

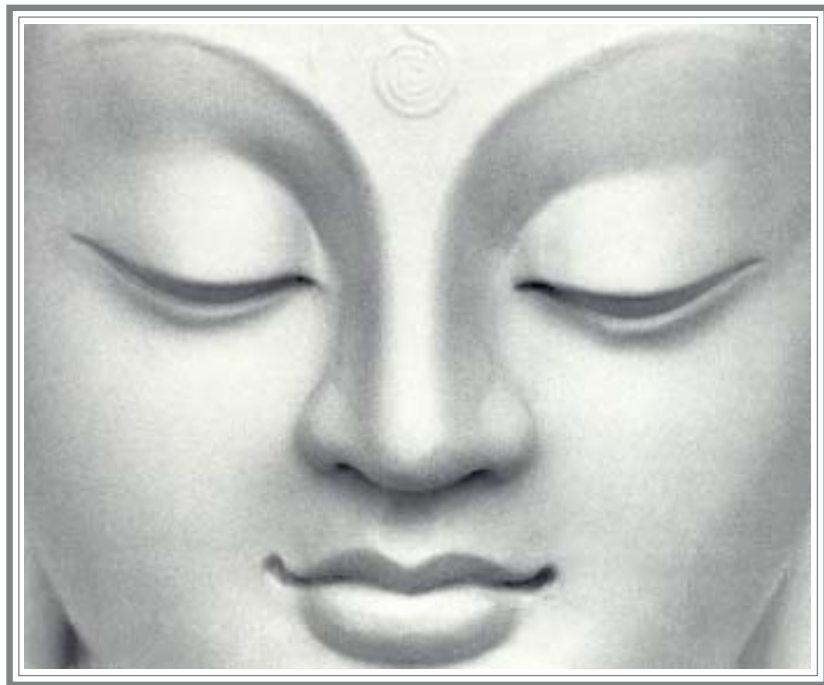
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# *Freeing the Heart*

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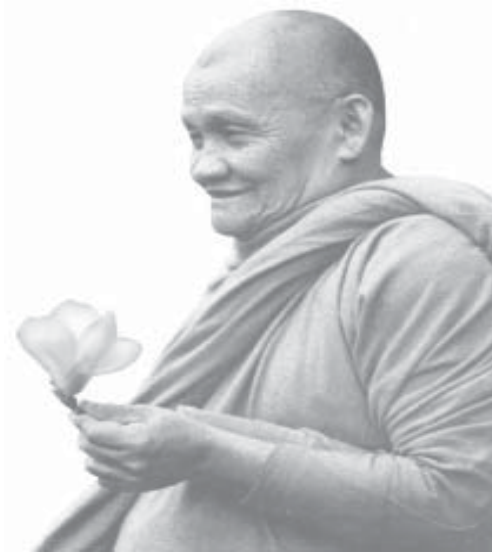
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*Dhamma teachings from the Nuns'  
Community at Amaravati &  
Cittaviveka Buddhist Monasteries*

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# *Freeing the Heart*

*Dhamma teachings from the Nuns'  
Community at Amaravati &  
Cittaviveka Buddhist Monasteries*



*“Our way of practice is looking closely at things  
and making them clear.*

*We’re persistent and constant, yet not rushed or  
hurried. Neither are we too slow.*

*It’s a matter of gradually feeling our way and  
bringing it together.”*

AJAHN CHAH

*Sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati.*

‘THE GIFT OF DHAMMA SURPASSES ALL OTHER GIFTS.’

This book was conceived, designed and  
published by a lay supporter as a  
gift of thanks to the Nuns’ community  
and Luang Por Sumedho.

Valuable assistance in the production of  
this book was given by:  
Ajahn Amaro at Abhayagiri,  
Sister Kovida at Cittaviveka,  
Jane Roseborough,  
Suliporn Surakomol.

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## EDITORS' NOTE

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Most of the articles in this book originated as extemporaneous, spontaneous talks given at meditation retreats by members of the Nuns' community.

It is hoped that little of the original meaning has been lost or changed in the process of editing the talks into a printed format.

Any mistakes or lack of clarity that may occur are entirely the fault of the editors.

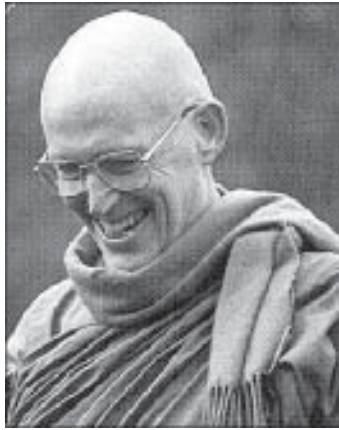
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*“More and more, the Path is just the  
simple being here and now, being with  
the way things are.”*

AJAHN SUMEDHO



# Foreword

by Ajahn Sumedho

---

With the completion and dedication of the Temple and Cloister at Amaravati, I notice that I have been spending quite a bit of time during this past year looking back over the last twenty years or so; over these years of my own life and the life of the Sangha here in the West.

I remember as a young monk, living with Ajahn Chah at Wat Pah Pong in Thailand, having what felt like a fairly clear idea of what my life as a *bhikkhu* would be like, how it would evolve. Looking back now, I can only say how astonished I am at life's ability to astonish! I could never have imagined the way things have developed and are developing still.

Of all the many surprises, none perhaps is greater or richer than to have witnessed and participated in the inception, growth and maturation of the Order of Siladhara, the Nuns' Sangha. It would be tempting in writing this to be revisionist, to suggest that the Nuns' Community emerged as part of some grand and sober plan for the Western Sangha. To do so would not, however, do justice to the way things have really been in all their haphazard glory.

Having had no particular previous experience

of leading groups of people. I must, I think have, inherited aspects of my own 'leadership style' from Luang Por Chah. He would always point out how senseless it is to try to control events according to one's designs, since in fact things just take their natural course in accordance with causes and conditions. As participants in any process, our job is to respond suitably to conditions but, as much as possible, to stay 'out of the way.' This, in many ways, is how it has been in this case.

Except for the short space of time when we (the first monks) lived in London, the story of the Western Sangha is really about both the monks and the nuns. I remember not having been in residence in Chithurst Monastery for very long before the first women, the women who would be the pioneers — the 'Founding Mothers', if you like — of the Nuns' Order also arrived. It was Sister Rocana and Sister Candasiri who were the very first, soon joined by Sister Sundara and Sister Thanissara.

Now as I look back, I see that it is a tribute to the resilience and the faith of these first few that the Order of Nuns survived even its earliest step. Conditions at Chithurst were nothing if not basic, and practice was really little more than just surviving day to day.

I never had the slightest doubt as to the sincerity of these women but I never, for one moment, imagined that an Order of Nuns was what was coming into being. I was very happy to be in a position to provide them with a place to live and some basic instruction in the

*samana* life, but beyond that I had no real idea what was transpiring — I don't think any of us did. I sometimes wonder what would have happened, whether we would have gone ahead in the same way, if we had known what uncertainties lay ahead. When I consider all the various conditions that had a bearing on this process, I am amazed, truly, that it came about at all.

There we were, ourselves relatively new transplants from Thailand, trying to see whether it was possible to live the mendicant life at all in the West. Our heritage was itself extremely conservative and it offered absolutely no precedent or guidance in the matter of a training for women in the Holy Life. These, and my own native caution might well, in retrospect, have added up to a sort of fatal inertia. However, I finally saw that a much more definite form, a clearer training, was needed in order for these anagarikas to really make sense of and derive full benefit from living the monastic life. It was this that led, in August of 1983, to the ordination of the first four nuns — to the formation of the Order of Siladhara.

It was also around this time that I decided that the nuns, whose numbers were beginning to grow, should move from Chithurst to Amaravati. In fact one of the reasons for the establishing of Amaravati was to provide a place for the nuns to live and train. What was needed too was a more formal structure for training and this was where — much to his surprise, I imagine, but also to his eternal credit — Ajahn Sucitto stepped in.

Various aspects of that time are still very vivid in my memory. I remember well my own sense of upheaval and sorrow at leaving Chithurst. I remember Ajahn Sucitto's continuing mentoring of the nuns as, over a number of years, he helped them in establishing themselves within their own structures and training. I remember Sister Uppala's arrival — the demands she placed on the other women — and I remember her death. I remember often having no real idea of what I could or should do to support the Nuns' Community, and I remember also some quite strong feelings of resentment at the sense of uncertainty that seemed to accompany this slow, and often agonizing, evolution of a unified and organized Order of Nuns.

Although there are somewhat painful memories of this time of evolution, it is quite clear to me now that the result is good. It is also clear to me that everything that the nuns now have in terms of status, recognition and respect has, in a very real sense, been earned and hard earned at that

At the risk of sounding facile, I think that one of the key things that I did not appreciate at the time was that there are differences between men and women. It was not obvious to me that the training of nuns requires a very different mix of elements, different skills and a different emphasis, than the training of monks. Although the results that can come from this way of practice are similar in terms of insight and spaciousness of heart, the means necessarily varies.

Over the past years, the community of nuns has become increasingly stable and self-reliant. The presence of Elder Nuns — home-grown as it were — has, I am quite sure, been instrumental in this process. It is a great joy to me to witness this continuing unfolding and to see the fruits — an ever-increasing sense of autonomy and enjoyment. I have felt inspired and encouraged too by other signs of maturity, such as the steady increase in confidence in the way the nuns receive and train their novices and junior nuns and the development of links with other communities, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist.

Overall, I am very glad to have been involved with the development of the Order of Siladhara; it has been a rich source of reflection and learning. It is a great pleasure to write a foreword to this collection of talks and teachings — may it be an encouragement and blessing to all who read it.

*~ Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, June, 2000/2543*



# Introduction

by Thanissara

---

*Thanissara was one of the first four nuns. She spent twelve years living in community at Chithurst and Amaravati until her return to lay life in 1991.*

**T**his collection of Dhamma reflections offered by the Forest Sangha Nuns' community introduces us, as readers, to a unique perspective which, like a soothing balm, calms, uplifts and enlightens. It celebrates the ability of women to use an ancient monastic system and a timeless teaching in a way that is both graceful and also relevant to each one of us.

A full appreciation of both the historical and contemporary context of the nun's life gives a better understanding of the ground from which these talks have arisen, but this is an intricate and complex subject. However, even a small glimpse heightens a sense of respect for the dedication of each nun, and the somewhat less visible lineage of nuns dating right back to the time of the Buddha.

Although a tradition of women seekers goes far back into the mists of time it is rare to have access to their wisdom and their stories, so it is all the more heartening that this book is so generously made available to us. What I find especially valuable about these teachings

is that they draw on subtle and broad aspects of the Buddha's instruction in ways that are comprehensive, fresh, honest and open. We see the transcendent threaded with the humane. We hear the voice of inspiration, struggle and humour through women who have undertaken a focused and disciplined life of renunciation.

I remember that it was late afternoon on 28th October, 1979. There was an autumn chill in the air. The four of us were busily sewing white robes, while practising chanting, putting finishing touches in preparation for the unprecedented precept ceremony (the first Theravadan ordination of Western Women on British soil), due to take place that evening. There was good humour among us as we shared both the apprehension and enthusiasm that accompanied this move from each of our very different lives into the unknown terrain of monasticism. Over the following years there were also difficulties and conflicts; however, beneath such passing mind states there grew enormous camaraderie, mutual caring and deep affection.

We began our monastic life in a small cottage near the run-down Victorian house which was slowly being transformed into Chithurst Monastery. For several years the cottage had no electricity and very little heating. I remember it was very cold, and the discipline was rigorous. Fortunately, we had so much inspiration and good cheer that it more than compensated for those basic living conditions. For the first six months or so of our life in robes we hadn't the courage to completely



shave our heads, so instead reduced our hairstyles to a rather radical-looking stubble.

We had no elder nuns to follow and so slowly, as idealistic women, we came to the painful understanding that monastic life is never the perfect life that the mind projects. Rather, it is a carefully honed vehicle for the contemplation of *dukkha* (suffering) and the realization of its cessation — sometimes called ‘The Heart’s Release.’ While serving the individual, it also helps others, through maintaining a way of life within which the Buddha’s Path of Awakening is demonstrated and encouraged.

Ajahn Chah compared the code of monastic discipline (*vinaya*), which gives shape and form to the monastic life, to the peel of a fruit. As the peel preserves the fruit, so the *vinaya* discipline preserves and holds the teachings, the essence of the Dhamma. To just chew the peel is a bitter experience, while tasting the heart of the fruit reveals subtle and profound insights that can nourish our spiritual roots. To be lived well, monastic life requires a balance between impeccable adherence to the *vinaya* form and an inner transcendence of that form.

It soon became clear that the place of nuns within the form and tradition we had inherited was somewhat indistinct and ambiguous. In Thailand, many women become nuns to make merit — which leads them to take on duties of service to the monastery and the Sangha. They are rarely acknowledged as respected practitioners and teachers in their own right. Also, generally speaking,

very little of nuns' experience has been recorded or even talked about — compared with the reverence duly shown towards attained and respected monks. This invisibility of nuns within the historic movement of Buddhism is perhaps partly due to the loss of the Theravadan nuns' ordination lineage around the 11<sup>th</sup> century in Sri Lanka; it has also resulted in a lack of strong role models for present day women. Such a complex historical legacy initially placed a question mark over the authenticity and validity of our place within the Order.

When we first began our training it was a step in the dark for everyone. There was no model that could be followed easily. Ajahn Sumedho, our abbot and teacher, not only had no experience of training nuns, he also had had little contact with women during his previous ten years in Thailand. Yet following that first ordination in 1979, many women began requesting ordination and living for periods of time within the monastic discipline. Many more have lived closely to the nuns as lay followers.

Within the greater context of the Teaching and Way of Practice, which generate an equality and mutual respect, there is an on-going conversation around the place of women within the monastic hierarchy. In the midst of this, the nuns have often experienced an ironic mixture of profound gratitude at having the opportunity to live such a pure life, and yet also the pain and confusion arising from their ambivalent place within the Tradition. To negotiate this has never been comfort-

able or easy, as the nuns have often been caught between the conservatism of the Tradition's ancient roots and the more contemporary views of Western feminism.

Given the tensions and strength of views present at the time, it was a very courageous move when, in 1983, Ajahn Sumedho offered the first four nuns the Ten Precept Ordination (*pabbajja*). This gave us a clearer place within the monastic life and the beginnings of a comprehensive training. With brown robes and almsbowl (hallowed symbols of the *samana* life) we were instated as fully-fledged alms mendicants. This was significant, as it formally shifted our community into a more prominent role, and towards something that was beginning to resemble the original Nuns' Order at the time of the Buddha.

This on-going evolution and empowering of the nuns' situation has been made possible through the wise encouragement of Ajahn Sumedho. He has always maintained a strong focus on Dhamma in offering support for women practitioners, wary of any tendency for the nuns' position to be hijacked into a political arena.

Ajahn Sucitto also played a very significant part in the formation of the Nuns' Order. Over a period of many years he tirelessly worked alongside the nuns fashioning an extensive training, which drew on the early Bhikkhuni Vinaya, fleshing out the Ten Precepts to one hundred and twenty training rules and observances. This role, taken by a senior and respected monk, was priceless, and essential for furthering the validation of the

nuns' place within the lineage. Apparently, such a difficult task was allocated to Ajahn Sucitto by Ajahn Sumedho as he was considered to be a monk able to stay steady in the midst of nuns' tears!

There has been much water under the bridge since those early beginnings and the Nuns' Order continues to develop within a dynamic process, never settling for a static conclusion. Each stage of its growth has entailed tremendous effort and has required a willingness to bear with much struggle and uncertainty. The central practice of relinquishing personal desires and agendas has allowed the Order to emerge from a profound trust in the Way of Dhamma. This, in its turn, has given rise to one of the lovely hallmarks of monastic life — a wonderful deep joy and freedom that comes from a life of renunciation. That many women have had the precious opportunity to touch into this is entirely due to the *paramita* of the Buddha, and of the many generations of practitioners from Asia who have passed down their blessings to us.

It is now possible in the West for women to commit to a life of contemplation and mendicancy. This also brings tangible benefits for the greater society as nuns share their practice as teachers, counsellors and holders of sacred space.

After these years — in spite of some of the inevitable bitterness experienced from chewing on the peel of the monastic form — we can clearly see in these Dhamma reflections that at the heart of monasticism

there are hidden jewels which reflect much wisdom for our modern life.

Now as we begin our own journey through the pages of this book, we each have an opportunity to share in the struggles, insights and joys of the nuns. We also have an opportunity to receive the very special gift of hearing a voice that emerges from the mysterious, fiery and yet cool crucible that a nun's life offers.

*~ Dharmagiri, South Africa, May 2001.*



*AJAHN SUNDARA was born in France in 1946. She studied contemporary dance and ballet in England and in France. After an active life as a dancer and contemporary dance teacher, a period of deep questioning ensued. In 1978, she attended a talk given by Ajahn Sumedho where he spoke about his life as a Buddhist monk. It resonated deeply. Before long, she asked to join the monastic community at Chithurst Monastery (Cittaviveka) as one of the first four women novices. Since then, she has participated in the establishment of the nuns' community and training. Since the late 1980s, she has taught and led meditation retreats in Europe and North America.*

# Even the Buddha was challenged

Extract from a talk by Ajahn Sundara

---

**Y**ou would have thought that after his enlightenment the Buddha would have had an easy life, wouldn't you? Isn't that what we're all hoping for, just a little bit of enlightenment, and then life might get a little bit easier?

I thought I'd tell you the real truth so that your expectations won't be disappointed! In the 45 years that the Buddha was teaching and leading monastic communities, he met an incredible amount of difficulties. Even though he was enlightened, he still had karma.

He had ascetics coming to challenge and criticise him, accusing him of distorted views and incorrect teachings, and throughout his entire life his disciples caused him lots of problems. Some wanted to encourage eating and sleeping and sexual practices as a way to enlightenment, while others wanted to tighten up the discipline, to enforce vegetarianism, for instance. His cousin Devadatta tried to kill him several times, sent a mad elephant to trample him and tried to create a schism in the Sangha. Finally some ascetics jealous of the Buddha got a woman to blame him for fathering her child. So we haven't got such a bad deal after all!

After spending a few days meditating, we realise that the point of the practice is not about getting out of our human predicament or avoiding life's problems; it's about understanding and liberating the mind from delusion. It is a great power within us which, if it's not understood, will easily send us to hell. The power of our wilfulness, our anger, our stubbornness, and our opinionated mind — have we ever noticed how strong it is? We can't stop getting depressed so we fill up our mind with things to distract us, but this feeling is still there, isn't it? We can't control our mind that way forever.

One of the Buddha's most important contributions to our understanding the mind is to teach us the cause of suffering. Most of us are still at the stage of looking outside ourselves for the causes of suffering, and indeed there are many external things that trigger our agitation, lack of contentment, and so on. But the Buddha's teaching is that the real cause is *tanha*: desire, grasping.

Without awareness, our mind is almost always found in a state of grasping, even at the pettiest things, like our cushion, or our place in the food queue. Little things like that are the causes of bigger miseries; it just takes someone to trigger an irritation in the early morning to set the tone for the whole day. Quite often we are totally oblivious of our feelings. Have we noticed how, often, the most angry people haven't a clue that they are angry? It took me a long time to truly acknowledge that in certain situations, or with certain people, I was



always infuriated. When I began to notice this process clearly and at a deeper level, it was a great relief.

Most of us are seeking happiness but don't even notice that we are unhappy. And yet before we can be happy the first step is to notice that there is *dukkha*, that there is suffering. It's quite frightening for many people to come to terms with that. They think: "If I find out I'm unhappy, I'll want to escape, I'll have to leave my partner, my home, my job." They believe that by removing themselves from a painful situation, they can escape their miseries. But that's not the way out of suffering. The Buddha said that even if you hid away alone in a remote place, you would still take your mind with you!

Monastic life is a wonderful playground for quickly learning about *dukkha* because every day you experience this truth with almost no distraction. In a monastic community you find yourself in situations you have little control over, with people you have not chosen. This kind of environment pushes all your buttons. The only thing that saves us is our refuge in mindfulness. When we are mindful, we contain the energies of our mind, we are cultivating restraint. In other words, we are not splashing our mental soup over other people.

I remember the time when I was cooking for a Senior Monk at Chithurst who for a few years was very sick. I offered to look after his diet as I knew about macrobiotic food before I became a nun.

One day everything irritated me. I was cooking his meal and I thought: "Angry vibrations in food aren't

going to help anyone, are they?" So I went to my teacher and said, "I think I'm going to have to give up this cooking. I'm so angry sometimes, I think I'm poisoning him." His reply was, "Well, if you're mindful of your anger then you are not poisoning him. Your anger's not coming out into the food, you're containing it within you."

On another occasion when I was due to give a teaching to 45 people, my heart started racing and all I wanted to do was to run out of the room to release the adrenaline. But as I waited in silence, knowing that things would change, I began talking. It's quite amazing. Even though I had experienced a feeling of total panic, the nun who was sitting next to me told me how calm and peaceful I seemed while teaching!

So when you go to the office tomorrow, and you have a boss you can't stand or you have come to your wit's end at work, just be mindful of that feeling, and your boss might not even notice.

Mindfulness truly protects us and you will know through cultivating it how you don't need to repress or wait to blow up to express yourself. See how it works, whether it is with your partner, your friend, or your dog. Just remind yourself every morning what is truly important in your life. In the West, so many opportunities are available to us, we are really spoiled. Even at the best retreat centres, people complain about the food, about this and that. Don't we recognise heaven when it is in front of us? It is so easy for us to fall into negativity; often we even seem to get a lot of energy out of it.

Instead, can we learn to tap into something more nurturing than frustration and discontent? Scientists tell us we're not using even a tenth of our mind's potential, and even that small amount is misused and channelled into things like doubt, worry, fear, greed, envy, etc.

The West has few examples that inspire qualities of wisdom and compassion in us. Our modern heroes are not particularly peaceful or wise heroes. In this materialistic society we often feel like spiritual orphans, bereft of guidance from wise and compassionate beings. Fortunately, the Buddhist teaching is always pointing to the teacher within. Here and now, we can tune in to the wisdom within us and nurture it, rather than tormenting ourselves for being a failure. It's important to see that the problems that arise in life can be a time of awakening, of transformation.

Even if we attach to goodness, as an end in itself, it will create suffering. Wanting not to be angry, or wanting to become good, is dukkha. The Buddha said that there is only one wholesome attachment, the desire for liberation. So with mindfulness as your refuge, cultivate in yourself that intention to release your heart from dukkha, to abandon all those things which are in the way of liberating your heart from delusion.

Once we've tasted what it is to be unburdened by craving, clinging, grasping, then life is so much simpler — we are abiding with the power in our own heart, with the power of patience, of mindfulness, of loving-kindness, of peace.



*AJAHN CANDASIRI was born in Scotland in 1947 and was brought up as a Christian. After university, she trained and worked as an occupational therapist, mainly in the field of mental illness. In 1977, an interest in meditation led her to meet Ajahn Sumedho, shortly after his arrival from Thailand. Inspired by his teachings and example, she began her monastic training at Chithurst as one of the first four anagarikas. Within the monastic community she has been actively involved in the evolution of the nuns' vinaya training. She has guided many meditation retreats for lay people, and particularly enjoys teaching young people and participating in Christian/Buddhist dialogue.*

# A question of balance

Ajahn Candasiri

---

Every winter at our monasteries two or three months are set aside as quiet retreat time — a time to focus more intensively on our inner work.

The encouragement given during this time is towards cultivating a stiller, quieter space within the heart. For it is only through attention to this that we are able to observe all our skillful and less skillful habits, and to train the mind — making it into a good friend, a good servant, rather than an enemy that can lead us into all kinds of unhappiness.

Emerging from such a period of retreat highlights a dilemma faced by many people — whether living as householders or in a monastic environment.

The question it poses regards finding an appropriate balance between essential ‘inner work’ — which requires periods of withdrawal and seclusion — and our relationship with ‘the world,’ including the responsibilities we have within our respective communities (whether family or monastic Sangha) and also towards the greater whole. If our attention and energies are directed only outwards towards our spiritual companions or towards society, it becomes clear sooner or later that even if we

expend every ounce of energy right up until the last breath, there will still be more to do — the needs, the suffering of the world ‘out there’ is endless. We can never make it *all* all right.

If we try, as many of us have to do before the penny finally drops, the result is exhaustion, despair and disillusionment. Eventually we see that actually it’s a question of balance; we need to find a way of balancing our ‘inner’ work and our ‘outer’ work.

We begin to appreciate a basic paradox: that in order to be truly generous, truly of service to others, we actually need to be completely ‘self-centred.’

We need to be able to stay in touch with our own hearts, listening carefully to what they tell us, even while engaged in external activity or interaction. We need to remain attentive to our own needs and to really make sure that these are well taken care of, even if it means disappointing people, letting them down, not living up to the expectations they may have of us (or that we have of ourselves). This is not at all easy, with the conditioning most of us have: “Don’t be selfish.”

There is a simile given by the Buddha of two acrobats. The master said to his pupil, “You watch out for me and I will watch out for you. That way we’ll show off our skill successfully and receive our reward.” But the pupil contradicted him, “But that won’t do at all, Master. You should look after yourself, and I’ll look after myself, *that* is how we shall perform successfully.”

The Buddha then goes on to explain that, in a

sense, it was the pupil who had got it right; that it is by watching out for ourselves, through the practice of mindfulness, that we look after others. But also, when we are mindful in regard to others that is a way of looking after our own hearts.

He further pointed out that we look after ourselves in a way which benefits others by really applying ourselves to the cultivation of the Foundations of Mindfulness; and that through patience, gentleness and kindly consideration we not only care for others, but also protect our own hearts.

During his lifetime, the Buddha established the fourfold assembly as a social structure that would facilitate the cultivation and maintenance of the qualities of mindfulness and consideration of others.

However, whether we go forth as monks or nuns, or live as householders, one thing is clear: it's likely to take time. This practice has to be developed and worked at over a lifetime.

Usually, things don't just change and fall into place with the first glimmer of insight; we need to do the work of laying the foundation, using the tools and guidance that the Buddha presented. Even though these were presented over 2,500 years ago they still work well, having been used over generations by men and women to shape their lives — to enable the ripening of the potential that each one of us has.

It waits quietly in the heart for us to choose to make its cultivation the priority of our lives.



AJAHN (MA) MEDHANANDI was born in Canada in 1949.

*She studied philosophy and religion, and began meditating in college. She spent some years in India living as a nun with a Sufi master. She also trained and worked as a social worker for the elderly, blind and disabled, and as a nutritionist in international aid programmes for malnourished children and mothers. In 1987, she entered a monastery in Burma and later joined the Amaravati Nuns' Sangha. The last few years have been mainly dedicated to formal meditation in solitude and leading meditation workshops. She enjoys interfaith practice and has a special interest in using the tools of meditation to help the elderly and disabled.*



# The Joy Hidden in Sorrow

Reflections given by Ajahn Medhanandi

---

During these days of practice together, we've been reading the names of many people — our departed loved ones, and also relatives, family members, friends, who are suffering untold agony and hardship at this time. There is so much misery all around us. How do we accept it all? We've heard of suicides, cancer, aneurysms, motor neurone disease plucking the life out of so many young and vibrant people. And old age, sickness, decay and death snuffing the life out of many elderly people who still have a lot of living that they want to do. Why does this happen?

Death is all around us in nature. We're coming into the season now where everything is dying. This is the natural law, it's not something new. And yet time and again we keep pushing it out of our lives, trying our best to pretend that we're not going to die, that we won't grow old, that we'll be healthy, wealthy and wise until the last moment.

We are constantly identified with our bodies. We think, 'This is me,' or 'I am my body, I am these thoughts. I am these feelings, I am these desires, I am this wealth, these beautiful possessions that I have, this personality.' That's where we go wrong.

Through our ignorance, we go chasing after shadows, dwelling in delusion, unable to face the storms that life brings us. We're not able to stand like those oak trees along the boundary of the Amaravati meadow that stay all winter long and weather every storm that comes their way. In October, they drop their leaves, so gracefully. And in the spring, they bloom again.

For us, too, there are comings and goings, the births and deaths, the seasons of our lives. When we are ready, and even if we are not ready, we will die. Even if we never fall sick a day in our lives, we still die; that's what bodies are meant to do.

When we talk about dying before we die, that does not mean that we should try to commit suicide to avoid suffering; it means that we should use this practice, this way of contemplation, to understand our true nature. In meditation, we can go deeply into the mind, to investigate the true nature of mind and body, to understand impermanence, and to ask what is it that dies? Who dies?

Death can be peaceful. A peaceful death is a gift, a blessing to the world; there is simply the return of the elements to the elements. But if we have not come to realise our true nature, it can seem very frightening, and we might resist a lot.

But we can prepare ourselves, by investigating who it is that we really are; we can live consciously. Then when the time comes, we can die consciously, totally

open, just like the leaves fluttering down, as leaves are meant to do.

Chasing shadows... What is it that we are really looking for in life? We're looking for happiness, for a safe refuge, for peace. But where are we looking for these things? We desperately try to protect ourselves by collecting more and more possessions, having bigger and bigger locks on the door, putting in alarm systems. We are constantly armouring ourselves against each other — increasing the sense of separation — by having more possessions, more control, feeling more self-importance with our college degrees, our Ph.Ds. We expect more respect, and we demand immediate solutions; it is a culture of instantaneous gratification. So we're constantly on the verge of being disappointed — if our computer seizes up, if we don't make that business deal, or if we don't get that promotion at work.

This is not to put down the material realm. We need material supports, food, clothing, medicines; we need a shelter and protection, a place to rest; we also need warmth, friendship. There's a lot that we need to make this journey. But because of our attachment to things, and our efforts to fill and fulfil ourselves through them, we find a residue of hunger, of unsatisfactoriness, because we are looking in the wrong place. When somebody suddenly gets ill, loses a leg, has a stroke, is faced with death, gets AIDS and has to bear unspeakable suffering, what do we do? Where is our refuge?

Before his enlightenment, when the Buddha was still a Prince, he had everything. He had what most people in the world are running after, as they push death to the edge of their lives, as they push the knowledge of their own mortality to the farthest extreme of consciousness. He was a prince. He had a loving wife and a child. His father had tried desperately to protect him from the ills of life, providing him with all the pleasures of the senses, including a different palace for every season. But he couldn't hold his son back, and one day the Prince rode out and saw what he had to see: the Four Heavenly Messengers.

Some of us might think it's contradictory that a heavenly messenger could come in the form of a very old person: 'What's so heavenly about a very old man struggling along the roadside?' But it is a divine messenger, because suffering is our teacher, it's through our own experience and ability to contemplate suffering that we learn the First Noble Truth.

The second and third messengers were a sick person and a corpse, riddled with maggots and flies, decaying on the funeral pyre. These were the things the Buddha saw that opened his eyes to the truth about life and death. But the fourth heavenly messenger was a samana, a monk; a symbol of renunciation, of someone who'd given up the world in order to discover the Truth within.

Many people want to climb Mount Everest, the

highest mountain in the world, but actually there is a Himalaya in here, within each of us.

I want to climb that Himalaya; to discover that Truth within myself, to reach the pinnacle of human understanding, to realise my own true nature. Everything on the material plain, especially what we seem to invest a lot of our energy hungering for, seems very small and unimportant in the face of this potential transformation of consciousness.

So that's where these four celestial signs were pointing the young Siddhartha. They set him on his journey. These are the messengers that can point us to the Way of Truth and away from the way of ignorance and selfishness, where we struggle, enmeshed in wrong view, unable to face our darkness, our confusion, our pain. Stephen Levine refers to the distance from our pain, from our wound, from our fear, from our grief as being the distance from an understanding of our true nature.

Our minds create the abyss — that huge chasm. What will take us across that gap? How can we face the darkness that we feel? How do we develop the kind of discernment with which we can realise pure love in itself, that sublime peace which does not move towards nor reject anything? Can we hold every sorrow and pain of life in one compassionate embrace, coming deeply into our hearts with pure awareness, mindfulness and wise reflection, touching the centre of our being? As we begin to see more clearly, with penetrating insight, we

learn the difference between pain and suffering.

What is the experience of grief? It's only natural that when someone we are close to dies, we grieve. We are attached to that person, we're attached to their company, we have memories of times spent together. We've depended on each other for many things — comfort, intimacy, support, friendship, so we feel loss.

When my mother was dying, her breath laboured and the bodily fluids were already beginning to putrefy, she suddenly awoke from a deep coma, and her eyes met mine with full recognition. From the depths of Alzheimer's disease that prevented her from knowing me for the last ten years, she returned in that moment to be fully conscious, smiling with an unearthly, resplendent joy. A radiance fell upon both of us. And then in the next instant she was gone.

Where was the illness that had kidnapped her from us for so many years? In that moment, there was the realisation of the emptiness of form. She was not this body. There was no Alzheimer's and 'she' was not dying. There was just this impermanence to be known through the heart and the falling away, the dissolution of the elements returning to their source.

Through knowing the transcendent, knowing the reality of things as they are — knowing the body as body — we come to realise that we are ever-changing. We learn to rest in pure awareness and we touch that which is deathless.

In our relationships with each other, with our families, we can begin to use wisdom as our refuge. That doesn't mean that we don't love, that we don't grieve for our loved ones. It means that we're not dependent on our perceptions of our mother and father, children or close friends. We're not dependent on them being who we think they are, we no longer believe that our happiness depends on their love for us, or their not leaving, not dying. We're able to surrender to the rhythm of life and death, to the natural law, the Dhamma of birth, ageing, sickness and death.

When Marpa, the great Tibetan meditation master and teacher of Milarepa, lost his son he wept bitterly. One of his pupils came up to him and asked: 'Master, why are you weeping? You teach us that death is an illusion.' And Marpa said: 'Death is an illusion. And the death of a child is an even greater illusion.' But what Marpa was able to show his disciple was that while he could understand the truth about the conditioned nature of everything and the emptiness of forms, he could still be a human being. He could feel what he was feeling; he could open to his grief. He could be completely present to feel that loss. And he could weep openly.

There is nothing incongruous about feeling our feelings, touching our pain, and, at the same time understanding the truth of the way things are. Pain is pain; grief is grief; loss is loss — we can accept those things. Suffering is what we add onto them when we push away,

when we say, 'No, I can't.' Today, while I was reading the names of my grandparents who were murdered, together with my aunts and uncles and their children, during World War II — their naked bodies thrown into giant pits — these images suddenly overwhelmed me with a grief that I didn't know was there.

I felt a choking pressure, unable to breathe. As the tears ran down my cheeks, I began to recollect, bringing awareness to the physical experience, and to breathe into this painful memory, allowing it to be. It's not a failure to feel these things. It's not a punishment. It is part of life; it's part of this human journey.

So the difference between pain and suffering is the difference between freedom and bondage. If we're able to be with our pain, then we can accept, investigate and heal. But if it's not okay to grieve, to be angry, or to feel frightened or lonely then it's not okay to look at what we are feeling, and it's not okay to hold it in our hearts and to find our peace with it. When we can't feel what must be felt, when we resist or try to run from life, then we are enslaved. Where we cling is where we suffer, but when we simply feel the naked pain on its own, our suffering dies... That's the death we need to die.

Through ignorance, through our inability to see Dhamma, to see things as they really are, we create so many prisons. We are unable to be awake, to feel true loving-kindness for ourselves, or even to love the person sitting next to us. If we can't open our hearts to the



deepest wounds, if we can't cross the abyss the mind has created through its ignorance, selfishness, greed, and hatred, then we are incapable of loving, of realising our true potential. We remain unable to finish the business of this life.

By taking responsibility for what we feel, taking responsibility for our actions and speech, we build the foundation of the path to freedom. We know the result that wholesome action brings — for ourselves and for others. When we speak or act in an unkind way, when we are dishonest, deceitful, critical or resentful, then we are the ones that really suffer. Somewhere within us, there is a residue of that posture of the mind, that attitude of the heart. In order to release it, to be released from it, we have to come up very close. We have to open to every imperfection, to acknowledge and fully accept our humanity, our desires, our limitations; and forgive ourselves. We have to cultivate the intention not to harm anyone (including ourselves) by body, speech or even thought. Then if we do harm again, we forgive ourselves, and we start from the beginning, with the right intention. We understand *kamma*; how important it is to live heedfully, to walk the path of compassion and wisdom from moment to moment — not just when we are on retreat.

Meditation is all the time. Meditation is coming into union with our true nature. In transcending our conditioned nature, we move towards the realisation of

the Unconditioned. We gain the wisdom which enables us to accept all conditions, to be in total peace, complete union and harmony with all things the way they are. As long as we're holding one negative thing in our hearts — towards ourselves or anyone else — we cannot fully realise our true nature. We cannot be free.

How can we really take responsibility for our actions? By reflecting on our virtuous, or wholesome actions we are taking responsibility, and this is a support for the practice in the present moment. We feel the momentum of our mindfulness, confidence, trust; we feel the energy of purity of mind, and that helps us to keep going.

Contemplating things that I don't feel good about can perhaps bring a dark cloud over consciousness. In fact this is very wholesome; it is the arising of moral shame and moral fear, *hiri-ottappa*. We know when we've done something that was not right, and we feel regret; being completely honest. But then we forgive ourselves, recollecting that we are human beings, we make mistakes. Through acknowledging our wrong action, our limitation, our weakness, we cross the abyss and free our hearts. Then we begin again. This moral fear engenders a resolve in the mind towards wholesomeness, towards harmony; there is the intention not to harm.

This happens because we understand that greed conditions more greed, and that hatred conditions more hatred, whereas loving-kindness is both the cause and

condition for compassion and unity. Knowing this, we can live more skilful lives.

Once, it is said, when the Buddha was giving a teaching, he held up a flower. And the Venerable Mahakassapa, one of his great devotees and disciples, smiled. There's a mystery why the Venerable Mahakassapa smiled when the Buddha held up the flower.

What is it that we see in the flower? In the flower we see the ever-changing essence of conditioned forms. We see the nature of beauty and decay. We see the 'suchness' of the flower. And we see the emptiness of experience. All teachings are contained in that flower; the teachings on suffering and the path leading to the cessation of suffering — on suffering and non-suffering. And if we bring the teachings to life in each moment of awareness, it's as if the Buddha is holding up that flower for us.

Why are we so afraid of death? It's because we have not understood the law of nature; we have not understood our true nature in the scheme of things. We have not understood that there's non-suffering. If there is birth, there is death. If there is the unborn, then there is that which is deathless: 'The Undying, Uncreated, Unconditioned, the Supreme, the Magnificent, Nibbana.'

In pain we burn but, with mindfulness, we use that pain to burn through to the ending of pain. It's not something negative. It is sublime. It is complete freedom from every kind of suffering that arises; because of

a realisation, because of wisdom, not because we have rid ourselves of unpleasant experience, only holding on to the pleasant, the joyful. We still feel pain, we still get sick and we die, but we are no longer afraid, we no longer get shaken.

When we are able to come face to face with our own direst fears and vulnerability, when we can step into the unknown with courage and openness, we touch near to the mysteries of this traverse through the human realm to an authentic self-fulfillment. We touch what we fear the most, we transform it, we see the emptiness of it. In that emptiness, all things can abide, all things come to fruition. In this very moment, we can free ourselves. Nibbana is not out there in the future; we have to let go of the future, let go of the past.

This doesn't mean we forget our duties and commitments. We have our jobs and the schedules we have to keep, we have our families to take care of; but in every single thing that we do, we pay close attention, we open. We allow life to come towards us, we don't push it away. We allow this moment to be all that we have, contemplating and understanding things the way they really are, not bound by our mental and emotional habits, not bound by our desires.

The candle has a light. That light, one little candle from this shrine can light so many other candles, without itself being diminished. In the same way, we are not diminished by tragedy, by our suffering. If we surrender,

if we can be with it, transparent and unwavering, making our peace with the fiercest emotion, with the most unspeakable loss, with death, then we can free ourselves. And in that release, there is a radiance. We are like lights in the world, and our life becomes a blessing for everyone.

The poet Jelaluddin Rumi wrote: 'The most secure place to hide a treasure of gold is in some desolate, unnoticed place. Why would anyone hide treasure in plain sight? And so it is said: 'Joy is hidden in sorrow.'

The illumined master Marpa weeping over his child — does his experience of profound grief over the loss of his young child diminish his wisdom? Or is it just the supreme humility of a great man, a great sage expressing the wholeness of his being, of his humanity — able both to fully feel the natural grief of a father losing his child within the deep understanding of the inevitable impermanence of all conditioned things.

I want to encourage each one of you to keep investigating, keep letting go of your fear. Remember that fear of death is the same as fear of life. What are we afraid of? When we deeply feel and, at the same time, truly know that experience we can come to joy. It is still possible to live fully as a human being, completely accepting our pain; we can grieve and yet still rejoice at the way things are.



*AJAHN JITINDRIYA was born in Australia in 1963. While at art college, she became deeply interested in spiritual questions and the investigation of the nature of perception and consciousness. Several years later, she travelled throughout South-East Asia, India and Europe. Living in England in 1987, she became seriously interested in meditation and the teachings of the Buddha. Feeling a strong connection with the Amaravati community and the teachings of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho, she took anagarika ordination in 1988. After living and training in the monasteries in England, a desire to spend more time alone developing the formal practice of meditation led her to Abhayagiri Monastery in California.*

# Cultivating the Perfections

Ajahn Jitindriya

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One thing I've begun to realise more and more is just how long this path to enlightenment actually is! Also, just how much effort, patience and persistence is required if one's journey is really going to culminate in the complete ending of all suffering.

During this time, I've drawn deep inspiration from the teachings of the Thai Masters, Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Boowa. What shines through and is so striking in their example is their deep commitment to realising the Truth and their utter strength of mind in applying the practice — relentless determination and sustained effort.

“This is what it's going to take,” I would say to myself at times, to get through the mass of junk the mind can produce. It seems tirelessly able to re-hash the past and invent all sorts of futures — it truly is the greatest deceiver and trickster of all time. But I'm learning that indeed it also takes time to build one's forces against such deeply ingrained habits.

In cultivating this path one needs to develop skills and qualities that will support and strengthen the mind, so it can probe more deeply into itself, withstand greater pressure from the distractions and buoy itself up during

the more dark and difficult times.

The ten *Paramitas*, or Perfections, provide an essential 'check list' for my practice as to what attitude or quality of heart may need developing or reinforcing at any particular time. These ten Paramitas are: Generosity, Virtue, Renunciation, Wisdom, Energy, Patience, Honesty, Determination, Kindness, and Equanimity.

The Buddha brought them to perfection in his 'pre-Buddha' journeys as a Bodhisatta — the power of such perfections and purity is what gave him the unshakeability and strength to achieve his final goal.

Fortunately for us, it is not necessary to bring these qualities to complete perfection for the gaining of *Nibbana* (as this is the accomplishment of the Bodhisatta destined for Buddhahood) but we still need to cultivate them as far as we can, if the heart is to find its freedom.

When one reaches an 'impasse' at certain times in practice, one can consider these qualities... "Do I need to be a little more patient with myself (or others)?" ... "Will a little more kindness help dissolve the obstacle or the hardened fear in the heart?" ... "Am I maintaining equanimity?" ... "Could my *sila* (moral behaviour) be polished up a little?" ... perhaps a certain obstacle is teaching one an important lesson in terms of the fruit of wrong action.

Perhaps we need to renounce something, let go of what we can do without, to enable balance and peace to be restored in the mind.

Using mindfulness, investigation and wisdom one



can find a balance for oneself in this way, to lead one through the difficulties, to lead one onward, or further inward.

“Am I really being honest with myself?” ... is a good question to pose at the right time, for we never really like to see ourselves in our more negative or ‘unlikeable’ modes. But in fact, ‘seeing clearly’ isn’t just a matter of taking on board more ‘honest’ perceptions of oneself; rather, it is to see that all perceptions of ‘self’, if grasped at and believed in, distort the truth; creating only more deception and *dukkha*.

The Truth is in seeing the essential instability of all of our self-concepts and sensory experience. This is not to reject these things of the conventional realm, but to see them as transitory and totally unreliable; as fickle and as changeable as the weather. Seen in this light, it is clear that such things can never really be satisfying or lead to satisfaction in any way. How can they be what I am?... for when they are challenged in the light of Dhamma, they dissolve and disappear like a frightened phantom!

As we go more deeply into the practice we come upon those views and assumptions that have hidden in the depths of the psyche for who knows how long. They whisper quietly, but are extremely powerful commanders that direct and control much of our lives. These culprits are masters of disguise and take many forms — but they are the roots of ignorance itself.

The continuance of the practice — in whatever

conditions — works to purify the heart, as we come to see more clearly, with mindfulness and acceptance, just the way things are.

In practising to see clearly the nature of our experience as impermanent, unsatisfactory (or stressful), a certain amount of delusion and dukkha drops away naturally. Insight arises. Other areas come into focus where we see that more skill and effort is required to break the shackles; with wisdom we should develop means that can help us to free ourselves.

So the path unfolds. And though I qualified it earlier as being something that is a 'long' process, we must also keep remembering that the practice is always a matter of the present moment — that there is no practice outside of the present moment, so in this sense it is not really a matter of time at all — it's just about being here, responding to whatever arises with wisdom and compassion.

Of course, it is very important for us to have direction, a 'guiding star', and to know our map — but always look where you're walking, or it's likely that you'll never get to where you want to go. Neither will you know where you already are!





*AJAHN THANASANTI was born in California in 1962. While at university, a class on the Religions of India sparked an interest in intensive meditation retreats. During the first month of the class, she had a vivid image of being a nun. This image remained for the next ten years until she was ordained. Before embarking on a pilgrimage to Asia, she worked as an analytical chemist. A short but very significant time with Dipa Ma, a near-death experience, a meeting with Ajahn Chah, and a visit to Wat Pa Nanachat in Thailand, crystallized her aspiration to be ordained. She requested novice precepts at Amaravati in 1989. More recently, Ajahn Thanasanti has been living in Australia, where she continues to study, practise and teach.*

# Working With Pain

by Ajahn Thanasanti

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Having spent the day speaking with different people and getting a little bit of a sense where people are in their practice, some themes emerge. One of the themes which emerges is pain: how to work with pain, how to be at ease with pain.

A fundamental problem is that we have the expectation that there shouldn't be any pain; and that when there is, something has gone wrong.

Most of our lives we're very good at being able to move and to adjust and to shift around, so that we don't have to feel discomfort or pain. But when we put ourselves in a situation like a retreat, we can find ourselves a little bit stuck. We come into the shrine room and we sit, and the idea is not to move until the bell rings. So there's the pain in the body or the heart; how can we work with that?

There are many skilful means that we can come up with. The skilful means of working with the breath — relaxing in the breath. There's the skilful means of simply knowing where to place one's attention. The experience may be unpleasant, but there are ways of placing the attention that support a gentle embracing of the experience.

Sometimes, one can put one's attention right in the very centre of the pain and discover after a period of time that it's not pain — it's just sensation. The quality of unpleasantness can completely disappear, one's just dealing with the energy. When that happens there's a nice sense of freedom because there is no longer the resistance associated with pain. There is no longer pain. It's just experience.

Sometimes, we can see that the pain isn't actually connected to the body, even though we experience it there. It's actually coming from a place of tightening, of resistance or fear. We can then explore the mind and look and see how the mind is actually manifesting itself into the body and how we're experiencing the mind in the body as pain.

All this we can know, we can discover. In the discovery of opening to something like this, we find a waking up. We wake up and see the relationship between the body and mind, between body and breath. We see the relationship around that which is fearful, or that which we resist.

So a freedom comes with just hanging out with knees that hurt. The freedom is that one doesn't need to be threatened by pain, or to be bullied by it, or to be pushed around by it. It's OK. We can just experience it. It's not a problem. Pain is something we can take as a curse or something we can take as a teacher. It can be an opportunity to open our hearts to something difficult.

When we're meditating we sometimes feel we can

just block out the pain. We can do that, with physical pain and with the pain in our heart. But if we do, meditation can become a way of dissociating from life. So learning how to open up to that which is difficult and that which is frightening and that which is unpleasant is part of the work we're doing. It's not inspiring work. It's not the kind of stuff one gets all jazzed up about but it is very powerful work and very liberating. When we're able to live in the world in a way where we're not frightened and we're not pushed around by fear, and we don't resist pain, we acquire the courage to stand and face whatever it is that we need to face.

That's a wonderful freedom. And there are many times when it might actually make a difference.

*“When we realise that getting what we want in  
the material world is unsatisfactory too,  
that’s when we start to mature.”*





# Freedom in Restraint.

Ajahn Sundara

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When the Buddha taught the First Noble Truth, he said that taking refuge in human existence is an unsatisfactory experience. If one attaches to this mortal frame, one will suffer. Not getting what you want is painful - that's quite easy to relate to. Getting what you don't want can also be painful. But as we walk a little further in the footsteps of the Buddha, even getting what we want is painful! This is the beginning of the path of awakening.

When we realise that getting what we want in the material world is unsatisfactory too, that's when we start to mature. We're not children any more, hoping to find happiness by getting what we want or running away from pain.

We live in a society that worships the gratification of desires. But many of us are not really interested in just gratifying desires, because we know intuitively that this is not what human existence is about.

I remember many years ago when I was trying to understand what I thought the truth was, but I had no concept for it. I knew in a way that it was something beyond the reach of my thinking and emotional mind, something that transcended this world of birth and death.

As time went on, the desire to live a life that was truthful and real became the most important thing. As I was trying to harmonise my thoughts, my feelings and my aspirations and come to a place of peace I became aware that there was something in between my mind and my aspirations. There seemed to be a huge gap between them and that was what I called 'myself,' this body with its five physical senses. At the time, I didn't even realise that the Buddhist teaching presented human beings with a sixth sense, the mind, the platform on which thoughts can arise.

Mind and body are a reservoir of energy and I found that my energy fluctuated, depending on how I used them. My way of relating to life and my understanding of it seemed also to be dependent on the clarity of my mind, and in turn that clarity was very much conditioned by the degree of energy I had. So I was quite keen to find out how to live without needlessly wasting that energy.

Many of us have not been raised up with a very disciplined life-style. In my family I was brought up within an atmosphere that fostered a certain amount of freedom of expression. But following one's whims and fancies, doing what we want, when we want, doesn't actually bring much wisdom to our life, nor much compassion or sensitivity. In fact, it makes us rather selfish. Despite not having been inculcated with any great sense of discipline, as a child I appreciated the beauty of being alive, the harmony of life, and the importance of not

wasting it. Yet the idea of living in a restrained and disciplined way was quite alien to my conditioning.

When I came across meditation and the practice of insight, it seemed a much easier introduction to discipline than following moral precepts or commandments. We often tend to look with alarm upon anything that is going to bind us, any convention that is going to limit our freedom. So most of us come to discipline through meditation. As we look into our hearts at the way we relate to the world of our senses, we come to see how everything is inter-connected. Body and mind are constantly influencing and playing on each other.

We know well the pleasure involved in gratifying our senses when, for example, we listen to inspiring music or when we are looking at beautiful scenery. But notice how, as soon as we attach to the experience, that pleasure is spoiled. This can be very painful and often we feel confused by the sensory world. But with mindfulness we gain insight into the transient nature of our sensory experiences and become acquainted with the danger of holding on to something that is fleeting and changing. We realise how ridiculous it is to hang on to that which is changing. And with that realisation we naturally recoil from wasting our energy on following that which we have little control over and whose nature is to pass away.

Sense restraint is the natural outcome of our meditation practice. Understanding the danger of blindly following our senses, the desires connected with them,

and the objects connected with the desires is one aspect of discipline. Understanding naturally brings about the application of this discipline. It is not sense restraint for its own sake but because we know that sense desires do not lead to peace and cannot take us beyond the limitations of identification with our mind and body.

When we first come to live in the monastery we have to adopt the discipline of the Eight Precepts. The first five precepts point to what is called Right Action and Right Speech: refraining from killing, from stealing, from sexual misconduct, from lying and taking drugs and intoxicants. The next three focus on renunciation, such as refraining from eating after a certain time, dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, beautifying oneself and from sleeping on a high and luxurious bed. Some of these precepts may sound irrelevant in our day and age. What do we call a high or luxurious bed today for example? How many of us have a four poster bed? Or why is dancing, singing or playing an instrument not allowed as a spiritual practise?

When we ordain as a nun or a monk, we take on board even more precepts and learn to live with an even greater restraint. The relinquishment of money, for example, makes us physically totally dependent on others. These standards may sound very strange in a society that worships independence and material self-reliance. But those guidelines begin to make more sense when integrated into our meditation practice. They become a source of reflection and put us in touch with the spirit

behind them. We find that they help us to refine our personal conduct and to develop a deep awareness of our physical and mental activity and of the way we relate to life. So that, when we look into our hearts, we can see clearly the results and consequences of our actions by body, speech and mind.

Following such discipline slows us down, too, and requires that we be very patient with ourselves and others. We generally tend to be impatient beings. We like to get things right straight away, forgetting that much of our growth and development comes from accepting the fact that this human body and mind are far from perfect. For one thing, we have *kamma*, a past that we carry around with us which is very difficult to shed.

For example, when we contemplate the precept about refraining from incorrect speech, we have the opportunity to learn not to create more *kamma* with our words and to prevent it from being another source of harm and suffering for ourselves or for other beings.

Right speech (*samma vaca*) is one of the most difficult precepts because our words can reveal our thoughts and put us in a vulnerable situation. As long as we are silent, it's not so difficult. We can even seem quite wise until we start talking. Those of you who have been on retreats may remember dreading having to relate verbally again with human beings. It's so nice isn't it just to be silent with each other; there are no quarrels, no conflicts. Silence is a great peacemaker!

When we start talking, it's another ball game.

We can't really fool ourselves any longer. We tend to identify strongly with what we think, and so our speech, the direct expression of thoughts, also becomes a problem. But unless we learn to speak more skilfully, our words will continue to be quite hurtful to ourselves and to others. Actually speech itself is not so much the problem but the place it comes from. When there is mindfulness, there are no traces left behind. Sometimes we say something that is not very skilful, and afterwards, we think how we could have said it better. But if we speak mindfully, at that moment somehow the stain of that self-image that is so powerfully embedded in us is removed or at least diminished.

As you follow this path of practice, discipline really makes sense. When you begin to get in touch with the raw energy of your being, and the raw energy of anger, greed, stupidity, envy, jealousy, blind desires, pride, conceit, you become very grateful to have something that can contain it all. Just look at the state of our planet earth, it is a great reflection on the harmful result of a lack of discipline and containment of our greed, hatred and delusion.

So to be able to contain our energy within the framework of a moral discipline we need to be very mindful and careful because our mind's deepest tendency is to forget itself. We forget ourselves and our lives' ultimate fulfillment and instead fulfill ourselves with things that cannot truly satisfy or nourish our heart. This discipline also requires humility because as long as we are

immature and follow our impulses we will feel repressed and inhibited by a discipline and consequently instead of being a source of freedom, we will feel trapped by it.

We are very fortunate to have the chance to practise and realise that our actions, our speech or our desires are not ultimately what we are. As our meditation deepens, the quality of impermanence of all things becomes clearer. We become more and more aware of the transient nature of our actions and speech, and our feelings related to these. We begin to get a sense for that which is always present in our experiences, yet is not touched by them. This quality of presence is always available and isn't really affected by our sensory interactions.

When this quality of attention is cultivated and sustained we begin to relate more skilfully to our energy, to our sense contact and the sensory world. We discover that mindful attention is actually a form of protection. Without it, we're simply at the mercy of our thoughts or our desires, and get blinded by them. This refuge of awareness and the cultivation of restraint protect us from falling into painful hellish states of mind.

Another aspect of discipline is the wise attention and wise use of the material world. Our immediate contact with the physical world is through the body. When we learn how to take care of the physical world, we are looking after the roots of our lives. We do what is necessary to bring the body and mind into harmony. This is the natural outcome of restraint. Slowly, we become like a beautiful lotus flower that represents purity

and grows out of the water while being nourished by its roots in the mud. You may have noticed how the Buddha is often depicted sitting on a lotus flower which symbolises the purity of the human heart. Unless we create that foundation of morality rooted in the world of our everyday life, we can't really rise up or grow like the lotus flower. We just wither.

In monastic life, the skilful use of the four requisites — clothes, food, shelter and medicine — is a daily reflection which is extremely useful because the mind is intent on forgetting, misinterpreting or taking things for granted. These four requisites are an essential part of our life. It is a duty for us monastics to care of our robes. We have to mend them, repair them, wash them and remind ourselves that we only have one set of them and that these robes have come to us through the generosity of others. The same goes for the food that we eat. We live on alms food. Every day people offer us a meal because we are not allowed to store food for ourselves for the next day. So our daily reflection before the meal reminds us that we can't eat without thinking carefully about this gift of food. As alms mendicants, we also reflect on the place we live in. You may not like the wallpaper of your room, but the reflection on our shelter: 'this room is only a roof over our head for one night' helps us to keep our physical needs in perspective. We consider also that without the offerings of these requisites we could not lead this life. This reflection nurtures a sense of gratitude in the heart.



Taking care of the physical world and what surrounds us is an essential part of the training of mind and body and of our practice of *Dhamma*. If we are not able to look after that which is immediate to us, how can we pretend to take care of the ultimate truths? If we don't learn to tidy our room every day, how can we deal with the complexities of our mind?

To reflect on simple things is very important, such as looking after our living place, and not misusing our material possessions. Naturally it is more difficult to do this when we have control over the material world and can use money to buy what we want, because we easily get careless thinking: "Oh well I have lost this or I have broken that, never mind, I'll get another one."

Another aspect of discipline and restraint is right livelihood. For a monk or a nun, there is a long list of things we should not get involved with, such as fortune-telling or participating in political activities, etc... I can appreciate the value of this more and more as I see how, in some parts of the world where the Sangha has got involved in worldly issues, monks find themselves owning luxurious items or even become wealthy landlords.

Right livelihood is one aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path which covers a wide range of activities such as not deceiving, not persuading, hinting, belittling and bartering and not involving ourselves in trades of weapons, living beings, meat, liquor, and poisons for a lay person. These guidelines call for a careful consideration of how we want to spend our life and what kind

of profession or situation we want to get involved in.

The reflections on the precepts, the requisites, right livelihood and the discipline of our mind and body are the supportive conditions within which the ultimate discipline can manifest in our hearts. That ultimate discipline is our total dedication to the Truth, to the Dhamma and the constant aspiration of our human heart to go beyond our self-centred lives. Sometimes we can't really say what it is, but through the practise of meditation we can be truly in touch with that reality, the Dhamma within ourselves. All spiritual paths and spiritual disciplines are here as supportive conditions and means for keeping alive this aspiration to realise Truth in our heart. That's really their aim.



*“Practising together we, in a sense, carry one  
another when there is faltering –  
just through doing the practice to the  
very best of our ability.”*



# The Buddha's advice to Meghiya

From a sutta class with Ajahn Candasiri

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This sutta, which appears twice in the Pali canon (Ud. Iv i, AN ix i 3), tells of a young monk, the Venerable Meghiya, who was the Buddha's attendant.

This bhikkhu, returning from alms round one morning, spotted a beautiful and delightful mango grove. He felt this would be the ideal place to practise meditation, so he asked the Buddha if he might go there for the day's meditation.

The Buddha responded by asking him to wait until another monk came to carry out his duties as attendant. However, the Venerable Meghiya was eager to go and persisted in his request: "The Lord has nothing further that should be done, and nothing to add to what has been done, but for me there is something further to be done and something to add to what has been done."

After the third such request, the Buddha agreed: "Do now, Meghiya, as you think fit." So Meghiya went to the mango grove and finding a suitable shady spot, sat down, his back erect and began his meditation. But for the whole time his mind was filled with unskillful thoughts — of sensuality, malevolence and cruelty. This was a source of surprise and consternation.

He had gone forth, full of faith and aspiration; he had found for himself what seemed like the perfect situation for practice, and was making enormous effort — but it was all going wrong, it was not bringing the results he had anticipated or hoped for. At the end of what must have been a very difficult afternoon, he returned to the Buddha to tell him of his troubles.

It seems that the Buddha was not at all surprised when he heard what had happened. (In fact, the Pali commentary suggests that the Buddha had refused permission for him to go, knowing that he was not yet ready to practise in this way.) He then listed the five conditions that, when the heart's deliverance is not yet ripe, conduce to its ripening:

1. Good friends
2. Virtuous life
3. Profitable talk
4. Zealous exertion
5. Insight into impermanence, which leads to the ending of Ill.

Four other things, he said, should also be developed (*bhavetabba*):

- i. Meditation on the unlovely (repulsive or loathsome) for the abandonment of passion (lust or greed).
- ii. Kindliness, for the abandonment of ill will.
- iii. Mindfulness of in and out breathing (*anapanasati*) for cutting off discursive thinking.
- iv. The contemplation of impermanence

(*aniccasanna*), in order to uproot pride of egoism: “for one who thinks on impermanence, the thought of not-self is established; thinking on there being no self, one wins to wherein the conceit ‘I am’ is uprooted, to the cool (*nibbana*) even in this life.”

We can take a closer look at these.

Firstly, good friends (*kalyanamitta hoti kalyana-sampavanko*): this is usually understood as meaning one has a wise teacher or wise spiritual companions. It would certainly be appropriate in this context: the Buddha advising the young monk on the importance of being with people who can influence him in a wholesome way. However, the word ‘*hoti*’ means ‘he is’, so a more literal translation might be: “He is a friend, an intimate of what is good and wholesome.’ This points to the need for any type of spiritual endeavour to be motivated by a sense of what is right, a love of the good, and a longing to manifest that in one’s life.

Whereas, practice motivated by selfishness — the desire to gain power, prestige, or to take advantage of others — would bring, instead of release, a sense of being increasingly trapped in the world of one’s own self seeking (*samsara*).

The Buddha explains that having a wise advisor, good friends or simply a love of the good, is the natural basis for the arising of other conditions. So, secondly: ‘It may be expected of one who has wise companions that he will be virtuous’ (*silava hoti*).

We learn by example. In Sangha life, although there is formal training in vinaya, most of our learning and aspiration comes simply through watching how others do things: their manner of behaviour, what they say (or don't say), and when and how they say it. Associating with people following a similar precept form stimulates an interest in this training of body, speech and mind; we are encouraged by its results. So the full translation of the second condition is that 'a monk is virtuous, he abides restrained by the restraint of the obligations; he is perfect in the practice of right behaviour, sees danger in trifling faults and trains himself in the ways of training.'

Thirdly: profitable talk. The sutta states that such talk arises easily, and that there is a willingness to share one's understanding with others: it arises naturally, according to the way one is living the life.

This talk is described as being that which is 'serious and suitable for opening up the heart, and conduces to a complete turning away from worldly values (*nibbidaya*): to dispassion, ending, calm, comprehension, to perfect insight, to Nibbana. That is to say, talk about wanting little; contentment; solitude; avoiding society; putting forth effort; virtue, concentration and wisdom; about release and the knowledge and insight of release'.

The company of wise friends who are at ease in themselves, dispels any sense of having to repress or deny inclinations that do not accord with these guidelines; to see it isn't a matter of forcing oneself into a puritanical



kind of 'holiness', but that these qualities arise naturally as the practice matures.

The fourth condition is zealous exertion. One abides, 'resolute in energy for the abandoning of unprofitable things and for taking up what is profitable — stout and strong in effort, not giving up on what one has undertaken (not relinquishing the burden of righteousness)'. Again, a wise teacher or good friend can encourage us and guide our efforts towards what is wholesome.

Inevitably, on a religious path there are times when the practice seems dull, lifeless, or totally unproductive. There may be an inclination to abandon the whole thing and to return to look for refuge in the world, in what is familiar and seems comfortable.

A wise teacher and good friends remind us of our deeper aspiration and potential, and of the inherent danger or unsatisfactoriness of the world of our senses. This enables us to continue towards our goal. Practising together we, in a sense, carry one another when there is faltering — just through doing the practice to the very best of our ability.

Fifthly, 'a monk is possessed of insight, and understands the way of growth and decay, having Ariyan penetration concerning the way to the utter destruction of Ill.'

We need to be reminded of where to look to find our freedom. It is not in the attainment of some

special state in the future, although such states can be the basis for insight, but right in this moment itself.

The late Ajahn Buddhadasa used to say: “Nothing whatsoever is to be clung to!” It’s an insight that’s so subtle that we can easily miss it. Our longing for security and the power of our conditioning are so strong that we can dismiss this key to the door of the Deathless; we are bound by ignorance, nescience — not seeing, not wanting to look, until it is too late.

So we need every encouragement to keep looking, to keep remembering, in order to find that point of non-attachment — which is not a rejection of anything at all but, rather, a proper appreciation of our human predicament.

Some pick it up quickly (according to the commentary, the Venerable Meghiya attained to stream entry just on hearing this teaching); for others, the lessons need much repetition. We are caught by some desire — a plan, an idea, a regret or a grudge — it hurts, and eventually we let go.

This happens over and over again, until finally we learn not to pick things up, not to attach to anything at all. The beauty of Nature is in its transitoriness — not in anything lasting that one can claim as one’s own. The Buddha, through his own efforts, awakened to this reality, which freed him from having to ‘trudge and travel through this long round’ (*samsara*). This is the insight, as he explained to the Venerable Meghiya, that can free us

from all the pain of attachment.

The Buddha concludes by outlining techniques of meditation that should be cultivated in response to the specific conditions that may arise in the mind. This responsiveness itself is important to consider. We are not asked to simply work away at developing one particular type of meditation practice.

The encouragement is to be aware of what is happening in the mind at any time, and to exercise our intelligence in choosing the technique suitable to bring about and support a state of calm, in order that wisdom may arise.

So we have: (i) Meditation on the unlovely (*asubha*) for overcoming states of passion, lust or greed. Sometimes this is translated as meditation on loathsomeness or repulsiveness — which indeed can be the case with certain aspects of physicality. However, a more analytical approach can often be effective in inducing a sense of neutrality or disinterest, as opposed to aversion — which is actually just another form of desire.

For example, there is the contemplation that monks and nuns are given at the time of Going Forth — hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin — which is a way of dismantling the illusion of physical beauty or attractiveness of another person.

Contemplating objects in terms of the elements that comprise them — earth, water, fire and air — can be helpful in cooling passion or interest, with things like

food; looking at the form, colour or texture, rather than just automatically absorbing into the anticipation of something to be consumed, or delighting in the smell or taste of it.

Next, (ii), for dealing with malevolence or ill will, the practice of kindness or well wishing (*metta*) is recommended. This does not mean that we have to like everybody, but at least to avoid allowing the mind to linger in states of negativity or aversion towards them.

The third meditation (iii) is mindfulness of in and out breathing (*anapanasati*). The Buddha recommended this universally as a way of focussing the mind in the present; gathering attention onto the breath, rather than being whirled around, pulled to and fro by distracting thoughts. While the fourth contemplation (iv) is of impermanence.

One way to approach this is by careful attention to how we experience 'ourselves' and each other in each moment. This pierces the illusion of a fixed and enduring personality that is in any way related to body or mind: there is simply awareness. These four meditation exercises need to be developed continually in order for the deeply rooted habits, which arise because of our ignorance, to be transformed.

But, as the Buddha pointed out to the Venerable Meghiya, the ripening of the heart's emancipation will arise quite naturally when the five conditions are there as a basis for our practice.



*“We live in a society in which we’re so used to being satisfied quickly, getting what we want, and being in control of things. But it just doesn’t work in this practice.”*



# The Way of the Mystic

Ajahn Medhanandi

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When we started out this voyage together, I invited you to join me on the journey of a mystic, to set foot in a boat unfamiliar to you, a vessel whose dimensions none of you knew, and to let it drift out to sea without really knowing where you were going; to face the unknown with an open heart, without any apparent support, with no promise of anything. Just the way ahead, the way within, an internal voyager who leaves the pleasures of the world, and dives down deep into the recesses of his or her own heart-body-mind, alone.

As we embarked on that inner journey, we resolved to use right mindfulness as our compass, to bring careful attention, astute observation and clear seeing to the witness of the present moment; and to be ready to meet any hindrance or obstacle that should arise in our path with that awakened awareness and purity of presence. Such a practice asks of us a deep commitment, perseverance and “fanatical patience,” to constantly come back, time and time again to this moment.

We live in a society in which we’re used to being satisfied quickly, getting what we want, and being in control of things. But it just doesn’t work in this practice. We have to have the faith, the willingness to surrender

to the present moment, and in so doing, to be annihilated, to be burned, to go into the fire of the mind without wanting it not to hurt, and just to sit there. We enter into a spiritual holocaust.

I find that a very poignant expression because most of my relatives were killed during World War II. My father told me the story of how my grandfather was given the chance to save himself because he was a builder and his skills were needed. But, he chose to go with his family. He went to his death holding his little granddaughter in his arms. I consider that act of courageous surrender for the love of one's family incredibly heroic.

Recently I read the diaries of Ettie Hillesum, a brilliant young Dutch woman who died in Auschwitz. She was only 29. While sharing her very intimate moments of prayer and struggle through a life torn apart in monstrous ways, she traces the journey of the mystic that each one of us has undertaken, the way beyond all mental and physical affliction into the realm of the timeless, the Deathless:

*"I have looked our destruction, our miserable end, straight in the eye and accepted it into my life. And I continue to grow from day to day, even with death staring me in the face. For my life has become extended by death. . .*

*Living and dying, sorrow and joy, the blisters on my feet and the jasmine behind the house, the persecution, the unspeakable horrors — it is all as one in me, and I accept it all as one mighty whole."*



Ettie exhorts us not to waste energy on fear of death, or the refusal to acknowledge its inevitability, to accept death into our lives not through resignation or bitterness but by “bowing to the inevitable,” by looking death “straight in the eye. . . sustained by the certain knowledge that ultimately they cannot rob us of anything that matters.”

*“We must surrender all that is dearest to us in the enjoyment of the senses and go through a dark night in which we live without their help and comfort. Then when this is accomplished, we have to sacrifice even our thoughts and our choices, and undergo a still darker night – deprived of our familiar supports. This is a kind of death . . . and when all has been strained away, our emptiness will be filled with a new presence.”* (from ‘An Interrupted Life’ and ‘Letters from Westerbork’ by Ettie Hillesum, trans. by Arnold J. Pomerans)

In this burning of the ‘self’ or the ego, we too, are asked, with clear presence of mind, with courage and surrender, to give ourselves completely to the unknown. We know nothing about this unknown, this unpredictable moment except that meeting it with full awareness and acceptance is a wholesome thing to do. And as soon as we can step toward this moment, the only moment we have, with heroic surrender, we are tasting peace.

We are here to learn this same alchemy of the heart. We’re not asked to do anything unwise or harmful, we are not asked to commit suicide or to annihilate

ourselves, but just to learn to die to ourselves. It is not a physical death but it is a spiritual dying that brings us fully to life now — moment by courageous moment.

For in dying to the present moment, we let go of all expectation and hope, all fear and desire, all sense of self and personal history — this kind of death is a true self-emptying; and it is, in fact, our redemption.

Coming here was an act of courage, to contemplate death and make dedications to our parents, children, friends, who have died in tragic or distressing ways; or to those who live in pain with AIDS, cancer, Alzheimer's, paralysis, mental illness, or abuse. In the face of such affliction in our own lives or in the lives of our family members and friends, it is natural for us to feel devastating grief, bereavement, such a darkness in the heart that is anything but peaceful. So in the face of such devastating loss and pain, is it possible to know peace? Can we enter the fire of our suffering, and allow it to burn inside of us without being burned?

Ettie had endured physical and mental abuse of the worst kind. But she did not allow herself to indulge in hatred or resentment for her abusers, nor did she lose her dignity as a human being even when there was nothing in her world to hope for beyond her suffering. All she could do was take refuge in herself.

This way of responding to life and death resonates with the teachings of the Buddha. In the suttas, we read the Buddha's instructions to his disciples in times of calamity or distress, and the ways that they used the

Dhamma to transform their suffering, through insight knowledge and understanding.

We see an example of this in Venerable Ananda. He was an experienced bhikkhu who had long been devoted to the Triple Gem, serving as the Buddha's personal attendant and frequently called upon to give discourses on the teachings. But after the Venerable Sariputta passed away, Ananda lamented his death so deeply that he felt "almost as if he had fallen into an abyss." And while he was in this state, he could not even find the strength in Dhamma to bear his overwhelming feeling of loss. It was only when the Blessed One consoled him and asked him if Sariputta's death could take away Ananda's virtue, wisdom, liberation or knowledge of liberation that Ananda's grief was assuaged.

Like Ananda, we must realise that our own suffering, the loss of our loved ones, even facing our own extinction, does not diminish the noble qualities in us. We must bring forth the reflection on the inevitability of death, "All that is mine beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me," (*Dasadhamma Sutta, Ang 10*), and seek refuge in ourselves, in no one else, to be our own "island and refuge." (*Samyutta Nikaya 47:13*)

In the story of Kisagotami, this teaching is beautifully brought to life. She had married into a wealthy family, in spite of her poverty and unattractive appearance and finally won the acceptance of her in-laws when she bore a little son. Suddenly, the child died. Nothing

could be more tragic for Kisagotami. She refused to accept that her little son was dead. In her desperation, she came to see the Buddha, cradling the infant in her arms, believing that the Blessed One could revive him.

The Buddha asked her to procure a small quantity of mustard seeds from a house where no one had ever died. When she could find no household that had been spared death's unremitting hand, the insight into the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena arose in her mind. And so, Kisagotami was able to go beyond "the death of sons," beyond sorrow. (*S.N. 5*)

One of the most heart-rending accounts of how personal tragedy can lead to insight into *anicca* and spiritual awakening concerns the beautiful young Patacara, who also lived at the time of the Buddha. Born to a wealthy merchant family of Savatthi, she eloped at a young age with her lover to avoid a marriage arranged by her over-protective parents. Fearing the wrath of Patacara's father, the young couple settled in a remote area.

On two different occasions Patacara became pregnant, and both times, in spite of her husband's unwillingness to accompany her, the head-strong young woman secretly set off on her own for Savatthi, hoping that the birth of her child would soften her parents' hearts and bring about a reconciliation. Each time, her husband pursued and found her. On the first occasion, the child's birth en route precipitated their return before reaching Savatthi.

But the second journey led to a series of calamitous events. First, Patacara had to endure the hardship of bearing her child in a raging storm without shelter or support. The next morning she discovered her husband's body; he had died from snakebite while looking for materials to protect them from the storm. Then, as she struggled on alone in the direction of Savatthi, her newborn was snatched up in the talons of a hawk and carried away, and within moments, her firstborn son accidentally drowned in the swollen currents of a river they were trying to cross. And finally, when she reached Savatthi, exhausted and stricken with grief, Patacara learned that her parents and brother had just perished in a fire that destroyed the family home.

By the time Patacara appeared before the Blessed One, she was nearly mad with grief and despair. Recognising her readiness to hear the Dhamma, and out of compassion for her, the Buddha taught her about the dangers of samsara:

*“Do not be troubled any more. You have come to one who is able to be your shelter and refuge. It is not only today that you have met with calamity and disaster, but throughout this beginningless round of existence, weeping over the loss of sons and others dear to you, you have shed more tears than the waters of the four oceans.”*

*“The four oceans contain but a little water  
Compared to all the tears we have shed,*

*Smitten by sorrow, bewildered by pain.*

*Why, O woman are you still heedless?" -  
Dhammapada Commentary 2:268; Buddhist Legends, 2:255  
(quoted in Great Disciples of the Buddha, edited by Bhikkhu  
Bodhi).*

She soon realised with penetrating insight the nature of all conditioned things, that they arise, they cease, and in their cessation there is peace.

After her acceptance into the *bhikkhuni* order, we learn of Patacara's deepening realisations through her poetry. She vividly compares the streams of water flowing down a slope to the different life-spans of human beings. Some streams drain into the sand very soon on the descent, others more slowly, while some reach the bottom of the slope and then sink into the earth. And so with beings of this realm, some live only a few years, some to mid-life, and others even to old age, but each one eventually succumbs to death. (*Therigatha* 112-116)

The final moment of her awakening is portrayed in a memorable poem:

*"Then I took a lamp  
and went into my cell,  
checked the bed,  
and sat down on it.  
I took a needle  
and pushed the wick down.*

*When the lamp went out,  
my mind was freed."*

From this seeing into the true essence of all conditioned phenomena, we realise three universal qualities: in the arising of all conditions, we see *anicca*, impermanence, that which is death-bound or has the sign of death, and which ultimately points us toward the signless or Deathless. These temporal conditions also dissolve and pass away; thus we know the *dukkha* of being propelled by desire, the unsatisfactoriness of the conditioned realm, and we are brought to the knowledge of the timeless, the desireless. Finally, in the cessation of these transient conditions there is peace, emptiness, no self to be found, *anatta*.

We are also urged to contemplate our *kamma* and the relentless wheel of *samsara*. At one time the Blessed One asks a man lamenting his father's death: "For which father are you grieving, the father of this life, or the last life, or the life before that. For if one wanted to grieve, then it would be just as well to grieve for the other fathers too." (*Jataka* 352)

As you contemplate these teachings, ask yourselves: Who is it that dies? Who is abused? Who grieves? What are we identified with — the body, feelings, perceptions, mental fabrications, thoughts, and memories? Where is our true refuge? Can shelter be found in that which is impermanent?

As soon as we identify with and attach to desire, to the conditioned, then we are seeking safety, refuge in things that die, not in the Deathless.

There are two kinds of death for the living, one

that leads to death and one that leads to peace, to enlightenment. When we carry around a lot of wreckage in the mind, we are not putting down the burden. We are identifying with and caught in self-view, 'I am an abused person' or 'a grief-stricken person', or 'Five of my friends have died from AIDS and I just can't face life.' That's a death that leads to death.

But if we can meet the present moment with mindfulness and wise reflection, we can begin to put down that burden, surrender it, and allow ourselves to receive the next moment with purity of mind, letting the conditions that arise and our attachment to them die. That kind of death leads to enlightenment.

If we are not aware, we are as if dead, and we live in fear of death. As Socrates said, "Those who love wisdom practise dying all the time and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world." The fearless mind is the mind of the mystic voyager, the mind that sees life the way it really is, holding each moment in its gaze, witnessing this arising and ceasing of tempest, of agony, of fear, of the darkest night and turning each one to the light to be redefined and revealed to us, and then to end, to cease.

This practice is not to condone our suffering, but to question our assumptions, to allow moral indignation when there are wrongs, to accept our humanity. So we feel the pain of illness, the burden of stigma, the loss of the loved, the fear of death, and yet, we fully



receive life with merciful awareness. No matter how much suffering life brings us, we can always return to that still point of knowing, to a serene abiding in the centre of life's storms, a safe harbour.

And like Patacara, Kisagotami or Ettie, in dying to our pain, to our grief, to our hatred, to our fear — letting them go at their own rhythm, not forcibly, not trying to control or get rid of them, we begin to see them as natural conditions arising due to causes. We know their nature, their origin, their ending, and the way to their dissolution. Rather than something dark and to be feared, death becomes a resurrection, an inner illumination, like “the sun awakening the lotus.”

By coming here, you may have expected that you would figure out how to get rid of the terrible grief or fear that you're feeling, or how to overcome death. Actually, it's not about getting rid of anything. We enter the eternal just by dropping our illusions and our assumptions, offering ourselves to the moment, and standing at the brink of the world with the courage not to cling to anything or anyone.

What would it be like if we never got old? What if we never got sick, or if we never died? Could we really love each other if we were here forever? Through our own mortality we learn to love, through our darkest suffering, we are taken beyond suffering, and being exposed to our own extinction, we can realise that within us which is indestructible.

Trusting each moment, even in the midst of the most terrifying conditions, we awaken in ourselves the possibility to live with complete trust. We grow more vulnerable and, at the same time, more fearless, not taking refuge in sorrow. We learn how to live, and how to die, and how to embrace our joy and our pain.

We heard of the atrocities happening in Kosovo, with so many innocent people being mutilated and put to death. It seems to go on in every generation, every century. Purity and wholesomeness are so needed in this world. Be earth, air, fire, water, the elements. Be that mystic traveller diving for the pearls of wisdom in your heart. Then your actions can spring from an awakened awareness, each moment of pure seeing conditioning the next.

This purity of view is able to contemplate defilement in the mind, to know sorrow as that which takes us to suffering; to understand that which is noble in the mind and, to be totally committed to it.

This then is our pilgrimage, not just during the retreat, but even when you leave this sanctuary and go back to your daily lives, sustain that ardour and that total commitment to free yourselves, and to bless the world. As Ettie wrote:

*“You must be able to bear your sorrow, even if it seems to crush you. You will be able to stand up again, for human beings are so strong, and your sorrow must become an integral part of yourself. You mustn’t run*

*away from it. Do not relieve your feeling through hatred. Give your sorrow all the space and shelter in yourself that is its due, for if everyone bears grief honestly and courageously, the sorrow that now fills the world will abate.”*

*“As the Buddha often pointed out, it’s  
worth getting to know this feeling of insecurity  
in the face of the unknown.”*



# Opening the Heart

From a talk given by Ajahn Jitindriya.

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For me, when it comes to offering some reflections on Dhamma, it always feels like the first time! I was inspired to read an article recently about a young Russian pianist, apparently the most accomplished pianist in the world today, who was a child prodigy. I can't tell you his name but he's got a big mop of black hair like Sai Baba!

I was reading through this interview with him — a very confident, powerful young man — and the interviewer asked if he ever got nervous before a performance. He said, “Always, I always get nervous, to the point where I can't even drink anything.” Then he added, “But that nervousness is really important, because as soon as I start playing the piano it transforms into inspiration.” And there was this photograph of him there just touching the keys. You could see he was already lifted into the heavens, he was away. It was quite inspiring.

It gave me a new view on what nervousness is about. It's not an inadequate response to a situation where you might feel inadequate, where you think you should feel confident, or whatever. It's actually very close to what Dhamma is all about — one is approaching the threshold of the unknown and, for most of us, given a chance,

we'll back right away. That's why it's so good to be confronted with situations such as this in the monastic life. There are many situations where you can't back away, so you look at that, you be with that and you look into that gaping black void... 'What's that about?'

I'm not just talking about my own experience in terms of giving a talk, or the nervousness of someone giving a performance, but it's something we can face, we can come up against, quite regularly in our daily lives, in our so-called normal and ordinary experience — but we have so many ways of avoiding it and backing away that we don't often recognize it. We don't take the opportunity to actually go towards what we might call 'emptiness' because it's uncomfortable, it's insecure. In that sense of insecurity there's fear — fear of losing the sense of identity, of not knowing what to do when there's no identity, when there's no strategy, when there are no reference points. What happens is we feel very threatened.

As the Buddha often pointed out, it's worth getting to know this feeling of insecurity in the face of the unknown. Get familiar with that feeling and turn towards it, feel it out in any given situation. It can happen in relationship quite a lot. One sign to recognize that we're backing away or that we're about to back away is that sense of *dukkha*, maybe manifesting in anger, or fear, or desire, or impatience; even boredom, restlessness; it manifests in many ways.

Recognize it manifesting, as you feel a kind of knot starting to form in your stomach, or a feeling of the

heart shutting down or the mind shutting down; a wanting to get out, get away or change the subject; or in not being able to look at the other person, to look into their eyes.

What is that? When I investigate such things in myself I usually find it's a 'fear thing,' a defense mechanism — not wanting to be hurt or not wanting to let in something I perceive as unpleasant, not wanting to experience it; fear of the pain involved, the possible pain. It's based on memory isn't it? Fear of possible pain, it's not actual fact yet.

We often project onto others or create an idea of a future that is going to be painful, and we back off, avoid, or somehow find a way to reinforce our sense of security and identity with something familiar, something pleasant, something that's OK and allowable in my world.

'VIBHAVA-TANHA'

When we are attracted to a spiritual teaching, to committing ourselves to a path of practice in order to find this promised freedom from suffering — enlightenment, wisdom, compassion; being able to exist in the world without fear or hatred — this is a very promising thing, something we all aspire to. But in many cases we undertake a spiritual practice with what is called *vibhava-tanha*, a sense of wanting to get away from our life as it is, from things as they are. This isn't to be seen as wrong, it's just a natural thing that happens. We've decided something is not right, it's not good enough, it's unpleasant, it's intolerable, unbearable and... "I want out.

There has to be a way out,” or at least, there has to be another way!

People enter upon a spiritual path for different reasons. Perhaps one has had insight into what we might call the ‘Unborn’, or what might be called pure consciousness, the Unconditioned, or a state of being that is totally free from the usual constrictions or constraints we feel as a limited beings. It’s hard to describe this but people experience it in different ways. There’s a recognition that there is something more profound to be discovered, a deeper understanding that can clear away this confusion that’s present most of the time.

Or one might be following an intuition one has of an ultimate happiness to be found, which might be based upon insight or might be based merely upon a kind of escapist hopefulness — a kind of wanting to experience the ultimate happiness and make it permanent, find a feeling that remains peaceful, that remains happy, that doesn’t change. Most of us want to find that kind of feeling and keep it all the time. It’s only when we get a little bit more familiar with ourselves, say through meditation, introspection and reflection, get more familiar with the nature of the mind, that we begin to recognize our own avoidance tactics, and that those avoidance tactics in themselves are what create the prison that we are trying to escape from.

So at some point it’s recognized that this happiness we are looking for — this freedom, this wisdom and compassion — is not going to come easily, that in



fact what we have to do is turn right around and face all of those very things we have been running from. And this is where the path begins. This is where we need to develop many qualities of heart that help us to do that — courage in the first place, tremendous patience, faith, willingness, and some faculties and powers of mind such as concentration, mindfulness, and wise reflection.

It often takes a long time to see where we're avoiding what really needs to be looked at. It's not easy to see it because we've got so many judgments in the mind, primarily about 'good' and 'bad' based on experience of pain and pleasure. Somewhere deep in our psyche we judge anything painful as bad and, depending on our varying kinds of conditioning processes, we blame ourselves for it, or blame the archetypal Father or Mother, or something 'out there.'

'THE HABIT OF SELF-BLAME'

In some ways, especially in Western culture, we have a very deep sense of self-blame and this needs to be uncovered because until we can get to this point of seeing our own judgment of pain as bad, and at some level 'my fault'... 'I've done something wrong,' or 'someone's done something wrong here'... then there's no real way to be free of the pain involved. We need to get to that level to begin to open the heart to that depth of pain.

You might be able to recognize the judgment that comes in — it's not necessarily a discursive judgment, you don't hear yourself saying, "That's bad" when you

experience some kind of pain, whether it be subtle or more obvious. It's more an attitude that you uncover, a way of responding at a very primary level, where we discover a resistance that manifests physically and mentally. When you feel that resistance happening — a kind of shut-down happening in the mind or a knot occurring physically — it's a sign, one that the Buddha points to as dukkha.

Turn towards that, recognise that, recognise what's happening, and in that recognition, for that moment, there can be a letting go of the resistance. And then you have to keep moving into it because the defense mechanisms are so strong they'll just keep re-activating. Keep recognizing the resistance as it's occurring, or the shut-down, and keep opening up, moving into it.

How do we move into it when there's so much pain and resistance? First of all we let go of the stories that are happening around it, the thoughts creating the "She did this ... he shouldn't have done that ... it was her fault...etc. etc." That's the first level, we let go of all that kind of discursive justification for 'what I'm feeling' and go further into the physical feeling or the mental feeling as we experience it. Experience the struggle and keep relaxing.

How do we relax with struggle? By cultivating mindfulness and concentration, just enough to stay present and notice that our experience in this present moment is always fluctuating and shifting, it's never fully static. It becomes static as soon as we solidify it by concept

and identification, making it into ‘me’ and ‘mine,’ then we’re trapped.

If you keep the mindfulness witnessing the process of change, slight fluctuations physically or mentally — noticing feeling, noticing perception — then this is a way to stay present with what’s actually occurring, whether it’s in your sitting meditation or whether it’s in your personal relationships. Usually it’s a little easier to do when sitting quietly, because concentration and mindfulness can be much more refined and you can drop those layers of social conditioning that seem to just keep rolling through when we’re engaging with others. But even when we are, say, in a discussion and some buttons are being pushed, one can still be deeply aware of where the reactions are coming from and what they are conditioning in terms of feeling, physical and mental. The mind, in itself, is not time-bound — what’s time-bound are thoughts and feelings and perceptions, but there’s an ability to witness to those things as they’re occurring and that is a timeless ability, it is not based in time.

It’s amazing, with a little power of concentration and mindfulness, what you can begin to observe in your conscious experience — and this is how wisdom can arise, through this clear observation of what’s actually occurring. It’s not a conceptual creation, it’s not intellectual understanding, it’s a clear, direct witnessing of your experience. But it is also helpful to know what

to focus on in order for a clear understanding to come about.

‘INVESTIGATING PERSONALITY-VIEW’

We’re encouraged to investigate the ‘personality factors’ as the Buddha has described, (body, feeling, perception, mental formations and sense-consciousness), what is sometimes referred to as the ‘ego structure’, but it’s not necessarily the same thing as referred to in psychology.

The ‘ego’ in the Western psychological model seems to be more about having a healthy sense of individuality, and that’s definitely needed, there’s no need to break that down. Having a healthy understanding of individuation and of the conditioned situation, the conditioned world we find ourselves in, is helpful, necessary. There needs to be a healthy sense of ‘self’ in that respect to know how to interact and to take care of oneself and others.

The ego structure within the Buddhist teaching is much more about that which keeps us trapped — our belief, our utter belief in those personality factors as self, not as mere functions but as ‘who and what I am’; our tendency to believe, to fix on to physical experience as self, to believe and fix on to feeling as self. We often think of feeling, *vedana*, as ‘emotion,’ but emotion is more a conglomeration of feeling, perception, thought and sense-consciousness in the Buddha’s teaching. Vedana is that initial felt response of pleasure or pain arising with

one's present experience. We are usually attracted towards the pleasant feeling and want to move away from the unpleasant.

Perception is described as that which is related to memory — how we perceive and label an experience based on past experience. *Sanna* is this conditioned kind of perception, it's not a pure seeing, a direct seeing, but an apprehension of something in a way that we fix it due to our past experience so we then experience that in a pre-conditioned way.

Often you can notice images arising in the mind upon sense contact — you can see this in meditation sometimes, or even in our everyday experience. We tend to fix to our perceptions as being true and real and part of me, myself, and we totally believe in and fix on to our sensory experience in terms of 'what I see, what I hear, what I smell, taste, touch and what I think.'

These are the sense realms, where 'ego' is created, if we fix those experiences as being true and real and what I am. It's as if we collect those experiences and create this sense of self from them and then become fixed in that world. It's not to say that those experiences, these sense realms, are unreal but they are conditioned experiences, they're dependent on many factors. But there is that which can begin to know the experiences of the sense world, and that which can know sight as sight is actually free of the conditionality based on that sight. It's not to say that you don't see what you see, it's just a different level of understanding.

If there's a clear knowing of a present experience then that clear knowing is not caught up in the identity structure, it knows the creation of identity, it knows the creation of ego.

Therefore what you see and hear, smell, taste, touch, think, becomes just that: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations and thoughts, arising and passing — certainly supplying much information about our world, our relationships, what needs to be done, what doesn't need to be done — but there can be that dimension of mind that knows all this as part of a world in flux, in flow: all experience conditioning further experience.

'THE UNBORN'

We can begin to have a sense of dispassion, a letting go of being totally fixed in the world of sensory experience, and that other dimension of clear knowing is what might be referred to as the Unborn or the Uncreated. It can't be conceived of — one can recognize a concept of it, 'the Unborn,' but that's not it. It cannot be grasped with the conceiving mind, but one can learn to abide in that place of knowing awareness.

Now the Buddha created his whole structure of teaching in order to help us find the way to free ourselves from suffering. It's not to create further ideas about an alternative Unconditioned realm, some kind of heaven where we can find that hoped for happiness, it's rather to find a present refuge in the midst of what we perceive

and experience as turmoil or suffering or confusion. A present refuge from where we can begin to understand this experience of being human.

So we have this faculty of awareness or what we might call ‘the knowing,’ ‘that which knows’ — that which can be awake to what’s happening, to what’s actually occurring – and this ability to be awake is compared to the very same awakened mind of the Buddha. It is a faculty of mind, of nature, it’s not a personal thing — the Buddha pointed this out as a place from where we can cultivate the path.

It’s so easy to construct an elaborate cosmology in our mind when we hear any religious teachings and then continue to seek security within that mental construction — trying to separate the good from the bad, trying to do ‘this’ in order to avoid ‘that.’ This is still the very strategy we have to keep seeing. It’s not about creating a wonderful future or the perfect heaven to be reborn in. It’s not about creating new concepts at all. Conceiving of the teaching, the path, is a natural thing, we have to use our conceptual faculties and our intellectual faculties, but see it as that, and never believe in that creation of mind as being the true thing. The true thing, the Dhamma, is always apparent here and now and is timeless, it’s never away from where we are now.

Various religious teachings infer that the Truth, or God, is unutterable — that you can’t describe it — it’s ineffable. And still that gets confused in many ways,

doesn't it? We create a 'holy' structure where we're never allowed to utter a word for 'God', out of respect for purity, yet we can still live out our lives in a very unrealised way.

We might be developing certain powers of faith and conviction in a particular path but is it really the path to freedom? Freedom, even though it sounds good, is something that we often find we don't really want, if we are honest — it's too scary. To paraphrase an Indian shaman, "Most people don't want to grow up, don't want to be adults, because you discover you have the freedom to invent your own life." It's that kind of freedom!

So we find we have to develop skills and ways of being, ways to help us be fully present in order to confront those fears, those avoidance tactics that are so deeply embedded in our minds. When we meet someone we don't like, when someone says something to us that's really hurtful, what do we do? Can our hearts stay open to that?

It doesn't mean that we have to condone something that is not necessarily wholesome, but the path is about looking at what this heart's doing, the path is about freeing this heart from the conditioned reactivity of just shutting down. So it means that in those moments which we find difficult, whether we're alone or with others, to develop the strength to stay open, to stay present, to stay feeling: to feel what we feel, to know what we think, to recognize how our thoughts condition our feelings and how judgement arises. What happens



when we judge the other or judge the world or judge ourselves, what kind of feeling or state does that condition?

‘COMPASSION’

Now this practice takes a lot of time because we find we can't face a lot all at once, and this is where we have to develop another powerful quality called compassion. We often think that compassion is something that we have for other people but the biggest lesson we learn is that compassion is something we must develop for ourselves.

When we feel the pain that we can't bear to feel, or we can't hold or we can't face, instead of just moving away from it or blaming the other, doing something against the other, can we just sit there and allow our heart to open wider and really feel the pain of whatever it is and say, "It's OK"? This is where we might notice that attitude coming in judging; "This is wrong, it must be wrong, it's too painful." I have to firmly tell myself sometimes "It's absolutely OK" ... to feel miserable, to feel despair, to feel fear; it's absolutely OK to feel what we're feeling.

Somehow in that space of absolute acceptance there's a release and in that moment we can recognize what it was that was keeping us trapped — just this attitude of judgement based in 'I want, I don't want.' What's that 'I want, I don't want' based in? It's based in a false understanding that pleasant feelings bring ultimate

happiness. It's based in a false understanding that feelings can be permanent, feelings can stay the same forever — but they can't. And in that moment when we totally allow ourselves to feel exactly what we are feeling and there's a moment of release, we recognize that those feelings pass because they're being let go of, because we are no longer fixing them through resisting or struggling or judging. And they pass, gone forever, they only ever were a moment.

But how much of our lives are created, how many stories are created around a moment of feeling this way or a moment of feeling that way, and then struggling to get it right, to feel more of this type of thing and feel less of that type of thing. A lot of pain, a lot of pressure and you never find happiness that way because feelings never stay the same.

So, in opening the heart and allowing oneself to feel the painful, which is what we have been trying to avoid, strangely enough we find we actually develop a capacity to enjoy the pleasant aspects of life more fully, because we begin to develop a knack for not clinging, for not trying to manipulate and create a reality that we *think* we want or we *think* will be right or the best. We find a sense of freedom or release coming through not clinging, allowing things, allowing life to flow as it will. We find a greater freedom to choose how to respond rather than react in situations, a greater clarity of mind to reflect upon situations, upon our own involvement.

This is where developing the path becomes more

effective. We can choose to act or not act according to how we understand the situation and as tolerance and a certain kind of courage and compassion grow, we find that our disposition is much more one of not wanting to harm or to hurt anything, so the choices we make tend towards harmlessness, the consideration of others. One becomes more sensitive to what's wholesome, what's worth developing — not only for ourselves but for all those we're involved with in our lives.

It doesn't stop there either, because there comes an increasing understanding of our interconnectedness, of the commonality of human experience. But it all starts with a willingness to begin to look under the surface of our initial reactivity, in every way possible.

'THE COMMON EXPERIENCE'

The Buddha described *dukkha* in many ways, and they're common daily experiences — getting what I don't want, not getting what I want — how does that make us feel? Taking the time and having the willingness to look at that, investigate that. These are often the things where the strongest reactivity comes up.

We can often be much more noble and giving in very dramatic situations and not think of ourselves first. But in little ways, in insignificant, petty ways, when we don't get *our* way or *my* way, it can be absolutely infuriating! Remember to reflect on it in terms of Dhamma, it doesn't need to be judged at any other level, it doesn't have to be right or wrong but just: "Is this

suffering?... Is there pain here?” Recognize it, accommodate it and reflect, “How do I relate to this... how is this pain sustained... why does it feel so bad?” And where do we feel it hurting?

It’s better to go directly to the contemplation of Dhamma rather than to think about it at a kind of social level of what’s right and what’s wrong and what should be and what shouldn’t be and why I was justified in saying this, etc. There might be certain situations where that’s needed but when we want to work at the spiritual level, rather take this framework of the Four Noble Truths, beginning with recognizing dukkha. Recognize that it has a cause and that the cause can actually be seen here and now in our own experience, it doesn’t have to be traced back in memory, in time.

We think the cause may have been when someone said or did those things that were so hurtful, but what is the present cause in the present moment? And we always find that it is in our relationship to the presently arising feeling, in the way we struggle with that present experience.

This is the place where we have to look if we really want to be free from dukkha, because there will always be people, as long as we are alive, that are going to ‘miff’ us in one way or another. If we are on the Path it doesn’t necessarily get easier either, because we get more sensitive and little things can miff you really bad!

Also as our heart opens more, we are becoming more allowing for things to be present, allowing ourselves

to experience things, and in that space things can often come up in a more dramatic, even violent way sometimes, surprisingly so. This again is where we need to develop that capacity of mindfulness and concentration, to be a container for when it does come up, to hold it, to be with that and be interested in that, as phenomena, as something to be experienced and to learn from — because if we had nothing to learn from it would be very slow going!

Take it as an opportunity — it's the hardest thing to remember that unwanted experiences are opportunities for freedom. Usually we don't take the wanted experiences as opportunities, we just get lost in them, enjoy them, that's why happiness isn't so conducive to awakening. It can be very helpful and supportive but if you don't know how to wake up, then often it's the painful that helps us, goads us to wake up. But we do need the balance of the pleasant as well; we need to feel supported, we need to know how we can take time to rest, to nurture ourselves.

‘APPRECIATION AND KINDNESS’

In our lives, one of the difficult emotions that can arise, (I'm not sure how it is for men but for women it is especially significant), is the sense of not being appreciated ... “No one appreciates what I do.” This can come up in different ways, sometimes bringing with it painful feelings of alienation or incompleteness, and we have to find ways to accommodate that. We can't expect people to

appreciate us or to like us or love us or to tell us nice things, but we can begin to be kind to ourselves. Why is it that we need others to appreciate us, apart from the fact that it is pleasant? Again, it's usually based in some sense of insecurity or a sense of not being OK as I am, not being able to appreciate myself as I am — perhaps trying to fulfil others' expectations of us, (that often we create and project on to them!)

In fact, as with many things we feel we need from others, we can begin to look inside and ask, "Why do I need this from outside? Is it present in myself? Can I find it in myself?" If we begin to look we usually can. If we feel we need appreciation or we need love or some tender care, we find there's a space within where we can allow that feeling to arise for ourselves.

It sounds a little indulgent, and it's very difficult to do, to allow yourself to love yourself, to allow yourself to be kind and tender with yourself. We end up realizing that we have been our own biggest critics. There is a depth of relaxation that's brought about by this ability to be kind to oneself — to be completely tolerant and open and loving and appreciating of oneself, not as an ego but as a conscious being experiencing this, right now, whatever it may be, and totally allowing that.

It's this level of relaxation that's needed to begin to appreciate life itself — consciousness itself, being — and from where each moment can be experienced as something totally new, not as something interpreted through the filter of conditioned ego strategies. It's that

depth of relaxation that can allow whatever presents itself, whether it's painful or pleasant, to be wholly received — because you know you have the capacity, you know you have the power of love, the open-heartedness to receive that, to bear with the consequences.

When there is the capacity to love ourselves, there is the capacity to love others, no matter how they present themselves or how they are experienced in our heart. So it is actually possible to love someone you don't even like, or to love someone you disagree with, or to love someone that you have to tell that they're sacked or that you have to divorce them or whatever!

It is possible to have that kind of open-heartedness. It doesn't mean that everything is sappy and that you have to be sweet and think pink with everyone and everything. It's an ability to stay present, to stay real, to stay open and to respond rather than react-respond from a place of compassion and love and wisdom.

Wisdom is fully operable in a heart that is open. Wisdom is not a strategy or a tactic, it's something quite spontaneous, something quite intuitive, and it's not one's own.

*Evam.*

*“One of the greatest experiences of loneliness is when two people are physically close but miles apart in every other way.”*





# Awakening to the Human Condition

From a talk given by Ajahn Thanasanti

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Awakening, in all its aspects, continues to be a deep-seated interest. Over the years if I look at experiences that have continued to reappear in my own journey and in the journey of others, I can see there have been times of intense pleasure, strong energy, deep pain, suffering, confusion, profound fear, transcendent joy and the stillness of a peaceful heart. These experiences have been both the gateway for and the result of much learning. As this entire range has been a part of my experience of sexuality, I'd like to explore this theme. In particular, I wish to connect the experience of sexuality with aggression on the one hand and loving kindness on the other as aspects which need to be understood whether celibate or not, in our endeavor to awaken to this full human condition.

For more than twenty years most of my Dhamma teachers have been men. Occasionally, there have been some very bold, insightful, very sensitive Dhamma teachers who have talked about sexuality in language I have been able to relate to and understand. I've felt grateful for their courage and compassion to bring light and clarity into these deep waters. As a laywoman, I also

heard Dhamma talks describing the power involved in dominance, the objectification and raw attraction to physical attributes driven by a desire for gratification, all devoid of affection and genuine respect — which I couldn't relate to.

For me the most familiar expression of sexuality was one accompanied by tenderness and care, much spaciousness, joy and opening of body and mind as the sense of self released through giving and sharing with another. The presence of mindfulness, awareness, perception changes as well as the emotional experience were the predominant features. To hear sexuality being described emphasizing the instinctual component of desire, the raw drive for physical gratification involving the dynamics of power and aggression sounded demeaning and very foreign. However, years later, I came to realise that what these teachers were describing was in fact possible and within me at that. This was discovered only after the crucible of mind and body had become sufficiently strong to withstand the fire of transformation that come from awareness in the way things are.

Growing up in California, with its lack of boundaries and cultural norms regarding courtship and sexual relationship, it took some learning to discover how much care was required to ensure ease and well being within relationship, to discover the impact of sexual intimacy and the degree to which one's partner's thoughts, moods, feelings and kammic formations are internalized. For this reason respect, kindness, genuine

love, friendship and commitment were essential to protect the environment necessary to open to the complexity of what ensued.

So if in relationship, it is important to bring every aspect of relationship fully into consciousness and be clear about the forces that are operating. It is important to see the nature of desire, the nature of pleasure, the way of attachment, grasping and wanting more and the fear of rejection or loss and their effects on the mind and body. It is important to recognize that the longing for love, acceptance and fulfilment are part of the human experience and part of the dance of our sexuality. All of these things need to be seen and understood.

After I decided to come to the monastery to live as a nun, I remember that there were a few people who said in their departing blessings to me, "Well I hope that on your way to the monastery, you meet the man of your dreams and fall in love." I understood what they were saying. They wanted me to be happy. To them, going to the monastery was the embodiment of a life-denying existence. In our culture, the highest life affirming experience is the consummation of a romantic relationship. The advertising strategies and movies are oriented towards the pleasure and happiness that come from falling in love and having a romantic relationship. It is considered the pinnacle of fulfilment.

Anybody in a healthy enough relationship certainly knows that there is a lot of happiness and pleasure, as well as the potential for healthy inquiry and

learning. But anybody in relationship also probably knows that it is not the whole story. It is not always so sweet. There can be times when intimacy can be boring. One of the greatest experiences of loneliness is when two people are physically close but miles apart in every other way. Sometimes it becomes very ugly. While on this retreat, we heard the story of a person whose unrequited love led to stalking, several acts of vandalism, attempted suicide, followed by physical assault.

So consummate love brings delights but unfulfilled love where desire, jealousy and power reign can become a nightmare. We see love easily turn to hate. For me this kind of love is one of attachment, not genuine love. Attachment and grasping cannot fulfill. They cause frustration. When there isn't insight into the frustration as it arises, the aggression that follows is an attempt to blame the trigger rather than understand the response.

After ten years working within the field of practice as a lay person, I left and went to the monastery. I remember, not long after entering the monastery, a much loved and respected senior monk saying that when he first became a monk, his mind was so shattered that it was years before he could get together a healthy case of lust. He was very candid and open. I appreciated that very much. In the ensuing years as a monastic, I was to learn much about this subject. And still what a surprise after several years of being in the monastery, and much life experience, to discover sex with capital letters and on big screens.

In a monastic lifestyle dedicated to meditation, inquiry and investigation, where restraint is cultivated, and where there are relatively few opportunities for distraction, the energetic system of a human being potentizes. The familiar becomes intensified.

I thought I knew a few things about my body, energies and the cycles of mood, emotion and sexuality. I thought I understood men. I was surprised to discover there was a lot I didn't know about the way energy moves through the body and mind, and what it does to various parts of the system, and how differently men and women experience things.

It was at this time I began to have an appreciation for what the monks and male Dhamma teachers had been talking about — the connection between sexuality and aggression. I could feel the power involved in captivating and holding a person's attention. I could see clearly how fast moods swing and how sexual desire was triggered by a myriad of things not only by an expression of heart-felt openness and tenderness. I could see the desire impulse working and feel the movement of mind towards pleasure and gratification. I could see how the strategies that were employed in optimizing pleasure either for oneself or in relationship with others were often based on control, manipulation, competition, defining one's territory and objectification. As long as my conscious experience of sexuality was just an expression of heart opening and tenderness, the potential for what it is capable of was not something I had

understood. Later I wondered how I'd missed some of the most basic instinctual elements of sexuality and its drive.

As these dynamics became clearer, the connection between sexuality and aggression became more apparent. A human being is made out of energy. Thought, moods and feelings are all manifestations of energy which changes in colour and tone depending on the characteristics it takes on but at its root it is just energy. We are often absorbed in these characteristics in the same way that we are absorbed in the objects of our experience. What we think, feel, experience is of great interest. When there is intense energy in the system, it can flow out in different ways. With sexual energy for example that manifests as desire, if unskillfully restrained or suppressed can cause confusion, frustration, anger and easily be released as aggression.

Working with restraint then requires that one become familiar with the experience of these feelings and the skillful means one can develop to work with them. Awareness is the key. One first needs to allow one's attention to rest with the experience. Feel the direct physical sensations in the body: the tightness, increased warmth, change and texture of the breath, the tension. Let one's attention rest there. Feel the experience is unpleasant. Feel the mind contracting and notice the desire not to experience these feelings. When one can see things as they arise and let one's attention rest there, then one doesn't need to be a slave to one's desire for

fulfillment or one's aversion to the unpleasant. One can be directly aware of the experience as it arises, and watch as it changes and ends of its own accord or is channeled through skillful sublimation. Once there is a connection of mindfulness and a clear comprehension of what is being experienced, options open up. With attention focused on the whole body or the breath, through awareness, one can allow the energy to flow. It doesn't have to be blocked or forced. By bringing awareness and attention to the breath, release will come from exhalation and vitality from inhalation. The contraction can be shifted. As the whole body is kept in mind, the energy can flow and become a source of vitality, creativity and radiance. Energy can be released or sublimated through the breath, physical work, and long walks or devotional practice. It is important to know the difference between repression, which doesn't allow and sublimation, which allows through skillful channeling.

It is important to recognize how much patience; kindness towards oneself and skill is needed to find one's way through this human predicament. Humour helps a lot. But sometimes tears are inevitable.

Even as one develops increasing skill allowing energy to flow throughout the system, it is important to see fundamentally that, when there is desire, there is suffering. There is 'me,' here who wants and something out 'there' that is supposed to satisfy. It is important to recognize whether one is sublimating in a skillful way and working to transform desire into something that is

useful. As long as there is a 'me' here and a something out 'there' that either needs to be got or gotten rid of, there is suffering.

Sexuality and the way aggression is experienced and expressed need to be understood if one is interested in opening up the field of one's experience and coming to terms with what it is to be fully human. It is scary because it takes people into the realm where they feel out of control and where they are confronting things about themselves that aren't in congruence with what they think they should be experiencing.

Some people think meditation is about developing clarity, concentration and kindness but is divorced from coming to terms with these basic and primordial energies. Understanding these energies, seeing what sets them off, what brings them into balance, how much of it is part and parcel of having a human body and how it can be used in its transformed potential is important for our aspiration for freedom. Rejecting one aspect of what it is to be alive and to be a human being can be profoundly destructive, and affect the way we see and relate to others and ourselves. It has a direct connection to our physical and mental well being.

Many people come on a retreat and the big question when the retreat is over is how to integrate the insights and bring the spiritual practice into daily life. It is a great sadness if someone feels practice on retreat to be holy and sacred and the practice at home, to be inferior, complicated or impossible. There is no split.



As for celibacy, it isn't meant to be a repression or denial of being a sexual being, a condemnation of sexuality or of sexual relationships. It is not a life-denying experience. The standards of behavior are clear. Our pathway is through insight and understanding, and for me, love. When lived to its full potential, celibacy is a vital, embracing and creative lifestyle in which one is aware of sexuality in all of its manifestations, aware of the way it can be transformed into other types of energy and in which one is at ease with life as a human being.

To those interested in understanding the end of suffering, the Buddha recommended seeing value in celibacy. Celibacy is a very powerful tool for understanding desire and coming to terms with the nature of attachment. It isn't an easy path, but it can be very valuable because one has to consciously face the habitual patterns of this deep-seated energy.

For all of us, if understanding and freeing the heart from suffering is of interest, we need to question our relationship with sexuality in a sincere and genuine way. Have the courage to look carefully at the way desire, attachment and power are embedded within our experience. See for ourselves what is appropriate and how mindfulness, understanding and restraint can be further cultivated. Ask ourselves if there is room for more honesty and integrity in this area.

Each of us has areas that are more difficult to resolve than others. We need to know what they are. I grew up in an environment where being hostile and

aggressive wasn't O.K. Coming to terms with these aspects in myself has been difficult because they were not congruent with my view of being a loving, giving and caring person. When there is a lack of familiarity with the energy for example of anger, it first gets screened through thoughts like, "I don't want to see it, I don't want to know about it, I don't want to deal with it, I don't want it to be there." Sometimes the thoughts aren't conscious. And so one suppresses the unacceptable form of energy until there is both the courage and strength of mind to be able to wake up to these aspects of what it is to be a human being and embrace them. So then, when anger comes, it is familiar. It is known. It is recognised and doesn't terrify or isn't being used against oneself or others. It doesn't have to go underground.

So what does this have to do with compassion and loving-kindness? Classically it is taught that we first need to have loving-kindness and compassion for ourselves before we are in any position to spread it outwardly. Awareness has an all-embracing quality. Whatever the experience, awareness can embrace, know and receive. Judgment isn't needed. Resistance isn't needed. As moods, feelings, bodily sensations, tensions and struggles are held in awareness, the reactive qualities of wanting and not wanting the experience diminishes. Compassion comes from opening to suffering with the right perspective. It is not the all-glorious compassion of loving a million people in a far distant land. It is the nitty-gritty compassion of being at ease with the things

that we experience whether or not they are to our liking. True loving-kindness isn't a construction of a thought or a feeling. It is the ability to be present with experience on a moment to moment basis with awareness. Loving-kindness is awareness.

It is important to see that within all experience there is a direct path to the stillness of the heart. Be it confusion, rage, the coarsest desire for gratification, within each there is a direct path to the stillness of the heart. When there is sufficient strength of mind to let awareness embrace the feeling, without either rejecting it or believing in it, without absorbing into it, a profound change takes place.

The identification we normally have with experience eases up. Instead of needing to get something, get rid of something or change one's experience in some way in order to find peace, fulfilment and rest; simply resting in the knowing of the experience, peace, fulfilment and rest are found.

This still, loving heart isn't a lovey-dovey sweet marshmallow pink smear one spreads all over the universe — that metta is a kind of goo. This still, loving heart is real. It is connected and appropriate. The only way it can be is if we understand what is appropriate in terms of actions of body and speech and feel at ease with the full range of what it is to be human being. As long as one remains cut off from sexuality or aggression, one is denied full access to the heart. Cut off doesn't mean an inability to act out, but an inability to feel fully,

understand, allow and transform. It seems to me, spiritual maturity is when we can see through the veils of the world, the myriad of our human experience and let everything bring us back to the stillness of the loving heart.

My experience is that the heart does open. Energy that used to be expressed in a sexual way or released in an aggressive response manifests through the heart but is not colored with the desire for gratification, possession or control. The heart is just open. It's allowing, it's receptive, and it's universal. There is no focus on the one that 'I' love or the one that pleases 'me.' It is a bit like loving the whole universe rather than an individual person, not the glittery kind of being in love that rejects things that don't fit. It's abiding in love, a still, alive, vital place, a place of rest.

There was a nun who spent some time at Amaravati. We all loved her very much. I remember her saying that she felt much more sexually liberated being a nun than she ever did as a lay person. I totally understand what she was talking about. Within a clearly defined boundary of restraint, we have the encouragement, teachings and support to let the body be the way it is: to allow the energies to be the way they are, to understand them, to be at peace with them.

We're not trying to get anybody's attention. We're not trying to dominate or control. We're not trying to live up to the culturally accepted norm of what a woman or a man should be. We are given the encouragement to

know what it is to be alive, to be a human being, to be a woman, to be a man and to know it fully and completely. Not so much that we can take this as our identity, but so this knowing can take us to the stillness of a loving and peaceful heart. One of the many blessings of this celibate life is that one doesn't need to be tied up into a pretzel. One can be fully human, utterly alive and be in peace.

It is a rich subject, one that I continue to learn about. I don't know if I've managed to do it justice or speak to your experience. You decide. My willingness to be candid is largely motivated by the suffering and insight I've gained over the years and by the suffering and need to understand of others. We can, celibate or not, bring awareness, integrity and kindness to this aspect of our lives. If there are things I've said that you find useful, use them. If not, leave them with me. I wish for everyone as for myself that the practice bears the fruit of awakening to the full human condition, allowing suffering to end and letting the awareness of everything we experience be the still point of our resting in a peaceful, loving heart, a heart whose freedom is unconditioned.

*“I think what brings many of us to be  
interested in the practice of meditation is  
the need to understand ourselves,  
the need to clarify the confusion we live in.”*



# Taking Refuge

From a talk by Ajahn Sundara

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After three or four days on a meditation retreat, most of us are over the worst. We tend to look a lot brighter and happier than when the retreat began. That's the result of three or four days of looking inwardly and of being with ourselves. However horrible we might feel about ourselves, we get close to that feeling and actually listen to our heart and mind. Then some lovely things happen and we begin to relax. It's not an easy thing to do but we begin to be more accepting of all the pain, of all the suffering, that we usually tend to put aside.

We never seem to have the time to be friendly towards ourselves. It doesn't seem like an important thing to do — to have the time and the space to live in harmony with ourselves. So when we go on retreat what a wonderful opportunity to be able to open up, to be able to listen, and perhaps to understand a bit more profoundly the nature of our mind, the nature of our thoughts, of our feelings and perceptions. We have the chance now to realise that we only feel limited and bound by them because we rarely have the opportunity to pay attention to or investigate and question their reality, their true nature.

At the beginning of a talk like this, we have a tradition, we acknowledge the Three Refuges: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. When we become a monastic, a homeless one, we trade our home and we get Three Refuges. So we're not totally homeless. We actually take three very secure refuges and we leave behind all that we suppose to be safe, that which we assume to be protective and secure. We leave behind home, family, money, the control of our lives, the control over the people we live with, the place we actually stay — we let go of all that. And in return, we take the Three Refuges.

Now, in my experience these refuges do not mean very much at first. I didn't quite understand what they were about. Several times a year, we have Buddhist festivals and ceremonies. We follow a lovely custom on those days. We meditate through the night and before the all-night vigil we slowly walk around the monastery three times, holding a candle, some incense and some flowers in our hands. Monastics and lay people walk together, silently around the monastery contemplating the Three Refuges, the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It's very beautiful and inspiring sight.

At first I didn't know what this really meant. I would reflect on the Buddha and just get a blank in my mind; reflect on the Dhamma, another blank; reflect on the Sangha, another blank. I didn't panic though. I realised that there must be something that I was not doing right and I wasn't in a hurry to get it right. I felt at that moment that I had a whole lifetime to understand this. So



I just relaxed considering that the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha wasn't something I had to think about. I knew somehow that those refuges were in the human heart and perhaps as I practised I would come to know what they meant.

I think what brings many of us to be interested in the practice of meditation is the need to understand ourselves, the need to clarify the confusion we live in. Many of us want to be free; we want to understand, we want to realise, to see for ourselves what it's all about. We are fed up with books; we've read enough; we've listened enough; we've met enough wise people. We've done everything we could to understand and yet that didn't seem to be sufficient.

Second-hand knowledge somehow is not really satisfactory. We want to experience for ourselves what all these wise people and all the wise teachings are saying. As long as there's no realization of the truth of our mind there's no real understanding. It's difficult to taste the joy and the freedom of knowing, experiencing the Buddha's teaching for oneself — what's known as insight, seeing directly the true nature of our mind and body and realising the freedom experienced when we let go of any attachments.

At the beginning of the practice, at the beginning of the path, we still tend to look for a form of happiness. We all want to be happy, don't we? Who wants to be miserable? We all want to be free and to experience pleasure. I certainly didn't want to come to the

monastery to be miserable and experience suffering. When I came, I was quite certain the practice of meditation would make me happier and give me a lot of pleasure. Happiness was pleasure. And that's something we should take into account.

The practice is not here to make us suffer. We only suffer because we haven't practised properly, because we haven't done what is necessary to let go of ignorance, to let go of our attachments. So it's important to take this into account. We should not imagine that because we are practising we have to be terribly serious and feel that unless we experience some terrible pain or hardship that somehow something is not quite right.

That kind of idea made me suffer quite a lot at the beginning of my training. I had the impression that unless I went through some kind of hardship I would not be able to let go. And it's true that more often than not unless it hurts our ignorance is not acknowledged. If it doesn't hurt, we can go on forever without really being aware of it. This seems to be our human predicament. Unless something hurts, we don't really wake up, we don't open our eyes and look.

So everyday we recite the Three Refuges as a reminder because out of habit, we tend to take refuge in things like anger and worry. We tend to take refuge in self-pity or pleasure, distraction, obsession with ourselves or wanting to sleep or eat all the time. We take a lot of refuge in food, don't we? And then we take refuge in

feeling guilty about eating. So our tendency is to take refuge in the wrong things, things that makes us unhappy. And if we didn't have reminders, if we didn't have skillful means to bring back into consciousness what's really important in life, we would forget ourselves and never see the way out of suffering.

~ REFUGE IN THE BUDDHA ~

The refuge in the Buddha is the refuge in the knowing. The Buddha knows the world — which in Buddhism does not mean the world of mountains, rivers and trees but the world that arises in our mind and body and the suffering that we create out of ignorance.

In our daily chanting we say that the Buddha knows the world, he knows the arising of the world, the ending of the world; he knows the way the mind creates the realities we live in, the universe we navigate through. By going through the process, we also begin to see clearly the path that leads us out of suffering. Somebody asked me today, "Who is the one who knows? Who is the one who is aware?" A good question, isn't it? Because I can't find anybody being aware, can you? I tried for a long time to find someone who was aware in me. I finally gave up. I remember when I did a meditation retreat with a well-known Burmese teacher, a long time ago, somebody was talking about "Who was the one who knows. Who is it?" One of the assistant teachers said: "A super consciousness." I really liked that at the time; the one who knows was a super consciousness.

So I imagined my brain to be lots of little, sort of mini-consciousnesses, with a kind of umbrella on top, a super consciousness. I felt really good; I really got the feeling I knew something about this Buddha, this Buddha mind, the 'one who knows.' But unfortunately, the nature of the mind being what it is, after about two or three days I began to question and doubt, because that's the natural process. As soon as we get an answer, we can be sure we are going to get a doubt. This is the way it goes.

And ever since I have made peace with the fact that maybe there is nobody who knows. Just knowing — that seemed to be fine. Knowing seems to be able to carry on functioning with or without my doubts. Without having an answer, I can still take refuge in being the 'knower,' being the one who's aware, who can see.

Even so, sometimes we can make a big problem out of it. We can create somebody who knows and then get upset because we've got somebody who doesn't know. We get disappointed when we haven't got somebody who knows in there, inside of us. And maybe we get overjoyed when we find someone who is aware. See, again it's the swings of pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. But the One who knows is that very factor that balances out those extreme swings of the mind. The 'One who knows' is what is called the Middle Way.

We can see the extremes of the mind, happiness, unhappiness, pleasure and pain, inspiration and despair.

We can see hope and depression. We can see praise and blame. We can see agitation, sleepiness, boredom, the whole lot. And that seeing is a balancing factor, because we become aware of our attachments to these moods, these states of mind. Without a refuge in the knowing, in the awakened mind, we'd never be able look at the mind; we'd be lost in confusion. So the refuge in knowing is very important.

Together, the refuges are called the Three Jewels — and they are really like beautiful jewels that we can go back to whenever there is confusion, whenever there is agitation. We can always go back and take refuge in knowing those states. We don't have to think about them, we don't have to psychoanalyse ourselves. We can actually go back to the knowing. And what happens then is that we see what the Buddha saw: impermanence. We can see that these states are not worth holding onto because they are insubstantial, not satisfactory. And we get the intriguing feeling that maybe we are not 'This.' Maybe it's got nothing to do with 'Me.' Maybe my depression is not 'My' depression.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to realise that one's sadness is actually not a personal thing? Because we tend to think that everything that happens to us is personal, we create many problems in our lives: 'Poor me'; 'I'm the only one that this happens to'; 'No one else has this problem, except me.' Everyone else looks terribly confident, don't they? Especially if we lack confidence in ourselves. Everyone else seems to be terribly strong and

really know what he or she is doing. I used to think like that. I used to look at someone and, if I felt a bit depressed or miserable, I could be quite convinced that they were OK. They were fine. I was the only one who had problems until I realised they, too, had problems.

Because we are self-centered creatures by nature, everything is 'my' problem, 'my' life, 'my' sorrows, and 'my' relationships. 'My' melodramas. Everything seems to center around 'Me.' Refuge in the Buddha allows us to see this very clearly. And it's a compassionate refuge. It's not a refuge that's critical.

When we take refuge in mindfulness, we don't have to criticize or condemn or get angry with ourselves. We can observe the tendency to be critical, angry or demanding towards ourselves. It's a very compassionate refuge. In fact, that refuge is one of the first lines of our chanting, 'the Buddha has compassion as vast as the oceans,' and that's really what that refuge means. It is a beautiful, compassionate home.

So we have three homes, three refuges. We have refuge in the Buddha. It doesn't have a roof, no central heating, but it feels very good. It feels very secure, very reliable — especially when you see how much of our life is so agitated, so unreliable and insecure. As we become more aware, we have a clear view and a clear understanding of what *samsara* - the endless round of birth and death - is all about. And we are all here to get free from our attachment to it.

Taking refuge in the Buddha actually keeps us

in touch with what is real, what is actually true. That's one of the reasons we tend to forget about it. The meanings of mindfulness is "recollection," to remember. We can remember every time we get lost in being silly or in being unkind or in being angry or impatient or stupid. We can also remember that we don't have to change ourselves. The compassion of that refuge is that in being awake to what is happening, there is no judgement; we don't have to become somebody who is not angry or who is not stupid. We can actually acknowledge what is happening and accept it in consciousness and in our heart. As soon as we have this clear vision of what's going on we realise that it's changing and see clearly the uselessness of struggling to keep things permanent, to keep ourselves as permanent entities. We are constantly changing, so what's the point being this person that we cherish, pamper and try to make as happy as possible?

Most of our struggle in life is to create situations where 'me,' my personality will never have to face suffering, or endure pain, will never feel embarrassed, ashamed or guilty. That's why we are so good at forgetting — and we have to learn to remember again. We have to learn to be aware, to have *sati* (mindfulness) in our heart as a refuge and as a protector — it protects us, it protects the heart.

~ REFUGE IN DHAMMA ~

The second refuge, the Dhamma, is very close to the first one. In fact, there is a famous teaching that

the Buddha gave to his disciples just before dying. They were anxious about him leaving this world and wondered who was going to be their teacher after the Buddha's passing away. They were concerned as to who was going to take over and be their guide. And he said: "The Dhamma and the Vinaya will be your guide and your refuge." On a previous occasion he had also said that: "Who sees the Buddha sees the Dhamma, who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha."

Dhamma and Buddha — there's no need to have a physical Buddha. We can actually find the Buddha, the one who knows, the one who is aware in our own heart. And as soon as we are aware, mindful, we are in touch with the Dhamma. That's the beauty of this practice. Sometimes, when we read books about Buddhism, we think we have to read the whole *Tripitika* before we can get in touch with the Dhamma. We believe that we have to learn the *Abhidhamma*, perfect the ten *paramitas*, develop the five powers, get rid of the five hindrances and know the 56 states of consciousness, and so forth. By the end, we can feel so exhausted that we don't even want to start.

In fact, today I was reflecting that when in our meditation period we mindfully breathe through our nostrils enduring a little bit of pain, a little bit of sweating or bearing with the heat and the cold, noisy people or boredom, we haven't got any idea of the amount of things we're really practising with. We don't know yet that at those moments we're perfecting the ten *paramitas*,



that we're letting go of the hindrances and developing the five powers of concentration, effort, mindfulness, faith, and wisdom. We might not be aware of it but we're really perfecting many spiritual qualities of the heart. But it doesn't seem like very much, does it? We're just breathing in through the nostrils and then breathing out, and then we feel a bit of pain, then it's gone. Nothing much really? And yet over some years of practise, we begin to see the fruits of our effort and the teachings come alive.

So the refuge in the Dhamma is not something we have to look for very far. We don't have to look for the Dhamma somewhere, out there in another country, or in another person, or for a thing that will happen tomorrow or next year.

The quality of Dhamma is immediacy (*sandittihiko*) — right here, right now. The Dhamma invites us to “come and see” (*ehipassiko*) and can be realised when there is awareness and wisdom. It's not “delayed in time” (*akaliko*). Each morning we chant those qualities. We don't have to wait for someone to tell us what it is. We don't have to read books. We don't have to have a progressive step-by-step study before we can get in touch with Dhamma.

The refuge in awareness brings us into the present and in the present there is the Dhamma, there is the truth, there is the way things are. But it can only be seen when there is a clear awareness of the present moment.

Another meaning of the Dhamma is “that which

sustains itself.” Nature sustains itself; it has its cycles and its seasons — it just goes on forever. We can look at the nature of our mind, our human nature and how we function. We also have seasons and cycles, we have our days and nights, our darkness and brightness, we have a rhythm. And because we don’t know that rhythm, we can sometimes drag ourselves to the point of complete exhaustion, sickness or mental stress. We often forget we are part of nature, part of “the way things are.”

Our intelligence, our capacity for knowledge, tends to alienate us from our nature. We often feel estranged from ourselves because our human nature is not really that exciting. Thoughts are so much more exciting! We think, think, think the most incredible things. Our imagination is really quite creative, especially on retreat. We can really see how the mind is this wonderful creator.

A famous Thai meditation teacher said once that in Buddhism it’s not a God that creates, it’s ignorance. We create out of ignorance. We create an incredible amount of wonderful things and miserable things — the heavens and hells. We can imagine almost anything. Sometimes we wonder what we have done in the past because our mind can think of the most bizarre things.

Because of our capacity to think and create mentally, we often don’t acknowledge our physical nature, the rhythm of our body, the rhythm of our mind, the rhythm of our emotions, of our feelings, of our moods, of how we are affected by the world around us, by the

moon and the sun, by the day and the night. Many of us don't seem to appreciate any of that in relation to ourselves. We tend to have a lot of ideas of how things should be, how we would like things to be, how we think things should be, and have very little space for 'the way things are,' for what is happening in the moment. In fact, after a while, one can see a really clear pattern in the mind: there is what we think it should be, then there is what we'd like it to be, and finally what is. All three seem to have a bit of a hard time cooperating with each other.

In my early years, it took me a while to notice this pattern but through the practice, I began to understand that in one moment we can only be aware of so much - which is often not very much. We can think a lot of things but we can actually know only a little. It's through knowing and investigating that which we are, that understanding deepens.

When I was still an *anagarika*, I spent my third *Vassa* with another nun 300 miles from the monastery. It was the *Vassa* period and we were on retreat for most of the time. In the beginning, whenever I experienced some forms of greed, anger or delusion I would see a recurring pattern of thoughts. At 7:00 PM at night, when we were doing our evening chanting, the suffering that I had undergone through the day would seem to be dispelling, or at least decreasing. And I would suddenly have this amazing 'insight' about how I would spend the next day and just how I was going to deal with all my problems.

I would suddenly know how to handle greed, I knew how to handle hatred; I knew how to handle boredom, restlessness, the lot. I felt fully in control and knew that I would never suffer again. I knew it. I was convinced that I would never suffer again.

Of course, by 9:30 my insight had blossomed to the point where I had absolutely no doubt that I was enlightened to all my problems. I would go to bed, and 4:00 AM would come. You can imagine what happens at 4:00 in the morning! In the early years, it was still quite hard to get up at that time in the morning. The mind can feel drowsy, dull, depressed, awful.

I would do some yoga exercises as I knew that doing yoga was better than just staying in that negative state. And after the session I would generally feel better. We would do our chanting then would come the morning. We did not have breakfast in those days except for a hot drink and my negativity wouldn't lift up as quickly as I wanted. I would still be feeling a bit grumpy and miserable. Then would come the meal and that was really quite something. During those three months we had decided to do the one-sitting practice which meant that once we sat down to eat we could not get up and if we did we had to stop eating and that would be it for the day!

So we made sure that when we sat down we had enough to eat in case we had forgotten something and had to get up again. By the end of the meal, I'd feel terrible again because of course, I had over-eaten. That

meant an afternoon of misery, dullness, sleepiness and confusion because the mind was not able to cope with the annoyance of feeling greedy or upset with itself. Every day for a while I would see the same cycle begin again. Of course there were some bright and peaceful spells too!

But sitting in front of my meal, all my insights had vanished, gone somewhere where I couldn't find them. At that moment it would be really hard to drag wisdom and mindfulness into being because basically I just wanted what I wanted; I wanted to eat what I wanted and how much I wanted. And that was it!

Before each meal we did a reflection saying that eating is for the welfare of the body, not for fun, not for pleasure, nor for beautification or fattening and so forth but after chanting it automatically I would forget all about it and start to eat.

Anyway, by 5:00 PM I would feel better and a little lighter. I had just spent four hours digesting a heavy meal whilst doing walking and sitting meditation; by 6:00 PM there would arise in my mind again the resolve to not do it again, to not budge at all or give into my desires. At that moment my understanding was perfectly clear. By 7:00, I had no doubt. By 9:30 I knew the whole Buddha's teaching and I knew I could handle it all and I would never suffer again.

That process went on for quite a while until I realised that it was just my mind. It had nothing to do with reality. It was just the way my mind thought. Now

if we believed these thoughts and didn't look at them as dhammas or felt that 'this is what I am,' can we imagine the amount of disappointment we would have every day?

In fact, every day I felt disappointed with 'myself' and would have the feeling that "I'm no good. I can't do it." But then I began to see clearly that pattern and, as I realised it was exactly what I was supposed to learn from and to understand, there were no problems.

As long as we take things personally, we miss the Dhamma and are fooled by what arises in our mind. We fail to see that the things that we are taking personally are not what we are, nor what we think they are. We tend to believe and identify with the constant stream of thoughts, feelings and perceptions of our mind and it's no wonder that we become neurotic and have to go to psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, faith healers and so on.

It is a matter of practising with right attitude, with an attitude of compassion and infinite patience, rather than developing and perfecting any particular techniques. Because although we may have done a lot of practice and be an expert in breath meditation, body sweeping and all that, if we are still striving to develop the perfect *anapanasati* meditator our approach is wrong. Without a correct perspective, we are still caught up with the idea that we have to improve on 'Me.'

The immediacy and directness of the experience of Dhamma is something quite extraordinary; it's another great blessing. We can realise the true nature of

our thoughts without any intermediary, without any interpretation. We don't have to create anything; we can just see thoughts as they are. It is quite a remarkable thing and it's what attracted me most to this teaching.

When came to practice I was, in a way, so overjoyed at the simplicity and immediacy of the realisation of the nature of the mind. You did not have to learn too much or get a Ph. D., you didn't have to start accumulating more knowledge. In the practice of Dhamma, there is a process of letting go, of emptying and freeing ourselves from the burden of knowledge, from the burden of accumulated experiences, from the heaviness of being somebody or carrying a person in the mind.

I remember that when practising in the world as a lay person — now of course this is not to influence you all to become monks and nuns — I had the feeling that I was always 'somebody' practising. I found that very difficult. There was this burden of 'me' practising. When I came to the monastery I was ordinary and could forget about feeling special or being somebody going against the stream, some strange creature on the spiritual path, because everybody there was doing the same thing — you were just normal.

That's another meaning of Dhamma — "the Norm." That which is normal, ordinary. Much of our training in the monastery focuses on the ordinary. Daily, we spend periods of time cleaning, sweeping, dusting, walking from one room to the next, doing simple jobs and paying attention to the most mundane things such

as opening doors, getting dressed, eating, getting up in the morning, brushing our teeth, putting our shoes on, going to the toilet, going to bed. Simple things like these are not exciting and our mind learns to calm down and be more simple, more ordinary.

We can't really get that excited about putting our socks on, or getting up at 4:00 in the morning. We can't really get fascinated cleaning the toilet somehow. Though I tried hard! I tried to make it really interesting but I couldn't. Somehow it's just so ordinary. I cleaned the toilets for a long time at Chithurst Monastery where we all had different morning chores to attend to. We call them chores but they're not really, they're just what we do each morning and whatever we make of them. They can be boring. They can be interesting. Or they can be just as they are.

We can see our mind wanting to make things special. I remember how in the morning, cleaning the toilet, I would decide to clean the sink first and then the toilet second and then the floor third. Perhaps next day I would change the pattern; I would prefer to start cleaning the windows first, or sweep with a different broom. Or I would decide not to mop with this particular mop. I would change my mops. I would find myself really getting hooked on using a particular tool, or getting upset about really trivial things and making a big melodrama about nothing at all. If I had not been living in the monastery, I would never have seen the way the mind can create melodramas out of absolutely nothing.



To be in touch with the ordinariness of our life is something very difficult for us because we have been conditioned to get our boost of energy through things that are interesting or stimulating. Or, we focus our attention on the next thing — on what's going to happen next.

Unless we have guidance and help from wise people, from people who have an understanding of the path, we tend to carry on in our spiritual practice in the same way as before we started. We're still looking for fascination, for excitement, for something special, for the big bang, for the flashing lights, for the super insight that's going to solve all 'my' problems.

But I'm afraid it doesn't work like that. With the practice, there is a change in our relationship with our mind. We let the flux of greed, hatred and delusion flow. We don't make a problem about it any more. We let the flow of our own mind just take its own course. We stop shaping the flux of our thoughts and feelings into this or that. Being in harmony with Dhamma is making peace with whatever is going on now, with "the way things are," the Dhamma.

That doesn't mean we turn into a cabbage or into a non-entity or that we just sit there and sort of wait and wait and wait for things to happen. Though we can sometimes feel like that. After some years of practice I remember how I could feel really stupid. There were moments when I had totally given up on the idea of ever feeling intelligent again!

Once I remember crossing the courtyard at Amaravati on one hot sunny afternoon feeling quite miserable and depressed. I had lost the passions of the mind. They didn't seem to be there any more. There was just a kind of dull state and I was strongly identifying with it. It was awful. I really thought that this mood was what I was and I could hear myself being really upset about it. I thought: "I can't bear this, it's impossible. 'They' with a capital 'T' are turning me into a turnip" (which I thought of as the most pallid, wishy-washy, nothing-looking vegetable!). I did not know who 'They' were... I remember meeting on the way one of the teachers of our community. I told him: "I am probably reaping the karma of having hated being a housewife." I always hated the idea of being a housewife so much so that in the past, before becoming a nun, I resented having to do any cleaning, housework, any washing or dishwashing. Yet I found myself doing just that in my early training at Chithurst. He laughed and replied: "Well, when you really don't mind that any more, then it means your karma with it is over."

That was really a very good insight because I didn't think that I minded. Yet I felt so despairing and miserable that obviously something in me did mind. So it's difficult to be ordinary and accept the triviality of our life. That's why most of the time we feel frustrated, because we think that somehow things are going to be different, or that they should be different, don't we?

We sense that life shouldn't be just getting up in

the morning, having breakfast, getting bored, having a cry with one's spouse, going to the toilet, eating, getting bored at work, coming back, watching television, going to bed, getting up in the morning, and on and on and on, day after day after day. We feel that somehow there must be something else. So we go on a trip and travel around the world — and we find out that even on the other side of the world, we still have to get up, we still have to go to the toilet, we still have to eat, we still get happy and bored with ourselves, we still get annoyed and depressed. We still get the same old 'me' — whether we are here, or in California, or in India, or anywhere. To come to terms with that has been the greatest teaching of monastic life.

Actually, monastic life is externally pretty repetitive and boring. And if we identify with the structure or the routine then it's the most tedious lifestyle. It's so monotonous at times, you have no idea! But through accepting the perception and feeling of boredom for example, we realise that it's actually quite OK.

It is not so much a matter of getting rid of boredom but of seeing what we are expecting from life. I spent many years expecting from life something it could not give me. That's why there was a problem. And in the same way if I expect something from the monastic life that it cannot give me, then I'll be very disappointed, frustrated or in a constant state of conflict.

So seeing the way things are is a very important realisation because then we can actually work with life

as it is rather than expecting or dreaming about it. Expectations are like dreams. And most of our life is like a dream, or like a cloud, and we hope that this cloud will give us something real and substantial. Have you ever been able to shape a cloud? Or a dream? Yet this what we are always trying to do isn't it? Can we have any control over our dreams? Maybe we can, but most of the time we can't even remember them or do what we want in them.

So there's this dreamlike state that we create out of expectations, out of not understanding the limitations of our mind and body, of our life and the world we live in. Our mind can only do so much. Our body can only do so much. When you're young, you think your body can do anything, but when you get to middle age, like me, then even sitting can become a challenge. I used to love sitting — I could sit for long periods and really enjoy it. It was a pleasure. But now, sometimes, it's more an endurance test.

So we are limited; we are bound by certain restrictions. But if we see them for what they are, then a wonderful thing happens: we can actually work with life as it is. We don't have to expect something from it anymore; we can actually give to our life. And that's a great change in the mind. Through the practice we begin to see that we don't have to ask or get or demand something from life. We can actually give, offer and joyfully respond to it. And this, we can all do.

The natural process of the realization of Dhamma

is the awareness that life is a constant opportunity to give, to be generous, to be kind, to be of service in whatever situation we are in. As we let go we don't get so caught up and obsessed with ourselves. We can actually be useful. We can help. We can give. We can encourage ourselves and the people around us.

~ REFUGE IN SANGHA ~

The refuge in the Sangha, the last one, is the refuge in noble friendship — *kalyanamitta*. It symbolizes the community of men and women, ordained or living in the world, who have taken refuge in living wisely and compassionately, in accord with the Dhamma. They take refuge in harmlessness, loving-kindness and respect for all living beings. These are people who have a moral conscience. They are aware when they're not really doing the right thing or acting foolishly or harmfully.

This refuge symbolises the purity of the human heart. I remember when for the first time I heard of the concept of the 'Pure Heart.' I thought that it was a beautiful expression — 'Pure Heart.' It felt like a good thing to be — a pure heart. And that's really what that refuge is: it's a refuge in that in us which is good, wholesome, compassionate and wise.

Before I started being interested in Buddhism, I used to go to Christian monasteries to do short retreats by myself. The thing that struck me most in those places — I didn't know anything about Buddhist monasteries then — was this awesome, pervading feeling of respect

for life, for each other. Even the silence seemed to be a kind of acknowledgement of reverence, of honoring the best in human beings. It was very moving. Even though I could not explain what it was, I sensed that people were devoted to something really good, to something really true.

When I came to Chithurst and met the community for the first time, I had a very similar feeling of meeting human beings totally dedicated to honoring the truth, to being it and living in accordance with it. And so the refuge in Sangha was the first thing that brought me to the monastic life.

My interest in joining the monastic Sangha came from the need to have a vehicle and a refuge of sanity in myself that would provide some guidance. I realized for example that without an ethical standard to contain and understand the energy of my desires, I was really in trouble. I was always very good at knowing what I should do, what I should be; I was a real expert at creating ideals! But somehow the energy of my desires had very different ideas about that. My self-gratifying habits on the one hand and my yearning for truth on the other didn't meet, didn't seem to be very good friends.

One of the first things that became really clear when I joined the Sangha was that the precepts were my best friends and my best protectors. I never had the feeling that they were imposing themselves on me at all. On the contrary, I knew that they were supporting me and reminding me of being more mindful of when I

spoke, when I acted, when I thought or when I ate or even when I slept.

The training of our body and mind requires an enormous amount of patience and compassion. Our habits are strong and if we have lived a fairly heedless life in the past, we can't expect to turn instantly into a virtuous person. When we arrive at the monastery we don't become a saint overnight. And it is not a meditation retreat and the keeping of the precepts for ten days that is going to turn us into one either, is it? But at least we have a situation and a teaching that can help us to look at what is not correct or skilful in our behaviour and our habits and to make peace with it.

So we take refuge in the Sangha and use the standards followed by those who have walked the Path and liberated themselves before us. This refuge points to our commitment to virtuous conduct, to a way of life that protects and nurtures peace in the heart and reminds us of our intention to liberate it. If we didn't have these guidelines, we would easily forget ourselves. And we are very good at that. In fact, that's what the mind is most intent on and does all the time, it forgets. But when we take refuge in mindfulness, in the Dhamma and in the purity of our intention to free ourselves from delusion, we remember that we have the necessary tools to train the heart and to see clearly the unskilfulness of our habits, of our speech or of our thoughts, etc.

These refuges may appear as if they were three: Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. But actually they are just

one. We don't have one without the other. When there is virtue and the intention to live harmoniously, with compassion and respect for oneself and each other, then there's a naturally growing awareness, in harmony with the Dhamma, and we are more attuned to the truth. All of them interact and affect each other.

At first, we don't know quite what or where these refuges are. They may seem to be just words. You might even feel confused and have no trust in them. But as we practise, as we keep letting go of our attachments to thoughts, feelings, perceptions, they become a growing reality.

We can actually experience these refuges. They become a part of our life, a part of something that we can go back to, right here, right now. We don't have to wait. They are always present in our heart. Here, now, in the present. That's the real beauty of the practice of the Path. It's that total simplicity, that immediacy, complete in itself. There's nothing else that you need. Just in taking the Three Refuges, you've got all the tools you need for your heart to be free.





*“We see that if we are to cure ourselves  
we need first to understand the cause of the  
sickness, which is desire.”*



# Why Come to a Monastery?

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From a talk by Ajahn Candasiri

One question we all need to ask ourselves is, “Why do we come to a monastery?” Whether we are monks, nuns, novices, lay guests or visitors, we should ask, “Why have I come?” We need to be clear about this in order to derive the greatest benefit from what a monastery has to offer. If we are not clear, we can waste a lot of time doing things that may detract from the possible benefits to be found there.

The Buddha often spoke of three fires — three ailments — that we, as human beings, are afflicted by. These three things keep us continually moving, never able to rest or to be completely at ease; they are listed as greed, hatred and delusion (in Pali: *lobha, dosa, moha*). He also, out of compassion, pointed out the antidote.

Actually, these fires are based on natural instincts. For example, greed or sensual desire — the sexual drive and the desire for food — is what allows humanity to survive. Without sexual desire, none of us would be here now! And of course without hunger, or desire for food, we would not be inclined to take in the nourishment

we need to maintain the body in a reasonable state of health. However, a difficulty arises when we lose touch with what is needed or necessary, and seek sensual gratification for its own sake.

Another kind of survival instinct is our response to danger. Either we turn around and attack something that is perceived as a threat to our physical survival, or we try to get away from it. This is the basis for *dosa* — hatred or aversion.

Clearly, too, this has an important place in nature, but again we have become confused and what we frequently find ourselves defending is not so much the physical body, but the sense of self — what we perceive ourselves to be, in relation to one another.

The third fire, which follows on quite naturally from this, is delusion — *moha*; not really seeing clearly or understanding how things are, not really understanding what it is to be a human being. We tend to fix ourselves and each other as personalities, or ‘selves.’ But these are just ideas or concepts that we measure against other concepts of who or what we should be.

Then, if anyone comes along and challenges that self, it can invoke a strong reaction — we instinctively attack, defend or try to get away from the perceived threat. Really, it’s a kind of madness, when you think about it.

Now, as I said before, the Buddha, having pointed out the nature of the disease, also presented the cure.

This came in the form of simple teachings, which can help us to live in a way that enables us to understand, and thereby free ourselves from these diseases; and also to avoid doing things that exacerbate them.

This brings me to the real reason that we come to a monastery. We want to free our hearts from disease, from the bonds of desire and confusion; and we recognise that what is presented here is the possibility of bringing this about.

Of course there may be other reasons: some people don't really know why they have come — they just feel attracted to the place. So what is it about the monastery that is different from what happens outside it?... It is a place that reminds us of our aspiration and our potential. There are lovely images, of the Buddha and his disciples which seem to radiate a feeling of calm, ease and alertness. Also, here we find a community of monks and nuns who have decided to live following the lifestyle that the Buddha recommended for healing those diseases.

Having recognised that we are sick and that we need help, we begin to see that the cure is in direct opposition to the ways of the world. We see that if we are to cure ourselves we need first to understand the cause of the sickness, which is desire. So we need to understand our desires — to get, to get rid of and to exist and be a separate self — in order to free ourselves from them. So instead of following desires, we examine

them closely.

The discipline we follow is based on precepts, which, used wisely, can engender a sense of dignity and self-respect. They restrain us from actions or speech which are harmful to ourselves or others, and delineate a standard of simplicity or renunciation. We ask, 'What do I really need?' rather than responding to the pressures of a materialistic society.

But how do precepts help us to understand these three fires? In a sense, what our monastic discipline offers is a container within which one can observe desire as it arises.

We deliberately put ourselves into a form which prevents us from following all our desires, in order to see them and to notice how they change. Normally, when we are caught up in the process of desire, there is no sense of objectivity. We tend to be totally identified with it, so it is very difficult to see it clearly or to do anything about it, other than be swept along with it.

So with lust or aversion, we can recognise that these are natural energies or drives, which everyone has. We are not saying that it's wrong, say, to have sexual desire — or even to follow it in appropriate circumstances — but we recognise that it is for a particular purpose, and it will bring about a certain result.

As monks and nuns we have decided that we do not want to have children. We also recognise that the pleasure of gratification is very fleeting, in relation to

possible longer-term implications and responsibility. So we choose not to follow sexual desire. However, this does not mean that we don't experience it; that as soon as we shave our heads and put on a robe, we immediately stop experiencing any kind of desire.

In fact, what can happen is that our experience of these desires is actually enhanced when we come to a monastery. This is because in lay life we can do all kinds of things to make ourselves feel OK — usually without really being aware of what we are doing. Sometimes there is just a subliminal sense of dis-ease, followed by the reaching out to get something to relieve it — always moving from one thing to the next.

In the monastery it's not so easy to do this any more. We deliberately tie ourselves down in order to look at the drives, energies or desires that would normally keep us moving.

Now you might ask: But what kind of freedom is this? — tying oneself down in a situation where one is constantly restrained, always having to conform? Always having to behave in a particular way; to bow in a particular way, and at particular times; to chant at a particular speed and pitch; to sit in a particular place, beside particular people — I've been sitting next to or behind Sister Sundara for the past umpteen years! What kind of freedom is this?

It brings freedom from the bondage of desire. Rather than helplessly, blindly being pulled along by our

desire, we are free to choose to act in ways that are appropriate, in harmony with those around us.

It's important to realise that 'freedom from desire' doesn't mean 'not having desire.' We could feel very guilty and really struggle if we thought like that. As I said before, desire is part of nature, only it has been distorted as a result of our conditioning, our upbringing, the values of society and education. We are not going to get rid of it just like that — just because we want to, or feel that we shouldn't have desire; it's actually a more subtle approach that's required.

The monastic form and precepts help us to make a peaceful space around the energies of desire, so that, having arisen, they can then burn themselves out. It is a process that takes great humility, because first we have to acknowledge that desire is there, and that can be very humbling. Often, particularly in monastic life, our desires can be extremely petty; the sense of self can be bound up in something very trivial.

For example, we might have a very strong idea about how carrots should be chopped; so if someone suggests we do it differently we can become very agitated and defensive! So we need to be very patient, very humble. Fortunately there are some simple reference points, or Refuges, which can provide us with security and a sense of perspective, amid the chaotic world of our desires.

These of course are Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha:



the Buddha, our teacher — also that within us which knows things as they are, seeing clearly, not confused or agitated by sense impression; the Dhamma, the Teaching or the Truth, how things actually are right now — often quite different from our ideas about things; and Sangha — the lineage or community of those who practise, and also our aspiration to live in accordance with what we know to be true, rather than to follow all kinds of confused and selfish impulses that can arise.

The Buddha gave some simple ways of turning to these. These are called Foundations of Mindfulness. Mindfulness of the body is one I use a great deal in my own practice. The body can be a very good friend to us because it doesn't think! The mind, with its thoughts and concepts can always confuse us, but the body is very simple — we can notice how it is at any moment. If someone acts or speaks in an intimidating way, I can notice my instinctual reaction, which is to tense up in a defensive attitude, and perhaps respond aggressively.

However, when I am mindful of the process, I can choose not to react in this way. Instead of breathing in, puffing myself up, I can concentrate on breathing out — relaxing, so that I become a less threatening presence to the other person. If, through mindfulness, I can let go of my defensive attitude, they too can relax rather than perpetuating the process of reactivity. In this way, we can bring a little peace into the world.

People visiting monasteries often comment on

the peaceful atmosphere they find there. But this is not because everyone is feeling peaceful or experiencing bliss and happiness continuously — they can be experiencing all kinds of things.

One sister said that she had never experienced such murderous rage or such powerful feelings of lust until she entered the Sangha! What is different in a monastery is the practice. So whatever the monks and nuns might be going through, they are at least making the effort to be present with it, bearing it patiently, rather than feeling that it shouldn't be like that, or trying to make it change.

The monastic form provides a situation in which renunciation and constraint are the very conditions for the arising of passionate feelings; but also there is the reassuring presence of other samanas. When we're really going through it, we can speak to an older, more experienced brother or sister in the life, whose response is likely to be something like, "Oh yes, don't worry about that; it will pass. That happened to me. It's normal, it's part of the process of purification. Be patient." So we find the confidence to continue even when everything seems to be collapsing or going crazy inside.

Coming to a monastery we find people who are willing to look at and understand the root cause of human ignorance, selfishness and all the abominable things that happen in the world; people who are willing to look into their own hearts and to witness the

greed and violence that others are so ready to criticise 'out there.'

Through experiencing and knowing these things we learn how to make peace with them, right here in our own hearts, in order that they may come to cessation. Then, maybe, rather than simply reacting to the ignorance of humanity and adding to the confusion and violence that we see around us, we are able to act and speak with wisdom and compassion in ways that can help to bring a sense of ease and harmony among people.

So it's not an escape, but an opportunity to turn around and face up to all the things we have tended to avoid in our lives. Through calmly and courageously acknowledging things as they are, we begin to free ourselves from the doubts, anxiety, fear, greed, hatred and all the rest which constantly bind us into conditioned reactions.

Here, we have the support of good friends, and a discipline and teachings to help keep us on course in what sometimes seems like an impossible endeavour!

May we all realise true freedom.

*Evam.*

*“And there arises this sense of confidence that  
we can bear with what we might  
previously have thought unbearable.”*



# Mindfulness of Dukkha

From a talk given by Ajahn Jitindriya

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I assume we all have the basic feeling, when we come to spiritual practice, of a certain amount of dissatisfaction with what we can find in the world.

We've tasted a certain amount of gratification in the sensory realm but find that it doesn't actually fulfill a deep inner need, so we come to spiritual practice to find something that fulfills that deeper need. It's a deeper longing really, a spiritual longing, for a peace, a stillness — perhaps a peace that can only come about through understanding what it is that makes us unpeaceful. We've all tasted various degrees of happiness and peace but they all pass away, they all, in their passing, leave us still with a sense of dissatisfaction and dis-ease with the world, with our situation, with our life the way we find it.

This is what keeps us seeking for something more fundamental, something that promises a lasting reprieve from *dukkha* — and this is indeed what the Buddha promises when he talks about his teaching, what he's found in terms of liberation. He said, in one of his more famous discourses:

“There is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed; if it weren't for this

Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, there would be no escape from the born, the originated, the created, the formed. But since there is this Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, then there is an escape from the born, the originated, the created, the formed.”

He’s talking about our psychological reality, the creation we experience as our internal world, as our external world — in fact, we are each our own world of experience, crossing over and interrelating with other worlds of experience, of people’s karmic predicaments.

The Buddha directs us to examine the world in which we find ourselves, our own experience, how we *receive* the world. The world is what we experience through the senses: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and the mind (discriminating consciousness) as the sixth sense. If you think about it, there is nothing in the world we experience that is not through these six senses. The Buddha is directing us to examine these sensory doors, to come to understand the world that we experience because it’s only through this understanding that we can begin to appreciate what this Unborn, Uncreated, this Deathless, this ultimate refuge might be, within our own experience. The tack he’s taking is to come to know the obstructions to this ultimate peace, to know them so fully that they can then be put down, abandoned, let go of; seen through as not who and what we are.

This is a tremendous undertaking — to begin to examine our experience, examine what the

obstructions to the Deathless are — primarily because much of it is painful and our natural response and reaction to pain is to get away from it, to get rid of it.

Now this is a misunderstanding within ourselves. We're searching for this peace and this happiness but our habitual way of looking for that is to just push away that which is not peaceful and not conducive to happiness. So it takes quite a training of the mind and the heart to begin to turn towards what we experience as unpeaceful or productive of *dukkha* — that's why the Buddha started with *dukkha* as the beginning of his teaching. "I teach *dukkha* and the end of *dukkha*," these are conjoined, they come together — it's only through coming to understand our pain, our reactivity, that we can then experience that which is beyond *dukkha*.

~ DUKKHA: A CAUSE FOR FAITH TO ARISE ~

I've talked about this before because, for me, *dukkha* is the primary reflection in my practice. Some people think that this is a very pessimistic approach, and at times it may sound pessimistic — we all go through rather pessimistic periods and optimistic periods too — but it's also a realistic approach, it's about our actual experience.

It's a technique really, of bringing us fully into the present moment. We tend to deny so much of what we're feeling, we haven't developed the capacity to bear the pain of what we're feeling, we don't have the confidence to truly feel what we're experiencing — and

by that confidence I mean what the Buddha refers to as *saddha*: faith, confidence, trust. To really allow ourselves to experience what's going on, to be fully present, there needs to be this *saddha*, because in being present we're letting go of our habitual clinging to the past and the future, we're letting go of our tight hold on our world, our life. We're letting go of the attempt to make life comfortable, bearable, happy, and that's a very, very deep clinging we have — this tendency to want to create our world, to manipulate, and to avoid suffering.

To be fully present in the moment means that one has actually let go of that habit of the mind, that 'becoming' energy, that sense of creating oneself in the future — be it in just the next moment, or the next hour, or in habitually thinking about what I'm going to do tomorrow, or what might happen in ten years time. As we develop meditation we may all experience moments of being fully present and recognise the peace in that moment, but the difficulty is in sustaining this kind of reprieve from being stuck in the conceptual creation, the dualistic notions, of 'self' and 'the world.'

There is nothing intrinsically wrong with 'self' and 'the world,' it's rather the ignorance with which this habit of mental concocting continues, our grasping at mental notions — it keeps us in darkness and it keeps us in a cycle of recreating pain for ourselves. Until we can break free of this cycle we won't experience the full depth of the liberation that the Buddha's saying is available, is possible. So the practice is continuing to find



ways to break this cycle, to sustain the gaps of becoming, to increase our faith, increase our confidence.

The Buddha, in a sequence of Dhamma teaching, described dukkha as a condition for the arising of saddha, which is this faith, confidence and trust. We need to bring our awareness to this point of dukkha, or unsatisfactoriness, in the present moment, and develop this knowing awareness of it, then ultimately that's a position in which one can begin to find freedom from dukkha.

Inevitably, dukkha is painful because we are bound up in that experience, we're struggling with it, there's identity bound up there, there's a certain degree of unconscious activity that keeps us bound up there — and that is the case with any kind of painful physical, mental or emotional state we might happen to be feeling, whether they be major traumas or just minor things.

Just as in meditation, for example, when we find we're caught up in a run of thoughts or just noticing the mood of the mind that feels trapped, limited, bound, struggling — any sense of self at all is limited, bound, and has a sense of grief involved in it. We need to come to this point where we can be fully conscious of that and begin to know that as it is.

At first it means perhaps entering right into the struggle, which is difficult because we're often judging — “This is not right, this is not what the path is, I should be free of it.” These aren't conscious thoughts, these are just attitudes, almost hidden assumptions. We have to

begin to notice, “How do I relate to this struggle that’s going on?” Really feel it, be right in the midst of it and recognise that *this* is dukkha, this is pain, this is how it feels; this is discontent, this is grief, this is anger.

Whatever it is, we allow our mindfulness to be big enough to hold that, to bear with that. We can recognise when that’s happening — the heart can expand to hold the pain. If it can’t expand to hold that pain then it continues to be a struggle, a tight relationship, an un-open relationship to that experience; it can be pushed back into the unconscious, it can be denied, or it can be fully expressed yet still clung to, still hung on to.

We have to find a way, each for ourselves, to open up to that struggle. We can literally feel it in our bodies, that hard knot of tension. Allow your awareness of that knot to remain relaxed — it sounds like a contradiction in terms, but it means to remain relaxed with that tension, to not struggle with that tension, to not struggle with the pain — and in this way we can come to experience a peaceful relationship with a painful feeling. We’re not going to know how long this will take. Maybe we can be mindful of a difficult emotion and get awfully frustrated because it’s not changing! We need a constant checking on such attitudes by asking, “How am I relating to this experience?”

Just be prepared to feel it as it is, without favouring or opposing, and at some point there will be a release, an opening, and ‘the world’ will change. There will be a recognition of what the Buddha meant by

transcendence — it disappears, it no longer carries this sense of self, and with it the sense of ‘the world,’ of me and other, of past and future, of good and bad, right and wrong.

The whole mental construct of how we relate to experience can be dissolved in that moment, and that is a tasting of the Deathless. But we have to *recognise* that to appreciate it — it can also be missed. We can jump from one form of clinging to another. So when something ceases we can cling on to the delight that comes, “Oh, I’m glad that’s finished!” or a sense of pride over ‘what *I’ve* attained’ when something wonderful has come about. So again, there needs to be this consistency of awareness — awareness of the attitude of mind, of struggle, of clinging. You can feel these attitudes at a physical level if you are developing mindfulness of body.

This is perhaps the experience the Buddha was talking about when he said dukkha can condition the arising of saddha or faith. The more you experience this kind of turning to dukkha, opening to it, bearing with it unconditionally and seeing it pass away or seeing release coming through that, then that feeds into one’s sense of confidence, “Ah yes, this does work, this is the way.” And there arises this sense of confidence that we *can* bear with what we might previously have thought unbearable.

That’s a really important point, because so much of what we need to face are these great monsters and ghosts in the mind that seem unbearably difficult to be with, that seem to have a power to darken our awareness,

to push or turn our mindfulness from them. We have to keep turning to re-apply that attention, that openness of heart, and the more we do that the more confidence we gain, and the more trust we gain in facing into the unknown — the unknowing aspect of that being “How much can I bear? How long will this be here?”

There’s the *saddha*, or trust, that arises when something does cease and there’s a moment of non-identification — there can be a relaxation into that place of no identity, of no self. But quite often that can also be a frightening place for people, which is possibly why we can’t sustain it for very long — there’s often not *enough* faith or trust. That’s really the place of Buddha, the place of pure knowing, pure awareness. To be able to sustain that needs an incredible faith — where there’s no need to be reborn again.

~ THE MIND’S NATURE IS INTRINSICALLY PURE ~

In another quite famous teaching of the Buddha he said that the mind is luminous, its true nature is pure and luminous, that it is only defiled by transitory, adventitious defilements. We so often take what’s occurring in our minds, in our experience — everything that we experience from anger to delight within ourselves and in relationship — we take it all to be who and what we are ... “I’ve got a problem with anger,” or “I’ve got a problem with lust,” and how deeply we believe in that.

To experience the true nature of the mind really has nothing to do with who we *think* we are or what

our personality is like — whether we have a great personality or a pathetic personality, a great intellect or a dull intellect. It has nothing to do with whether we can even express it or not. It has to do with our capacity to look honestly within and to bear with what's there; and to develop the courage to continue to go deeper and deeper.

It doesn't mean we have to retreat to a cave or a *kuti* for years until we find it either. We all might long for that at times but actually we just need to keep facing into what life is presenting to us. Whatever we find ourselves involved with in our lives, this is our particular karmic predicament, and anything we're involved in has highly personal possibilities for learning. We're not here, involved with what we are for no reason — the predicaments we find ourselves in are the ones that can teach us the most.

But again, as I was questioning earlier: are we willing to face into it? I look at myself and my own practice and so often I find an unwillingness to face into what's presenting itself at that moment. There's this picking and choosing going on, and this idea that there's something better to be had elsewhere — 'the grass is always greener' syndrome runs so deeply in our attitudes. It's just this discontentment, lack of ability to fully be with, to open to dis-ease, pain, dukkha, right here, right now.

I think this way of practice I've been describing can bring together almost every strand of technique or

practice that the Buddha taught — it all comes into this practice of mindfulness and facing into dukkha. If we look closely and examine what is happening, we will see that the four foundations of mindfulness are being developed, that the eightfold path is being practised; the cultivation of loving-kindness and compassion, of empathetic joy and equanimity; the cultivation and balancing of the spiritual faculties of faith and wisdom, energy and concentration with mindfulness. These faculties are being worked all the time.

~ READING THE HEART ~

So it's not as if we first have to learn this great body of knowledge and understand it at the level of the intellect. I heard that Ajahn Chah often encouraged his disciples to put their books away — “Read the book of the heart,” he would say, because that's where the real knowledge is, that's where true understanding can arise. We get so used to the kind of satisfaction of knowing something through books, the satisfaction of intellectual understanding, but it's worlds away from experiential understanding, which can be very simple, very direct.

Often we don't have the confidence to go ahead with this kind of 'private investigation.' We've been undermined by many aspects of our cultural conditioning and education. There's the tendency in the modern world to obsess on personality and image and quick fixes of happiness and excitement, and we grow up with this tendency to feel that everyone else knows how to be

happy but somehow we don't. We are always looking to other people to affirm us or approve us or tell us how things are, how we should be and how we can be happy. But actually, each of us can know only for ourselves. The Buddha was saying just that. He provided hundreds of teachings to help people, pointing them back towards themselves, giving clues and pointers as to what to look at, and how to look at what we experience, to reap the most beneficial results.

Once when he was with a large group of monks in a forest, the Buddha picked up a handful of leaves and asked the bhikkhus, "What's more, all the leaves in the forest or just the leaves in my hand?" They said, "Well, of course all the leaves in the forest are many more than what's in your hand." And he said, "Just so, all the leaves in the forest can be compared to as much as I know, but the leaves in my hand, this is as much as I teach you because that is what is conducive for liberation."

So we can search for knowledge of many things and actually gain it, but it's not necessarily going to lead us towards this goal of liberation. If we pick up the thread of what the Buddha gave us, that's the direct route, and the essential teachings are very simple. This mindfulness that we've been talking about, this awareness of dukkha, understanding dukkha — that is what will lead us to see the end of dukkha.

In the teaching on the Four Noble Truths, the first Truth is phrased 'there is dukkha' — and the instruction is that it should be understood. The second

Truth is phrased ‘there is the cause of dukkha’ and the instruction is that its cause should be abandoned, when we realise the cause.

I can tell you that the Buddha said the cause of dukkha is *tanha*, craving, but that doesn’t help us in abandoning it, it doesn’t help us in understanding what craving is, it doesn’t help us to know how it arises in ourselves — all of that work we have to do ourselves.

The third Truth is about realising the cessation of dukkha, and the fourth Truth is that of developing the path leading to complete liberation. But the path is merely understanding dukkha and abandoning its cause in each moment — it’s not work that can be done in the future, it’s not work that can be done in the next minute, it’s only now.

So actually, when we examine it, it’s not too great an undertaking — because we can deal with things moment by moment, we have that capacity, if we allow ourselves, and don’t try to take on more than what this moment actually is. That’s the simplicity of it. However, as many people have said, “it sounds simple but it’s not easy.” Perhaps that’s because of our habit of wanting to take on too much, wanting to get too much. Don’t believe that liberation is a long way off, it’s not necessarily so. It’s always here and now, apparent — Dhamma can be seen here and now.

The path is often described as a gradual one — but it’s not something particularly done in stages, like cultivating the first aspect of the path, then the second



one, or working on the first foundation of mindfulness then the second one. It's the coming together of all of this in our practice in the moment, and it's a deepening spiral of understanding — it can arise in a moment, and it can deepen over time.

~ A POST-SCRIPT ~

I'd like to finish with this one little story from the scriptures, to bring us back to where we started — contemplating the created and the uncreated. One of the monks who had tremendous psychic powers wanted to know the answer to a deep question which troubled him in his meditation... 'Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?' That is, the foundation of material reality — earth, water, fire, air — where do they cease?

Apparently this monk went travelling through all the *Deva* realms and the Brahma worlds to ask the gods this question and he got to the highest Brahma realm, and was able to ask the Great Brahma himself, the highest god, who's supposed to know everything.

So he asked Great Brahma this question: "Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?" To which Brahma replied: "Monk, I am Brahma, Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Has Been and Shall Be." And this monk said: "Well, where do the four great elements cease without remainder?"

And Brahma just kept saying, “I am the Great Brahma...” etc., etc.

This went on for a little while, then Brahma took the monk aside and said: “Don’t ask me that in front of my retinue...” (They don’t know that I don’t know it, basically.) He then said: “You’ve come to the wrong place, you should go to the Buddha, he’ll know the answer to your question.”

So this monk came back to the human realm and found the Buddha to ask this question: “Where do the four great elements cease without remainder?” The Buddha replied: “Monk, you’ve asked the question in the wrong way, rather you should ask ... ‘where do the four great elements find no footing?’”

The Buddha continued: “Where consciousness is signless, boundless, all luminous, that is where earth, water, fire and air find no footing. Both long and short, small and great, fair and foul, there ‘name and form’ are wholly destroyed, with the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.”

Name and form is *nama-rupa*, mentality/materiality — he’s pointing to a place where there is no longer the movement of the mind that clings to mentality and materiality, so there’s no longer the creation of the subject/object related ‘world,’ no longer the dualistic consciousness operating. “With the cessation of consciousness this is all destroyed.”

Sometimes people are confused by that phrase, ‘the cessation of consciousness.’ It’s a quelling of the

habitual movement of the mind as it is distracted by contact, by sense objects. It doesn't mean that one is *unconscious*, obliterated or annihilated. As he first says: "Where consciousness is signless, boundless and all luminous" — that sounds quite positive to me. It is found in the ultimate stillness, the mind no longer habitually re-acting to sense contact, re-creating the world that, as psychological beings, we inhabit.

*Evam.*

*“Whatever the experience, there needs to be a reflective awareness able to return to the heart of the matter and see what is actually going on.”*



# Yogi Mind

From a talk given by Ajahn Thanasanti

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After several days on retreat we can see what the result of the practice is. We can observe the effect of mindfulness, attention, a life style of simplicity, restraint; moral integrity and hours of meditation with some Dhamma input each day. We can see what our minds and our bodies are like and notice some change from what they were like when we first arrived.

There's a certain pattern noticeable on the retreats I've been on. People come and they're often relieved to be here, but they're still very much carrying the burden and weight of the world they've left behind. The first few days are a combination of frustration, pain, confusion, tiredness, dreariness and dread mixed with good will, right intention and effort.

Characteristically, the faces are long and drawn, and the energy is thick and heavy and people are doing their best to be good yogis. But the feeling is one of 'me,' 'my' pain, 'my' problem, 'my' dilemmas, 'my' poor practice, and 'my' painful knees. It shows in people's faces and is obvious in the quality of the energy in the room. You can feel it.

After some time there's a little bit of perspective.

The quality of stillness becomes more tangible. People's faces begin to lighten and brighten. Then the whole 'me/my' universe begins to soften and we begin to wake up to realise there are actually other people in the universe. In fact, they're sitting right next to us. Then, as the mind begins to become more still and more focused, we experience what is commonly known as "yogi mind."

"Yogi mind" is a focused and concentrated mind, which like a magnifying glass doesn't only magnify the pretty things. It magnifies everything. So the pretty things and the not so pretty things are equally magnified and become more recognisable, more visible, more exposed.

One of the characteristics of "yogi mind" is the capacity to get obsessed with the minutest detail, to hate — all of a sudden — the person sitting next to you because of the way they're breathing. Or to be utterly convinced that the entire suffering of the universe is the result of the way this one person is walking in and out of the door. Or various forms of war take place between those who want one particular use of a room and people who want another use of the room. Then, there's the opposite — the 'vipassana romance.' You've finally found the beloved you've been dreaming of. They're sitting a few seats away from you. You're convinced they have the same feeling about you. It's obvious by the way they're doing their walking meditation.

"Yogi mind" focuses and concentrates emotions, feelings and mental tendencies that are present or latent in conscious awareness. These things just become bigger

than they normally would or different to how we normally experience them. Little things take on grand proportions. Projection is the important aspect in understanding “yogi mind.” The intention of mental proliferation is aimed at getting what we want or getting rid of what we don’t want. The problem or the answer is seen to be outside of us.

Meditation and a retreat environment causes increased energy. When there is an ability to use that energy to bring awareness and attention to the nature of desire, aversion and the way fantasies are used to bypass problems or seek the answer outside of ourselves, then yogi mind becomes a useful tool for learning. One uses the process as a way to come to terms with the mind.

I remember once doing a long retreat at IMS in Barre, Massachusetts. I had come with three different pairs of shoes — ‘Rambo’-type mountain climbing-boots, a pair of wooden clogs, and a pair of shoes that had straw soles. As long as the weather was dry and there wasn’t snow on the ground, I used to wear the straw soled shoes all over the place because they would work well inside and they would work well outside.

Then, it started raining. Then, it started snowing. It took the straw-soled shoes three days to dry out once they got wet. I couldn’t bear to keep putting on and taking off my ‘Rambo’ mountain boots with their 25 eyelets, so I would just put on the wooden clogs.

Well, the meditation center at IMS has wooden floors. Unbeknownst to me, most of those present were

convinced I had a sadistic urge to torture everyone, that it was an intentional and completely sadistic thing to be doing using these wooden clogs during the walking meditation. A warfare of notes on the bulletin board took place.

The retreat manager, being skilful, intervened. She saw some of these notes plastered on the bulletin boards aimed at this sadistic yogi who was determined to torture everyone.

She removed the notes before I had a chance to see them so that I didn't have to deal with the effect of having to read such things. She came to me to find out what was going on. I explained to her the situation was that I just had these three pairs of shoes and the wooden clogs were the only ones I could use.

I left a little note on the bulletin board asking if anyone had a pair of shoes I could borrow. The next time I went down to check there were no less than ten pairs of shoes that somehow all fit my feet exactly and would be quiet on the wooden floors.

For me it was an interesting learning. For one it was illuminating to see how insensitive and lacking mindfulness I could be to wear wooden clogs on a wooden floor. Equally illuminating was to see what happens when we become, intentionally or not, the object of someone else's aversion or desire.

Such is the way with "yogi mind." Because the mind is concentrated, it takes things and it gets very convinced about the absolute rightness of the perception.



But often there isn't a lot of wisdom, discrimination or equanimity. And these qualities of discrimination and equanimity are ones that need to be cultivated. Whatever the experience, there needs to be a reflective awareness able to return to the heart of the matter and see what is actually going on. It's important not to get caught in the appearance of things or carried by the tide of emotion so much so that the capacity to reflect is lost. It can be useful to ask, whatever is going on, "Where is the suffering? What is the cause? Is it 'out there' or in my relationship with what I am experiencing?" To ask, "Does the world really need to be different and give me what I want in order to be content and feel at ease?" It is important to wake up to these things and see them as just another view, another thought, another habit of mind that is constantly being enacted without checking if by doing so the desired result is ever produced.

So if you have experienced such things, just rest assured that this is an utterly normal part of meditation and it's nothing to be distressed about. But it is something to open up to, to look at closely and not to be fooled by or believed in.

When the passions of the mind are saying, "This is not just an opinion, this is ABSOLUTELY TRUE" you have your signal, your red flag. Anything that presents itself as absolute truth, is a sign to look at. Check into it. Feel the screaming mind. Take a look at what's going on. There's usually attachment, often a lot of fear. Anger or self-righteousness can be a mask of many things

including fear. All of this is very good to notice, to open up to, to look at, and to have a sense of the way the mind operates in its peaceful as well as its non-peaceful moments.

It is important to learn about the movements of mind so that they no longer confuse or deceive us, to let the awareness of all experience take us to the still heart. In that way, regardless of what we are experiencing, pleasant or unpleasant, there is the contentment that comes from abiding in awareness. This contentment is worth cultivating.



*“One of the things that attracted me most to the Buddhist teaching was the simplicity of its approach — I think this is what all of us would like to nurture in our practice and in our lives.”*



# Simplicity

From a talk by Ajahn Sundara

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The time I spent in Thailand practising meditation quite intensively was a great learning experience. For nearly two and a half years it gave me the chance to be part of a culture that was incredibly different from our's in its outlook on life, and provided an environment that made me realise how much my mind was conditioned by Western values, assumptions, prejudices and conceit.

At first, many aspects of that culture were totally alien to me. There were so many things that I found impossible to understand. But by the time I left, I felt quite at home. So I would like to share with you some facets of the time spent in this beautiful country.

In the rural area where the monastery is located the people are mostly farmers, simple people, living uncomplicated lives. Unlike us, they do not seem to be burdened with a lot of psychological concerns or existential crises. Their lives revolve around immediate needs such as food, sleep, getting through the day, and simple pleasures of life. Thai people are great at enjoying themselves!

When I first met my teacher, Ajahn Anan, he asked me how my practice was going. I said that one of my

interests in coming to Thailand was to have the opportunity to continue to develop it. Then he asked me if I had any difficulties, so I explained to him how I had been practising and how I was feeling about it at the time.

It was quite extraordinary, as I was talking, suddenly to sense that I had a strong mirror in front of me, and to see this 'Me,' going through its usual programme with clever justifications, suddenly turn into a big cloud of proliferation! This was a wonderful insight. With anybody else I might have been offended or felt that I had not been taken seriously but somehow, with him - maybe because he was just himself and deeply at ease there was a huge sense of relief.

The way Thai people approach the teaching and themselves is deeply influenced by the Buddhist teaching and its psychology. Even their everyday language is mixed with many Pali words. I remember noticing how their way of speaking about the mind/heart could seem quite cold-hearted to us. If you were going through some great suffering, some fear or painful memories, the teacher could just say: "Well, it's just *kilesa* (unwholesome mental states)." Or, "Your heart is not happy?"

Strangely enough, in that context such statements would completely deflate the habit to think in terms of: "'Me' having a huge problem that needs to be sorted out." And there was always a strong and compassionate mirror and reflection. If anyone else had reduced my 'problems' to a simple feeling of unhappiness I would

have been really annoyed and felt dismissed but, with Ajahn Anan, in whom I had a deep trust, I was able to see the way my mind worked and, when there was confusion, to drop it. I would be reminded of the present moment by the question: “What’s going on? Is your heart unhappy?”

Of course, in the immediacy of the moment nothing was going on because the monastery, located in a lovely forest on the side of a mountain, had a very peaceful atmosphere. It was a simple place, quiet and secluded, and there was nothing to do all day except receive alms food, eat and sweep one’s path for about half an hour. That was all. The rest of the time was free to develop formal practice. My mind calmed down a lot.

These experiences gave me a real taste for simplicity and for the mind in its state of normality — the mind that does not create problems out of the way things are. I’m not saying that this seemingly simple and direct approach to the mind is right or wrong, but I found that practising in this environment and culture over a period of two years had a powerful effect. It helped me to stop the habit of creating myself as a person — and this was quite a liberating thing. As the mind calmed down I could see the person, the sense of ‘Self,’ really clearly every time it arose.

The teaching pointed out that if we suffer through the sense of Self, we can’t actually go very far in our practice; insight cannot arise deeply enough to cut off attachment. The whole culture facilitates this approach.

If one thinks too much, people consider that one is on the verge of madness. Ask any Thai: when someone thinks too much, they'll say that she or he has a 'hot heart' — and if you are 'hot' ('*ron*' in Thai), you're seen as deluded. To have '*ronchai*' (hot heart) is quite negative, even insulting. People there are not much into thinking — I am not saying that it is good or bad but they don't trust the thinking mind. This was very different from the culture I came from where thinking is worshipped, tons of books are written, and people rely on and trust the intellect a lot. So it was interesting to be in a culture that functioned so differently — so much more intuitive, more feminine.

What struck me most when I came back to Europe was the complexity of the western way of life and I could see that having access to many traditions and teachers had turned our society on the spiritual level into a vast supermarket. This is not all negative, but it's extremely challenging for the mind that is already struggling with all it receives through the senses. No wonder people become neurotic after being exposed to so much information and so many choices!

When you're in the forest out there, you're just with a few birds, a few creepy-crawlies and nature all around. Days come, rise, and pass away with nothing much happening, and you get used to a very simple, peaceful rhythm. I found that extremely pleasant and I knew that it was conducive to deepening the practice. In fact, I felt quite at home and very privileged to have



that opportunity. The culture itself being predominantly Buddhist keeps things simple, the whole atmosphere was not one in which you felt intellectually stimulated; it's quite amazing the effect that this has on the mind. It would naturally slow down a lot, and become quite still. So I was scared to come back to the West, and whenever I thought of coming back, my mind would conjure up the image of drowning in a huge ocean of thought — not a terribly auspicious sign!

Even though I had to adapt and to follow the Thai maechee etiquette, 'the Thai nuns' choreography' as I used to call it: walking in line to receive my food behind very young boys, crouching down every time I spoke to a monk — it was little compared to the blessings and support I received there.

So I was not sure that I would cope with the life and rhythm of Amaravati. I decided that if I had to teach, I would keep things simple; I would just speak about practice, just facts: *Anapanasati*, the Five *Khandhas*, or Dependent Origination. I would not complicate people's lives with more words, concepts and ideas.

But it was a great lesson in letting go when, a few weeks ago, I went to teach at a Buddhist group. As I was being driven there, I said innocently to the leader of the group: "How do you see the weekend?" Of course, I already had some ideas: "I'll just meditate with them. I'll really teach them how to do it, rather than to think about it — then we can share our experience afterwards." But the person answered: "Well, Sister, we really want to

talk with you about practice, and ask you questions, and have some discussion on Dhamma, and ...” I thought, “Oh dear! Never mind.” I just had to let go. I was reminded of the teaching of Luang Por Sumedho: “Just receive life as it is. Don’t make a problem about it. Open yourself to the way things are.”

Thai people do not seem to suffer much from self-hatred; they don’t even seem to know what it means! Once, out of curiosity, I asked an educated Thai woman who had come to visit me: “Do you ever dislike yourself?” And she said, “No, never.” I was amazed. She had just been talking to me about some very painful issues in her life yet she was not critical. Self-negativity does not seem to be part of their psychological make up, whereas we are riddled with it. So we have a difficult beginning, because the first step on this path is to have peace in one’s heart — which doesn’t happen if there is a lot of self-hatred.

Fortunately Ajahn Sumedho, who is well acquainted with the western mind, has devised a very good way of dealing with its tendency to dwell on the negative side of things and be critical — just recognising it and receiving it within a peaceful space of acceptance, love and ease. This is a mature step as most of us find it very difficult to create a space around experience, we tend to absorb into what comes through our minds and to create a Self around it.

Let’s say we experience boredom; if there is no mindfulness, we easily absorb into that feeling and

become somebody who is bored, somebody who has got a problem with boredom and needs to fix it. This approach hugely complicates a simple experience like boredom. So all we need to do is to allow space inwardly to contemplate that feeling instead of fixing it as a problem. In Thailand where psychology and the Buddhist teaching are so intertwined, Ajahn Anan would simply say: "Well it's just one of the hindrances." Simple, isn't it? But often for us it can't be just an ordinary boredom — it's got to be a very personal and special one!

One of the things that attracted me most to the Buddhist teaching was the simplicity of its approach — I think this is what all of us would like to nurture in our practice and in our lives. The Buddha said: "Just look at yourself. Who are you? What do you think you are?... Take a look at your eyes, visual objects and at how you receive that experience of sense contact? What are the eyes, nose, tongue, body and ears? What are thoughts?" He asks us to inquire into sensory experience rather than absorb into it, and react to pain or pleasure. He said to just observe and actually see the nature of experience, very simply, directly, without fuss. Just bring peacefulness and calm into your heart, and take a look.

The sensory experience is really what creates our world. Without knowing its source and its effect, it's very difficult to get out of the vicious circle of 'Me' and 'my problem' that needs to be sorted out, or 'Me, who loves it' — this kind of push and pull agitates the heart further. So instead of pushing and pulling we take a good look and,

without getting involved, we know things as they are: impermanent, unsatisfactory, not self. But this requires certain conditions, it doesn't happen by itself.

The first condition is peace and calm; without that, it's very difficult to see anything. That's why a lot of our practice is actually to bring the heart to a state of balance and calm. Most people are in a constant state of reactivity. If you ask them if they suffer, they say, 'No.' They think they are perfectly fine. But someone who has seen the suffering of reactivity gradually comes to realise that it's not the best way to relate to life; it is very limited — always the experience of 'Self', 'Me' and 'You.' But as the sense of 'Self' decreases, the reactivity decreases, too.

It is not so much the sense of Self that is the obstacle it's our identification with it. The Four Noble Truths point to that very experience: the suffering of attachment to Self, the belief that one has a permanent ego. One teacher gave the example of self being like a necklace; when the beads are held together by a thread it becomes a necklace, but as soon as the thread is cut, the whole thing falls apart...

I've spent many years observing closely the experience of the sense of Self. I remember in the early days when I was upset, Ajahn Sumedho would say to me: "Well you don't need to suffer about that. You've got the Refuges and..." — but this used to enrage me: "But what about Me? I'm suffering right now!" I felt he was just dismissing the huge personal problem, and wasn't

taking me seriously. So for years I cherished that sense of Self without knowing it. I didn't think I was deluded, no, I was simply taking myself seriously!

In Thailand if you suffer and talk about it, you quickly get this funny sense that your practice has gone down the drain. This may be because in the quiet and simple life of a forest monastery, the formal practice is strongly rooted in the development of concentration, *samadhi*. It's a different approach there.

At Amaravati, the foundation of our practice is the Four Noble Truths which point again and again to suffering, its cause, its relinquishment and the path. It's not so easy here to get refined states of mind because we are constantly impinged upon by sense contacts: things, work, many strong-minded people living together, etc. Ajahn Sumedho teaches that to free the mind one just needs to put this teaching into practice right until the day we die.

I was struck by how soft and gentle the psyche of the Thai people is compared to ours; I found them generally very easy going. They like to laugh a lot, and basically life is no problem; if you make one you are considered kind of stupid. Even very simple villagers will think that if you make a problem out of life you are stupid. This was a nice contrast to our tendency to complicate life and create problems around most things — mainly because we have not been taught a better way. Our whole culture is based on the view that the world

is understood through the thinking apparatus, rather than through the silent knowing, awakened mind.

For our practise to bear fruit it's important to not make too much of ourselves. Basically, as long as we are fascinated by ourselves we will be bound to suffering. When the mind is undermined by streams of self-centred thoughts such as: "I don't like myself," "I think I've got a problem," and so on, it ends up being fed the wrong food, filled with unskillful states (*akusala dhamma*).

The realisation of Dhamma is dependent also on the strength of our mind, so how can that come about if there is not a certain degree of positive energy? That's why *metta*, kindness and acceptance, is very important. We don't get a bright mind by filling it with a lot of negative states; that weakens it. Whether it's anger, greed, jealousy or despair, if their true nature is not seen they weaken the *citta*, the heart. But when we see them in the light of mindfulness, then they have no power over us. Try meditating filling your heart with metta, then with miseries and then with joy — you'll see the difference, it's quite simple. You can do the same with anger; bring up things that make you angry for a moment and see how it affects the heart. These are just conditioned mental states, but often we are not really aware of how they affect us; this is the work of delusion.

So knowing very clearly the difference between what is skillful and unskillful, not from an intellectual point of view, but from wisdom, is great progress. The Buddha's teaching is like a map that helps us to recognise

skillful and unskillful dhammas which we should learn to recognise and let go.

Remember your heart is like a container filled with things that come from the past. If we've been a thief, or lazy or arrogant, loving and generous in the past then we'll have certain habits. When we meditate, we receive the result of our habits — we can't just throw them away at will. Wouldn't it be nice if we could? We'd all have been enlightened a long time ago! So bearing patiently and compassionately with one's kamma is very important.

One thing that has become clearer from my experience in Thailand is that while the actual practice is always here and now, it's also a gradual process, like developing a skill. It needs concentration, mindfulness and effort. They are the tools needed to gain insight into our attachments and to let them go. We're all here to liberate the heart from delusion, to learn how to live free from remorse or confusion. For the fruits of practice to arise in the heart, we need to develop these qualities of mind.

Here in the West we make a big deal about the body, and demand a lot from it. It's got to be healthy, strong and comfortable; whereas, in the East, it's made much less of. It's important of course, as without it we would not be able to practise but if it cracks up or deteriorates, there is no need to agitate the mind. So as meditators, if we talk too much about our body, or want to sleep a little bit more, we are basically considered a

lousy practitioner! From a Buddhist perspective, it is the mind that is more important, since it will condition what happens when you die. When the mind is strong and healthy, then the body calms down naturally, and benefits a lot more than when we allow ourselves to be overwhelmed by concern for its well-being. This outlook gave me a more balanced perspective on the physical body and a more detached way to deal with it. The mind can easily dwell upon negative aspects of oneself or other people. This is the easiest way of looking at life; the hardest thing is to actually train the heart to follow the path of goodness, kusala dhamma, skilful dhamma.

We may feel down or depressed but consider, it's only one mental state, one moment; do we want to perpetuate such a state for a lifetime? Or can we actually, through wisdom, realise that it's only one moment, one feeling, one thought? Such realisation brings a real sense of urgency. If we are going to have feelings, or to think — which we can't avoid — we might as well guide our mind towards things that are skilful. Anything else just drags us down to hell... but actually we do this to ourselves quite a lot unknowingly.

So we have an option: we can stay in hell, the realm of miseries or in heaven, the realm of happiness or we can stay in a state of peace that comes from wisdom — knowing that when pleasant feelings, pleasant experiences are present, that's heaven and when it's unpleasant, that's hell. The moment you know both as they are, that's freedom, isn't it? The mind doesn't linger



— that’s the middle way. We can’t control life and it takes time to go beyond wanting heaven or fearing hell.

Just the way people walk or open doors, the way they speak or eat can send you to hell or heaven. It doesn’t take much. Isn’t that ridiculous? Sometimes we feel blissed out or we feel friendly to the whole universe, then, coming back to our dwelling place we find somebody’s making a bit of noise, and suddenly we feel enraged. It doesn’t take much, does it? So life is very unstable. Yet there is the knowing, that moment of freedom when you know: “Ah, this is a feeling, sense contact, ear, nose...”

The teaching of the Buddha, remember, is to know sense contact, its object and the effect it has on the heart. So we hear our neighbours making a lot of noise: “I’m going to tell them off, I can’t stand it!” But when we are able to let go of it, we notice that we don’t mind really... but then the noise starts again, and finally we find ourselves in front of their door knocking: “Can you stop it!” And of course, if there is no wisdom at that moment, no mindfulness, then later on, we feel remorseful: “I feel awful, I shouldn’t have done that...” and the whole cycle of suffering starts again.

The path shown by the Buddha is very simple. We need to remind ourselves again and again to have *sati*, mindfulness. It’s like an endless refrain: *sati, sati, sati*: Where are we now?... The practice of awareness is always in the present moment. There’s no knowing in the future or the past. We can know a thought that takes us into

the past or the future, but in the moment there is just knowing, awareness.

So we can remind ourselves that we are all here to train and keep the practice simple. To know what nurtures the heart: truth, peace, calm, compassion, metta. When we have metta, the ego, the Self, can dissolve. Notice how when people have metta for us, peace arises in our heart, doesn't it? When people feel love towards us, we feel more peaceful and more calm. This is what we can do for ourselves too, and if all of us do this with one another, it will be a good basis for the practice.

So I just want to leave you with this: let's keep things very simple and remind ourselves that whatever complicates life, it's not something to trust. It's more likely to be the work of my friend Mara, the Self or ego. When the heart is at peace and there is understanding, then things are quite cool, quite peaceful, quite OK. So I wish you to cultivate kindness and infinite patience towards yourself and towards whatever resultant kamma you have to work through and that may be bothering you at this time. This is why the Buddha said that patience and endurance are the highest disciplines.



*“When there is a sense of ease, we’re in tune  
and we can respond in a way that is suitable,  
rather than a way that’s wilful and  
that will perpetuate agitation.”*



# Beyond Worldly Aims and Values

Ajahn Candasiri

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**N**amo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa — Homage to the blessed, noble and perfectly enlightened One.

I always find these words paying homage to the Buddha helpful as a way of recollecting that which is a place of refuge. From such a place we can notice the Siren songs, the voices of the world that lure us into things that are not safe, while having a sense of refuge. Often these may be things we have to deal with that are not really obvious, and we can very easily be pulled into all kinds of compulsions — those very powerful thoughts about what we should or we shouldn't do, things we should or shouldn't be concerned about.

There is a *sutta* which we recite sometimes that I find most helpful as an anchor; it lists the ten things that *samanas*, those who have gone forth, should recollect frequently. The first is 'I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values.' It is pointing to the fact that when one becomes a monk or a nun one gives up worldly titles. You can't actually tell which of us are princesses or princes, titled people, we all become just *samanas*.

There is a lovely story from the time of the Buddha. After the Buddha was enlightened, his cousins, who were all princes with noble positions, decided to go forth, leaving their family situations, their situations of power, and to go and be his disciples. So they set off with Upali who was their barber. Their intention had been to send Upali back to the palace, but he wanted to go on with them, to also be a disciple of the Buddha. When the time came for their ordination, the Sakyan princes made sure that Upali was the first, and hence their senior. In this way they gave up their princely status. In the same way, we bow to one another simply in order of seniority, depending on how long we've been ordained.

Another way I like to think of this reflection is that we're operating more in terms of Dhamma rather than looking to be very powerful or successful in a worldly sense. In Sangha life we can be very good at doing certain things. We have very skilled crafts people in the community, we have people who are good at giving talks, we have people who are very good at sewing or very good administrators or very good artists; but in terms of practice these things aren't really that important. It doesn't really matter how successful we are in worldly terms. Certainly it's nice when a community runs smoothly, when things are well taken care of and when people can construct buildings that don't fall down and sew their robes straight. These kinds of things are good things to do, but really our gift, our offering, is in

terms of our Dhamma practice.

This is a useful thing for everybody to consider — whether living as a monk or nun, or living a household life, having to go out and earn a living, look after a family, or whatever. Because these Sirens, these voices of the world are very powerful, very convincing, and can lead us into a lot of trouble. No matter how successful we are, how wonderfully we *do*, the moments of great triumph where we really hit the heights in terms of fame or prestige or do the very, very best — these are only moments, they don't last. They bring a kind of pleasure and satisfaction, but if they're the things that we make the most important in our life, our life is going to be a series of ups and downs. We'll have moments of great success, but they'll pass, and then what will we do? Either we can look for another moment of success, or remember that great moment, that peak, and take it out from time-to-time and fondle the memory of it.

Having this practice gives us a chance to find something that is beyond the world, and that will endure in a way worldly success and failure don't endure; something that will be a real refuge to us when everything else is falling apart. So when we are old or sick, when we are no longer able to succeed, there is something that we can turn to as a safe abiding place.

I find this reflection very helpful because, while there are days in our community when everything seems to go very well (and we can certainly enjoy these) there

are also days when things don't work out so well.

Sometimes everybody else is feeling fine but maybe I'm having a bad day. I'm upset, things aren't working out, the computer doesn't do what I want it to, the fax machine breaks down. If I don't keep remembering that I'm not living according to worldly aims and values — that it actually doesn't really matter if things go wrong, but that what is important is how I respond to these things — then I can suffer. I can either suffer, or I can understand that this is just how it is right now. Maybe it's not my fault, or anybody else's fault, maybe it's just how things have come together. I don't have to blame anybody, I don't have to blame myself, I don't have to fight, or struggle, or try to manipulate things so that they're different — all I have to do is make peace with things as they are.

Sometimes people say, "Gosh, Buddhists are awfully passive just making peace with things as they are. What good are they doing for the world?" But the alternative, when we're not mindful and things are going wrong, is that we tend to tense up. A reactivity happens in the mind, and there's a closing down; it's like having blinkers on so we can only see in one direction. We hold everything very, very tight to try and keep things the way we think they 'should be.' There's a wilfulness there. So we can create a mood of tension that everybody picks up on. This certainly brings suffering.

But when we cultivate an attitude of letting go, of being present with things as they are and making



peace, then the mind is more sensitive, more responsive, more intuitive. It is much more aware. Then our response can be in accordance with Dhamma; there is a sense of harmony rather than of tightness from holding with fear or desire.

The Dhamma is one of our refuges, a place of security. We can find peace in what is unpeaceful, find security in what is insecure; just by coming for Refuge in the present moment, through asking, “How is it right now?...” and resting in the present like that. When there is a sense of ease, we’re in tune and we can respond in a way that is suitable, rather than a way that’s wilful and that will perpetuate agitation. What happens otherwise is that when something goes wrong there’s a rebound: we react, we say something unskilful and then people get upset with us, and then there’s a general feeling of disharmony.

There was a wonderful scene at tea-time today down at the ‘peaceful little cottage where the nuns live.’ I had had an idea about how the evening was going to go; I was expecting a cousin and another very good friend to visit, and I was going to prepare tea and then go off and talk quietly with them. However, as I was preparing the tea another friend showed up — that was very nice, I welcomed her and she helped. Then a Tibetan nun dropped by with a friend — that was a bit of a surprise and they joined us. Then someone else came.

Then a young friend staying with us who is going through a fairly major breakdown right now, came

wandering through doing strange things. Then a couple of sisters who are on retreat in the forest came in, expecting to find the place empty and quiet and there was our small kitchen full of people drinking tea! I was very grateful for this practice. It meant just keeping my feet on the ground and realising that, 'this is how it is right now, it's not that there's anything wrong.'

It was not exactly what I had in mind for the evening but it was perfectly all right. I felt we had a very nice time with just a whole series of different things happening, and I was grateful that I was not living according to worldly aims and values. A worldly value would be, 'Well it's supposed to be like this and we're supposed to do this. Things have gone wrong, they haven't worked out and now it's up to me to make things all right.' But when we let go, then whatever happens is fine, things don't have to go according to plan. This is a great security.

Before I started this way of practice I was always concerned about things working out. I always had to have an idea about how things were going to go. I had to make proper preparation and if things didn't go right then there was tension.

When I first came into the community I went on a retreat led by Ajahn Viradhammo. I remember him talking about taking refuge in Dhamma and I began to have a sense of what it really meant 'to take refuge in Dhamma.' It felt awesome, I was so used to taking refuge in my mind, my clever mind that would work things

out and would be able to judge and assess things, according to what I thought was right and proper. I realised just how much I used my intellect to hold my world together, and I began to see that actually taking refuge in Dhamma meant letting go of this intellect, letting go of these structures that I'd used to determine how I lived my life. It felt like a leap of faith — being willing to let go of what I'd grown up to depend upon, to allow myself not to have a clue what to do or what was going to happen next, and to take refuge in the moment. To know the moment, rather than hold on to a fixed view or a fixed plan.

When we talk about this turning aside from worldly aims and value, or taking refuge in Dhamma, this doesn't actually mean to give up our intellect, it means to stop allowing it to be the master. We can still plan things, we can still make intelligent use of the brain that we have, but we do it from a place of Dhamma, rather than a place of fear or desire. We let them go. It does take time; we can't just do it straight away.

Living in community, living in society, of course we have to make plans. Those of you who have jobs have to turn up for work; you have to earn your livelihood. Living in the monastery we have different duties that we do our best to perform, we try to live as well as we can in accordance with our training, which is set up to help us to understand our inner drives, to see clearly the Sirens, that are pulling us away from our real potential, our real possibility of being free.

I remember a number of years ago when the nuns' community was still in quite a tender, fragile state, we had a visit from Maechee Patomwan, who at that stage had been a nun in Thailand for thirty-six years. She was aware that I was concerned because some people were anxious about the nuns' community — whether we had enough respect and whether things were all right for us. But she said to me, “Don't worry about it. Don't worry about looking good or any of that, just concentrate on your own practice. Just look after your own heart, keep your own heart peaceful. If you do that everything will be all right, the respect will come, things will work out.”

Just hearing that was such a relief because it confirmed what I had felt intuitively all along. I realised that trying to look good, trying to get respect were worldly aims, worldly values; it was getting it the wrong way round. So we can notice, ‘Is there suffering? Is there not suffering?’ and if there is suffering then, ‘Why is there suffering? There's suffering because I want to be respected, or because I want to look good.’ OK, that can be looked at: ‘Is that really important? Does that really matter?’

I've been contemplating the question ‘How are you?’ and have realised that it's a question we should ask ourselves often. ‘How are you today?’ I'm beginning to learn how to do this. For example, I had a quiet day this week; I was quite tired so I thought: ‘I'd better have a rest.’ So I lay down but my mind was going berserk. So then I thought: ‘Well, how are you?’ And I could see that I was thinking about all the things I had to do: ‘I've got to

do this and I've got to do that and I've got to think about this, and I've got to plan this, and I've got to write to so-and-so and I've got to talk to so-and-so, and...' I thought: 'Is resting really going to help?...' And I could see 'No.' It wasn't that I needed to rest, what I needed to do was to help the mind to settle: 'OK, so what's the remedy for this?...' I realised that what I had to do was to just sit quietly.

It was as though the mind was filled with Sirens all demanding attention. But I could also see, 'No! You don't have to listen to those voices of the world, it's time to pay attention to your heart. Just stay still, stay quiet, stay with nature.' So I spent the rest of the day just listening to those voices and, at the same time, staying with the body, staying with the breath, watching the light, watching the trees, touching the earth.

By the end of the day, when I asked myself, 'How are you?' The answer was 'All right.' There was a feeling of wholeness, rather than of agitation and of being pulled all over the place by the demands of the world.

So just consider: 'What are worldly aims and values?' And, 'What are the aims and values towards which we aspire?...' We can bring Dhamma into our lives, we can bring Dhamma into the world through our willingness to bear with the voices of the ego, to bear with the insistent demands of the world and not be bullied by them. Say, 'OK, I hear you...' Then from a place of calm we respond. We can do an enormous amount of good from this place of stillness, this place of quiet.

After his Enlightenment the Buddha didn't spend the next 45 years just sitting in a state of bliss. If you look into the Vinaya teachings — the teachings about how the monastic orders were set up and how the different rules came into being — or if you look into the Suttas, you can see that he was extremely active in a very compassionate, wise and skilful way. He dealt with people who were in the extremes of human anguish and despair, presenting teachings that responded to their particular need in the moment. He was also able to respond skilfully to the people who tried to catch him out in debates. He met all kinds of people.

To be like the Buddha is perhaps asking too much but perhaps we can try, moment-by-moment, to distinguish these voices of the world — to interrupt the compulsions of the mind that pull us around and just be with one breath. We can be with the feeling of the body sitting on the mat, or with the feeling of the feet touching the ground as we walk from place to place. We can relax the shoulders when we're finding ourselves getting tense in a difficult situation, or relax the face when we find that we are thinking an awful lot in our meditation - just letting the thoughts go their own way, using little things in our daily life as ways of helping to anchor us in what is a secure refuge. Then, in moments of extreme anguish, or complete confusion, when everything around us is falling apart, and when things just aren't the way they 'should be' — and even at the moment of death — we can turn to these signs, these anchors in the

present moment.

Being peaceful with one breath is obviously not a worldly value. It's obviously not something that is going to get us an enormous amount of praise. Fortunately here we have a situation where we're encouraged to do this, which takes us to a system of values that goes beyond the changing world. There isn't very much we can rely on in terms of our bodies, in terms of one another, in terms of worldly success, in terms of prestige and fame, in terms of our intellect. All of these things are changing. But we have this opportunity to develop the practice of being present.

Sometimes it's difficult, sometimes it doesn't really seem like it's anything very much but little-by-little it adds up. There's a verse in the Dhammapada that gives a valuable simile of this: if there's water just dripping into a bucket, just one drip and another drip and another drip, sooner or later the bucket fills up — it can be hard to notice it filling.

Similarly, you might think you are getting nowhere, the moments of mindfulness may not seem to be adding up to very much but give yourself a year or a couple of years or a decade or two, and you'll find that little by little things change. You'll notice that there is more of a sense of ease, there is more of an ability to respond rather than to get uptight and agitated. There is a little more compassion, a little bit more space in the heart. This is how it works. There might be a sudden insight, like my insight into what taking Refuge in

Dhamma really meant, but for each one of us it takes time and a humble step-by-step application, to bring about this gradual transformation.

I'd like to end this teaching, offering it as an encouragement for each of you to work at developing this very humble moment-by-moment mindfulness practice. And my wish for each one of you is that you will gradually find more peace, freedom and happiness in your lives.





*“The feelings of gratitude and blessing that can well up within one in those moments are ‘other-worldly’ and feel quite transformative.”*



# Tudong

by Ajahn Jitindriya

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*The idea of going on tudong conjures rather romantic and inspirational images and feelings, for me at least... “Ah, the real wandering life!” But reality is never contained or represented fully in ideas and perceptions, and remains always unexpected and unknown.*

In the spring of 1997 four of us set off on a five-week walking tour from Amaravati Monastery in Hertfordshire to the South-West of England. Ajahn Siripanna, Sister Uttama, Anagarika Joanne and myself were going to take up residence in Hartridge Monastery in Devon and had thought this would be a wonderful way to go, and in keeping with the practice of the Forest Tradition and alms mendicancy.

However, the journey wasn't all inspirational by any means. In concept and theory and in philosophical retrospect... yes, perhaps... but the nitty-gritty of it at times was quite challenging — physically, mentally and emotionally — but then that is what this kind of walk (*tudong*) is all about. It's a kind of stripping away of the usual 'comfort zones' that one can retreat into, so as to contemplate the sense of insecurity that is thus laid bare in the face of the unknown.

This is much of what the monastic training is about too, to train the mind to be more fully present with life as you experience it in the raw, creating the possibility for direct insight into the true nature of things. In doing so one notices how habituated the mind is to controlling and manipulating circumstances, in both gross and subtle ways, in an attempt to not have to feel the natural pain and insecurity of life. But by doing this we effectively cut ourselves off from true wisdom and understanding and the way to freedom, and can eventually wind ourselves into a tight ball of alienation and despair. So these walks are a monastic practice, intended to help deepen mindfulness, to cultivate a heart of faith, and to develop qualities such as patient endurance, equanimity and gratitude. Having said that, it's true to say that they are also undertaken with great enthusiasm as an opportunity to get out of the monastery for a while and enjoy life in the open countryside!

All in all, one could say that the walk was a great success in that we survived, and we arrived in Devon to many people's enthusiasm for our presence there. We also arrived still friends and in reasonably good humour! Five weeks together (literally 24 hours of every day, side by side), there were naturally and expectedly some moments of difficulty, as we each went through our different moods and cycles. In fact, I find relationship and communication in community life one of the most challenging areas to continue to be honest, open, and yet responsible in. So I find there's always much to be

learnt... primarily about myself and my own ways and tactics in communication, and also about others. Learning about how to express oneself more clearly and unconditionally, and learning to be more and more open to *others'* minds and moods of all kinds in an honest and unconditional way too.

Walking is a good pace for this kind of contemplation. There's time to feel and to be with suffering as it arises, to find its cause and source, to try to understand it and let go of it. Always moving on is helpful; not going backwards or hanging on to what's gone before. Also not knowing what's to come, but knowing only each step as it is, and constantly seeing all imagined futures to be pure projection, things rarely or never unfolding exactly as expected.

When the four of us set off on the 1st of May, the weather was warm, sunny and beautiful. All of April had been like that. We heard an ominous report of rain to come, but we remained hopeful. However, after only two or three days the weather turned and most of the first three weeks were cold, wet and not great walking weather. We had planned to camp out in bivvy-bags but found we often had to ask for shelter in barns. All but once we were met with warmth, kindness and sometimes remarkable hospitality.

Despite the adverse weather conditions, our hearts were being nourished by the kindness we met along the way. There were some nights that seemed very bleak to us at the time, very cold or very wet, not being able to

find shelter or anywhere semi-decent to stop and sleep, and having to walk on till almost dark or after dark (after 10 PM in that season). But we always survived, and in the wake of the new morning it never seemed quite as bad as it had the night before.

The first few days were inevitably rather painful as we got used to the weight on our backs and extra stress on our feet. Ajahn Siripanna and myself hadn't really had time to prepare ourselves physically beforehand so we knew the first part of the walk would be painful. I was also breaking in some new sandals. Although we gradually felt a bit fitter as the days passed, we never really felt on top of things physically. Even on the last day of our walk we battled with low energy and fatigue. Perhaps it was an accumulation of tiredness as there were many nights with little sleep because of cold, discomfort, throbbing feet, exhaustion, or all of it!

It might sound rather horrible as you read this but actually, it was alright. It was just how it was and there was no alternative to be had so although not particularly pleasant, it was all good stuff to practise with. We were never in any danger. Much of the time, despite the difficulties, a certain kind of ease or quiet joy could be detected in the heart, in just the simplicity of it all — not having to think too much, being 'unburdened' (bar the weight of the pack) and wandering as we were. It was good not to have any planned rendezvous, which meant we didn't have to stress ourselves out in covering miles or making deadlines that inevitably become

difficult to meet. We could rest when we needed to, and move on when we were ready.

The first few days weren't so great. It wasn't easy to find water or anywhere to camp, and the countryside was not so striking. But before long, once we entered into Oxfordshire, then Berkshire and Wiltshire, things were very different — beautiful countryside and kind, interested and hospitable folk.

We stayed in all sorts of situations — barns, sheds, a caravan, in someone's spare attic room one night; in dense woods, in open fields, on the moors, in a strip of land between barbed wire and electric fencing (it was at least flat ground, often hard to find!) — on lounge room floors, a redundant church, someone's back lawn, a garden, a porch in a cricket ground, some guest bedrooms, a night at a Christian Abbey, and finally, a B&B! We also spent a night with a Buddhist Community in Devon. Oh, and a night on the beach! But more about that later.

Apart from one arranged meal invitation the day after we left Amaravati, we didn't arrange any other meetings beforehand, just wanting to take each day as it came and to go on faith. Anagarika Joanne had been given a bit of money by various people to help support us along the way and so was able to offer us food at times, so it wasn't the complete 'faith tudong,' but we did go on alms-round as often as we could in various towns en route and were always met with an astounding response from people, nearly always getting much more food than the four of us could eat that day.

It was remarkable that people in these places were so keen to help us. They weren't particularly Buddhist, or even knew that we were, much of the time. They were just kind, thoughtful folk all too happy to give. Most tried to offer us money at first but we would gently explain that our monastic rule did not allow us to accept or use money. This always amazed people — some could not fathom it, others apologised and some even tried to convince us that it was alright to take their money. Almost always people would come back with food once they had understood what our alms-bowls were for.

When we go for alms in villages, we find a suitable place to stand so we won't be in the way of people, but where they would naturally pass us and see us, and we stand there silently with our bowls. We are not allowed to ask for food, begging is against the training. The attitude is more one of making ourselves available to receive alms, as in Buddhist practice the virtue of generosity is held in high esteem and its cultivation of prime importance in developing the spiritual path.

Being Westerners, and not living within a Buddhist culture however, this practice of alms-round can feel quite uneasy at first. Having been brought up with ideas about being independent and self-sufficient; pulling your own weight; not being a drain on the society and all that, and with most of us coming from a rather middle-class background, to actually stand there with our bowls, defenceless, open to whatever... can feel quite embarrassing at first. It's not easy to learn to be fully



open and to 'receive' whole-heartedly and unconditionally. But it helps us remember again, in quite a sobering way, what we are doing as Buddhist nuns and what the commitment to this form actually means. Then, in receiving such positive response from people generally, a deep ease arises.

For me, and I think for all of us, these alms-rounds were the high points of our walk. It's so powerful to receive people's generosity in this way (especially in Western countries) — such a touching and poignant reflection in that simple interaction for both giver and receiver, and a deep and strong sign in the psyche of the path and fruit of the religious life.

The feelings of gratitude and blessing that can well up within one in those moments are 'other-worldly' and feel quite transformative. Memories of those who offered us hospitality in various forms would often come to mind at later times bringing again warm feelings of gratitude and a deep, sincere well-wishing towards them. And one knows that they will also feel happiness as a result of their unconditional giving. And when recounting these acts of generosity to others, one sees a kind of 'magic' still working as people are both amazed and gladdened to hear that it *is* possible to live this way, that there *are* generous, kind and sincere people everywhere.

It was about five days after we set out that we first went for alms, in a place called Wallingford. The weather was freezing and we had stayed overnight in a

redundant church (with permission). We walked into the centre of town and stood silently with our bowls. The first person to stop and offer nourishment actually recognized us as nuns from Chithurst and Amaravati where he had visited a few times.

The weather seemed to be getting colder all morning. After having received ample food, with blue fingers and chattering teeth we walked briskly back to a park we had passed earlier to eat our lunch. Then it started to sleet and snow on us. We continued to eat however, as it was nearly one o'clock (after which time we could no longer take solid food) — our priorities were clear!

Afterwards, we walked by a launderette and having joked all morning about the possibility of somehow getting our clothes washed (which by this time were in good need of such), it seemed now to be not such a crazy idea after all, as it also offered the opportunity to sit against a warm dryer for an hour or so to thaw out and digest lunch. Problem was, we were wearing all our clothes! But with the kind understanding of the woman there and the help of our trusty raincoats, the operation was successful. We all remember Wallingford as being good to us.

It took us about ten days to reach Avebury, a tiny little village of great fame for its ancient stone-circles and other archaeological formations. But it should be known that it's not such a great place to find somewhere to camp! That was one of the more difficult

nights we had. We later found out that Lord Avebury is a Buddhist, and we believe we actually walked by his large estate at least twice that dark, rainy, cold evening looking for somewhere to stop.

The following day and evening was rather wet too. We got caught in some storms while walking and our rain gear was beginning to flag. But fortunately the sun came out and dried us in the late afternoon. Despite the amount of rain we had, we actually always managed to dry out before the day's end.

That evening we were having some trouble finding a suitable place to stay — we had been looking for a barn to take shelter in as the storms were still brewing around us. We headed towards some farm buildings in the distance and stopped to ask a woman in her garden about who might be the owner of this hay barn down the road, as we wished to ask for permission to stay there overnight. She pointed us to the cowherd's place. We walked briskly, directly to the barn as the storm was beginning to break, and in the sky appeared a fantastically brilliant double rainbow... we thought it a good omen indeed.

It felt like heaven to reach the barn and see that there was hay (warmth!), a decent roof with walls, and no cows!... the promise of a protected, dry night's sleep. When the rain lessened a little, two of us set out to ask for permission to stay in the barn when we were met by the woman we had stopped to talk to earlier. She said she couldn't bear to think of us there for the night and

she and her husband (plus two young boys) invited us to stay with them. They said later that they couldn't quite believe their eyes when they first saw us, four Buddhist nuns on the road, (actually, we looked more like Franciscans in our long, dark brown, hooded rain coats.) They had a spare attic room and were very hospitable to us indeed. They weren't particularly religious, just very kind people and very happy to offer support.

It was lovely to walk through some very old and interesting villages on route — those that you would never set out to see deliberately or even know were there but for the fact of accidentally stumbling on them whilst lost and trying to make sense of some twenty year old map of non-existent country footpaths. 'Twas lucky we never really had to be anywhere! As we meandered further south the pace of life became perceptibly slower, the folk we met more open and friendly, often stopping to talk, curious of who and what we were.

About two weeks into the journey we took a two-day wash and rest break in a place called Frome with some friends of the Sangha who offered us hospitality. This time for recouping a little energy was much appreciated. We stopped for another couple of days when we walked by the monastery a week or so later. Then, from just outside Exeter we walked towards Dartmoor. This last leg of our walk was a bit more structured. We'd heard the weather report of more rain so we thought it wise to have some contacts on Dartmoor, as it might turn much too cold for us to

sleep out up there. But as it turned out, that week brought lovely weather... a welcome relief for us.

Dartmoor is a very beautiful place to walk. Many ancient stone circles and settlements scattered around and its landscape is quite magical. I don't think I have the skill to describe it here. Predominantly space; its grazed, green form is scattered with rocks of all shapes and stories; its great, rocky tors and tumuli evoke a sense of power and mystery against the timeless, wild sky. The ancient Dartmoor ponies, the goats and sheep are quite at home here. Fresh water springs run into streams and winding rivers. It is sparsely forested in parts and the ground underfoot can at times become boggy without warning. But if the weather turns, it can become a dangerous place to be — many rescues have happened on Dartmoor apparently. However this was our sunny break!

We spent about three days and nights on Dartmoor itself, staying with friends on two nights, both in beautiful, magical places, and camped out for one night. That particular morning we sat around our camp-fire savouring a cup of tea in the middle of nowhere, quietly taking in the misty landscape of the moors, when suddenly over the hills charged an army squadron of about 40 young men in full combat gear, packs on their backs and machine guns under arms, their commanding officer loudly and roughly urging them on.

They looked rather tortured, running (some limping) in those hard, black boots. They were quite

surprised by our presence I think — probably looking somewhat like over-grown Brownies to them — and they had to run right by us to avoid the bogs, some looking rather longingly at our relaxed formation and our steaming tea, others obviously interested in our army-style bivvy-bags still laid out from the night's rest!

“Keep away from them, gentlemen,” the commanding officer shouted, and we watched still silently as they charged over the stream and up the next hill. When the clamour of their manoeuvre had faded back into silence we all just looked at each other and laughed at the impressions this surreal scene had left.

Some twenty minutes later, another squadron burst over the crest of the same hill. We hadn't moved much at all, and we watched again as the same scene took place. Was this 'take-two' of a Monty Python skit? This group seemed a little more chirpy though, and in better humour...

“Good morning, ladies, that's a cosy little scene you have there!” They all looked quite interested as they ran by.

“How long have you been out?” I asked.

“This is our fourth day, we're on our eighty-ninth mile.”

Hmmm, pretty impressive... we were certainly taking things a little easier at about ten to twelve miles a day! Strange to think that people think *our* lives are too tough, but they do this voluntarily as well! Not long after, a third troop charged over the hill but headed off

in a different direction, and we knew it was time then for us to head off as well.

We walked on for several days towards the coast, then from Dartmouth took the blustery, coastal walk to Torcross. We spent our last 'out-doors' night at the far, secluded end of Slapton Sands beach. You might remember the history of this place... where the allied troops had their practice runs for D-Day. This turned into a tragedy actually. Two ships wrecked and many lives lost in some bungled operations. All villages for miles around had been evacuated so they could do these operations in secret.

Anyway, we staggered up the far end of this pebbly beach at dusk, exhausted (me at least), to find our own privacy near a rocky niche. It felt nice to be there: clear weather, no worries about private property, having a camp-fire or making noise, and finding the sand quite comfortable... (at last, completely level ground!); to fall asleep and wake to the sound of crashing waves at the shore some fifty yards away. We didn't rouse early that morning, we only had a few miles to walk to Joanne's father's place in time for lunch, so we took our time over breakfast and enjoyed the solitude and relaxed atmosphere for a while.

At around eight-thirty some people started trudging up the beach towards us. Typical British, we thought, with wind breaks under arm, not a great beach day but the sun was up and it was the beginning of a long weekend. But why make such an effort to trudge

all the way up this pebbly end, there was plenty of beach, about five miles of it?

Soon more people were turning up, then as one rather weighty man and his wife who settled in just a few yards from us undressed, completely, we began to realise what was so attractive about this part of the beach. It wasn't us. When this man began to strut up and down proudly airing his naked glory right in front of us we knew it was time to go. It felt quite ridiculous at the time to wrap ourselves up over both shoulders in dark robes, don packs, and covered from neck to toe walk back past all these 'nature-loving' bods!

A few days later we arrived at our destination, in Totnes, where Ajahn Siripanna was due to give a public talk at a Buddhist college/community called Sharpham.

After the talk, we were given a lift back to the monastery to begin the process of settling in and settling down. There was one monk who waited for our arrival to ceremoniously hand over the Relics and left a day or two afterwards, the other monks had left earlier. We all felt very comfortable and at home straight away and really appreciated having beds to sleep in and electric kettles again. Over those five weeks, if nothing else, we gained a deep and profound understanding of why it was that humankind began to settle down in houses and create such things as central heating!

The journey is not really finished though — only now we don't strap on the rucksack and change location, but attempt to maintain the spirit of tudong: of not



getting stuck in one place, of not struggling with things that are bound to change, cultivating the heart of faith and the power of renunciation; to keep seeing that the only true stability is non-attachment.

*Evam.*



# Pali/English Glossary

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*The following words are mostly in Pali, the language of the Theravadan Buddhist scriptures. They are brief translations for quick reference, rather than exhaustive or refined definitions. Not all of the foreign words found in the talks are listed here, as many are defined as they are used. Note also that Pali diacriticals have been omitted within this book as few people are familiar with the specialized pronunciation conventions.*

**ajahn** (Thai): ‘teacher’, a title given to a monastic who has been ordained for ten or more years.

**anagarika**: ‘homeless one’; a novice, still technically a lay person, who lives in a monastery and follows the Eight Precepts.

**anatta**: ‘not self’, i.e. impersonal, without individual essence.

**anicca**: impermanent, transient, having the nature to arise and pass away.

**bhikkhu**: In Buddhism, a monk who lives on alms and abides by the training precepts which define a life of renunciation and simplicity.

**dana**: generosity. Hence, often used to refer to an offering to a monastic community

**dhamma**: This word is used in several ways. It can refer to the Buddha’s Teaching, as contained in the scriptures; to the Ultimate Truth towards which the teaching points; to a discrete ‘moment’ of life, seen as it really is.

**dukkha:** *literally, 'hard to bear'; dis-ease, restlessness of mind, discontent or suffering, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness.*

**kamma:** *action or cause (and by extension, the result or effect) which is created or recreated by habitual impulse, volition, natural energies. (Sanskrit: karma.)*

**khanda:** *'heap'; the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of human psycho-physical existence.*

**metta:** *'loving-kindness.'*

**Nibbana:** *freedom from attachments. The basis for the enlightened vision of things as they are. (Sanskrit: Nirvana.)*

**samana:** *one who has entered the Holy Life.*

**samanera** (Thai: samanen): *The novice stage for a monastic.*

**samsara:** *the unenlightened, unsatisfactory experience of life.*

**sangha:** *the community of those who practise the Buddha's Way. Often, more specifically, those who have formally committed themselves to the lifestyle of a mendicant monk or nun.*

**sutta:** *a Buddhist scripture.*

**tudong** (Thai): *a mendicant's wandering practice, dating back to the Buddha's time. Hence the phrase 'to wander (or 'go') tudong.'*

**vinaya:** *the monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries.*

**vipassana:** *the penetrative insight of meditation, as distinguished from simple mental tranquility.*



~ This edition printed to mark a 60th birthday ~

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