I was given was Samanera Dhammavicayo which means, 'one who investigates reality'.

3.6

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES

Bangkok used to be known as the Venice of the East because of the network of canals that criss-crossed the city. In the first half of the last century, in an attempt to eradicate malaria, many of the canals were filled in and replaced with roads. There were still two canals which passed through Wat Boworn and there were still plenty of mosquitoes, although I believe malaria was no longer a big concern. It was a delight to watch the many turtles that populated those canals. It wasn't such a delight to one day notice an enormous snake that appeared just outside my accommodation. I would estimate it was at least eighteen to twenty feet long and sixteen to twenty inches in circumference. Nobody else made much of it. There seemed to be a belief that such snakes were connected to the spirit world and harming one would bring misfortune. Indeed, it almost seemed as if the snake was considered venerable. It was generally understood that this massive reptile had been resident in the monastery for a very long time (somehow living in the canal) and would emerge from time to time to catch a dog.

There were plenty of dogs, most of them with the mange. Where I was raised, dogs were used to help round up the sheep or were pampered pets, in both cases much appreciated and cared for. Here there were dozens of dogs and nobody appeared to own them, almost nobody really cared for them; they just lived there with their mange. I heard somewhere that Thai people would rather deposit unwanted puppies at the local monastery than put them in a sack with some stones and throw them in the river. Seeing so many dogs looking so wretched wasn't pleasant, but the thought of heartlessly drowning them was much worse. The monks and temple boys did feed them though with leftover alms-food. Temple boys were children, or teenagers, who lived in the monastery and helped with cleaning and running errands for the monks. In many cases they were from poor families up-country and were there primarily to receive an education.

It took quite a while before I was able to go on alms-round in the morning without feeling afraid that my robe would fall off or my alms-bowl might slip out of my hands. The faithful lay folk, who got up early in the morning to reverentially place food in our bowls, considered it a privilege to have a monk to whom they could make offerings. Although, as recipients, we would acknowledge their gifts with words in Thai or the traditional language of Theravada Buddhism, Pali, we weren't saying thank you. To say thank you would risk offending the donor since that would imply that we assumed their offering was made to please us. In fact, what they were doing was being intentionally generous so as to build up their own storehouse

of wholesome potential, known in Thai as *boon* or in Pali as *puñña*. Words or verses that we recited in response to their offerings were forms of expressing *anumodana*, which means, 'I acknowledge and celebrate your good efforts; may this act bring you true benefit'.

There is an ingrained appreciation in Thai culture of the Buddha's teaching on developing goodness so as to eventually reach Awakening. To think one could reach Awakening without having already accumulated a wealth of wholesomeness would be the height of folly. One of the easiest ways of generating goodness was through acts of generosity. Hence the ubiquitous spirit of giving and receiving throughout Thai culture. It would be almost unheard-of for someone to visit a monastery without taking something to offer. It didn't have to be a substantial sum of money or an impressive object; what mattered was the spirit of giving. Often offerings were totally mundane items such as cleaning products and postage stamps. Here I was beginning to see that there was another language besides Thai that I needed to learn. Perhaps this was how people communicated with each other in spiritual communities. Religious forms obviously have their place, but the spirit profoundly matters.

On one occasion, early on, I recall my assumptions about giving and receiving being challenged in a very beautiful way. It involved witnessing an exchange between three women. It began with one woman presenting a gift of a bag of oranges to another woman. What pulled me up short was seeing how the woman who received the gift, immediately separated out

a substantial portion of it, and then, right in front of the woman who had given the gift, passed that portion on to her friend sitting next to her. ‘Surely the woman who gave the gift of a bag of oranges is going to be upset on seeing that what she just gave was being given away’ I thought, but no: the original giver was genuinely delighted. Not only did she have a chance to accumulate goodness by giving a gift to her friend, she also gave an opportunity for her friend to herself perform an act of goodness. This, I learned later, is what the Buddha referred to as *mudita*, or taking delight in the well-being of others. I was very familiar with the opposite of *mudita*, which is jealousy, but this was my first lesson in the virtue of vicarious delight in the wholesomeness of others.

There was so much to learn. Some lessons were exquisite, such as this one of witnessing *mudita*. Others were hard work. It wasn’t obvious to me at the time, though I can see now that what I was having to adjust to was not being in control. Not unusually, I imagine, I was used to operating on the assumption that it was all up to me: I had to strive and struggle to get what I wanted out of life, to become who I wanted to be in life, or I would fail. It was an intensely assertive and tiring way of relating to life. Now, as a samanera, I was having to let go of excessive striving and struggling and learn how to graciously receive what was offered. When we walked on alms-round we were not allowed to ask for offerings. We could stand and wait, but never ask; ‘eyes cast down at plough’s length ahead’. The same principle applied to other material requisites such as robes, shelter and medicines. Certainly I

had my preferences though the training made it clear that we were to accept whatever requisites we were given, without complaint.

This encouragement to patiently wait and receive, was contrasted with the principle of giving and serving (though at the time I wasn't thinking in terms of contrasting principles; everything was so new). Every evening at chanting, we recited the words, 'I am a servant of the Buddha, I am a servant of the Dhamma, I am a servant of the Sangha'. We were called to offer ourselves completely – physically, mentally, emotionally – in service to the Triple Gem. In practice this might mean turning up on time for the chanting whether we wanted to or not. It could mean going out barefoot on alms-round every morning regardless of how we felt about the filthy streets of Bangkok or what the weather was like. Sometimes it meant accompanying an Elder who needed a chaperone while he spoke with a supporter seeking advice with difficulties in her life. On a more subtle level, it related to how fully we were able to give ourselves into formal meditation practice. We were expected to be able to sit upright and still for long periods of time, and without a cushion, since cushions were only for placing the head on.

Making such an offering, of our whole body-mind, regularly involved enduring a considerable amount of pain. However, this wasn't masochistic; this was about learning to find the point of balance between being assertive and yielding. Most of us are out of balance in one direction or another, either too assertive or too yielding. Finding that point of balance

required mindfulness, concentration and a great deal of patient endurance. Years later I was introduced to the Qi Gong exercise of ‘pushing hands’ which involves two people standing opposite each other, literally pushing each other’s hands, leaning forward and leaning back. It is an excellent exercise for embodying this principle of balance.

The changes I was having to make were considerable but I was enormously glad to be there doing what I was doing. From what I heard later on, my family back home in New Zealand were not so glad. Of course my decision to take robes in the Buddhist religion and live ‘the homeless life’ was going to be hard for them to accept. Perhaps if we had had Skype and FaceTime back then I might have been able to manage it more sympathetically and have caused less upset. In terms of what I was experiencing though, for the first time I felt like I had discovered something I genuinely wanted to be doing. Yes, it was challenging, but these were challenges that not only was I willing to face, I truly wanted to.

In a matter of only a very few weeks I had gone from being a confused, disoriented backpacker wandering through South-East Asia, to being an alms-mendicant, living on offerings made out of faith in the Buddha’s teachings. How did that happen? I don’t know how it happened, but I am very grateful. I don’t think it an exaggeration to say that a deep process of healing had begun. The words ‘wounded’ and ‘healing’ are rather hackneyed these days, however sometimes there are no other words that fit. The wounding I had suffered by betraying myself, by not acting and speaking honestly,

had significant consequences. The medicine prescribed by the Buddha – integrity, tranquillity, and insight – were the remedy.

Still I was struggling to regain the clarity and calm I had known during the period immediately following the retreat in Australia. At one point I think I even wrote to my friends at Narada asking that they post me the copy of Alan Watts' book, '*Nature, Man and Woman*', hoping to find that place of inspiration again. However, even though I didn't have the joy and confidence of those earlier months, what I did have, and what I was so glad for, was a sense of being part of a community that I respected. With hindsight, I now see it provided a subtle but significant feeling of belonging.

There wasn't anybody at Wat Boworn with whom I was friendly on a personal basis. Bruce had left after only a short while, presumably to return to America. Also, at the time there were a number of English-speaking monks who were getting ready to disrobe. They had a lot to say about what was wrong with this or that teacher, this or that monastery. From where I was at, they just sounded like they were missing the point. Probably they saw me as a wimp who didn't know what he was getting himself into. For me, it was enough to feel a part of something that encouraged me to develop wholesomeness and to let go of self-centredness. Going on daily alms-round was a religious ritual with meaning. Regularly joining in chanting was providing structure to my life that was relevant. Even having our names called out at

the end of puja, to make sure we were all there, and having to reply in Pali, was fine by me – *agato bhante*.

There were other English-speaking monks around who were not suffering from disillusionment. One evening, as I was coming out of puja, I met two young American monks who were visiting from Wat Nong Pah Pong, that monastery up-country where Bill and Randal had gone. They were Tan Pabhakaro and Tan Anando. I can still see them standing there: upright, clear faced, neither showing off nor hiding, just standing there in their dark brown forest monk's robes (city-dwelling monks usually wore brighter coloured robes). There was an air of impeccability to them. How appealing! They were staying at another temple nearby, Wat Saket. I can't remember what we spoke about. I don't recall why they were in Bangkok or why they were at Wat Boworn that evening, but I am very glad to have met them. These days they occupy a vivid place in my memory alongside that 'Awareness' poster.

Then there was a meeting with another Western monk whose name I cannot recall but I do perceive as having been particularly helpful. The mental impression I have of that meeting is that it was Tan Varapañño (aka Paul Breiter) but in a recent conversation with Paul he assured me he was not in Bangkok at that time. Here I will refer to him as Tan Cittapalo. There were many teachers and many monasteries in Thailand and it was becoming clear that my staying in this rather noisy city monastery was probably not the best choice if I wanted to develop meditation practice. I was interested in knowing

in which monastery, and with which teacher, it would be most useful to spend time. One of the questions occupying my mind then was regarding the correct understanding of the Buddha's teachings on the first factor of the Eightfold Path. So I asked Tan Cittapalo how Tan Ajahn Chah taught about *sammaditthi* or right view. His reply was brilliant. He explained that Tan Ajahn Chah pointed to two aspects of right view: there were the views themselves, but then there was the way we related to those views. Even the Buddha's teachings on right view, that is the Four Noble Truths, were wrong view if we were clinging to them. Wow! That was different. It wasn't only about having the right view regarding reality that mattered – it also mattered how we held those views. Thank you, Tan Cittapalo.

As I adjusted to this new life there was one issue that was constantly troubling me: food. It wasn't so much the fact that Thais were fond of eating meat. As monks we were generally obliged to accept whatever food was offered us but we weren't obliged to eat it. (I say generally, because there is a rule that states, if a monk sees or suspects that an animal has been specifically killed to feed him, then he is not permitted to accept it.) The thing that was causing me difficulty was my digestion. Ever since that bout of illness in Bali, my stomach had not been right. Although the food was so considerately and generously offered, much of it simply didn't agree with my condition. Add to that my often feeling anxious about upsetting my hosts and the fact that I was greedy, and consequently mealtimes were intense and

uncomfortable. The bio-flora in my intestines seemed to be struggling to handle the daily onslaught of rich, oily and spicy foods. Occasionally while I was staying at Wat Boworn, Her Majesty Queen Sirikit would invite the entire community to a vegetarian meal. That was indeed welcome and encouraging, but rare. The food issue was a struggle throughout my time in Thailand and for a good many years afterwards.

At some stage, John from Sydney, who had taken me for my first visit to Wat Buddharangsee, arrived at Wat Boworn. I think he had aspirations for joining the sangha. However, like Bruce, his sojourn in Thailand was brief. He did stay long enough to take me to meet John Blofeld, an Englishman who had lived many years in China before the revolution, and now had an impressive traditional Thai house on the outskirts of Bangkok. Well, it used to be on the outskirts when it was built, but these days there were houses and factories surrounding it. Meeting John Blofeld was like meeting a perfect combination of an English and Chinese gentleman; such dignity and such modesty. Clearly he had accomplished a lot in his life, but talking with him you wouldn't know it. It was only after I left and eventually read his book *The Wheel of Life*,²⁸ that I became aware of what an extraordinary life he had led. He showed us the original *tanka* painting that features on the cover of that book. Although I wasn't aware of it when we met, in his book he describes his visits with the great Chinese meditation Master Hsu Yun²⁹ who, some years later, was to have a significant influence on my practice.

John from Sydney introduced me to the treatise known as, *On Trusting In Mind*, originally written by the great Chinese Master Tsen Tsan. There weren't many texts at the time that I had read that truly spoke to me, but this one did.

Another short but significant text that spoke to me was, *Fragments of a Teaching and Questions and Answers with Ajahn Chah*.³¹ This was a small booklet of translations of Tan Ajahn Chah, compiled, I believe, by Jack Kornfield. What I recall in particular from that booklet was how Tan Ajahn Chah taught regarding doubt. He didn't make it into a problem, he used it as an object of contemplation. Little by little I was coming to recognize that Tan Ajahn Chah's approach to practising Dhamma was much more here-and-now and applicable and less theoretical. Although my samanera Preceptor was an abbot in the Dhammayuttika Sect and I was part of that tradition, I was feeling inspired by the community living under Tan Ajahn Chah.

The non-Thai monks and novices at Wat Boworn were accommodated together in a building called Ganna Song. One day, around the beginning of the year 1975, there was a knock on the door to my ground floor room at Ganna Song. Standing there was a leaner version of someone I ought to recognize; it was Samanera Dhammiko, previously known as Bill Hamilton.

Nehn Dhammiko, as he was now called, was staying nearby at Wat Saket accompanying Ajahn Sumedho, the senior Western monk living at Wat Pah Pong. Ajahn Sumedho had a chronic medical condition stemming from an old injury he

had received during his time in the Peace Corps in Borneo some years earlier. The injury meant that his left foot would sometimes swell up dangerously, and he was in Bangkok to see if there was anything that could be done about it. Nehn Dhammiko was keen on my meeting Ajahn Sumedho so we agreed I would come around to Wat Saket.

In terms of relevance, that meeting with Ajahn Sumedho, and the conversation we had, comes right up there next to that first meditation retreat at Nimbin. In my book, *Alert To The Needs Of The Journey*,³² I wrote the following,

‘On the first occasion of my meeting Ajahn Sumedho, I was struck by the simple, but beautiful way in which he was able to say no to a second cup of coffee. That sounds like a small and insignificant thing, but it left a vivid and meaningful impression on me. We had enjoyed an initial cup together, and then his attendant, Nehn Dhammiko, offered him a second cup. Somehow, he seemed able to say ‘No’ in a way that I had never witnessed before. His manner wasn’t that of a self-conscious somebody doing something special to get somewhere, which was probably what I would have expected from those living the religious life. It was a plain and simple ‘No, thank you’. It was new and delightful to meet someone with both a sense of humour and clear discipline. I had known people who were fun to be with but not particularly principled. And I had known those who were seriously disciplined, but not much fun. Here was someone who

appeared able to honour a commitment to spiritual training, but without denying life. Here was the result of wise cultivation. Later, when I met Tan Ajahn Chah, I found that he too had both infectious laughter and an evidently sincere commitment to discipline.’

3.7 FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH THE FOREST SANGHA

It was that meeting with Ajahn Sumedho that motivated me to venture out of Bangkok up to Wat Nong Pah Pong, near Ubon, in the North East of Thailand.

After a long and slow train ride I arrived at the monastery at a time when the community were still out on morning alms-round. Just as I can't remember much about arriving at the Narada commune in Australia, my memories of arriving at Wat Pah Pong are very hazy. I was left though with an impression that the sangha at Wat Pah Pong were not in the business of trying to attract newcomers. The first Westerner I met looked at me and said something like, 'What are you doing here?' My accommodation was a thin grass mat and a blanket in a corner of the meeting hall (*sala*) and no mosquito net. The linoleum-covered concrete flooring was a far cry from the plush red carpets of the temple in Bangkok. Not that I was overly enamoured of those plush red carpets, but this was towards the other end of the spectrum. Perhaps the reception I received had something to do with my wearing

the robes worn in city monasteries, combined with my only being a samanera and belonging to the Dhammayuttika Sect. I had never been in the military, but this was how I would imagine it felt to be in boot camp.

I was told that Tan Ajahn Chah's mother had died not long before, so regrettably he was not there during my stay. It was a relief to meet Ajahn Sumedho again and to find he was ebullient as ever; and of course it was good to meet up with Nehn Dhammiko. Some of the other Westerners were veterans from Vietnam who would have known about real boot camp.

The daily routine began with the morning bell being rung at 3 am. I had to quickly gather up my bedding and store it away before morning chanting. Here chanting was a lot longer than what I had become used to, as each line was recited in both Pali and Thai. After chanting we sat together in meditation for a painfully long period, before heading out on alms-round.

For the once-a-day meal, we sat in two long lines; I was almost at the very end with a group of young boy-novices below me. From the food we had received when we went out on *pindapat* (alms-round), we were allowed to keep as much rice as we wanted and the rest was given over to the community. Here it was the glutinous 'sticky rice' variety and everyone would make a large ball, perhaps four or six inches in diameter, and place it in the centre of their bowl. Several senior monks would then walk down the line and ladle a variety of curries, pieces of vegetable and, maybe fruit, into our bowls.

In the afternoon, after sweeping leaves and hauling water, the second chanting and meditation session began at 3 pm, and lasted for about one hour. From time to time, the silence of the sitting was interrupted by the eerie screech of a tokay gecko³³ – *tokay, tokay, tokay, tokay, tok, tok, tok*. When the rest of the sangha all departed, the Westerners remained in the *sala* for another four hours, alternating sitting and walking meditation. Sometimes we would be invited to gather around Ajahn Sumedho and listen to a reflection on the teachings.

Those Dhamma teachings were what I was looking for, however, I was having grave doubts about my ability to hack the austerities. The haziness of my memory around arriving at Wat Pah Pong extends to the full four or five days I was there. I do, however, recall that Nehn Dhammiko's travelling companion, Randal (I forget his Pali name), was seriously unwell, and the only medicine he was receiving was a thermos of hot water in the evening which he could mix with a spoonful of Marmite. Whatever thoughts I might have had about my first visit to Wat Pah Pong, the feeling was one of intimidation. Several of the Western monks struck me as disturbed to the point of being frightening. One of them in particular was extra scary, and what made it worse was that he was being held up as an exemplar of mindfulness and restraint!

Did it really have to feel this heavy? Was there something wrong with me that meant I found it heavy? Was I going to be able to do it? I desperately wanted to be able to do it. Maybe this experience was helping me get just a little bit

clearer about what it was I was looking for: it wasn't the form. It wasn't about another religious tradition or organization. One distinct impression I do still have is that when it came time to leave, I said that I looked forward to coming back: that might not have been completely true.

On the train trip to Bangkok I managed to get an object stuck in my eye. It was extremely uncomfortable. After a troubled night it was obvious that I needed medical attention. Almost the whole day was spent riding around Bangkok attempting to find the right person with the right equipment who was available to help. The offending object was a small piece of metal which, by that time, had already started to go rusty. Eventually we found the right person and, with my head clamped into a device that made sure I didn't move, the eye specialist carefully drove a magnetic needle directly into the eyeball, gently extracting the slither of metal. This incident fittingly symbolized the long and painful process I had ahead of me of extracting many offending mental and emotional objects from my mind.

Despite that disappointing first encounter with the forest sangha, I don't believe I was put off at all. A facility for burying disappointments was part of my character. Also I did have faith in the practice. Perhaps there were other ways of approaching the meditation monk's life. For the time being anyway, it felt good to settle back into the less austere surroundings of Wat Boworn. The noise of the rowdy tuk-tuk taxis driving by outside the monastery were tolerable, as were the smells of food being cooked in the evening just on the

other side of the monastery walls. I persisted in trying to learn the Thai language. An elderly monk who used to be a school teacher attempted to instruct me in reading and writing, but I really couldn't get my head around it at all. When it came to repeating words that I heard, I was quite quick in picking them up; and since Thai, like Chinese, is a tonal language, that makes all the difference. I have met several Westerners who have an impressive grasp of the written Thai language, but they haven't managed to get the significance of the tones. To a Thai person, even one who is well educated, they can have trouble imagining what a Westerner is trying to say unless the tones are accurate. One word in Thai, such as 'kaaw' (pronounced cow in English) can have five entirely different meanings according to the tone – high, low, rising, falling and neutral – and the length of the vowel sound.

In April 1975 both Cambodia³⁴ and Vietnam³⁵ fell to the Communists. Presumably this news caused trepidation in my parents in New Zealand. I was periodically sending them an aerogramme; from their perspective, my predicament must have seemed dangerous. Even though Bangkok is not that far from Phnom Penh and Saigon, the general population in Thailand appeared to be getting on with business much as usual. Perhaps if I had been able to communicate in Thai more competently I would have had a different impression. It does seem though that the Thai way is to try to avoid making any sort of problem out of anything unless it seems absolutely necessary. One of the first expressions everyone who visits Thailand learns is, *mai ben rai*, which translates as 'never mind, it is not a problem'.

3.8

LESSONS TO LEARN

Once a week the abbot of Wat Boworn, Phra Somdet, would lead a class in English in an air-conditioned room adjacent to his residence. These meetings were open to members of the sangha and laity alike. They were lessons in the *pariyatti*, or theoretical aspects of Dhamma, and were well attended. Sitting and walking meditation are obviously important aspects of this path, but if we don't have a good grounding in *pariyatti*, our meditation can be heading off in an altogether unhelpful direction. Personally I haven't read many Dhamma books in my life - '*What the Buddha Taught*' by Walpola Rahula, '*The Word Of The Buddha*' by Nyanatiloka, and '*The Dhammapada*,⁴ being three of the most significant – but that doesn't mean I don't respect the *pariyatti* aspect of training. People are different: some people need a lot of theoretical explanation before their faith is strong and clear enough, others need less. Besides, some people learn better by listening than reading. It is only relatively recently in human history that the majority of humans have been able to read and write. I am one of those who enjoys learning from listening.

At one of those Wednesday evening classes, the Venerable Master Hsuan Hua, abbot of The City Of Ten Thousand Buddhas in California, was present. He had with him several of his Western disciples, including, Heng Sure and Heng Ch'au. Heng Sure and Heng Ch'au had completed their *Three Steps, One Bow*³⁶ pilgrimage up the coast of California and their group had been visiting Malaysia. I recall the Master having an interesting response to the many questions that were asked of him: he just wouldn't answer. This went on for quite a long while with people asking for his thoughts on such subjects as *arhats* and *bodhisattvas*, *anapanasati*, *vipassana*, the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and so on. Then the bell rang for evening chanting and that was the sign the meeting would conclude. At that point the Master started talking. What he said, and what stayed with me, was that *as a teacher his job was to trick us*. It is because of all the games that we play in our minds that we stay lost. His job was to trick us out of believing in our games. Thank you, Master Hsuan Hua.

One of the regular attendees at these Wednesday meetings was Mrs Josie Stanton, the wife of the ex-US Ambassador to Thailand. She had been living in Bangkok for many years and held up Phra Somdet as her Dhamma teacher. She was also a very generous supporter of quite a number of the Western monks and novices at Wat Boworn. The house where she lived when she was in Thailand was in the lush gardens of Her Majesty The Queen's mother's residence and was within walking distance of Wat Boworn. She took her

study and practice of Dhamma very seriously and I believed she genuinely appreciated her conversations with her teacher Phra Somdet. On one occasion, after she had been travelling around Thailand and was upset about the decrepit state of many of the monasteries that she had seen, she asked Phra Somdet how it could be that this wonderful and precious Dhamma teaching could end up looking so unseemly. Phra Somdet's calm reply was that she shouldn't be too disturbed by the deterioration of buildings and institutions as they too are subject to the law of impermanence, *anicca*: the Dhamma is not *anicca*, just the structures.

As weeks went by, the question of where I was going to stay and whether I would request *upasampada* (acceptance into the sangha of monks) became more relevant. In July the annual Rainy Season Retreat (*vassa*) would begin and at that point I would be obliged to stay put for three months. I'm not sure which came first: the decision to request *upasampada* at Wat Boworn or my meeting some very friendly monks from Wat Hin Maak Peng. Wat Hin Maak Peng was Ajahn Thate's monastery near Nong Khai in North East Thailand. Tan Ajahn Thate was the meditation master under whom Phra Somdet Nyanasamvara had trained once he had completed his studies. Another Western monk, Tan Dhammachando, and I took the decision to travel up-country to Wat Hin Maak Peng for the *vassa*. If I recall it correctly, my *upasampada* took place at Wat Boworn around the time of the full moon of May 1975, which was Vesakha Puja, the occasion marking the birth, enlightenment and passing away of the Buddha.

Phra Somdet Nyanasamvara was my preceptor, and Mrs Josie Stanton sponsored and presented my robes. Great gratitude to Phra Somdet, and a sincere thank you to Josie Stanton.

Wearing the robes of a fully accepted Buddhist monk (*bhikkhu*) brought with it an intensification and many more new lessons. It was clear that there were stronger expectations to conform to higher standards of conduct as well as requirements to participate in various ceremonies. Now, instead of the modest ten precepts that defined the conduct of a novice (*samanera*) there were 227 that had to be followed.

Early on after taking up the monk's training, I received a painful wake-up call regarding the consequences of heedless speech.

One evening, after the group meditation in Phra Somdet's residence, I made a joke to one of the other participants about how I had been just about to drop into *jhana* when a mosquito bit me and ruined things. A short while later, on my way back to my room, I was reflecting on what I had just said, and was suddenly struck by a truly terrible upthrust of guilt and anxiety at the thought that I had just made a false claim to a superhuman state – an offence of automatic disrobing. I was so shocked and confused I straight away made my way over to see Phra Somdet. That he was engaged at the time in a meeting with other senior sangha members didn't prevent me from approaching him and explaining how I thought I might have just broken one of the four most serious monks' rules. He kindly gave me his attention and was quick to reassure

me that, since I had obviously been making a joke, there was nothing serious to be concerned about.

As it happened, I should have been concerned not because I had committed a disrobing offence, but that obsessive guilt, a fault line in my psyche, had been revealed; such a susceptibility wasn't going to disappear just because of a few words from a kindly abbot.

3.9

FIRST RAINS RETREAT

It was probably in June 1975, not long before the beginning of the Rains Retreat for that year, that Tan Dhammachando and I travelled to Wat Hin Maak Peng. We were received in a friendly manner by the monks that we had met earlier at Wat Boworn and were given our accommodation. I was to be staying in the meditation hut (kuti) that Phra Somdet had lived in, which felt like an honour. During the initial period there, we would bathe each evening in the Mekong River which flowed gently by, just beneath my kuti. The point where the monastery was situated was one of the narrowest sections of the river and it was easy to see Laos on the other bank. Shortly after we arrived, however, the Russians invaded Laos and it was deemed too dangerous for us to bathe there anymore, so we had to walk inland a short distance to a stream. There were times when the Russians could be seen speeding by in their boats and at night tracers could be seen being fired. On one occasion a farmer who apparently held property on both sides of the river – in Thailand and in Laos – was

shot at whilst attempting to bring his tractor back across into Thailand. I think his tractor ended up sunk in the river.

Not long after we arrived at Wat Hin Maak Peng, the two of us were invited to come to Tan Ajahn Thate's kuti. As I recall, the teacher asked us a little bit about our understanding of practice and then offered us advice. The instruction and encouragement he gave us continues to this day to inform my effort in practice. He told us that *the primary task in practice is to learn to differentiate between the heart and the activity of the heart, awareness itself and the activity taking place within awareness*. This was a simple but truly precious gift of Dhamma.

My grasp of the Thai language was still minimal so I depended on a translator to understand when the Ajahn gave talks. The very few books in English that I had with me proved to be a valuable source of inspiration. I was committed to making progress and felt fortunate to be in such a supportive environment. The booklet of *Questions and Answers with Tan Ajahn Chah* that I mentioned earlier was extremely helpful; it was clear and succinct. Much of my time was spent in silent sitting and walking meditation. Every few days, I would attach to one of the pillars under my kuti a verse from the treatise, *On Trusting In Mind*, by Master Tsen Tsan; then, as I walked up and down, I would contemplate it, and in the process, commit the words to memory (although I don't think I reached beyond the initial few verses).

Tan Ajahn Thate, by that time, was about seventy-three years of age and had already been diagnosed with leukaemia.

His health was a subject never discussed with me, but I was aware that he was limited in how much he could take on. It didn't stop him from doing his walking meditation or being available in the evening for a very vigorous Thai-style massage. Outwardly his appearance was extremely gentle and his voice was high-pitched to the point of being almost squeaky. However, when the Thai monks and novices massaged him, they would dig their elbows deep into his muscles with a force that even a young person might not be able to tolerate. Despite outer appearances he was very strong and lived until he was ninety-two years of age.³⁷

Within the sangha of forest monks in Thailand there is a beautiful tradition of, just around the time of the beginning of the Rains Retreat, many monks taking the opportunity to visit elders in nearby monasteries, to pay their respects. For the sangha at Tan Ajahn Thate's monastery that meant we went to visit Luang Por Kaaw who lived relatively nearby. Such occasions are highly ritualised, starting with the visiting sangha offering a tray of candles, flowers and incense, and then requesting forgiveness from the elder for any wrongdoing. The elder then reciprocates by asking for forgiveness from the visiting sangha. More or less the same sequence is performed with each elder; what might vary would be the degree of conversation that followed the ritual. I don't remember now, but it might have been that we visited other elders on that occasion, though Luang Por Kaaw is the only one I recall. The lasting impression I have of that visit is that I was privileged to have the opportunity to pay my respects

to him. Also I have an impression of meeting someone with extraordinary dignity and strength. His body was very frail by this stage. Although he and Tan Ajahn Thate were both disciples of Tan Ajahn Mun, and would probably have been considered as contemporaries, Luang Por Kaaw was a lot older. It is difficult to estimate the degree to which one might be influenced by spending time in close proximity to highly purified beings, and I am cautious to not invest too much in speculation; however, I don't dismiss the possibility that such association can have profound consequences. If one is susceptible to being influenced, or if kammic affinities are involved, spending any time in the company of great beings can be a great blessing.

Back at Wat Hin Maak Peng, even though we were aware of the unwelcome activity taking place on the other side of the river, life in the monastery was peaceful and calm. Gradually I felt like I was settling into a comfortable enough daily routine: morning alms-round, meal, rest, meditation, bathing, puja – ending the day with gathering at Tan Ajahn Thate's kuti for the massage. That was all about to change.

RESHAPING

4.1

THE MISSING INGREDIENT

After having lived at Wat Hin Maak Peng for several weeks, one evening, part way through a perfectly normal puja, a shift in perception suddenly occurred. Without trying to do anything in particular other than follow along with the chanting as usual, a joyous ‘just-so’ appreciation of an altogether new perspective on experience manifested. Years later, in an attempt to find words for that altered perception, I described it as a shift from finding identity as someone having this or that experience, to abiding *as* the context of all experience. Witnessing from this altered perspective, any and every experience that could ever arise, would be seen simply as ‘content’ within that ‘context’. It was joyous, unexpected, and felt profoundly significant, but at the same time utterly normal. There was nothing dramatic about this new perspective though at the same time it felt like it changed everything.

When I reflect back now on what happened that evening, I see there never really was any missing ingredient in my life. The struggle to find something that I hoped or assumed would

make me feel OK, was never going to provide true satisfaction. What was needed was a shift in the way I viewed experience. That new perspective was the greatest gift I have ever received.

When the chanting session was over, I attempted to share with the translator monk something about what had occurred. I don't think I said very much, but it was enough for him to suggest that I should explain what had happened to Tan Ajahn Thate. We gathered as usual at Tan Ajahn's kuti. Initially everything went as usual, until my translator began to describe what I had shared with him. At that point Tan Ajahn stopped the massage and sat up. That was unusual: having the Ajahn interrupt his massage and address one of the most junior monks in the community. By this stage I expect my mind had returned to finding identity as 'content' again, nevertheless I tried to convey what had happened. Tan Ajahn Thate was encouraging and he said something along the lines of, 'from now on your practice should be about remembering quicker and to not be caught up in all the activity of mind.'

The next thing I can recall was walking back to my kuti, and, similarly to what had happened at Wat Boworn a few weeks earlier, I started to reflect on the things I had just been saying. Very quickly my mind became possessed with self-doubt and guilt at the thought that I might have exaggerated the extent of my understanding and, in so doing, transgressed one of the monks' rules about making an unfounded claim to a supermundane state. The terror that was released was indescribable. What had happened at Wat Boworn was like a heavy rain storm compared to this full-on hurricane, and the

ferocity of this storm was beginning to wreak serious havoc throughout my body-mind. I had no idea such an intensity of mental and emotional anguish was possible. This was terror. The contrast between the sublime, selfless, incontrovertible OK-ness of earlier that evening and this devastating sense of being drawn down into hell, could hardly have been more pronounced.

Many years later, I came to appreciate that such an unexpected but profound opening as that which occurred during that evening puja, is not uncommon. Even without any specific spiritual preparation, it is not rare for people to find themselves spontaneously having to come to terms with such a completely new perspective on reality. It seems that for some people the heart remains open and they learn how to integrate this new way of seeing. Then there are others, like me, who go through a powerful shift in perspective and sense the beautiful possibility of living in expanded awareness, but then find their heart closes again, and they have to endure a period of painful disorientation. In the case of the latter, although the clarity that came with the expanded state was no longer accessible, something precious still remained. Perhaps it is like this: if we were to throw a pebble into a very deep well and listen until eventually we heard the sound of the splash as the pebble entered the water – afterwards, even though the sound of the splash has gone, an appreciation of the depth of the well remains. Whatever one might say about it, or however one might attempt to explain it, that shift is something for which I am deeply grateful.

The torture that followed did indeed wreak havoc in my physical, emotional, mental and relational worlds. Looking back now with hindsight, I can view it as at least in some ways cleansing. Some people carry with them what would classically be called a lot of old negative kamma. I prefer to think of it as old, unmet life. If you find yourself encountering such difficulties, the most helpful thing to do is resolve to learn how to meet it, receive it, allow it, until the lesson we need to learn has been learnt; at that point letting go might happen. In other words, resolve to take full responsibility for it. Desperately trying to let go of old unmet suffering is another way of trying to get rid of suffering; if we do that, then the burden is likely to become heavier. We would be wise to reflect on how the Buddha taught: *'It is through not seeing two things that we remain lost: not seeing suffering and not seeing the cause of suffering.'* We need to learn to view suffering as our teacher, not as an obstruction – and to not merely pay lip service to this new attitude. What is called for is a radical re-education of perception so we come to view suffering constructively, not as a symptom of failure.

My burden was painfully heavy. Where did it come from? Was I that bad a person that I deserved to suffer so intensely? Fortunately, I was prepared enough to be able to endure it without making too big a mess. I could have been better prepared, but I could also have been much worse. The sense of belonging to a community that was worthy of respect was precious – likewise, the training in restraint that comes with the monastic discipline (*vinaya*). Then there was the

structure of the daily routine: the chaos that prevailed in my inner world was made more manageable because, on the level of the outer world, things were so predictable and stable. The significance of this last point cannot be overestimated.

Fortunately I didn't try to tell anyone what was going on. If I had, I imagine they would have been unnecessarily worried about me. This is not to say that having the right person who shared the same language and an appreciation for the psychological factors involved, wouldn't have been helpful. Indeed that could have helped, but there wasn't any such person around.

On the feeling level I was condemned to excruciating hell as a result of having done something unforgivably bad – that is, making an unfounded claim to a supermundane state. Conceptually I was intensely confused. Yet, in some dimension, perhaps we can say at a heart level, there was a feeling of trust that everything was OK. I had a dream during this period that gave me confidence. In the dream, which I can still recall, I gave birth to a child. As far as I was concerned, all was well, but what puzzled me was that my friends who were standing around were disappointed. They had expected the child to be a boy when it was a girl, or maybe a girl when it was a boy, either way they were disappointed. What I am not able to recall accurately now, is whether my translator told Tan Ajahn Thate about the dream, or I told him, or I came up with my own reading of what the dream was saying. Whatever actually happened, the message of the dream, as far as I was reading it, was that I had given birth to my practice,

but the consequences would not accord with my preferences; things would not turn out how I had hoped or imagined.

The weeks and months, indeed years, that followed were either varying degrees of hell, or feeling as if I was about to fall into hell. I recall, after one painful period of sitting meditation inside my kuti, that when I walked outside, I saw that the Mekong river was still flowing by – and that provided me with some reassurance. The word that comes to mind when I try to recall the rest of my time at Wat Hin Maak Peng is ‘intense’. On one day I felt convinced that the biggest issue I had to grapple with was anger. Then on another day it would be fear, then greed. My digestion was not good, and gradually I was becoming emaciated. In the afternoon, some of the monks and novices would occasionally gather to brew up various concoctions to drink. If we were lucky there would be cocoa, and the brew-up sometimes extended to making fudge out of sugar, cocoa and salt. The day of my twenty-fourth birthday, approximately midway through the Rains Retreat, was one such occasion. I remember at the time thinking I was overdoing the consumption of fudge; I still had a lot to learn about restraint. In the middle of the night that followed, I was awakened to find the walls of my kuti seething with ants. Everything was covered in them – I was covered in them – and trying to brush them off was futile. Were they attracted by all the sugar I had greedily consumed? In that already heightened state of shame and anxiety, this incident only served to take my anguish to another level. Eventually I abandoned my kuti, took my robes and went to the main

meeting *sala* and lay down on a mat on the concrete floor in a state of despair. I reflected on how this birthday marked the end of the second twelve-year cycle of my life. There seemed to be some sort of poignancy to this and to how I was feeling so racked with despair: there were thoughts of death in my mind.

I managed to survive the full three months of the Rains Retreat, though my emaciated condition had not escaped the attention of the other monks. Almost immediately after the retreat ended, the parents of my translator monk companion kindly offered to fly me down to Bangkok. When I took leave of Tan Ajahn Thate, his parting words were something like, 'you are in a vulnerable condition, be careful.' I didn't hear his words as judgemental, but full of kindness and concern.

Soon after arriving at Wat Boworn I was taken to the Chulalongkorn Hospital and placed in a private room and prepared for all sorts of tests in an attempt to find out what was causing my physical symptoms. Apparently the King kept a fund at Wat Boworn that took care of the monks if they were unwell, and at some stage I was told that my stay was being paid for from that fund. I was unwell, but the nature of my illness was not obvious. Was it a parasite, or digestive problems, or was it old unreceived life coming to the surface waiting to be received? The clinicians were thorough and extraordinarily considerate, but in the end they found nothing. I returned to Wat Boworn feeling utterly dejected. This was the beginning of an approximately fourteen-year-long holding pattern of contained disorientation.

4.2

A NEW KIND OF DISORIENTATION

My initial encounter with the forest sangha at Wat Pah Pong had left me disappointed and confused. My second attempt, this time at Wat Hin Maak Peng, had left me utterly shattered. I think it is safe to say that my faith was undiminished but certainly it was obscured. The pain of humiliation, failure and loneliness were overpowering: so much sadness. At times it did actually feel as if my sense of identity had literally been shattered – as if my conventional sense of self had broken. I wondered what I was going to have to do to reconstruct a functioning sense of self. It was evident that the previous one had not been fit for purpose. This was not the way I figured my spiritual journey might unfold.

At other times I had the powerful impression that my heart had been scarred for eternity: that the depth and intensity of pain I'd suffered had caused an irreversible wounding. The thought of my having made such a massive mistake fed into my sense of failure and self-condemnation. Even just thinking the thought 'I', could trigger a fiery upthrust of guilt, and these regular upthrusts were compounding self-doubt. There was a strong suspicion that I felt this bad because I *was* this bad.

There wasn't anyone around who was particularly interested in what was happening for me, so I was left alone to endure. Besides endurance, though, there was still that underlying and significant sense of belonging to a community. Maybe it was true that nobody was interested in my miserable condition, but I was still part of something. I believe this perception held me in a way that contributed to my not being completely overwhelmed. Perhaps also, as a consequence of that shift in perception of 'abiding as the context of all experience', some sort of rewiring of my mind had occurred and I was being afforded protection. Faith is a mysterious matter; if we try too hard to understand it we deny its reality.

Gratefully, one day Phra Somdet instructed a worker at the monastery to give me the use during the day of one of the big, usually empty, temples. It was vast, dark and ornate, similar to the large main temple in which I had received my novice and monk's precepts. Certainly I appreciated this gesture of thoughtfulness, but as it happened it did little to placate the madness of my mind. There were times when I felt a visceral hatred for anything to do with Buddhism; I think there were occasions when I actually felt nauseous. Was this a purging of guilt, or a release of previously denied resentments? I really didn't know. Fortunately, that state of 'not-knowing' was not the whole of me. Although I continued to regularly be dragged down by a vortex of pain into fiery hell realms, part of my mind was still able to contemplate.

In the evenings I was invited to sit with Phra Somdet in his private meditation room upstairs in his kuti. I would go there

after evening puja and already be sitting by the time he arrived. A vivid mental image has stayed with me of how he began with humbly bowing to the shrine, then would sit back and lean against the wall. I imagine he was tired at the end of a long day. Then, after perhaps five or so minutes, he would shuffle forward, light the candles and incense and settle into meditation. When I couldn't bear the pain in my knees any longer, I would quietly leave the room, with Phra Somdet still sitting there.

There was a substantial library in Ganna Song where I was staying, and it was well stocked with books from various different Buddhist traditions. I found myself wondering if I might be better off at Song Kwang Sa³⁸ monastery in Korea under Master Ku San, or perhaps going to Japan. I still felt drawn to Japan. Given the state of my knees though, and the long periods of obligatory group sitting meditation practised in those traditions, I recognized those options were not realistic. Also, I think I was wondering about the training in *vinaya*. In the midst of all the turmoil I was having to endure, I like to think I was still able to appreciate the importance of a strict training in discipline and restraint. Probably there was uncertainty as to whether such a training was going to be available elsewhere. So my fantasies were never more than that: stories I was telling myself as I puzzled over what I was supposed to be doing with my life.

As one week flowed into another, it felt like I was in survival mode: so much fear, so much loneliness and no sense of direction. One day, I think around the end of 1975, there was

a knock on the door of my room at Ganna Song: it was Tan Jotiko, previously known as Nehn Dhammiko, previously known as Bill Hamilton. Once more, he was accompanying Ajahn Sumedho and they were staying at Wat Saket. Certainly I was keen to meet Ajahn Sumedho again. When we did meet, Ajahn Sumedho spoke enthusiastically about the new monastery they were involved in building. Not long after I had left Wat Pah Pong the year before, he and a group of Western monks had been invited to set up a monastery in a forested area just outside the village of Bahn Bung Wai. The group had spent the Rains Retreat of 1975 there, and it now looked like a monastery called Wat Pah Nanachat (the International Forest Monastery) was well on the way to being established. I imagine the idea appealed to me; however, I was still cautious. The main thing I took away from that conversation with Ajahn Sumedho was his response to something I said just as I was about to leave and go back to Wat Boworn. I had told him how I had been feeling terribly torn because I really wanted to live the life of a forest monk, but after the experience at Wat Hin Maak Peng, felt uncertain as to whether or not I would be able to do it. ‘Maybe I should try and learn to practise in a city monastery’, I had said to him. ‘Besides, the idea that practising in the forest monasteries is better than practising in a city monastery, is just an opinion, and Tan Ajahn Chah strongly emphasizes we shouldn’t attach to views and opinions’. Ajahn Sumedho responded with a big smile and said, ‘Yes, that is true, however some opinions are right’.

Around the beginning of 1976 my dear friend from New Zealand, Jutta Passler, came to visit. She was on her way to spend time in India but had planned a stop-over in Bangkok. How fortunate. Her friendship was very healing. We didn't really discuss the disintegration taking place within me, but having her company was like a balm. I am reminded of what the Buddha said about *kalyanamitta*. Jutta was indeed a wonderful *kalyanamitta*.



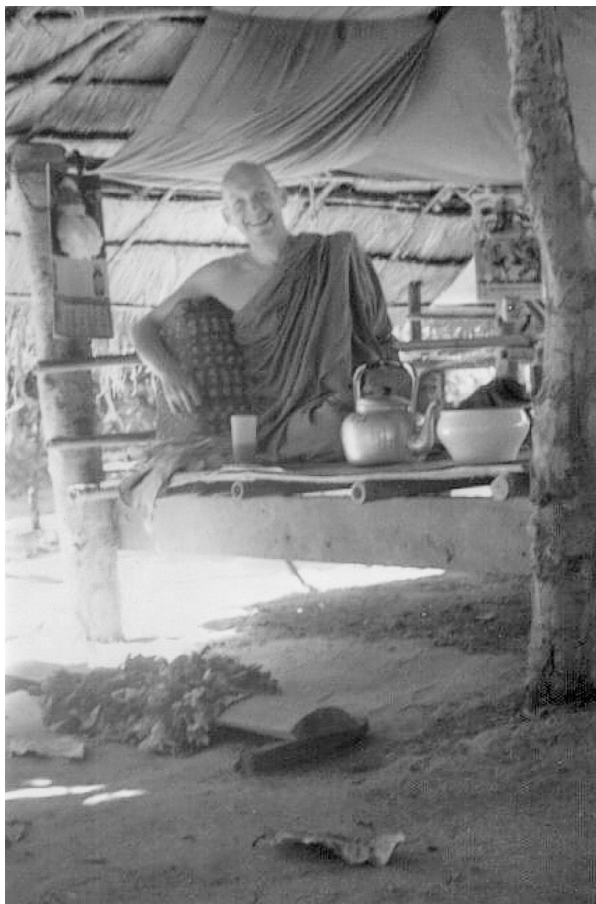
During the time Jutta was visiting, Tan Jotiko again turned up at my door, this time he was in Bangkok to see his parents off back to America; they had been visiting him at Wat Pah Nanachat. He was enthusiastic about me at least coming to visit the new monastery. Probably I was already thinking about the potential conflict between Tan Ajahn Chah's monastery being part of the Mahanikaya Sect and myself having taken Precepts in the Dhammayuttika Sect, but by now the invitation to visit had become appealing, so a plan was hatched for the three of us, including Jutta, to take the train to Ubon.

4.3 THE INTERNATIONAL FOREST MONASTERY

In January 1976, Wat Pah Nanachat was made up of one grass roof *sala* with a dirt floor, and a collection of a few very simple kutis. Upon entering the monastery, my first impression was one of seeing Tan Pabhakaro, the tall, American monk I had met outside the temple at Wat Boworn, sitting cross-legged on a bamboo platform doing crochet. I don't know what I had expected but it was not that.

Once again, it appears my memory of arriving at places is consistently vague, however I do still have an overall impression of how it felt to be there for those few days. To me the atmosphere was a combination of focused spiritual aspiration, pioneering spirit, and New Age adventure. Ajahn Sumedho's confidence and joy were infectious. Although the group of mostly Western monks and novices living there all appeared to be strong-headed individuals – there were no sycophants – the quality of Ajahn Sumedho's commitment and understanding was what fuelled the community. There was a sense of 'we are all in this together', but his leadership was genuinely respected. The monastery followed more or

less the same routine as Wat Pah Pong: morning and evening puja, daily alms-round, water hauling, leaf sweeping and robe making. Thankfully though, there was none of the heaviness I had experienced at Wat Pah Pong. In fact there was a lightness, a kindness, a quality of willing cooperation.



It didn't take long before I was feeling that I could fit in there. The community made me feel welcome, and gladly, the fact that technically I belonged to the Dhammayuttika sect didn't seem to make any difference: I was treated as any other monk would be treated. Since nearly everyone other than Ajahn Sumedho was relatively junior in the training, my place in the line was fairly near the top, near where Tan Jotiko was sitting.

Jutta was staying with generous supporters of the monastery about fifteen kilometres away in the town of Ubon, and would come out to visit us during the day. As I have mentioned earlier, I was pleased that she could meet Tan Ajahn Chah and had a chance to taste the authenticity of this tradition and these teachings. The photo above of Ajahn Sumedho in the grass roofed *sala* was taken by Jutta.

There seemed to be no question about my being welcome to join the community at Wat Pah Nanachat, but there was a question about the correct way to handle the issue of the two different sects. It was decided that I would have to go over to Wat Pah Pong and see what Tan Ajahn Chah had to say about it.

Probably Tan Varapañño accompanied me, as he was considered one of the most skilled in translating. Tan Ajahn Chah was very straightforward about the matter: 'Whatever your *Upajjhaya* (Preceptor), Tan Somdet Nyanasamvara says, simply move here to live in this community, or disrobe and formally request acceptance (*Upasampada*) anew'. He made it clear I was welcome regardless. You might think I would

recall my first meeting with Tan Ajahn Chah, but I don't, other than that exchange about merely practical matters.

I suspect for the first time in many months I was beginning to feel somewhat positive. 'Yes, this is doable, and not just doable – it is genuinely desirable.' I could say with confidence that I really wanted to live in this place and practise with these people. Thank you, Ajahn Sumedho and the sangha of Wat Pah Nanachat in 1976.

Jutta and I returned to Bangkok and I began the process of taking leave from Phra Somdet. Josie Stanton helpfully arranged some white clothes for me. The plan was that I would stay in Bangkok so long as Jutta was there and then return to Wat Pah Nanachat. Jutta was staying in a modest hotel on Khao San road which was near Wat Boworn, close to where I would walk in the morning on alms-round.

The actual disrobing was difficult. Phra Somdet was gracious and generous as ever, and made it clear that all he was concerned about was my being contented living the Buddhist monk's life; and whenever I came to Bangkok I was always welcome to stay at Wat Boworn (which I did until I eventually left Thailand in 1979.) I cried as I bowed in front of him; disrobing was not what I wanted to be doing, but I could accept that it was an expedient means to an end. If Thai monastic culture required that I go through this process, then that was OK, even though it was painful.

To suddenly be walking around on the streets of Bangkok as a layman, when inwardly I still felt myself to be committed

to the life of a monk, was weird. In retrospect, I see it taught me something valuable about how the robes do not truly define who I am. They are a convention – a valuable one, but in reality they do not change who or what I am. In the Dhammapada verse 9, the Buddha says:

*Wearing the robe of a renunciate
does not in itself render one pure.
Those who wear it and yet lack diligence
are heedless.*

When I returned to Wat Pah Nanachat, wearing white, I was given a seat out the back of the *sala*, almost at the bottom of the line. An American psychiatrist, Gary was there, as was Bruce, an Australian I had met some months earlier in Bangkok. I thought he had been headed for Japan, but while he was in Nong Khai on a meditation retreat, his guitar had been stolen and apparently that contributed to his giving up his travels and deciding to take up monastic training under Ajahn Sumedho. Also during that brief period when I was back down in Bangkok, Tan Tiradhammo had arrived to join the community. He was a particularly affable Canadian monk who had previously lived at Wat Umong in Chiangmai.

The simplicity and modesty of the life was enjoyable, as was the companionship. We each had our own kuti so there was plenty of private time, but there were also regular periods of group practice and group work. Sweeping leaves and pulling water from the well happened daily, as did morning

alms-round and pujas. From time to time we would meet up to wash and dye robes, which was a hot and sweaty process. Bathing took place at a communal area where a few square metres of the otherwise dense undergrowth had been cleared and half a dozen large clay water jars had been set up. For shaving, there was a very small mirror sitting on a makeshift shelf, or perhaps it was wedged into a cleft in a tree.

When I met Tan Ajahn Chah again, he commented that maybe I would have to wait something like five years before taking my monk's robes again; but he wasn't being serious. His ability to jest without being frivolous or unkind was endearing.

I think it was around May or June that year that Gary, Bruce and I were called over to Wat Pah Pong to prepare for the *Upasampada*. We had already sewn our robes and presumably had a good grasp of the chanting; now we would just wait until we got the word that Tan Ajahn Chah was ready to perform the Precept Ceremony. At Wat Pah Pong we met an English chap called Alan who was also preparing to take Precepts. He and I had met at Wat Boworn where he had explained to me that he had been a monk before with Tan Ajahn Chah but had left; now he was ready to rejoin.

This period coincided with Tan Ajahn Chah having a massive *Uposatha* temple constructed right in the centre of the monastery. He let it be known that he wanted the temple built on top of a hill, and for it to have open sides so a cool breeze could blow through. An extra advantage of building it that way was that there would be space in the foundations for large

water storage tanks. The main issue, however, was that there was no hill. Accordingly, a large lake was excavated outside the walls of the main monastery of Wat Pah Pong; the soil which was removed was then trucked inside the monastery to the site of the temple building. Three or four metre high concrete retaining walls had already been built, so that when the trucks dumped the soil, there was the task of somehow getting it over the walls, spreading it out and pounding it. All the monks and novices and nuns that were available joined in. Initially the nuns (*maechee*) were outside, throwing the soil over the walls, and we were on the inside collecting it, spreading it, and pounding it. Then we swapped places. It was solid, hard work which began soon after the morning meal at 8 am and continued right through the day until late in the evening, sometimes until midnight. Thankfully, the 3 am morning pujas had been temporarily suspended. To help keep us fit and healthy, senior monks would walk down the line at the mealtime handing out vitamin pills.

On the evening of 21st June 1976, as we were making our way back to our kutis after water hauling, Tan Ajahn Chah made a gesture that indicated we should get ready. None of the four of us – Gary, Bruce, Alan or myself – must have really understood what he meant, because we were comfortably sitting round chatting, having a jolly brew-up, when someone appeared asking if we could make our way over to the *sala* since the sangha, including Ajahn Sumedho who had come over from Wat Pah Nanachat, were waiting. How did that

happen? This was worse than my towering over Phra Somdet telling him that I wanted him to accept me as a Samanera.

Needless to say, we quickly gathered our wits and our robes and made our way over to the *sala*. Indeed, the entire assembly of the Wat Pah Pong bhikkhu sangha was waiting for us. The ceremony began with our being formally offered our robes and bowl; in my case it was by the parents of Tan Pabhakaro, who were visiting at the time. The chanting *acariyas* for Gary and myself were Ajahn Liem (later to become abbot of Wat Pah Pong) and Ajahn Sawaeng. My new name was Uppanno Bhikkhu. What an extraordinary privilege. I am profoundly indebted and grateful to Tan Ajahn Chah and the sangha at Wat Pah Pong.

4.4

THE SPIRIT OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNITY

From June 1976 until November 1979 I considered Wat Pah Nanachat to be home. I know Buddhist monks are described as ‘having gone forth from home to homelessness’; however, that is an ideal. If we cling too much to that ideal we could forget to cultivate the wholesome source of support which comes with having *kalyanamitta*. The culture of Wat Pah Nanachat was imbued with the spirit of spiritual companionship. Ajahn Sumedho was like a magnet around which iron filings would configure, or a flowering shrub which attracted lots of bees. His evident enthusiasm inspired and sustained the many spiritual aspirants who passed through Wat Pah Nanachat. Some only briefly stopped by, some stayed for a short while, and others settled in and made a commitment.

Tan Ajahn Chah would pop in from time to time and offer us some of his wonderful variety of inspiration. We were like a young family and he was like a Grandfather who, instead of bringing us presents, would bring wisdom. In a typical talk that he gave one evening he spoke about how natural

it was that not everyone who showed signs of having faith in Dhamma will follow it through. In that talk which was translated and is now called ‘Dhamma Nature’ (printed in *‘The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*³¹, page 480) he says,

... Sometimes when a fruit tree is in bloom, a breeze stirs and scatters blossoms to the ground. Some buds remain and grow into a small green fruit. A wind blows and some of them, too, fall! Still others may become fruit or nearly ripe, or some even fully ripe, before they fall... When reflecting upon people, consider the nature of fruit in the wind: both are very uncertain. This uncertain nature of things can also be seen in the monastic life. Some people come to the monastery intending to ordain but change their minds and leave, some with heads already shaved. Others are already novices, then they decide to leave. Some ordain for only one Rains Retreat then disrobe. Just like fruit in the wind – all very uncertain! Our minds are also similar. A mental impression arises, draws and pulls at the mind, then the mind falls – just like fruit...

On another occasion he visited at a time when I was having trouble with a very nasty infection on my ankle which was taking a long time to heal. It was so bad in fact that I wasn’t going out in the morning on alms-round, something almost unheard of; if you wanted to eat you had to go out on alms-round. On this occasion, when Tan Ajahn Chah asked Ajahn Sumedho how everyone was doing, he mentioned that Tan

Uppanno was struggling with a bad infection. Tan Ajahn Chah asked me to come forward and show him my foot. Whether or not he said anything at the time isn't the point, it was his caring that I recall. I mention this incident here because of the impression his kindness left on me. It wasn't just his wisdom that he shared with us, it was also his overall quality of attention; call it compassion, empathy, clarity – but whatever we might call it, it was a blessing.

The many blessings that emanated from Tan Ajahn Chah were at times obvious and welcome and at other times less obvious and they might even be less welcome. He was aware of this and made no apology for it. His intention was to offer whatever was needed for us to get the message and learn to let go of clinging. Once, when he was being questioned as to which system of meditation he taught: was it *samatha*, or *vipassana*, or *anapanasati*? – he replied that his system was 'frustration' (lit. Thai: *toramarn*). He knew he appeared inconsistent but that didn't matter so long as his disciples got the message. This sounds similar to what Master Hsuan Hua of the City Of Ten Thousand Buddhas had said about his job being to trick us.

Not everyone did get the message. There was one guest staying who had had a very difficult time before coming to Wat Pah Nanachat and Tan Ajahn Chah spoke about the obstructions we create in our minds so long as we are still following our habits of clinging. In the case of this person, apparently they had become stuck with something that arose when they were in a subtle state of mind and hadn't managed

to let go of it. Tan Ajahn Chah explained that when we cling while in meditation, the consequences can be very difficult to correct. If, for example, we become afraid when we are in a somewhat subtle state of mind, and we attach to that fear, then when we come out of meditation, we remain stuck and the consequences affect other aspects of our life. Part of me was not pleased to hear about that; it felt too close to the bone. However, I understood he had only said it *could* be difficult to correct, not impossible. My commitment to the training was strong.

One of the guests who arrived and stayed for a longer period of time was a French Jesuit priest known as Por (Father) Pauset. He came to stay at Wat Pah Nanachat several times over the years and was responsible for the planting of a great many trees. He and Tan Ajahn Chah knew each other quite well and were able to comfortably converse in the local *Isaan* dialect. When Por Pauset had first arrived in North East Thailand, many years earlier, he could only speak French. He learned to speak Thai in the local dialect but then caught the mumps and went deaf. Although he did learn English that was only after he had already gone deaf, so his grasp was minimal. When he spoke with us, it was mostly in Thai or French, mixed with lots of hand gestures. He was a beautifully humble human being, intensely committed to cultivating the spiritual life. If he wasn't living at Wat Pah Nanachat, wearing white and fitting in with the other postulants (*pah kaaw*), he resided at a village not too far away that was predominantly Christian.

Tan Ajahn Chah seemed unphased by paradox. He often spoke about the doubts that he had had to learn to handle in his own practice. Once when Tan Varapañño was helping me explain to him the struggle I was having coming to terms with my mad mind, he spoke about how at an earlier stage in his practice he had such intense fear of uncertainty that he ‘thought his head was going to explode’. He went on to say that, ‘If something is uncertain, and you demand that it be certain, you will suffer’. Again, in my mind, I can visualise his smile and still feel in my heart the warmth of wholesome human companionship. There was no judgement. Being in his company was so special and so normal.

Even his getting things wrong was inspiring, at least to me. After one of his visits to Wat Pah Nanachat he complimented the *Phra farang* (Western monks) for putting ugly old dead flowers on the central shrine in the *sala*, the implication being that he thought we were using this as a form of contemplation on impermanence and decay. In fact, the ‘old dead flowers’ was a dried flower arrangement that an artist woman from Bangkok had offered when she had been staying with us. We didn’t see them as ugly or as an object of contemplation on death and decay. Probably some people would prefer to think of Tan Ajahn Chah as perfect in all regards because it makes them feel secure to think that way, but personally I am happy to see he made such mistakes. We are not talking here about moral or ethical misjudgements, just errors on the level of culture and conventions. I never had a chance to discuss such

matters with him, however I feel confident that he would not want us to project that fantasy of perfection onto him.

If Tan Ajahn Chah wasn't visiting us at Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Sumedho was going over to visit him at Wat Pah Pong. The two monasteries were within walking distance. On one of those occasions when Ajahn Sumedho was over at Wat Pah Pong, he mentioned to Tan Ajahn Chah how happy he was with the harmony and cooperation of everyone at Wat Pah Nanachat. Tan Ajahn Chah responded saying something like, 'Well you won't develop in conditions like that.' He was highlighting a principle: to be free from suffering we must investigate suffering, and not just set ourselves up with agreeable conditions. Of course Tan Ajahn Chah supported harmonious cooperative community, but he would caution us against getting attached to the good feelings that arise in such circumstances; it is insight into suffering that leads to liberation, not being surrounded by nice conditions.

Ajahn Sumedho was a thoroughly faithful disciple of Tan Ajahn Chah, both in terms of his attitude towards monastic training and his approach to developing the inner life. His attitude seemed to be one of adhering to the tradition, while making an effort to avoid clinging. If something outside of the tradition felt congruent with the *Dhamma-vinaya* that Tan Ajahn Chah was teaching, then he was comfortable endorsing it. At one stage, in conversation with Ajahn Sumedho, he recommended I look into the teachings of the Chinese Ch'an Master Hsu Yun.²⁹ He suggested I might look at some translations by Charles Luk that we happened to have in

our library. I did, and it was uplifting to discover that these teachings, although from another tradition, were so in tune with what was being taught by Tan Ajahn Chah. Also it was a joy to find how Master Hsu Yun encouraged using the *upaya*, or skilful means in practice, of enquiring into ‘who’. The validity of the experience I had of dropping into a deeper level of awareness on my first meditation retreat when I had asked, ‘who is aware?’, or ‘who is knowing?’, was in some helpful way affirmed by those translations. Presumably, as usual, I only read a small portion of the books I had been recommended, though some years later I did manage to read all of a biography of Master Hsu Yun, called Empty Cloud.³⁰ I am very glad I read that book. An image of Master Hsu Yun these days hangs beside those of Ajahn Thate and Tan Ajahn Chah in my kuti.

There were times during my stay at Wat Pah Nanachat when I longed to be able to openly talk over what had happened for me at Wat Hin Maak Peng. The wound was far from healed, and occasionally I did attempt to address the topic. But every time I started to get close to it, echoes of the terror would resurface, threatening me with a sense that I was again about to be overwhelmed. If anyone might get it, I thought, it could be Tan Jotiko, so on one occasion I did try to see if he could recognize what I was talking about. I am sure he listened, but I failed to communicate in a way that made any difference.

Of course I wanted to be understood, and probably some of the others were wondering about this Tan Uppanno character who seemed to be carrying such a burden around with

him, but everyone had their stuff to be dealing with. What mattered was that we were companions on this demanding but meaningful journey together. That was already amazing. I did still have to work hard at suspending assumptions such as, 'I feel bad because I am bad'. However, the work served to build the strength of patience, of mindfulness, and of trust. Fortunately, I found I was willing and able to simply give myself into the training: to be on time for morning chanting, walk on alms-round, eat, sweep leaves, pull water from the well, be on time for evening chanting, and keep trusting. Without that ordeal I would have been less well-equipped when it came to handling the many challenges that lay ahead.

4.5

RECONFIGURATIONS

By the beginning of 1978, Ajahn Sumedho had departed Thailand and was engaged in establishing a branch monastery in Britain. The tall American ex-helicopter pilot who was skilled in crochet, Ajahn Pabhakaro, had been asked by Tan Ajahn Chah to take over leading the community at Wat Pah Nanachat.

Around the beginning of 1978 a young, energetic, smiley English fellow called Jeremy had arrived and was expressing interest in joining the community. One morning, when he was diligently using a machete to chop wood at the kitchen, he accidentally missed the piece of wood and instead hacked into his foot. The reason I remember the incident is because it fell to me to accompany him to see a doctor. In fact I ended up physically carrying him into the local hospital. Jeremy was one of those visitors who did settle in and make a commitment. He eventually received *upasampada* from Tan Ajahn Chah and the sangha at Wat Pah Pong and was given the name Amaro Bhikkhu.

Later that year, I entered another hospital, this time as a patient for knee surgery. The difficulty with my knees was likely due mainly to my motorbike accident, combined with other possible causes such as hours of forcing myself to sit on the floor without a cushion. I had gone to Bangkok to see if there was anything that could be done about the increasing amount of pain I was having with my knees, and the advice I received was that I needed a meniscectomy. In those days that amounted to open surgery on both legs, and resulted in my being in Ramathibodi hospital with both legs in full length plaster casts for several weeks. Once the casts had been removed it became apparent that the excessive growth of scar tissue had caused both knee joints to seize up, requiring two more sessions of general anaesthetic so the scar tissue could be torn. That was an ordeal I would not want to have to repeat. Initially I had been told by the doctor that having both knees done at the same time might mean being incapacitated for something like three or four weeks. As it happened it was many weeks.

To my surprise, one day as I lay in bed in the hospital, I received a visitor; it was ex-Tan Jotiko, now calling himself Mason Hamilton. When Ajahn Sumedho had gone to live in Britain the then Tan Jotiko had gone to live at another, rather remote branch monastery called Wat Keurn. It wasn't long, however, before he took the decision to renounce his commitment to the robes and return to lay life. Of course, I was sad to see my friend in this new form, but as far as I recall that it wasn't too big a deal. Tan Varapañño had

already disrobed by that time, so the perception wasn't new, and finding myself stuck all alone in a Bangkok hospital for weeks on end meant that I was already dealing with plenty of disappointment; this was just a bit more.

Mason was staying with Geoff, an English friend and supporter of Wat Pah Nanachat, and by the time I emerged from hospital the two of them had organized a trip up to the north of Thailand, to Chiangmai. There we would have the use of a quiet secluded house on the side of a forested hill.

Before departing on that trip I had a chance to pay my respects to Tan Ajahn Chah, who himself was in hospital in Bangkok. Seeing him again meant a great deal. Having been for such a long time away from the mother ship and its captain, it was encouraging to see Tan Ajahn Chah once more. My knees were still not very flexible, so when I attempted to get down on the floor to bow, I was particularly awkward. I started telling Tan Ajahn Chah, 'It shouldn't be this way. The doctors said it would only take a few weeks and here I am after all this time and my knees are still not working properly.' He looked at me sternly, and with an almost surprised expression at the degree of my foolishness said, 'What do you mean it shouldn't be this way? If it shouldn't be this way it wouldn't be this way!' That was helpful. Thank you, Tan Ajahn Chah. He wasn't implying anything like there being a big plan and that the universe was teaching me a lesson; he was simply saying there are causes and conditions for it to be this way, so stop resisting reality. It *is* like this! Such resistance only makes things worse.

Mason, Geoff and I had a splendid road trip. The house on the side of the hill, Doi Suthep, was Japanese-style and was surrounded by gorgeous gardens and forest. Nearby was a waterfall that we could easily walk to. During the day Geoff would sometimes drive us around to see some of the sights, and at night it was quiet – no more of the noise and fumes of Bangkok traffic. That interlude was refreshing and renewing; thank you, Geoff.

On one of those trips out, Geoff, Mason and I went as far as the next province, Chiang Rai, where there was a small hermitage monastery associated with Wat Pah Pong, called Wat Udom Waree. The abbot there was Ajahn Koon, a short, young, enthusiastic and incredibly talkative monk. Besides the welcome we received, there was a nearby thermal hot pool where I was able to soak my still painful limbs. Ajahn Koon generously invited me to stay there for the approaching Rains Retreat (*pansab*) and the thought of having access to the thermal spring clinched it for me.

It was appropriate that I return to Wat Pah Nanachat to get permission to be away for the Rains. By the time I reached there, there had been another change in leadership. Now Ajahn Jagaro had been put in charge. He was an Australian whose family were of Italian descent and he had a big warm heart. He didn't hesitate to draw lines when they were needed, but he did so with a warmth and sensitivity that commanded love and respect from the community. There seemed to be no hesitation in giving me permission to return to Chiang Rai province in the North.

4.6

BURNING, BURNING, BURNING

Compared to Wat Pah Nanachat, at Wat Udom Waree we were a relatively small community of about seven monks and two novices. Nobody could speak English, and that was a good fortune. I already had the basics of the spoken language down, and now I was obliged to make use of it. During this Rains Retreat something seemed to click, and I felt like I reached a level of proficiency which made speaking with Thai people enjoyable, not merely a struggle; I wasn't having to try so hard. Most days, someone from the nearby village would drive me the two or three miles to the thermal spring where, for perhaps an hour, I would soothe my legs.

During this period, the Canadian monk, Tan Tiradhammo, was living with Tan Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong. That year there were a large number of junior monks in residence, and many of them were from Bangkok. This meant that Tan Ajahn Chah regularly offered Dhamma talks spoken in the Central Thai dialect. Most of the Western monks who had learnt to speak Thai had learned that dialect; only a few were fluent in the Isaan dialect. Tan Tiradhammo was

thoughtfully sending me audio tapes by post, and it was a delight to discover how well I could now understand them; also I was motivated to start to work on translating at least one of them into English. This was the talk now called, *Reading The Natural Mind*, and is printed in *The Collected Teachings*³¹ (Chapter 22, p.237).

The exercise of translating proved particularly rewarding. It required using my head to access conceptual meaning and word equivalents in both languages, as well as the heart to sense the essential meaning that the teacher was putting across. I vividly recall how in that *Reading The Natural Mind* talk, Tan Ajahn Chah was helpfully pointing out the difference between the way wise beings and unwise beings relate to wanting. Awakened beings relate to wanting with clear understanding so they don't suffer. The rest of us still find identity by clinging to wanting, and suffer accordingly. That opportunity was another gift.

Part way through that three-month retreat period, the monastery was threatened with a forest fire. Fortunately Ajahn Koon had had the foresight to create a firebreak around the vulnerable perimeter of the monastery. After a lot of energetic sweeping the firebreak clear of leaves, and skilful extinguishing of fires, the monastery was declared safe again. Thinking about it later, firefighting struck me as a fitting metaphor for the spiritual life. When we are on the front line dealing with the flames, we can't be thinking too much about the bigger picture; we can't know for sure the overall extent of the fire. However there are those, our teachers and guides,

who do have an overview; they can see more than we can. It doesn't serve us well to be worrying about whether, in terms of the bigger picture, we are succeeding in stopping the fire; sometimes our task is to deal with the flames here and now, right in front of us, and keep trusting.

It might have begun earlier, but from what I remember, this was the first time that I registered another type of fire: an intense physical sensation of burning. Sometimes my body felt like it was on fire, at other times it was just my head. Where did all this heat come from? Was it because of all the sugar I was consuming? There did seem to be a correlation between taking a very sweet drink in the evening and shortly afterwards having disturbingly strong symptoms of sweating and heart racing. Or was it the kammic consequence of my misspent youth? If so, it seemed a high price to pay for what, by comparison to others, was a moderate amount of heedlessness. Maybe it was the result of how unskillfully I approached meditation in the beginning, without an appreciation for precepts and restraint. Or was this past life kamma? Then again, if you trust in the theory of epigenetics,³⁹ perhaps it was related to how my ancestors conducted themselves?

I definitely didn't know what it was. It took a very long time – and here I mean years, not weeks or months – to even begin to learn that right practice meant training the whole body-mind to be able to simply receive such sensations of being on fire, along with the not-knowing state, and let it be. Trying to get rid of it, or to get over it – and often our attempts to

understand are another sort of trying to get rid of it – only provides fuel which it feeds on.

It was during that period that one night I rolled over in my sleep and landed on a scorpion. Understandably the scorpion stung me. I sat bolt upright, putting my hand around to my back to find what had happened; the critter must have taken that as another threat so it then stung my hand. This was about 1 or 2 o'clock in the morning. I had received bites from stinging ants before which were nasty, but this was my first encounter with a scorpion. I was only guessing it was a scorpion as I couldn't see anything. My heart was racing as was my mind: is there anything I should do about it? The monastery I was in was a long way away from any significant medical facility. Is there a chance I might die? Should I be reciting *Buddho, Buddho*? After some time the pain subsided and I probably ended up going back to sleep. The next day, back in my kuti after morning alms-round, I reached for a book that was on a ledge above my bed and, just in time, I saw there was a scorpion heading for my hand. I reacted quickly by throwing the book out the window. I did feel bad about having possibly caused damage to the book; but when I went outside and picked it up, I didn't feel terribly bad on seeing it had landed in a way that meant the scorpion had been squashed. My level of compassion was still not very well-developed.

4.7

VISITING LUANG TA MAHA BUA

Towards the end of that year, or perhaps it was the beginning of 1979, I returned to Wat Pah Nanachat. On the way back, I took the opportunity to visit a young English monk friend who was living at Wat Pah Bahn Tard, Luang Ta Maha Bua's monastery in Udorn province. There are three vivid memories I have of that visit.

The first, I think, was from an incident that took place the day after I arrived. As I wrote in the book *Servant Of Reality*⁴⁰ p.12,

It was the tradition in that monastery for all the monks to wait in the main meeting hall before the morning alms-round. I recall being somewhat taken aback when Luang Ta entered the hall, immediately approached the shrine and performed three bows. He had a reputation for being particularly fierce, possibly because in his earlier life he had been a boxer. He was also reputed to be fully awakened. Somehow these factors caused me to assume that when he entered the hall he was likely to start

barking orders at the junior trainees and not bother with something as mundane as bowing. That was a mistake on my part.

Once again, similar to my perception of Tan Ajahn Thate and Luang Por Kaaw, Luang Ta Maha Bua was the manifestation of gentleness, strength, and dignity.

The second impression that stays with me is of the camaraderie of the monks when they gathered in the dyeing shed for evening tea. It was a thoroughly informal occasion with everyone wearing the minimum amount of clothing, as befitted the sweltering heat. There was a regular supply of sugar, tea and coffee and, unless I'm mistaken, plenty of cocoa. It seemed like everyone helped themselves and could have as much as they wanted. Without getting into making heedless comparisons, this did contrast dramatically with teatime at Wat Pah Nanachat where everyone sat in lines and talked very quietly. At Wat Pah Nanachat there was no choice over what you drank; you took whatever was in the big aluminium kettle that was passed down the line, or you went without. The atmosphere in the Wat Pah Bahn Tard dyeing shed was even jovial, at least at the time I was there. The overall approach to training in that monastery was different; there was no morning and evening chanting, for instance, and the emphasis was more on doing sitting and walking meditation practice alone. In Tan Ajahn Chah's monasteries there was a strong emphasis on group activities such as daily chanting, sweeping leaves, and hauling water from the well.

Ajahn Paññavaddho, who, in terms of years in the robe, was senior to Ajahn Sumedho, would sometimes join us for those tea sessions. I remember how he seemed to listen in a way that meant I felt heard. That wasn't always the case with senior monks. Presumably, it was over evening tea that he found out about the difficulties I was still having with my knees. He was obviously aware that at that time in the forest monasteries in Thailand, sitting on a chair during sangha gatherings was not an option. I suspect too that he sensed how threatened I felt because of this physical condition. If I understand correctly, Ajahn Paññavaddho was a trained engineer before becoming a monk; and he had someone he knew who worked at the railways build a sitting stool for me. It was almost strong enough to survive being run over by a train. That he went to all the trouble of having it built was one thing, but then he had it delivered for me to Wat Pah Nanachat. Thank you, Ajahn Paññavaddho.

The third memory is of an occasion when Luang Ta Maha Bua offered a formal teaching. If there was to be a Dhamma talk to the sangha, I was told, it would usually happen on an evening when there wasn't a lot of distracting noise drifting in from nearby villages, or from the wind and rain. Although I was feeling pleased with my improved grasp of the Thai language, unfortunately on that occasion I still had to depend on the translation into English given by Ajahn Paññavaddho. That translation happened with all the Thai monks still sitting there, and when he finished, Luang Ta Maha Bua singled me out and asked if Tan Ajahn Chah gave talks especially

for the sangha, or just in general for everyone, including the extended community of lay supporters. I expect I was like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car in my reply, saying that yes, Tan Ajahn Chah regularly gave talks to the bhikkhu sangha after the fortnightly *patimokkha* recitation.

4.8

TIME IN THAILAND COMING TO AN END

The difference in training style didn't cause me to think, even for a minute, that I would be better off living at Wat Bahn Tard. Tan Ajahn Chah's employment of group practice as a training tool made very good sense to me. Years later I adopted a similar attitude in how I ran the monastery in Northumberland. In the first few years of monastic training, most of us want to be able to do what we want, when we want – something like, 'doing your own thing, in your own time.' However, if doing our own thing had been so great, we wouldn't have gone to live in a mosquito-infested forest with one meal a day and excessively sweet drinks in the evening. We went because we understood, at least to some degree, that a commitment to 'my way' doesn't work. Hence, training involves countering 'my way'. And living together with other monks, often with very different preferences, is an excellent way to get in touch with 'my way'. Getting in touch with 'my way' is the first step; then we have to learn to let go of 'my way'.

I was pleased to be back again at Wat Pah Nanachat with what felt like family. During my absence, the BBC had visited Wat Pah Pong and produced a film for the Open University, called *The Mindful Way*. Not long after that film was shown in Britain, an elderly English woman who saw it was so inspired that she quickly caught a flight to Thailand and found her way up to Tan Ajahn Chah's monastery. On the day she was due to depart for Britain, I happened to be at Wat Pah Pong waiting under Tan Ajahn Chah's kuti, ready to join him on morning alms-round. An American *maebee* who was living there at the time, brought this English guest to pay her respects to the teacher and, at the same time, asked if he would kindly say something like 'goodbye' into her tape recorder. Tan Ajahn Chah took the recorder in his hand and delivered a profound and loving message lasting about fifteen minutes.

Since the *maebee* was only able to speak Laotian, and not Thai, I volunteered (or was asked) to translate this short talk into English. After returning from alms-round I rushed over to my kuti to translate it in time to give it to the departing guest. That talk is now printed in '*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*³¹', page 233, with the title, *Living with The Cobra*. It is a brilliant, succinct summary of the right way to approach practice. My favourite part of the talk is where Tan Ajahn says,

We extinguish fire at the place at which it appears.
Wherever it is hot, that's where we can make it cool.
And so it is with enlightenment. *Nibbana* is found in

samsara. Enlightenment and delusion exist in the same place, just as do hot and cold. It's hot where it was cold and cold where it was hot. When heat arises, the coolness disappears, and when there is coolness, there's no more heat. In this way *Nibbana* and *samsara* are the same.

I have listened to this talk many times over the years and continue to enjoy the vitality and the compassion in Tan Ajahn Chah's voice. When I reflect on it these days, what I hear Tan Ajahn Chah saying accords with how I have come to think about the two different ways of approaching practice: one way could be called a 'goal-oriented approach' and the other a 'source-oriented approach'. People are different and naturally have different ways of picking up the practice. Some, it seems, benefit from having a clear idea of the goal spelt out for them, and the stages of reaching that goal. They feel energised by the perception that they're making progress along the path. For others, ideas of a goal can serve a useful purpose in the beginning, but the deeper they go in practice the more such ideas get in the way. For them what is more important is learning to let go of approximations of a goal, letting go of even wanting to progress, and instead growing in ability to be more intensely and accurately present in this moment with whatever is happening – resolutely releasing out of habits of being someone trying to get somewhere.

It was around this time of that year that Tan Tiradhammo began compiling the first collection of translated talks given by Tan Ajahn Chah which were eventually printed in a small

booklet called *Bodhinyana*. A fledgling sangha was beginning to settle in, in Britain, but there was no idea that in only a very few years a worldwide community of monasteries⁴¹ would be established. Here at Wat Pah Nanachat we were still sweeping leaves and pulling water from the well every day, and dealing with the almost constant challenges that such a simple and disciplined life is guaranteed to produce.

On occasions I would still become caught up in worry about my health, especially to do with the consumption of sugar. Eating only once a day around 8 o'clock in the morning, and sweating a lot because of the heat, meant that the temptation to gobble vast amounts of sugar in the evening was strong. I felt sure it was not a sensible thing to be doing, but I guess I was addicted. At some stage that year I underwent a medical test to assess my sugar metabolism, and the result indicated that I either had a tumour on my pancreas or was suffering from 'functional' hypoglycaemia. After further tests it was agreed that there were no signs of my having a tumour, so the doctors prescribed a regime for dealing with hypoglycaemia. They recommended I eat several small meals throughout the day, including in the evening, and see if the sugar metabolism would stabilize.

This event coincided with a fad passing through the monastery inspired by a book called *Water Of Life: A Treatise on Urine Therapy*, by John W. Armstrong. Eating several small meals a day, and especially, eating in the evening, were not options, so I determined to abstain from consuming any sugar at all for the duration of the three months Rains Retreat

of that year; also I committed to drinking urine and often received a massage of fermented urine. I have only a very vague memory now of undergoing another test at the end of the three months but what I recall is that my sugar metabolism was by then perfectly normal. Not only is the drinking of urine mentioned as an allowable medicine in Buddhist scripture, but it turns out that it is a well-known practice, especially amongst yogis in India. The book mentioned that the practice was not suitable for anyone with high blood pressure, and also I imagine it says it shouldn't be used by anyone who is taking other medication.

After that Rains Retreat I asked Ajahn Jagaro if I could go back and spend some time in New Zealand. My parents had offered me a flight ticket and in correspondence with them I had said I would like to accept their offer, but only on the condition that I could return to Thailand. I don't imagine Ajahn Jagaro had any objections, because I went over to see Tan Ajahn Chah who, at that time, was staying in a nearby village monastery, Wat Gor Nork. It was a pleasure to be in his company, and I don't recall him raising any concerns about my going for a visit home.

This reminds me of another occasion regarding Wat Gor Nork when Ajahn Jagaro himself went over to speak with Tan Ajahn Chah. He was accompanied by Tan Thitiñano, a French-Italian monk, and Tan Gavesako, a Japanese monk. I wasn't around on that occasion but I have a tape recording of the conversation. The three young monks were questioning Tan Ajahn Chah about what exactly is meant by the term

‘Original Mind’ and what exactly is contemplation. A translation of this conversation is printed on p.475 in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*.³¹ Here is my favourite extract from that dialogue,

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

Tan Ajahn Chah: We use thinking as a tool, but the knowing that arises because of its use is above and beyond the process of thinking; it leads to our not being fooled by our thinking anymore. You recognize that all thinking is merely the movement of the mind, and also that knowing is not born and doesn’t die. What do you think all this movement called ‘mind’ comes out of? What we talk about as the mind – all the activity – is just the conventional mind. It’s not the real mind at all. What is real just IS, it’s not arising and it’s not passing away.

This teaching inspired me to develop the meditation practice I have used for many years, of enquiring, *in WHAT is all this taking place?*

I departed Thailand for New Zealand on 25th November 1979, with a ten day stopover in Sydney. On landing in Sydney airport and exiting the plane, the cooler air seemed to trigger a sensation which gave me a feeling like my brain had started working again. It was as if I had been partly brain dead.

This was my second visit to Wat Buddharangsee where Luang Por Mahasamai was still living. He was still smiling. During those few days there I was encouraged to give a talk at one of the local Buddhist societies, which didn't exactly fill me with delight. As I recall, however, I might have been forewarned, either by Ajahn Jagaro, or another New Zealand monk who had been training in Korea and was also currently home visiting, Bhikshu Ham Wol. Bhikshu Ham Wol and I had been in correspondence, and he was arranging accommodation for me in Auckland before I ventured north to the Bay of Islands to see my parents. Whoever it was who warned me about possibly giving a talk in Sydney, also helpfully advised me to approach it as giving voice to my own inner contemplations: instead of just inwardly pondering on a theme, give your ponderings a voice and that will be your talk.

On 5th December I took a flight to New Zealand and landed in Auckland.

TRANSLATION

5.1 BETTER A MONK THAN A DRUNK

Bhikshu Ham Wol had arranged for the two of us to be staying at a Tibetan Centre in Mt Eden, a particularly lovely part of Auckland. Like much of New Zealand's largest city, this suburb is nestled on the edge of a dormant volcano (there are roughly 50 dormant volcanoes⁴² in Auckland alone, and many more volcanoes throughout the country, several still active).

This Tibetan Buddhist centre was of the Gelugpa tradition associated with Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa. I had attended a session of talks by these two Lamas some years earlier in Bangkok, but I couldn't say I knew much about their practices. It did seem though that they placed a lot of emphasis on study. Study seemed to take precedence over meditation.

Meeting and staying with this group in Mt Eden was enjoyable. They were exceedingly considerate. I doubt whether any of them had ever met a Theravadin monk before and would not have been familiar with our 227 rules. Bhikshu Ham Wol, who had arrived from Korea quite a few months earlier, had a distinctly different take on the monks' rules. He

had spent time in Thailand and had initially taken novice (*samanera*) precepts there, but had left and gone to Korea to take up the monks' training. The most obvious difference between us, besides the fact that his robes were grey and mine were brown, was that he handled money. He was also comfortable cooking food; these two points meant that the laypeople found him much easier to look after. For my part, there was no way I was going to dilute my commitment to the discipline as it had been taught to me by my teachers. Although Bhikhsu Ham Wol and I had not met before, other than in written correspondence, we quickly settled into an easy mode of cooperation and mutual support. I felt our rules served as a protection and source of strength, while he seemed to perceive them as creating an unhelpful distance between us and the community of householders; but that difference never caused any issues between us. We were both excited to be in New Zealand, and obviously this was a time when interest in Buddhism was beginning to blossom. In the few months he had been there he had already connected with many groups, and he was keen that we travel around the country together and offer teachings to them.

One of those connections was with the FWBO, or the Friends of The Western Buddhist Order. As far as I could make out, this was an organisation attempting to establish itself as a secular community of people committed to the Buddhist teachings, contrasting itself with the monastic communities found in Asia. Its founder, Sangharakshita, was a contemporary of Ajahn Khantipalo; they had spent time together in

India but ended up parting ways. This group in Auckland was very energetic and impressively well set up. Before I left to go north and spend time with family, I visited their library and they generously allowed me to borrow from their reference section the five volumes of the *Vinaya Pitaka*. While I was living at Wat Pah Nanachat I don't think we had an English translation of the *Vinaya Pitaka*; in those days we took our guidance from the Thai commentaries – *Vinayamukha*, Volumes one and two.

My arrival back in Opuia must have been hard for my parents. I was painfully skinny to look at, which for a mother can be no easy thing. She knew there was no room for negotiation over my eating in the evening but I did agree to eat twice a day before noon. Thankfully, there was no big welcome home party organised; I would have found that difficult to handle. As far as I recall, I settled into a routine which included doing morning and evening chanting, periods of formal meditation and spending time talking with my mother. The role that external structures play in containing internal chaos was something of which I was already aware. My father and I had never had much of a relationship, but on this occasion he did seem keen to take me out for walks. Because he was so private, I never did find out from him what he really thought about the way I was living. One day, though, I dared to ask my mother directly if my father was embarrassed to be seen with me in robes, walking around the village. She was emphatic that the way I appeared, and for that matter what other people thought, was of no concern to him. Apparently he had said that he would rather have me as a monk than a drunk.

That wasn't exactly a fulsome expression of appreciation, but coming from my father it felt like a gesture of approval.

Regularly I would go out on my own for long walks in the beautiful surrounding countryside. I was intentionally trying to build up some physical strength. The food my mother prepared was nourishing, and there was no need to be concerned about offending Thai customs. In Thailand there is an accepted view that monks should not pay too much attention to their physical strength. That has positive and negative consequences. On the positive side it is obviously suitable that the emphasis be on letting go of vanity, however, on the negative side, it means that these days many monks suffer from obesity and diabetes. For those walks I would pack the five volumes of the *Vinaya Pitaka* into a bag and carry them on my back just as someone at the gym might lift weights. I like to think I also studied the texts, though now, nearly forty years later, I can't say for sure.

Being alone as a monk in that situation after having spent several years contained within an intensely structured environment, triggered anxiety. My mother had spent much of her life burdened with anxiety and perhaps I had inherited some of those traits from her. Even without that, the situation was odd: I was twenty-nine years old, the only Theravada Buddhist monk in the country, and with an awareness of how the way I conducted myself could have consequences for monks who would visit New Zealand in the future. I was making more out of it than was needed, for sure, but maybe that was better than being in a hurry to feel overly relaxed.

5.2 SPREADING THE WORD

By the time I went back down to Auckland, Bhikshu Ham Wol had prepared an itinerary for us that included Hamilton, Palmerston North and Wellington. I do remember that we hitchhiked at least some of the way to Palmerston North where my good friend Jutta had arranged accommodation for us with a colleague of hers from the school where she taught. This acquaintance had a large house with a separate building out the back that Bhikshu Ham Wol and I were invited to use. She also had a swimming pool which must have been tempting, but perhaps by that time the weather was already turning into autumn.

Once we arrived in Wellington we were again hosted at a Tibetan Buddhist Centre associated with the same group as the folk in Auckland. They were likewise gracious in their hospitality, support and interest.

Bhikshu Ham Wol said there was one person in particular in Wellington that he wanted me to meet; everyone knew her as Aunty Mabel, but her full name was Mabel San Nyein (or her Burmese name, Daw Aye Myint). Aunty Mabel owned the

Monsoon restaurant in Upper Willis Street, opposite a very colourful shop called 'The Merchant Adventurers of Narnia'. As was later explained to me, when Aunty Mabel and her four children had left Burma during a period of political unrest, they managed to make their way to New Zealand to reunite with Aunty Mabel's brother and his children, but with only the minimal amount of funds allowed by the Burmese government. Aunty Mabel was well known to some of the folk who ran the 'Narnia'; she would regularly invite them to her house for a meal. They had a lease on a property which they used as a warehouse but which was no longer large enough. Zeke, one of the partners in the 'Narnia', apparently encouraged Aunty to open a restaurant and take over the lease (perhaps in part so they would have ready access to her food).

Immediately upon our entering the Monsoon, it was obvious that Aunty Mabel was a woman of considerable faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. She hadn't seen a Theravadin Buddhist monk for a long time and with joyous self abandon, threw herself down on the floor and made prostrations. I was very moved by her devotion. Soon after that meeting she became a devoted supporter. I learned the Burmese words for someone of her standing in the community and henceforth generally referred to her as Da Ga Ma Gyi (Burmese for devoted supporter of the sangha).

Buddhists expressing devotion was not unfamiliar to me from my time in Thailand, but somehow it had always felt as if it was filtered through layers of cultural assumption which

I didn't really understand. Aunty Mabel had been brought up speaking English in British-ruled Burma, which meant we could speak in a much more open, unfiltered manner; and here we were in my home country. I think on that first meeting we were offered the midday meal, and I might have let it slip how impressed I was with the pumpkin curry and coconut rice. For years afterwards, we were served pumpkin curry and coconut rice and I didn't mind at all.

One day, as Bhikshu Ham Wol and I walked through downtown Wellington, we were approached by a photographer. He politely asked if he could take our photograph and we said it would be fine. That photograph ended up being printed in *The Dominion*, a leading newspaper in New Zealand's capital city. Not long afterwards, a phone call came through for me at the Tibetan Buddhist Centre from the Royal Thai Embassy, enquiring if the two of us would be available to receive a meal offering. As it happened, also staying at that Centre on that occasion, was an Australian man who was training as either a novice or a monk in the Tibetan tradition, so in the end the three of us, in our very different robes, attended the invitation.

Typical of the way Thai people enjoy sharing opportunities to accumulate goodness, a large group of Buddhists from a variety of countries had been invited. I believe it was there that I first met Mrs Parker, a Thai woman married to a New Zealander. I also met Mrs Gurusinghe, a Sri Lankan woman married to Dr. Gurusinghe who, along with their children, had settled in the Wellington area.

Perhaps as soon as the next day, Mrs Gurusinghe visited me at the Tibetan Centre and was asking quite a lot of questions. Only later did I come to appreciate that she wanted to see what sort of Buddhist monk I was. She would have been aware from having grown up in Sri Lanka, that some monks are more committed than others to observing their rules and practising with sincerity. It was those three women – Aunty, Mrs Parker and Mrs Gurusinghe – who formed the core group of what later came to be known as the WTBA, the Wellington Theravada Buddhist Association. When I think of them now, the word that comes to mind is ‘formidable’: such commitment, strength and determination, combined with a wholesome, happy disposition. The WTBA managed the purchase and eventually saw to the building of Bodhinyanarama Monastery.⁴³

As I met more monks and novices from other Buddhist cultures, along with their lay supporters, I was beginning to appreciate that there was another kind of translation taking place – not just that of the texts, but of the traditions. It became apparent that I myself had picked up a set of assumptions during the years spent in Thailand, and I felt as if there was a ‘right way’ to do things: a right way to bow, to chant, to make offerings to the shrine, to make offerings to the sangha. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise to discover that each country had their own set of assumptions. It was going to require mindfulness and probably patience to discern the essence of these traditional practices; in the process I would hopefully learn how to exercise skill in their observance.

One matter that had already become clear was the importance of Theravadins and Mahayanists making an effort to get along together. The last thing the world needed was another religion with its members squabbling with each other. It was one thing to speak about each other in less than complimentary terms when we lived thousands of miles apart, but now, because of the ease of travel, we would be regularly encountering each other. This situation wasn't totally new; records show that in the time of Nalanda University in India, various different sects of Buddhism managed to live harmoniously in close association with each other. Now we had the potential advantage of access to technology which, if we were wise, could help us with the task.

Of the roughly six months I spent in New Zealand, it was at about this point that my personal lack of restraint meant I had once again become hooked on smoking cigarettes. It is common in Thailand to see monks smoking; however in Tan Ajahn Chah's monasteries it was not permitted. I heard that he said he didn't want the faithful lay supporters spending the little money they had on purchasing tobacco to offer to the sangha. At that time there wasn't the same amount of information available about health hazards associated with smoking. Partly I had resumed my old habit of smoking in an attempt to handle feelings of anxiety that I was having; and probably rationalized going against the Wat Pah Pong standard because I wasn't staying in a Wat Pah Pong monastery. It was a humiliating situation that I had got myself into. I wasn't smoking in public and that meant there was the added

sense of being dishonest. Attempts to wilfully stop the habit had failed. Eventually I decided to draw upon the strength of making a vow – *adhitthana*. Kneeling in front of the shrine, I made the formal determination, ‘So long as I am staying in New Zealand I will not smoke cigarettes.’ I expect I added, ‘May the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha bear witness to my determination.’ After that there was very little or no struggle at all. I never smoked in New Zealand again.

This was a real eye opener for me. During the early years of training in Thailand, we were strongly encouraged to develop the spiritual muscle of *adhitthana*, but now I was seeing the benefit. Some of the monks, on hearing that encouragement to make a special effort for the sake of strengthening this ability, decided to take up the daunting practice of not lying down to sleep, or strict adherence to the practice of eating only food received on alms-round. I was cautious to not make vows that I thought I might not be able to keep, so I would generally decide on such practices as sweeping out my kuti every day. Even that minimal level of resolution I could forget; when that happened and I was already in bed before remembering my resolve, I would have to get up again and sweep out my kuti. In the process, I was training my mind with the perception that if I determined to do something, I would honour that resolve. At the time of performing such practices it is not necessarily obvious that a gradual accumulation of increased ability is taking place. I am very thankful indeed that the teachings highlighted the benefit of training in *adhitthana parami*.

Maybe it was on our way back up to Auckland that Bhikshu Ham Wol and I stopped to spend a few days at a Christian Abbey. I'm not quite sure why we ended up there; perhaps my companion had a certain zeal for spreading the word. I don't think I was against meeting the monks; at some point in Thailand I had come across translations of the Desert Fathers⁴⁴ by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, and was very inspired by them. It was interesting to notice how at this monastery, during meal times, one community member read loudly from scripture or commentaries. Maybe this was a way of helping keep their hearts and minds focused on the spiritual quest and not be distracted by sensuality. I can sort of appreciate the thinking that was perhaps behind that. I didn't appreciate, though, their attitude towards raising stock for slaughter. It is so sad that people who are otherwise committed to goodness don't see how their attitude towards animals generates so much suffering.

Our hosts in the nearby town of Napier were once more beautifully generous and accommodating. They were part of a Zen group there. We also ended up staying one night at the home of the liberal vicar from my Gordonton commune days; he was now living at nearby Havelock North.

By the time we arrived back in Auckland, we were thinking about how we might mark the traditional celebration of the birth, Awakening and final passing of the Buddha. The Awakening is universally celebrated within all Buddhist traditions on the full moon of May, or *Vesakha*, as it is called in the Pali language. Only the Theravadins observe all three on the

same day. Luang Por Mahasamai, from Wat Buddharangsi in Sydney, had accepted an invitation to join us, so we organised an event that included members of the Thai, Cambodian, Sri Lankan, Burmese and Laotian communities.

The gathering took place at Patsy's house in Parnell. One of the things I remember from it was the shared sense of enthusiasm. Either at the time, or shortly afterwards, some of the Sri Lankans there on that day began discussing how they might set up a group that would look into establishing a Theravada Centre in Auckland. Yet again, the level of excitement and energy, and the harmony between the groups, were a delight to behold. That occasion was the beginning of what later became the ATBA, the Auckland Theravada Buddhist Association. It was this group that bought and developed a property on Harris Street, known as the Auckland Vihara.⁴⁵ After many years and a huge amount of hard work, the same group went on to purchase and develop Vimutti Monastery,⁴⁶ just south of Auckland.

The months were passing by, and soon it would be time to decide where I would be spending the three months of the Rains Retreat. My parents let me know they were not happy with the idea of my returning to Thailand. I had told them about the developments in Britain, and they said they would offer me a ticket to go there if I wished. After some correspondence with Ajahn Sumedho, I think I got the impression that they could use help with painting and decorating the large Victorian mansion into which they had recently moved.

There are two routes by which one might travel from New Zealand to Britain: westwards, via Singapore, for instance, and eastwards, via Los Angeles. Since my friend Mason Hamilton was in those days living in Los Angeles, I elected to go via LA. He helpfully wrote a letter endorsing my application for a stopover visa in the USA.

On 7th June 1980 I departed New Zealand. The time I had spent there had given me my first glimpse of what Buddhism in the West might look like. The potential for benefit seemed very real, and I was leaving with a feeling of inspiration. Thank you, New Zealand and thank you, Bhikshu Ham Wol. It would be approximately another ten years before I would return.

5.3

A RELIEF TO BE IN BRITAIN

Unfortunately, family commitments meant that Mason and I didn't manage to meet up in Los Angeles, we only spoke on the phone. The monks at the Wat Thai temple were helpful in providing a place for me to break my journey. Then on 10th June I arrived in Britain. On exiting the airport I had a sense of relief; somehow I already felt safe in this country and was glad to be here. A friend of the sangha, Paul James, was waiting to drive me to the monastery in West Sussex. It was not long before I met Ajahn Sumedho, and he was still his ebullient self. He immediately took me on a tour of the property, which included not just the impressive mock Tudor Victorian mansion of Chithurst House,⁴⁷ but also the nearby substantial forest and lake property. On that particular day there was work being done on the weir at one end of the lake. It was known as Hammer Pond, because in the seventeenth century the water spilling over the slipway drove a hammer which was part of an iron forge. One of the people busy working on the repair of the ancient weir was Chris, a Kiwi

fellow who later took Precepts as a monk with the name Tan Thitapañño.

Earlier I have described the atmosphere during the first years at Wat Pah Nanachat as a combination of focussed spiritual aspiration, pioneering spirit, and New Age adventure. Life at Chithurst was much the same, but was a great deal more ‘yang’. For one thing, the climate was cooler, and there was almost an urgency to community activity. Instead of everyone wearing only a lightweight waistcloth and flimsy *angsa*, here people wore a lot more clothes; instead of crochet hooks and whittling knives, here it was chainsaws and concrete mixers.

The large room in which I would be staying overlooked the bucolic countryside of that part of West Sussex. I would be sharing the room with Tan Sucitto. He went out of his way to be hospitable and expressed concern for my welfare. Tan Sucitto had spent time living in a meditation monastery in Thailand but, at that stage, had never visited Wat Pah Pong or Wat Pah Nanachat. As I said, he was very attentive to my well-being; he did strike me as a bit of an enigma though. I had trouble getting any sense of what made him tick. Over the years that followed, a friendship developed between us, based on trust. It turned out that he similarly didn’t quite know what to make of me, and that didn’t matter. Trust and respect were more important.

Throughout all the years I have been living in the UK, I have felt grateful for the privilege: grateful and extremely fortunate. Although the English themselves excel when it comes to criticising their own institutions and traditions, personally,

I find it easy to heap praise on the country; since arriving here I have never wanted to live anywhere else. I do confess, however, that it took me about twenty-five years to eventually admit how inscrutable I find not just the English, but the British as a whole. As a country, they obviously understand each other, but even after several decades I remain mystified. They almost never say anything directly – rather, there are hints and innuendos that one is supposed to interpret. It is not surprising that I have been told more than once that some find my Kiwi character a bit coarse. It was naive of me to not admit sooner how often I have struggled to find my place in the situations in which I find myself. The truth was that I was feeling excluded, and I didn't want to admit that. When eventually I did admit it, it was a relief, and didn't seem to matter too much. This wonderful country is full of misfits and, to me at least, there seems to be an admirable willingness to tolerate people who are different. Of course, at the same time I am aware that in Britain, as in other countries, there is a lot more that could be done to address inequality on many levels.

Perhaps this hesitation to admit feeling like I didn't fit in is similar to the way we refuse to admit to ourselves that one day we will die; by that, I mean that we habitually lie to ourselves about things we find difficult to acknowledge. Out of wisdom and compassion, the Buddha instructed his followers to regularly reflect on the inevitability of their demise. Those who heed his instructions are sometimes surprised at how good it can feel to own up to that fact. It can release a lot

of energy when we stop lying to ourselves. I intend to later reflect more on this aspect of teachings by the Buddha and how they have impacted upon me.

5.4 CHITHURST EMERGING

The extensive Hammer Wood and Hammer Pond property had been given as a gift, but Chithurst House had been purchased by The English Sangha Trust (EST). Presumably most of the purchase price was for the surrounding fields, since the house itself was full of dry rot and in need of a massive amount of repair. Personally, I would have been fine if there had been an accidental fire and the whole place had burned down. That was another aspect of the British about which I still had to learn: their fondness for old buildings. In New Zealand there weren't really many old buildings, and until relatively recently, there hadn't been much of an appreciation for good architecture.

As it was, a huge amount of care and attention went into renovating Chithurst House. The large internal wooden staircase was completely dismantled, sanded, repaired, polished and reinstalled. The tall ornate chimneys were taken down, cleaned brick by brick, and then put back up in their original place. Ajahn Sumedho was part of the brick cleaning team. One of the first jobs I was given was repointing the outer walls

of the house. I would never have imagined there could be so many opinions about how one should point stone walls. The way the mortar was mixed and the style in which that mortar was then shaped, were obviously relevant, but they were not the most important thing. These were pioneer days and thankfully, there was a spirit of cooperation and mutual support. I like to think that most of us shared the view that it was good enough that we were making an effort. Ultimately it didn't matter whether or not we knew how to point properly; what mattered was that we had this amazing opportunity to live as monks and nuns in a cooperative community, at this time, in this country.

Those who were tasked with converting two of the downstairs rooms into one big shrine room had a particularly challenging job. The old plaster was stripped off the walls, which were then sprayed with an anti-dry rot chemical. When it came to removing the wall that divided the two rooms, care was taken to check to see whether or not it was structural. To that end, a strip about thirty centimetres high was removed, the full width of the room, at the bottom and also at the top. This way, it was thought that if there were structural supporting beams they would be visible. There was nothing; the space was clear, right through to the room next door, from pillar to pillar. So it was decided that it was safe to knock the wall down. I can't recall now exactly how it happened, perhaps the job of taking out the wall was delegated to others, but a while later, when one of the senior community members came back to see how the work was progressing, he noticed a disturbing

bow in the ceiling as it was beginning to drop down, precisely where the wall had been. What hadn't been understood was the way the Victorians had built that supporting wall using cross beams: they weren't perpendicular, so there were no supports between the floor and the ceiling. What was not seen were the supports constructed diagonally, pillar to pillar. Fortunately, maybe just in time, acrow props were put in place, preventing the building from collapsing on top of everyone.

That was a good lesson, and one I have reflected on many times over the years. Just because we can't see the point in a particular structure doesn't mean there isn't one; and this applies to not just physical structures, but social, relational, psychological ones also. When a young Englishman once told me that he would really like to take up monastic training but he couldn't abide the robes that we wore, he wasn't able to see beyond the aesthetics. He suggested we should swap our robes for saffron tracksuits. What he wasn't able to see was the current of energy, metaphorically speaking, that runs through the centuries, of millions of *samanas* wearing the same form of clothing: the robes are a symbol of what we are referring to when we talk about lineage. Also, he wasn't aware of the risk of rupture in our relationship with our brothers and sisters in Thailand if we had changed our robes to suit our preferences.

The same principle applies to ideas one might have about altering our adherence to the monastic rules. Plenty of people have been keen to tell us that in this day and age, we need to

be handling money. As it has worked out, in truth, because we don't change the rules – because we don't handle money – there are many people who have confidence in this tradition and generously offer their support. It can be humbling to realize how our attachment to outer forms often blinds us to the truth. So long as we cling to the surface level of experience, our attention readily falls short of what we really need to see. One of Ajahn Sumedho's many valuable gifts to our community has been his hesitation to change structures and conventions; thankfully, his approach has been one of wait-and-see.

After the wall had been removed, I was invited to help with the decorating. Part of that stage of the project meant a cluster of us (if that is a suitable collective pronoun for a group of *samanas*) were sent away for a day to the British Gypsum factory to don white coats and learn how to work with their dry-wall lining system. Because the house was riddled with dry rot we couldn't use wooden battens for fixing the plaster boards to the walls; we had to use a system of gluing metal furring strips to the very uneven stonework and then, with self-tapping screws, attach the massive plaster boards. These weren't just long and wide boards, they also had thick insulation on the back; they were very heavy. Once the boards had been securely placed, the joints were then taped and filled. Often the days were very long and the work very tiring. After many weeks though, I like to think we ended up with something quite suitable.

5.5 EMPHASIS ON LETTING GO

Ajahn Sumedho put a lot of effort into offering teachings to the community, and there was evidence that his effort was appreciated. We had a fairly constant stream of interested people, men and women, coming to stay. Despite there being a lot of hard physical work, a rhythm of morning and evening pujas was usually maintained. Also there was the traditional weekly observance on the moon day when we would stay up at least until midnight. There was no breakfast during those initial two or three years, as we were trying to see if it was possible to keep to the standards we observed in Thailand. Letting go was the teaching, and letting go was the practice. Anyone who insisted on holding to their own way of doing things soon stood out.

Not very long after I arrived in Britain my mother and father came to visit. I think they found the few days that they stayed with us at Chithurst rewarding. They then went on a whistle-stop tour around the Continent. Soon after returning from that trip, while they were staying with a Thai family who were friends of the monastery, in Hampstead, north London,

my father suffered a stroke. The wife of the couple was a medical doctor and quickly recognized the symptoms. My father was immediately admitted to a nearby NHS Hospital and underwent surgery.

The Thai family accommodated me in a converted garage adjacent to their house, and I was able to support my mother and visit my father. On one of those visits, when my mother and I were walking down a corridor at the hospital, I was struck by her reaction to comments made by a young doctor. As I recall, there were what looked like three junior doctors walking towards us, and as they passed us one of them made a comment referring to me: he said something like, ‘Take a look at that get-up’. Without hesitation, my mother turned on him and said, ‘That is not a get-up; my son is a Buddhist monk.’ I don’t remember his reaction, but presumably he felt suitably upbraided. It was gradually dawning on me that, although my parents found it hard to understand what I was doing, they did respect it. A few weeks earlier they had met Ajahn Sumedho and engaged in what they seemed to find a very rewarding conversation.

Staying in that garage with the thought of my father’s medical condition and my mother’s disappointment over how their trip had turned out, was not easy, and my attempts at meditation were hopeless. What I did find helpful, however, was chanting. I was grateful that as a community at Chithurst we had learnt to recite the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta – The Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma. This was the Buddha’s first discourse and contained the

core teachings, including the Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path. Besides serving to occupy my mind with something wholesome, I seem to recall that this was when I discovered the physiological benefits of chanting. The exercise of short in-breaths followed by long out-breaths can result in feeling as if energy is being drawn down from out of the head into the belly. It can be calming both mentally and physically.

During this interlude in London an exceptionally friendly young fellow called Chris would sometimes come to visit us, and on occasion kindly accompanied my mother on outings to sites such as Buckingham Palace and Madame Tussaud's. He later took up the training as a monk and was given the name Karuniko Bhikkhu.

The generosity of that Thai family felt very supportive. Once again I was struck by the beauty of a culture that is based in Dhamma principles. Both of my parents were understandably extremely grateful. My father made a good enough recovery, and several weeks later was allowed to fly back to New Zealand. I returned to Chithurst.

The stage of painting and decorating the new shrine room was exciting. By this time another Kiwi fellow had joined us, called Finlay, and he was impressively skilled in carpentry and cabinet making.

The central piece of the shrine room was of course to be the shrine itself. A massive oak tree had been extracted from Hammer Wood and it was decided that the community would mill it ourselves and use it to construct the shrine.

What I think is called a 'pit saw' was sent to us from Thailand and Ajahn Anando and Tan Amaro together took on the task of converting the log into a long thick oak plank.

The eventual arrival of a large gilded Buddha rupa from Thailand marked a significant stage in establishing Chithurst, or what was to be called Cittaviveka, as a monastery.

The ongoing renovation of the house took years, not months. There developed a bit of a pattern whereby I would be given a room to stay in and asked to fix it up at the same time. At least during one period I recall how, after a day of scraping walls, filling holes and painting, I would push the paint pots aside and lie down to sleep, wake up the next day, and carry on. One of those rooms had probably previously been the place where the nanny lived; once the redecoration was finished Ajahn Sumedho moved in, and I was sent to live in the Granary.

That was a move I welcomed, as I was to be sharing the space with Tan Kittisaro. He and I had been good friends already at Wat Pah Nanachat. Sometime after that sojourn in the Granary, I moved into the loft above the old Coach House: a very desirable residence, at least in terms of the view over the walled garden and across to the South Downs. Other than the bats that also occupied the Coach House I was alone there. Eventually that semi-dilapidated building was to be replaced with the current, very handsome, Dhamma Hall. Well before then I had moved back into the main house and was living in the attic in a room where the water tanks were situated.

I mentioned earlier that we were cautious about changing anything. In my first or second year at Chithurst, I took the initiative to try and sew a jacket. I think Tan Anando supported the idea. It seemed to me that if we had a suitable jacket, that would mean we could wear pretty well anything we wanted underneath it and still look presentable from the outside. When Tan Ajahn Chah was visiting in 1979 and had seen the variety of jumpers and t-shirts that community members were wearing, he announced that when it was time for wearing the formal robes, they must be worn covering both shoulders. Usually inside the monastery, and always during puja, the main robe was worn with the right shoulder uncovered. This originates from a custom in ancient India when baring your right shoulder was seen as a sign of respect. We obviously followed Tan Ajahn Chah's instruction; however, it appeared to me a bit of a pity to lose such a long-standing traditional way of wearing our robes. As it happened, a Sri Lankan gentleman who owned a fabric dyeing mill in Leicester, had offered us a large amount of polyester cloth dyed in our colour. It was with some of this cloth that I experimented in making a jacket. In my mind I had a memory of how tidy the jacket looked that my New Zealand friend, Bhikshu Ham Wol, wore. The resultant garment received Ajahn Sumedho's approval, and in no time at all the monks were wearing jackets, or English *angsas*. Not long after this, Ajahn Sumedho visited Thailand, and it was thought that, as a courtesy, we should inform the elders there about this modest adaptation. To that end, quite a lot of work went into

producing a rather fancy hardbound book with lots of photos, the idea being that Ajahn Sumedho could present these to respected elders and hopefully gain their endorsement. What I heard when Ajahn Sumedho returned from his trip was that they had almost no interest at all in the book, the implication being that they trusted us. That was reassuring news.

5.6

EARLY LESSONS ON LEARNING HOW TO SPEAK

Relatively early on, Ajahn Sumedho began to encourage me to start giving talks. Sometimes he invited me to accompany him to a conference or a lecture.

One conference I remember we went on together was called, ‘Mystics and Scientists’. There was an extensive programme of speakers, and not just from the UK. A scientist who had come from the US gave a particularly impressive presentation that was riveting in its content and eloquent in its delivery. Thinking about it now, however, what has stayed with me is not the content of the talk that he gave, but what happened at the dinner table afterwards. During the midday meal, Ajahn Sumedho and I were sitting opposite this speaker. When one of the servers wheeled her meal trolley towards our table, this fellow reached out and helped himself to a plate of whatever it was that was being served – spaghetti, I think. The server was having none of it and grabbed the plate back, saying something about how that food was for the table opposite, and he would have to wait; a brief tussle followed between

the two of them over the plate of spaghetti. The manner in which this incident occurred, so soon after his well-received discourse on the interface between science and spirituality, made it all the more bizarre.

I don't remember now whether Ajahn Sumedho's talk on that day came before or after the meal, but I do still remember that it was not particularly eloquent. My distinct impression was, and still is, that for Ajahn Sumedho, practice is the priority, not trying to impress his listeners. From the very early days at Wat Pah Pong, he has trained himself to speak from 'this' moment. As far as I could tell, he puts very little, or no effort at all, into preparing or planning talks that he gives. This often results in the same thing being said over and over again, but this is because primarily he is interested in the quality of attention that he brings to the occasion, not just in the information he imparts. As I see it, his offering is not so much the content of the talk, but the sincerity of his commitment to awakening. The reason people find so much benefit in listening to his teachings, even when they have heard the words before, is because the words serve as a conduit for the spirit; the words are the form, and although important, they are not the essence. The essence, or the message, is that there is a path and it is worth walking.

I am reminded of what the Buddha said in Dhammapada verse 93,

*There are those who are free from all obstructions;
they don't worry about food.
Their focus is the signless state of liberation.
Like birds flying through the air,
trackless they move on their way.*

I'm not suggesting that this is a description of the reality in which Ajahn Sumedho lives; it is not my place to speculate about such matters. However, for me, these words from the Buddha point in the direction that all who are truly committed to the spiritual life need to be going. Eloquence is not necessarily an indicator of profundity.

Another quote from the Dhammapada verse 262-263, says,

*Those who are envious, stingy and manipulative
remain unappealing despite good looks
and eloquent speech.
But those who have freed themselves
from their faults
and arrived at wisdom are attractive indeed.*

On at least two or more occasions during the 1980s I was invited to assist Ajahn Sumedho when he attended the annual Buddhist Society Summer School.⁴⁸ To be calling it a Summer School felt just about right. No doubt there would have been some newcomers each year, but many of the attendees knew each other well; for them it was a much-loved annual event. The daily schedule included a comfortable programme of morning meditations, chanting

sessions, and large group lectures by well known teachers from the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana schools, as well as small group classes for such activities as Tai Chi and *Ikebana*.⁴⁹

As the leader of the Zen branch of the London Buddhist Society, Dr. Irmgard Schloegl⁵⁰ was one of the main contributors at this event. She and I had already met at Chithurst one day when she just happened to visit, unannounced, at a time when I had been left in charge. What a good fortune! Bhikshu Ham Wol had spoken to me about her back in New Zealand, and probably it was through him that I became acquainted with her book, *Gentling The Bull*. I think I am right in my understanding that the chapters in that exceptional book are distillations of talks which she had given at those Summer Schools. It was at those Summer Schools that our acquaintance deepened, evolving into a valued Dhamma friendship that lasted until she passed away in 2007.

Another regular speaker at those gatherings was a contemporary of hers from Japan, where she had spent over ten years, Ven. Soko Morinaga Roshi.⁵¹ My favourite speaker at those gatherings was Trevor Leggett⁵² who had also lived many years in Japan working for the BBC, and who was held in exceptionally high regard within the world of Judo.

The Ven. Soko Roshi one day agreed to see me, along with one of the siladhara from our community who was also attending the Summer School. The precious teaching that I took away from that interview was his response to

a question about the process of establishing a tradition of training for nuns within our family of monasteries. Implied in the question was the opinion that the process was taking an awfully long time. The Roshi was attentive and then gently commented that, in nature, when there is rapid change, it usually comes in the form of a hurricane, a volcano, or tsunami, and is disruptive and disharmonious; change that is harmonious tends to emerge in a way that might not even be noticed. I think he gave the example of an acorn turning into an oak tree. He encouraged patience and trust in the harmonious kind of change. He had a quality that reminded me of Tan Ajahn Chah. I can't think of anyone else about whom I have ever said that.

I didn't question Ajahn Sumedho's motivation when he put me up on the stage beside all those proficient speakers; in some sense it was a compliment that he thought I could do it. It was even a gift in as much as it taught me a lot; but it was a gift that I didn't fully appreciate at the time. It fell to me to conduct one rather large class in which I opted to invite questions from the audience. A junior monk who happened to be with me on that occasion took the opportunity to ask a burning question that he had on his mind: 'What is the difference between *samsara* and *sankhara*?' I managed to contain the embarrassment I felt in having one of our monks, already some years in the training, asking such a basic question, and went on to offer some explanation. One good thing though that came out of that, was that some years later when I was in charge of running a monastery, I compiled various lists,

clearly indicating the books that were required reading at each stage of monastic training.

A situation that I recall not handling quite so well came at the end of a period of guided morning meditation. Ajahn Sumedho regularly conducted those meetings in a very beautiful, wood-lined building that would have previously served as the chapel for the old Manor House, where the Summer School was being held. On this occasion he had asked me to lead it, so I took the opportunity to offer guidance in *Metta* meditation, or perhaps it was *Karuna* meditation. Either way, the instruction included words to the effect, 'May I be well, may I be free from suffering.' I like to think that when I offer such guidance I am sincere in what I say and try to avoid the words becoming empty platitudes. After the session was over, an older woman with a very confident bearing came up to the front and quietly but firmly pointed out to me that, 'In this country we don't talk like that.' She was referring to my encouragement to specifically wish ourselves well, to wish that we be free from suffering. I suspect she had noticed my antipodean accent and assumed I wasn't aware that in British culture it is considered vulgar to be so overtly self-concerned. Her attempts to be helpful triggered something very unrefined within me. I can't be sure now what it was exactly: probably a combination of rage from having grown up in a culture that forcefully and harmfully denied wholesome self-concern, along with not wanting to be criticized. As far as I remember I managed to remain outwardly courteous, even though that which had exploded

within me was violent. Obviously I still had a lot more work to do on *metta* and *karuna*.

(For anyone who might be wondering, out of respect I showed Ajahn Sumedho the paragraphs above which refer to him and asked if he wanted me to change anything. He said he didn't.)

5.7 THE DEVON VIHARA

During the year of 1981, Tan Sucitto and a new young anagarika, named Philip, from York, had been sent by Ajahn Sumedho to see what might be possible to establish in Northumberland. They went to a place called Harnham, a few miles north of Newcastle and just south of the Scottish border. A group of local people who shared an interest in yoga and meditation, had earlier attended a retreat led by Ajahn Sumedho at Oakenholt, near Oxford. After that retreat they visited Chithurst and upon observing how hard everyone was working, offered to see if a place could be found where community members might wish to go for some retreat time.

By 1983, anagarika Philip had already taken on the monks' Precepts and was now called Tan Chandapalo. Ajahn Sumedho asked him to accompany me and go to live in Raymond's Hill, near Axminster. We were being invited to see what could be established in Devon.

We moved from a substantial four-storey mansion near the South Downs in West Sussex, to a two and a half bedroom bungalow on a busy tourist route near the South Devon coast.

I loved it. Having an opportunity to spread my wings, so to speak, was a relief. Not that living at Chithurst wasn't agreeable, just that by age thirty, and having been a monk for five going on six years, I welcomed having an opportunity to write my own programme. Also, I think having a sense that Ajahn Sumedho trusted me enough to take on such a project, mattered. The modesty of the accommodation wasn't a problem, though conditions were cramped. The four of us – myself, Tan Chandapalo and two anagarikas – were living in very close proximity, and, thinking about it now, I admire the good effort made by everyone.

The main heating was an old Rayburn stove, I think, fuelled by off-cuts from a chipboard factory. My sensitive nostrils registered the interesting smell as those off-cuts burned. The room I had, and the one shared by the two anagarikas, were adequate, but Tan Chandapalo, who was very tall, lived in an exceptionally small room alongside the boiler tank. He never complained about it – in fact, quite the opposite. More than once over the years he has mentioned to me how much he enjoyed his time there. He took the opportunity to learn to recite the Patimokkha, which was no small feat. He and I both enjoyed walking, so would often venture out into the surrounding countryside; at least once we made it to Charmouth where we went for a swim.

The house was old but provided adequate shelter. Occasionally it required a bit of renovation. One day, when I was taking a bath, I was puzzled to see a dark black line gradually creeping up the wall besides me. 'What on earth!?' It turned out that it

wasn't a black line creeping up the wall – the bath was sinking through the floor. Fortunately the floor was only a small distance above ground level. Had that happened upstairs at Chithurst, the consequences would have been very different. I don't remember now whether we ever fixed the sunken bath. At a much later time I found out that one of the trustees had taken out a substantial loan to facilitate the purchase of that property, which was typical of the extraordinary generosity of the group of people involved.

We had neighbours living very close by on both sides of the bungalow. They could hardly have been more different. On one side lived Father Straub, a retired Roman Catholic priest, who was a thoroughly sweet and friendly person and someone with whom it was always a delight to spend time. On the other side lived a fellow who held the view that human beings were a virus or a blight steadily destroying planet earth. He told me that he included Mother Theresa in that world view. He had a less sweet demeanour and was less lovely to spend time with.

Whatever arguments one might make for being critical of the world we live in, and the way our fellow human beings conduct themselves, it has long seemed to me that having a pessimistic view of things only serves to worsen the situation. Being naively optimistic strikes me as irresponsible, which is part of the reason why I favour the perspective of a strategic optimist. I am aware that the future could turn out to be very difficult for everyone, but I am also aware that if I dwell on negativity I become part of the problem. Choosing to

assume a positive outlook means that I am more likely to act constructively. It is also possible that I was just born with a positive disposition.

One of the trustees, Geoffrey Beardsley, was a lawyer and had been associated with the English Sangha Trust for some years. Two of the other trustees, Douglas and Margaret Jones, were school teachers, and I remember their being intensely committed to their Dhamma practice. On the small farm where they lived, called Golden Square, they had converted what looked like the old milking shed into a large meditation room, and it was there that we regularly conducted retreats. I think it was also there that I met that fellow who thought we ought to be wearing saffron tracksuits.

I am confident that it is there that I met Sue Warren. Sue would have been about eighty years old by this time. Had she met Aunty Mabel, Mrs Parker and Mrs Gurusinghe in New Zealand, they would have got on like a house on fire. Formidable! Sue lived within walking distance of Golden Square. On occasion, when Tan Chandapalo and I would go there to receive the midday meal, she would regale us with stories about what it was like travelling around Germany in the 1930s, also about her years in the WRENS⁵³ during World War Two. She shared too how inspired she had been many years before when she met the Thai Dhamma teacher, Dhiravamsa. Sue was very committed to her meditation and Dhamma studies. Some years later, after I went to live at Harnham in Northumberland, she sold her house in Devon and moved to live in a retirement home in Newcastle where

we would regularly go to visit her. She was ninety-five when she moved, and lived there until she passed away at one hundred and one. Despite having had a rather privileged upbringing, and having moved from a not-insubstantial house in a gorgeous setting in rural Devon, when it came to spending her final years in a single room in the suburbs of Newcastle, she was able to do so with ease. Sometimes she told me how sorry she felt for the other residents in the home who had not prepared themselves for that stage of life. When Sue died, it was as she had requested, with someone reading to her from one of her favourite Dhamma books by Ajahn Buddhadasa. A beautiful person who lived her life well.

There was an occasion when Ajahn Sumedho was visiting us in Devon and he and I were walking from Golden Square to Sue's place. I can't recall what we were discussing as we walked along, but I do vividly recall at one point his turning to me and saying rather sternly, 'You don't have to be like me you know!' That didn't strike me as a characteristic Ajahn Sumedho comment, and I hadn't been aware that I was imitating him, so I was a bit surprised; however, I am glad he said it. It seems to me that during our teenage years, imitation can be a valid way of experimenting as we seek to find a meaningful direction in life. But by the time we are in our thirties, we will hopefully have begun to move beyond imitation. Growing up is really hard work, so thank you again, Ajahn Sumedho, for that. Although I have no idea of what aspect of my behaviour he was referring to, the fact that he said it was a gift.

He was probably not referring to the routine we followed at the Vihara. All branch monasteries of Tan Ajahn Chah's main monastery, Wat Pah Pong, were expected to follow a somewhat similar structure. Hence, as at Wat Pah Nanachat and Chithurst, our daily routine at the Devon Vihara included regular morning and evening chanting. Early on we established a practice of having public pujas on Thursday and Sunday evenings, during which time I would offer a Dhamma talk. Within a very short period of time a sizeable group of participants were joining us. Tan Chandapalo was a very junior monk at the time, which meant all the talks at that time were given by me; similarly, I would lead all the retreats.

Because we lived in a built-up area, there were often occasions for going out on morning alms-round and stopping for tea and convivial chat. One of our regular stops was with Canon Horrocks and his wife. As with Tan Chandapalo, Canon Horrocks originated from Yorkshire, and it appeared he and his wife had moved to Devon when he retired. Another regular stop was at a New Age community called Monkton Wylde. The group of approximately ten residents always welcomed us warmly and often offered food that was freshly picked from their impressive vegetable garden into our alms-bowls. Several of the community members attended our Thursday evening meetings.

Once a week we would walk down the hill to the village of Axminster. It was a reasonably long walk and by the time we were in the middle of the town, I welcomed the opportunity to sit for a while in the Minster. It was in this Minster that

during one period, possibly it was Lent, the vicar organised a silent group sitting session. This was something we felt we could participate in, and it was here that we first came in contact with Harry and Mac. From then on our weekly alms-round to Axminster always included a stop-off at their home with Harry's mother participating in the offering of alms-food. Harry and Mac eventually moved away from Devon up to Southampton, and became frequent visitors and supporters of Chithurst.

It was around this time I heard that my good friend Mason Hamilton (ex-Nehn Dhamiko, Tan Jotiko/ Bill Hamilton) and his wife had been killed in a motor accident in the U.S.; their baby daughter, Metta, survived the crash. Obviously nobody saw that coming. Even though the Dhamma teachings tell us that all things are impermanent, much of the time we behave as if things are permanent. When something like this happens, it can help us see how deep our refuge in Dhamma truly is.

After a year, Tan Chandapalo returned to Chithurst and was replaced by another young monk, Tan Dhammapalo, and two new anagarikas. Tan Dhammapalo was soon replaced by Tan Nyanaviro.

It was during my second year at the Devon Vihara that I received word that Ajahn Sumedho had scheduled me to lead a lay retreat in Switzerland. One of the new anagarikas, Jurgen, whom I had known as a baker of bread in Brighton, was to accompany me. Since I had never visited the continent before, I asked if we could travel to and from Switzerland

by train. Some of the strongest impressions I have of that trip are the smell of chocolate wafting into our carriage as the train waited at the station in Brussels, and the smell of cow manure that was spread on the fields around the Stafelalp retreat facility.

As for the retreat itself, that was a combination of enthusiasm and anxiety. The dedication and discipline of the Swiss retreatants were inspiring and energizing. However, nobody had ever offered me any guidance regarding leading a meditation retreat: what might be helpful to bear in mind and what would be good to watch out for; it was a case of sink or swim. Fortunately I found I was able to swim, though these days I make a point, before and after sending a junior monk out to give teachings, to check in with him and make sure he feels supported. For most people, public speaking can be nerve-racking, and if the subject matter is the most precious aspect of our lives, our spiritual commitment, it can be terrifyingly difficult.

Around the same time that we moved to start the Devon Vihara at Raymond's Hill, a group of committed Buddhist laypeople took up residence in a wing of a building known as Sharpham House,⁵⁴ near Totnes. Some of this group were associated with the community of the Insight Meditation Society, near Boston, Massachusetts, U.S. There was already a meditation group in Totnes which I regularly visited, and I expect it was through them that we met the Sharpham House folk.

As far as I could tell, it was thanks to the largesse of Maurice and Ruth Ash that a large portion of this grand villa was made available for Dhamma-related activities. The charming grounds, which included a sculpture by Henry Moore, were the location for several ‘Dhamma picnics’. Besides being an opportunity to simply enjoy each others’ company, these occasions meant that members of the different schools of Buddhism could meet and discuss shared concerns.

One of the things that contact with the Sharpham group brought into focus for me was the nourishment that our community derived from lineage. I confess that by that time, I might have started to take for granted the benefits that come from being part of a long-established community. At least one person in that group living in Sharpham House shared with me their sense of uncertainty about the future of their community. The fact that this caught my attention suggests that this was not something I had even considered. The sangha had been around for such a long time, like a great river that had flowed along the same course for millennia; I saw our little group of *samanas* at Chithurst and at the Devon Vihara, as followers of the Buddha just joining in with the flow. What the future might hold for us was not something that concerned me.

As things turned out, a few years later, when seven Western abbots of our various monasteries all disrobed within a period of five years, our community did change size and shape, even if it didn’t necessarily change direction. We had issues that we needed to deal with, some of which members of secular

Buddhist groups perhaps didn't have to worry about. They had certain advantages that we lacked. For instance, they were sometimes more skilled in dealing with psychological and relational matters. Often they were better informed when it came to discussing issues around authority structures and projection. At that stage we didn't even have a shared vocabulary with which to engage each other so as to be able to discuss the tricky dynamics that inevitably occur within communities.

Eventually, if I understand correctly, out of the people associated with that group residing at Sharpham House, grew the development of a retreat facility, on that same property, known these days as The Barn.⁵⁵ Some of the same group were also involved in the purchase of an old Christian nunnery, the other side of Totnes, which was to be developed into the large retreat facility called Gaia House.⁵⁶

There were other groups we visited in Devon. Perhaps the best established was the one in Plymouth. One of the leading members of that group, a Sri Lankan woman called Sushila Jayaweera, became a long term friend of our sangha. Later, along with her husband and two children, she relocated to Middlesbrough in North Yorkshire, and was a regular visitor at Harnham Monastery. Sushila told me that she hadn't been particularly involved with the Buddhist teachings until, in this country, she came across translations of talks by Tan Ajahn Chah. These teachings and her committed formal meditation practice sustained her through a long period of cancer. On one of the final occasions that I visited

her in hospital, I recall how she was more concerned with making sure her husband had provided the monks with suitable refreshments. Of course we were not interested in refreshments but that was characteristic of the selflessness and strength of Sushila. Spending time with her during her final days, gave me insight into how it is possible to die beautifully. It was a great privilege to know her.

We received our midday meal at the Jayaweera family house in Plymouth on the day that Tan Nyanaviro and I started our walk along the south Devon coast. Also accompanying us was anagarika Jurgen. Some months later, Jurgen would go on to take monks' Precepts, and was given the name Khemasiri Bhikkhu. He eventually spent several years as abbot of Dhammapala Buddhistisches Kloster⁵⁷ in Switzerland. In those days my knees were still up to what turned out to be a very demanding hike; even without backpacks it would have been a workout.

Totally unexpectedly, one day back at the Devon Vihara, I found myself pondering the fact that in no time at all everybody I knew would be dead. Within perhaps a hundred years, nobody who I knew now would still be here. That is amazing! At least it struck me so at the time. Indeed, reflecting on it now can still trigger a sense of alertness. In a hundred and twenty years, nobody alive on planet earth now will still be here. I think it is safe to assume that everyone will be dead and gone. It also struck me as very interesting that it felt so good to be thinking about it. This wasn't anything to do with wishing myself or anyone else to be dead. Upon

investigation it occurred to me that the good feeling arose out of ceasing from telling myself lies. Maintaining our habits of denial consumes a huge amount of energy. Nothing could be more certain than the fact that we are going to die one day. Every person who has ever been born has died. So it will happen. Then why do we deny it? And herein lies the reason for the Buddha's encouragement to his disciples to regularly reflect on death.⁵⁸ Hence too, the recitation we perform as part of our Morning Puja: *I am of the nature to grow old; I am of the nature to sicken; I am of the nature to die.* We are working on dispelling the myths which we have been conditioned to believe. I was aged about thirty-three at the time, and happy to find I could be a little bit more honest about life, and death.

During a period when I was staying at Douglas and Margaret Jones' place, possibly while leading a retreat in their converted milking shed, I came across a book of transcribed and translated teachings by Sri Ramana Maharshi.⁵⁹ I am not sure whether I ever discussed that book with my hosts but I do recall how glad I felt to find yet another endorsement of the path of enquiring into 'who'. The first time that approach to practice had occurred to me was on retreat near Nimbin with Ajahn Khantipalo. The second time was in Thailand, when someone related to me an exchange between Ajahn Fun and his teacher Tan Ajahn Mun. Apparently Ajahn Fun had been struggling with fear in his practice, and approached his teacher for advice. Having listened to Ajahn Fun, Ajahn Mun asked him, 'Who is it that is afraid?' The third occasion of

coming across an affirmation of this avenue of enquiry, was in the translated teaching by the Chinese Master Hsu Yun, in the books by Charles Luk that Ajahn Sumedho had suggested I might read. Thank you, Sri Ramana Maharshi, and Douglas and Margaret.

It was around the same time I came across a description of what had happened in a monastery in Britain some hundreds of years earlier when a Christian abbot required that the monks learn to chant in a new style. Records show that this didn't go down very well – to the extent that some of the monks simply refused to follow the orders they had been given. That had the regrettable consequences of archers being sent into the abbey (I forget whether it was the King or the abbot who sent them in) and one by one the monks were shot. The coincidence of reading this description and my receiving news that at Amaravati and Chithurst a new chanting style had been introduced, was fortunate. I was, and still am, very fond of our chanting when it is done well. During my period as a monk when I lived in Wat Boworn, I became used to participating in beautiful chanting. This process of reinterpreting our chanting had happened without my having been consulted, which, even without hearing the new interpretation would have been enough to unsettle me. Thankfully, that little lesson in British history helped prevent me from making a problem out of what was really not a big deal. If I didn't like the new style of chanting, that would only be a problem if I made it one. That was helpful to reflect on.

After a little over two years at the Devon Vihara, my friend Tan Kittisaro was sent down to replace Tan Nyanaviro. A few months later, in 1985, I returned to live at Chithurst. Shortly after that the trustees sold the property at Raymond's Hill and the sangha moved to Hartridge, near Honiton; the new place was named Hartridge Buddhist Monastery.⁶⁰

INTEGRATION

6.1 RETURNING TO CHITHURST

During my time down in Devon, Ajahn Sumedho and a substantial portion of the sangha had moved to live near Hemel Hempstead, north of London, where they were engaged in building a new monastery, to be called Amaravati.⁶¹ The move came about because of the significant increased activity at Chithurst, including growth within the nuns' community. After considerable discussion a decision was made to find another place that would not only accommodate an increasing number of resident sangha members, but could also serve as a facility that provided resident retreats for laypeople. Because of planning restrictions imposed on the Chithurst property, retreats for large numbers of lay guests were never going to be possible. Hiring conference centres always felt like a bit of a compromise. It would have been alright to continue hiring conference centres, and in some ways it might have been more convenient; however, given the need to expand anyway, finding a much larger property seemed sensible.

Initially, after Ajahn Sumedho left, Ajahn Tiradhammo led the community at Chithurst; after about six months, Ajahn

Anando, who had been living in Harnham, came back to take over. For most of the year in those days there was a small community of nuns also resident at Chithurst, in the cottage next to Hammer Wood, but during the Rains Retreat they were all together at Amaravati.

As the years passed, more options for spiritual development were opening up throughout Britain, and in presumably the Western world. Teachers within the Burmese tradition of U Ba Khin already had centres established in Britain before we arrived. More yoga groups and meditation groups seemed to be opening up all the time. Just a few miles away was Brockwood Park, the Krishnamurti Centre. Still there seemed to be a steady stream of guests passing through Chithurst, with some asking to stay and take up monastic training. The monastery appeared to be serving a particular need.

One of those visitors, in 1986, was Andrew Walker. Having recently completed a degree in Comparative Religion at the university at Bristol, he was driving back to his parents' place up in Yorkshire. He took the opportunity to stay for three nights at the monastery, and, in conversation with me, mentioned he was interested in taking up the anagarika training. About two years later, in April 1988, he requested the eight precepts of an anagarika at Amaravati. These days, as Ajahn Puñño, he is a valued member and dear personal friend, living as part of the sangha here at Harnham.

Also during that period while I had been in Devon, Ajahn Viradhammo had moved to New Zealand and was busy building Bodhinyanarama Monastery in Stokes Valley, just

north of Wellington; Ajahn Tiradhammo had moved to Harnham, in Northumberland. Towards the end of 1986, Ajahn Sumedho invited Ajahn Anando to accompany him on an overseas teaching tour which would include the U.S. and New Zealand. That meant I was left to lead the sangha at Chithurst during the Winter Retreat of 1987. It surprises me now, when I think back about that period, that I was not more intimidated by such a turn of events. We were still in a pioneer phase of development and there was a lot that kept changing. I can't say I felt particularly confident, but neither was I terribly daunted. In some ways the whole thing felt like a shared adventure. To call what we were doing an experiment feels like it trivializes the intense effort people were making. It was a daring exploration of the unknown inner worlds in an increasingly secular society.

During the Rains Retreat of the previous year, Ajahn Anando and I had spoken about the possibility of asking Ajahn Sumedho to change my name. I had never found the name that I had been given back in 1976, 'Tan Uppanno', at all inspiring; it literally means 'manifest' or 'arisen'. Compared with names such as Tan Anando, 'the great blissful one' or Tan Sucitto, 'the beautiful-hearted one', I felt just a little hard done by. Besides, it also sounded weird. I mentioned to Ajahn Anando that one of the other monks who took Precepts at the same time as I did, Tan Puriso, had once asked Tan Ajahn Chah about receiving a new name. His name, Puriso, translated as 'man'. Apparently Tan Ajahn Chah had said something like, *come and see me again when*

you have been a monk for ten years. By 1987 I had been a monk for ten Rains Retreats. Also there had recently been a notable improvement in my health, and somewhere I had read, or heard that in certain Buddhist cultures, under such circumstances, people might take on a new name. In the end, nothing came out of those discussions since, as far as I recall, neither of us was minded to approach Ajahn Sumedho about it.

Hence it came as a surprise when, part way through that Winter Retreat, I received a card from Ajahn Anando, who was with Ajahn Sumedho somewhere in the U.S. He explained that Ajahn Sumedho happened to mention to him that he wanted to do something supportive for Tan Uppanno. That gave Ajahn Anando an opening to tell him that I would be grateful for a new name. We had already discussed a few possibilities which Ajahn Anando was able to remember, so Ajahn Sumedho selected the name Munindo. It was also during that Winter Retreat that the sangha of monks at Chithurst presented me with a new robe which they had sewn.

Improved health, receiving a new name and a new robe, all gave me strength; and I needed it. Most of the sangha members there at the time were very new to the training, and that called for a certain quality of attention. And leading a two-month long meditation retreat wasn't the only thing happening; as I mentioned, there was a lot that was changing. Along with the relocation of many community members to Amaravati, much of the management had gone too. It was

taking time to get things running smoothly. I remember how during that retreat we received notification that various bills, including the telephone, were not being paid (by the administrator now located at Amaravati). Also around that time, one of the leaders of the community of lay supporters was manoeuvring to establish an alternative structure to the English Sangha Trust. Looking back now, such events appear to be not such a big issue; however at the time they did contribute to a perception of pressure. It would still be many years before there was the option of setting up a Skype call with a senior sangha friend, who was teaching in San Francisco and benefitting from their counsel.

As it happened, not only did we survive, but lessons were learned, and now I can appreciate them. It is bound to happen over and over again on this spiritual journey, that practice will take us to the point where it all feels too much. We have to get used to it, and stop resisting. Saying ‘it shouldn’t be this way’ is not what Tan Ajahn Chah taught. Rather, we need to learn how to turn perceptions of outer pressure into inner strength and increased competence.

After Ajahn Anando returned, he, Tan Vajiro and myself settled into a rhythm whereby the three of us took turns in visiting and giving talks at various meditation groups that had become associated with the monastery. Sometimes this meant going by public transport up to London; at other times a lay friend of the monastery would drive us down to the south-coast; Brighton or Southampton. It might have been because of one of those teaching trips that I found

myself in London on that fateful night in October 1987, when a powerful hurricane tore through southern England. According to a BBC article,⁶² eighteen people were killed in that storm. A couple of days after the storm, when it came to trying to get transport back to West Sussex, we found most of the routes were blocked. A large number of trees had come down, resulting in a great deal of damage. Eventually I think I managed to get a train or bus, via Heathrow, down to Southampton, where a supporter, who was a member of the Laotian community there, picked me up and drove me to Chithurst. From the road approaching the monastery we could see that the massive Cedar tree, which had once stood close to the main house, was no longer there. The question was, which way had it fallen. Fortunately, it had fallen away from the house. Had it gone in the opposite direction it could have taken out at least half of the house, and possibly have caused serious injury or even death.

On the positive side, timber from that cedar tree was milled and stored, and eventually used to construct desktops and surfaces in the old granary when it was converted into the abbot's residence. Perhaps even more positively, a good number of the oak trees that had come down in Hammer Wood were milled, dried, and, a few years later, sent to Harnham to form the floor of their new Dhamma Hall. I expect that all happened because of Ajahn Anando's considerable generosity. There is no doubt that the Harnham sangha were very grateful. Such beautiful thick oak planks would have cost a fortune to purchase.



6.2 VENERABLE VENERABLES

Earlier I mentioned that, during the period of my first visit back to New Zealand after having left Thailand, it quickly became evident that we were faced with the task of not just translating texts, but also of translating traditions. In the meditation monasteries in North East Thailand, there was more or less one way of doing things which we simply adopted, or at least tried hard to adopt; sometimes we didn't quite succeed, to the amusement of our hosts. Now, in this new context, we were discovering that we had to learn how to accord with the ways things were done in Bangkok, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Burma, and of course, Britain. Buddhism had been here for a significant period of time⁶³ and British Buddhists already had certain assumptions and expectations.

Occasionally, as mentioned earlier, during those initial years at Chithurst, someone would suggest that it was time to start thinking about changing this or that way of doing things. Ajahn Sumedho was slow to engage such proposals, and appeared to derive strength from his commitment to

honouring the way of doing things that we had been taught during those formative years in Thailand.

One issue, though, that really did capture the interest of most of us, was the possibility of changing the dates for the period of the annual Rains Retreat. In India two and a half thousand years ago, the Buddha instructed the sangha that they should cease from wandering during the three months of the monsoon season; this roughly coincides these days with July, August and September. Inconsiderate monks had caused annoyance to the laypeople by trampling their paddy fields, and besides, a regular period each year of more focussed formal practice was useful. In Britain, however, that period of the year was when the weather was mild and actually more suitable for travelling around. It was also a better time of year for doing outdoor maintenance work; it was not an ideal time for formal retreating. Try as they might, however, those with a good understanding of the monastic code of discipline were not able to find any suitable way of making an adjustment; the *Vinaya* simply didn't allow for it. So it was accepted that we would find ways to live with that structure as it was.

Tempering our excessive eagerness to change structures to suit our preferences is no different from restraining the hyperactive mind in meditation. If we call it a problem, then we have to deal with the consequences of having created a problem. In reality there are no problems. In reality there are difficulties, pain and irritation, but problems are something extra we create out of the resistance which is an expression of unawareness.

The benefits that stem from living in harmonious community are considerable and it behoves us to regularly reflect on that. Community is the container. Because of that container, the heat and pressure that inevitably builds up as we progress in spiritual practice, is made more manageable. It is not insignificant that the Buddha identified community (sangha) as one of the Three Refuges. The consequences of messing with community structures might not always be obvious, and by the time we do come around to seeing any consequences, it could be too late, as the cohesive element of concord might already have been lost. Sometimes I ponder on the process of a caterpillar transforming into a butterfly, and the function of the chrysalis. The caterpillar is obvious and we are fascinated looking at it; the butterfly is obvious and beautiful; but how much value do we place on that which serves as the 'container' during that process of transformation? The container deserves a lot of care and attention.

It was a boon in those early years to often receive visits from senior sangha members. Sometimes without warning, an elder from Sri Lanka or Burma might turn up. Presumably they wanted to see what these Westerners were doing; and, as far as I recall, it was always the case that they wanted to be helpful.

Their sage advice gave us confidence and, I think it is true enough to say, moderated to some degree our excessive enthusiasm. Whatever clever ideas we might have about *Dhamma-Vinaya*, or insights we thought we had experienced, there is no substitute for the benefit that comes from years of experience. There is a unique beauty to be found in maturity.

Venerable Ananda Maitreya⁶⁴ from Sri Lanka visited us several times over the years. There is one particularly lovely memory I have of an occasion when he was staying and the Venerable Taungpulu Sayadaw⁶⁵ from Burma arrived. Both were in their nineties at the time, I believe, and it was a joy to witness the interaction between these two elders. It is customary, when monks meet each other for the first time, that they respectfully enquire as to which year they had taken up the monks' Precepts. Although Ven. Ananda Maitreya knew many languages, Burmese was not one of them; the only language they had in common was Pali. It then transpired that they had both taken up the training in the same year, so the conversation proceeded to which month. Once that was established, the junior of the two bowed to the senior. Besides the beauty that can come with maturity, there is also the admiration one feels on witnessing such commitment and endurance. This is the beauty of virtue. In Dhammapada verse 55 the Buddha comments,

*The fragrance of virtue surpasses by far
the fragrance of flowers or sandalwood.*

Possibly due to the way some of the early translators of the traditional Theravada Buddhist texts rendered the Pali word *Bhante*, these days even very junior Buddhist monks are addressed as Venerable. I have occasionally attempted to dissuade people from using the word venerable in that way, but with little success. In my opinion it would be good if the word could be reserved for actually venerable Venerables.

When it came to the community feeling ready to establish a *sima* boundary⁶⁶ at Chithurst, we had anticipated it would require a lot of planning and preparation; we hoped that eventually we would be able to create one out in the Hammer Wood. For Ven. Ananda Maitreya, who had probably been involved in setting up many over the years, there was nothing to it. In no time at all, we were out on the old croquet lawn next to Chithurst House, going through the traditional chanting: sorting out the possibility that there could have been an old *sima* boundary there before (from who knows when), and then culminating in the formal procedure of declaring a new one. Once this was properly established, the sangha at Chithurst was rightly prepared to conduct Precept ceremonies. Indeed, for many years after that, this was the place where all such ceremonies happened.

Bhante Dhammawara⁶⁷ from Cambodia was another venerable Elder who stayed with us a number of times in those early years. A good lay friend of the sangha, who moved to live near the monastery, had spent time training as a monk under Bhante Dhammawara in India. From him I later learnt that Bhante became a monk around the age of thirty-five after World War One had ended. Previously he had served as a district governor and had a wife and a child. He lived as a monk for many years in India, and a lot of his time was spent setting up and running a natural health clinic. The first clinic was built in Northern India. After Partition,⁶⁸ it was deemed more suitable that he move to Delhi where, with the help of Mrs Rameshwari Nehru, the wife of Mr Brij Lal Nehru who was first cousin of then Prime Minister,

Mr Jawahar Lal Nehru,⁶⁹ he set up a temple and another clinic. During his time staying with us at Chithurst, Bhante instructed community members in ways of using colour for healing. Often this involved drinking water that had been stored in coloured glass bottles. For several years afterwards it was normal to come across coloured glass bottles perched on windowsills around the monastery. In fact Bhante has a significant repertoire of various skills that he had developed and used over the years running those clinics in India.

Bhante Dhammawara was staying with us on the occasion that the Ven. Maha Ghosananda⁷⁰ came to visit. Also from Cambodia, Ven. Maha Ghosananda had previously been the Supreme Patriarch in that country and was renowned for his peace marches. When Ven. Maha Ghosananda passed away in 2007, he was ninety-three years old. When Bhante Dhammawara passed away in 1999, he was one hundred and ten.

The thing I happily remember about a visit by the Venerable Piyadassi Thera was a comment he made during a talk he offered in which he summarized practice by saying, 'Just practise the Dhamma, leave the rest up to kamma'. So simple that one might overlook its profundity. We easily make practice complicated because of a lack of maturity in mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection. Hearing these reminders from such well-practised monks was significant.

There were also a number of inspiring female Dhamma teachers who visited. During my time in Devon, Ajahn Sumedho had invited Dr. Irmgard Schloegl to use the gardens

at Chithurst for her ordination. A retinue of elders came over from Japan and performed the ceremony according to their Rinzai Zen tradition, and Dr. Irmgard Schloegl took on the name Myokyo-Ni.

On one evening I recall seeing Ayya Khema⁷¹ at puja sitting in the midst of our Siladhara community. I think our paths might have crossed some years earlier in Bangkok when she was still Ilsa Liedermann. I do recall meeting her husband from back then, Gert Liedermann, who spent time with us at Wat Pah Nanachat. He was responsible for introducing the community to foot massage. Ilsa and Gert had a property near Obi Obi in Queensland, Australia, where they hosted Ajahn Khantipalo. Later on that property was sold and another property in New South Wales was purchased, eventually to be known as Wat Buddha Dhamma, where these days Ajahn Tiradhammo is living. Ayya Khema went on to request Bhikshuni Precepts within the Mahayana tradition and settled back in Germany, where she had been born, establishing a centre called Buddha Haus.⁷²

Ruth Denison⁷³ also visited Chithurst in the early days. She was one of the formally appointed teachers within the U Ba Khin meditation tradition. As I recall, she stayed only briefly, but I was pleased some years later to have a chance to visit her place, Dhamma Dena Vipassana Center, out in the desert near Joshua Tree National Monument.⁷⁴

While reflecting on visits from venerable elders, I also want to fast-forward a few years and mention the visit in 1990 from Master Hsuan Hua. He brought with him a large group of his

monks and nuns from The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas⁷⁵ in California. The venerable Master must have already been very advanced in years, but his vitality was impressive, also his generosity. His style of responding to questions was certainly very direct. When one of our young monks who, at the time, was struggling in his practice, asked a question hoping for some encouragement, Master Hua told him that practice was like a tiger and it would eat you up. On another occasion, when some of his monks and nuns asked if they could learn our *paritta* style of chanting, he scolded them saying they were only interested in it because of the appealing tune, not because of the Dharma content.

6.3

CREATIVE VIGILANCE

As a gift on my birthday, I think in 1987, Ajahn Anando generously arranged for me to be able to visit family and friends in New Zealand. At the time I was presented with the card, which had the gift inside it, I was somewhat confused, and maybe wasn't even sure it was for real. I had not seen that coming. Ajahn Anando was very thoughtful like that. Exceptional generosity on the part of many lay friends and supporters of the sangha over the years meant that that was just the first of several trips back to New Zealand. The same generosity by supporters extended to financial gifts being given to my parents, since some of the supporters knew that as monks we aren't able to make such gestures.

It might have been on that first trip back that I met up with an ex-monk friend, Mark Overton. Some years earlier, after finishing his medical training, Mark had heard Ajahn Sumedho speak during one of his visits to New Zealand. This inspired him to travel to Thailand where, eventually, he took up the monks' Precepts and trained under Ajahn Pasanno at Wat Pah Nanachat. He then went on to spend a brief

period of time training at Amaravati, before disrobing and once again practising medicine. I think it was on that trip that Mark and I went hiking together (called 'tramping' in New Zealand) in the stunningly beautiful North West Nelson Forest Park. On another one of those occasions when he and I were hiking in New Zealand, I recall how we had climbed a peak in the Southern Alps, I think it was Mt Sefton; I took a refreshing dip in a glacial lake at the summit before we walked back down again, and, on the same day, drove out to one of the many lovely beaches on the coast of the South Island. I knew the South Island of New Zealand was beautiful, but now I was seeing it from a different perspective. At one point, as my eyes scanned the forest that stretched all the way to the mountains in the distance, I registered how refreshing it was to simply gaze upon the un-interfered-with. Thank you, Mark, and, again, thank you, New Zealand.

The following year I once more found myself in New Zealand, this time for a stay of about two months, most of which was to be spent at the Vihara in Auckland, on Harris Road. Part of my plan was to try and spend more time with my parents, who had moved to a retirement village near Orewa, just a few miles north of Auckland.

Early on during this period in New Zealand, I also took the opportunity to visit with my good friend Jutta in Palmerston North. It was noticeable on that visit that something had changed for her. Up until then, I don't remember her ever having shared much about the terrible suffering she had endured in Dresden, and throughout the Second World War,

but now she spoke more freely. She also shared with me how she had learnt a particular breathing technique which meant she no longer felt burdened by so much old pain.

It was inspiring to meet my friend in this new way and I was happy for her. Whatever spiritual techniques she had learned, or retreats she had been on, or psychotherapy she had undertaken – and there had been a lot – nothing had led to the integration she was seeking. This breathing technique seemed to be the medicine she needed. The technique that she was now working with appeared to be a gentler form of holotropic breathing as used by the Czech psychiatrist, Stanislav Grof.⁷⁶ Jutta had earlier tried the Grof approach and found it too invasive. Later, I believe, she spoke with me about how people sometimes use this, and similar breathing techniques such as rebirthing, in a goal-oriented way, and that she was not at all keen on that approach. Her way was not necessarily looking to relive the birth experience, or uncover past lives, it was much more here-and-now and, as far as I could see, more in harmony with dhamma practice. After hearing about the benefit she derived from this exercise, I was keen to try it out for myself and she kindly offered to teach me.

The subjective experience that this form of disciplined breathing precipitated in me defies description or explanation. Suffice it to say that this technique, which here I will refer to as ‘connected breathing’, along with a here-and-now, whole body-mind quality of awareness, brought an end to the

fourteen year long 'holding pattern' that I mentioned earlier began after my first vassa.

There are 'how-to' books that have been written on this subject, but I would very strongly advise against trying it out alone. An enormous amount of energy can be accessed and flood the body in exquisitely agreeable ways, but that same energy can put you in touch with pockets of old pain that you didn't know you had. The technique is designed to put you in touch with such pain, but if at the point of opening up to it, you re-enact the resistance which caused the pain to become stuck in the first place, you risk re-traumatizing yourself and, in the process, making your state of imbalance even worse. On the level of mind, we might like to think we can handle it; the same as when we are on retreat cultivating *metta* towards all beings, we might like to think that from now on we are going to always behave in a kind and caring manner towards absolutely everyone. But when we actually meet some of those beings, maybe we find our emotional reactions are not quite so kindly after all. So long as we are identified with our thinking, we cannot trust our mind.

This type of breath work can be very effective in putting us in touch with that which was previously out of reach. Somebody who has worked extensively with the technique themselves, could recognize, during a breathing session, signs that point to where and when old pain is ready to be received yet is still being resisted. Then, hopefully, they will be able to suggest, at just the right time, in the just right manner, a change in approach, or perhaps a change in the rhythm of breathing,

which will lead to a deep letting go of that resistance. Once such resistance is let go of, there is a chance we will have a much clearer sense of what our teachers mean when they tell us to be practising ‘in the body’. Also, we see more clearly the disastrous consequences of having betrayed ourselves in the first place by abandoning our bodily intelligence and taking refuge in thinking. I am not saying that everybody betrays themselves and becomes lost in their heads, but those who do, suffer a great deal because of it. In earlier times, the degree of dysfunction that many of us are defined by these days would have been seen as a form of madness. If we do find freedom from the madness of being disembodied, there will be much gratitude.

Back in Auckland at the Vihara, I was feeling grateful for the support of the Theravada Buddhist community, who had set up a rota of drivers that took turns in taking me out to see my parents and then bringing me back again. The same group took it upon themselves to make sure someone was always there each day to offer a meal. There was a tradition already established within their community whereby a good number of mostly Sri Lankans, Burmese, Malaysians and a few Kiwis, would meet for chanting and meditation each Sunday night. When there was a monk staying at the Vihara, the numbers swelled. The quality of their interest in Dhamma and the sincerity of their commitment to meditation and Dhamma practice in general, was truly impressive. These were not Buddhist-by-name only; they had a love for the Dhamma and genuinely wanted to make the most of their good fortune in

having an opportunity to practise it. Thinking about them now, I still find it heart-warming, and I am very grateful to have met them. In my experience, it is rare to find that quality of commitment. *Anumodana*.

Other than the visits to see my parents, the daily meal and the once-a-week pujas, my time was free, which meant I persevered with ‘the breathing exercises’. I looked forward to my sessions each day, in the same way I would look forward to food if I had been starving. It was as if seeds had been planted a long time ago, but had not had sufficient water or warmth for them to germinate. Now it felt as if many seeds were beginning to sprout. A new kind of hope began to emerge. Where I had felt deeply emotionally and energetically obstructed, I now felt there was great possibility. I didn’t know what those possibilities were, but, with here-and-now, whole body-mind awareness, that didn’t really matter. This kind of hope was not a naive longing, it was about being positively oriented towards the future in a way that generated energy, which was then available to investigate whatever was happening here and now.

Somebody set up a meeting for me one day to see a Christian monk who was living in Auckland. When we met, he struck me as a dedicated person with a strong sense of integrity. Some years prior, he had been working (as a nurse I think) in a hospice in Saigon that was part of the Mother Theresa’s community. During our conversation, he spoke about what he had witnessed in a number of the Vietnamese patients as they approached death. He told me that some of those

who came into the hospice professing to be Christians, had previously been Buddhists. He said that when the end came near, it wasn't to Jesus that they were praying; they reverted to their faith in Buddhism. What he seemed to be telling me was that, although these days I called myself a Buddhist, when it came to the crunch, I could expect to revert to Christianity. What was good about hearing that was that I didn't feel threatened. Maybe I was mistaken in what I understood him to be saying, and he was in fact paying a subtle compliment to Buddhism, but I don't think so. Feeling that my commitment to Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha was being challenged like that was helpful. What was about to happen, however, was even more challenging.

One of the Kiwi fellows who attended the Vihara from time to time, asked if I would be interested in spending a couple of days hiking along the coastal footpath just north of Auckland. I jumped at the invitation. We began at Piha⁷⁷ and walked south. I can't remember now, but I assume he had arranged for someone to pick us up at the exit point. The description that follows of what happened during that walk, is an edited extract from *Alert To The Needs Of The Journey*³² Chapter Two (p 15),

We had been hiking for several hours along the coastal footpath; the weather was hot, and since the beach below us was empty, it seemed fine to cool off in the water. What I didn't notice was that at the point where I chose to enter the water, the waves were not breaking. Had I been

better informed about such things, I might have known that the absence of white-water breakers was a sign that there was probably a hollow area in the sand beneath the surface of the water, creating a counter-current that would pull anyone that entered there out to sea; and being pulled out to sea is exactly what happened to me. My hiking companion was still standing on the shore, witnessing in desperation the situation that was unfolding. Many drownings result from just such situations, when a swimmer is unexpectedly caught in a rip current and reacts by struggling against it until exhaustion eventually takes over. Initially, I did struggle, trying to get back to the shore and out of the danger, doing what I was used to doing whenever I felt threatened: trying to save myself. But I realized quite quickly that no amount of fighting to overcome the current was going to work; it was far too powerful. What did work, thankfully, was surrendering; I flipped over onto my back and floated: no more fighting, but simply allowing the current to carry me.

I spontaneously remembered the connected breathing; instead of struggling, there was deep trusting and a whole-body sense of surrendering habitual controlling. I found myself drifting out to sea, floating and breathing. My head was filled with powerful conflicting thoughts and images: of being eaten by sharks somewhere between Piha and Sydney; of my parents being upset on hearing that their son had drowned; of Ajahn Sumedho being annoyed with me for my heedlessness. But at one point,

associated with the effort to keep floating, trusting and breathing, came the powerful thought, 'Let the Buddha take over': my translation of *Buddham saranam gacchami* – 'I go for refuge to the Buddha'. It felt like a battle was going on within me, between, on the one hand, strong inclinations towards trying to save myself, and on the other, an impulse towards trusting. The thought that I mustn't give up the struggle to save myself was fuelled by guilt and distrust, and when I engaged it, the rhythm of the breathing became interrupted and my body began to sink. When there was letting go of the contraction of fear and trusting again, the body felt supported and I returned to floating. There was no doubt about the intensity of fear coursing through my body; I definitely did not know that I was going to be OK. At times it really did look like I might not be. Thankfully, the intimidation of the impulse to control was outshone by the impulse to surrender into the breathing, to trusting, to releasing out of the struggle to save myself.

As it happened, the current did drag me out to sea some distance, but then carried me down the coast and out of the dangerous area, and eventually the waves brought me safely ashore. Once I was standing on the beach again I was elated: not just because I was now safe, but because I felt I had been given the gift of affirmation of practice. In a modest but significant way, it felt emblematic of what it meant when the Buddha conquered *Mara*.

Back at the Vihara, during the Sunday night Dhamma talk, I chose to speak about my joy at receiving such an affirmation. I might have even included some comments about what the Christian monk had suggested would happen when it came to the crunch. Unfortunately, not everyone picked up on my sense of gladness, and instead became upset at the thought of nearly losing their monk. Later, when I considered what had happened, I realized that talking about that experience in that context was not at all clever. In fact, swimming in a place that is renowned for rip currents, was also not at all clever; it was completely foolish. The good friends and supporters at the Vihara forgave me quite quickly and for the remainder of my time in New Zealand there were no more such escapades.

The impact that the connected breathing was having on me was profound. It did worry me somewhat, since the energy involved was at times so dramatic. I didn't want to start talking about it with everyone; it was too important. Also, in monasteries, such bits of news sometimes lead to ridicule or to becoming the latest fad. It wasn't that I felt precious about this technique, I just wanted time to see how it would develop. Also I suspected I would sound evangelical if I began to speak about it at that stage. This was the most significant aid for integration that I had come across. I realized, though, that in its power lay its danger. Perhaps I would lose perspective and go crazy. So I decided to let two people that I trusted know about it, and then wait one year to see how it settled. One person I confided in was Ajahn Viradhammo, the Canadian abbot of Bodhinyanarama

Monastery, near Wellington; I either wrote to him or spoke with him on the phone. The other person was Tan Kittisaro, and I waited until I was back in the UK before telling him. Obviously both of them respected my wish for discretion, even if they couldn't directly relate to my experience.

It might also have been during this period of staying at the Auckland Vihara that a somewhat rough and ready Kiwi fellow called Blue came to see me. He was already familiar with our tradition, and was hoping I would accept an invitation to lead a meditation retreat on his property out on Great Barrier Island. He offered to make all the necessary arrangements, so I agreed. Great Barrier Island is easily reached by ferry from Auckland, and when I arrived there, Blue was waiting to pick me up, on his quad bike. That was different. His house was only half built but the weather was mild and the group who had gathered for the retreat were friendly and interested. I suspect that already, by that stage, Blue was intent on taking up monastic training. Either way, it wasn't long before he joined the sangha at Bodhinyanarama and was given the name Kusalo Bhikkhu. From 2012 until now, Ajahn Kusalo has been the abbot of Bodhinyanarama Monastery.

When it came time to depart New Zealand and return to Britain, it was with even more inspiration and gratitude than before: inspiration born out of association with the fine group of supporters at the Auckland Vihara, and gratitude for this new skill to which I had been introduced. Besides the hope I mentioned above, there was a new quality of confidence, and an increased ability to trust and to feel

without being quite so defended, also a readiness to aspire. All of those qualities contributed to what these days I like to think of as a state of creative vigilance: creative, inasmuch as it is agile and interested in investigating conditions from different perspectives – not a fixed position or approach –and vigilant in the sense that it is a state of aliveness, alertness, and somewhat more ready to meet what life gives us. Perhaps in Pali it is akin to *saddha*.

6.4 OUR SPIRITUAL TOOLKIT

Arriving back at Chithurst I felt renewed and revitalised. From now on, my practice was more about working with a quality of feeling awareness, in touch with the body, a much broader perspective than viewing life from my head. (Of course I hadn't previously been aware of the degree to which I was identified with my thinking mind). It no longer mattered quite so much what the sensations were – gladness, sadness, joy or sorrow – the task was how to receive them, how to allow them. Gradually my ideas about what awakening meant were changing; now I was more interested in 'unobstructed receptivity of everything', or 'unobstructed relationship with everything'. The idea of striving towards some imagined experience in the future really made little sense to me. This didn't mean I abandoned all notions of a goal; it meant my relationship with those notions was changing.

It felt as if up until that point in time I had been listening to music with the bass turned down. Now the bass was turned way up! Aliveness. Instead of trying to be free from painful feelings such as anticipation, for instance, I was

now interested in how to feel whatever feeling I was feeling, without adding or taking anything away from it: learning what it meant to be *free to* feel that which I was feeling, rather than struggling to be *free from* certain feelings. The feeling of anticipation, for example, is just a feeling; but there is a space in which that feeling is arising and ceasing. The feeling is not ultimate; there is also awareness of the feeling. Now I felt like I had a powerful new tool in my spiritual toolkit: embodied awareness.

This new tool didn't suddenly absolve me of the pain of guilt and self-doubt, however. There were still periods when I struggled with a sense that I was about to be overwhelmed by pain. Sometimes I would have to tell myself, 'Just because I feel bad, does not mean I am bad'. The bullies of guilt and self-doubt, along with many other apparent obstructions, didn't disappear, but there now seemed to be a chance that we could get to know each other.

As a craftsperson will have a variety of tools in their toolkit, so those committed to awakening require a variety of techniques and skills to deal with the many challenges he or she is going to encounter on their quest. Since everyone is different in temperament and talent, we need to equip ourselves according to our own conditioning. In my case, it became very apparent that I had been seriously out of touch with my body, so I needed skills that addressed that particular imbalance. The breathing discipline I learnt that year in New Zealand helped.

So, too, did frequent visits to see a Vietnamese acupuncturist in London, called Thong. That he was a Buddhist monk within the Mahayana tradition and a Tai Chi teacher were also significant. For a period during the Vietnam war he had been imprisoned, as a monk. After having been released from prison he disrobed, and, before leaving Vietnam to come to Britain, married and had a family. Once his family had grown up, he again requested the monks' Precepts. By that time Thong already had an acupuncture clinic established in London and was well-known as a skilled Tai Chi teacher. After many years, I continue to practise the Qigong form that he taught me. And I believe I continue to benefit from the many sessions of acupuncture and the traditional Chinese herbal remedies that he kindly offered me.

Whatever understanding of the Buddha's teachings we might have, if our body is not in harmony, then life will be a struggle. Maybe some of those struggles are kammic and unavoidable, but perhaps some of them are not necessary.

In Theravada Buddhism it is taught that there are three types of illness: one from which you will recover whether or not you take any remedy; another from which you will recover if you take an appropriate remedy, and from which you won't recover if you don't take the remedy; and the third, where whether you take any remedy or not makes no difference, since the illness is a result of kamma. (For a more literally accurate interpretation of what the Buddha said, see Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Anguttara Nikaya – *The Numerical Discourses*, Somerville, Wisdom Publications,

MA, USA, 2012, Book of Threes, 'Patients', page 217). Thank you, Thong, for those treatments, and remedies; for teaching me the Qigong form; also for your strength and gentleness.

Somewhere I heard or read that, within certain schools of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, they won't even introduce you to meditation practice until you have completed one hundred thousand prostrations. It makes sense to me now why, in Zen Buddhism, so much attention is paid to the sitting posture during meditation; if you begin to droop it could result in your receiving a wack. When Tan Ajahn Chah returned from a visit to America, he spoke enthusiastically about stories he had heard of the Chinese Patriarch monk Venerable Bodhidharma. Tan Ajahn Chah was impressed by how, if Ven. Bodhidharma asked you a question and you answered it wrongly, you received a whack; if you answered it correctly, you received a whack; if you didn't answer it at all, you received a whack. 'As for us Theravadins', Tan Ajahn Chah said, 'we just carry on talking about Dhamma, saying it is like this and it's like that, and so on.' Tan Ajahn Chah also wanted us to get out of the head and come back into the body.

At one point, I think it was in 1989, Ajahn Sumedho received word that Tan Ajahn Chah appeared to be dying, and so he quickly departed for Thailand. As it turned out, it wasn't until January 1992 that Tan Ajahn Chah eventually passed away. Just before leaving us on that occasion, however, Ajahn Sumedho had turned to me and, almost as a passing comment, said that he wanted me to be his substitute at a

one-day seminar due to take place at the Buddhist Society in Eccleston Square, London. The theme for the day was, 'Several Schools, One Way'. By then I should have been used to how Ajahn Sumedho would occasionally throw a googly, not just to me, but to anyone in the community. I have never figured out whether he did that sort of thing as a strategy to test our agility, or if perhaps he wasn't even aware that he was doing it. Personally, I wouldn't have expected a relatively inexperienced monk like me to be standing in for someone of Ajahn Sumedho's stature on such a public platform – at least not without some sort of a discussion. An august line-up of very senior teachers had been planned, including Ven. Myokyo-Ni representing the Zen tradition, a famous Rinpoche for the Tibetans, and a well known elder from the Pure Land School. This was an invitation that did intimidate me.

On the day of the seminar, I discovered that Ven. Myokyo-Ni was to speak first and then I was to follow. Ven. Myokyo-Ni gave an inspiring talk, as always, but all I can recall now was that it was on the Four Noble Truths. From other conversations I have had with her, I know she never wanted to be described as a Zen practitioner – rather she insisted that she was a Zen Buddhist practitioner. Before being inspired by Christmas Humphreys and then following Japanese Zen Buddhism, she was already studying Theravada Buddhist teachings, and always maintained that having a good grounding in the original teachings was essential. That was all well and good, of course, but on the occasion of that Several

Schools, One Way seminar, what was there left for me to talk about. One of the things I can still remember about my contribution on the day, was that when they pinned a microphone onto my robe at chest level, I imagined it was going to amplify the sound of my heart pounding.

During an interval between the talks, Ven. Myokyo-Ni and I went outside for a walk by the Square. I took the opportunity to ask for her thoughts on the situation in which we found ourselves: practising traditional forms of Buddhism in the West, in an environment that was not always welcoming or supportive. She turned and focused her gaze on me and said, ‘Venerable, when you are doing the real practice, it can feel like too much, too soon!’ Thank you again, Ven. Myokyo-Ni.

On another occasion when Ajahn Sumedho asked me to accompany him to the Buddhist Society, (not just to deputize for him), his talk had to be interrupted because there was a distracting amount of smoke rising up from behind where he was seated. As usual, he was sitting on a zafu in front of the shrine in the main meeting room of the Society. There was no mistaking it being smoke, and it wasn’t a small amount which could have come from the sticks of incense. What had happened, it seemed, was that when he had lit the candles and incense as a preliminary to the occasion, a spark must have dropped onto his zafu, igniting it. Somebody helpfully removed the smoking zafu and the talk continued. Interestingly, quite a long time afterwards, when we went to leave the Society buildings, we found a bright glowing orb sitting on the pavement outside the front door. That helped

me appreciate why kapok filled zafus, although preferable to sitting on a polyester-filled one, are considered a fire hazard; once they start burning it is difficult to put them out.

6.5 ORDEAL IN THE ATTIC

In part because of the confidence that had arisen from being more in touch with my body, and because of the sense of hope that the breathing exercise had given me, when we were preparing for the 1990 Winter Retreat at Chithurst, I asked Ajahn Anando if I could determine to spend the two months in solitude. I was interested to see what the increased intensity would bring up. There were other motivations as well, but having a chance to meet myself in solitude was appealing. It turned out that I overreached with that determination.

The room I was living in was in the attic, and the floor space was roughly three by four metres (there were also two sizable raised platforms). I covered the windows with tracing paper so light could come in but I couldn't see out. The idea behind that was to intentionally frustrate any impulses to distract myself from what was going on inside of me. Somebody left food outside my door each day, and during the community's morning chanting period, I would take my slop bucket down and empty it in the bathroom. Other than that, the only time

I left the room in those two months was to participate in the fortnightly recitation of the Rule.

Very soon after the retreat began, I was assailed by intense anxiety. Much of the following two months was spent doing whatever it took to survive the onslaught of fear and dread. I find it impossible to compare the horror I endured during those two months with what had occurred at Wat Hin Maak Peng in my first Rains Retreat, since somehow I was not the same person. I had accumulated many experiences over the approximately sixteen years since then, and acquired new skills. None of those skills, however, protected me from having to go through what turned out to be another agonizing ordeal.

At one point during the retreat a severe storm struck and, as a result of my confusion, I was consumed by feelings of fear that I personally had caused the storm. On this occasion I broke my silence to enquire whether anyone had been killed in the storm. To say I was consumed, is partly an exaggeration, since if I had truly been consumed I would not have survived. I did survive, but the intensity was way more than I bargained for.

After the Winter Retreat ended and I again joined the community for evening puja, Ajahn Anando invited me to give a talk. My memory of that occasion now is that the act of opening my mouth to speak required such a huge amount of effort – so much intensity had built up over the two months – that I spoke only one sentence.

It took some time before I could find a sense of balance again. My confidence hadn't been shattered – not at all – but it now had a companion called modesty. All those hours spent bathing in exquisite bodily sensations associated with the breathing exercises, hadn't driven me crazy, but they had led to a degree of delusion. I think the bass had been turned up a bit too far.

6.6

THE FOREST SANGHA CALENDAR

When we had received word that our teacher, Tan Ajahn Chah, might not be with us much longer, it occurred to me that we could mark the occasion with a pictorial calendar – something that could be printed and distributed around the world to the increasing number of branch monasteries and their supporters.

In part, my motivation was to find a beautiful way of honouring the life of our teacher. Also, in equal part, it was to produce something that would offer the extended community of lay disciples of Tan Ajahn Chah a sense of belonging. We all benefit from feeling like we belong somewhere, and if that somewhere is a spiritual community for which we have respect, then all the better. It seemed to me that having a calendar hung on the wall throughout the entire year, one that you could look at regularly and be reminded of the community of which you were a part, would be beneficial. A young fellow called Pete, who was frequenting Chithurst in those days and was a graphic designer, kindly offered to assist me in compiling such a calendar.

This was the beginning of the annual Forest Sangha calendar⁷⁸ that has been produced each year, except one, since 1990. The design has altered somewhat over the years, and the production and distribution has changed, but as far as I can tell, the function has remained much the same. It has been a privilege and a pleasure to have been involved in this project all these years. I say ‘involved’, because it depends on many more people besides myself to produce it. The final selection of photos and quotes has been my contribution, but I have had the assistance of a good number of others when it comes to design, layout, printing and distribution. The process of acquiring the astronomical (and astrological) dates for many years depended on when the royal palace in Thailand would release them. These days, thanks to an algorithm skilfully generated by Tan Gambhiro and colleagues, we are able to calculate the dates with excellent accuracy, without having to wait to hear from others. Initially the calendars were printed in this country and shipped abroad. For many years now, thanks to the generosity of the Kataññuta Group in Malaysia, they have been printed and distributed from there.

Not everyone in our sangha agrees with my personal preference (influenced by Marshall McLuhan’s *The Medium is the Message*) for black and white images, and my view that they more effectively communicate the message, ‘less is more’. The world is intoxicated, in my opinion, with excess sensory stimuli. The idea of producing a full-colour calendar could be tempting in the same way that over-eating of cakes and cookies could be tempting. Our message, as far as I am

concerned, is: if we are seeking clarity and contentment, either as a samana or as a householder, then simplification is what is called for – not proliferation. This is one of the central themes in the teachings of Tan Ajahn Chah, as I understand them. It is not merely a matter of aesthetics (although I acknowledge that is a factor).

Then there have been a variety of opinions about the sort of photos to publish. The first year consisted exclusively of images of Tan Ajahn Chah. If we had continued doing that, it could have fed into the notion some people had that we were a sort of cult. For a while it seemed that nice pictures of nature would be a good way of representing the Forest Sangha. One year we used images of shrines in the various branch monasteries. On occasion I would receive an objection because somebody didn't think a photo I had selected looked quite right. Then there have been requests that we have more photos of monks' and nuns' faces; at other times, requests that there be less photos of faces. For many years now the photos have simply been of people doing things in monasteries. Since we regularly receive messages of appreciation, and this year, 2020, over 12,000 copies were printed, it must still be serving a useful purpose.

Selecting suitable photos for these calendars is always fun; however, an equally rewarding part of the project is finding the 'just right' Dhamma quote: one that resonates with the image. In the early years we used extracts from translated teachings of Tan Ajahn Chah. More recently we have been alternating, year by year, Tan Ajahn Chah's teachings with

verses from the Dhammapada. When our efforts are successful, the image generates an atmosphere that makes users of the calendar susceptible to the message contained within the Dhamma quote.

Towards the end of 1990, I was told that I would be moving to Northumberland to take over leadership of the community at Harnham. With the development of more branch monasteries in Britain, Switzerland, Italy and New Zealand, a pattern was beginning to emerge whereby abbots would be moved on roughly every two years. The idea behind that was to try and avoid anyone becoming overly attached to one place. This wasn't the only reason Ajahn Sumedho sent me to take over at Harnham in Northumberland, but it fitted in with the pattern. A second monk was to join me, Tan Vipassi. Before heading north, he and I spent the Winter Retreat together at Amaravati.

6.7 HEADING NORTH

The winter retreat that year lasted for the two months of January and February. This was the first time I had lived at Amaravati. I was invited to stay in a room often used by visiting senior sangha members, which meant that although the weather outside was cold and miserable, I was warm and comfortable, for which I was very grateful.

Although the accommodation and routine were agreeable, my mind was preoccupied with what I imagined might lie ahead at Harnham. Amaravati and Chithurst were sister monasteries in more ways than one. Regular exchanges of residents took place between the two communities, and they were both run by the English Sangha Trust. The monastery at Harnham was managed by a completely separate and independent body, these days known as Harnham Buddhist Monastery Trust.⁷⁹

I had visited Harnham monastery before, and I confess I found the buildings and the surrounding countryside somewhat bleak. That could perhaps have been because

my visits coincided with the Kathina season which always falls in autumn. Whatever the reasons for my reservations, that retreat period gave me plenty of time to look and feel into where, when and how I was creating suffering out of something that I was only imagining. Perhaps it would all be wonderful, with a community of monks, novices and anagarikas living in a cooperative manner, with attentive trustees supporting the sangha – all in an effort to create something profoundly beautiful. Of course, I didn't know.

Thankfully, part way through that retreat, I came to realize that many of my worries were a result of the way I held the idea of leadership. I have written in *Servant of Reality*,⁴⁰ (p2) about how, one morning, while reflecting on the words of our morning chanting, *I am a servant of the Buddha, I am a servant of the Dhamma, I am a servant of the Sangha*, a fresh perspective on the idea of leadership opened up.

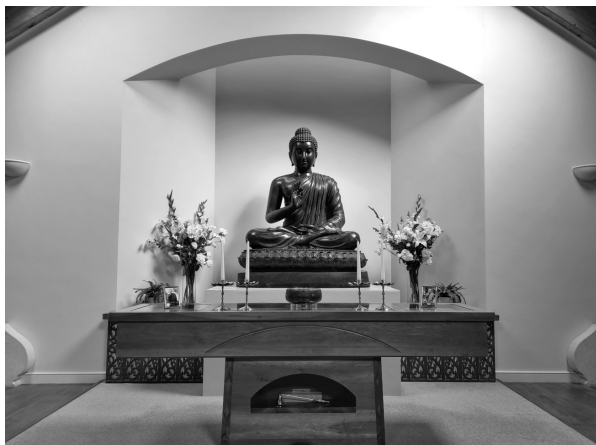
A wonderful feeling of relief came over me as I recognized how appealing I found the suggestion of being a servant. And how different holding that image in my mind felt, compared to the idea of being a master. It was obvious that I really didn't want to be a master. I began to see the extent to which I had been struggling to try and master everything: trying to master my meditation, master my relationships, master my understanding of Dhamma. It was just deluded personality yet again, trying to control everything. I started to realize that not only did I not want to be a master, but nobody had ever told me that

I had to be one. I could be a servant if I wished. With this recognition, a burden fell away. The unconscious commitment to compulsively controlling was seen just a little bit more clearly. My vision of Harnham, and whatever the future might hold, shifted significantly.

Being a leader of a community is a way of serving that community; it is not merely a way of controlling it. This change in perspective helpfully influenced how I would navigate the vicissitudes of community life over the following years.

There never had been any good reason for concern about what I would find when I arrived at Harnham. Amongst the six or so residents living there at the time was one with whom I was already somewhat acquainted. Tan Suriyo I had known as Robin when he was an anagarika at Chithurst and was my driver and chaperone on a number of occasions. He took monks' Precepts at the same time as Tan Puñño, and I had the good fortune of being their mentor during the period of transition from anagarika to monk. There was also a particularly helpful anagarika from Boston, called Chris (these days known as Ajahn Jayanto). Tan Suriyo and he were from a similar part of America, and they each contributed to an atmosphere of goodness and integrity. Sometimes I imagine that in the future scientists will develop a way of measuring an individual's integrity, similar to how these days they measure intelligence. Maybe in the future IQ will stand for Integrity Quotient. I estimate these two men would score very highly.

Another unexpected and agreeable aspect of the move was finding that there was a Dhamma Hall building project well underway. The initial work of excavation and outer construction was virtually all complete, and the building was now ready for the next, thoroughly pleasing, phase of interior design. It could hardly have been a more welcome task. Of course it wasn't without its challenges. The first decision to be taken was regarding a large bay window that had been planned to sit behind the main shrine. From what I had learned in consultations at Chithurst, according to the Chinese concept of *feng shui*, there should never be a window behind a Buddha image. I cannot substantiate that in any way; however, the sense I have of how it would feel to be looking at a Buddha image with trees and possibly even people moving in the background, is not one of stillness. When I look at a shrine I want to feel stilled. So I took the decision to cancel the bay window project and had the construction workers continue building the wall all the way up, but leaving an opening on top for an atrium, so light would descend down from above the Buddha. The decision wasn't met with the approval of everybody but I was unwavering. Nearly thirty years later, and I am still convinced it was the right decision. We don't go into a spiritual sanctuary in order to gaze outside at the view.



Tan Vipassi and I considered very carefully how we should approach the period of my taking over as leader. The previous abbot, Ajahn Pabhakaro, as mentioned earlier, had been a helicopter pilot during the war in Vietnam. He was a tall and imposing figure. He spoke with a commanding sense of what was needed, and seemed to relish any opportunity to use a chainsaw. He and I could hardly have been more different. Understandably, it was going to take time for the resident sangha to get used to the style of this new leader, quieter Kiwi abbot; also, the trustees would have to get used to yet another way of doing things. I was the fifth senior incumbent in the ten years the monastery had been running. Tan Vipassi and I decided that we wouldn't change anything that wasn't necessary for the first six months: just observe and wait until we had a good enough overall impression of the place and the people there. That decision worked well. As the weeks and months went by, a new configuration of community dynamics was gradually emerging, building work

proceeded without too many hiccups, and everyone seemed to be cooperating well.

The month of May in that first year marked approximately ten years since Harnham Monastery had begun, and it felt fitting to have some sort of celebration. The occasion was modest but rewarding and I am pleased we did it. I was also pleased that the ceremony we organized later that year in September to celebrate establishing a *sima* boundary inside the new Dhamma Hall went so well.

Senior sangha members from various monasteries down south were invited. Eight handsome bodhi leaf-shaped ‘*sima* markers’ were carved by a local craftsman, along with eight large and very heavy stone spheres that were used in the formal designation of the *sima* boundaries. As at Chithurst, we went through the process of removing any possible previous *sima* boundary, and then established the new one. It was conducted with an attitude of dignity and respect as befits such an occasion.

It was also later in that first year, 1991, that the main *Buddharupa* for the Dhamma Hall arrived. When Ajahn Pabhakaro was still abbot, he had made arrangements for it to be cast in Thailand, and it was sponsored by a long-time *looksit* (disciple) of Tan Ajahn Chah’s, Khun Siri. On receiving notification that a half-metric-ton image was due to arrive, no small amount of trepidation was triggered within me. Over the years I had seen many large Buddha images that were far from inspiring to look at. The image that was about to arrive would grace our Dhamma Hall for ever; whatever it was, was what we would be bowing to from now on.

Ideally, of course, one would be making an effort to maintain equanimity, but *upekkha* is a virtue in which I was, and still sadly am, undeveloped. I wanted our Dhamma Hall to be a space in which the Thais, Burmese, Sri Lankans and Westerners, would all feel uplifted when they entered. If the central Buddha rupa on the shrine looked garish and out of proportion, that was going to be difficult. I assume I knew enough about practice back then to appreciate that wanting was not the problem, it was clinging to wanting which led to suffering, but I wasn't able to let go. I *really, really* wanted it to be inspiring, so I suffered accordingly.

On opening the crate, I saw that my concerns were, once again, groundless. The bronze Buddha image had been superbly crafted and cast; because of the unpolished finish, it had a slight green patina, the colour of the moss on the stone walls. Immediately upon seeing it I was relieved. *Anumodana* Khun Siri and everyone else who was involved in making this offering. I continue to work on developing equanimity.

6.8 TAN AJAHN CHAH'S FUNERAL AND TEACHINGS

On January 16th, 1992, our teacher, Tan Ajahn Chah, passed away. He had appeared to be near death for several years, so that when the time came it wasn't a terrible surprise. There was of course, nevertheless, a sense of loss. Some of the sangha from down south travelled out to Thailand to participate in the chanting sessions honouring his life and his teachings. In keeping with Thai custom, occasions such as the passing of a great Dhamma teacher calls for a very special event. In the case of Tan Ajahn Chah, there was going to be an extended period in which many thousands of disciples, monastic and lay, would gather at his monastery, concluding with His Majesty The King of Thailand coming to pay his respects before the actual cremation. All that would require a great deal of preparation, so the date for Tan Ajahn Chah's funeral was set for the following year, 16th January 1993.

At Harnham we established a week-long routine of evening sitting meditation and chanting, ending with a public event, during which I read out one of his translated talks, Not Sure;³¹

a teaching on uncertainty. A special shrine was set up in the meditation hall on the Dhamma Seat. Our teacher had gone; we were now left with the teachings.

One of the great appeals of Tan Ajahn Chah's manner of teaching was the way he used similes. He was skilled in turning everyday situations into Dhamma lessons. When he spent time in Britain he visited Edinburgh, but that was well before the monastery in Northumberland was established. Had he spent time here on Harnham Hill in these old stone buildings, he would very likely have had something to say about the conditions to which we were having to adapt.

There was a very good reason why the roof tiles on many of the buildings on Harnham Hill were made out of thick stone slabs; the winds that sometimes buffeted us were forceful. The walls of the stone buildings were thick, also for a good reason; particularly when the winds blew in from the north, they could be very bitter. The nearby city of Newcastle upon Tyne is on approximately the same latitude as Moscow.

However, the winds from the north were not the only challenge we had to handle. We certainly also had our share of being blown around by the eight worldly winds: praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, honour and insignificance. In the Mahamangala Sutta⁸⁰ (p39), in the third to last stanza, the Buddha describes how the heart of one who has insight into the Four Noble Truths reacts when impacted by the worldly winds,

*Phuttassa loka-dhammehi,
cittam yassa na kampati,
asokam, virajam, khemam,
etam mangalam-uttamam*

*‘Though subjected to the worldly dhammas,
the heart (of one who has insight into the
Four Noble Truths) will remain unshakeable,
griefless, dustless, secure.
This is the greatest blessing.’*

The land and buildings surrounding Harnham Monastery were owned by Mr John Wake, or Farmer Wake, as he was known. The main building, which the sangha occupied, had been in a semi-derelict condition when Farmer Wake originally let it to us. Eventually, once repairs had been done, he would often join in with the sangha for the midday meal. From time to time the monks would help him out with tasks around the hundred-or-so acres of farmland. He was already in his eighties by then and could use the help. He seemed to enjoy having the company of the community on the hill. Often he would talk about the history of the place, including the period when an earlier owner of the property, Madam Babington,⁸¹ had lived in the Hall and was eventually buried in a crypt not far from the main house. There had also been a small chapel that she had built near the walled garden. Some say the ghost of Madam Babington still appears on the hill.

In the early years, Farmer Wake took part in our festival events, including a circumambulation on Vesakha puja. I remember

on one occasion, around the time when the building of the Dhamma Hall was newly completed, he came inside to see the result of all our work, and commented, 'What a pity that your teacher didn't live long enough to see this'. Thank you, Farmer Wake, for being so broad-minded and big-hearted as to welcome a bunch of Buddhist monks onto this wonderful Hill.

In those days, we received regular visits from members of the Leeds and Edinburgh meditation groups. They were generous and energetic in helping with the ongoing building projects. One of those visitors was a young student called Timmy, who was studying Russian at Edinburgh University. His mother was Thai and his father Malaysian; he seemed keen to help out and fitted in well. These days he is known as Ajahn Siripaño and serves as leader of the sangha at a remote residence near the border between Thailand and Myanmar, a place called Dtao Dam, or The Black Turtle Hermitage.

In January 1993, nearly all the senior Western sangha disciples of Tan Ajahn Chah were gathered at Wat Pah Nanachat. The schedule had been skilfully arranged so that, besides our having time to participate in the events taking place nearby at Wat Pah Pong, we also had quality time together, meeting formally and informally. There was at least one large meeting in the main *sala*, to which everyone was invited – monks, novices and nuns, residents and visitors. I was asked to facilitate. The atmosphere was surprisingly harmonious and the Q&A session was not difficult to mediate. I say surprisingly, since having such a large group, of mainly men, from different backgrounds, and most of us strong-headed,

differences of opinion were inevitable. I would say that in a large part the concord was a result of the very grounded approach Tan Ajahn Chah had towards monastic community life in general, and towards *Vinaya* in particular.

Vinaya, or the monastic code of discipline, in its original form was an expression of the wisdom and compassion of the Buddha himself. However, there are a great variety of interpretations of just how to apply the many rules and procedures included within that code of discipline. Approximately two thousand six hundred years ago it had been spoken in a dialect known as *Magadhi* (with some possible other related dialects) and was recorded in the Pali language within the first two hundred years after the Buddha passed away. Pali was not a generally spoken language (the word Pali actually means ‘text’); some scholars think it is somewhat similar to esperanto⁸² inasmuch as it was intentionally generated for a specific purpose, in this case to codify recorded teachings. These days there are still many scholars who can understand it, and these Pali texts are available to consult when seeking clarification on particular points. Tan Ajahn Chah’s approach was to show respect for the tradition and for the theoretical (*pariyatti*) aspect of our monastic training, but to always remember that the point of these teachings and traditions is to awaken to the truth that lies beyond our habits of clinging. Hence a lot of care is required to avoid falling into the trap of seeking security by clinging to the *Vinaya*. In other words, remember to keep your feet on the ground.

At the gathering at Wat Pah Nanachat, there were not just the large group meetings; there were, for example, other

meetings that involved the abbots of formally appointed branch monasteries. These various meetings, large and small, were the harbinger of the now well-established tradition of senior sangha members meeting up approximately every three or four years to discuss shared concerns. It was the first opportunity we had to see ourselves as this evolving worldwide community, and to begin to acknowledge how we were going to have to work to maintain cooperation. As I said, most of us were strong-headed and had our own views on things; however, again, I think it was because of Tan Ajahn Chah's example, and the value he placed on cultivating cooperative community, that we managed to meet in harmony and express differences without too much difficulty.

One example of an issue that we successfully navigated our way through to a mutually agreed solution, was to do with traditions around bowing. In Thailand, tradition dictates that when paying respects to an elder, first the sangha of bhikkhus bow, and the elder acknowledges them by holding his hands in *añjali*. This would then be followed by the novices, nuns and laity all bowing, with the elder having lowered his hands. There is an explanation within the *Vinaya* for how this practice might have developed, but we felt that in this case, where Buddhism was rapidly spreading to many very different cultures, there was room for another interpretation. We discussed how, outside of Thailand, it would more likely lead to harmony and mutual benefit if everybody bowed together. It was encouraging to find that as a group we were able to listen to each other – both those of a traditional

persuasion and those keener on adaptation – consider the variables, and eventually arrive at an agreement by consensus. As far as I know the decision taken at that meeting has never caused any disruption.

It is not insignificant that the Buddha established consensus as the primary principle involved in making formal decisions in the sangha. In some cases a decision made by majority vote can still stand; however, it is better to make the effort to reach a consensus. It can take a considerable amount of time and patience to reach a decision by true consensus, as it requires that all those involved in making the decision feel included. It doesn't require that everyone has exactly the same view – that would be unanimity. On any matter of substantial importance, it is likely that not everyone will hold precisely the same viewpoint, but it is possible that people holding a divergence of views can all agree on a single course of action. I don't know if social psychologists have ever done studies on this subject, but if they did, I expect they would find that when a course of action is decided upon by way of consensus, there is a better chance of everyone respecting that decision, because they were all involved.

As an aside, I want to deviate briefly and comment on what has been happening here and now, in July 2020. As mentioned above, that gathering at Wat Nanachat in January 1993 was the first in a series of such gatherings. I don't think we had a name for it at the time since the main purpose for our being there was the funeral of Tan Ajahn Chah. Over the years, however, a variety of acronyms have been used to describe

these gatherings: WAM for ‘World Abbots Meeting’; GEM for ‘Global Elders Meetings’; IEM for ‘International Elders Meetings’. Currently, when referring to the smaller meeting of abbots only, we are using BAM, which stands for ‘Branch Abbots Meeting’. The name change factors in the difference between the formally appointed Branch Monasteries,⁸³ of which there are now fifteen, and the more loosely affiliated Associated Monasteries, of which there are maybe eleven or twelve. The fifteen abbots who constitute the BAM group are tasked with discussing and hopefully reaching decisions on matters pertaining to these monasteries outside of Thailand. (The abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand is also included). As it happens, the stage I am at currently in writing these reflections, has just coincided with two days of meetings of these branch abbots. A gathering, probably in Thailand, was due to take place around now, but the Covid-19 pandemic meant that was not possible. The meetings of the past two days took place via the internet and were hence referred to as v-BAMs, ‘virtual Branch Abbots Meetings’.

It is noteworthy that, for roughly a third of the participants, this was their first abbots’ meeting; their predecessors, who probably attended that meeting in January 1993, have all recently relinquished their roles as abbots. In advance of these meetings I was considering the fact that there would be a new configuration of participants, but wasn’t especially concerned. Experience over the years has taught me that there are grounds for trusting in the goodness and competence which results from right practice. The six hours of these

virtual meetings were not a picnic: they were work. On the practical level alone, accommodating the different time zones was tricky enough; some participants were up at two o'clock in the morning. And inevitably, of course, there were issues with technology: several of us were at school when the very first computers were being invented, and not all monasteries have a high speed internet connection. The more challenging aspect, however, was to do with how we might raise matters of concern with each other, listen, discuss and agree, or disagree, and at the same time honour our commitment to harmony. Given the enthusiasm expressed by all participants for holding more such events, I would say the meetings were a wonderful success. I continue to marvel at, and feel grateful for, the skill Tan Ajahn Chah displayed in his way of imparting the training, and the beauty of the legacy he left behind. What he gave us was a way of living in spiritual community with an emphasis on the spirit, not merely on the form; his way was to cultivate a quality of mutual respect which allowed for individual differences without compromising concord.

Now back to 1993. On the day of the cremation ceremony itself, there were approximately 500,000 people⁸⁴ at Wat Pah Pong, including the Supreme Patriarch, Ven. Somdet Nyanasamvara of Wat Boworn, and Their Majesties the King and Queen of Thailand. From what I could tell, the overriding atmosphere during this phenomenal event was one of reverence and respect, gratitude and sadness. It is rare that such beings as Tan Ajahn Chah appear in the world; it is natural that we feel grateful, and understandable that we

feel as if we have lost something precious. When the Buddha was dying and was asked who would take over leading the sangha once he was gone, he pointed to the Dhamma, saying that was to be the teacher. I am sure Tan Ajahn Chah would likewise have pointed to the teachings.

Anyone who has listened to talks that I give⁸⁵ would probably have noticed how often I refer to Tan Ajahn Chah. Perhaps, also, they have observed that there are several teaching stories or situations on which I regularly comment. In this context of reflecting back on the life of Tan Ajahn Chah, there are twelve points which I wish to highlight; seven of these I have written about earlier in these notes, but I will list them all here again.

The first, is a teaching shared with me by a Western monk (earlier referred to as Tan Cittapalo) who was visiting when I was still living at Wat Boworn in Bangkok. On that occasion I asked him what Tan Ajahn Chah had to say regarding right view. Tan Cittapalo said that Tan Ajahn Chah teaches that even the Buddha's instructions on right view become wrong view when we are clinging to them out of unawareness. This introduced me to the emphasis Tan Ajahn Chah placed on being mindful of how we hold the teachings and the training, rather than merely struggling to get the 'right' idea and becoming attached to it.

The second teaching I would mention is that of experiencing Tan Ajahn Chah's warmth and sensitivity at Wat Pah Nanachat when my foot was seriously infected. Some teachers, it seems, insist on always presenting the highest Dhamma

and, unfortunately, in the process, tend to forget the benefits of shared human companionship. On that occasion, where I was suffering physically, Tan Ajahn Chah didn't tell me to tough it out; he offered me his warm-heartedness.

Then there was a time when I was suffering intensely, mentally, because of doubts I was having. Once more, instead of presenting me with the ideal of how we must develop faith and strive on to overcome all fears, he just smiled at me and said, *I've been there*. If he had looked at the floor, or out into space, and spoken about strengthening my commitment, I would probably have forgotten the incident. As it was, he looked at me directly and offered empathy; I still feel touched by it. Having made the human connection, he went on to talk about his own experience with doubts. At one stage, he said, the doubts were so severe he thought his head was going to explode. He also helpfully pointed out what I might change that could make a difference. He commented that, 'If, when we encounter that which is uncertain, and we insist it be certain, we create suffering.' I trust deeply that he knew what he was talking about.

The next teaching came in the form of an audio tape that Tan Tiradhammo sent me when I was staying in Chiang Rai province, in Northern Thailand. It coincided with a period when my grasp of the Thai language was sufficient for me to start translating. That talk was called, *Reading The Natural Mind*, and was eventually printed in *The Collected Teachings*³¹ (Chapter 22, p 237). Paying close attention to the words and the meaning of that talk, I considered with

interest what Tan Ajahn Chah was saying about the difference between the way unawakened beings and awakened beings relate to desire. Desire is not the problem, despite what many Buddhist might say; it is clinging to desire that creates suffering.

The fifth teaching is one that took place one morning when I had the good fortune to be sitting under Tan Ajahn Chah's kuti before alms-round, when an elderly female guest came to pay her respects and take leave before she returned to the UK; an American nun, Maechee Kamfah, was with her. They asked if Tan Ajahn Chah would say a few words into the tape recorder so it could be taken back as a memento. As it was, she received a fifteen minute teaching about Buddhist practice in which Tan Ajahn Chah summarized the essence of the path and liberation. The talk is now printed in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*,³¹ page 233, with the title, *Living With The Cobra*. The central message, as far as I was concerned, is: don't invest too much in ideas of enlightenment; look instead into that which is happening right here and now.

Nibbana is found in *samsara*. Enlightenment and delusion exist in the same place, just as do hot and cold. It's hot where it was cold and cold where it was hot. When heat arises, the coolness disappears, and when there is coolness, there's no more heat. (*The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*,³¹ p.235)

The sixth situation or teaching that stands out for me and has shaped my life, stems from an incident which took place when Tan Ajahn Chah was in hospital in Bangkok. I hadn't long before left hospital myself, after having had surgery on both knees. Things hadn't gone to plan: the doctors had initially indicated I would be in and out of hospital quite quickly, but after three sessions under general anaesthetic and lots of physiotherapy, my knees remained very stiff and painful. I look back now and see how I embarrassed myself in front of the other disciples who were visiting Tan Ajahn Chah at the time, by wallowing in self pity. I said to Luang Por, 'It really shouldn't be this way; this is not what the doctor said I was to expect.' He looked at me with what I recall as a mixture of puzzlement and kindness and said rather firmly, 'What do you mean it shouldn't be this way? If it shouldn't be this way, it wouldn't be this way!' In fact there was no problem with the surgery, the doctors, or with my body. My resistance created an imaginary problem. Thank you, Luang Por.

There was another significant teaching occasion which I have already described in this compilation, that took place at Wat Gor Nork, and I would like to mention it again here. It occurred when Ajahn Jagaro, who was then the abbot at Wat Pah Nanachat, and several other non-Thai monks, visited Tan Ajahn Chah; they were trying to pin him down by asking questions about exactly what is meant by the term 'Original Mind' and what actually is contemplation. A translation of this conversation is printed on p.475 in *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*.³¹

The comment from that Q&A session that has stayed with me all these years, is when Tan Ajahn Chah was responding to a question about just how much *samadhi* is needed for true contemplation to arise. The questioner was wondering whether we are supposed to be using thinking in the process of investigation, or was it something else that was going on. Tan Ajahn Chah emphasised that the point of the investigation was to come to recognize that which is inherently still. He suggested that, as we observe all that which is arising and ceasing, we should be enquiring, out of ‘what’ is this movement we call ‘mind’ emerging.

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

The eighth teaching was a conversation I heard reported took place between Tan Ajahn Chah and the first Siladhara in our community, Sister Rocana. I can no longer recall whether at the time Sister Rocana had already taken up the training or if she was still Pat Stoll. What matters though is the particularly useful way Tan Ajahn Chah answered her question. The question she asked was, ‘How is it possible to practise *samadhi* if there is no self to practise it?’ He answered, ‘When we are developing *samadhi* we work with a sense of self. When we

are developing vipassana we work with not-self. When you know what's what, you are beyond both self and non-self.'

I don't know where the ninth teaching that I want to mention came from. I do know that I used it one year on a page on our Forest Sangha calendar. It is a particularly quotable quote⁸⁶ and it is widely commented upon, not just by me. Tan Ajahn Chah is reported to have said: 'Don't be an arahant, don't be a bodhisattva, don't be anything at all. If you are anything at all, you will suffer.' In a way that is characteristic of Tan Ajahn Chah, he cuts through all fixed positions – all inclinations to become something. It wasn't that he left the student of Dhamma with nothing, which might be assumed when you read words such as these. In reality he left us with the inspiration to give ourselves fully into the practice. From the disembodied perspective of the written word and the concepts they give rise to, that part of the message might be missed.

The tenth teaching is about learning to listen. Around 1977 I was staying in Bangkok at Wat Boworn. At that time Tan Ajahn Chah was staying just outside of Bangkok near Don Mueang Airport. One evening several of us took the opportunity to go and pay our respects. A small group of lay people had also gathered and Tan Ajahn gave a Dhamma talk. He started with the usual encouragement to 'establish your hearts in a fitting mode for receiving these teachings.' Before he went into the body of his talk, however, he described what he meant by establishing our hearts in such a manner. Referring to the recording machine that had been placed in

front of him, he said, listening to teachings is like turning on the tape recorder: once we have established a degree of inner calm, we can then trust that the teachings will be received. He was encouraging us to rest in open-hearted receptivity and allow the peaceful heart to do its work. Later, when needed, the teachings we have stored away in our hearts can appear. It is not necessary to try and understand or remember what is being said. In fact, all the trying can get in the way. We are listening, we are not abandoning discernment. However, this kind of listening doesn't disturb serenity. It is not like listening to a lecture where we are concerned with accumulating information. This is contemplative listening.

A less appealing, but still profoundly important teaching might have come from some notes I scribbled down of translations by Tan Varapañño. Apparently Tan Ajahn Chah commented something along the lines of, 'When practice is going well, it will take you to the point where it feels as if you are hanging out with your best friends, and the Buddha comes along and says, break it up.' I really did not want to hear this teaching. Indeed, it took many years before I was able to see the point. There was considerable resistance. Thankfully, eventually, I came to appreciate that what the teacher was telling us was that the things we feel we hold dearest are, in truth, the very things we are most attached to, and will really not want to let go of; they are our addictions. Only after having been a monk for many years, did I come around to even beginning to admit that I had undermining addictions, and that feeding them was a way of avoiding looking at deeper

issues. It wasn't that I was hooked on imbibing substances; my coarsest addictions were travel, sugar, caffeine. And all three of them were expressions of the deeper addiction to distraction. Definitely I did not want to stop feeding them. I tried a number of times over the years, but always went back to them again. Now that I have been reasonably clean for a good while, I think I can say I have a better handle on them. International travel stopped about ten years ago. I gave up nearly all sugar (and honey and maple syrup etc.) a bit over two years ago, and caffeine just over one year ago. These days I can look at my passport (which has only blank pages in it) without giving rise to painful longings to visit friends in New Zealand and walk along beautiful beaches. I can see a tub of Manuka honey and, while I might start salivating, it is not a struggle to leave it be. And interest in consuming caffeine (other than cocoa) is less convincing. Here I won't go into the issues that were driving me to distraction; suffice to say I am glad that I didn't wait until I was on my deathbed before beginning to address them.

The final teaching of Tan Ajahn Chah's that I want to mention is the simplest and most straightforward, 'In the end there is just patient endurance.' We develop tricks and techniques that help us keep moving forward on this spiritual journey, but a time will come, probably several times, when nothing works any more. None of our insights or ideas or strategies free us from the obstruction with which we feel confronted. If we insist on making progress, we could hurt ourselves. There are times when we have to surrender and willingly

submit ourselves to bearing the unbearable. It is not that we are not doing anything; what we are doing is learning to humbly acknowledge our limitations.

. . .

After that first tsunami of a Rains Retreat at Wat Hin Maak Peng in 1975, when I had been left with a subjective sense that, instead of my personality having been transcended, it had been shattered and my heart scarred, I had the thought that somehow I had to find a way to reconstruct a more functional sense of self; evidently the one I had, had not been fit for purpose. In pursuit of that hopefully more stable and functional sense of self, I went to live with Tan Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho. From conversations I had with others who had taken up training within Tan Ajahn Chah's monasteries, and from reading a few brief transcribed, translated teachings, I had the impression that this was the most suitable place to be to do the work that needed to be done. Forty something years later I have huge gratitude to Tan Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Sumedho and the sangha that has surrounded them. I don't think it is too much of an exaggeration to say I owe them my life. I love this life that I am living. For sure, there are periods that I would prefer were otherwise, but I don't find myself looking with envy at anyone else's life.

6.9

SYMBOLS AND RITUALS

In 1994, we had the official inauguration of Harnham's Dhamma Hall. For the two years prior to that, a great deal of time and effort had gone into the construction and finishing of the building. Nothing seemed to happen very fast in Northumberland, and gradually I was getting used to that. By character I can be a bit speedy, so this more modest mode of operating was good for me.

Shortly after Tan Ajahn Chah had passed away, two local sculptors who were friends of the monastery, Ken and Jenny, humbly asked if, on behalf of the extended lay community, they might express gratitude and respect to our late Teacher by carving a stone *stupa* and presenting it to the monastery. Their generous offering was gladly accepted. This was just one example of several local artisans who significantly contributed to this emerging spiritual sanctuary.

My memory is that carving the stupa did not take too long. What was trickier was the installation. We agreed that it would be a nice idea to position the approximately two-and-a-half-metre-high stupa in the middle of a small pond. Of course the

pond would have to be watertight and Ken and Jenny went to great lengths to ensure it was well-built. When the *stupa* arrived at the monastery, it was delivered on the opposite side of the Dhamma Hall from where it was going to be installed as part of a Tan Ajahn Chah memorial garden. Transporting that half metric ton of stone on rollers, across the new wooden floor of the Dhamma Hall was quite a feat. The really delicate stage, though, came when this immensely heavy object had to be raised and suspended from a tripod over the plinth in the middle of the pond, and then, ever-so-gently, lowered down onto ice-cubes, so there would be enough manoeuvrability to slide it into its final position. Any sudden impact on the base could have broken the seal on the pond. Thank you, Ken and Jenny, for such an exquisitely beautiful act of devotion. It is indeed a fitting gesture of gratitude to our teacher. Now, approximately twenty-five years later, although the pond has been filled in and the stone of the *stupa* is partially coated in moss, the surrounding fern garden is kept tidy, and every few years a devout Burmese layman comes with gold leaf and regilds the finial.

Ken and Jenny were likewise responsible for crafting the ‘moon-stone’ that sits at the entrance to the Dhamma Hall, also for the front door handles and the handsome sculpture of the *Dhammacakka* in the vestibule. It was a lot of fun visiting the workshops of these craftspeople and discussing the details of the various projects. The traditional ‘moon-stone’, which is often found at entrance ways to Sri Lankan temples, is usually a highly stylised piece compared to the

modest, understated version we have. Although I am not sure, it seems that the original symbolic significance of the ‘moon-stone’ was the cyclic nature of *samsara*.⁸⁷

In the case of Harnham’s entranceway, on the corners of the stone slabs surrounding the moon-stone, there were placed four brass etchings of the ‘divine messengers⁸⁸’ – old age, sickness, death and a wandering monk. They were inset there as symbolic reminders of how it is often the suffering of life that inspires us to turn away from a path of heedless distraction and enter upon the spiritual journey. We so easily become intoxicated by momentary happiness, unaware that there is the possibility of awakening to an unshakeable form of happiness. Suffering can sober us up and reveal the possibility of an altogether different approach to life.

The bronze handles on the front doors to the Dhamma Hall depict, on the right-hand side, a dragon, symbolising *hiri* and *ottappa*;⁸⁹ on the left hand side there is a representation of the world: *hiri* and *ottappa* are watching over the world. The Buddha referred to *hiri* and *ottappa*, as *lokapala*, ‘protectors of the world’. The decision to locate depictions of these important Dhamma principles on the front doors was a way of saying that, before we can enter the spiritual sanctuary, our heart must be imbued with a wholesome sense of shame and a fear of doing that which is unskillful.

The word ‘shame’ has heavy connotations for many Westerners because of the pain of having been taught when we were young that we are all sinners. When such spiritual instruction is not imparted wisely, it fails in its intent to instil

an appreciation for virtue; instead it just makes people feel bad about themselves. The Buddha called these two aspects of virtue – *hiri* and *ottappa* – protectors, because that is what they do; they protect our psychological world and conduce to inner balance, as well as having a wholesome influence on the outer world. It doesn't take a lot of thought to appreciate how, when we act heedlessly and shamelessly, there are unpleasant consequences, for ourselves and for the world in which we live.



Once visitors have entered the vestibule of the Dhamma Hall, they are immediately confronted with two large black stone lions. These weren't carved locally, but were purchased by my friend, Mark Overton, while he was working as a doctor in Beijing, and shipped to Newcastle. Two supporters of our monastery who lived in Glasgow, Sena and Aruni, sponsored them. I wanted them placed at the entrance like that, to symbolically test the resolve of those who entered. Perhaps we have been inspired by suffering to seek an alternative to the casual pursuits that we have hitherto followed, and have

enough moral confidence to take the first steps, but we need to know that our resolve will be tested, probably over and over again. We need to learn to be daring and courageous.

Above the two lions is a carving of the Dhamma wheel, the symbol for the Buddha's teachings. For the last two thousand years, since Alexander the Great from Greece⁹⁰ forayed into what is now Afghanistan, we have had Buddha images which serve to inspire followers of this path of practice. However, the Buddha himself recommended using the wheel as a symbolic object of devotion. The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta, his first recorded discourse, means *Setting the Wheel of Dhamma in Motion*.⁹¹ There were other objects that he endorsed, such as the Bodhi Tree and a Dhamma Seat, but it is perhaps the wheel that has become best known.

It was important to me that we engaged local artisans in the work of designing the Dhamma Hall. Yes, we are a branch monastery of Wat Pah Pong, in the North Eastern Province of Thailand, and many of our visitors are from that part of the world. There are also many who come from just a few miles away. Someone once reported to me a comment made by His Holiness the Dalai Lama, when he was asked what he thought about Tibetan Buddhism in America. Apparently he said, 'Rather too Tibetan.' I wanted our friends from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Sri Lanka to all feel at home in our monastery, but I also wanted the Europeans who joined us for evening meditation or on retreat, to feel at ease. This was all part of integrating Buddhism into this culture at this time.

Once you enter the Dhamma Hall itself, you will see in the centre of the oak floor, a very large rug. Theo and Val, who lived in a small town called Coldstream, just across the border into Scotland, had started visiting the monastery. They worked as weavers and were part of a Craft Centre on The Hirsle Estate.⁹² When I discussed with Theo the idea of having a large rug with a Dhammacakka woven into it, he was enthusiastic. It would be no small undertaking for a cottage craftsman, but he was keen. The meditation group in Leeds, called Dhammapala, offered to sponsor the wool for the project. A great many rolls of yarn would be required. Theo's first introduction to Buddhism had been via the Tibetan tradition and he tried hard to persuade me that the rug should be designed in bright primary colours. My preference was to have the inside of the hall feel connected with the outside. After some mild-mannered debating, Theo acquiesced, and a massive amount of moss coloured yarn was ordered.

Once the bulk of the work on the rug had been completed, there was still the task of refining the carving of the wheel design into it; it wasn't a woven rug, it was tufted. This would require laying the rug out in a large, clean, empty space. Theo and Val lived in the Lodge (Gatehouse) of the Hirsle and didn't have a room big enough. At that time, the 14th Earl of Home⁹³ (pronounced Hewm), Sir Alec Douglas-Home, an ex-Prime Minister of Great Britain, was living in the main house with his daughter Caroline. Caroline was very helpful in allowing Theo to make use of a large room in the main

house that, at the time, was not occupied. The result of all the effort is beautiful. I expect the rug will continue to grace our Dhamma Hall for many years to come.

When Jody Higgs, one of the monastery's trustees, retired, she wanted to mark the occasion with a special offering. We discussed it and agreed that it would be good to engage one of Scotland's skilled potters to produce a raku⁹⁴ style pot to use as the main incense dish on the shrine. What she produced looks just right. It sits on the 'just right' puja table constructed by a local cabinet maker, who also built the Dhamma Seat.

Another piece that was at least partially produced locally is the wall mural. Traditionally, in Thai temples the mural on the wall directly opposite the main Buddha image and shrine is a depiction of the Buddha-to-be sitting under the bodhi tree, conquering the hordes of *Mara*. Khun Pang Chinasai, a Thai artist known for his skill and experience in traditional temple painting, was commissioned by a supporter from Guildford to do the work. Since we didn't have the right sort of wall on which to paint, and perhaps for other reasons, Khun Pang decided to produce the painting on a huge canvas that would later be fixed to the wall. This also meant he could get started while he was in London. When it had reached a stage of being ready for the more refined details, he brought the canvas up to Harnham and completed it on-site. I don't know exactly how long it took him, but it required great dedication and focus. He had a practice of getting up very early in the morning to sit meditation and then start on the painting. It was impressive to watch, for example, when it came to the parts of the mural

which were in gold, the precision with which he applied the gold leaf. The refinement of detail was extraordinary.

In keeping with ancient tradition, the mural tells a story. At the centre is the bodhi tree under which the Buddha-to-be (*Bodhisattva*) is seated – composed, reflective, resolute. His right hand is reaching down and touching the earth, which indicates that he is asking *Mae Thorani* to bear witness to his right to seek liberation. There is a depiction of *Mae Thorani* beneath the Bodhisattva; she is wringing water from her hair, symbolizing all the accumulated wholesome potential (*puñña*) that the Bodhisattva had generated over many lifetimes in pursuit of freedom. On the right-hand side of the mural, the hordes of *Mara* can be seen in warring mode, hurling spears and threats at the Bodhisattva. As the spears and arrows get near to where he is seated, the force and purity of his resolve transforms them into flowers. On the left-hand side of the mural the hordes can be seen with their hands raised in *añjali* asking for forgiveness, having recognised their mistake. Towards the top of the painting there are depictions of celestial beings (*devas*) who are intentionally keeping their distance.

For someone brought up in a traditional Theravada Buddhist culture, it would be normal to relate to activities in these non-visible realms of existence as if they were literally true. For others who have been reared in a more secular materialistic culture, would probably find it hard to believe literally in the existence of such dimensions. Whether one believes literally or reads the depictions figuratively, the story still conveys

a powerfully relevant message. The Bodhisattva under the bodhi tree represents the heart that is resolved to awakening from unawareness. The hordes of *Mara* are the myriad impulses that have the power to distract and intimidate anyone who dares to aspire for awakening. The celestial beings hiding away up in the clouds attempting to escape the unpleasantness, are all of our clever ideas about practice; when it comes to truly confronting the consequences of having indulged for so long in unawareness, they abandon us. It takes much more than bright ideas to transform unawareness into wisdom and compassion.

When Khun Pang had finished his work on the mural, members of the local Thai community flew His Excellency the Royal Thai Ambassador up from London to participate in a celebration of this magnificent work.

On the occasion of the Thai Ambassador's visit, Ajahn Sumedho was also with us, and this marked the inauguration of the Dhamma Hall. It was also in the month of August, but in 1996, that I conducted our first *pabbajja* (novice precepts ceremony). Anagarika Axel requested the Ten Precepts of a samanera and was given the name Revato.

6.10 RIDING THE WAVES

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there was a lot of joy in designing and decorating the sanctuary that is our Dhamma Hall. Of course, as is to be expected, there were also times when things were not so joyous. Looking back now, though, I can see that even the truly challenging conundrums with which we were presented brought benefits. It would be foolish to assume that everything was going to be smooth sailing. The skill that is worth developing is the ability to accord with the ups and downs of life – being able to ride the waves of samsara and, in the process, learn what we need to learn. Dreaming about a life free from ups and downs is just that: dreaming.

One of the most challenging issues we were obliged to deal with during the early stages of development of Harnham monastery was the wastewater system. Farmer Wake and I had a meeting with his solicitor to see if we could come up with a mutually agreeable plan that would accommodate both his needs and those of our growing community. It was an amicable meeting and I thought things were going in a good

direction: we seemed to agree that the monastery could pay for the construction of an eco-friendly reed bed system on his land in the gully directly behind the property we occupied; he would have use of it so long as he was alive, and a formal agreement would be set up which meant future owners of the land would share in the running costs. Unfortunately, Farmer Wake passed away in 1996 without anything having been signed. His heirs were not at all interested in a cooperative arrangement and went ahead with putting in their own separate system.

This was doubly difficult for us because by this time we were well underway with renovating another property, Kusala House, part way down the hill. This building would mainly be used as lay guest accommodation. We followed the suggestion of the new landowners and employed a professional consultant to see what they could come up with, only to have the expert's idea rejected. We had reached a point where we simply could not see any way of dealing with the wastewater. We couldn't undo the work already done and we couldn't see a way forward.

The monastery's trustees decided that they should consult the wider community of lay friends and supporters, present them with the situation, and see how they felt about it: should we proceed with the building work and trust that a suitable plan would eventually emerge, or should we close the project down? This wasn't the first time that the trustees and the wider community had faced the unknown. When the replies came in, I was inspired to hear it was a resounding endorsement to carry on and keep trusting. We hadn't made

it this far in establishing the monastery because we felt certain about how things would turn out; for much of the time it had been down to trust.

Work on Kusala House continued, and after some time we received an encouraging message from Bill, the project overseer. He and a group of friends – a men’s group associated with the monastery – had been away hiking for a few days in an area of exceptional botanical interest. They had spent the night in a Youth Hostel, called Langdon Beck,⁹⁵ in higher Teesdale. In the morning, on waking up, Bill had a light bulb moment when suddenly it occurred to him that this Youth Hostel, like the monastery, has to handle a fluctuating number of residents and is also surrounded by land which they didn’t own. He set about investigating the system they had in place, came back to the monastery, and presented us with a plan. The monastery’s wastewater system has now been working efficiently for more than ten years. Thank you, Bill, and all the friends and supporters, for having a good sense of how and when to trust.

There was a similar sort of issue involving an electricity pylon that was situated slap-bang in the middle of our Kusala House building site. The power lines were carrying electricity to several houses, not just to the monastery, and it was proving difficult to find an agreed relocation of the pylon. Any suggestion that we put to the neighbours was viewed negatively. This went on for years and, once again, it looked like it was going to be impossible to find a solution. Meanwhile, construction work on other parts of the building

steadily continued, trusting that we would eventually find an answer. And, indeed, an answer was unexpectedly found. In a conversation with a neighbour one day, Bill asked what they thought about a new configuration he had come up with and, almost as an aside, they simply said 'fine'. That was it. Thank you again, Bill, for your patience and creativity, and also to our neighbours.

In the year 2001 the community on Harnham Hill was virtually isolated because of the Foot and Mouth Disease⁹⁶ outbreak. It was the only time I have seen our trustees genuinely distressed, even in tears. After many years of working really hard to build and maintain the monastery, very little support was coming in, Vesak had to be cancelled, and we were surrounded by massive cremation sites as many hundreds of animals were being slaughtered and burned. Talk at the Trust meeting included the possibility that we might have to close the monastery down. Cars were not completely forbidden from using the road leading up the hill to the monastery, but those that did venture in had to drive over sacks soaked in disinfectant. All visitors to the monastery were obliged to wash their footwear in disinfectant.

Such services as Tesco's 'home deliveries' were not available in those days. During one stage of the lockdown, community members would take the wheelbarrow down to the main road and wait for a supporter who had rung to say they were bringing out offerings.

The horror of the whole episode eventually passed and things returned to usual again after about one year. While we were

in the midst of it, it felt terrible, but one of the unexpected consequences was that a few years later a nearby farm came up for sale and we were able to acquire Harnham Lake, where now there are several kutis and a thriving wildlife sanctuary.

We only learn to ride the waves of experience by truly meeting and going through experiences. If we allow ourselves to indulge in old patterns of longing for the comfort of certainty, we fail to learn. It is in letting go of our resistance to pain, and receiving it in the whole body-mind, that we are more likely to learn the lesson, and let go. Even then, we don't know how long it will take before we are freed from old habits of resistance. We can't stop pain – pleasure and pain are part of life – but we are potentially capable of changing the way we relate to it. As with waves, at times the pain might be a mere ripple, while at other times it might be huge. What matters is: are we preparing ourselves to mindfully receive the moments of pain that life gives us, and not default to denying them? Denied pain, unmet pain, accumulates in our hearts, in our minds, in our bodies, and leads to chronic insensitivity. Mindfully received pain leads to aliveness.

It is important to understand that, although letting go is the goal, we can't 'do' the letting go. Letting go is what happens when we see with sufficient clarity, that we are creating the suffering by clinging to something too tightly. If we have the good fortune to experience a conscious moment of letting go, and we do manage to experience the benefit for ourselves, then we might assume that that is what we are supposed to keep doing – keep letting go. However,

if we are discerning, we will see that we didn't make the letting go happen. By paying attention to the way clinging causes the suffering, letting go happens by itself. We make the suffering happen; being honest and mindful about the process of causing suffering is what leads to the letting go.

*It is wisdom that leads to letting go
of a lesser happiness
in pursuit of a happiness
which is greater.*

In the Dhammapada verse 290 quoted above, the Buddha acknowledges that there are different levels of happiness. And he spells out how it takes wisdom to recognise the potential benefit to be found in releasing out of a lesser happiness and discovering a happiness that is greater.

. . .

Earlier on in this compilation, I mentioned that there had been a five-year period during which seven Western monks who were abbots of branch monasteries, disrobed. (They weren't all abbots at the time of disrobing.) The first of this group to give up the training was Ajahn Pabhakaro in early 1991. Then Ajahn Kittisaro left towards the end of that year, followed by Ajahn Anando around the middle of 1992, and Ajahn Puriso towards the end of 1992. By the time of the gathering at Wat Pah Nanachat in January 1993, we were discussing possible causes for these sad and unforeseen

developments. It is probably safe to say that many of us were still in somewhat of a state of shock at seeing four highly respected and much loved Dhamma friends leave with such short notice. We could only speculate about what had truly happened for these individuals and, of course, nobody knew how the future was going to pan out for them. What we did all agree on though, as far as I recall, was that those of us who found ourselves in the role of teacher, needed to be careful that we didn't allow ourselves to become too busy. Our community was still in a pioneer phase of development and there was always more work that needed to be done, but we must remember that the inner work takes priority. We shouldn't wait until we become exhausted before setting time aside for personal retreat. Also, I think it was at that meeting that we started talking about abbots taking longer periods of time out – a sort of sabbatical leave.

Regardless of the causes that led so many senior monks to disrobe in such close succession, we need to keep asking ourselves, what is it that really matters? The temptation to place the perceived needs of the community ahead of our own needs can be strong. It might be that such an impulse is genuinely selfless and beneficial. Then again it might be a sign of a lack of self-regard. If we hold too tightly to the role of being a 'teacher', we risk losing balance, which in turn, easily leads to our feeling alienated from the community and from ourselves. This isn't just true for teachers and leaders; it applies to all of us, whatever role we might take up. In verse 157 of the Dhammapada, the Buddha says,

*If we hold ourselves dear,
then we maintain careful self-regard
both day and night.*

Whether we are wearing robes or jeans, maintaining careful self-regard means putting the emphasis in the right place. Whatever understanding we have regarding the Buddha's teachings, we will only integrate that understanding into the rest of our lives if we manage to maintain faith and confidence in the path and the practice.

When we start out on this journey we are energized by a sense of trust that there is truth and it can be realized. This trust has as its companion, interest: interest in finding out for ourselves how to let go of that which limits us. And in every moment of letting go, faith, confidence and trust deepen, becoming stronger, and our hearts open just a little bit – or maybe a lot. Now we need to be asking ourselves, what is it that will nourish and sustain this process in the long term? When our hearts open, we see more and feel more, and we are also faced with more questions. In the beginning it was fine to run on the energy of inspiration, but as we progress, we find such a source of energy unsustainable; new ways of supporting ourselves on this journey need to be found.

SUPPORTIVE STRUCTURES

7.1

SHARED ASPIRATIONS

As I begin writing the seventh and final part of this book, I find myself pondering on how, by March 2021, I will have been abbot of this monastic community for three decades. A reader who has been helpfully checking what I have written recently recognized this fact and mentioned it by way of appreciation. I am grateful for his thoughtfulness. Earlier on in this compilation I described some of the challenges we have had to deal with here on Harnham Hill, and maybe hinted at the many more that have come our way. Attempting to establish and maintain a spiritual community in twenty-first century Britain has not been easy work. There have been many times when I have doubted whether I had what it takes to keep going. However, at this point, what stands out for me is how fortunate I am to have been put in this position. Thank you, Ajahn Sumedho, for sending me here in the first place; thank you to all the sangha members who put up with me as I have attempted to give shape to this community; and thank you to the trustees and supporters who provided the food, the fuel, and all the material means for maintaining this venture.

In many unexpected ways, being put in this position has helped me learn how to surrender more fully into serving the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha; it has supported the cultivation of wisdom and compassion. In my early twenties, when I was wondering if I would ever manage to find a way to live in this world that didn't feel foreign, I would sometimes think in terms of a biological model I had been taught when I was still at college; the concept of an ecological niche. I seem to recall the teacher giving us an example that was something to do with nitrogen-fixing bacteria living on the roots of clover plants. The reason this biological model struck me as relevant, however, was because it demonstrated how different organisms can find mutually beneficial ways of coexisting, in a state of balanced reciprocity. It occurred to me that finding such a 'niche' for myself in life would mean finding an environment that obliged me to develop those qualities that I truly needed to develop, and, in the process, I would make a useful contribution to the world in which I was living.

GIVING TO AND RECEIVING FROM COMMUNITY

It turns out that being a Theravada Buddhist monk, and, in particular, a leader of a monastic community, has been my niche. The precisely stated precepts of the monastic order require that, as monks and nuns, we continually work on developing mindfulness, restraint and reflection. At the same time, in the process of making an effort to cultivate those qualities, we are contributing, in a modest but nevertheless significant way, to the sanity of this world. Not everyone

is going to want to live in a spiritual community such as this; however, given all the support and encouragement we continue to receive, it would appear that the example of a renunciate community in the midst of a secular, materialist society is still appreciated.

Dhammapada verse 122 says,

*Do not ignore the effect of right action, saying,
"This will come to nothing."
Just as by the gradual fall of raindrops
the water jar is filled,
so in time the wise become replete with goodness.*

The deep benefits that can be derived from living in spiritual community are not always immediately obvious. It can take a long time for our habits to change. As in the example mentioned earlier of a small, apparently insignificant acorn turning into a glorious oak tree, we don't necessarily see the change taking place in real time. Some of the benefits might be immediately apparent, but others could take decades, or even lifetimes, to manifest.

In the scriptures there is an incident recorded of the Buddha staying with a small group of his disciples, and his commenting on how harmoniously they were living together. Perhaps that state of harmony was particularly pronounced for him since a short while earlier he had walked out on a group of monks who refused to stop bickering with each other. Indeed, they had told him to leave. The Buddha enquired of these

monks who were living harmoniously how they managed it. They replied that they all made an effort to watch out for each other. They explained how they regularly recollected the benefits which accrue from keeping in mind the well-being of those with whom they are living.

As reported earlier, when Bani Shorter, a Jungian psychoanalyst friend of our monastery, once spoke to me about her appreciation of spiritual community, she referred to it as ‘a harmonious resonance of shared aspiration.’ At the time we didn’t discuss her comment in detail so I can’t say for sure that I fully understood what she meant by that expression, but I can confidently say that over the years I have felt glad for the many benefits derived from living in cooperative spiritual community. There have been times when I have felt as if harmonious spiritual community generates a sort of rarefied atmosphere that nourishes beings who live within it. Almost as if being part of such a community contributes to an elevated quality of awareness. I don’t want to sound too flaky here, but I do think the point is worth considering. If we appreciate how this particular quality of goodness might emerge from beings who share an aspiration for awakening and are living together in harmonious communion, then we will want to contribute to and protect that communion.

So long as our insight into the Buddha’s teachings is not so well established that we can totally depend on ourselves, our spiritual companions help protect us from falling into delusion. In Dhammapada verse 354, the Buddha points out, *The gift of Dhamma excels all gifts*. Being blessed with the

company of true spiritual friends, and having access to a well-practising sangha are part of this gift of Dhamma.

True spiritual companions do not necessarily conduct themselves in the way our worldly friends might; they don't encourage us to indulge in heedless habits. For instance, if we are caught up in a flow of speaking in an unkindly manner about someone, a Dhamma friend might just go quiet for a while and leave us feeling awkward. In that quiet space which we have been offered, hopefully we will catch a glimpse of the consequences of compromising our commitment to training in right speech. The contracted, deluded character that we often experience ourselves to be was conditioned by the relationships that surrounded us in our early life. To untangle ourselves from misidentification with this conditioned character, we benefit greatly from the company of those who share an aspiration for awakening. Hence the Buddha's emphasis on cultivating spiritual friendship.⁹⁷ If we are concerned with finding structures that will sustain us on our journey, building and protecting spiritual community ought to be high up on our list.

Such work will, inevitably at times, be difficult, but it is worthwhile. It requires that we be willing to go against the current of our conditioning. Although it can be hard work, when we truly surrender ourselves into it, we grow in self-respect. It is easy to follow habitual ways of acting and speaking, the same as it is easy to scratch a wound that feels itchy when it is healing. Without skilful restraint we won't

build up the potential required for a new way of seeing to emerge.

*Whoever is intent on goodness
should know this:
a lack of self-restraint is disastrous.
Do not allow greed and misconduct
to prolong your misery.*

Dhammapada v.248

It is not always because of a lack of good intentions that spiritual communities fall into disharmony; often it is a lack of skilful restraint. And, conversely, it can be the presence of skilful restraint that means communities succeed.

It is tempting to think that we will live happily and harmoniously together if we all like each other. That is never going to happen, at least not for very long. Sooner or later we will find ourselves in the company of someone we find irritating. With skilful restraint, we will be in a position to reflect on how liking and disliking are conditioned, unreliable and unstable. It is embodied mindfulness, skilful restraint and wise reflection that build harmonious community – not being surrounded by people that we like.

In the early days of living in monasteries in Thailand I observed how Tan Ajahn Chah built the monks' meditation huts (kutis) with a significant distance between them, emphasising isolation. For young Thai monks I imagine this was quite difficult to tolerate, since they are a very social people;

they find it hard to be alone. The Westerners who came to join the monastery, on the other hand, often loved not having to see anyone or talk to anyone; we tend to be rather more individualistic and can find it annoying when we have to put up with others. It occurs to me that, when considering whether we might benefit from living in community or living in solitude, we need to know our motivation. Are we avoiding relationships out of a balanced appreciation for the benefits of quietude, or are we strategically avoiding the pain we feel in the company of others? And from the opposite perspective, are we associating with others because we genuinely find the company of spiritual companions nourishing, or are we using them to distract ourselves from the pain we feel when we are alone? Are we capable of both living with others and living alone? I am reminded of what Tan Ajahn Chah would say if one of his monks was complaining about not being able to practise because he had been sick. 'If you can't practise when you are sick, then you can't practise when you are healthy. If you can't practise when you are healthy, then you can't practise when you are sick.' Likewise if a monk had to spend time away from the monastery in the city, and complained that he couldn't practise while he was there: 'If you can't practice in the city, then you can't practise in the forest. If you can't practise in the forest, then you can't practise in the city.' In other words, we should not cling to ideas about suitable conditions for practice, but determine to work with whatever is happening. Obviously this is an ideal that he was presenting and not something to be made into a fixed position. Such ideals are for helping us orient our lives.

Sometimes when Tan Ajahn Chah spoke about living in community, he compared the frustrations that are inevitably experienced to the friction that stones in a riverbed undergo as they are tumbled; in the process their sharp edges are gradually ground down; those stones become smooth and agreeable to hold. Likewise, those who choose to work creatively and constructively with the frustrations of community living can learn how to fit in with, and are welcomed by, any community they visit.

Acknowledging this point about developing a willingness to keep practising, whatever our circumstance might be, does not mean that we should expect everyone to want to live together. That, again, would be idealistic. There is such a thing as natural affinity. We all approach spiritual community with our own set of abilities, assumptions and limitations. It took me a number of years before I realized that many people join a monastery because they want to avoid having to deal with the difficulties that arise out of human companionship. While I was enthusiastically interested in finding ways of living cooperatively with my fellow *samanas*, many of them were equally enthusiastically seeking solitude.

PRACTISING TOGETHER AND ALONE

Accordingly, some monasteries emphasise solitary practice; other monasteries encourage group practice. From what I have observed, generally speaking, during the seven years that constitute the first three stages of training – *anagarika*, *samanera*, *navaka bhikkhu* – it is to everyone's advantage

if trainees spend most of their time in a monastery that emphasises group practice. This observation is based partly on my having noticed how, sadly, a number of monks become quite senior in the training before they recognise that they have some untidy loose ends that require attention. By that I mean they might, for instance, have unacknowledged authority issues or biases (more on that later). They could even be in a position of leadership and be exercising authority over a community before they get around to owning up to such unaddressed aspects of their character.

Living with others is bound to put us under pressure, and it is when we are under pressure that weaknesses in the system show up – as when a doctor who wants to check the strength of our heart prescribes a stress test. Community practice stress-tests us. Once we know our strengths and weaknesses then we are more likely to make skilful choices as to whether we go on living in community or spend more time in solitude.

Also, generally speaking, there are two ways of using solitude: one, as a means of accessing ease and well-being so as to deepen our practice; two, as an *upaya* for turning up the pressure so we get to see what unreceived aspects of life have been stored away in unawareness. Or, as the Buddha put it in Dhammapada verse 239,

*Gradually, gradually,
a moment at a time,
the wise remove their own impurities
as a goldsmith removes the dross.*

Being surrounded by others, friendly or otherwise, can serve to support us or undermine us, depending on where we are at in practice.

Mentioning as I have that generally speaking, in my view, junior monks and nuns should spend the first three stages of their monastic training living in community, is very much in keeping with how I understand Tan Ajahn Chah's teachings. He himself benefitted from spending time alone; however, as far as I could discern, his emphasis was on each individual finding out what works: what takes us to the point where genuine letting go of fixed positions takes place. People are different, but particularly in the early years of training, it is wise to follow what our teachers recommend. Of course, this also accords with the spirit of what the Buddha laid down when he required that monks, during their first five years, spend the Rains Retreat period living with an elder monk.

The tricks that our minds play on us can be very deceiving. When we live in community we are more likely to receive helpful feedback from others and are hopefully less vulnerable to believing in any deluded notions. When we live alone, we might be entertaining ideas about how well established we are in practice – even be delivering profound Dhamma talks to ourselves – but that doesn't mean that when we are under

pressure we won't crack. We might enjoy living alone for a number of years, but then if we were to suffer an accident, who do we assume would take care of us? Or if we needed our teeth done, who would be paying for the work? If we are assuming there is someone who will take care of those things when they are needed, then we are already indebted to them, and part of right practice means honouring those on whom we depend. Living alone can be very appealing so long as we are reasonably young and healthy; it might not be the case once we are older. Then again, perhaps it will work out OK. What matters is that we are motivated by honesty and gratitude. We all depend on others who have protected these teachings and passed them on to us; our job is to show appreciation by sincerely surrendering ourselves into the practice.

ATTENTION TO STRUCTURES

One of the first decisions that Tan Vipassi and I made when we initially arrived here at Harnham was to reconfigure the breakfast routine. As at Chithurst, things here were set up so that everyone – sangha and lay guests all together, with monks and novices wearing our formal robes – sat in lines, with the abbot on a raised platform at the head. To my mind it generated a rigid atmosphere and didn't at all conduce to ease of communication. The midday meal was arranged in a similar manner and I was confident, for a number of reasons, that that was how it should be. But I wasn't confident that it was helpful to have this earlier meeting set up that way.

I had observed that there were no other opportunities during the day when just the monastic residents were all together without guests present, which struck me as a pity.

When at first the change was made and the sangha started meeting informally, with the laity taking breakfast in their accommodation next door, I heard that it hadn't gone down so well with all of our guests. I understand that visitors find it supportive to spend time with the sangha, but if the monastic community is not being properly nourished – and by that I mean on an interpersonal level, not just with power-porridge⁹⁸ – then it could lead to disharmony. Within a very short period of time, I was informed that the guests were now enjoying a more relaxed atmosphere at breakfast and appreciated not having the sangha there all looking so serious. Ever since then, breakfast time has become our regular house meeting. With a structure that is less formal and an atmosphere more relaxed, it is easier to check in with each other. That is not to say breakfast is a consistently jolly occasion, but it is better than it was.

When monks and nuns fail to develop a sense of belonging within their community, they are more likely to become disaffected. This is partly why I have long considered it a priority to pay attention to such dynamics as how we meet with each other. The excessive fascination that some *samanas* have for using social media is, I suspect, an expression of their search for relational sustenance. That is just an observation on my part, since as far as I know nobody has done a survey on the subject. Thankfully, generally speaking, there is still a good level of restraint exercised within Tan Ajahn Chah's

branch monasteries in the west and we regularly review the influence technology is having on us.

Most people will be familiar with the conventional saying, ‘the survival of the fittest’. The assumption that ‘the fittest’ means the toughest, is unlikely to stand up to scrutiny. Being tough is no guarantee that you will survive; sooner or later you will need to depend on the support of others. Maybe it is better to understand ‘the fittest’ as meaning those who have learnt how to cooperate.

. . .

Earlier I attempted to explain how fundamentally important I have found it to be that all of us, those living the monastic life and those living the life of a householder, find ways of meeting our conventional need for community – the need to feel like we belong. Monks and nuns who ‘have gone forth from home to homelessness’ are not magically released from such relative psychological needs. Maybe they will eventually arrive at a state of awakening whereby they are freed from the painful consequences of identifying with their personality, but if they attempt to override that condition by clinging to ideals, they might find they slow down their progress towards liberation. In the following pages, I would like to offer further reflections on some of the skilful ways in which we can support ourselves and each other. Also, I hope to be able to usefully identify some of the obstructions and distractions we might meet along the way.

7.2 STAYING IN TOUCH

Another structural change made early on after arriving at Harnham was at the monastery's Trust meetings. I suggested that before the meetings began, we might briefly check in with each other on a personal level; also that we could start each meeting with a short period of meditation. As spiritual director of the Trust I was invited to attend meetings but didn't have any voting power. The trustees were obviously interested in how I saw things and regularly consulted with me before any decisions were made. For the most part it felt like a functional meeting. There were a few teething issues but they were eventually ironed out. My suggestions to set time aside to meet each other before turning to business matters, and the short period of meditation, were aimed at avoiding having the meeting lose the connection with the spirit of the spiritual life. All of us were there because we shared a faith in the validity of Dhamma practice, but if we were not careful, concerns about funds and future planning had the power to overshadow that faith. During the checking-in periods it was helpful to listen as the trustees spoke about their lives

and the issues they had to deal with, and I think they were keen to hear how it was for me, dealing with the day-to-day demands of being abbot. I believe this small modification to the procedure of the meeting contributed to our having a good and supportive context within which the business could be efficiently conducted. I am glad that slight structural adjustment was made and continue to be impressed by the competence of our trustees. Some of them travel all the way from Glasgow, Edinburgh, even London, several times each year, to offer their skills. Without them I doubt that the monastery would still be here. And it is a credit to their commitment that most of them have been on the Trust for many years, thereby contributing to a sense of stability in the community.

LIVING TOGETHER HARMONIOUSLY

One of the most oft-quoted teachings from the Buddha that I have heard within our group of Western monasteries is from the Aparihaniya Sutta,⁹⁹ *‘As long as the monks meet often, meet a great deal, their growth can be expected, not their decline. As long as the monks meet in harmony, adjourn from their meetings in harmony, and conduct Sangha business in harmony, their growth can be expected, not their decline...’* These two sentences appear at the beginning of a discourse by the Buddha in which he lists the seven causes for the growth (or decline) of the sangha. These words, and those of Tan Ajahn Chah, on how to live together in harmony, have no

doubt informed the ways in which our communities outside of Thailand have taken shape.

Throughout the 1980's and 1990's branch monasteries continued to be established. By the year 2000, five monasteries¹⁰⁰ had been started in Britain, two more on continental Europe, one in the US, one in Australia and one in New Zealand. The significance of the teachings quoted above was becoming increasingly evident, not just because of that cluster of disrobings which occurred towards the beginning of the 1990's, but also because the greater the number of branch monasteries, the more complex our community became. We needed each other to help with navigating the complexities.

To this end, the monasteries under Ajahn Sumedho's immediate auspices – Cittaviveka, Amaravati, Aruna Ratanagiri, Hartridge, Dhammapala, Santacittarama – formed a body called the Elders' Council Meeting (ECM). As the number of residents at this group of six monasteries increased, so did the number of issues calling for attention. When this body was first formed it was referred to as the Abbots' Meeting and, as the name suggests, comprised the abbots of the six monasteries. This initial Abbots' Meeting then morphed into the Theras' and Theris' Meeting (to accommodate senior nuns) and eventually into the ECM. These days, in the latter formation, if a community has four or more *samanas* resident, then a second representative of that community (so long as they have eight or more vassa) can also attend meetings. This structure introduced a helpful element of community representation – it wasn't just the abbots and perhaps their

deputy – the second representative was to be someone whom the community had elected.

As I already explained when describing the 1993 gathering at Wat Pah Nanachat, consensus is the underlying principle when it comes to decision-making. The ECM has been meeting twice a year now, for nearly fifteen years, and I can't recall any decision ever having been made on the basis of a vote. I can recall our deciding to delay making a decision and give each other more time to consider the matter being discussed. Each meeting has an agenda which is supposed to be shared with community members in advance of the meeting, and a synopsis of the meeting is then to be reported back to each community afterwards. Any committed community member is entitled to submit a topic for discussion at an ECM.

This present structure of the ECM works well in terms of helping us all stay in touch. Many of the issues we deal with might not appear to be of world-shattering significance; however it can be over apparently very small matters that community members fall out with each other. Even in the time of the Buddha, communities of monks had major disputes over matters that, from the outside, looked very minor. If a schism does arise within the sangha it is considered extremely unfortunate; all community members are encouraged to go to great lengths to try and avoid it happening in the first place. Our ECM gatherings serve well the need to maintain open channels of communication between our communities. So far, this has meant that when difficult issues do appear, we already have the means in place for handling them.

Regarding the larger world-wide community, as already mentioned, these days there are fifteen Branch Monasteries,¹⁰⁰ including Wat Pah Nanachat, who maintain a connection with each other and aim at offering mutual support. The structure of the meetings and the degree of interaction is continually evolving, not least because those leading the various communities keep changing. The first generation of elders who trained under Tan Ajahn Chah are now stepping back and taking a much less hands-on role in our communities.

Also, as technological communication becomes more efficient, questions are being asked about whether we really need to keep meeting quite so often, with us all travelling to the same location. The recent v-BAM (virtual Branch Abbots' Meeting) was very successful in terms of being able to talk with each other and reach decisions on matters such as ascribing official 'Branch' status to a new monastery, but the opportunities such virtual meetings provide are minimal compared to those provided when we are actually together in the same place. Much of the benefit of the 'same location' meetings come not from those periods spent sitting around going through agenda items, but in between, over tea or when going for walks in twos and threes. These days there are also questions being asked about our contribution to environmental degradation through the use of air travel, maintaining standards of modesty, and the physical strain involved with international travel.

The nexus within our world-wide communities is generated by our shared interest in concord. Because of that interest

we are motivated to stay in touch, which, in turn, maintains the channels of communication necessary for handling the questions that keep arising. Nobody knows how human society is going to develop over the next few decades, and for the monastic sangha to survive, in my opinion, cooperation is not just nice, it is truly essential.

OUR NEIGHBOURS

Returning now to the dynamics within our small community on Harnham Hill, it is clearly important that we remain mindful of the relationships between monastic residents, but it also matters that we are alert to how we are perceived by our neighbours. Our neighbours are not likely to feel drawn to understanding the teachings of the Buddha if they feel threatened by us.

When first I arrived in this community, it quickly became apparent that some of the locals were very happy to have us here, while others were not quite so delighted. For example, we always felt welcome when, once a week, community members went on alms-round to the nearby village of Whalton. Gwenda Gofton, the wife of Canon Gofton, the vicar of Whalton, was usually working at the Village Hall when the monks arrived, and would regularly offer a tin of beans or some bread into the alms-bowls. Most times, the caretaker of the hall, who lived next door, would then invite the monks in for a cup of tea and a biscuit before also placing offerings in the bowls. Once a year, around Christmas, our whole community was invited to the Vicarage for a meal. Gwenda

had gone out of her way to learn how to properly pronounce the Thai words for addressing members of the sangha and would warmly greet us at the door with her hands raised in *añjali*. She and her husband couldn't have been more friendly. When he was younger, Canon Gofton had lived as a monk in an Anglican monastery, and it was clear from our conversations that he felt an affinity with what we were doing. Those Christmas meals and the conversations were a joy.

Generally on Christmas Eve, several sangha members would walk to the nearby Bolam church¹⁰¹ for the midnight service. At that time of year people seem to be a bit more relaxed and allow their sense of reserve to drop. The majority of the local people appeared happy that we made the effort to turn up for that traditional event.

Not everyone approved of the vicar of Walton associating himself with us. On one occasion (before I arrived here) when Canon Gofton had generously offered to drive the monks back to the monastery, his car was involved in a serious accident requiring an air ambulance. A car approaching from the opposite direction had cut the corner causing a near head-on collision. Some of the parishioners apparently interpreted the accident as a sign confirming their beliefs that their vicar should keep his distance from us. Fortunately nobody was too seriously injured, but we did introduce a new agreement whereby monks travelling in cars must store their bowls in the boot and not hold them on their laps. I think the worst injury on that occasion was to the chest of one of the monks from the impact of his bowl that he was

holding. Thankfully the incident did nothing to compromise the rewarding relationship between the monastery and Canon and Gwenda Gofton.

Another of our near neighbours was David Robson who owned one of the largest farms in the immediate vicinity. I understand his family is known to have been in the area for several hundred years. David and his wife Charlotte were always very welcoming. Whenever the monastery was holding a festival we would ring them up to let them know, and they would generally allow us to use their fields for parking. We made a point of sending them a card afterwards by way of appreciation.

We also made a point of sending out a greeting card each New Year, to them and our other neighbours, to let them know that we didn't take them for granted. Even when it looks like everyone is getting along alright together, it is useful to check that we are not taking each other for granted. Regular reaffirmation of friendliness can be like watering a houseplant: without it, there is a chance the plant will wither and die.

GROUP DYNAMICS

Over the years, there have been monks who have come to live here who have suggested that we ought to introduce group meetings which give sangha members an opportunity to talk openly about how they are feeling about themselves, each other and the monastery. As I wrote much earlier on in these notes, I am somewhat familiar with such group activities. I am also familiar with what the Buddha had to say about the

supportive conditions that need to be in place before offering critical feedback to others. In my experience, even when a meeting is ostensibly about sharing where individuals might be at within themselves, it easily ends up with things being said that cause more harm than good. I am not suggesting this is the intention, but it can be the effect. The Buddha spoke about this, saying that before we point out someone else's faults, we should check to see if it is the right time, the right place, using the right words, and that we speak with the right motivation. In my view, it is unlikely that, without very skilful facilitation, a sizeable group of monks are all going to be in that sort of space at the same time. Unfortunately I have witnessed elsewhere how, when not handled well, such meetings taking place within the sangha have caused considerable emotional injury. Accordingly I tend to be cautious about them.

That does not mean I hold to a fixed position on all such group meetings. From what I have heard, several of our communities do hold such meetings and it may well be that they are skilfully facilitated and support community concord. If community members all share an interest in being part of such a meeting, and they are equipped with a similar understanding of the process, and they have sufficient skill in exercising non-aggressive speech – then yes, I can well imagine that they could be constructive.

In the past I have personally benefited from participating in psychotherapeutic style group meetings, but not with people with whom I have been living seven days a week. Some of the

group work that sangha members have suggested is designed for people who want to put time aside, step out of their usual living environment, and pay money with the expectation they are going to be helped to solve a problem. That might work well in those cases. However, as far as I am concerned, the culture of the contemplative community that we are living in here is predicated not on goal-oriented ambitions, but rather on trusting that conflicts can resolve themselves when everyone is cultivating the qualities of integrity, embodied mindfulness, skilful restraint and wise reflection. Even within a community where everyone does share such aspirations, it is still likely that there will be times when we want to speak directly with each other about things that trouble us. Hopefully it will happen without our projecting too much of our personal pain onto others. (I expect there will be more to say on the subject of projection later on.)

IN TOUCH WITH NATURE

While considering this topic of 'keeping in touch', I would like to comment on keeping in touch with nature. Most of the meditation monasteries in Thailand are to be found in forested areas, not in cities. The majority of monks and nuns who are focused on developing meditation are surrounded by trees and wildlife. In some monasteries in the West, where the weather is not as mild as in Asia, we tend to spend a lot more time indoors. I am not saying this is necessarily an obstacle, just that we should be careful.

In recent years a lot has been written about the Japanese practice of ‘Forest Bathing’.¹⁰² Here at Harnham we probably don’t approach the exercise of intentionally walking in nature with the same refined degree of appreciation, however we are intent on cultivating a nature reserve for the purposes of increased well-being. Penny, a long-time good friend of all of our monasteries in Britain, trained in ecology and we have benefited greatly over the years from her counsel. When Harnham Lake became part of the monastery in 2010, the surrounding land was nearly all covered in grass and the soil was saturated with fertilizer. Thanks to Penny’s skilful guidance, in only a few years that land has been turned into a rich and diverse woodland with beautiful pockets of wildflowers. It is an excellent location for nature walks and, perhaps in a few more years as the trees get bigger, will even be suitable for forest bathing. It is already a great location for three meditation huts.

Whatever shifts in understanding we might experience while sitting meditation, the process of integrating those new understandings calls for mindful movement of the body. Our muscles, our nervous system, our breath, have all been conditioned over the years by the activity of our deluded personalities. As we hopefully grow out of our old ways of compulsive self-centredness, and into more mindful and embodied awareness, those conditioned pathways of our body’s energy need to adjust. Physical exercise and spending time in nature can help in that.

For many of us, when we first encounter meditation techniques we are already suffering the condition of being misidentified with the thinking mind – in other words, we are disembodied. If we are fortunate, our teachers will point out the risks of meditating in ways which can lead to losing touch with our bodies even more. Possibly you might have read the traditional Buddhist scriptures and think that the Buddha taught we should contemplate the loathsomeness of our bodies so as to let go of them; but you should also know that the Buddha laid considerable emphasis on mindfulness of the body and bodily movement. If we are already lost in our heads, then it is perhaps that aspect of the teachings that we should be emphasizing. Without being well-grounded in our bodies, we are at serious risk of meditation making us more imbalanced.

Those who take up monastic training at Harnham are told that when it comes to the way they use their personal time – when not engaged in community work or group practice – they need to make effort in four areas: formal meditation, formal study, learning chanting and physical exercise. Just how they address the area of physical exercise is up to each individual. Some might regularly perform a number of circumambulations of the boardwalk around Harnham Lake. Others might prefer to practise Tai Chi or Qigong or yoga in their rooms. Some go for a longer walk to the nearby Bolam lake.¹⁰³ Particularly in the early years of my being here, when there seemed to be endless difficult issues to deal with, almost daily I would walk the twenty minutes to Bolam Lake, do at

least one circumambulation, and then walk twenty minutes back again. Often I noticed how different I felt on the return part of the walk. Whatever aspects of community life had been bothering me on the way out, appeared much more manageable on the way back.

This same welcome sense of groundedness and feeling refreshed is no doubt what used to motivate Ajahn Puñño to go out on long walks. These days, like me, he also has physical limitations which means he doesn't walk quite so far, or at least doesn't carry a backpack as he used to. Even in the middle of our Winter Retreat, it wasn't unusual for Ajahn Puñño to head off, sometimes in thick snow, towards the Kielder Forest¹⁰⁴ where he would find a bothy and settle in for a few days. Whatever direct benefits he might have received from his periods of meditation, I am convinced it was the feelings of renewal resulting from spending time in nature and being in touch with his body, that drew him out of the confines of the monastery's buildings.

If, for whatever reason, we are obliged to spend a lot of time indoors, it is still possible to develop a habit of regular physical activity. For a period when I was a young monk living in Thailand, I was committed to doing the yoga routine known as 'Salutations to the Sun' (*Surya Namaskar*). I would do it fast so that not only was my body stretched, but also my breathing. I recall thinking at the time that if ever I found myself leading a spiritual community I would encourage absolutely everyone to perform this routine daily. These days my knees don't permit me to do this exercise, but thankfully

I have my Qigong routine that I am confident contributes to keeping me healthy.

Keeping our body healthy and free from debilitating disabilities is one reason why it is sensible for all meditators to establish a habit of regular physical exercise. The second reason is because it helps keep us grounded. Anyone who has been meditating for a while, or who has perhaps gone through a minor or major mental breakdown, knows how dangerous it is to allow ourselves to become lost in our inner worlds. The third reason for maintaining a form of physical discipline is that it supports the process of integrating insight. It is one thing to have inspiring experiences while sitting on your cushion, but the process of learning how to truly *live* those insights can take time and a different quality of effort.

All of us encounter challenges as we travel along this path of purification. It is wise to equip ourselves in advance and not wait until we find ourselves confronted by the demon of doubt – the feeling that we are sinking into the swamp of uncertainty. Regular physical exercise and spending time in nature are ways of readying ourselves to meet these challenges.

SILENCE AND SOLITUDE

Before leaving this topic of ‘staying in touch’ we ought to consider the place of silence and solitude in our practice. It might appear counter-intuitive to raise the subjects of silence and solitude in the context of contemplations on staying in touch with each other. However, the truth is, as we might know from what the Buddha had to say in the

Sutta of the Acrobats,¹⁰⁵ if we are not truly in touch with ourselves, we will feel obstructed in our efforts to relate with others. Conversely, when we are capable of meeting ourselves, without being driven by habitual patterns of grasping and rejecting, then we will be better able to truly meet others.

There are many means of learning to meet ourselves in our experience of limited being, some upon which I have already commented, such as physical exercise and disciplined breathing practices. Placing ourselves in solitude can be another very effective way of highlighting those areas of our character which we have been avoiding. For some people, solitude and silence will be a rewarding relief which energizes them. For others it could feel intensely threatening. For all of us, to periodically put ourselves into such an environment – by way of experiment, not to prove anything, but because we are interested in learning about ourselves – can be productive. I emphasize ‘by way of experiment’ because there can be a tendency to engage such practices idealistically – blindly clinging to an idea that they are good for us, or because somebody else did it and had such and such a result. We are all different. Surely what is important is finding out what works in our case. Dhammapada verse 160 says,

*Truly it is ourselves that we depend upon;
how could we really depend upon another?
When we reach the state of self-reliance
we find a rare refuge.*

All residents in our monastery are invited to make use of the meditation huts down by the lake so as to experiment with solitude and silence. It is essential, however, that nobody is ever required to do so. Intimidating someone into spending time in solitude and silence can be similar to pressuring someone to go into therapy. Similar to meditation retreats, these *upaya* can support deepening of our practice, or they can create further obstructions. Nobody should ever feel obliged to go on retreat. The Buddha instructed his monks that imposing silence on the community is inappropriate. Here we do usually have seven or eight weeks of group silence, spaced throughout the year, but they are referred to as periods of ‘noble silence’, and usually everyone structures their own formal meditation routine. Since the encouragement to be silent during those periods is nearly always honoured by everyone, I feel satisfied community members are finding them beneficial.

One of the most basic principles of the monastic life is simplicity. I think it was in an early publication of the *Fragments of a Teaching*³¹ booklet by Jack Kornfield, that I read that Tan Ajahn Chah defined Buddhism as: ‘simplify your life and watch your mind’. We might be keen on watching our minds, but it takes skilful effort to keep life simple.

7.3 WHY STUDY?

*A master is one who has let go of all craving
and clinging to the world;
who has seen the truth beyond forms,
yet is possessed of a profound knowledge of words.
Such a great being can be said
to have finished the task.*

Dhammapada v.352

As I begin addressing the topic of ‘study’, I should explain what I mean by it in this context. Here I am referring to the whole territory of acquiring the information needed so as to safely engage in the practice; this includes, but is not limited to, the Pali Canon. Studying could take the form of reading, but it could also come in the form of conversation and listening. Reading books is one of my least favourite activities, but I do like listening. Often these days, before retiring at night, I will listen to an audio book via Bluetooth into my hearing aids.

When I was leading that Q&A session at the Buddhist Society Summer School back in the 1980s and discovered some members of our monastic community didn't know even the basics of the Pali tradition, it revealed a gap in the training that we were offering. Anyone who was born and grew up in a traditional Theravada Buddhist culture would have already absorbed many of the basics before they put on robes. In the context of the West we need to take care that adequate training in the theory of *Buddhadhamma* is being properly instilled, and not allow aspirants to naively assume that feeling inspired is enough. The theory of practice is like the highway code: we might own a wonderful car and be enthused by the thought of driving to some stunningly beautiful destination, but if we don't know which way we are supposed to turn when we reach a roundabout, we might not arrive at that destination. It matters that we are adequately informed before travelling too far along the way. Without study, we leave ourselves vulnerable to falling into delusion. As we regularly recite in our Evening Chanting,

*The Dhamma holds those who uphold it
from falling into delusion.*

On the other hand, however, too much study and we could be feeding delusion.

HOW MUCH STUDY?

So just how much study of the theoretical teachings do we actually need before we can feel confident that we are

sufficiently well-informed? Our mental curiosity can be a support for our commitment to the inner journey or it can create obstructions. The point of study is to strengthen and protect ourselves from falling into delusion, not for it to become another addiction to distraction.

Tan Ajahn Chah instructed his Western disciples that during the first few years they should avoid reading anything other than the books on monastic discipline. It would be a mistake, though, to interpret this instruction as dogma that everyone must always abide by. There were also occasions when he spoke about the importance of the right amount of study. He likened it to a medical practitioner needing to have done a certain amount of study before trying to heal people. Study alone is not enough, but practice without study is likewise not suitable.

Presumably Tan Ajahn Chah had observed how tormented many of us were by sceptical doubt and knew for himself how feeding mental curiosity, when it is an obsession, is not the path to freedom. By saying we should avoid reading, he was trying to show us that there is a 'right amount' of study, and that it is simply not the case that by reading more we will find more contentment. Many of us tend to assume that we need more information before we will feel satisfied. Hence Tan Ajahn Chah's observation, 'The reason you don't know anything is because you know so much.' By 'knowing so much' he was referring to our knowing 'about' things, not knowing in terms of the kind of insight that dispels all doubts.

The study of the theoretical teachings is the first of the three stages of training: study, practice and understanding (*pariyatti, patipatti, pativedha*.) If we consider the practice of Dhamma to be like watering and weeding our vegetable garden, and the arising of understanding to be like eating the vegetables, then study of the teachings is like digging the water channels so that when it rains the seedlings will be nourished. Study is about preparation, and we bypass it at our peril.

We do, however, need to be honest about our motivation: are we seeking mental clarity regarding the path of practice so we can walk the way with confidence, or are we indulging in our compulsive craving for conceptual certainty? It is unlikely that anyone else can really tell us how much study we need. They can make suggestions, but we have to keep reading our own hearts and minds until we find our own answer. If we are being resolutely honest, then study can serve as a support and not be a mere gratification of intellectual cravings. The 'right amount' is enough to assuage sceptical doubt to the degree that we are able to trust in the teachings and in ourselves. That trust then supports us as we face our doubts, fears and confusion. It will help sustain us when we reach that point where we are obliged to endure the (apparently) unendurable.

A NEW RENDERING OF THE DHAMMAPADA

Towards the end of the 1990s I embarked on a project of producing a new rendering of the Dhammapada.⁴ As already mentioned, our annual Forest Sangha calendar regularly used Dhamma quotes from translated teachings of Tan Ajahn

Chah. I also wanted to use verses from the Dhammapada. Issues around providing proper accreditation of translators of those Dhammapada verses was one of the main motivations for my deciding to attempt to compile my own version.

There are a great number of translations already in print and many of them by highly qualified Pali scholars. One thing that stood out for me, though, was just how different most of them are. They might all have been produced by skilled scholars who would have all been referencing the same Pali texts, yet there is an evident lack of uniformity.

The other thing that stood out was that they read as if they were teachings given for men only. I am aware that up until relatively recently in the history of the English language, the term 'he' was used to refer to both men and women, but in today's use of the English language that is no longer the case. I am not a scholar, but I am aware that the Buddha stated his teachings were to be made available to everyone. So with the help of a good friend who knew more about Pali than I did, Thomas Jones, I embarked on a project of producing a new rendering.

For the most part, the recognized translations that I consulted were: from Burma, the version by Daw Mya Tin and the editors of the Burmese Pitaka Association;¹⁰⁶ from Sri Lanka a version by Ven. Narada Thera (B.M.S. 1978), and also one by Ven. Ananda Maitreya Thera (Lotsawa 1988); and in later editions I consulted Ajahn Thanissaro's and Bhante Buddharakkhita's¹⁰⁷ versions. For each verse I looked into the Dhammapada Commentary¹⁰⁸ that is traditionally associated

with it. Even though these stories are generally considered to be apocryphal, I feel they nevertheless contribute to understanding the spirit of the verse.

The exercise of producing this new rendering of the Dhammapada was thoroughly rewarding. It was a privilege, and I am grateful for the opportunity it gave me to study what the scholars and practitioners have preserved. Here we are, after more than two and a half millennia, and these teachings are still available for us to study and be guided by. I do not claim that what we produced was a new translation of the Dhammapada: in several places I have emphasised this is a new ‘rendering.’

The Dhammapada is a good book to read for those who are new to Buddhism. However, the book that I most frequently recommend is *What the Buddha Taught*, by Ven. Walpola Rahula. This small volume, along with Ajahn Sumedho’s *Four Noble Truths*,¹⁰⁹ provide a clear and accessible foundation upon which anyone interested in answering life’s great questions can build their practice. When I stop to think about it now, I consider myself extremely fortunate to have come across these teachings. Sometimes I have expressed the opinion that the Buddha’s teachings on the Four Noble Truths are the ultimate articulation of wisdom ever uttered by any human being throughout all of human history. To be accurate, though, by the time Siddhartha Gotama offered these teachings, he was no longer a normal human being – he was a Buddha.

These two books mentioned above come top of the list of required reading for anyone who wishes to take up monastic training here at Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery. There is a wealth of resources available these days in the form of printed and on-line translations of the Pali Canon, and many of these make up the remainder of our reading list.

EXTRACURRICULAR STUDIES

When it comes to applying these Four Noble Truths in daily life, I am indebted to a number of people who have worked in the field of psychology. It is hard to find adequate words to express the appreciation I feel for the understanding that they have so generously shared. The associations and friendships I have developed over the years with various psychotherapists, psychoanalysts and psychiatrists, have helped me learn how to not just conceptualize about suffering and its cause, but to truly meet it, here and now, in the body-mind. In many ways they have demonstrated how to convert a chronic sense of feeling obstructed into a more connected relationship with life. And I am not just referring here to my own painful experiences of feeling obstructed, but also to those of many other Dhamma practitioners I have met who have been struggling to find realistic ways to deal with the difficulties they encounter in practice. Considerable agility of attention is called for as we are challenged over and again by the many coarse and subtle expressions of delusion. Without agility we can easily be fooled by old habits of clinging into forgetting

about the Buddha and once more falling into the trap of going for refuge to ‘my way’.

These days I almost never think about reaching the final goal of complete freedom from suffering, but that does not mean I have lost faith in it. It means that I feel my faith is sufficiently well established, so that I don’t need to always be dwelling on it. What I do often think about, though, is how to be more accurate and sensitive in my investigations of suffering, my own and others’, where and when it arises.

So what studies and strategies support the letting go of our misguided identification with the body-mind? How can we more readily access expanded states of awareness within which we can study our own hearts and minds?

Perhaps we received instructions from a teacher who was full of confidence and genuinely believed they knew what was good for us. Out of respect we gave ourselves into following their instructions, only to discover that our anxiety level increased and our mind was anything but peaceful. Does that mean there is something wrong with us? In the *Visuddhimagga* by Ven. Buddhaghosa,¹¹⁰ a well-known text within the Theravada tradition, it is explained that there are various character types – at least six: greedy, hating, deluded, faithful, intelligent, and speculative (*The Path of Purification*, translated by Bhikkhu Ñanamoli, Buddhist Publication Society, Part two, Chapter 3, para. 74). The text helpfully describes how a person’s posture when standing or walking reveals their character type; it then goes on to explain how a particular style of accommodation will be suitable

and supportive of progress for one character type, but not necessarily for another. One style of meditation could be suitable for one person but not for another. From this we should understand that just because one particular approach to practice works for one person does not mean it will work for all. It is indeed an expression of fundamentalism to insist that one approach will suit everybody.

Earlier in this book, when discussing my brief time at Waikato University (Part 3, Chapter 3), I commented on the apparent conflict between what Buddhists mean when we talk about letting go of the self and what psychotherapists mean when they talk about the importance of developing a strong sense of self. I offered an explanation of why that apparent conflict need not be a problem if we look deeply enough into what each discipline – spiritual practice and psychotherapy – is saying. A few decades ago it was common for Buddhist meditators to speak critically about psychotherapists, and some psychotherapists were disparaging of Buddhist meditators. Thankfully, these days a level of mutual appreciation has evolved whereby each discipline is better informed as to the other party's perspective. Many meditators have now come to realize that the aspiration to let go of attachment to the body-mind can be inhibited by deeply held mental habits which do not always disappear even after many years of meditation. Some psychotherapists have realized that having a balanced and rounded personality is no guarantee that they will remain cool, calm and collected when confronted by the deepest and most difficult question: what is life and death really all about.

It is also becoming apparent that the more imbalanced and confused we human beings are, the more extensive a repertoire of skills is required to untangle the knots of mental, emotional and relational complexity. It is probably safe to say that those who have not struggled so much with confusion require less complicated remedies; they might even have difficulty understanding why traditional straightforward spiritual instructions are not enough. Some people, and I count myself as one of them, grew up to find they were carrying a burden of unreceived life, of unacknowledged suffering – perhaps what might be referred to as heavy kamma. Those who find that the formula of ‘make your mind peaceful and look at impermanence’ fails to produce clarity and understanding, need to feel allowed to be agile in how they approach their spiritual practice. They need to be daring and brave, and at the same time gentle and caring, and not be intimidated by those who were perhaps less confused to start off with and who have trouble relating to their struggles.

GOAL- AND SOURCE-ORIENTED PRACTICE

There is a small village in Yorkshire called Ampleforth which lies about two hours drive south of our monastery and is where Ajahn Puñño grew up. Just outside this village is Ampleforth Abbey and College^{III} where Ajahn Puñño did most of his schooling. On one of the occasions during the 1990s when I visited Ampleforth, we walked over to the abbey and met with Father Cyprian Smith. Besides being the novice master at the abbey, Father Cyprian was also a respected

commentator on Meister Eckhart and is known for his book, *The Way of Paradox*.¹¹²

I believe it was in the conversation we had on that occasion that I first became aware of the two distinctly different approaches to the spiritual life found within the Christian tradition: the cataphatic and the apophatic.¹¹³ The former is that expression of Christianity with which most of us would be familiar, characterized by positive affirmations about the nature of God and the spiritual journey. The latter is an expression of the journey characterized by non-affirmation – exemplified, for example, by Meister Eckhart and St John of the Cross – a path sometimes referred to as ‘via negativa.’ That conversation later stimulated in me a contemplation which eventually gave rise to the concept of goal- and source-oriented practice.

I think that visit might have taken place around 1999 because a dear Dhamma friend, Peter Fernando (known then as Samanera Dhammadaso), was living at Bodhinyanarama Monastery, near Wellington, New Zealand. He tells me that during the early months of the year 2000, I gave a series of talks on the topic of goal- and source-oriented practice. (See Appendix, ‘*We Are All Translators*’, for an edited transcribed version of those talks.) I suspect those talks were fuelled by the enthusiasm that emerged along with this way of viewing the different approaches to practice.

Because of that conversation with Father Cyprian, I discovered a fresh perspective on how, not just in Christianity but in many of the world’s great religions, there are similar

delineations: in the Zen school of Buddhism there are the Soto and Rinzai schools; in Tibetan Buddhism there are the Dzogchen and the ‘gradual’ approaches; in Hinduism there are Advaita Vedanta and the more dualistic traditions. Within Theravada Buddhism we have teachers who emphasize ardently striving to overcome all obstacles in pursuit of *jhanic* mind states which they trust will then provide the environment within which deep letting go can take place; and then there are those who advocate letting go of everything:

There isn’t anything and we don’t call it anything – that’s all there is to it! Be finished with all of it. Even the knowing doesn’t belong to anybody, so be finished with that, too! Consciousness is not an individual, not a being, not a self, not an other, so finish with that – finish with everything! There is nothing worth wanting! It’s all just a load of trouble. When you see clearly like this then everything is finished.

(Ajahn Chah, *The Collected Teachings*,³¹ p 478: Chap. 40, *What Is Contemplation?*)

My contemplations on goal- and source-oriented practice led to a more confident appreciation of how different character types require different approaches; as we see from the *Visuddhimagga*, there is nothing new about that. What a relief! I had spent many years feeling frustrated by the goal-oriented efforts I was making. A great many of the teachings within Theravada are couched in a language that appear to

endorse such an effort. Gradually it became clearer to me that this apparent conflict was not a conflict at all. The language used when talking about study, and that used when talking about practice, are different. The idea of suffering and the experience of suffering are worlds apart. If, for example, I am sitting in my cottage of an evening thinking about the tahini on toast that I might have for breakfast in twelve hours time, those thoughts just cause me to start salivating and to feel hungrier. The next morning, when I am actually eating breakfast, is an altogether different experience – it is nourishing.

It helps if we recognize the place of goal- and source-oriented efforts. We don't have to judge ourselves or others because we read or hear teachings about one style of practice and find them inspiring, and those about another style not so much. Probably all of us started out with an idea of a goal and that idea generated enthusiasm and motivated us to take on practices. For some, it seems to be useful that they maintain their relationship with an idea of the goal: it continues to inspire and support them in their pursuit of freedom. For others, as they move beyond the stage of initial faith in this path of practice, if they keep focussing on an idea of the goal, they become more confused. What inspires and supports them is not trying to get somewhere else, but trusting in being acutely aware, here and now. Intentionally trusting, not trying, replaces wilful striving as the primary motivator.

Those for whom trusting rather than trying makes sense need to prepare themselves to include everything in their

practice. For them, doubt does not have to be an obstacle, it is something to get interested in: ‘This is suffering. Can I sense the awareness in which this suffering is taking place? Or am I totally identified *as* that movement of mind that feels like doubt?’ Similarly with sadness: ‘Do I believe this sadness is ultimate, or is there a spaciousness through which this sadness is moving?’ ‘Am I still projecting attention out into the imagined future or can I exercise that subtle shift in focus that means attention is more here and now?’

Earlier I was asking, ‘What sort of studies and strategies might support the letting go of our misguided identification with the body-mind?’ Considering the difference between goal-oriented practice and source-oriented practice can lead to our feeling confident about the sort of effort we need to be making. From the outside, those who have faith in a source-oriented style of practice might appear to not be practising at all. In fact, sometimes I encourage meditators to spend time ‘not-meditating’. For all of us, our effort in practice can become subtly compulsive. *Bhavatanha* can be insidious and creep in without our realizing it, to the point where the deluded personality is driving our meditation. By way of experiment, it can be helpful to simply sit in a chair and consciously ‘not-meditate’ for twenty minutes: no special meditation posture, no meditation object, nothing in particular to contemplate – here and now, embodied awareness, just-knowing.

My experience suggests that if we are given permission to be agile in our approach to spiritual practice, there is a better chance we will be able to keep practice constant; we won't just be filling in time until we are next able to go on retreat. This applies both to those living in monasteries and to those living the householder's life. When we hold too tightly to an idea of progressing towards a goal, sometime 'out there', then we are not truly 'all here'. We are not fully in touch with what is happening, inwardly and outwardly, right now. We are not properly receiving and processing the data that reality is giving us. Worse still, we could be creating unnecessary limitations for ourselves.

Also, so long as we are not 'all here' we are not able to draw on the potential creativity that we have. If, after having spent a good number of years following the instructions that we were given by our teachers, we are still feeling obstructed, I would recommend turning attention around and getting interested in that very feeling of being obstructed. We need to be ready to look directly at the suffering, here and now; holding onto hopes about being free from suffering in the future is not enough.

One of the many forms of suffering with which I struggled during the early years when I was living near to Tan Ajahn Chah was the hesitation I felt about joining in with the other monks who were helping take care of him – such things as washing his feet when he came back from alms-round and cleaning his kuti. I say hesitation, but it felt more

like a disability. I really wanted to be close to him but felt obstructed. ‘Why can’t I just grab his foot and wash it and dry it like the other monks without making such a big deal out of it?’ There were possibly others who felt intimidated as I did; I couldn’t tell. What I did know was that I wanted to be part of the ‘in group’ who seemed unfazed by being close to the teacher.

It was unacknowledged fear of rejection that was getting in the way. In those days, presumably because I was still in a striving and overcoming mode of practice – rather than consciously feeling those feelings of fear and making an effort to sense the space in which those feelings were arising and ceasing, I expect I just tried to get rid of fear – as well, of course, as indulging in seeing myself as a failure for having such feelings in the first place.

So long as we are caught up in trying to transcend suffering and reach the goal, we are ignoring the Buddha’s teachings. *‘It is because you don’t see two things that you continue to suffer: not seeing dukkha and not seeing the cause of dukkha,’* the Buddha said. When we hold too tightly to the idea of freedom from suffering, we can mistake the experience of suffering to be a sign of failure. In fact the experience of suffering is the teaching. If I am feeling afraid that I will be rejected by the teacher, then feeling that very feeling, in the body-mind, is the message. That experience of suffering is ready, right now, to be received into awareness – to be met. If I refuse to meet myself there, and instead keep striving to develop states of meditative absorption, hoping that one day

I will transcend suffering, I could be throwing myself even more out of balance.

‘But what about how the Buddha taught us to strive on with diligence?’ you might think. Yes, indeed, we can read in the recorded teachings that the Buddha did say we should strive on with diligence, but what does that *actually* mean in practice? What does diligent effort look like? The Buddha elaborated on the different ways we might approach practice by giving us instruction of the ‘four right efforts’: There is the effort to give rise to so far unarisen wholesome states of mind, and the effort to protect already arisen wholesome states of mind; then there is the effort to avoid the arising of so far unarisen unwholesome states on mind, and the effort to remove already arisen unwholesome states of mind. When we look into what these truly mean in terms of how we apply ourselves, it should become clear that we need to be adaptable. For instance, the effort to protect an already arisen wholesome state of mind does not necessarily mean that, having experienced a moment of insight, we should be barging ahead aiming for the next one. It might in fact mean we ought to change gear, slow down, and contemplate the effect that this new experience is having on us.

Then, in the case of the kind of effort we make to remove an already arisen unwholesome state of mind, it might mean gritting our teeth and refusing to give vent to the impulse to speak unkindly to someone; or it might mean cultivating the patient recognition that we are not always able to get rid of mind states just because we don’t like them – there are

times when all we can do is bear with the unpleasantness and humbly wait.

It does seem that there are some people who are already sufficiently well grounded and integrated and have a genuine affinity with what we could call the 'transcendent approach'; but, again, it is naive to suggest that because such an approach works for them, it will work for everyone. Trying to force ourselves along a path with which we feel no affinity, might initially give rise to an increased sense of aliveness but eventually take us to a place of extreme vulnerability. Consciousness might become brighter for a while, but if mindfulness is not adequately embodied, when states such as fear arise, we cling to them and are drawn down into a vortex of terror. Or, instead of fear, if we encounter unacknowledged anger and cling to it, we risk becoming possessed by rage. Such potentized suffering is much more difficult to deal with.

We need not worry that spending time enquiring into our relationship with fear is an abandonment of our aspiration for awakening. When we fail to understand just where, when and how we are creating suffering by indulging in telling ourselves stories and then clinging to the emotions that appear as a result, we remain caught in a painful cycle, which can seem endless. If, conversely, our practice is informed by an understanding of how fear of rejection and desire for acceptance go together, then perhaps we will stop trying to get rid of these conditions and allow them to teach us how to let go. When we cling to fear of rejection, we generate and cling to the desire for acceptance. If we are lost in the desire

for praise and appreciation, we tend to become lost in the fear of criticism. Desire and fear go together like this.

As I was saying, most of us begin practice motivated by an idea of reaching some sort of goal. As we progress, we need to learn how to hold those ideas more lightly. The suggestion that we should let go of our idea of the goal might trigger the worry that if we don't hold fast to our aspiration, we will lose it. That is not very different from how, as children, we were afraid to let go of mummy or daddy's hand in case we fell over. Without letting go of a relative form of security, we will never learn to walk. Agility in practice means that, when necessary, we are ready to turn attention away from any idea of a goal or of making progress towards it, and are willing to fully feel our fear of failure, or rejection, or sadness, or loss – to skilfully and sensitively enquire directly into suffering.

Earlier, when commenting on the two months I had spent at Bodhinyanarama Monastery in New Zealand, in the year 2000, I referred readers to the edited talk (*We Are All Translators*) that can be found in the Appendix to this book. The transcribing and editing work on that occasion was undertaken by Tan Abhinando who was living at Bodhinyanarama Monastery at the time. We had met briefly before at Harnham when he was still an anagarika, but those two months were the first occasion of our becoming properly acquainted. Shortly after I returned to Harnham he sent me a copy of a poem he had written about the occasion of his seeing me off at the Auckland Airport. (See, 'The Inner Distance' in *When Everything Is Said*¹¹⁴ p 61.)

*Again I am standing unarmed.
Again I am standing paralysed
facing your last words.
Your open gaze,
our vulnerable silence;
from farewell to farewell
we feel for the inner distance
of a reality
that resists
all feelings.*

Sometimes we use prose to describe the process of inner investigation; at other times we write poems about it. Not long after that Tan Abhinando came to live at Harnham and stayed with us for about fifteen years. These days he is the abbot of Dhammapala Kloster in Switzerland. Thank you, Ajahn Abhinando, for your friendship.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE PROJECTION

Another psychological concept that I have found particularly helpful is that of projection. I have not studied the subject extensively, but that which I have gleaned from what I have read or heard has helped me a great deal to integrate into daily-life practice the Buddhist concept of clinging. For instance, what was really going on in my mind when I was too afraid to join in with the other monks in performing attendant duties with Tan Ajahn Chah? It wasn't as if he was going to whack me over the head with his walking stick if I didn't dry his feet quickly or carefully enough: so the reticence wasn't anything

to do with him. Out of unawareness I was mindlessly projecting onto him my longing for approval, which gave rise to the fear I wouldn't receive the approval. That mental process of compulsively projecting responsibility for that which is actually ours onto external objects, is happening much of the time. It is very useful to be aware of this. I perceived that I needed Tan Ajahn Chah's approval and, in so doing, became afraid of him. In Pali it is an expression of what is called *upadana*, (clinging), but we need much more than the concept. We need to learn how to skilfully inhibit that impulse to cling.

Not all projection is to be viewed negatively: there is such a thing as positive projection. When a child perceives their parents to be indispensable and they cling to their parents, that is suitable. If the parents are doing their job well enough, little by little, as the child grows, he or she will gradually learn that they have their own set of abilities: they do not have to totally depend on their parents. In other words, that which they projected onto those who cared for them is taken back, and the child, or teenager, or eventually young adult, learns to be independent. If the parents are not doing their job so well, because of their own unawareness, they cling to their child and fail to adequately mirror back his or her ability, and the development of the child is interrupted.

It can be helpful if Dhamma teachers also appreciate this principle. Naturally, in the beginning students project their ability onto those they perceive as being able to help them in their practice. The teacher's job is to gradually and skilfully

reflect back to their students that ability; in the process the students learn to find their own confidence and become independent of their teacher. When a teacher doesn't quite understand this process, they can become excessively keen to receive the adoration and respect that is being projected onto them, and instead of supporting their students' becoming independent, they encourage further attachments. It can feel very lovely to receive admiration from others, but teachers are not supporting their students' progress in practice if they are feeding on their projections.

Something similar can happen in the world of psychotherapy. It is understandable and even functional for a client to project onto their therapist that which they have so far not felt able to own within themselves. If the therapist is skilled in their work, they will be able to read the readiness of their client and, at the right time, reflect back that which has been projected out. Again, in the process the client grows stronger and more competent. If the therapist misreads the situation, or for other reasons of unawareness, their client could remain in therapy for much longer than is really necessary.

Equipping ourselves with an understanding of how we tend to project our ability/energy onto others, can show us how, where and when we can reclaim that ability/energy. Instead of making ourselves weak in somebody else's company, and possibly blaming them for what is in fact ours, we can apply mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection, and discover where the source of competence really lies: it is not in gaining approval from our teacher or being praised by others, it is in

seeing for ourselves, as we are doing it, exactly how we are causing our own experience of limitation.

Perhaps progress on the spiritual journey could be described as a process of gradually withdrawing our projections from external forms: rituals, teachers and traditions. Having said that, though, I hasten to emphasize the word 'gradual'. And if it is happening in the right way, it will not be 'me' that is withdrawing the projection; it is more likely to be a process of looking back and seeing, 'Oh, look what happened there.' The rituals, teachers and traditions are similar to our parents and therapists: they support us so long as we need them. If we have access to such precious supports in practice, we are truly fortunate. When we bow down to the Buddha image, we project out, in a positive way, our spiritual ability, and, if we are practising with embodied awareness, then the admiration and gratitude we express is reflected back to us, nourishing our confidence and commitment.

LOVING AND HATING

One of the trickier territories through which any human being ever has to navigate, is the experience of falling in love. This too is an area in which it helps if we understand the process of projection.

Most of us will be familiar with the phenomenon of falling in love and, generally speaking, it is assumed that when it occurs it is a wonderful thing. Without a doubt it can be a very powerful thing, but whether it is wonderful or not, in my view, warrants careful consideration. It is worth mentioning

that wearing robes does not mean we have escaped from having to deal with the experience referred to by the expression, 'falling in love'. I say this here so it is clear that I am not unfamiliar with how extraordinarily beautiful, and how potentially overwhelming the condition can be – also how heartbreakingly painful it can be.

From what I have seen, it is not love that we are falling into; it is pleasure. I prefer to reserve the word love for that open-hearted state that, for example, a parent might know when they gaze at their child. It is undefended, undemanding, generous, caring, kind. This beautiful state is more likely to happen with a newborn child, whose consciousness has not yet collapsed into being identified *as* the limited, contracted condition of defended egoity, than it is when we are in the company of an older person who has already assimilated the collective assumption that *we are* our ego. Yet that open-hearted state does still keep happening, not just when gazing at innocent babies. It might spontaneously occur whilst out in nature, or in an inspiring building, or on a meditation retreat. And, obviously, sometimes it does mysteriously occur between people who, much of the time, experience themselves to be in a limited, closed-hearted state.

Whatever triggers it, when it does happen and the heart is happy, the body feels pleasure. When two people simultaneously experience such happiness, a sort of resonance can be struck up which intensifies the happiness and potentizes the pleasure. It is this pleasure that, unless we are thoroughly well prepared, we fall into; and in my view falling into it is

not at all wonderful. It is unfortunate; that is, if we accept that by 'falling' we mean being identified *as* those feelings and becoming lost in them. If we cling to, or become identified as those pleasant feelings, we are no longer able to contain the intensity, and our heart projects the happiness out onto the other. When this happens for two people, at the same time, the experience is intoxicating. They start believing that the other person has power over them; and in a sense they do, because they have given them that power.

Because people rarely stop to investigate the reality of such an experience, they assume lots of things about it that are not valid. Falling in love, or falling into pleasure as I prefer to think of it, is generally celebrated as a good thing and people want it to last forever. But it never does last forever. In some cases, if both parties are committed to integrity, the relationship could evolve into something genuinely beneficial, but that requires a great deal of patience. Or perhaps the relationship morphs into something that is more manageable than amazing.

When the intensity of happiness which arises with the open-hearted state becomes too much to bear and we project it out onto the other person, we start saying such things as, 'I can't live without you.' It sounds irrational – because it is irrational. We have fallen into a condition of diminished responsibility. I am not saying it is necessarily wrong or bad, just that we are not quite all there when it happens, and it would be helpful if we understood that.

At the other end of the happiness-sadness spectrum, the same dynamic also occurs, but with very different consequences. When two people simultaneously experience so much sadness or anger or hurt that they can't contain it, they project it out

onto the other person and ‘fall into’ suffering. In this case they start saying such things as, ‘I can’t stand you,’ or ‘I can’t even be near you.’

Falling into *sukha* and falling into *dukkha* are really the same thing; both end in intense disappointment. But if we have a degree of wisdom, that disappointment can be turned around to our advantage. This is similar to how somebody who might have had a real reason to feel threatened by the possibility of death yet survived might speak about how grateful they are for the experience that they went through. At the time, their suffering might have been difficult to endure, but because they were well enough prepared, and they didn’t merely believe in the way things appeared to be, they received a precious lesson in life. So long as we are still clinging to feelings – agreeable or disagreeable – we are vulnerable to falling into delusion and will have to suffer the results.

Having shared my perspective on these matters, it might be assumed that I am saying there is something wrong with love. That would be like saying there is something wrong with the sun rising in the morning. The point I am making is not that there is a problem with being loving – being loving is an expression of selflessness – the trouble begins when we don’t have enough clarity and understanding to accurately recognize the causes of suffering; we fail to see how clinging spoils everything, including love. To have learned how to effortlessly dwell in the selfless, open-hearted state, would be to have learned one of life’s most important lessons. And

anyone who helps us learn to see how clinging obstructs all that is truly beautiful is a true spiritual friend (*kalyanamitta*).

. . .

To conclude these considerations on the place of study in the spiritual life, I want to emphasize the importance of our refuge in the Buddha. Our conscious commitment to the Buddha – that is, to selfless, just-knowing awareness – provides us with a point of reference around which we can explore and investigate our lives. Without that point of reference, the many intriguing, often intellectually fascinating theories about how to handle the difficulties of life, can turn into further fuel for self-inflation: by investigating ourselves we could become even more obsessed with our self-image. Personally, I consider the tried and tested teachings contained within the Theravada Buddhist tradition to be a reliable roadmap upon which we can depend as we proceed on this journey. Without such a roadmap we are vulnerable to becoming lost. With a well-developed commitment to the Refuges of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha at the core, we can trust ourselves as we enquire into what earlier on I referred to as extracurricular studies, and see which of them genuinely serve our aspiration for awakening. Also, we can see how those aspirations translate into serving the well-being of the world in which we live.

Often I have found it is not only the Dhamma books that I have read, or the discourses I have heard, that have been

so helpful in trying to make sense of the madness that our human family is currently having to face. The understanding found in the field of psychology has been tremendously useful in augmenting Dhamma teachings. Had there not been a degree of spiritual aliveness at the core, however, it is questionable whether much of what I studied would have been so helpful.

It is essential that we appreciate the profundity of the Buddha's teachings on the nature and the cause of our suffering. We need the basic principles of right view in place. With that right view at the heart, there is a better chance that our efforts to resolve our many difficulties will be productive. These days, I find I am not especially intimidated when confronted by such challenging questions as, 'Why the increase in fundamentalism?', 'What is causing the current collective identity crisis?', and 'How did this present pandemic of narcissism come about?', to name just a few of the topics that recently have people wringing their hands and furrowing their brows.

Sometimes I fantasize about how psychologists might one day apply their admirable skills to doing the R&D on the subject of integrity. I try to imagine what effect it could have on society as a whole, if, as mentioned earlier, instead of IQ meaning merely Intelligence Quotient, it stood for Integrity Quotient, and was a recognized metric used for assessing the employability and overall worth of an individual. Surely we can do better than assess somebody's worth by looking at their parents' wealth, or their education, or their popularity

on social media. Similar to how the subject of mindfulness has made its way into everyday life, a shared recognition of the importance of cultivating integrity could bring many benefits – individually and collectively. I would suggest that if we did have a shared appreciation of how integrity is conducive to self-respect and inner stability, it would lead to a rebalancing in society, which, in turn, would redress injustice and inequality: mental health issues would become more manageable and the equitable distribution of wealth could be a natural outcome. Religion used to serve the well-being of society by instilling the sort of virtues that protected its members from becoming overly narcissistic. For large portions of society now, conventional religion has almost no place. For the sake of our survival, we need to find new ways of protecting ourselves from our folly.

The right amount of study of Dhamma can provide the impetus and the encouragement to cultivate our spiritual faculties (*saddha*, *viriyā*, *sati*, *samadhi*, *pañña*: faith, energy, mindfulness, collectedness, discernment) so that we are truly able to meet our suffering, here and now, and let it guide us towards a clearer and broader perspective on reality.

7.4

EXPECT THE UNEXPECTED

In 1973, when I was experimenting with back-to-the-earth communal living in Australia, and my Texan friend from Sydney persuaded me to join him on my first meditation retreat, I definitely was not anticipating discovering a wonderful new dimension of life. When I entered my first Rains Retreat with Tan Ajahn Thate in 1975, it didn't occur to me that I was about to have my world-view turned upside down and inside out. In 1991, when I joined the sangha at Amaravati for their Winter Retreat, I was not anticipating the shift in perspective that introduced me to the possibility of living life as a servant⁴⁰ rather than always trying to be a master. As far as I am aware nobody foresaw that between 2008 and 2010, thirteen members of our siladhara community would disrobe or leave. The unexpected can happen at any moment. And this is true for all living beings. So what qualities do we need to develop in order to not just survive, but to awaken to true wisdom and compassion? How do we make ourselves ready so we can learn what we need to learn from life? In this

chapter I would like to reflect more thoroughly on the theme of agility.

CONTRAST AND AGILITY

In the world of photography, contrasting shades contribute depth to an image, in music, contrasting tones produce richness. In our spiritual life, contrasting modes of practice lead to agility and aliveness. In the previous chapter I commented on the importance of cultivating agility of attention. Without it we risk developing in an imbalanced manner. For instance, we might feel confident when we are practising in solitude, but become confused when in the company of others, and vice versa. Well-established agility of attention supports our ability to practice whatever the situation might be.

Tan Ajahn Chah was known for sometimes upsetting the rhythm of the monastery by changing the routine, often without warning. He was aware of our tendency to become complacent. With complacency comes lethargy, and he was keen to keep everyone on their toes; he was encouraging us to develop agility.

Anyone even slightly familiar with Tan Ajahn Chah's teachings will probably be aware of the emphasis he placed on the contemplation of impermanence. There are Westerners who look to Tan Ajahn Chah as their teacher, who have never visited Thailand and cannot speak the Thai language, but from having studied his teachings know the words, *Mai nae*: 'Not sure.' In *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*,³¹ there

is a talk titled, 'Not Sure' (p 599), in which Tan Ajahn Chah says,

So I say, 'Go to the Buddha.' Where is the Buddha? The Buddha is the Dhamma. All the teachings in this world can be contained in this one teaching: *aniccam*. Think about it. I've searched for over forty years as a monk and this is all I could find. That and patient endurance. This is how to approach the Buddha's teaching – *aniccam*: it's all uncertain. No matter how sure the mind wants to be, just tell it, 'Not sure!' Whenever the mind wants to grab on to something as a sure thing, just say, 'It's not sure, it's transient.' (p606)

Paying close attention to the universal law of impermanence is one of the most important ways in which we can prepare ourselves to be ready to meet the unexpected. So long as our minds are still under the sway of unawareness, we continue to seek certainty and security in that which is inherently uncertain and insecure. The conditioning that we have been subjected to, ever since we were born, means we easily believe in the way things merely appear to be. Without wise reflection we fail to see beyond the apparent level to the truth of impermanence, and make the mistake of blindly attaching to things that don't last: possessions, opinions, preferences, relationships.

Sometimes I follow Tan Ajahn Chah's example and alter the monastery routine without a lot of warning. Efficiency

in the monastery is about trying to maintain our hearts in a state of good-enough clarity. If, for example, there is a lot of building work taking place and community members are getting frazzled to the point where speech is becoming heedless, we might just halt the project and have a week of noble silence. Even if halting the building work at that stage is inconvenient on a material level, it might be the right thing to do from the perspective of training awareness.

Here at Harnham during the seven or eight weeks of noble silence that we observe throughout the year, the answerphone is switched on, the internet in the office is switched off, and we remind ourselves that the inner life is the priority. Just as we might stop eating food for a week for reasons of physical health, abstaining from speech is a way of putting our personalities on a fast. For those who are not used to it, the first few days of noble silence might feel uncomfortable, but after a while it can feel easier. Then we shift back into talking mode again, which offers an opportunity to study how our personality reconfigures itself. The contrast can provide a useful perspective on the dynamics of personality.

It is the same principle that determines group practice versus solitary practice and living at the main monastery versus living in a kuti down by the lake. This principle of contrast influenced the trips we used to take up to the Scottish Highlands. One of our trustees owned a small thatched roof cottage at the mouth of Glen Lyon and generously offered us the use of it. For several years, usually during the summer, most of the community would pack our alms-bowls and camping gear

in the car and head north for a week. The cottage was small which meant some of us slept outside in tents. Observance of our monastic code of discipline didn't change, but the kind of effort we made while we were hiking and sitting around a campfire did have to change, and it was invigorating. Then after a week, we would pack everything back in the car and return to the monastery, to the same routine of morning chanting, morning chores, group breakfast ...

We have an expression in English, 'A change is as good as a rest.' This is the same principle again: it is not necessarily the case that we have to do something special like go on an intensive retreat before we can feel refreshed and renewed; simply doing something distinctly different can be enough. In a recent conversation with my good friend the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Kevali, I asked why he kept sending junior monks to train here at Harnham for a year or two, and he said it was because he felt the contrasting experience was useful for them. Since he has been sending them here now for several years, I think it is safe to assume the monks find it helpful.

TRAVEL AND AGILITY

For the first ten or so years that I was living in this monastery, we had major building projects ongoing. There was often a lot of noise and a lot of mess, and having a break was one of the motivations for my spending two or three months each year overseas. Also, when I was not here to make all the decisions, the rest of the community had an opportunity to learn. But

on a personal level, when I reflect back on those years of travelling, one of the most attractive aspects of that time was the way the contrasting environments and cultures energized me. It took energy too, not just making preparations to travel through four or five different countries – sometimes more – but it also generated energy.

I mentioned early on in this book how shocked I was when I witnessed the contrast between the affluence and comfort of Darwin in Australia, and the poverty of Portuguese Timor. That was the shock of awakening from a dream that I was having, and though in that case it wasn't pleasant, it was productive. The energy I experienced from travelling was something similar: the newness of the situations in which I found myself required letting go of assumptions and making an effort to stay open and alert.

For several years we would put our monastery car on the ferry at the nearby Port of Newcastle upon Tyne and take an overnight trip across the English Channel to Hamburg, in northern Germany. After a few days there we drove down to Kandersteg, in Switzerland and stayed with Ajahn Tiradhammo at Dhammapala Monastery. Sometimes those trips involved giving talks to Buddhist groups in Hamburg or Heidelberg. I found it invigorating to have to adapt to having my talks translated into a language that I totally didn't understand, and found it interesting learning to adjust to the ways different people presented themselves. I recall that the Germans appeared riveted when I gave a talk and were intensely keen on asking questions, which was altogether

different from the reserve of the British. On one occasion, not long after East Germany had opened up, we took a detour via Berlin to Dresden where I saw the Zwinger¹¹⁵ that Jutta had helped rebuild after World War Two. On another occasion it was a treat to walk the Philosophenweg¹¹⁶ in Heidelberg and reflect on the famous thinkers who had used that path.

Besides finding energy in having to let go of preconceived ideas, I also found a sense of vitality whenever an idea that I had long held onto, a preconception, encountered the reality.

Seeing the Eiffel Tower in Paris was one of those experiences; something shifts when the image in my brain that was produced by a two-dimensional picture on a page collides with a multi-dimensional reality. There were no longer just colours on a thin piece of paper, or fantasies in my head; now there was the smell of Gauloise cigarettes, the sound of the French language being spoken, and the site of this massive cold steel construction – the reality of Paris was thoroughly different from the idea of Paris. Somehow in those situations, when a concept impacts with the associated physical reality, it feels as if energy is released; such contrasting perceptions are conducive to aliveness.

On a return journey from a visit to New Zealand, my Kiwi ex-monk friend Mark invited me to stop over in Beijing, where he was working as a doctor. He was keen for us to travel together to Japan. While we were there I was struck by the composure and sensitivity of the women who served tea on the train from Tokyo to Kyoto. Similarly, the dignity of two businessmen bowing to each other on a sidewalk matched the

understated beauty of everything in the Muji Supermarket. Kyoto also has their own Philosopher's Walk,¹¹⁷ and it was a privilege to be offered a place to stay nearby.

Those impressions of Japanese culture powerfully contrasted with the experience of being in China. It was great to spend time in both countries, but I find myself wondering, 'They are such close neighbours, how can human beings be so different?' Well, in many ways we are that different; maybe I was beginning to see that letting go of ideas about us all being the same was part of growing up. It can be a symptom of mental laziness to ignore the complexity and uncertainty of life.

Whenever a monk arrives at the main International Airport in Thailand, he is greeted by the immigrations officers with hands held in *añjali*, and is invited to conveniently pass through the diplomatic channel. In contrast, a twelve-hour flight later, on arriving in New Zealand's Auckland Airport, it was likely that I would be taken aside and left standing as my bags were thoroughly searched. And for several years, whenever I entered Australia's Sydney Airport, I was regularly told that my passport was listed as having been stolen. Generally the immigration and customs officers in New Zealand and Australia were courteous and, although having to face them after a long flight did take some effort, I appreciated how they conducted themselves.

My lasting impression of the United States of America is that it is a country of extremes. During a visit to Los Angeles I was invited to view an exquisitely beautiful and refined

Japanese garden; around the same time I was taken to visit the vast and extraordinary Monument Valley¹¹⁸ and Joshua Tree⁷⁴ National Parks. The memories I have of the three or four times I entered the U.S. are all of feeling thoroughly unwelcome; it seemed that the immigration and customs officers were trained to make you feel like a criminal. Once I was in the country, however, every American I met was exceptionally friendly and hospitable. Contrasting with that overt friendliness was the unawareness of so many Americans regarding anything that happened outside of their country. Despite its phenomenal wealth, the majority of Americans have never travelled abroad. In 1995 when the Oklahoma bombing¹¹⁹ took place, I happened to be staying in LA and was surprised at the difficulty so many Americans had in accepting that the perpetrators of that devastating blast were not foreigners. Then there is the fact that the US has some of the most liberal laws on freedom of speech, at the same time as being the world leader in incarcerating¹²⁰ members of its population.

India must be the overall world leader in contrasts of the senses: colours, smells, sounds. I was grateful to have the chance to pay my respects at the Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya, but found my feelings for India hadn't changed much since those days in Indonesia when my fellow travellers were drawn there like bees to flowers; I just wanted to go to Japan. The sensory overload, the glaring disparity of wealth, and the way there always seemed to be someone trying to grab my attention, made visiting there very hard work.

Giving talks in South Africa where everyone in the audience spoke English, was strangely difficult. Giving talks in Italy, where only a few in the audience spoke English, was a joy. I can't say I have a clear sense of why, but it was noticeable. I recall that after a talk I gave in Milan, one of the attendees approached, and, with a radiant smile and exuberant gestures, poetically described how uplifted his heart felt because of what I had shared, and how grateful he was.

Nothing like that has ever happened to me in the nearly forty years of my living in Britain. That is not to say that one is better than the other; what I find interesting is the contrast and how it can quicken useful contemplation. In case I sound like an ingrate, however, I do want to comment on how good I consistently have felt when returning to these shores after having been away. As mentioned already, I stopped travelling several years ago, but I can still recall the sense of relief that came once I was back in Britain. To avoid the risk of sounding insincere I will be restrained here in my expressions of gratitude, but I often regularly reflect on the privilege and pleasure I feel on being permitted to live in this country.

DEVELOPING AGILITY

The way I have been discussing agility could sound as if I am saying it is something new – something outside of our Theravada Buddhist tradition. This is not the case. In the discourse on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness we are taught to exercise mindfulness regarding the body; regarding feelings; regarding the quality of awareness; and regarding

those Dhammas that lead to awakening. Then there are the four *iriyapatha* or ‘modes of movement’: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. Seeing Buddha images in these four postures can serve to remind us that we should be making constant effort in practice – not just when we are sitting on our cushion. Also they can remind us that awakening can take place in any situation, at any time. Then there is a fifth posture, as displayed by the Buddha’s attendant, Ven. Ananda – the between sitting and lying down posture. After an extended period of making ardent effort to free his heart from all remnants of unawareness, Ven. Anando accepted that it wasn’t going to happen, so he decided he would lie down and rest. Just before his head hit the pillow, his heart was freed and he arrived at full awakening.

Another way of approaching the development of agility based on what the traditional teachings tell us, is to reflect on these two things: the consequences of not having cultivated it, and the benefits of having cultivated it.

I mentioned already the example of someone who is adept at practising in solitude but struggles when they have company. Similarly, some people will feel confident when conditions are conducive to maintaining a degree of *samadhi*, but when conditions are not conducive, they struggle and fall into old habits of resistance. If our preferences are never challenged, we remain vulnerable. Over the years when I was travelling, my preferences were significantly challenged every time I had to pass through Customs. This was especially true in New Zealand where an extremely strict biohazard policy is

enforced. One monk I knew was fined something like \$200 because he omitted to declare his wooden *mala*-beads as he entered the country. After having travelled there several times I learnt to not wait until we were about to land before writing down whether I had worn my sandals on a farm in recent weeks, and to list the herbal remedies I was carrying. However, I never managed to feel relaxed as I passed through Customs. The experience did serve to highlight limitations in my practice.

There were other occasions when I enjoyed receiving confirmation of the benefits of the training I had been doing. On an occasion when I was staying with my parents and was out for a walk, a carload of louts drove by and one of them threw an egg at me. That was different from the way I was used to being treated, but I was pleased to discover it didn't disturb me too much. Fortunately I was on my own; the thing that did disturb me was how upset my mother would be if she knew. As I recall, I managed to get into the house and wash my robe without her finding out. Later when I was describing the incident to Ajahn Karuniko, he reminded me that the same thing happened to Her Majesty the Queen when she was in New Zealand.

We don't need to be engaged in international travel to reflect on the advantages of having cultivated agility and the disadvantages of having not cultivated it. I have stopped flying now for many years, but there is no shortage of situations in which my agility is tested. Every time we don't get our own way is an opportunity to strengthen our commitment to the training – to deepening our refuge in the Buddha: selfless

just-knowing awareness. Every time I don't get my way is a time to stop and check: am I going for refuge to the way of the Buddha – *Buddham saranam gacchami* – or am I going for refuge to 'my way' – *attam saranam gacchami*?

APPLYING AGILITY

Over the years, I have found myself in the middle of a number of intense dilemmas: powerfully uncertain situations with potential for far-reaching consequences, where I am required to make a decision. Perhaps these were partly due to my having been put in a position of leadership whilst still young and unprepared, or maybe it was just happenstance. What I can say, though, is that those situations tested me deeply, and in that testing I learned a lot. I would never have chosen to have to face those dilemmas, but now I can feel grateful. On occasion the situation involved telling somebody something that they did not want to hear: it was my job to tell them, and yet I couldn't see how to do it without hurting them. In most cases there was also a risk of my being hurt in the process. It is not appropriate to describe here the details of some of those incidents, but I think the situations are worth mentioning by way of demonstrating the advantages of developing agility. For example, occasionally it has fallen to me to tell someone that I thought it is time for them to take leave of the community, and that is really difficult. At least as far as I am concerned, wearing robes is not a guaranteed formula for progressing in the spiritual life; indeed, for some it can be a hindrance. Likewise, if I don't feel confident that an applicant for ordination will benefit from the pressure

they will be under, I won't support their taking up robes in the first place.

On one occasion when I was staying at a monastery abroad, I had the very difficult task of telling someone that I thought they had exhausted their options in trying to make this lifestyle work for them. The monk was not junior in the training and I did not want to be the one to tell him. This was a time long before mobile phones and the internet, so consulting with elders in other monasteries was not realistic. I didn't know how to say it or when or where to say it. Thankfully, the years of developing patient endurance, restraint and reflection enabled me to sit with the not-knowing, feel the not-knowing, breathe through the not-knowing – until one day, almost without planning, the words were said. Very quickly after that, things fell into place and, given the potential for it being otherwise, the dilemma resolved itself without too much difficulty.

Another situation occurred involving my parents. It wasn't so much a dilemma, but nevertheless had the potential for triggering considerable conflict. (I appreciate that those who are unfamiliar with the culture of evangelical Christianity might not recognize the dynamics involved.) It was a festival day at the Auckland Vihara on Harris Road and members of the Auckland Theravada Buddhist community had invited me to receive the midday meal and offer a Dhamma teaching. They also took it upon themselves to invite my parents to participate. I was the only monk there on the occasion, and it felt surreal to see my parents sitting on chairs in the front

row with almost half the floorspace of the room covered with food offerings that were about to be given to me. This was the first time my parents had seen me officiating in that capacity; they had seen me in their home, but there, in their eyes, I was still very much Keith. Here I was Ajahn Munindo and the Sri Lankans, Thais and Burmese were utterly unrestrained in their expression of gladness and devotion for ‘their monk’. I feel that my appreciation for and practice with agility contributed to my being able to honour the occasion, receive the gestures of devotion, accept the offerings of food, and deliver a befitting Dhamma talk. I heard afterward that one of my parents had commented about how impressed they were that I had managed to deliver the equivalent of a twenty minute sermon without notes – saying, ‘He has got the gift of the gab’.

MEETING DUKKHA WITH AGILITY

All of us have, locked away in our basement of unawareness, varying amounts of unacknowledged *dukkha* – unreceived suffering. If we are fortunate enough to reach the point where we find it intolerable to continue to deny it, and we feel inspired to sort it out, we should be prepared to feel intimidated, on several levels at the same time; it can be dark down there. Depending on how much we have stored away and for how long, for some it can be very frightening. We have put ourselves under pressure by engaging in such spiritual exercises as chanting, concentration, restraint, fasting, and extended periods of silence, so we should expect to meet that

which we have previously denied. If we are equipped with agility of attention we will be better placed to know where, when and how to stop resisting the suffering – how to fully receive it and let go.

It is useful to be ready to enquire: is it present-generated *dukkha*, or old unacknowledged *dukkha*, or adopted *dukkha*? What I refer to as ‘present-generated *dukkha*’ is that which we are actively generating, right here and now, by resisting what is. ‘Old unacknowledged *dukkha*’ is still suffering, but this term refers to the backlog of suffering resulting from our having tried to avoid it in the past. When we don’t understand this particular aspect of *dukkha* we can become confused. For instance, a minor incident of sadness can trigger an unexpected extreme reaction of deep grief. That small moment served to open the door to the room in our basement in which we had previously stored all the sadness we either didn’t feel ready or able to receive.

The expression ‘adopted *dukkha*’ is a term I use to refer to the suffering we pick up, so to speak, from our environment. For example, all human beings feel fear, and if, particularly in our early life, we were surrounded by adults who carried within them a heavy burden of their own unacknowledged fear, there is a chance our fear can become potentized as a result. We are still responsible for it – this way of thinking about *dukkha* is not a way of blaming others – but I find it helps in understanding why our struggles can, at times, seem so onerous.

Analysing the type of *dukkha* that we are dealing with makes spiritual work more manageable. We also need to be ready to enquire into the whole body-mind, not just the mind. Letting go of *dukkha* is what we are interested in, but holding on in ways that cause *dukkha* is constantly taking place on different levels.

Hopefully most meditators learn early on that we need to let go of the stories we tell ourselves in our heads. Perhaps we have already made an effort in that direction and are skilled in inhibiting the story-telling, yet still do not feel open, trusting and engaged in life. Especially for many men, it can come as a surprise – and not an easy task – to admit that they have been numbing their hearts. To allow sensitivity, without indulging in sensitivity – without making it into a ‘me’ who is sensitive – is a task requiring embodied awareness. That can be challenging when we are so used to being identified with our thinking mind.

If we have some competence in letting go of the story-telling in our heads and are able to allow a balanced quality of sensitivity on the heart level, then there is the third dimension of our body. Early on in life, as we attempt to navigate our way through the uncertainty of our inner and outer worlds, we often develop unconscious habits of compulsive controlling of our breath which develops into chronically contracted muscles. Learning how to let go on the physical level is a different skill from letting go mentally and emotionally. We need agility of attention to be able to discern where we are resisting. I can recall around the age of eight or nine, when

at school we stood in rows for morning assembly and were taught to recite loudly a three line ditty which was aimed at developing good health. This included an injunction to always be pushing back our shoulders and keeping our heads held high. Also there was the encouragement to leave the bedroom window open at night. It was many years before I discovered that somewhere along the line I had developed a rigid pattern of restriction in my upper back. I have heard that pushing back one's shoulders and tilting the head upwards is a means of blocking feelings: if you look at soldiers on parade, that is the posture they adopt. (Of course it is also possible that the perceived obstruction in my back had nothing at all to do with those morning assemblies.)

RAPPROCHEMENT

So far, in this chapter we have considered this theme of agility in terms of it being a Dhamma principle, as well as the advantages of having developed it and the disadvantages of having not developed it. A lot of this consideration has been in terms of our subjective or inner experience. Before ending this contemplation, I want to mention a couple of examples of the benefits of bringing this aspect of practice into the realm of our outer world – our relationships.

Part way through the winter retreat of 1999, I woke up one morning from a powerful and disturbing dream; it featured Luang Ta Maha Bua. That fact alone made it noteworthy; my dreams are not usually about Dhamma teachers. The most noteworthy aspect was that in the dream the acclaimed and

virtuous teacher, Luang Ta Maha Bua, was secretly running a fishing business on the side. The recognition that my mind had created a story about such an honourable being behaving so dishonourably really shook me. Twenty years have now passed since that dream so the details are a bit faded, but I suspect I didn't have much of a choice other than to feel into what was behind this unsettling image. Very quickly my mind presented me with the message that it was me who was behaving dishonourably: I was presenting myself to the sangha and to the laity as the abbot of Harnham monastery – delivering Dhamma talks and offering guidance – and at the same time, I was harbouring thoughts of resentment towards my teacher, Ajahn Sumedho. The disharmony between us wasn't a total secret; it had been going on for a number of years. Although I wasn't being overtly unpleasant to Ajahn Sumedho, neither had I made amends for a disagreement that had occurred some years earlier. The message sounded loud and clear: this is intolerable and dishonourable and I have to try to make things right again.

To my great relief, I easily managed to get through to Ajahn Sumedho by phone and, without attempting to explain anything, I simply asked if it would be OK if I came down to Amaravati to see him. Although our monasteries were on retreat he said that was fine. So with another young monk, Tan Revato, as a companion, we took the two or three hour train trip south. It was a cold and snowy winter and I was heading into the deep unknown.

The only thing I remember about the meeting was that it quickly became apparent that neither of us felt any need to talk about whatever had happened in the past. I was able to bow and offer my sincere respects and gratitude to my teacher once more, and it was over – after years of iciness, we were at ease in each other’s company. Thank you yet again, Ajahn Sumedho.

It could have very well been otherwise. Holding onto hurt feelings and projecting the pain that we cause ourselves onto another is very common in our world. My holding on for as long as I did caused disharmony in our community and I feel remorse for that; I regret that it took me so long before I was able to do the right thing. At the same time I feel very grateful that I was eventually able to let go and make amends. That the impasse had been resolved was also noticed by others; a senior monk in Thailand who had been aware of the difficulties even sent a gift to our monastery in appreciation of what he referred to as a rapprochement.

Another surprising and pleasing resolution occurred a few months ago. At an early stage in preparing notes for this book, I realized there were gaps in my memory, and probably the only person who could help fill those gaps would be my sister, Jennifer, a pastor with the Assembly of God community in New Zealand. We hadn’t spoken in the nearly four years that had passed since our mother had died. The recollections I had of every interaction with my siblings over the past forty-five years were all without exception unpleasant. As a result, any time the thought of being in touch with them arose in my

mind, I quickly dismissed it. Initially, when I started visiting New Zealand to see my parents, I had tried to have a normal, friendly interaction with them, but it never happened. On this occasion, when the thought occurred to me that I could contact Jennifer to discuss details, I was delighted to find there wasn't the immediate reaction of, 'No way – that is not going to happen'. It was not that I had suddenly forgotten the pain of always feeling judged, just that this time – and this was new – those memories and perceptions felt somehow more remote: almost as if they belonged to a different era. It now felt OK to trust the impulse and at least take the first step of searching the web for a phone number.

Without too much trouble I found a mobile phone number for her husband, Guthrie, my companion of many years ago at the Ngawha hot springs near Kaikohe. The roughly fifty-minute phone conversation with my sister that followed was less than encouraging, but thankfully I found I had enough alertness to be able to receive the things that were said (and not said) without too much resistance.

A few days passed, during which time I allowed the pain that had arisen as a result of that call to simply be there as long as it wanted to be there. Then, once more to my surprise, I felt moved to call again; this time using Zoom. (It turns out that this had the advantage of our being able to see each other more as people, and perhaps less as ideas.) What a delight that was. I'm not sure now exactly how the conversation unfolded, but I do clearly remember being able to say things about the dynamics within our family over the years, and then

hearing my sister acknowledge that she could understand that I would not want to have to keep defending myself all the time. Something began to dissolve. How powerful just a few words can be. That call lasted about forty-five minutes, and this time, when it ended, it was with a feeling of lightness. I hadn't set out with any agenda to put things right, but I was interested in being available if something new was ready to emerge.

It was good to see that my mind was not overly interested in the idea that this reconciliation should have happened sooner. Obviously I would like to understand what causes and conditions contributed to such an agreeable change in course, but asking 'why' with an assumption that I should understand, seemed pointless. We can't know the degree of habitual resistance to reality that we carry within us; we don't know what old kamma we have stored away. We can, however, come to appreciate that often it takes time before the momentum of habitual resistance slows down enough to arrive at the point where we can actually catch ourselves, in the precise moment when we are about to create a problem out of life.

The next morning I took the opportunity to send an email sharing with my sister how good I felt about our meeting. I apologized for my part, having in the past inflicted pain on our family. She replied very quickly that she was delighted at being reunited with her brother again, but also mentioned the respect she had for me and for the choices I had made. She asked for forgiveness for any hurt that they had caused me and suggested that we could have more Zoom calls since

she was keen to find out about the community in which I lived. Wow! That was not expected. Thank you, Jennifer.

I like to think that the effort to cultivate conscious gratitude (which was one of the main reasons why I started writing this memoir) along with a daily ritual practice of dedicating the *puñña* of my practice to my teachers and to members of my family, contributed to this happy resolution. Re-establishing communication with my sister feels like a harmonious resolution of powerful, long-held misunderstandings. I am glad that we are talking with each other again. Since then my younger brother Bryan has also been in touch to wish me happy birthday. We ended up having a video chat; our first conversation in eighteen years. He is a competent photographer, particularly of birds, and we have been exchanging photographs. Most recently he sent me some shots he had taken of some Godwits¹²¹ which annually fly many thousands of kilometres from the Northern Hemisphere to New Zealand, and back again. It occurred to me that the relationship Bryan and I have has come a long way though it has taken us about fifty years.

It is easy to indulge in the assumption we will feel grateful once we have got what we are looking for. Another way of approaching life is to intentionally dwell on feelings of gratitude for the goodness that we already have, and to witness how attending to gratitude helps life to flow.

7.5 CONTENTMENT

*While in the midst of those who are troubled,
to remain untroubled
is happiness indeed.*

Dhammapada v.198

Continuing this enquiry into structures that sustain our spiritual practice and support harmonious community, I would like to consider the topic of contentment.

In response to a request by the first Buddhist nun, Bhikkhuni Mahapajapati,¹²² the Buddha offered a concise eight-point summary of all of his teachings. Around the middle of this discourse he stated: *That which leads to contentment is Dhamma and that which leads to discontentment is not Dhamma.*

Earlier this year I gave a talk titled, Unapologetic Pursuit of Contentment.¹²³ A friend of the monastery warned me at the time that currently many people equate the pursuit of contentment with being irresponsible: since the world is in such a precarious state, contentment is the last thing we

should be thinking about – everyone ought to be striving to find ways to fix this terrible mess.

In that talk I spoke about awareness as a multidimensional reality, not a singular thing: just as the ocean can have waves thrashing about on the surface and at the same time there can be perfect stillness in the depths. The point I was making was that so long as we believe that the surface-level of turmoil is all there is, we will continually struggle and risk ending up in despair. I support the enthusiasm for finding creative solutions to the current global crisis, however, we will only be successful if we factor in all dimensions of reality, not just the immediately obvious surface-level. A broad-minded and open-hearted approach is necessary – one that supports sustained effort and an ability to view the situations in which we find ourselves from varying perspectives.

We are all familiar with surface-level contentment – the feelings we experience when we get what we want: when the weather is agreeable, our health is good, and the friends we are with are telling us nice things. Such feelings are obviously desirable, however, we know that they don't last. Our Dhamma teachers tell us that there is another quality of contentment – one which does last. This is an aspect of our being with which those who have looked more deeply are familiar. They know that, like the ocean, even when conditions on the surface of the mind appear wild and unruly, at the same time, on a deeper level in their hearts, there can be peace. To have such a perspective on reality leads to confidence, or faith, and can be a powerful source of support.

If we focus on merely the surface or material dimension of existence, then indeed the world is in a terrible mess, and this readily gives rise to feelings of hopelessness. However, our life is much more than materiality. Even some scientists and philosophers are these days talking about ‘the hard problem of consciousness’. The fact that they are acknowledging the possibility that there may be more than mere materiality is significant. Not only are they acknowledging that potentially there is another dimension that is profoundly relevant to our lives, they are admitting that they know next to nothing about it. I find this very hopeful indeed. It is like when someone who has been suffering with physical pain for a long time, but refuses to go and see a doctor, eventually comes around to admitting that they need help.

Part of the help that all human beings need is the recognition that the real source of contentment is to be found within awareness itself – no amount of rearranging material conditions can truly protect us from sorrow, loss and despair. Herein lies the value of the discipline of attention, or formal meditation. Even an entry-level familiarity with meditation can acquaint us with hitherto unappreciated inner ability. It would be a mistake to assume that the benefits of meditation can only be found after many hours, weeks, or years of practice. After only a few months of twenty-minutes-a-day, six days a week, or even a lot less, meditators can begin to taste the benefits. So long as we are unaware of this potential inner resource, we are likely to keep striving to rearrange conditions on the surface. As already mentioned, even when

we do manage to make things agreeable for a while on that level, part of us knows that conditions could change at any moment and become disagreeable, which in itself is a sort of suffering.

In case there be any doubt, I should emphasise that I am not saying we can afford to completely ignore the conditions of the outer world and turn a blind eye to such matters as injustice and abuse of power. What I want to emphasize is that, since surely we aim to be effective in addressing issues of injustice and abuse, we have to properly equip ourselves for the challenge. If we were to take on the challenge of climbing Mount Everest, we would invest a lot of time and effort in preparing ourselves in advance. Taking on the challenge of transforming the suffering of existence into wisdom and compassion, likewise requires that we are ready for the task.

Before considering some of the skilful ways in which we might equip ourselves, I would like first to look into why it is that, despite our longing for freedom from pain and confusion, so many of those who start out on this journey end up disillusioned. It would be helpful if we understood some of the hindrances to accessing the resource of deep contentment.

There is a pattern that regularly shows up in monastic communities whereby people start out determined to reach the goal of unshakeable peace, only to return to their old habits of distraction; despite initial zeal for the practice and feeling grateful for the opportunity to commit to the inner work, they forget what it was that motivated them to begin on

this journey. The community they are in has not necessarily changed, and others are still benefiting from being there, so what is it that overshadows their wholesome aspirations? Dhammapada verse 344 says,

*There are those who have begun
on the path to freedom,
yet run back to being chained once more.*

Recently a young fellow who was visiting our monastery with the intention to request monastic training asked me if I had any advice on how he should prepare himself for what lies ahead. My advice was: take note of your motivation – the aspiration that you feel right now at the beginning of the path – and regularly reflect on it.

UNADDRESSED AUTHORITY ISSUES

During the year 2007, I received a warm and friendly message from the new abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Kevali, inviting me to visit whenever I was available. Around the beginning of 2008 I accepted that invitation and, en route to New Zealand, stopped off in Thailand to meet Ajahn Kevali and spend time with the sangha at Wat Pah Nanachat. As was usual when a senior sangha member from another monastery was visiting, I was invited to take part in a Q&A session at an evening tea gathering. One of the questions I was asked on that occasion was, ‘What would you say was the number one challenge within our Western sangha?’ My reply was immediate: ‘Authority issues.’ After a good number of years

of observing the dynamics within our various communities, unaddressed authority issues stand out for me as one of the main obstructions to harmony and contentment; and disharmony and discontentment are amongst the main reasons for people leaving. We all value the opportunity to live in spiritual community, yet somehow we still act in ways that undermine ourselves. What is behind this?

I am very cautious in what I say on this topic of authority as I know others have studied the subject more thoroughly than I have. However, much of what has been said is from the perspective of social psychology: for example, the consequences of the industrial revolution which led to 'the absent father' and the terribly damaging effect that has had on boys and young men. Here I wish to reflect more from a spiritual perspective.

In the early days of developing Chithurst monastery, around 1981- 1982, Tan Ajahn Chah sent a message from Thailand expressing his well-wishing. He commented on the importance of working together and helping each other, and spoke about some of the difficulties he himself had experienced in the early days of developing Wat Pah Pong. It was a tape-recorded message and it was a joy to hear him mentioning our names and, like a caring father, giving us some pointers. The part of that message that stayed with me, and on which I have often reflected, was where he said,

To be the abbot of a monastery can be compared to being a rubbish bin: those who are disturbed by the presence

of rubbish make a bin, in the hope that people will put their rubbish in there. In actual fact what happens is the person who makes the bin ends up being the rubbish collector as well. This is how things are – it's the same at Wat Pah Pong, it was the same at the time of the Buddha... everything gets chucked in the abbot's bin! One in such a position must therefore be far-sighted, have depth, and remain unshaken in the midst of all things. They must be consistent – able to persevere.

Every abbot of our branch monasteries in the West with whom I have spoken has developed serious spiritual muscles in the performance of their duties as a rubbish collector. And the rubbish I am referring to here comes not just in the form of a novice monk who might be sharing the difficulties he is having in missing his evening meal; sometimes it comes in a form that feels more like you have been kicked in the stomach. There are numerous occasions I can recall from over the years when suddenly, out of the blue, a community member has thrust upon me an unexpected amount of their personal pain. An abbot from another monastery recently mentioned to me that he had given himself a few days of private retreat in order to reorient himself after being on the receiving end of strong blame and unfair criticism. Taking some time out was, of course, the right thing to do; pretending he had not been affected by the experience would have made things worse.

When the leader of a community feels like he or she has just received a kicking from someone who offloaded their *dukkha*,

it is important that they understand accurately what has taken place. From the perspective of the Buddha's teachings, the leader has been given a message. The Buddha was very clear: *you continue to suffer because you fail to see two things – not seeing dukkha and not seeing the cause of dukkha*. He didn't say that we suffer because someone spoke to us unkindly. If we feel hurt because someone projects their *dukkha* onto us, we should (if at all possible) take whatever time is needed to meet ourselves, to receive ourselves, there, in that very place, in the whole body-mind. This is the time and place where we learn. Reacting with counter-accusations of how ungrateful the student is and how he or she should show more appreciation for all that they have received, is not being the sort of rubbish bin that Tan Ajahn Chah recommended. It is not truly taking responsibility for ourselves.

In the process of observing how it feels to be on the receiving end of someone else's projected negativity, we will hopefully also recognize that we have a choice: we can feel the pain and react with resistance, or we feel what we feel, take a long, slow, deep in-breath, and create a sense of expanded awareness within which that pain can be received, and maybe witness letting go. In such moments of letting go we might even discover an unexpected sense of gratitude for the attacker who helped us deepen in awareness (although that might take quite a bit longer).

So far we have considered such interactions from the perspective of the one who received the projection. We could also usefully consider why the projection occurred in the first place.

Why is it that some people seem capable of handling more pressure than others? In my own observation and experience of what actually takes place when someone blames another for their suffering, it is because they feel they have more pain than they can handle – their ability to take responsibility for the *dukkha* of life has reached its limit. The point is made perfectly clear when they say, ‘I just can’t stand it any more’. It is not, however, the *dukkha* they can’t stand, it is the lack of inner space in which to receive it. Their heart is already choc-a-bloc full of suffering; only a little bit more and there is an explosion.

Everyone has to deal with *dukkha*, but not everyone understands that we can cultivate the capacity for dealing with *dukkha*. When I suggested above that we respond to feelings of being attacked by taking a long slow deep in-breath, I meant we do something that reminds us that we are not victims of the experience of limited capacity or limited awareness. We do whatever we need to do to honestly feel what we are feeling in the moment. If you are someone who still finds your identity in the thinking mind, then the long slow deep in-breath might not be enough, as you will probably be busy in your head trying to figure out what to do. Instead, what might be needed is a more vigorous form of physical activity – something that takes you out of your head and back into the body where you can feel the intensity and the heat and learn to accept it.

When one experiences the threat of being overwhelmed by *dukkha*, this contributes to a lack of self-confidence, which

in turn leads to a lack of personal authority. As long as we lack a stable inner sense of authority, we will struggle. If we perceive ourselves to be under the authority of someone else, we tend to suspect that those above us are abusing their power, and we resist, either aggressively or passively. If we see ourselves as having authority over others, we are susceptible to feeding on a form of 'borrowed' authority that comes with the role. When our actions are motivated by a sense of borrowed authority, we come across as untrustworthy, because in fact we are. The various roles that we play in life are simply social structures that provide us with a convenient degree of predictability. Those who lack an inner sense of authority easily fall prey to taking their roles too seriously.

Authority can also be borrowed by clinging to our personality structure – to our deluded ego. Instead of training awareness so that we keep learning to meet ourselves and let go of ourselves, we cling to the perception of 'me' and 'my way'. With varying degrees of intensity, this is the disposition of someone lost in a sense of self-importance. It can produce an impression of being authoritative, but only those people who want someone else to take responsibility for their lives will go along with them. These people project their own potential for inner authority onto so-called leaders because it makes them feel safe. If the leader no longer provides them with a sense of security, the projection can quickly be withdrawn.

Another significant cause for the lack of inner authority is the compromising of integrity. The mobile telephone I was using earlier this year had been faulty, probably for as long as I had

had it. I strongly suspected there was a manufacturer's defect, however I couldn't be sure that I hadn't dropped it. I think I dropped my last phone several times, but was uncertain about this one. Having put up with poor quality phone calls for many months, I asked someone to take it into the phone shop and see about having it repaired. When it was mentioned to the shop assistant that there was a possibility that the phone had been dropped, she said that if that was the case then there was no way the manufacturers would even look at it, but she insisted, in a matter-of-fact way, you didn't have to tell them it might have been dropped. She gave the impression that reporting any possibility of the phone having been dropped was unthinkable. She was confirming what sadly these days appears to be widely accepted: that it is alright to lie.

What people who habitually lie don't understand is that even if nobody else knows, they themselves know. And just as if we were to catch someone lying to us, we would no longer trust them, when we know that we lie, we stop trusting ourselves. Every time we compromise integrity, we contribute to inner fragmentation – we weaken inner stability.

We need to commit to cultivating impeccability, not because God will punish us if we don't, but because when we don't, we undermine ourselves; we do damage to inner harmony. Often when I speak with psychiatrists and psychotherapists I look for an opportunity to encourage them to find ways of supporting their clients in understanding the value of integrity. I find it truly tragic that strong medication purporting to help people with their suffering can be prescribed before any

sort of a conversation regarding ethical matters. Of course I appreciate how difficult such a conversation might be, but to hand out mind-numbing drugs without raising the matter is also difficult. To me it is the same as a GP providing a prescription for insulin to help a patient manage diabetes without offering any advice on dietary matters. Low self-esteem is a logical consequence of acting and speaking in ways that are dishonest, and it contributes to a sense of lacking inner authority.

Conversely, those who are equipped with the self-respect that comes naturally with impeccable conduct express an authentic sort of authority. Anyone who keeps the company of those who are committed to integrity is very fortunate. To live life surrounded by people who think 'everyone lies' is a great misfortune. However, there is no benefit in dwelling on our misfortunes; as soon as we recognise the link between the way we conduct ourselves and self-respect and inner authority, we can resolve to be more careful.

RESHAPING OF THE SELF

As recently as one hundred years ago, the majority of inhabitants of England periodically engaged in a variety of spiritual exercises that helped protect them from the danger of excessive self-importance. On a regular basis they would shake hands with and feel seen by someone who they perceived to be in close communication with the Almighty; they sang rousing hymns of praise and gratitude to the Almighty; listened to sermons that highlighted virtues such as forgiveness, generosity,

modesty, and humility; and each time the offerings plate was passed down the pew, they would invest some of their hard-earned money in their own personal relationship with the Almighty, the Lord, the Omnipotent, that which is perceived as being inherently secure. In so doing their personality was relativized. They didn't experience themselves as the centre of existence; they saw themselves as living in relationship with that which was all-loving and imperturbable. I don't know how far back records go, but it is probably safe to say that, up until the beginning of the last century, something like this had been happening in most countries throughout most of human history. During the last century, materialism, scientism and humanism (including communism) have changed all that.

These days, a large percentage of the world's population live their lives without ever thinking about the importance of instilling virtue in themselves or in their children. Their sense of self is left dangerously vulnerable to the powerful forces of delusion. They rarely if ever meet anyone whose life is committed to serving the transcendent reality. For many, the mere thought of a transcendent reality is dismissed as being so passé as to not even warrant consideration. Individualism is their religion, and sadly, so far, they haven't seen that they are worshipping a false god.

Although I haven't researched the data, it wouldn't surprise me if statistics showed that over the last fifty years there has been a steady increase in use of anxiety medication; one that coincides with the increasing rate of suicide.¹²⁴ What does

surprise me is that I almost never hear anyone talking about the effect that this sudden absence of religious belief must be having on our sense of self.

We are not born with a sense of self. We are born with undifferentiated awareness and it takes several years to evolve a sense of separate identity. I sometimes fantasize that if neuroscientists had mapped the personality part of the brain over the last century, they would have seen a radical change in shape taking place. And further, if we accept that the decline in attendance at a place of worship corresponded with a loss in faith in any overriding principle, I would suggest that that decline would coincide with the gradual increase in anxiety. With that increase in fear and confusion comes a decrease in a personal sense of authentic authority.

Obviously there are other powerful influences that humanity has undergone over the last century, but the loss of faith in true principles must have major consequences. (The loss of a sense of being part of a community would surely count as another such powerful influence). If questioned, I would assume many people would say that giving up a belief in God has made them stronger and more confident. But from what I have observed, the opposite is the truth: the degree to which people have become ego-centric corresponds to their loss of inner security. Being self-centred leads to disorientation, which is expressed in desperate attempts to find a secure identity. The belief that I am the centre of everything makes my thoughts, my feelings, my preferences, my opinions, terribly important, even though on some level

I know that my thoughts, feelings, preferences and opinions are continually changing. No wonder there is such an increase in conspiracy theories and so-called culture wars, to name just two examples of people's often frantic struggle to find out who they are.

Of course I am not suggesting that those spiritual exercises in which the general populace of this country were engaged a hundred years ago were ultimately beneficial, but I do think the impact they had and the consequences of their disappearance deserve careful and thorough investigation. Many of those people who now believe that their current secular approach to life has liberated them from 'primitive' beliefs seem to me to be wandering around in a wilderness – lost and homeless. Neither the beautifully decorated house in which they live, nor the impressive car that they drive, protects them from feeling threatened by the current pandemic. Even if there is a return to normal, no amount of material possessions will provide deep contentment. In Dhammapada verses 288-289 the Buddha says,

*As you approach death
none of your fond attachments will protect you.
See this, then, wisely restrained by virtue
and unwavering effort,
hasten to clear your path to liberation.*

The words '*wisely restrained by virtue*' here refer to the practice of equipping ourselves with the right understanding and appreciation for such principles as integrity, generosity,

forgiveness, kindness and gratitude. These are what protect an inner sense of psychological integration. Earlier in this book (Part 6) when we were considering ‘Symbols and Rituals’ I explained why we had the *lokapala* (protectors of the world) depicted on the front doors to our Dhamma hall: those who wish to enter the sanctuary – the place where we go to contemplate our deepest concerns – must have prepared their hearts and minds with the virtues of *hiri* and *ottappa*.

TECHNOLOGY IS NOT THE PROBLEM

Technology is another of those powerful influences that has had a profound effect on our lives. However, to blame technology for our discontentment is yet another example of heedless projection. All technology does is amplify where we are at. We, the users of the gadgets and devices, are the ones who are responsible for the effects of technology, including the data presently being churned out by algorithms over which humans now have limited control. The initial algorithms were a product of human awareness.

Technology amplifies the consequences of both our foolishness and our virtue. It is great that I can write this book on gratitude and spiritual community in only a few months, have it typeset, and distributed as an ePub, all within one year. It is amazing that an aspirant for acceptance as a trainee in the monastery can turn up already prepared with questions that arose out of their having listened to Dhamma talks that he or she had downloaded from the internet. Also it is terrifying how easy it is for one disturbed individual to acquire a following of likewise disturbed individuals and, in

no time at all, start a movement which is equipped with deadly weaponry.

Whether or not technology contributes to the harmony and contentment within a spiritual community, a family, or society at large, depends on our relationship with it. It is appropriate that we feel afraid of it, in the same way we should be afraid of getting too close to a source of radiation: it has the power to cause harm. However, to react with panic and blame technology, and possibly even try to ban its use, is similar to what the Luddites¹²⁵ did back in the 1800's out of fear of the fabric-manufacturing machines. Their disruptive actions didn't stop the mechanical production of cloth. Technology is not going to disappear. What would help is to develop a wise relationship with it and learn to understand where the real causes of suffering lie.

*Ably self-restrained are the wise,
in action, in thought and in speech.*

Dhammapada v.234

The Buddha's encouragement to strengthen our capacity for restraint (*indriya samvara*), is not some neurotic religious injunction that leads to blind repression. Through the development of embodied mindfulness, we are encouraged to learn how to contain compulsive reactivity; perhaps restraint might be better described as a form of conscious composure. All deluded personalities are addicted to their preferences. Most of us manage to get by in life without causing too much

damage, by controlling our preferences using will-power: we don't allow ourselves to do or say anything that is too harmful. But such wilful controlling is energy-extravagant and takes its toll on our nervous system. If, instead, we employed mindfulness and wise reflection on that which leads to increased well-being and that which leads to harm, perhaps we would come to understand what the Buddha meant by *indriya samvara* – sense-restraint or conscious composure – and appreciate the power it has to genuinely protect us.

Without such restraint we are victims of our habits of reactivity: the phone rings or we receive a notification and we *have* to pick it up. But do we really have to pick it up? Is it not possible to develop a quality of restraint that overrules tendencies to react, without tipping over into repression? Once more we can consider the benefits of formal meditation. We learn by trial and error how the way we react whenever our mind wanders from the object of meditation has a direct effect: if we are judgemental and critical of ourselves for not being as good as we want to be, we increase our suffering; if we respond with gentleness, as a parent would when teaching their child to walk, we experience a lessening in our suffering. Little by little we learn what 'ably self-restrained' might mean, and perhaps find we are better equipped to make skilful use of technology.

In our monasteries here in Europe, for several years now, we have had an ongoing discussion about our relationship with technology. As someone who enjoys communication, but who is also cautious about being defined by the tools that

we use, I fall somewhere around the middle, or perhaps to the cautious side of the middle, when it comes to making decisions on what is suitable and what is not. Around 1995 I was looking into the potential benefits and dangers of our monasteries having websites. At the time, others in the community were more cautious than I; they assumed that having websites would increase our workload. I settled on the view that websites could simplify things and save us from having to reply to lots of letters.

Around the same time, with the support of the Elders' Council in Europe, I produced the first iterations of the websites www.dhammadata.org.uk and dhammadthreads.org.uk, which provided centralized free access to audio and written materials from within our family of monasteries. It concerned us that other groups or individuals might be posting our materials online without our knowing about it, and possibly even charging for them. Later those two websites were combined to form the current www.forestsangha.org⁸³ website. (A considerable amount of time and effort went into consulting around our world-wide family of branch monasteries to ensure there was sufficient agreement that I construct such a website. At that stage of the evolution of our global community there was no body of Elders who had the authority to endorse any such proposal. In fact it was only in 2016 at an International Elders' Meeting at Amaravati, that the BAM group accepted the responsibility of being a decision-making body). I am indebted and sincerely grateful to a good friend of the monastery, Kris Quigley, for

his generous offering of skill and support in that project. I remain convinced that such websites provide a useful service to both the sangha and the world-wide community of friends and supporters. Currently Kris and I are considering the possibility of producing a smartphone app that corresponds with the content of the www.forestsangha.org⁸³ website.

My early adoption of Facebook was not such a good idea. I was looking for a means of distributing fortnightly Dhammapada reflections¹²⁶ without triggering users' spam filters. It quickly became apparent that Facebook was not the right tool. (Eventually we learnt about bulk emailing services which now serve the purpose.)

Currently in our communities here in Europe there is an ongoing debate regarding which of the various video-distributing platforms we ought to be using. During much of this pandemic there has been a sort of moratorium in place so monasteries can conveniently make teachings and services available to the wider community. But the jury is still out in terms of an overall policy. My personal view on the subject is influenced by Marshall McLuhan's 'the medium is the message'. In the ever-increasing mania of our out-of-balanced world, I believe the sangha's message of stillness, silence and space, is rare and must be protected. It is part of our duty as inheritors of this ancient Theravada tradition to be cautious, and not engage in adaptations until it is clear they will not harm that with which we have been entrusted. At the beginning of this chapter there is a quote from the discourse given by the Buddha to Bhikkhuni Mahapajapati, mentioning the place

of contentment in his teachings. Alongside contentment, the Buddha also mentions: *that which leads to modesty is Dhamma and that which leads to self-importance is not Dhamma*. It seems to me great caution is called for when using the various video-distributing platforms to address matters of the heart.

The electronic distribution of audio files, however, is something I do very much support. We tend to use our eyes to search outwards, and when it comes to studying Dhamma it is good to remember that the solutions to our apparent problems are to be found inwards. When listening to Dhamma it can be helpful to close our eyes – to release ourselves from the scanning, straining, liking-disliking mode – and simply receive that which is being offered. This is what I understand Tan Ajahn Chah was pointing to when he encouraged us to listen to Dhamma talks with our hearts.

It is alright to say no to so-called technological advancements, even if part of us wants to say yes. In fact I teach the young monks here at Harnham to practice saying no just so they know they can do it. Obviously I don't want them to say no when they are asked to do the dishes or rake the grass that has been cut. I mean say no to an extra cup of coffee or to agreeing to have their photograph taken. Sometimes we are asked to appear on television, and I make it a rule to always say no. Regardless of how charming or persuasive the contact person or the interviewer might be, I tend to distrust television editors. It seems to me that their agenda is nearly always financial gain, while sangha life is predicated on

principles that are different from theirs. A television company once asked if they could paint the front door and window frames of part of the monastery a different colour because they were filming an episode of a Catherine Cookson movie here on Harnham Hill, but I said no. On another occasion we were asked if a television company could borrow some monks robes to use in a film that was being made, but I said no. They told us that it was our fault if they got it wrong. On yet another occasion, the teachers of a school group that was planning a visit told us a local television crew had asked if they could come along and film the visit, and I said no. I confess on that occasion I was concerned that the teachers were going to be upset with me. As it happened, they mentioned how pleased they were that I rejected the request; they also didn't want the television people involved. The timeless principles of Dhamma are too precious to subject them to the vagaries of worldly preference.

The initial driving force behind social media may well have been increased ease of communication and facilitating community; however the way it has evolved, it has turned into a destabilizing influence. The lack of integrity in the media industry in general is part of what has brought humanity to a point where cynicism is not only accepted, it is normal. It is now even normal to question the accuracy of news that is broadcast by long-established outlets. This is not the fault of technology, it is the fault of the users. It is a very sad state of affairs and we don't have to contribute to it by always going along with it. We can train ourselves by turning off

our gadgets, and by recognising and inhibiting the impulse to always react when we hear a beep. When we have suffered a wound to our body and it is healing, it is natural that we want to scratch the itch, but we know that to do so risks making things worse. Maybe humanity can learn to apply that understanding to restraint on the level of mental activity.

We have the option of investing in our refuge in the Buddha – in selfless just-knowing awareness. Going for refuge to the Buddha is not aligning ourselves with a group of people who all believe that the Buddha knew best; it is disciplining our attention so that in a moment when suffering arises, we remember to turn directly towards the *dukkha* and enquire into the cause of *dukkha* – get interested in the reality of *dukkha* and not follow our habits of resistance. The situation that we are in as a species is already so severe, it is hard to imagine how we will survive without a fundamental shift which involves recognising the primacy of the cultivation of awareness.

Earlier I referred to the expression that we have in English: ‘the survival of the fittest’. There is an equivalent expression in Chinese, *Shi zhe sheng chun*, which translates roughly as ‘the one who adapts is the one who survives’. The word ‘adapts’ here holds the key: if we want to survive we need to adapt to the information and evidence that we have available. A few years ago climate change deniers managed to refute statistics and get away with it; the disastrous effects of climate change are now very difficult to deny. Before the pandemic many people insisted individuality was all-important; now

it is evident that our very survival depends on cooperation. Whilst it is sensible to be afraid of technology, it is not helpful if we become lost in fear. We can have faith in the potential to train our faculties with accurate understanding of the advantages and disadvantages of technology, and choose to use it for good.

REPLENISHING OUR STOREHOUSE OF GOODNESS

Some readers might find that in these pages I have used the words ‘thank you’ just a few too many times; however, I hope that we all agree that it is not possible to actually feel too much gratitude. In my experience, it seems that dwelling on gratitude begets gratitude and has within it the power to dissolve obstructions and transform our view on life. This principle applies not just to gratitude, but to wholesomeness in general. When we focus on our misfortune we easily sink into feeling sorry for ourselves and see only the things that we think are wrong; when we focus on the goodness of our lives, our hearts are buoyed up and we notice even more goodness. Dhammapada verse 118 says,

*Having performed a wholesome deed
it is good to repeat it, again and again.
Be interested in the pleasure of wholesomeness.
The fruit of accumulated goodness is contentment.*

It is such a simple fact that we could dismiss it: when we remember our good actions, we feel good. It takes very little effort to recollect the goodness of our lives. The gladness

that arises in the process naturally manifests as gratitude which, in turn, can be expressed as generosity. If we want to make a difference to our inner and outer worlds, regularly replenishing our storehouse of goodness is essential.

Giving is one way that leads to contentment. As monks and nuns we don't have much in the way of material things that we can give, but we can share things that we have learnt. In this regard, giving Dhamma talks can be a source of much happiness. I wrote earlier about Ajahn Sumedho supporting me in giving talks quite early on after I arrived in Britain. I can't pretend it was easy in the beginning, but I am hugely grateful now for his encouragement. I have been told that I come across as confident when I speak in public, but even after many years I still find that it is work. Other monks tell me that they find it easy but I have more or less given up expecting it to be easy. Even though it is work, it is work I love doing. It reminds me of many years ago when I used to dabble in throwing clay pots on a wheel: there is a joy in crafting something beautiful out of that which was raw and unrefined.

An oft-reported incident, that apparently occurred in the early years when Ajahn Sumedho lived at Wat Pah Pong, involved Tan Ajahn Chah having a firm word with Ajahn Sumedho about his preparing in advance for a talk that he gave. It is reported that Tan Ajahn Chah told him that he should never do that again. This reported incident is well-known within our family of monasteries and is presumably the reason why many monks and nuns attempt to give talks without any

preparation. For some that seems to be a useful approach; they find they can handle whatever emotional reactions they might be having, maintain mental clarity, and ably offer a Dhamma reflection at the same time. For others I suspect it is a terrifying experience; certainly from the tone of their voice and the content of their talks, it would appear that they are caught in an intense and often humiliating struggle. I don't believe it has to be that difficult. Tan Ajahn Chah was aware that he could appear inconsistent, and personally I am not convinced that he would insist everyone abide by the same instructions he gave to Ajahn Sumedho when he spoke to the congregation gathered on that occasion in North East Thailand in the late 1960's.

When I look out into the Dhamma hall, here in twenty-first century Great Britain, I see people who have made considerable effort to attend the gathering and who are seriously seeking meaning in their lives; I want to give them something helpful that they can take away and ponder on. It does happen that sometimes I give a talk that is totally unprepared, particularly in spontaneous Q&A sessions, or perhaps a talk given specifically to the resident sangha. However, for many years now, when I know that I will be offering a Dhamma talk, I prepare my thoughts in advance. Typically I will make notes on an A4 sheet of paper, folded into four, with two points listed in each quadrant, usually adding more detail. Committing those eight points to memory means I feel ready to offer a reflection to the listeners without worrying that I am going to be wasting their time.

Sometimes I am told that I sound a bit heavy when I talk. Maybe this is because as far as I am concerned, life is not a picnic. There is also the possibility that it stems from very many years ago when I was struggling to overcome fear in advance of those Rotary speech contest talks. I recall one year in particular, as I was preparing my speech, my parents insisted I go next door to where my Nana and Grandad (Rev. Duncumb of the skewered moth on the sofa incident) were living. Since Grandad was a preacher, he was presumably considered a competent speaker and it was thought a good idea that he listened to my delivery. I went over as I was told. Now, more than fifty years later, I can still vividly recall standing there in their living room, mute. Intense fear prevented me from even beginning my speech. My sweet, caring Nana told Grandad he should let me go as I was obviously struggling, but he insisted I deliver the talk. He said I couldn't leave until I did. I never did deliver that talk in front of them. I just stood there, rigid with fear – petrified. By the time I eventually got around to taking a closer look at that pocket of fear, there was already enough awareness to be able to appreciate that my Grandad wasn't to blame for inflicting that trauma on me – unawareness was the cause. He didn't know what he was doing and I wasn't ready. I might not feel thoroughly equanimous about it, but neither do I feel passionately indignant.

That is one way how unawareness can manifest. This is not to say that Grandad didn't rack up some negative kamma for himself; I suspect that out of insensitivity and heedlessness he

might have done. But it is helpful to understand that many of the obstructions that we encounter don't come from our having been 'bad' in the past; they come from our having been unaware. One of the things we can do about that is invest in the goodness that has the power to outshine feelings of limitation. I can't say I feel grateful to Grandad for that ordeal, but neither do I resent him. It hasn't stopped me from finding my own way of sharing the good fortune of my life with others.

My advice to anyone who is feeling anxious before speaking in public is to be honest with yourself. Ask yourself, 'what is the cause of this suffering?' Or, since we already know that uninformed desire is the cause of all forms of suffering, ask, 'What do I want?' And listen carefully to the answer. If it is, 'I want to get out of here', tell yourself you are absolutely allowed to want to get out of there. But what is happening there that is so bad? Probably the only thing that is happening right there and then is anticipation about the future. Anticipation is just a movement of energy; it is not a rabid dog that is about to bite you, which would be a perfectly valid reason for wanting to get out of there. Simply becoming aware that it is anticipation that we are struggling with, can take the sting out of the struggle. If we deal honestly here and now with our anticipation, we might find that there and then things are not so bad.

Or when we ask ourselves 'What do I want?', maybe we hear the answer, 'I want everyone in the audience to be impressed by my talk'. Again, all we need to do is listen to that voice,

be honest, no judgement – receive that movement of energy, and see what a difference it makes when we stop resisting it. I would not advise that you share with the audience the answers to your question and tell them how petrified you feel, or that you hope they will be stunned by your erudite teachings. If we do that, it is expecting others to take responsibility for that which is ours.

It was possibly towards the end of 2009, again during a stopover in Thailand en route to New Zealand, that I visited Ajahn Nyanadhammo at Wat Ratanawan near Khao Yai National Park¹²⁹ in central Thailand. It so happened that while I was there, a supporter of his monastery was also visiting and was discussing with Ajahn Nyanadhammo the possibility of reprinting the translated talks of Tan Ajahn Chah. Various booklets of Tan Ajahn Chah’s teachings had been published over the years in a variety of formats, and a number of them were out of print. In the course of that conversation, I was asked if I would possibly be interested in heading up such a project. What a delight that production turned out to be! It was a big project and it felt like a big responsibility. Much of the delight that I experienced came from knowing that I was helping to make Tan Ajahn Chah’s teachings available to others. I was already familiar with much of the content, but reading the talks was not the only source of delight: much of the good feeling came from the process of collecting all the available material, seeing that it was adequately proofread by a global group of readers, finding sponsorship, and arranging for distribution. Due to the

generosity of the Kataññuta Group in Malaysia, Singapore and Australia, we were able to produce both a box set and a single volume version. Neil Taylor, who has been helping me over the years with the graphic design aspects of our annual Forest Sangha calendar and other publications, was a significant support in the layout and presentation of what ended up being called *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*.³¹ Tan Gambhiro was responsible for the phenomenal amount of work that went into typesetting. Thank you, Tan Gambhiro, and Neil, and to all the other good friends for being part of the team that produced this wonderful collection.

The way I felt about being part of the group that published these teachings is also the way I felt about designing and managing the www.forstsangha.org website. I have a similar feeling regarding the monthly Dhammapada Reflections¹²⁶ that we distribute. This later project was initially inspired by a conversation I had with Ven. Myokyo-Ni during one of my visits with her at her Fairlight Zen Temple¹²⁷ in Luton. We were discussing a program that she had been running for many years whereby she sent out, by mail, a Dhamma teaching to a number of recipients around the world. This gave rise to what I called our *Dhammasakaccha* program (Dhamma dialogue) whereby I sent out, via email, a short commentary on a theme of Dhamma, and recipients replied with their own reflections on what I had written. The program quickly became popular to the point where it was taking up a considerable amount of time.

After that project came the current Dhammapada Reflections^{12.6} program which has been running now since 2007. It started with sending out a verse from the Dhammapada and an associated reflection every fortnight to coincide with the new- and full-moons, but eventually that also became more work than I could manage. These days the reflections are offered in seven languages – English, Chinese, French, German, Italian, Serbian, Spanish – and emailed out once a month on the full-moon day.

The comments associated with the Dhammapada verses are not aimed at explaining the verse itself – readers can do their own research if they wish – rather, my reflections are an effort to encourage followers of the Buddha to develop their thinking minds in service of deepening in Dhamma. Many Western Buddhists seem to have picked up the teachings in a way that causes them to assume that the point of practice is to make their minds peaceful by focussing on a meditation technique. In the West our minds have been programmed since very early on to be discursive, and while being compulsively discursive is indeed painful, the way back to stillness is not necessarily by wilfully concentrating on the end of your nose. When the Buddha asked his son Ven. Rahula what the purpose of a mirror was, Ven. Rahula replied it was used for seeing the face. The Buddha then told him that wise reflection is what we use for seeing the mind. A degree of mental calm and clarity are important, but there is much more to our practice than just that. So each month I find a verse that feels apposite, pick up whatever contemplation is stimulated in my

mind, and then share that contemplation. It is an attempt at acquainting readers with an appreciation of their own ability to contemplate. It is also a source of happiness for me.

Like gratitude, giving can lead to contentment. Traditionally, in all Buddhist countries there is an emphasis on the cultivation of generosity (*dana*), and there is much talk about ‘making merit’ (*puñña*). When we perform wholesome acts, however, it is unfortunate if we dwell only on thoughts of how much merit we are making. This is an understandable mistake if we have not been taught all the benefits of developing *dana*. We can trust that there is such a thing as *puñña* which can be accumulated, but rather than thinking of it as credentials which define our worth, it is wiser to view it as potential. This is similar to how refraining from consuming junk food and filling our bodies with harmful chemicals makes us potentially less likely to become sick because our immune system is in good shape. Every time we act generously we let go of a little bit of the sickness of selfishness. In Dhammapada verse 118 it says accumulated goodness leads to happiness, but we would do well to pay attention to what we lose, not just what we gain. The less selfish we are, the happier we are. As Tan Ajahn Chah said: ‘If you are not careful, you will make so much merit that it will be too heavy to carry.’ He went on to say: ‘The point of accumulating merit is for the sake of realization.’ Accumulated *puñña* nourishes our potential for awakening. It is what gives us the strength and resilience to do the work.

Also in Dhammapada verse 118 we are encouraged to be interested in the pleasure that arises from such wholesome acts as generosity. For some readers, the mere suggestion that we should take delight in our own goodness could set alarm bells ringing. 'Aren't I at risk of becoming conceited?' There is a big difference between mindfully taking delight in the natural sense of well-being which arises when recollecting our own good deeds, and heedlessly indulging in the ego-centric thought, 'Aren't I wonderful'.

The helpful reminder by Tan Ajahn Chah that *puñña* is not the goal – it is the fuel that propels us on our journey towards the goal – is the basis of a significant part of my personal morning ritual routine. After bowing to the shrine and reciting some verses in Pali, I make the conscious wish: 'May whatever happens today be for the development of goodness and wisdom.' We need goodness, we need fuel, and we also need wisdom. A well-stocked storehouse of goodness can help sustain us as we burn through the layers of habitual resistance to reality in the pursuit of wisdom.

After spending nearly five years living in Thailand back in the 1970s, I felt as if I had absorbed an appreciation for the skilful use of rituals and symbols; it seemed to happen without my trying. In the beginning my rational mind had made a bit of a problem out of them, but somehow eventually the resistance fell away. I suspect that initially I was afraid I would lose the (false) sense of security I felt by remaining aloof – rather arrogantly looking down on those caught up in superstitious rituals. But it was undeniable that they were

the ones who were happy, not me. And I also think Ajahn Sumedho's willing participation in the rituals helped give me permission to experiment with letting go of my resistance. He was comfortable going along with the way things were done, and yet obviously had lost neither his sense of humour nor his critical faculties. I am grateful that I managed in those early years to let go of the conceited view that progress on this path depends solely on being rational and reasonable. Many of the obstacles I face in practice are unreasonable and irrational, so why not surrender myself to these tried and tested rituals? During our evening chanting, when I ask the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha to bear witness to my acknowledgment of fault, it is not so much about some deity listening to me and being pleased by my obeisance; I am listening to me, and it feels good to hear my acknowledgement of fault. Sometimes rituals can communicate what our hearts want to say better than linear logical dialogue.

When the first substantial meeting hall (*sala*) at Wat Pah Nanachat was completed, around 1977, Tan Ajahn Chah paid us a visit. He complimented us on how the area in front of the main shrine had been laid out. It seems he was pleased with the way we had arranged it so that everyone who came into the hall – sangha members and laity alike – had direct access to the main shrine; everyone was able to make offerings and pay their respect to the Buddha. In many monasteries, the area immediately in front of the shrine is designated for only the Ajahn to sit. For reasons that I can no longer recall

our *sala* had been designed with Ajahn Sumedho and all the sangha members sitting off to one side.

This might have been an early occasion of my beginning to contemplate matters of authority: who has the power and how is it exercised? In most theistic forms of religion there is a mediator – a priest, or rabbi, or holy man or woman – located between those who are seeking and the Godhead. I interpreted Tan Ajahn Chah’s comments on that occasion as saying the space between the followers of the Buddha and the Buddha himself should be open. Years later I followed his example when we designed our Dhamma hall here at Harnham so that all who entered had direct access to the main shrine. More recently, because my mobility has become impaired, during pujas I sit on a chair in the middle in front of the shrine, but as soon as I leave the chair is removed.

When I was describing earlier my first visit back to New Zealand as a monk, I mentioned how I engaged in a ritual practice of making a vow (*adhitthana*). On that occasion it proved very helpful. I am aware of occasions when overly zealous monks have made vows that were beyond their ability to keep. We do need to exercise caution and not be too idealistic. For instance, it sometimes happens that, while on retreat, meditators experience a lot of enthusiasm and feel motivated to make firm resolutions. It should be understood that resolutions that are made when the mind is clear and the heart is open – when we are in a state of heightened and focused energy – can have very far-reaching consequences. As long as we are surrounded by friends who are walking

the same path, have access to teachers who are offering us reassurance, and we recognize the great privilege of being able to commit to this practice of purification, we might be tempted to say, 'Bring it on *Mara*. I am ready.' The sincerity of our resolve means the message goes deep. Unless we have experience in such matters, it can be difficult to know whether our enthusiasm is grounded in our own matured awareness, or is an effect of feeling held by spiritual community. If it is the latter, it would be better to discuss our intentions with a teacher before being too adventurous in making vows. The point is, making vows is like turning up the heat. We might be keen on the image of purifying the gold, but not be ready to handle all the dross as it comes to the surface. What I am saying is: we need to be careful to not bite off more than we can chew. Naivety can make progress on the path more difficult than it needs to be.

EQUANIMITY

At the beginning of the previous chapter on expecting the unexpected, I quoted Tan Ajahn Chah saying, 'I've searched for over forty years as a monk and this is all I could find. That (*aniccam*) and patient endurance.' I ask forgiveness for assuming that I know what went on in Tan Ajahn Chah's mind, but I think it is safe to say that he was also well acquainted with patient endurance's close friend, equanimity (*upekkha*). Patience and equanimity are like companions on the journey that work together to help us meet the many obstacles on the path to freedom. For example, patience and equanimity can tame our excessive striving and protect us

from the danger of craving for results in practice. In a talk by Tan Ajahn Chah titled, *Two Faces of Reality*, he says,

‘I used to think, about my practice, that when there is no wisdom, I could force myself to have it. But it didn’t work, things remained the same. Then, after careful consideration, I saw that to contemplate things that we don’t have cannot be done. So what’s the best thing to do? It’s better just to practise with equanimity.... If there’s no problem, then we don’t have to try to solve it. When there is a problem, that’s when you must solve it, right there! There’s no need to go searching for anything special, just live normally.

The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah, 2011, p.500

The word that quickly comes to my mind when contemplating equanimity is ‘even-mindedness’. When we read or listen to what our teachers tell us, it should be clear that true equanimity is an expression of wisdom. In the lists of traditional Theravada teachings we find equanimity consistently comes last. It is last in the four divine abidings: *metta, karuna, mudita, upekkha*; it is last of the seven factors of awakening: *sati, dhammavicaya, viriya, piti, passadhi, samadhi, upekkha*; it is last in the ten perfections: *dana, sila, nekkhamma, adhitthana, sacca, khanti, pañña, viriya, metta, upekkha*. There are possibly other explanations as to why equanimity comes last, but I trust that in some ways at least it is because there cannot be true equanimity without true wisdom; in other words it is difficult to develop.

The formal cultivation of this virtue has its place in our monastic routine as one of the recitations during morning *puja*,

*I am the owner of my kamma,
heir to my kamma,
born of my kamma,
related to my kamma,
abide supported by my kamma;
whatever kamma I shall do,
for good or for ill,
of that I shall be the heir.*

*All beings are the owners of their kamma,
heirs to their kamma,
born of their kamma,
related to their kamma,
abide supported by their kamma;
whatever kamma they shall do,
for good or for ill,
of that they shall be the heirs.*

Chanting Book, Vol. 1, p.56¹²⁸

Reflecting thus on the law of kamma is a way of instilling the understanding that we cannot take responsibility for the intentional actions of others, and nobody else can take responsibility for our intentional actions – nobody can take away our kamma. Even the Buddha, with his profound wisdom and limitless compassion, could do no more than ‘point the way’. It is important that we equip ourselves with

this understanding, otherwise we could live our lives without growing up properly – always expecting someone else to take responsibility for us.

It also matters that we train ourselves with this perspective so we are protected from being overwhelmed by emotions, and not just painful negative emotions. The first three of the four divine abidings are positive emotions – kindness, compassion and empathetic joy – and without equanimity we are at risk of becoming lost in the pleasure of positivity. Being positive is not enough. We might feel compassion for a drug addict and sincerely try to help them come clean from their habit, but what do we do if they decide to not come clean? Compassion fatigue, an expression sometimes used in the caring professions, is not the result of too much compassion; it is the result of too little equanimity.

It is also possible to have too much or an immature kind of equanimity. Without kindness, compassion and empathetic joy, so-called equanimity can be a form of cold-hearted indifference. A mere intellectual understanding of the law of kamma without warm-heartedness is not a true source of support on this journey.

One useful way of developing equanimity can be to allow ourselves to feel foolish in front of others. For instance, if in a group meeting we say something that we think is funny but it falls flat like a lead balloon, instead of rushing to cover up the embarrassment, allow those feelings to be there: fully feel what it feels like to feel embarrassed. It takes a well-developed quality of awareness to be able to allow such

feelings to be there without defaulting to strategies of self-defence. Equanimity is an expression of inner strength that from the outside might appear as weakness. However, an individual who is equipped with such strength will be able to listen to criticism and consider whether there are grounds for it or not; they will be able to make mistakes and learn from them; be disliked but remain committed to true principles; feel judged by others and not fall into despair.

As with developing any Dhamma principle, we need to exercise caution and not be overly idealistic. We once had a guest staying who appeared to have turned equanimity into an idol, possibly because they had experienced some benefit from attending a series of meditation retreats where there was a lot of emphasis on this particular Dhamma principle. As appealing as it might be to dwell on the thought of realizing unshakeable equanimity, the reality is that if we cling to an ideal of the goal, then we create obstructions; we need to be more subtle in our approach. Many determined Dhamma practitioners have found themselves obstructed in practice because of clinging to ideals: by wanting wisdom, by longing for tranquillity, by hoping for freedom from anxiety – but the way they were wanting lacked equanimity.

There is a lot more that could be said about equanimity, however my own lack of development in this area means I probably shouldn't try to say too much. There have been a number of occasions over the years when I have given a series of talks on the ten *parami* and, when it came time to address the topic of equanimity, I have turned to the second monk,

Ajahn Abhinando, and asked if he would address it. The ten *parami* provide a useful framework for a series of talks, and for nine of the ten I usually have something to say, but consistently when it comes to the last in the list – *upekkha* – I feel unqualified. My lack of equanimity regarding even something as mundane as smells has long been a challenge for me. After forty-four years as a monk, the smell of certain detergents used for washing clothes and bedding still disturbs me. The fragrances that people wear when they attend our evening puja sometimes disturb me. Thankfully, though, the fact that I am still disturbed by these things is something about which I can work to feel equanimous – making an effort to develop equanimity for my lack of equanimity is a beginning.

CONTENTMENT IN OLD AGE

Earlier this year I received a phone call from Luang Por Sumedho in Thailand. He had been due to arrive in Britain to lead a retreat at Amaravati, but his trip had been cancelled due to the pandemic. He wanted to be in touch to see how our sangha here at Harnham was doing, and to wish us well. During that conversation he explained to me that these days he is having to learn to walk with a cane; since he is now eighty-six that isn't surprising. We spoke about the benefits of working on cultivating contentment. He commented on the fact that it is work, and if we don't do our work, then we risk the restlessness of the physical body taking us over.

I have been thinking about what a rare and wonderful thing it is to have been acquainted with such a person as Luang Por Sumedho for nearly forty-five years. Also, earlier this year I spoke with Luang Por Pasanno in the US and we discussed how folk at Abhayagiri were coping with the forest fires and earthquakes; and with Luang Por Viradhammo in Canada to talk over publishing a photograph of him; and with Luang Por Tiradhammo in Australia in a conversation about the new book he is writing on ‘Beyond I-making’; with Luang Por Sucitto at Cittaviveka to consult on points of *vinaya*; with Ajahn Vajiro in Portugal to discuss distribution of the FS calendars printed in Malaysia; with Ajahn Jayasaro in Thailand to talk over a translation of teachings by Tan Ajahn Thate; with Ajahn Amaro at Amaravati to consult on the *upasampada* of two of our novices; and with Ajahn Candasiri in Scotland to discuss protocols around live-streaming via the internet. All of these people I have known for forty or more years. How fortunate!

Soon I will be seventy. Although that is not exactly old, clearly it is not young, and I am glad about that. Thinking back to the first thirty or forty years of my life, it feels as if a lot of the time I was in a fog. I suspect that much of how I conducted myself – by body, speech and mind – was influenced by fantasies about the future: ‘what will I do with my life? what really matters? am I up to it?’ I expect that most of the time I wasn’t even aware how much I was being affected by thoughts of the future. One of the many advantages of being older is the way such mental patterns naturally reveal themselves.

Those who have confidence in the Buddha's teaching would do well to read what he had to say about recovering from the 'three intoxicants: youth, health and life' (see Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation of the Anguttara Nikaya – '*The Numerical Discourses*', Somerville, Wisdom Publications, MA, USA, 2012, Book of Threes, 'Delicate', Sutta 39, p.241). Probably, again due in large part to the influence of technology, humanity is presently more intoxicated by youth, health and life than ever before. It is not that the Buddha is saying there is anything wrong with these aspects of existence – Buddhism is not a life-denying religion, it is a reality-affirming religion – rather, he was highlighting how, without wise reflection we misperceive the life we are living: we create problems out of things that are perfectly natural. Old age, sickness and death are no more wrong than the changing seasons, but because of a lack of wise instruction, we develop attitudes and behaviours that contradict that which is natural.

In a recent conversation with one of our monastery's trustees, who happens to be around the same age as myself, I mentioned that these days when I lock the door to my kuti at night, I always take the key out of the latch, so if I die during the night my attendant monk will be able to use the spare key to unlock the door and avoid having to break the glass to get in. It turned out that the trustee does the same thing each night in their house in London. It is always refreshing to find there are those whose reflections on life have taken them to a point where they no longer lie to themselves about their mortality. The opposite is also true: it is sad to find that there

are many who prefer to hide behind the myth of immortality. Obviously they don't believe that they are literally immortal, but they behave as if they are and invest huge amounts of material and mental energy in trying to maintain the myth. So long as we entertain the idea that old age, sickness and death are problems, we will struggle to find contentment. Contentment increases to the degree that we are honest with ourselves. That doesn't mean the topic of death should be raised at a dinner party (unless all who are there are clearly willing to discuss the matter, in which case it could be quite productive).

It would be disingenuous of me to not mention the difficulties that come with old age. Sometimes I struggle to find where I have left my glasses, and that is not fun; nor is regularly forgetting my lines when I lead the chanting. I even forgot to light the candles for evening puja recently. But these are all very minor matters compared to the relief I feel about no longer being quite so concerned with what others think of me. Even in my fifties it still sometimes seemed the young monks and novices felt as if they had to compete with me – as if it was a sign of their weakness to simply go along with what I was asking them to do. These days it is obvious they don't see me as one of them, and there is a greater willingness to accept what I tell them.

When recently we took the decision to no longer allow monastery funds to be used to purchase animal food products, I found it pleasingly easy. A few years ago I might have been more worried about what others would think. At this stage,

although such concerns haven't disappeared, they do seem to have less momentum. For a long time I have felt dismayed by the lack of effort made in our monasteries to carefully dissuade supporters from offering meat at the meal time. Only very rarely did I say anything about it, out of a fear of causing division between our communities. Our monastery here in Northumberland hasn't been purchasing meat for many years, but more recently we took it to the next level and agreed to also stop purchasing dairy products. I have already described the horror of what happens in abattoirs and the impressions left in my mind from having visited one. Now that we have taken this decision I feel an increased sense of ease. We don't have a big sign up saying which offerings are accepted and which are not – everything is accepted – but gradually our community of supporters have learnt that we are more likely to eat plant-based food if they bring it. As far as I am aware, our decision hasn't caused any rift or difficulty within the monastic communities or amongst the laity. Perhaps people don't feel so threatened by those who are older and allow us to be a bit different.

There was a period when Tan Ajahn Chah started eating vegetarian food. At the time it was quite a radical statement to be making. He didn't hide the fact, but neither did he push it – there was no shaming or pressure of persuasion. He made it clear that everyone in the monastery should feel free to eat whatever food had been offered. I took strength from that example of skilfulness and from his willingness to go against the grain.

Competence is something that, over the years, I have often enjoyed consciously admiring; be it of a skilled craftsman, a caring professional, a clever computer programmer, or an experienced cook. I can find delight in observing the efforts of wholesome, sincere commitment and dedication. Although in my own case I see plenty of evidence of a lack of competence, I remain enthusiastic in making an effort to improve upon the abilities I do have. These days, however, I find there is a new kind of difficulty that comes with discovering I no longer have the equipment with which to work. Even though I try hard I keep forgetting the chanting and find it challenging to memorize new verses.

When I notice people around me my own age, or older, employing strategies to hide the signs of their deteriorating faculties, I wonder if they are aware that they are doing that, and if perhaps the same thing is happening to me. Am I aware of my increasing incompetence? And when I hear a young monk talking about the mental decline of a senior sangha member in their monastery, I wonder if the junior monks here are having the same conversation about me.

I am reminded of something Tan Ajahn Chah said when he was describing self-view. He had read in the scriptures about the different types of conceited self-view – how we see ourselves as being better, equal or inferior to others. He spoke about the struggle he had to equate what he read in the scriptures about getting rid of conceit, with his own experience, ‘The fact is I can sew robes better and chant better than many of the other monks.’ He couldn’t deny

that reality. Then he realized that the problem was not the perception of being better, equal, or inferior to others, it was clinging to those perceptions – it was finding identity *as* those perceptions of self. In themselves, the perceptions are ‘just-so’, they are not a problem. The suffering of conceited views arise from our clinging to the sense of self.

Perhaps contemplating this Dhamma principle can help in coming to terms with seeing oneself as less competent. It is not pleasing to find that I have trouble to hear without hearing aids, or see without glasses, and likewise, it is disagreeable to find my memory less accurate. But at what point do these perceptions of loss become a problem? At the point of clinging! If we can reflect on there being a larger reality in which these perceptions of oneself as being competent or incompetent is taking place – if we remember the refuge in the Buddha – then maybe we won’t fall into the trap of resenting deterioration. I suspect from here on out, a large part of my practice is going to be about learning to be competently incompetent.

. . .

In this contemplation of contentment we have considered how important this particular Dhamma principle is, how obstructed we sometimes feel in our efforts to access it, and how supportive it is to be building up our storehouse of goodness. Most fundamentally we need to own up to the fact that discontentment is not happening to us – it is something

we are doing – we are the agents of discontentment. If our attempts to cultivate contentment seem to be getting us nowhere, I recommend using the word ‘contentment’ as a mantra: on each good long out-breath, quietly think the word, con-tent-ment.

To end this chapter, here is one more helpful verse from the Dhammapada,

The timely company of friends is goodness.

Fewness of needs is goodness.

Having accumulated virtue at life’s end is goodness.

Having dispensed with all suffering is goodness.

Dhammapada v.331

7.6

SITTING IN THE BUDDHA'S WAITING ROOM

There is a story traditionally associated with *Dhammapada* verse 331¹³⁰ above, in which *Mara* tries to entice the Buddha to take on the powers of a king and become a worldly ruler. There was no way that was going to happen; the Buddha was not interested in having power over others. He was interested in showing people how they could have dominion over their own lives. All of his teachings point to the true source of inner strength and security: selfless just-knowing awareness. Most of our practice is about learning how to make that just-right kind of effort so we are gradually more aligned with this inner refuge.

We all like to feel reassured that we are making progress in practice and that our efforts are not wasted. However, there comes a time when we need to let go of requiring such reassurance and choose instead to trust. We should not see this as abdication or resignation. When it is trusting in a wise way, it is based on an understanding that persistently checking up on ourselves undermines us. Tan Ajahn Chah illustrated

this habit of always seeking proof of progress: he said it was like planting a sapling and every few days pulling it out of the ground to see whether it was still growing. Obviously, to do so is unhelpful. As with equanimity and patience, trust is not assertive, and from the outside it can appear weak. In truth, trust is potentially a very powerful source of support.

A visitor to our monastery who was clearly committed to the spiritual life once asked me if I would explain the correct approach to practice. The image that came to my mind and which I shared with her was one of our sitting in the Buddha's waiting room. I suggested that our trust in the possibility of awakening is like having an appointment to meet the Buddha. In such a situation, while we were waiting to be called, what would we be doing? Would we be complaining to the Buddha's secretary, Venerable Ananda, about how long we were having to wait? I don't think so. Would we be pacing up and down fuming with impatience? I doubt it. Would we indulge in getting upset when we saw someone else go in ahead of us? Unlikely. I didn't elaborate to that extent in the conversation with the visitor, but I had the impression that the image helped her clarify how she should be approaching her practice. Her approach and my approach would not be the same; we are not coming from exactly the same place. What we do share, though, is faith that there is an end to suffering and that the Buddha realized it.

When I think about how I personally would conduct myself were I waiting for an appointment to see the Buddha, I am sure I would be careful and try to not indulge in heedless

mind states. Probably the thing I would focus on would be the five spiritual faculties. During his lifetime the Buddha gave many different teachings to different types of people. Some who came to listen to his teachings were suffering a great deal, and others not so much; some needed a lot of explanation before they got the message, and others needed only a few words. It is not necessary that we study and understand everything that has ever been recorded about what the Buddha taught. What is necessary is that we reach a point where we can let go of doubting the validity of the path and surrender ourselves – whole-bodily, wholeheartedly – into the spiritual training. For me, surrendering into the training means working on the five spiritual faculties: *saddha*, *viriya*, *sati*, *samadhi*, *pañña* – faith, energy, mindfulness, collectedness and wisdom – coming back, over and over again, and refining my relationship with them.

(Some readers might find it unhelpful that I so frequently use the Pali words instead of the English equivalents. I take this decision partly because I suspect there is a better chance the Pali words will come less encumbered with assumption. That we don't quite know what the Pali words mean could help us be more open to enquiring.)

One way of approaching these five faculties is to think of them as a pyramid: the four sides of the pyramid have *saddha* and *pañña* facing each other, and *viriya* and *samadhi* facing each other. Then, from the apex of the pyramid to the base, right down through the centre, there is the axis of *sati*, maintaining balance.

*The fragrance of flowers or sandalwood
blows only with the prevailing wind,
but the fragrance of virtue
pervades all directions.*

Dhammapada v.54

This Dhammapada verse fifty-four is about *sila*, or integrity; I also think of *saddha*, or faith, as being like a beautiful fragrance. To use the example of honeysuckle: it is possible to feel the texture by touching it, and we can capture the shape and colour with a camera, but how do we sense the fragrance? The scent of the honeysuckle has a somewhat amorphous quality to it which we can't quite capture. In the same way, *saddha* or faith (or trust) cannot really be grasped; however, it can affect us if we allow it.

As we contemplate the faculty of faith, it is helpful to appreciate this amorphous quality. Sometimes we make the mistake of only valuing those things that we think will make us feel sure. It is not in the nature of faith for it to make us feel sure; however, and most importantly, it can help us to be more at ease with feeling unsure. We are not sure that every chair we sit on is secure and won't collapse under us; we trust. We are not sure that our car will start next time we need it; we trust. In our heads we have an assumption about what will or will not happen, but that assumption is based on how we feel – in this case, a sense of trust. This ability to

trust is a faculty which can be, and needs to be, cultivated. It has the potential to sustain us when we are confronted with intense uncertainty. Having embarked on this journey to awakening, it is guaranteed we will travel through territory that is uncharted, uncertain, unknown. A well-developed sense of *saddha* means we can feel uncertain, we can enter into the unknown better prepared and less likely to sink into the swamp of fear and dread.

Saddha in the context of the Buddha's teachings is not the same as belief. We believe in ideas in our heads. *Saddha* or faith involves our whole body-mind. To use another metaphor: when we are swimming in the ocean and roll over onto our back and float, it is not the fact we believe that floating is possible that prevents us from sinking; it is a whole body-mind effort. It is an embodied sense of trust. We are not sure, but we allow ourselves to trust. It is helpful to find our own word for the feeling we have when we engage with this faculty of *saddha*. For me the key word is 'surrender'.

Because the power of *saddha* is sometimes not as obvious as such qualities as concentration and insight, we risk undervaluing it. *Saddha* is like a reliable secretary who works behind the scenes to make sure the visible aspects of our life function efficiently. Sometimes it inspires us, at other times it sustains us. *Saddha* can be good at protecting us from taking ourselves too seriously. When we recite the phrase, *Buddham saranam gacchami* – I go for refuge to the Buddha – we are saying that I trust that awakening from unawareness is possible and that the Buddha was fully awake. When we

recite the phrase, *Dhammam saranam gacchami* – I go for refuge to the Dhamma – we are saying that I trust that the teachings of the Buddha lead to awakening. When we recite the phrase, *Sangham saranam gacchami* – I go for refuge to the Sangha – we are saying that I trust that there is a community of awakened beings who have followed those teachings. *Saddha* encourages us to let go of ‘my way’ and go for refuge to the Buddha’s way, the Triple Gem: to align ourselves with timeless truth and in so doing learn how to hold our views and opinions more lightly.

Besides having trust in the Triple Gem, we also need to have trust in ourselves, which requires learning to be increasingly honest with ourselves. The more honest we are with ourselves, the more we trust ourselves. The more we trust ourselves, the more inner strength we have. The Triple Gem serves as an outer representation of wisdom and compassion. So long as we are still under the sway of unawareness, we need external supports that protect us from falling into vortices of delusion. Trust in the Triple Gem provides us with a frame of reference that supports trusting in ourselves. Without such a frame of reference there is the risk that we could misperceive self-confidence and cling to it; instead of being freed from the suffering of deluded egoity, we become more identified as it. *Saddha* is precious and as practice progresses we come to see the wisdom of protecting it, of guarding it, of treasuring it. Here is a poem about *saddha* by Kittisaro that he shared with me. He wrote it while he was on a year’s retreat in Chithurst forest in 1989.

Faith

*Trust is precious
A treasure trove of gold.
Guard it with all your heart
And you'll never grow old.*

*It's not a question of this or that
Believed or disbelieved,
But rather letting where you're at
Be silently received.*

*The heart of faith,
The heart that knows,
Leaves no trace,
And neither comes nor goes.*

PAÑÑA (WISDOM)

Elsewhere I have mentioned the conversation that the Buddha had with his son, Rahula, in which he asked Rahula what the purpose of a mirror was. Rahula replied that a mirror was for seeing our face in. The Buddha went on to say that when we want to see our heart, we use wise reflection. Towards the very beginning of this book, where I was explaining the way Tan Ajahn Thate taught about wisdom, I described *pañña* as being a self-reflective capacity which has the function of revealing the reality of that which appears within awareness. It is *saddha* that gets us started on this journey to awakening, and it is wisdom that shows us where we need to go.

If we have too much *saddha* we can become lost in naivety. The confidence that comes from *saddha* has the potential to make us complacent. That which counters naivety and complacency is *pañña*, or wisdom. Wisdom functions in relationship to faith; they cooperate. *Pañña* likes to enquire: it asks questions; it is not satisfied with a surface level of understanding: it wants to look deeper. *Pañña* is a disruptor – a constructive disruptor. It dismantles and dissects, but not out of heedless reactivity. True wisdom accords with reality and deconstructs in pursuit of the understanding that liberates us from conceit and confusion. My personal key word that connects with the concept of *pañña* is ‘discernment’.

We begin by using the wisdom of those who have taken the journey ahead of us. By paying close attention to their teachings, we make progress and avoid too many serious pitfalls. We don’t yet know what they know and we don’t see what they see, but we benefit from what they share. Similarly to how we would use a satellite navigator in the car: to begin with we are not sure that it is reliable, but as we travel along we see that indeed there is a bridge where there should be, and we pass through a village at just the right time. In the process we learn to trust in the instructions that the device gives us. Those instructions are not the journey, and are definitely not the destination, but they can be very helpful. Likewise we can learn to trust in the wise instructions that our spiritual teachers give us. What they offer are approximations – they are not the journey itself and not the goal – but their guidance is beneficial.

For example, wise teachings point out the importance of heedfulness and integrity. On the surface level we might think that so long as nobody else knows that we are being dishonest then we will get away with it. What we don't see is the damage we are doing to our self-respect.

In recent years several of the building projects here at Harnham Monastery have been overseen by an architect friend who lives in London, Rion Willard. When I was first getting to know Rion he shared with me how he reached a point in his life where drinking alcohol no longer made sense. He had participated several times in meditation retreats at our sister monastery, Amaravati, and had probably heard on a number of occasions the 'precepts talk' given just prior to retreatants leaving the monastery. The talk on the five precepts is aimed at helping those who have been in the supportive environment of a retreat to integrate whatever benefits they have accrued, as they merge back into situations that are less supportive. Without the protection of a commitment to restraint and harmlessness we are exposed to the influence of old habits of resisting reality; in the process, dark shadows of unawareness return and obscure the clarity that perhaps we enjoyed while on retreat.

Rion explained to me how one year he had spent time during the retreat pondering: 'Why do I continue to drink alcohol when it costs so much money, causes me to behave heedlessly, and I end up feeling horrible?' That year, after the precepts talk was given, he joined in with the group recitation and made a firm resolve to give up all alcohol. He hasn't drunk

since. At that time he was working in an architectural firm and, as would be expected, was often invited to attend social gatherings where alcohol was consumed. Having made that resolution at the end of that retreat, he drank juice, water, coffee, or soft drinks. Not only did his mental clarity benefit but often others would notice and were inspired to ask how he managed it. Some of them had made big mistakes in their lives while under the influence of alcohol. Many rewarding conversations occurred as a result. The confidence and energy that was released as a result of making that resolve contributed significantly to his establishing his own architect company. These days Rion runs a consultancy business, and as part of the contract that clients sign, there can be no consumption of alcohol for twenty-four hours prior to their meeting. We could say that it was wisdom that recognized the relevance of the precept talk and compassion that meant the wisdom was shared. Dhammapada verse 290 says,

*It is wisdom that leads to letting go
of a lesser happiness in pursuit
of a happiness which is greater.*

It is easy to be inspired by the compassionate example of those who have already taken the journey – who have done their work – but we would be mistaken if we think we can have the wisdom without doing the work.

In 1967 I was fifteen years old, and I can recall sitting in the living room in our house in Morrinsville, watching on our

black and white television set a global TV link-up¹³¹ – the first occasion when many countries around the world all simultaneously tuned in to the same program. One of Britain’s contributions to that event was the Beatles singing *All You Need is Love*. They were backed by a large orchestra and joyously sang out a refrain about love – over and over again. It was a catchy tune and sounded very hopeful. Unfortunately, that global link-up and the Beatles song were not enough to transform the insanity and suffering of the world. In reality, when what is referred to as love is not associated with wisdom, it can be very selfish. A song called *All You Need is Wisdom* is not so catchy, but the message is closer to the truth.

Wisdom understands, for instance, that reality is multidimensional. The waves on the surface of the ocean are only part of the reality of the ocean: there is stillness in the depth. For example, we might think we are acting with good intentions as we try to persuade others that we know what is best for them, but perhaps we don’t have the depth of discernment to realize that it is delusion that is driving us. If we look at the results of many of the religious crusades over the centuries we see how, despite what they thought were good intentions, they left a trail of disaster behind them with far-reaching consequences. Without true wisdom, delusion can be running riot and our actions can be causing a great deal of suffering, for ourselves and others. It takes wisdom to see through self-delusion, and without it the spectre of self-centredness creates a massive amount of trouble.

Pañña doesn't shy away from hard questions. We need to learn how to turn our attention around and truly face *dukkha*, and ask, 'Where does this suffering come from?' This is what the Buddha in his wisdom is encouraging us to do. Because of habits of heedlessness we find it easier to turn away and distract ourselves – to blame external conditions. Even the development of goodness can become a form of distraction. I attended a public talk once in London where the teacher was comparing different Buddhist traditions, and commented that, in his view, the Theravadins focused too much on suffering. I wouldn't want to comment on all Theravadins, but I would say that it is also possible to focus too much on the aspects of practice that give rise to surface-level good feelings. (See the example of Tan Ajahn Thate who was locked into *samadhi* for several years without progressing towards wisdom.) Indeed, we need to be able to draw on the strength that comes from our storehouse of goodness, but we also need to be careful that we are not merely indulging in pleasant feelings. It is possible to be dwelling on thoughts of kindness and gratitude yet at the same time be completely lost in pleasant feelings. Pleasant feelings that arise from focusing on goodness can be intoxicating. Once again, it is wise to reflect that the Buddha pointed out: *You continue to suffer because you fail to see two things – dukkha and the cause of dukkha*. When wisdom is well-developed it is less likely that we will make the mistake of indulging in agreeable feelings. There is a better chance we will engage the strength and resilience that goodness gives us, and use it to fearlessly

face *dukkha*, to drill down into it and enquire: ‘What is this suffering? What is the cause of this suffering?’

Pañña sees through facades – our own and others. We might catch ourselves midway through telling a familiar story about how great we are, then suddenly see our own falsehood. Or when listening to another person talking about the drama of their life – they could be utterly convinced about how unfortunate they are and justified in blaming so-and-so for their unhappiness, but all you hear is somebody totally lost in a dream. With wisdom you won’t be pulled into heedlessly believing in, or reacting to, their drama. Without wise reflection we tend to become lost in habits of reactivity, taking sides for and against opposing views and perspectives. Wisdom shows us how to pull back from heedless reactivity and see the situation from a broader perspective, one of expanded awareness: one that has the space to accommodate the *dukkha* – our own and that of others. Without such a perspective it is not likely that we will be able to really change anything.

So long as we totally believe we are our conditioned personality, our ego, there is very little hope of our finding any happiness other than that which arises from mere gratification of desire. One who is searching for satisfaction and security but still believes their personality is who or what they are, is like someone who is hungry and eats some photographs of food. Those colourful photographs approximate food but they are not the real thing. *Pañña* sees the games we play and sees through the fronts that we erect and hide behind:

the powerful one, the entertaining one, the sensitive one, the spiritual one. Wisdom has the potential to lead us in the right direction of dismantling those fronts and learning how to stand firm on our own two feet, without hiding.

We are fortunate to have the benefit of the Buddha's all-encompassing wisdom, as there are many opportunities on this journey for us to become distracted. Even avenues of apparently profound significance can be a complete waste of time. The classic teaching we have from the Buddha illustrating this point is where he was with a group of monks and scooped up a handful of leaves from the floor of the forest and asked them which was greater: the handful of leaves or all the leaves on all the trees in the forest? The monks replied that the leaves on all the trees were greater. The Buddha then explained that the truths that he had realized were much greater than those which he had taught. However, what he had taught was what mattered to anyone who was interested in awakening to freedom from unawareness.

The traditional presentation of the teachings that lead to the arising of wisdom involves an analysis of phenomena according to the three characteristics: *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta* (impermanence, suffering, and not-self). We are taught that investigating experiences – mental, emotional, physical – in terms of these three characteristics gradually leads to our letting go of habits of clinging. The tradition also suggests that we might well find an affinity with one characteristic in particular, in which case we ought to follow that line of enquiry. Essential to that enquiry, however, is that we engage

it with an authentic quality of interest; we are not blindly applying a technique because someone said it was good for us. The Buddha's own motivation to turn away from a life of habitual distraction and to pursue liberation began when he truly saw the consequences of his behaviour – when he truly saw that this life is fraught with *dukkha*. It was at that point that disillusionment arose in him. This recognition triggered in him a deep interest in searching for an escape from the terrible tedium of always trying to avoid old age, sickness and death. The great question, 'What truly matters?' arose in his heart and with it the energy to embark on the great journey.

VIRIYA (ENERGY)

*Those who are energetically committed to the Way,
who are pure and considerate in effort,
composed and virtuous in conduct,
steadily increase in radiance.*

Dhammapada v.24

Let us now turn to the third face of the pyramid, the faculty of *virīya*. The usual translation of 'virīya' is energy, or sometimes vigour, or effort. The word I find helps form a connection with this Dhamma principle is 'motivation'.

Virīya gets things done. It can help get you out of bed in the morning and motivates you to do your morning exercise before settling into sitting meditation. *Virīya* is needed to endure through difficulties. Even after experiencing

significant insights, it can take a lot of effort before feeling able to fully live from that place of new understanding.

Viriya is needed to overcome inertia and to take initiative; it means we don't settle for the status quo. Without *viriya* the Buddha-to-be wouldn't have embarked on the journey to awakening. Without *viriya* he might have accepted one of the the invitations from his first two teachers to settle in and help them run their communities, and might even have abandoned his aspiration to realize full and final freedom from all suffering.

Without *viriya*, Ajahn Sumedho might have remained at Wat Pah Nanachat and not spent years initiating and supporting the development of many monasteries in the West. Without *viriya*, the abbot I mentioned earlier who found himself on the receiving end of somebody else's projected pain wouldn't have taken the time he needed to thoroughly attend to how he had been affected.

In the early days of Chithurst there was an occasion when I was tasked with moving Ajahn Sumedho's belongings from a small room in the main house over to the redecorated Granary. There wasn't very much to move, and I paid what I thought was enough attention to boxing things up. I like to think I was particularly careful in packing up his shrine. As it happened I should have been more careful, because somewhere between the main house and the Granary the head of Ajahn Sumedho's carved rose quartz Buddha rupa was broken off. What I particularly remember about that day was Ajahn Sumedho offering a very helpful Dhamma

talk in which he described how, instead of on the one hand pretending that he wasn't annoyed, and on the other hand indulging in the annoyance, he made an effort to simply bear with the suffering that arose upon learning his lovely Buddha rupa had been broken, until the suffering faded. It is not necessarily the case that practice will take us to a point of profound insight and suddenly all our suffering disappears. That might happen for some, but what is more likely is that the arising of insight is a beginning of a new way of relating to suffering. Insight gives us a new perspective. From that point onward *virīya* is required as we endure the burning that is the purification and the integration.

While we are contemplating the spiritual faculty of *virīya* we should look again at the Buddha's teachings on the Four Right Efforts. It is easy to memorise and rattle off the list of the four right efforts, but what does it *actually* mean to make these four kinds of effort?

Let's begin with 'making an effort to protect already arisen wholesomeness'. As an experiment, bring to mind some positive aspect of your character, and then ask yourself, 'what do I need to do to protect this good quality?' For example, perhaps some time ago you decided to take the precepts seriously – not merely repeating them in Pali without any intention of observing them – and you have managed to honour that resolution. However, now the festive New Year season is approaching and you feel afraid you could end up compromising yourself. One way of making an effort to protect the already arisen wholesomeness is to call

on a Dhamma friend to bear witness to your resolve to maintain the five precepts. It doesn't matter whether we really understand why it makes a difference having someone else that we respect know about the effort we are making; we can just try trusting in it and see if it helps. Or, another example, perhaps we have reached a point in our meditation practice where we find the benefit from regular sittings is spilling over into daily life and we are experiencing increased clarity and calm. One way of making an effort to maintain that benefit of practice is to determine to keep to a regular sleeping routine: setting an alarm for ten o'clock at night and being in bed by ten-thirty, for instance. We know that irregular sleeping patterns are unhelpful, and that staying up late dealing with emails is disruptive; to make a resolve to be in bed by a certain time can be supportive.

Considering now the second right effort: what is involved in 'making an effort to give rise to so far unarisen wholesome states of mind'? Perhaps you are someone who finds it easy to be generous, but finds it very difficult to forgive those who you feel have harmed you. One way of making the effort to develop the virtuous quality of forgiveness could be to focus attention on how much pain we cause ourselves by indulging in resentment – not merely mentally, but feeling the resulting pain and the tension in the body. Only once we realize that we are the ones responsible for making ourselves unhappy will we be motivated to stop doing it. And perhaps upon acknowledging the consequences of indulging in resentment, we will discover that we can enquire more clearly into the

mental processes involved. Maybe we come to see that memories of past hurt are not actually a problem. The suffering of unforgiveness comes with our investing ill will in those memories. The memories and our ill will are not the same thing. We can't necessarily free our mind from unpleasant memories, but we do have the potential to stop compounding the unpleasantness by adding resentment. The ill will is extra. As a result of seeing this, forgiveness grows.

The near right effort is described as 'making an effort to remove already arisen unwholesome states of mind'. It is beneficial to familiarize ourselves with what the Buddha said about the five ways of removing distracting thoughts.¹³² Also I would recommend reading what Ajahn Tiradhammo wrote in his book, *Working with the Five Hindrances*.¹³³

In my own experience I have found it useful to bear in mind that the kind of effort required to deal with an already arisen obstruction depends on the intensity of the obstruction. It seems to me there are three approaches. When an obstruction is of a low level of intensity we can afford to simply ignore it – to not give it the energy of our attention. Sometimes this is enough for the obstruction to disappear. It is similar to choosing to not answer the phone when it rings. I call this the 'cutting through' approach.

When we encounter an obstruction that is charged with more energy, attempting to ignore it or cut through it could lead to making things worse. It might seem like it disappears, but that doesn't mean it has gone away; it has gone into unawareness and might be more difficult to deal with when it returns.

For this level of intensity we need to turn around and face that which is troubling us and use our faculties to investigate. We could call this approach 'seeing through'. We use our mental, emotional and physical faculties to enquire as to the source of this obstruction. How do we feel in our heart as we face this sense of being blocked from progressing? Where do we feel the tension in the body? In other words we build a relationship with it: the opposite of ignoring it. We might even strike up a conversation with it: 'What do you want? How can I help you? Sorry I have been ignoring you.' As we become more acquainted with the whole body-mind sense of the obstruction, not only will our mental acumen be available to support the investigation, but also our intuition. When we feel confronted with a real conundrum, we need to be listening to all of our being, including our gut. In the process we might find that we grow tired of trying to figure out a solution and head outside for a long walk in the woods, or go swimming. Physical exercise is an important concomitant in this process.

A different kind of effort is required when dealing with the most intense type of obstruction, which I call 'burning through'. In my own case it often feels like physical burning involving a lot of heat. If we find ourselves in such a situation, there is not much that we can do other than feel the fire, stay present in the body-mind, stay soft and open, and be consciously willing to bear with it, especially when it feels unbearable.

Now to the final of the four right efforts: what is involved in ‘making an effort to avoid the arising of so far unarisen unwholesome states of mind’? Let’s take the example of witnessing how unpleasant it is to be in the company of someone lacking empathy. Having noticed how much hurt can come from such a lack of emotional development, we decide to make an effort to avoid becoming like that. Just because we happen to meditate regularly does not guarantee that we are protected from falling into the trap of insensitivity. There are many meditators around who become so caught up in trying to solve their own suffering that they become obsessed and short-sighted: while making an effort to attend to their pain they have been pulled down into the vortex of their pain. This is one of the very real dangers of meditation practice. To avoid this danger we can turn up the volume of compassion.

As an exercise in formal meditation we can imagine the face of another person and think to ourselves, ‘Just as my eyes have cried many tears, their eyes also have cried tears. Just as I suffer, they too suffer. May all beings be free from suffering.’ We can perform the same exercise in daily life: sitting on a train or waiting in an airport, look at the faces of those around you and imagine tears rolling down their cheeks. It is safe to assume that everyone has cried, and when we feel how we feel when we recognize that fact, the barriers we construct around ourselves can begin to dissolve. Maybe we start to sense that we are all in this together – men and women, young and old, rich and poor – we all suffer and long to be free from suffering.

Mindfully empathizing with the suffering of others gives rise to compassion and can protect our heart from becoming cold and insensitive.

Although there is a great deal more that could usefully be discussed on this topic of *virīya*, there is at least one point in particular that should be mentioned. We have considered the importance of generating energy, and we also must be ready to accord with energy that arises spontaneously. Here I am referring to the intensity we feel when faced with a dilemma.

When we are in the middle of a dilemma and feel frustrated, it is the easiest thing to indulge in wanting the *dukkha* to disappear. The same applies to when we are shocked – when something totally unexpected occurs and our bubble of uninspected assumption bursts, and we experience a great release of energy. If our wanting to be free from *dukkha* is informed by wisdom and restraint it will help motivate us to find the cause of the *dukkha* and the way out of it, but often our wanting is laced with clinging and only serves to stoke the fires of frustration. It is skilful to prepare ourselves in advance for such occurrences in order to not miss the precious opportunity to make progress on the path. A dilemma or a shock should be seen as free energy that has been made available to fuel the purification of our gold. And we prepare ourselves by wisely reflecting in advance. The perception of intolerable intensity that arises with such experiences is the result of our imposing limitations on awareness. When we decide that we can't handle the intensity, there and then we are imposing limitations on the heart of awareness: we

are turning away from our refuge of trusting in the Buddha, and instead believe in the story in our heads that tells us we can't handle it. Wisely reflecting in advance is one way of nurturing the mindfulness and restraint that have the power to prevent us from forgetting the refuge in the Buddha – in edgeless, selfless, just-knowing awareness. If we remember the refuge, then the energetic intensity that manifests upon feeling frustrated or shocked is a gift for which we can feel grateful. It is our habit of clinging that creates the perception of limited awareness, and it takes energy to free ourselves from that habit. How we view energy when it hits us determines whether or not we benefit from it.

As with gravity, we don't have to know what energy actually is to be able to accord with it. What matters is that we know how to access it and generate it so that when it is needed we are not caught unprepared; and when an unexpected wave of energy does appear, how to meet it without judgment, without the contraction of fear – how to benefit from it.

*On hearing true teachings
the hearts of those who are receptive become serene,
like a lake: deep, clear and still.*

Dhammapada v.82

As *saddha* and *pañña* compliment each other, so do *virīya* and *samadhi*. While *virīya*'s speciality is getting things done, *samadhi*'s speciality is skilful not doing.

The Dhammapada verse above speaks of a deep, clear stillness that can appear upon receiving true teachings. This image fits well with how we might usefully contemplate the cultivation of *samadhi*. Particularly for those whose native approach to practice is primarily source-oriented (refer Appendix I, *We Are All Translators*), developing *samadhi* is not so much about making the mind peaceful, as about allowing the mind to resume peacefulness: we are not 'doing *samadhi* meditation', but 'allowing stillness'.

When we first start out in meditation practice, most of us benefit from precise instructions on what to do and what not to do. When I give beginners meditation instruction I usually encourage them to count the out-breaths. We are so used to always doing something to get somewhere, that beginning with 'not-doing' is perhaps asking too much. However, it seems to me particularly important that students of meditation learn early on that the attitude with which they approach practice will determine the result of their effort.

If they relate to their practice with an attitude instilled by a culture of consumerism, and they feel entitled to get the results they desire as and when they wish, they may not get very far on the journey. I am not saying that everyone ought to adopt a source-oriented approach, and that goal-oriented practice will not be productive – obviously for some it can be – just that if our striving to make our mind peaceful is not working, then we should be ready to consider adjusting the kind of effort we are making. Applying focused attention on counting the breaths, for instance, can introduce us to what is possible; it can nurture faith and motivate us. But once we recognize the potential that we have for inner peace, we need to attend closely to the attitude with which we engage the spiritual exercises.

The sort of attitude we need to have when disciplining attention is similar to that of a gardener as he or she trains their runner beans¹³⁴ to run along the frame which they have erected. The gardener gently guides the beans to grow in a certain direction so they get maximum sunlight and are easy to pick once they are mature. The gardener is aware that if they are not careful they will damage the tender young shoots. And they understand that, with enough water and warmth and time, the vines will produce beans of their own accord. They are not trying to squeeze the beans out of the vine – it is not up to the gardener to force the plant to produce beans. Personally, I have found that when I approached practice with a striving-gaining attitude, my mind became more disturbed, not less. I spent many years trying to make my mind peaceful

because that is what I understood the teachers were telling me to do. Eventually, when I came to realize that not everyone was out of balance in the way I was, I was able to accept that I needed to adjust my approach. And upon reflection, it seems that not all the teachers were advocating a goal-oriented kind of effort anyway – just that that is how I interpreted what they were saying.

If I were to compare myself with how I understand some other meditators relate to *samadhi*, I would say that my mind is all over the place – my *samadhi* is hopeless. However, that would be a heedless assessment. It is indeed true that my mind is not as still as I would want it to be, but it is not all over the place. There is a sense of containment, and with that comes a degree of clarity that I did not use to have. With that increased clarity comes an ability to contemplate life, and that is what really interests me. I am not drawn to ‘making the mind peaceful’, but I am drawn to stewarding attention in a way that inclines the mind towards stillness, and such stillness invites deepening of enquiry. This approach to the development of *samadhi* is perhaps best described as an effort to stop causing disturbance: to stop taking sides, and to let go of the compulsive judging mind.

Many of the approaches to meditation that have been taught in Buddhist centres in the West originated in monasteries in the East. These teachings emerged out of minds that were conditioned in ways very different to ours. Casually comparing one culture with another is of course unhelpful and disrespectful, but to ignore how different our cultures

are, and the effects those differences have, is naive. The effects of being raised and educated in Judaeo-Christian culture, where there is an emphasis on competing and comparing, are very different from the effects of growing up in a traditional Buddhist culture where the law of kamma and rebirth is accepted, and where guilt and self-loathing are generally unfamiliar concepts.

For many years now in my meditation practice I have used a reflection on the compulsive judging mind: observing the tendency of the conditioned mind to take sides for and against, and observing how a confused sense of self is sustained by that process. Regularly I hear meditators talk in very critical tones about their practice. They might have been practising for many years and making admirable effort, but because they still don't see the undermining effects of the compulsive judging mind – of taking sides for and against the conditions that arise – they don't receive the fruits of their good efforts. They are addicted to 'becoming' – to *bhava*.

Twice a year in our monastery, we meet for a fire risk assessment. One of the major risks that requires regular mention at those meetings is the overloading of extension cables. Extension cables come in various types: some can be used for operating a lamp or a laptop but must never be used for a hot water kettle or a heater. Others are designed to carry a heavier load and can be used for running more power hungry appliances. If the wrong sort of cable is used there is a real risk of starting a fire. In the spiritual life, regular mention is required regarding the immodest efforts of meditators who

are hell-bent on attaining elevated states of mind. Without modesty and contentment their heroic efforts can lead to an overload of their nervous systems and, sadly, sometimes cause meltdown. Many people come to this path of spiritual practice with wholesome aspirations but regrettably don't receive adequate instruction in developing the right attitude. Our aspirations are a form of energy and that energy can take us either in a direction of increased balance and ease, or to increased confusion. We would do well to remember the teaching that the Buddha gave to Bhikkhuni Mahapajapati where he included modesty and contentment as two indicators of right practice.

We are bound to have been affected by the greed-fuelled consumer culture in which we grew up. I recommend posting the words 'contentment' and 'modesty' in places where you will easily see them, or any other words that you feel could serve to counterbalance the effects of rampant consumerism. Approaching the cultivation of *samadhi* with an attitude that is rife with self-centred greed is setting ourselves up for great disappointment, or worse: it can sow seeds of discontentment deep within our hearts.

If you have had a taste of *samadhi* and then get greedy, it is possible you will become hypersensitive and won't want to listen to what anyone else has to say: you become inflated with self-importance. When practice is proceeding in a balanced way, inevitably you experience an increase in sensitivity – mentally, emotionally, physically. However, contrary to what we might imagine, increased openness and sensitivity does not

necessarily immediately make us feel more calm and balanced. It can in fact make us feel more exposed and unstable. The amount of time it takes before we feel comfortable with increased openness and sensitivity will probably depend on how contracted and out-of-balance we were to begin with. The point here being: as tempting as it can appear, it is not always the case that the more *samadhi* the better. *Samadhi* should be viewed as a medication that can be skilfully used in support of increased well-being. It can also be abused in support of habits of addiction. If you notice that you are still entertaining attitudes of untamed greed in the way you hold your meditation, try dwelling on how you would hold a newborn baby – gently, softly and lovingly.

Another approach to stillness – and one with which we might prepare ourselves by contemplating in advance – can come with sickness. A few years ago a good friend of our monasteries contracted Lyme disease.¹³⁵ As can happen, his condition went undiagnosed for a long time. Then it took a great many months before he could say he was back to anything like normal again. When he was somewhat recovered, he shared with me how at one stage during his illness he didn't have enough energy to even lift himself off the bed. And in that debilitated state, there was a period when he was so drained of energy that even the effort required to maintain a sense of personal self was beyond him. He related how when he reached that point, the individual self disappeared, and what was left was a perception of vast expanded awareness and connectedness – there was no fear. He felt that if that was

his final breath he was going to take, that would be OK. This friend had been meditating for many years before falling ill, so we can assume it was not through sheer luck that he stumbled upon this life-changing experience.

SATI (MINDFULNESS)

If the four faculties of *saddha* and *pañña*, and *viriya* and *samadhi* are functioning in an optimum way, they will exist in a state of balanced tension. If there is too much faith we tend to lose our edge in practice and become heedless; if there is too much enquiry we end up questioning absolutely everything and risk becoming possessed by doubt. If there is too much energy we will feel restless, and if there is an over-emphasis on stillness we could become susceptible to delusion. *Sati* serves to oversee balance. *Sati* does many other things besides, but in the context of this contemplation of the five spiritual faculties this particular function warrants mentioning. Ideally there will be a dynamic tension between the faculties, which strengthens and deepens our effort. *Sati* manages our life. My keyword for *sati* is watchfulness.

Tan Ajahn Chah had an interesting expression: ‘kaad *sati* muea rai, bpen baa muea nan’ which translates as ‘moments when you are without *sati* are moments of insanity’. *Sati* is that central, not only to the Buddha’s path of practice, but to life. Sometimes Tan Ajahn Chah made jokes saying that Westerners have ‘stupid feet’ because we would always be stubbing our toes as we walked through the forest. We might have appeared very clever intellectually since most of

us had spent more time in school and at universities than the Thai monks, but we were clumsy and inattentive. When ceremonies take place, the Thai monks seem to have a way of knowing exactly when to act and what to do, and it isn't just because they are familiar with the protocol and we aren't. Even very junior monks and novices seem to be attuned to what is happening and can respond without someone having to tell them what to do. They are attentive and more 'embodied' than we are. Owing to their better developed sense of spatial awareness they are picking up on more information. I doubt that mindfulness will ever be commodified in Thailand the way it has been in the West; it would be like trying to commodify breathing. The concept of *sati* is so thoroughly embedded in their culture.

At Wat Pah Nanachat, particularly during the seven years that constitute the first three stages of training, as a postulant, novice and junior monk, the monastic training offered is largely a process of assimilating the principle of embodied mindfulness. There is an emphasis on the cultivation of mindfulness in all aspects of life – mental, emotional, physical, relational. It is a gradual whole body-mind training which is altogether different from 'me' performing a technique so that 'I improve 'myself'. The understanding behind this traditional approach of embodying mindfulness is that to be able to untangle the knot of deluded egoity – to be able to investigate *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta*, and awaken – requires that we are mindful in the whole body-mind. Mindfulness training is not merely a mental exercise.

Earlier I described how during my time as a junior monk in Thailand I was hesitant to join in with the other monks performing attendant duties with our teacher, Tan Ajahn Chah. I suggested that my hesitation was because of a fear of rejection, but it might have been more complicated than that. I suspect that I also sensed on some level that I simply wasn't up to the task. When there is embodied mindfulness we can function with ease; intuition will be informing our actions. In my case, because of a lack of embodied mindfulness, I was functioning from a place of perpetual controlling. I was always thinking, 'What should I be doing now?' No wonder I was so exhausted so much of the time. It wasn't that I was bad, I was just a little bit crazy. Fortunately I wasn't so crazy that I couldn't learn from my mistakes, and that is really what matters.

We all fall short of how we would want to be. We all have so much to learn. However, when we have mindfulness we are more able to learn. The root of the word '*sati*' means 'remembering', and perhaps when we are translating '*sati*' a better word than 'mindfulness' would be 'presence'. We can be too trusting, too energetic, too tranquil and too inquisitive, but we can never be too present. The more consistently present we are in the whole body-mind, the better.

Regularly reflecting on these five spiritual faculties is an activity I find thoroughly rewarding. If I were sitting in the Buddha's waiting room contemplating as we have been doing, I like to think I would be protected from falling prey to too much heedlessness. I also like to think that by sharing these

reflections, readers might find a few hints that will help them as they progress along the way. It is a huge good fortune to have come across this way as explained by the Buddha. It is a privilege to find companions with whom one can share the journey. None of us know how much time we have and what challenges lie ahead. But right now it is my conscious wish that we remember to dwell in gratitude for the benefits we have already received.

EPILOGUE

*A sweet-smelling and beautiful lotus
can grow from a pile of discarded waste.*

Dhammapada v.58

Although our goal in practice is clear seeing – wisdom – it is faith that ignites our aspiration and enables us to embark on this journey of awakening. We have faith that there is more to life than that which appears on the surface; we are keen to look more deeply. Faith helped pique my interest and led to my joining my first meditation retreat; faith meant I have been able to endure apparently unendurable ordeals and burn through layers of habitual resistance. Faith illuminates the way ahead when it seems that there is no way. To have faith in the Buddha's teachings is to have wealth.

This wealth nourishes us, often in unimaginable ways. If we could accurately imagine what lay ahead we wouldn't need faith, but we can't, so faith is essential. Faith has the power to transform pain into understanding and confidence. On this journey I have seen how the pain of the loss of a sense of belonging can lead to learning how to let go of false securities. I have learned that the pain of feeling judged can lead to enquiring more deeply than I thought possible. Early on in life I was told that we are all born damaged goods, and in my case it took a lot of effort before I could even begin to

see that story as a story. Like many others I was taught that we need someone else to save us, but that is like being told someone else can take away our shadow. Everybody has a shadow. What is needed is that we understand the nature of our shadow and we develop the spiritual faculties until we are able to fully receive all aspects of who and what we are. For the teachings that point to that understanding I am sincerely grateful.

Alongside the teachings of the Buddha, spiritual companionship is that which I hold most dear. Without the clarity of the teachings, there would be no path for us to follow, but without good friends progress would be limited. I have already mentioned some of the names of those friends upon whom I have depended, but there are more whose names, for a variety of reasons, have not been mentioned. Before this series of reflections comes to a close I want to express my heartfelt appreciation to you all. The thought of how this life would have been without your friendship is very unappealing.

Sometimes when gratitude appears it is familiar and expected, like how we feel when we take off a heavy backpack at the end of a long day's walk. At other times gratitude feels both familiar and surprising at the same time, such as when, towards the end of a long dark winter, the warm sunshine might suddenly break through, triggering a release of the fragrance of hyacinths and jonquils. Then there are times when gratitude comes as a total surprise, such as when an old friend whom we haven't seen for many years, unexpectedly arrives for a visit.

However it manifests, a sense of gratitude is always welcome. Gratitude nurtures hope: not hope of the naive kind, as we have discussed, but of the kind that conduces to insight, of the kind that teaches us that, whatever is happening – be it agreeable or disagreeable – every moment is always new, even if we feel or think otherwise: every moment is a new opportunity to learn how to let go and trust in that which is, and always has been, simply true.

Thank you.

WE ARE ALL TRANSLATORS

*Truly it is yourself that you depend upon;
how could you really depend upon another?
When you reach the state of self-reliance
you find a rare refuge.*

Dhammapada v.160

On this occasion I would like to discuss the effort that we are all making in our work to translate the practice of Buddhism. Maybe it hasn't occurred to you that you are a translator. I would like to suggest that we are all translators, in the sense that the teachings which we have inherited from our Asian brothers and sisters cannot be simply uprooted and then replanted in another place on the planet without due attention to the differing environmental conditions. While we gladly recognize there are certain universal principles in the teachings, there are obviously also some aspects that are relative to culture and tradition. So the manner in which we are taking up Buddhist practice and the kind of effort we are making is our contribution to this shared task of translation. This is as important as, if not even more important than, the work of translating texts. Can we become more conscious of our contribution to this task as we make it?

I have often spoken about identifying what pertains to form in the teachings, compared with what is in the domain of

spirit. Mixing up these things can mean that we put emphasis in the wrong place, and in so doing we end up with results that we didn't expect. But sorting out such matters is far from easy. The sparkling radiance of these exotic teachings and techniques readily dazzle us, especially since we have been in the dark for so long. We might feel contented to settle for that initial bedazzled response to this new-found light. However, the Buddha was consistent in his encouragement to not be fooled by the way things appear to be; only after careful scrutiny should we fully accept something to be true. The point of this encouragement was that we should come to know directly for ourselves the benefit of the teachings. On the other hand, it is not suggesting that we dismiss things because we don't see the sense in them straight away. So how should we approach this matter of discerning the spirit of the teachings?

DISCERNING ESSENCE

The point of our taking up the Buddhist Way is to find support for our heart's yearning to be free, and it is natural that we begin by observing the way in which others engage in practice. But although a particular technique or system has been applied successfully by one person, it does not mean that it will work for everyone. It is wise to ask, 'What is important to me? What is it that is quickened in me when I see a teacher, or hear a teaching?' I like to think about religious forms as being like conventions around eating. If we are hungry, the point of eating food is to become free from the discomfort

of hunger. Whether you go to a Japanese restaurant and eat with chopsticks, or a Thai restaurant and eat with a spoon, or a place where you use a knife and fork, the conventions are not the point. The point is that we are fed. So it is with practice. The point is that our heart is nourished. So our task is to identify what it is that is nourishing, and to focus on that. This is identifying the domain of spirit. If we give this task priority, whatever this might mean in our own case, then there is a better chance that forms that support the spirit will evolve rightly. Not to give spirit due priority means we might be missing out on what is most of value in a religious tradition.

Something we could miss out on is a creative participation in our enquiry. If our translation is going to be relevant, we have to be creatively involved with it. Yes, we respect the forms that we inherit; we have to begin with learning that which has been tried and tested. At times this requires that we simply do what we are told; at this stage, learning the form is the priority. For example, if we are learning T'ai Chi, we don't question the master because the movements feel uncomfortable, and then on our third lesson make some suggestions as to how the form could be altered. No: although in the beginning we might feel awkward and look a little silly, we simply learn the form and humbly accept that it doesn't quite feel right, remembering that these forms are supports for spirit – in this case, the flow energy in the body. If we practise the form with commitment then hopefully we eventually learn to relax into

the form. Then perhaps we will feel the benefit of the practice and we will be grateful.

So we are not dismissing forms. We take up the various forms of practice and wait patiently until we settle into them. Then we feel for the meaning behind the form, which is what I am referring to as the 'spirit'. Once we are familiar with the spirit, that becomes the main focus. This way we will be better placed to change the forms if needed without risking compromising or obstructing spirit. If we attempt to adjust things too soon, based on our likes and dislikes, we could be creating obstructions.

A friend of the monastery relates a story about a valuable lesson he learned during his first year of training under an experienced cabinetmaker. Starting out on his apprenticeship as a young man, this friend had been given a brand-new, top-of-the-range hammer as a gift from his father. It was perfectly balanced, with a wooden handle – just what an aspiring cabinetmaker would dream of. His master instructed him numerous times on how he was to hold his hammer towards the end of the handle so as to gain the best swing. But although a beginner, our friend thought he knew better. If you are new at carpentry, it does feel easier to hold the hammer nearer the head; you feel like you can be more accurate. After a number of reminders, the boss one day took hold of our friend's beautiful hammer and proceeded to saw half the handle off, declaring that since he was not using that half he obviously didn't need it.

We respectfully look at the practices that we take on, feeling for the spirit. The teacher says practise this way, don't practise that way. We do what the teacher says but, as we proceed, we are checking and feeling. We do not just believe. It is necessary to trust our teacher, but trust is not mere belief. There is a big difference between trusting in what teachers are offering and believing in them and their techniques. Many of us came into this path with conditioning from a different religious tradition; one which holds up belief as the whole point. Such an approach cannot be applied in Buddhist teachings.

In Buddhism, beliefs are functional. We believe in things like rebirth, for example; we believe that when we die we are reborn. But most of us don't know this to be objectively true. I don't know that it's true. I believe it, but the way in which I believe hopefully means that if somebody says it is all nonsense, then we won't have to quarrel. I choose to hold a belief in the process of rebirth, but I make an effort to hold this belief lightly. The belief is not the end point.

When our teacher tells us to practise in a certain way, we take this teaching on trust. When teaching about purifying our hearts from obstructions, the Buddha used an image of a goldsmith purifying gold. I think this simile could also be applied to the effort we make in purifying our relationship with the teachings; a process of removing the dross over and over again until we get pure gold. We purify our relationship to the teachings by cultivating enquiry and feeling into how they work for us. When we are practising various exercises

and techniques and we find something is not working, we start having doubts. That's fine. Doubts do not have to be an obstruction in our practice. Doubts can also indicate that the spirit of enquiry is alive within us.

Enquiry is something that comes naturally to us in the West, and we should value it. This capacity for enquiry is one of the contributions we are able to make to the task of translation. We shouldn't automatically assume that, because our experience appears to be contradicting what someone else is saying, they are right and we are wrong, or vice versa. We listen. We feel for what is being said. We patiently enquire. And if we proceed with a willingness to go gradually, translating everything we experience into practice, then I trust that an organic and lasting understanding will be born out of our effort.

As we discover for ourselves what works and what does not, a confidence grows, bringing benefit to us individually and to the community at large. Discovering our own true way of practice is like finding a good restaurant; the first thing you want to do is take your friends along. My sense is that if we arrive at such confidence in a gradual way by respectfully questioning as we go along, we spontaneously find our own ways of expressing it. We are not just using other people's words. Such confidence will spill over – we might not even notice it happening.

One way of illustrating this task of translating the practice is to look more closely at how we internalize the teachings. If the kind of effort we make is not coming from a place of confidence, not only are we wasting energy, but we could actually be doing ourselves harm. I see a lot of confusion in the way many meditators relate to the different types of effort required in practice. There is sometimes quite a naïve hope that by endlessly plugging away, doing what they have been doing for years, something good will come out of it.

These days I feel convinced that there are basically two different and distinct orientations of effort – what I refer to as goal-orientation and source-orientation. For many years I tried to practise by having a goal ‘out there’ to strive towards. My understanding of the teachings as I heard them was that this was what I should be doing. I received instruction in various techniques, which were oriented towards realization of this goal. The goal was called ‘enlightenment’ or ‘the deathless’ and so on, but it was always ‘out there in the future’. I was encouraged to make great effort to achieve the goal and to break through those things that obstructed progress towards it. And even when the words didn’t directly say that the goal was ‘out there’, that was the message that I heard. Eventually I found myself in a terribly frustrating knot. At one point I felt that my whole commitment to practice was seriously challenged. Gratefully, with some help, I came to realize that part of the struggle I was caught in was about the very feeling of having to get somewhere. I had internalized a sense

that I had to fix myself somehow, change what I was and get somewhere else. Clearly it wasn't working, and little by little I started to give up. In giving up I experienced a sense of beginning a different sort of journey. Instead of the journey coming to a sad and sorry end, I found myself settling into a new approach – one that felt more natural. And with this shift came a feeling, initially unnoticed, of being genuinely personally responsible. This was new.

This experience contributed to my developing a practice characterized by a strong sense of trusting in that which already exists. This was altogether different from striving towards achieving some goal. The effort that this new appreciation spontaneously called forth was 'not seeking'. My attention was – and is – looking and feeling in this moment; enquiring, 'Where and when do I decide this situation is somehow inadequate or wrong or lacking?' I found that I was able to notice quite clearly when I was imposing on life some notion of how it should be, thinking, 'it shouldn't be this way, it should be that way.' My practice became that of simply, but resolutely, being with this awareness. Now I refer to this as source-oriented practice – in which a trusting heart intuits that what we are looking for is right here, not anywhere else, not somewhere out there.

FAULTY WILL

Many of us start meditating with a faculty of will that is not doing its job properly. In trying so hard and for so long to wilfully fix ourselves, we have abused the very faculty of will.

Now we can't help but habitually overdo it and interfere with everything that happens. We often feel unable to simply receive a situation and gently apply will to direct and guide attention. If we find something that we think is wrong we tend to automatically slam an opinion on it – that 'it shouldn't be this way', and then we set about wilfully trying to fix it.

For those of us who suffer this dysfunction, engaging the will as the primary tool of meditative effort just doesn't work. Whereas, if we disengage from willing and abide in a mode of trusting in that which already exists, trusting in reality and truth, if we simply stop our compulsive interfering, then there is a better chance of an accurate and conscious appreciation of that which already exists revealing itself.

If you follow a path of practice that is goal-oriented, you can expect to have a clear concept of what you should be doing and where you should be going. There will be appropriate actions to take for any obstacles that you might encounter. But if your path of practice is source-oriented it is not like this at all. Here you come to sit in meditation and you might begin by checking bodily posture, making sure the back is upright and the head is resting comfortably on the shoulders, chest open, belly at ease; and then you sit there, bringing into awareness the sense that you don't know what you are doing. You simply don't know. All you know is that you are sitting there (and there may be times when you are not feeling sure about that). You don't hang on to anything. But you do pay attention to watching the tendency of the mind to want to

fix things. You focus interest on the movement of the mind towards taking sides, either for or against.

Usually when I sit in meditation I assume a conscious posture and simply observe what's happening; maybe the mind is all over the place – thinking about the liquorice I had the other night at somebody's house, or about how it's a pity the sun has gone in, or about how I will be in Beijing this time next week, or about how the monks at Harnham sent an email asking whether they should use gloss paint for the doors in the monastery kitchen, and so on. Such thoughts might be going through my mind, but I don't try very hard to do anything in particular with them; until I start to feel a little bit uncomfortable, and then I watch to see where that discomfort is coming from. It is usually coming from: 'I shouldn't be this way. I should be... My mind should be clear, I shouldn't be...' When we identify that which takes us away from our natural feeling of centredness, there is a better chance we will start to settle. This is not the same kind of effort one would be making in goal-seeking practice.

KNOWING FOR YOURSELF

Most of us have a natural tendency to incline towards one of these two orientations of effort. Some people are contented and confident when they have a clear sense of the goal – that is where they are supposed to be going. Without a clear idea of where they are going, they become confused and anxious. Others, if they focus on the idea of a goal, end up depressed, feeling like they are failing: trying to stop thinking, they fail;

trying to sit properly, trying to make themselves happy, trying to be kind, trying to be patient, trying to be mindful – they are always failing. What a terrible mistake! The worst disease of meditators is trying to be mindful. Some quit, feeling they have been wasting their time. However, if we realize that we don't have to do anything other than be present with an awareness of the tendencies of the mind to take sides for or against, then a new quality of contentment might emerge.

These two orientations are not mutually exclusive. It is useful to understand how each of them has particular merits at different stages of practice. In the beginning, to build up some confidence, it is necessary that we have a good grasp of techniques. Even though we may relate more readily to source-oriented teachings and practices, if we haven't yet found a foundation on which to practise, or if we have found that foundation, however our life is very busy, it can still be appropriate at times to intentionally make effort to exercise will and focus on techniques.

I encourage people in the beginning to be very disciplined and to count their out-breaths, being quite precise in the effort made. This way we get to know that our attention is indeed our own. We are not slaves to, or victims of, our minds. If our attention is wandering off and we get caught up in resentment, then we need to know that we are responsible for that. Our practice, whether we are goal-oriented or source-oriented, is not going to progress until we are clear that we are responsible for the quality of attention with which we operate.

To reach this perspective it may be necessary to exercise a rigorous discipline of attention for a long period of time. Yet we may reach a point at which we sense that in continuing to make this kind of effort we need to refine the techniques and systems to pursue a goal. But if we encounter a deep conviction that to do so is no longer appropriate, then we need to be ready to adjust – to let go altogether of seeking anything. If it is right for us to make this choice, then when we hear someone talking about their differing way of practice, we will perhaps find ourselves saying, ‘That’s fine’, and not be overly intimidated by their enthusiasm and conviction.

As we settle more comfortably and confidently into making our own right effort it becomes easier to recognize the various strengths and weaknesses of different styles of practice. In goal-oriented practice, for example, it is probably easier to generate energy. With a clear concept of what you are supposed to be doing, attention narrows, you make an effort to remove distractions, and you focus, focus, focus. By being so exclusive, energy gathers; this way you readily observe yourself progressing along the path. This in turn supports faith. As with everything, there is a shadow side to this, which is directly related to this strength. In being so exclusive you risk chopping out things that could be useful or need to be addressed; there is a danger of denial. If old neurotic habits of avoidance have not been addressed and you follow a goal-seeker’s practice, then those tendencies can become compounded. This is one aspect of fundamentalism. And

despite popular belief there have been, and there are now, Buddhist fundamentalists.

One of the strengths of source-oriented practice is that as we release out of the striving and the aiming for something other than here-and-now, a balanced, whole body-mind relaxation can emerge, drawing on our creativity. We have to be creative, since by not excluding anything, everything must be translated into practice. There is no situation that is not a practice-situation. However, unwise creativity can harbour delusion. If we are so happy and relaxed that we are getting lazy or heedless with the precepts, for example, then we need to recognize what is going on.

Another danger in source-oriented practice is that when we really do get into a pickle we could feel disinclined to do anything about it. This tends to happen because we no longer relate to structures in the way we used to. Faith for us is inspired not by a concept of what we hope lies ahead, but by a sense that what we trust in is already essentially true. However, if the clouds of fear and anger overshadow the radiance of our faith we can tremble badly, and possibly even crumble. In this case it is important that we have already cultivated spiritual friendship. To have the blessing of association with others with whom we share a commitment to conscious relationship is a precious resource. When we gather in spiritual companionship, a special feeling of relatedness can emerge in which we rightly feel safe. This relative security can be for us what concepts and goals are for goal-striving spiritual technicians.

As we progress in our practice each of us has the task of checking to see whether we are moving into or out of balance. But how do we assess how things are moving? If we are moving into balance, it means we can handle more situations, we can accommodate states of greater complexity. If we are moving out of balance, it means we can handle fewer and fewer situations: instead of spiritual practice liberating us and opening us up to life, it makes us exclusive and painfully cut off.

So it is wise to examine our practice and see if we can find the direction we feel we move in most easily, which orientation of effort comes most naturally to us, what sort of language works for us. We need to prepare ourselves with the understanding that teachers of these different approaches use different ways of talking. So listen to the teachings you receive, contemplate that which you read in books, and see which orientation of effort makes sense to you. Once you know, I suggest you go with what inspires you.

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Hopefully you can see how this contemplation is an important part of our contribution to the shared task of translating practice. May we all feel encouraged to investigate the contribution we are making to this task at this stage in its unfolding in the West. I like to think that our careful enquiry will show up our weaknesses, individually and collectively, and when we become quietly aware of our deficiencies we will be creative; we will be able translators of the practice;

adaptation will happen where it is necessary and it will be in the service of Dhamma. Possibly we won't even notice it. We will just know that the spirit of the practice is alive within us and that our hearts are more at ease.

Thank you very much for your attention.

BE LIKE A TREE

Edited and reprinted from Alert To The Needs Of The Journey³² by Ajahn Munindo

A guided meditation on: alignment, softening, broadening, listening, receiving, the just-so reality.

Those who regularly read or listen to my Dhamma talks will know that I rarely give formal meditation instruction. There are a number of reasons for this, not the least being that we are all so different. It is true that there are basic principles which apply to everyone – when we cling we create the causes for suffering; when we let go we undo those causes – but just how we arrive at letting go differs from person to person. The suggestion that there is only one way to practise properly is to underestimate the complexity of our human condition. And I feel it is unkind and unwise to ignore the individual strengths and limitations of seekers on this journey. I have experimented over the years with a variety of formal meditation techniques, and also with body awareness and conscious breathing exercises. What it comes down to, in my view, is trial and error: we try to do the best we can and learn from our mistakes. When our actions of body and speech are guided by a commitment to a life of integrity, then hopefully the consequences of any mistakes we do make will not be too serious. On this occasion, since it has been specifically

suggested that sharing what I have found to work could be helpful, I am happy to attempt to do so.

When I first started out on this path, the effort I was making would best be characterized as controlling. Compulsive controlling is what all deluded egos love, and I was quite good at it. It suited me to hear the teacher speak about sitting and walking meditation as exercises in concentration. I was ready and able to apply myself with gusto to these exercises, and I had some interesting results. The benefit of those early efforts was evident in the enthusiasm I felt for pursuing the practice. The limitations, however, quickly showed up when the initial delights which come with the mind of a beginner faded away. To progress beyond the fascinating new perspectives which manifest when attention is concentrated required letting go of habits of controlling. A big part of me didn't feel so good about letting go. I liked holding on to 'my way' of doing things. But an ability to concentrate and control is not enough when it comes to meeting the many and varied obstructions we encounter on the way. This fits with what the Buddha teaches us about the Four Right Efforts. To apply the same kind of effort, regardless of the nature of the apparent obstruction, is not likely to be successful.

In all the different approaches to practice which I have tried, the single most helpful meditation instruction I have received is Ajahn Sumedho's teachings on listening to the *Sound of Silence*.¹³⁶ It was a relief to discover that however compulsive one's controlling tendencies might be, the meditation object of the Sound of Silence remained constant and undisturbed.

Unlike the rhythm of the body breathing, which can become irregular if we pay attention to it in the wrong way, the Sound of Silence is always there, wonderfully just so.

It turns out, however, that even this practice of listening to the Sound of Silence is not always enough on its own. It seems that for some who use this practice, they can be paying attention to this subtle inner sound, yet be thoroughly out of touch with the rest of the body and the world around them. It is also possible to attend to this background sound and remain very rigid in how we hold the overall body-mind. Further, as a result of having been taught for years to concentrate, pay attention, and focus, many of us have ended up with a very narrow, cramped perspective on life – our field of awareness having collapsed. And all our efforts to fix our perceived problems can lock us into a perpetual ‘doing’ mode; we are always going somewhere to get something to make ourselves better. But addressing these symptoms of imbalance does not have to be an onerous chore. I see it as akin to inheriting a big, wonderful house which is in need of refurbishing and redecorating. It can be a lot of fun to commit yourself to such a project.

When I look back over the years on this spiritual journey, there are six key prompts or suggestions which have emerged as significant ‘signs’. These six ‘signs’ or ‘prompts’ I find serve as helpful reminders and support for an embodied presence. The recollection of these six prompts constitutes what these days I would call my formal practice. A typical session of sitting could involve intentionally bringing these six

prompts to mind and dwelling for a while on each one, and then, depending on which point happens to attract particular attention, resting there for an extended period; usually I settle on the Sound of Silence. Having invested attention in these prompts during formal practice, the mere mention of one of them in the context of daily life can serve as a trigger to check the state of balance (or imbalance). So this is a practice that we can take anywhere. No special conditions are needed.

Perhaps I should mention here that personally, I have very little interest in special experiences or special states of mind. What does interest me is the possibility of developing a quality of awareness that is able to accommodate whatever life offers: is it possible to be buffeted by the eight worldly winds¹³⁷ – praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, honour and insignificance – without being blown over by them?

The six signs or prompts are: aligning, softening, broadening, gently listening, simply receiving and the just-so reality. Now let's look at them in detail.

ALIGNING

Establishing a sense of embodied 'alignment' is similar to what some people do with 'body-scanning' meditation, but in this case we are aiming particularly at a perception of uprightness and groundedness. Try experimenting with suggesting to your mind, '*Be like a tree*'. Consider how the upper branches and leaves of a tree are reaching for the light, while at the same time its roots are firmly planted in the ground, and both are absorbing essential nutriments. Recollect the Buddha's

discourse¹³⁸ on meditation on breathing in and breathing out. For those of us fortunate and agile enough to be able to develop the full- or half-lotus postures, that is good. But the rest of us may apply the principle of ‘uprightness’, to whatever posture we are able to develop.

Meditating on this first prompt means cultivating a familiarity with a set of specific points within the body which conduce to a sense of being aligned. Begin with bringing attention to the area at the top of the back of your head and feel the sensations there. Imagine you are being lifted up from that point. As you visualize that, also feel your chin and see if it is being tucked in just a little. Inhibit any inclination to make it happen intentionally by using muscles. See if imagination alone can trigger a subtle shift, with your head neither falling forward nor tilting back.

Now, moving down the body, bring attention to the feeling of the tip of the tongue as it rests gently touching the roof of the mouth behind the front teeth. Remember this is an effort to ‘align’. We are using our imagination to direct attention to a sensation. Once you are clear that you can really *feel* the tip of your tongue, not just think about it, go back again to the top of the back of the head, then return to the tip of the tongue. Back and forth, slowly, gently.

Now move awareness to your shoulders. Bring to mind an image of carrying two heavy buckets of wet sand. Feel your shoulders drop down, way down, and allow the chest to open. When we are misaligned we easily fall into a habit of stressing our tongue within the mouth cavity, clenching

our jaw, holding our shoulders up and cramping our chests close, even while we are meditating! Not only do these habits compound the state of stress, but they also waste a lot of energy.

With an awareness of the sensation of the top of the back of your head, with a feeling for the tip of the tongue gently touching, with the shoulders relaxed and chest resting open, feel for the weight your body is exerting downwards onto the cushion or the seat where you are sitting. Without forcing anything, allow the body to rock very slightly forward and then backward, and then forward again, until you find the point of maximum downward pressure. Visualize completely flattening your seat just by sitting on it. This is exercising 'aligning'.

SOFTENING

Due to unawareness, most of us grow up gradually accumulating a backlog of unmet life. Sadly, nobody has taught us the difference between the natural pain which all beings experience, and the suffering which occurs as a result of our clinging to experience. As a defence against this increasingly difficult-to-deal-with suffering, we fabricate forms of rigidity. If by mid-life we are not already alert to these defences, from about forty years of age onwards a type of energetic *rigor mortis* starts to set in, with a dispiriting insensitivity. Well before middle age many people have already compromised their natural sensitivity, and as a result they feel chronically obstructed when it comes to simply feeling what they feel.

Sometimes meditators wonder why, after they have been making so much effort for so long, they are still so unhappy. Being imprisoned behind these rigid defences against denied life might be the cause. Softening helps with this. What we are aiming for is a softening of attitude, but softening in the body is a practical and effective place to begin. In cultivating conscious softening, try suggesting '*Be like water*' to your mind. When you gently immerse your hand in water there is almost no resistance. This perception of no resistance contrasts with our habits of struggling for and against life.

Now bring awareness once more to your head; this time feel your eyes and invite them to soften. Imagine your eyes floating gently, comfortably, at ease, as if they have been set free from having to always be staring at something. Feel your forehead soften, feel your jaw soften. Feel your belly soften. Being soft is not being weak. Flowing water is powerful, yet it can accord with everything it encounters. This is exercising 'softening'.

BROADENING

From an early age we were told to pay attention and to concentrate on whatever was put in front of us, be it a book, a monitor or a screen. No doubt we became skilled at accumulating information in this way, but an unintended side effect may be to end up feeling as if we had only a very small, cramped space to live in. Our subjective sense of the world may have become painfully closed and limited. At least in part, this is why so many people reach a point where they

feel they can't take it any more: 'I haven't got enough room to move!' But this 'room' is a fabrication, an imposition on awareness that we are *doing*.

This perception of the personal space which we occupy is not a fixed thing; we can work on dissolving those perceived limitations. Using our imagination, we can make an effort to expand the field of awareness. We can intentionally generate a sense of broadening by suggesting to the mind, '*Be edgeless*'. As an experiment, bring attention to the temperature of the air touching your skin. Then imagine feeling a few centimetres outside your skin. Is it possible to sense the temperature of the air around your body? Or experiment in the same way with sound. You can hear sounds immediately next to you; now try listening to sounds a bit further away, then further away again. Imagine listening and sensing a very long way away. What we are feeling for here is the ability to relax the sense of being defined by a perception of rigid, limited space. Using our imagination, we can create an image of a field of awareness expanding beyond the immediate sensation of our body, outward and ever-increasing, with the suggestion, '*Be edgeless*'. We are interested in a field of awareness vast enough to accommodate all of life. This is exercising 'broadening'.

GENTLY LISTENING

If you can hear the high-frequency internal ringing of the Sound of Silence, by gently listening to this sound you can discover a different way of paying attention. When we send

attention out through our eyes, we easily narrow our field of awareness. We often equate paying attention with excluding everything other than the object on which we are focusing. This has its uses when intense concentration is what is called for, but it is distinctly unhelpful when this way of paying attention becomes our everyday mode of operating. It leads to an insensitive, closed-off type of attention, not a skilful, sensitive attunement. If we want to be able to see beyond the deluding stories that we have hitherto believed, we need to be able to tune in sensitively to what life is presenting to us. Being closed off and insensitive is the last thing we need.

Turning attention towards our ears and listening, and away from our eyes and looking, can relax the way in which we pay attention. Listening is a 360 degrees application of attention. Listening is less 'doing' and more 'allowing', less 'selecting' and more 'according with'. To support easing out of the picking and choosing mode, try suggesting to your mind, '*Gently listen*'. Intentionally listening in this way to the sound of silence is cultivating a new disposition or attitude towards experience. Instead of always controlling what appears in awareness and trying to 'get something' out of experience, we simply open to what at this moment is available and willing to learn. This is exercising 'gentle listening'.

SIMPLY RECEIVING

When we have learnt to relax the way in which we pay attention and to open ourselves to be available to learn from everything that life offers us, this means we have already

loosened our grasp on compulsive tendencies to control. If we keep checking to see whether we are still controlling, or still trying to not control, that means we are still caught in controlling. It is only when we have grown tired of deluded ego's dishonest games that our compulsive tendencies to want to be in charge fall away. We don't drop them by trying to drop them. Letting go happens when we see with insight that clinging is fruitless. This is why the Buddha said, *It is because of not seeing two things that you stay stuck in samsara: not seeing suffering and not seeing the causes of suffering*. Trying to let go only perpetuates the struggle. Rather, make the suggestion to your mind, '*Simply receive*'. Trust that this receptivity has within it the potential to see clearly, to understand, and that it is understanding which brings about letting go. Don't be afraid that cultivating such sensitive receptivity will lead to a kind of passive selfishness. When there is such a quality of awareness, any expression of selfishness is more likely to be seen for what it is: a tired and painful limitation that we are imposing on awareness.

THE JUST-SO REALITY

What we are aiming at being receptive to is the just-so reality of this moment. If there is fear, receive fear into an expanded field of awareness and allow fear to be 'just so'. If there is anger, receive the anger and allow it to be 'just so'. If there is wanting, not-wanting, liking, disliking, receive it all and contemplate that it is all just-so. There are causes for the conditions of this moment to appear as they do here and now.

Our task is to develop the quality of attention which has the capacity to receive this just-so reality, honestly: nothing added and nothing taken away. We are not programming ourselves to believe in the just-so reality. As with the other prompts, the suggestion to recollect the just-so reality supports honest, careful receptivity of this moment.

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ENCOURAGEMENT

Over the years I have witnessed many meditators trying to squeeze themselves into forms which clearly don't suit them, so perhaps some will find it helpful to know there is more than one way to climb a mountain. Parents lovingly encourage their children to develop according to their abilities. Alert to the individual needs of their children, parents give them permission to experiment and to discover for themselves what works. Wise yoga teachers warn their students against using force as they become acquainted with the *asanas*. Hopefully, wise meditation teachers will also tune into the abilities and needs of their students, giving them the freedom to discover what works and encouraging them to ask what is it that truly nourishes selfless confidence.

Thank you very much for your attention.



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