

THE BODY

DHAMMA REFLECTIONS ON AGEING, SICKNESS AND DEATH
BY THE NUNS OF THE THERAVADA COMMUNITY



AJAHN SUNDARA • AJAHN CANDASIRI • AJAHN METTA

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AMARAVATI
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DEDICATION

We would like to dedicate this collection of teachings to our parents and all others who have shared gracefulness and wisdom in response to their meeting the messengers of old age, sickness and death.

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KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

A	Anguttara Nikaya
M	Majjhima Nikaya
S	Samyutta Nikaya
SN	Sutta Nipata
Ud	Udana

INTRODUCTION

This collection of nuns' talks, which were originally offered to the monastic communities and during meditation retreats for lay people, focus on two main themes. The first is obvious but, remarkably, overlooked by many people: our very existence as a physical presence - how that changes and how it ends. The second theme, the Buddha's teaching, which he referred to as the Four Noble Truths, begins with what is obvious: 'Life is stressful', However, having enumerated the causes of this state of affairs, it quickly moves on to the supremely subtle remedy - what the late Ven. Ajahn Chah referred to as 'letting go'.

We hope, as we reflect on these themes, that our respective approaches and voices will contribute to a cohesive sense of the remarkable legacy of the Buddha himself, and of his disciples over the past 2,500 years. The teachings are timeless; our practice enlivens them. This collection is an indication of what they have meant to each of us, and how that understanding has been passed on to others of our human family. May it serve as a support for all who are interested in meeting life with wisdom, facing up to the challenge of dealing with the inevitable changes that the body undergoes, and responding with compassion to the struggles of our fellow humans.

The talks were given over a span of many years. We would like to express our appreciation for the many people who have helped with transcribing them. We are grateful too to Adam Long, Jayasiri, Donald Murphy, and Anagārikā Nick and others who have been involved with editing the transcribed material, and to Nicholas Halliday who has coordinated the production of this book, giving it a title and incorporating Victoria Roberts' beautiful photo in the cover design. The Kataññutā Group in Malaysia has sponsored the printing and distribution.

May recollecting the efforts made by each of those who have been involved be a source of joy and insight. May all beings find peace.

Sister Ajahn Candasiri
Amaravati, 2013

A PROCESS OF CHANGE

AJAHN METTA

When we look around ourselves, in nature, what we see is a constant process of change – arising, existing, passing away. The seasons pass and as they do we can observe the changes that nature undergoes. A constant process of creation and falling apart, birth and death. We see this unfolding year after year, day after day, right in front of our eyes. Life itself is a constant process of change, a flow of coming into existence and ceasing.

The Buddha recommends that we look at the body in the same way: as a process of constant change. In the ‘First Foundation of Mindfulness’, one way of working with the body is to look at it in terms of the four elements: fire, water, earth and air. When we do this, we should remember that these teachings come from 2,500 years ago and that the

understanding of the physical nature of matter was very different in the days when the Buddha was alive. At that time, examining the smallest particles of matter involved the investigation of these four elements. Science has moved on in its explorations since then and now we perceive the physical world quite differently. What we see in the Buddhist teachings is a way of directly experiencing how the four elements work together as processes unfolding. This relates not just to the physical body but also to the physical world around us.

Not all Buddhist traditions use the same elements. For example, in the Vajrayana tradition they speak of five elements, adding the element of space. In some Mahayana teachings, we find wood and metal as elements. What we can see from this is that different concepts prevailed at different times.

The point I want to make is this: when we look at the body and the elements that form it with this kind of body awareness, it helps us to detach from our identification with it. Can we allow ourselves to perceive the body as a process? This process is the four elements working together, building, forming, falling apart, over and over again. When we do this, it becomes more difficult to identify with the body as being 'me' and 'mine', even as an entity in itself. The body as a static entity dissolves and we begin to see it in terms of the elements working in this way. What is unfolding here is a constant play of conditions coming together, existing for a while and then falling apart. And we can observe this directly.

When we look, for example, at the water element in the body, how can we actually experience this? When you think of the water element in relation to your body, what image comes to mind? I am sure we all have different responses. We might think of blood, tears, sweat, spittle or urine. It could be any liquid that the body contains. But when we look at that in terms of 'me' or 'mine', is it really possible to continue to identify with the body? What happens when we see it in this way?

Can you really believe that the heat of the digestion process is 'you'? And what about the brain, where the play of all of the elements comes together: the warmth of the fire element, the cohesiveness of the water element in the liquid around the brain, the earth element as the main substance and the air as the space it occupies? Can I believe that this brain is really 'me'? That it's really 'mine'? The absurdity of exaggeration shows us more clearly what we are in fact doing all the time. This is what this contemplation is all about: looking through the illusion of our identification with this body.

Our bodies are in constant flux, forming, shaping and re-building, growing and falling apart. When you were born, what did your body look like? What does it look like now? Very different, I'm sure. This process is the result of these elements coming together, interacting, decaying and re-forming, in a constant flow of growth, maturation and change.

In the *Satipatthana Sutta* the Buddha speaks about the elements in this way:

‘Again, bhikkhus, a bhikkhu reviews this same body, however it is placed, however disposed, as consisting of elements thus: ‘In this body there are the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the air element.’

‘Just as though a skilled butcher or his apprentice, had killed a cow and was seated at the crossroads with it cut up into pieces; so too, a bhikkhu reviews this same body ... as consisting of elements thus: ‘In this body there is the earth element, the water element, the fire element and the air element.’

‘In this way he abides contemplating the body as a body internally, externally, and as a body internally and externally ... And he abides independent, not clinging to anything in the world. That too is how a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body.’

(MN 10, 12-13)

What the Buddha suggests is that we have a closer look at what we call our body. If we examine the qualities of the elements, such as those of the fire element, what do we find? What accompanies that element? There is the quality of heat or warmth, which is used, for example, in digestion. The fire element is also responsible for the process of ageing, ripening and maturation. And we find the quality of lightness. If you put a piece of paper into the fire, when it is almost burnt up, it is so light that it can float up into the air. This is one expression of the quality of lightness. And there is of course the destructive aspect of heat, when it is so intense that it can burn things up completely. We experience heat in the body when there is a

fever or when we have an inflammation. As the fire element and the heat it generates destroy the invading particles or bacteria, we often experience this as quite unpleasant. At this point the elements are out of balance. If they stay out of balance for a long time, we experience this as illness.

The main qualities of the water element are fluidity and cohesion. How do these manifest in the body? When we look at the areas of the body where the water element manifests predominantly, such as the blood, it is clearly fluid and flows through the body with the help of the air element. We see a similar process at work in our tears, spittle or urine. The quality of cohesion is apparent in all of the different organs and in most parts of the body, in the muscles, sinews, and so on. The water element is in fact so predominant in the body that it accounts for more than 80% of our body mass. Without it, the organs would not be able to carry out their functions.

The earth element is obviously predominant in the bones, skin, teeth, hair, nails, etc. Its qualities are a kind of dryness, a quality of hardness, softness, stiffness or looseness, a seeming solidity (although physicists have shown that actually most of what we perceive as solid consists mainly of space). This is how the earth element manifests in the body and how we can experience it with investigation.

We can experience the air element very directly in the process of breathing: as air flowing through the body. One of the qualities of air is movement, and it moves the other elements through the body. With the air element goes the notion of pressure, which we can observe in our breathing in

the expansion and contraction of the chest and abdomen. The air element also moves fluids through the body, for example, in the circulation of the blood.

So, if we observe these processes in the body, we have the chance to witness impermanence (*anicca*) and not-self (*anatta*) directly, seeing how they unfold with the interaction of these elements. When we look at the body in this way, in the process of breathing or digesting, for example, it is actually rather difficult to apply a sense of self to it.

In the Sutta mentioned earlier, the Buddha said that a monk should contemplate this body in terms of these elements. He used the simile of a butcher taking apart the body of a cow. Here the body actually dissolves as an entity and becomes a concept in our minds. He then suggests that the monks look at their bodies in the same way, in terms of the elements working together.

When you look at the different elements, which ones are the body? Or in the simile the Buddha uses here, of a cow cut into pieces, which pieces represent the cow? When the body is taken apart like this, the animal as a body, as an entity, does not exist any more. It has become a set of parts and so it becomes obvious, even before we cut it into pieces, that the body of the cow, or 'the cow', is just a concept created in our minds. You might also say that it is a perception. This perception of our bodies is a useful one. It has its place in our everyday life and helps us to relate or refer to ourselves and others. But when we begin to see the body as a process, then the body as such, as an entity in and of itself, ceases to exist. The illusion we

create when we believe that the body is an entity of this kind is a creation of the mind. In terms of the elements, the body is merely a process of forming, building, changing and decaying.

The Buddha suggests that we observe this process internally and externally. This means to see it unfolding in ourselves, internally, and in others, externally. Take, for example, the water element. Are the tears that I am shedding in any way different from the ones of the person sitting in front of me? Or a person crying, say, in India? What I call my tears is just a perception, convenient but not quite in alignment with reality.

This all points to a very different way of seeing reality. When we really understand what in our ordinary lives we perceive as the body, we see that it is in fact only this process of elements coming together. We can then take the step toward accepting that there are different perceptions and different ways of experiencing reality. What we call our body in terms of relative truth does not exist in terms of ultimate truth. It is just a process unfolding. The more we look in this direction, the more we see that what we call ourselves, and what we call the world around us, is a process of perceptions, fed by conditions coming together, forming and dissolving. This is an experience in the mind that we perceive as solid, as existing in and of itself. We do not see this constantly changing process. We do not see that this is a kind of delusion and that things do not exist in the way we perceive them. By understanding how these elements work together and what they produce, we have the possibility of freeing ourselves from our attachments

to the body and to our perceptions in general.

By now, you might begin to see that we sometimes relate to our bodies in ridiculous ways. How strange it is to think that our hairstyle has any special importance! Or look at all the time that some of us spend at the gym, wanting our bodies to look better, to be different from the way they are. Having said this, if we do it in order to keep the body healthy and well, then I think it has its rightful place. But look at how we try to change our bodies in order to create an image that will make an impression on others. Isn't this a waste of time? Of course, this does not mean that from now on we should deny that the body has a certain function in this world. It is the vehicle we live in and in fact offers us the possibility of practicing and walking this path.

The body, then, appears to be an entity in itself only from a certain point of view. From a different perspective, it is not. It is just a phenomenon, a concept created in our minds, and yet we live according to it. It is convenient in terms of social conventions and serves this purpose well. But from another point of view, it is a phenomenon that arises and changes. If we look at it in terms of process, of the elements working together, it forms and re-forms and sooner or later will cease to exist altogether. As we all know, these bodies – or, let's say, these unfolding processes – are not eternal. These bodies, these phenomena, live for a given period of time and then they wear out, get sick and die. If we are able to see that this is a perfectly natural process, than we can begin to accept that nothing is going wrong when our bodies start changing in the

ageing process, or when they get sick. There is nothing wrong in this. It is just the way things are.

We all know that there can be an imbalance in the way the elements work together. If one element is predominant to a point that it is not meant to be and the natural balance of the body is disturbed, the body becomes ill. If this does not change and goes on for a long period of time, the body can become very ill indeed. But again, when we speak here of the body, what we are seeing is the unfolding of a process. And of course it does not mean that we shouldn't take care of our body! And as it is our vehicle, we need it to be relatively healthy. What is more, when the body is not well, it becomes all the more difficult to keep up our practice.

What we don't need is the attachment to the body. This means that we do not need a body that is especially beautiful, or especially strong. It is okay as it is, as long as it works and can support us on the path. As long as it functions in a way that we can live with, it is good enough.

Do we attach to the body? Do we spend a lot of time wanting to make it different from how it actually is? Do we really want to spend our time manipulating, controlling, in this way? Living as a nun, I have seen how my perceptions of the body have changed, especially in terms of its importance in my life. It has become obvious to me that attaching to the body is so easy to and yet so unnecessary, almost a waste of time. I can never forget how much time I used to spend as a laywoman doing my hair, looking for the best diet, finding the clothes that suited me best. I think you all know what I am talking about.

All of this feeds the delusion of a self image, that our bodies represent a self which in fact does not really exist except in our minds. Our bodies are what they are and when we look deeper we can see that they are only these processes unfolding, this constant flow of forming and re-forming. In one sense, there's nothing incredibly fantastic about it, while in another, if we consider how these bodies work as systems, that seems like a miracle just in itself. So, if there is anything fantastic about it, then it is inherent in all of us, in all of our bodies, in all of these processes of change. If the body is well, it is an excellent vehicle for liberation. If it is not and we fall into lamentation and wishing it to be otherwise, we actually lose our perspective of it.

In studying this subject of 'the elements', what fascinates me is how we can use the elements and the processes that unfold as a contemplation. We can do this, for example, in our formal practice of walking meditation, by not seeing it as 'the body walking', but as a process of these elements at work. We can observe the air and earth elements coming together, the foot lifting up from the ground, its movement representing the air element. And we can witness the solidity and hardness of the earth element as we put the foot back on ground.

Or when we look at the breathing process, we not only see air moving through the body, but the coming together of all the elements: air, as it passes through the body; earth, in the apparent solidity of the body; the water humidifying the air as it moves; fire warming up the air in the process. We also

see the air element moving the different parts of the body as it passes through.

By directly experiencing this, we have the opportunity to see the body as processes unfolding with the elements at work. We can experience these directly as bodily sensations while we do whatever we do. Contemplating in this way can help us to get a handle on the illusions that we have, about the body and its apparent solidity, about the body as an entity in and of itself.

There is another issue as well, although I do not want to go into this too much here. When strong levels of concentration are developed, these can lead to altered states of perception. Our perceptions change and in the process we are developing powerful mental abilities. What I want to point at here is that these elements can be changed, transmuted or transformed just by mental powers. Isn't it fascinating that believing something to be solid and existing in a certain way is just one possible way of looking at it? Doesn't how we see things depend entirely on our perspective? If we believe our perceptions about the world, others or even ourselves and think that this is the only way of seeing and experiencing, aren't we deluding ourselves?

Reality is simply not like that. It has many more facets that we do not yet know.

MEETING DEATH AND SADNESS

AJAHN CANDASIRI

Recently the young son of one of our most faithful lay friends died. Such an event is a terrible shock, and it's also a strong reminder of the fragility of our human existence. It shows that nothing in this world of conditions can be relied on as a source of lasting happiness and well-being. Certainly we can enjoy the pleasures of life, and experience wonderful relationships with others. We can know enormous amounts of sense pleasure and mental pleasure, all kinds of satisfaction; but when we come to appreciate the fact of change, *aniccā*, we see that none of these things can satisfy us in any lasting way. There's much joy to be found in relationships, but if we rely on them too much, sooner or later there will be tremendous sorrow when the time of separation comes.

It was this sense of vulnerability that led the young prince

Siddhartha Gotama to leave home in search of some kind of stability, some place of balance within the human realm. Having come to appreciate the inevitability of death – the death of his own body and the bodies of all of those he loved – and the facts of sickness and the ageing process, he was deeply disturbed. In an attempt to make sense of it all, he spent six years practising all kinds of austerities, looking for a sense of inner ease and balance. He had realized that there isn't anything very stable and balanced in the world in which we live, and that no matter how successful we are – how popular, attractive, physically strong, gifted or wealthy – no matter how much we possess of all the good things we can possibly imagine, there will inevitably be separation from them. After those six years of practising austerities, Siddhartha Gotama eventually realized that he was no closer to his goal; he had just become extremely emaciated and close to death. Fortunately for us, a milkmaid named Sujata came along and offered him some milk rice, and instead of saying, 'No, no, I'm fasting. Please don't offer me any milk rice', he realized that it would be a good idea to accept it as nourishment for his emaciated body. So he began to take food, and little by little regained his strength. Then according to the legend, on the full moon of May, sitting underneath the Bodhi Tree, he came to the realization that enabled him to win through to perfect enlightenment. He understood perfectly the nature of human existence and, through complete relinquishment, he let go of the causes of suffering.

This was the most important event in his life – and a very important time for all of us too, because if he hadn't come to that understanding and subsequently agreed to share his understanding with others, his teachings would not be available for us today. Shortly after his enlightenment, he considered whether it would be beneficial to share his understanding with others, whether anybody would be able to appreciate it or be at all interested in practising what he taught. It seems that he had serious doubts about this, thinking, 'Maybe it's better just to leave it.' But it's said that then the brahma god Sahampati appeared before him and, with palms joined in reverence, requested a favour, 'Beings are here with but a little dust in their eyes. Pray teach the Dhamma out of compassion for them. There are people who will understand, and who are suffering for want of hearing this teaching.' He begged the newly enlightened Buddha to share this teaching out of compassion.

So the Buddha considered who he might teach, and the first people he thought of were his two former teachers – this would be a way of repaying them for the teaching he had received from them. But he learned that they had both recently died. He then decided to share his understanding with five ascetics who had formerly been his companions, but had left him after having heard that he had eaten some milk rice. They felt he had given up on the struggle to reach the Deathless, and so they decided among themselves that they would offer him some water and a place to sit, but would not

show him any kind of reverence. However, as he approached them, something about his presence was so impressive that in spite of their agreement they found themselves attending to him in a most appropriately respectful way, offering him the best seat and taking care of his robes and bowl. But they still weren't really ready to listen to what he had to say. He had to say to them three times, 'Friends, the Deathless has been found. Listen carefully...' Each time their response was, 'Even practising all those austerities you didn't achieve the goal. How, having given up on your austerities, could you possibly have attained to that state?' Each time he said, 'Listen! The Deathless has been attained. Listen to what I have to say.' Finally, he said, 'Have you heard me say this before?' They admitted that they hadn't, so he said again, 'Listen!', and at last they agreed to listen to what he had to say. First of all he pointed out that there's a middle way, a path between the extremes of austerity and indulgence in sense pleasures which leads to insight, to understanding. This is the path to be developed, to be followed. Then he enumerated what we now know as The Four Noble Truths. The first is that life as a human being is difficult. The Pali word *dukkha* literally means 'hard to bear'. There is suffering: birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, death is suffering. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair are suffering. Association with the disliked is suffering. Separation from the loved is suffering. Not getting what you want is suffering. We can all relate to these things; as human beings, we all experience that life is difficult.

He pointed out that the five focuses of identity – body, feeling, perception, formations and sense consciousness – are suffering too. This is interesting. This body and mind are things we habitually identify with; however, if we cling to them they too inevitably will cause us suffering, because at some stage they will change and die. And before they die we can expect to experience significant amounts of discomfort, either physical – physical pain, feeling too cold, too hot, hungry, thirsty, tired – or mental. All these things are unpleasant states, and even pleasant states are unsatisfactory, are dukkha, because of course they too will change; they can never provide us with any lasting peace and satisfaction. It's interesting that after the Buddha had enumerated the Four Noble Truths, one of the ascetics who were listening to him fully understood what it was that he was pointing to. I always enjoy the description of his understanding, of what he came to appreciate as a result of hearing this teaching. I like it because while the sutta which relates these events is quite long, enumerating in detail each of the Four Noble Truths, the understanding that the Venerable Kondañña reached is just one sentence: 'Everything that has the nature to arise has the nature to cease.'

That was it. All that arises ceases.

It's interesting how sometimes we don't really appreciate the most obvious things. I'm always interested in how long it was before the Buddha really woke up to the facts of old age, sickness and death. According to the legend he was twenty-nine before these facts of human existence really became apparent to him. True, it's said that he had a protected life,

that his father had done his utmost to make sure the young prince didn't experience anything that would cause him to question the values with which he had been brought up. But I find it hard to imagine that he never saw anybody who was old or sick, that he never saw any living being die. However, when I contemplate my own life I begin to understand how that might be the case, because it seems that we have some built-in defence mechanism, something which clouds our vision so that we don't recognize the fact of our own mortality. We tend to live life as though we'll continue forever, putting things off, saying we'll do something next year or at some other time. It's only when something happens to us, or somebody close to us dies, that we are shocked into appreciating the fact of our own mortality. The Buddha talks a lot about this, and encourages us to be very conscious of it – not so that we become totally depressed, but more to give us an incentive to look into our lives and learn as much as we can about this human existence. In this way we can discover and apply the causes of happiness, and begin to relinquish the causes of unhappiness.

When the Buddha finally agreed to offer these teachings, it was out of compassion; he saw that there were beings who were struggling in their lives, who were suffering unnecessarily. He saw that if they could understand certain things they would suffer less, and could eventually experience the sublime happiness of liberation. The first of the Four Noble Truths is that life is difficult. The second is that there is a reason why it's difficult; this is referred to as the cause or origin of suffering, which is attachment to

desire, clinging to desire. Sometimes people misunderstand this and think that Buddhist teaching is about not having any desires – that if you’re a good Buddhist you don’t have any desires! But that would be to enter some kind of zombie-like state, because as human beings, of course we all have desires. Some of them are wholesome and skilful, and some of them are not so skilful. The Buddha’s teachings are always very simple and very precise. He explained that the problem comes from attachment to three different kinds of desire. There’s desire for sense pleasures: delicious food, pleasant fragrances, beautiful sights, pleasant sounds, enjoyable bodily experiences and delightful ideas (in Buddhism the mind is also considered to be a sense). Then there’s the desire to exist, *bhāva tanhā*, the sense of being somebody existing in the world as a permanent, fixed, solid person. The third desire is the desire not to exist, as when we feel fed up with the world and want to do away with ourselves through suicide, blanking out or just sleeping all the time, or using intoxicants so that we don’t actually have to experience life. Attachment to these three kinds of desires causes suffering.

The Third Noble Truth, which is where the good news begins, is that suffering can cease. It ceases when we relinquish our attachment to these desires. We don’t necessarily have to get rid of the desire, but we do need to relinquish the attachment to it. Say you really want some kind of sense pleasure, but then think, ‘Actually, I don’t have to have that...’; it’s such a relief, isn’t it? You suddenly realize that it doesn’t matter if you don’t get whatever it is that you thought you

really wanted.

Often *bhāva tanhā*, the desire to exist, expresses itself through wanting to have our own way. We tend to invest in that a lot. When people used to ask me what was the most difficult thing to give up when I became a nun, it was very easy for me to answer immediately – and it wasn't to do with food or sex, or anything like that... it was having my own way! You may have noticed that when you live with other people, you often don't get your own way... but you can also notice that sometimes, when you really want something to be a particular way, you might suddenly have the thought, 'Actually, I don't need it to be like that – it's OK.' So it's attaching to the desire that is the cause of suffering, and letting go of it is a relief.

Another example is when we want to have the last word in an argument. This can be very funny when you notice what's happening, particularly if the discussion is on something you don't really care about all that much. You feel yourself getting more and more wound up, hotter and hotter as the other person gets hotter and hotter, and the whole thing seems to escalate. But if you suddenly realize what's happening, you can choose just to breathe out and let the other person win. That feeling of not having to win is so pleasant! So when we relinquish that desire to 'be', to exist, to have our way, to win out over somebody, this is where suffering ceases. The Fourth Truth is the Eightfold Path, which consists of basic guidelines for our lives. It's referred to as the Middle Way, the way of balance: perfect view, perfect intention (right intention), right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right

mindfulness and right collectedness or concentration. All these are aspects of our lives that we can develop. As we do so, little by little we experience an increasing sense of ease and lightness as our understanding grows and deepens.

We gradually become clearer about *aniccā*, the fact that everything which arises ceases. We might understand that intellectually at first, but we can still get stuck on it. I notice that sometimes I can start feeling glum, depressed, and that can feel very un-*aniccā*, very permanent. As a result I tend to struggle: 'I don't like this, I want to get out of it. I want to feel happy again. I want to feel bright and positive. I don't want this depression.' It's the same with any unpleasant mind-state. We struggle with it. It can seem permanent, and we react on the basis of the assumption that it will always be there – unless we can get rid of it, do something about it. So we react, we struggle, we suffer. We are caught in that struggle, that suffering. But when we realize that these things are not really permanent, we can respond more skilfully by considering what is going to be most helpful, rather than just blindly flailing around trying to make things all right.

For example, there may be times when you find yourself stuck in a repetitive pattern of thinking and believe you'll never be able to change or get rid of it. Or you may be irritated by something that somebody does – maybe they are breathing too loudly in their meditation, or you don't like the way they walk, or the way they eat or drink. We can latch on to all kinds of things, even if we realize they are totally foolish: 'I'm an adult. I shouldn't mind about these things. I'm a reasonable

human being. I've been practising as a Buddhist for all these years; I should be over this by now.' And yet the thought keeps on repeating, and you think, 'How am I going to get rid of this thought?' This happens to all of us; we get stuck into things. But it's important to point out that even the most irritating pattern of thinking can change. One helpful little mantra in such cases is something like, 'This too will pass.' It's a useful mantra even for pleasant things, because if we are in a pleasant mind-state we tend to want it to last forever. If we have a few moments of *samādhi*, when we're completely with the in-breath and the out-breath and the mind becomes calm, peaceful and blissful, we may find ourselves thinking, 'I want this to last forever. How can I make it last forever? I'd better not move, not open my eyes, and I hope the bell never rings!'

These are subtle ways in which we try to make things last, or repeat them. After having a few moments of peace in meditation, we may think the next time we sit down to meditate, 'How was I sitting?' in the hope of getting back that peace, recreating what we experienced before. And of course, it's lovely if it does happen again. But isn't it better to experience life as it unfolds, moment by moment, to enter into the flow of life, instead of always trying to hold on to what we like and get rid of what we don't like, manipulating things to get them just the way we want them to be? So the contemplation of *aniccā* is really important, because even if things are just the way you want, they're going to change, they're not going to last forever. You can't keep hold of anything!

The second characteristic that's important for us to appreciate is *dukkha*, which refers to both the unsatisfactoriness of unpleasant conditions and the fact that even pleasant conditions don't last; they won't provide lasting satisfaction. All the things we experience as human beings in the world of conditions arise and cease; they all have an unsatisfactory aspect.

The third really important characteristic for us to appreciate is what we call *anatta* or 'not-self'. One way of appreciating this quality of not-self is to investigate whether you can find an actual self. In fact, we create this sense of selfhood without ever really questioning it. 'Where is it? Is it in the body?' If you contemplate your own body in a particular way, you can ask, 'Is the self my hand?... my finger?... maybe it's here in my heart – maybe that's where my self is! Or maybe it's up here in my head....' So we can ask, 'Where am I?', or, 'Is my name, my profession, my gender, my role a self – what I am, essentially?' The Buddha encourages us to contemplate our life in this way, so we come to see that neither the body nor the mind is a self. Feelings are not a self. Thoughts, ideas are not a self. They are not who and what we essentially are. However, rather than struggling to arrive at an idea about what we are, it can be more peaceful just to be what we are – because it doesn't matter what we are. We are! There's something here, but it's not something we need to explain, describe or fix as a solid personal identity.

So these are some thoughts we can consider when we encounter suffering and death. They highlight the importance

of putting our feet on this path of practice, and appreciating the possibility of liberation from the suffering of this human existence. Then, although we will certainly still experience sorrow when those we love die or go away from us, we won't need to struggle with it. We'll be able to experience sadness and death with a sense of peace, because they're a natural part of life, as are birth and joy. We don't have to identify with them, to cling to birth and joy or seek to avoid sorrow and death; we can simply experience them, allowing life to flow. Like everything else, they too will pass.

OLD AGE, SICKNESS AND DEATH

AJAHN SUNDARA

I have been reflecting on how much cooling down we need to do.

As you probably already know, the mind has a lot of heat in it. So we all love cooling down, finding some peace, but we don't always know how to do that. The heat element is not just the fire of our passions; it also expresses the amount of complexity that we build up in ourselves. A very simple fact or reality can become a mountain of issues, difficulties, and problems. The Dhamma perspective asks you to turn away from complexities and look at the simple facts of life. Rather than analyzing a whole train of thought, the Dhamma asks you just to look at thought and see how it behaves. What is it and how long does it last? How does it affect you? We ask these questions not from an intellectual point of view but

from intuitive knowledge – the knowing mind, which Ajahn Sumedho sometimes refers to as ‘intuitive knowing’. It is a knowing which comes not from thinking but from just seeing, from presence.

Sometimes this is a little startling, because as soon as you bring things into ‘presence’ they become simple. Then you can get lost – you may think something is wrong, you are just suppressing something or maybe doing something incorrectly, because life becomes so simple when you are just present. I’m sure you’ve witnessed how many times the mind goes astray during the day, how many times it moves out of this sense of presence, of knowing. If you look deeply at the causes of this movement, it has to do with heat which agitates the mind, creating a kind of turmoil.

In Dhamma practice there are many means of addressing this particular turmoil. One way is sitting on your cushion, but there are also reflections, like the reflection on ageing, sickness and death:

I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond ageing.

I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness.

I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying.

This reflection helps us cool down the mind and bring it to a level where we face facts rather than a world of fantasy. This is what brought me to the Dhamma: wanting to face those three facts of existence, and death in particular, the awareness

that death can happen at any time. There is a whole aspect of the practice which has to do with simple reflections like that – reflecting on the transience of life, on the uncertainty of our existence. Reflecting that we are fit now but one day we may be sick; one day we might no longer have all the privileges we have at present, the privileges of good health, strength in the body and strength and clarity of mind.

When we do not reflect in this way we are likely to be caught up in the illusion of the future and in planning for that future, organizing our life, worrying or getting excited about what could happen, or becoming depressed. The mind creates a whole range of feelings and moods when it forgets that our life could terminate at any time. So paradoxically, this reflection, this recollection of ageing, sickness and death can help us to appreciate our life more positively.

How do we deal with the ageing process? Do we fear being sick? Do we fear death and all that goes with that aspect of our life? We make plans so as to put off dying, doing everything we can not to fall sick or grow old. A lot of energy is spent on that. You can see in our society how many gadgets just to keep us looking young are dangled in front of us – hair dyes, Botox, facelifts, eternal youth pills... ! We try to go against nature, but that means paying a price and in the end it never works.

Ageing, sickness and death are the three signs that propelled the Buddha onto the path of liberation. When the Buddha was a prince he was completely protected from seeing anything that could give him an idea of ageing, sickness and

death. It was only at the age of twenty-nine, when he left his father's palace for the first time and was going through the town, that he saw an old person, a sick person and a dead person, and each time he asked his friend the charioteer Channa, 'What is this? Is that going to happen to me too?' Channa said, 'Yes, all of us are going to age, get sick and die.' Having witnessed and realized this, the Prince decided to find out the meaning of this life. What was the point of being alive if the only things that awaited us were ageing, getting sick and dying? Why were we here in the first place? That is why this reflection is such an important teaching – those three signs were the gateway to the arising of the Buddha's interest in Dhamma.

The first reflection is on ageing: 'I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond ageing'. This reflection is a very potent one, because we are all ageing from the moment we are born. None of us are going to escape. When I was thirty-one, in my mind I felt as if I was ninety. Now, except for the body, I feel much younger. The Dhamma does keep the mind young. If you want to make an investment in your life towards staying young, make sure you practise Dhamma. The wakefulness it teaches is the only thing you can really bank on. Everything will fall apart except that brightness, that radiance of mindfulness. Everything else will just go back to its elements. All of us who are over fifty know that this is true. We are definitely leaning downwards, back to the earth. We're getting podgier, spreading, becoming bent over. If we are really vain

and our personal appearance is all there is to our life, ageing is pretty miserable, isn't it? If you are attached to the body, what a terrible thing when the body is changing, getting sick, growing old, decaying and eventually facing death.

The second reflection is on getting sick: 'I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness'. This reflection reminds us that we never go beyond the risk of sickness, we can never be liberated from fear of sickness or our attachment to health. If we haven't reflected on the body's limitations, the fact that even with the healthiest diet and lifestyle it is prone to sickness, we may dread being sick. When I was a young dancer, before I encountered the Dhamma, I thought I could do *anything* with my body. I never looked at it as a limited thing. I wasn't conscious of my fears regarding the body until I started meditating. Then I realized there was a lot of fear in it, fear of death, of disappearing, of changing, of losing control.

We invest so much in trying to keep the body healthy, which on one level is a good thing; this is our instrument, after all. For example, we have to keep it strong enough to practise. If we didn't have a good back, good knees and a certain degree of general good health, we wouldn't be able to sit and go through what we have to go through when we do intensive practice. But a lot of our mind is kept extremely busy with the body, and this is what you need to see in meditation; that busy-ness and worrying around the desire to keep the body healthy.

We have a very strange, conflictual relationship with the body, because even though we want to stay healthy and strong and youthful, the body also receives all our negativity and

stress. We punish it with certain habits – smoking, drinking, constant worrying. When you are not aware of the body, do not acknowledge it, you can pile up a lot of stress. We can spend a lot of time indulging in mental activities, without paying much attention to how they affect our whole physical experience. So this reflection, ‘I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness’, reminds us to take care of our body and to realize that the body is dependent on the mind and the mind is dependent on the body. They are inter-related. They affect each other: sometimes the body affects the mind, sometimes the mind affects the body. If we do not understand that, we can easily damage the body by overriding the signals that it sends. The body is a very good gauge. If you know how to read them, it gives you every signal you need to know about your mind and how to take care of it.

It is also important not to indulge in endlessly pampering the body. You should understand how it works, but if you are obsessed with the body you will actually make it sick, because the obsession will become worry and that won't help much. So we need to remember that falling sick is not unnatural. The body does get sick. Some people believe that if you think the right thoughts all the time you will never fall ill, but you're still at the mercy of bugs and weaknesses in the body and of organs failing, not necessarily because you have been thinking a certain way. Of course, if you think in a negative way for too long this will affect the body. But sometimes the body just fails, because it is part of nature, like a tree. A tree's leaves fall every year and eventually an old tree falls down,

but not because it was depressed or worried! It hasn't suffered from stress or mismanagement. Falling down is just its nature; at some point it gives up. This is something for us to reflect upon. Sometimes we do create the conditions for ageing more rapidly or falling ill, but in any event we age naturally, because we are part of nature.

Sickness is not a personal problem. You don't need to feel bad about being ill. The Buddha says we are of the nature to fall sick and we haven't gone beyond sickness. If we haven't been ill yet, this is a cause for appreciating our good health and the good health of others – feeling a sense of *muditā* (appreciation), instead of complaining that we don't have the right food, the right conditions or the right job to be healthy. A mind that is always complaining will certainly *make* you sick. But if you appreciate what you have and receive at each moment, that can sustain you – even if it doesn't sustain the health of the body, at least it can sustain the health of the mind.

The third reflection is: 'I am of the nature to die; I will not go beyond dying'. Even before I knew anything about Buddhism, at one point in my life I became interested in reflecting on death. Maybe it was because I was in a vulnerable state, or maybe it was because I was open and searching for the meaning of life. I wished deeply that at the end of my life I might have no regrets. This reflection on death brought me an immediate sense of presence, it immediately brought me down to reality. If I had any doubts about things, which option to take, what to do and how, or similar mental proliferations

about this and that, I'd ask myself, 'If I died tomorrow, what would I like to do now?' The very powerful effect that had on me was just amazing. My whole body would relax and become very at peace with things. That thought was a great cooling factor.

Since becoming a nun I've seen many people dying, and I've been blessed with seeing some of them dying in wonderful ways. This is something that I will always cherish, because when it's my turn I'll be able to call to mind the amazing experience of being with those people right to the end. Over the years several people have come to die at the monastery. There was a Thai lady who temporarily ordained and spent six months with us at Chithurst. Three years later she was diagnosed with liver cancer. She decided to prepare herself to die, so she came back to the monastery. It was extraordinary to be with her during the last six weeks of her life and to see her last minutes – she was so bright and alive. She didn't have much pain. We spent a lot of time around her. The monks and nuns sat in her room and we did some chanting. She had a bag of sweets, and about ten minutes before she died she said, 'Oh, let's share all these sweets, this is my last sensual enjoyment on this earth'. She shared out all the sweets, then five minutes later she lay down and died. Until the end she was very bright, even chirpy, with a kind of energy – a radiance and brightness.

There was also a man who came to die at the monastery. He was himself a Dhamma teacher. He had taught Dhamma for many years and he was interested in talking about *mettā*, so he led a kind of *mettā* seminar. We studied various texts and

reflected on *mettā*. The next morning he died.

So I've been blessed with witnessing these quite inspiring endings. Our own life is also a preparation for death, isn't it? We live well so we can die well. The two go together. If we wholeheartedly put all our good energy into living this life, without holding back, being selfish or caught in fear, we will probably find that we will die much more peacefully. That's what I've noticed; when people have lived a good life they tend to die much more at peace with themselves.

Reflection on dying is a way of appreciating our life right now. When we think of death, we can appreciate each present moment as a very precious moment. This life is a precious life. This opportunity to learn is a precious opportunity. We may be feeling so many things – a sense of failure, regret for the mistakes we have made in life and a reaction of righteousness connected with those mistakes: 'You should have done it this way! Never forgive! Feel bad!', followed by a very quick spiral down into a hell realm. But at that moment you reflect, 'I may die tomorrow, what is important right now? What is meaningful?'

One aspect of ageing, sickness and death is forgiveness: being able to forgive ourselves for being stupid, forgetting to be aware, being misunderstood. Tomorrow we may end, so we do not hold on to old grudges, fears, projections, perceptions or views, the strong ideas we have about ourselves and others. It is so important to develop that lightness which is part of letting go. But letting go calls for skills. It's not just sitting on the cushion. There is reading the Suttas, reflecting on the

teachings, encouraging oneself. Sometimes we need to talk to ourselves too. Ajahn Chah used to encourage his students to talk to themselves as if they were talking to a friend.

The programme of ignorance loves to undermine all the good work that you do. In the poems of enlightened monks and nuns from the time of the Buddha, even though they are enlightened, *Māra* still has the guts to come and say to a nun, 'What are you doing here, Sister? You could be having such fun in life. You could have a husband and make lots of merit and enjoy all the sensual pleasures of the world, instead of looking gaunt and miserable.' And the nun says, 'I know you, Mara. I've seen the limitation of sense pleasures, thank you very much.' We need to remember the goal of our path. If we lose sight of the purpose of practice we can easily get lost. Ageing, sickness and death remind us to reflect on the purpose of this journey of life. Sometimes we can cling to practice so desperately that we may actually lose the moment of insight, of awakening. We forget that in many stories enlightenment happens at the most unexpected moment. For example, one bhikkhuni disciple of the Buddha, *Patācārā*, became enlightened as she put out the wick of her lamp. It wasn't as she was straining and feeling, 'It's coming! It's coming!', she just extinguished her lamp and there was enlightenment! Venerable Ānanda, the Buddha's cousin and devoted attendant, spent a whole night contemplating the body. The story tells us that as he went to lie down, 'before his head touched the pillow and after his feet left the ground, in that interval his heart was

liberated from taints' and he became an Arahant.

We are programmed and conditioned into always wanting, wanting, wanting something. Wanting some proof of the value of our practice and preferably now, not tomorrow: 'I will do it only if it works, and if it doesn't work I'll give up!' But we can learn not to expect anything and just remember these reflections: 'I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond ageing. I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness. I am of the nature to die, I have not gone beyond dying'. The recollection which follows them: 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me', can come as a hard truth to consider. Everything will be separated from us. That teaches us to remember to enjoy fully what is here with us now, as one day it will be gone. Worrying about *when* it will go or being miserable while it is present and thinking too much about the future will spoil the joy of life.

Reflection is a way of training the mind. Although that word may conjure up ideas of military training, and becoming a good Dhamma soldier, we have to be quite realistic. The path is about training the mind/heart. But the training does not have to be militaristic; it is a compassionate training that helps the mind to be free from delusion and pain. The mind as we experience it is not what we are, but we still have to live with it, so we have to guide it in a kindly way and give it some pointers, some guidelines to help its energy flow in the the right direction. During difficult times we can recall that

THE BODY

many things, many good forces are helping and supporting our endeavour to walk this path. These reflections on ageing, sickness and death are among them.

GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY

AJAHN CANDASIRI

I recently visited some relatives in Canada, where I also had a chance to share *Dhamma* with various Buddhist groups there. I realized that when people don't have a local monastery or regular contact with *Dhamma* teachings, they really seem to value having contact with a monk or nun. These people were very interested, very eager. They had lots of questions and seemed very enthusiastic about practice.

GROWING OLD

One of the things that struck me most forcefully during my visit was a question that someone asked in one of the meditation workshops. She said she was noticing that as she grew older she tended to forget things, her mind is no longer

so bright and clear. She asked, 'How do you practise with this? I know that it's not going to get any better; I can feel that my mind is going.'

After she had asked this question there was an awesome hush in the room. I think quite a few of the people there were aware that they were no longer remembering things so well. Though they were from a wide range of ages, the fact of ageing was very real for all of them. It's clear that we can't stop the ageing process, but how can we practise with it? Is there anything we can do to make it all less difficult for ourselves and others? What was really striking was that shared realization of the inevitability of old age, sickness and death; this is something that all of us are facing right now in varying degrees – and we can't do anything about it. Some people will completely lose their minds fairly early on. Others of us may grow into our seventies, eighties or nineties with a mind that is still quite bright, but certainly the body will change. How can Buddhist practice support a sense of well-being during this process?

WELL-BEING

It was a particularly interesting question because the theme I had chosen for the workshop was 'Well-Being': maintaining well-being. I have come to see that well-being is a necessary foundation for practice. It is said that you can't teach people when they're hungry; you have to feed them first. There has to be a reasonable degree of well-being to really contemplate

dhamma, otherwise the bodily and mental stress become too much of a distraction.

MINDFULNESS

Whenever I am asked a question, rather than thinking and struggling to find a suitable response, I tend to go quiet and see what arises. So when the person asked the question about ageing, I turned my attention inwards, listened and felt what was behind her question. I realized that the only response I could give was to say, 'Mindfulness'; that the way to prepare for and manage the process of growing old is to cultivate mindfulness – a quality of presence and a sense of ease and well-being.

I've noticed that when my mind is a bit forgetful, or if I have some physical discomfort or pain, my habitual reaction is a tensing up, a feeling of anxiety or panic: 'Oh dear, what's happening here?' There is a kind of mental freezing, but that actually makes things worse. It doesn't help me, and it doesn't help the people I'm in contact with because they become tense, anxious and worried as well. However, if I can just relax and acknowledge what's happening, I don't add to the difficulty I might be experiencing. I'm not adding to the concern that other people may feel. It's as though I'm taking responsibility for what is happening to myself moment by moment, acknowledging, 'OK, this is how it is right now.' Because of the ageing process we may make a mistake, forget to do something or get something wrong. But if we can be

mindful, present and aware of what's happened, and just acknowledge what's happened, there is a chance to correct the mistake, to make amends.

For example, those of you who work in the monastery kitchen meet many people who visit at weekends. They tell you their names and a little about themselves, but then when you meet them three weeks or a month later, you may not remember their name or what it was they told you about themselves. This is because you have met so many people. It is not easy to remember so many names or to put names to faces. I find that in those situations I have a number of choices. I can try bluffing, pretending that I can remember the person, but usually what works best is just to admit: 'I really can't remember having met you before.' Then they may tell me a little bit about themselves, and that jogs my memory. Sometimes I can remember them, but I have no idea what their name is or what they do, so then I have to say: 'Well, I can remember you, but I'm afraid I can't remember what your name is.' I find that actually people are very forgiving if I am straight with them and acknowledge: 'I can't remember who you are.' Most people can accept that. More than our remembering everything about them, what they seem to respond to is the quality of our presence. I remember realizing many years ago, when I was in conversation with somebody, that what was most important for me in relation to that person was not to spend a lot of time in conversation with them, or that I wanted them to do anything in particular for me; what I was looking for was simply a quality of presence.

When one is able to fully acknowledge someone's presence, whatever may be needed can happen in just a few seconds. There is the sense that somebody is right there, present and attending to you; there is a sense of connection.

This was some of what I said to the lady in Canada who asked about growing old and forgetfulness. I encouraged her just to try to make a habit of mindfulness, a habit of presence, so that even when she forgot something or made a mistake, she could simply acknowledge that. Forgetfulness and mistakes needn't be a big deal; and if people are very upset, just staying present can be the most helpful response to their concern or irritation. One of the beauties of living in an international community is that we are in contact with people from many backgrounds, with different expectations, skills and gifts so there are often misunderstandings. This gives us the chance to develop great patience, kindness and acceptance of one another.

CULTIVATING PATIENCE

This leads to the second thing that came to mind when I was speaking to that lady. It was the importance of cultivating not only the habit of presence, but also kindness, patience, appreciation, contentment and forgiveness. These are qualities that I have found helpful throughout my monastic life and training. I suspect that if I can keep perfecting them, then when I am a really old lady, not just elderly (as I am now!), they will be a most valuable resource. It is good to begin to cultivate these qualities while we are still young, because as

we get older we tend to become more fixed in our ways. Our ingrained habits become more intractable, less easy to work with; so it's important, first of all, to recognize those habitual tendencies.

Some of us who had the opportunity to look after Sister Uppala found that experience very helpful. She lived in our community for about seven or eight years, until she died at the age of ninety. Whenever I was around her I got an idea of just how patient one must be as one gets older, because everything becomes more difficult and time-consuming. She couldn't see or hear so well, couldn't move around so easily. Life became more and more difficult for her, so she was dependent on many people helping her. She certainly tested our patience, but you could also see the extent to which her situation required great patience from her side too, because we couldn't always understand what was needed, didn't always arrive on time, didn't always get things right. It's hard to have to rely on other people who may not always get things right. So I am suggesting that we make cultivating patience a priority.

Winter is a good time for cultivating patience. It takes effort just to get dressed warmly enough to move about from building to building in our monasteries. One time at Chithurst I counted. I needed something like twenty garments to go out and do walking meditation: two pairs of socks, long johns, two hats, two pairs of gloves, a pullover, scarves, a number of other bits and pieces, just to keep warm. After you've put them all on you might realize you've forgotten something, so you have

to unlace your boots to go back into your *kuti*! All that gives a chance to cultivate patience—a willingness to be present with the different things we need to attend to. It's a very useful reflection as a counter-balance to restlessness and agitation.

ONE THING AT A TIME

In the monastery some people have many duties, many things to attend to. Something else people asked about when I was in Canada was: 'How can we bring mindfulness into everyday life, when we have so many things to attend to, so many demands on our time and energy?' Then I thought of Ajahn Sucitto's advice once when we were preparing for some important event here at Amaravati. He said, 'Well, there's a tremendous amount to do – so we must go very slowly, very carefully.' I've always remembered that, because it reminds me of the need to attend to just one thing at a time.

When we have many things to do, we have a tendency to carry them all in our mind. It's like having twenty people to see. Rather than just being with each person and attending only to them, we allow the pressure of all twenty to queue up, to crowd into our mind and make us feel agitated. Whereas I've found that if I can attend to things carefully, one at a time, I find that I have plenty of energy for everything, and I don't feel frazzled and agitated by the end of the day. This is another useful reflection for us here in the monastery. Can we cultivate patience in our daily life, doing just one thing, then the next, then the next, rather than allowing them all to queue up in our minds, putting a sense of pressure into our activity?

CALM COLLECTED ENERGY

This requires a willingness to be present, to be mindful, and an interest in being calm. I say this because it can be quite exciting to have many things to do. I can get quite a high out of it, and I imagine it's the same for some of you. A kind of energy and momentum can arise, and we end up doing a great number of things on this high kind of energy – which is different from the collected energy that comes when we're mindful. This restless energy arises when we're moving towards something in the future; it is like a succession of rebirths. The energy of rebirth is pulling us into the next thing. There is an aspect of humanity, of our human existence, that loves this, that wants to be reborn, to exist. We call this desire to exist, which leads to a continuous taking of rebirth, *bhavatanha*. However, those of you who have begun to be attentive to it as it happens in daily life may have seen that it is actually quite a dangerous energy. I've noticed myself that if I follow it, it can easily lead to exhaustion and burnout. It's not sustainable, and it can also lead to a feeling of irritability that can be extremely unfortunate. We can do or say things that really upset others, even without meaning to – we just blurt things out on the spur of the moment when we're caught up in this restless energy of becoming.

So having a lot to do can give us a sense of self-importance, but it's not a peaceful state, and it can have unfortunate consequences. It's really important to notice when that is happening for us. We don't need to stop doing the things we've undertaken, but we can change the way we do them.

We recognize the excited energy that wants to be reborn, but we decide that actually peacefulness is more to be treasured. Being peaceful is even more precious than becoming or having a mission. So we take a moment just to breathe:

Breathing in for the Buddha...
breathing out for the Buddha...
Breathing in for the Dhamma...
breathing out for the Dhamma...
Breathing in for the Sangha...
breathing out for the Sangha...

establishing ourselves in the Refuge of the Triple Gem. We breathe awareness into the body and attend to whatever it is that we have to do, whether it's a conversation we're having or some duty like hanging up the tea towels. I hung up the tea towels today. Until then I hadn't been aware of this duty that someone has to do each day. There were a great many tea towels, I couldn't believe how many! I thought, 'I'll just hang up a few of them', but then I hung up a few more, and presently they were all done. I hope the person who usually does this job is able to enjoy hanging them up one at a time, rather than thinking: 'I've got to do this, and I've got to do that, and I'm never going to get it all done!'

Many years ago, before I was a nun, I was part of a Christian meditation group. We had invited a very impressive Orthodox priest to visit the group one evening to give a short reflection. As part of his talk, he said, 'If I have fifty letters to write (that

blew me away, the thought of fifty letters to write!) I write the first one, then I write the second one, and, in time, by the grace of God, all fifty letters are written.' As Buddhists we'd say that if we just do one thing at a time, attending fully to what we're doing, then in due course the job can be completed.

KEEPING THE HEART SWEET

Of course, we may actually have taken on more than we can complete. This too requires a mindful response, and a willingness to take responsibility. If we have a large number of things to do, instead of acknowledging what is happening, that we've taken on more than we can reasonably handle, we may find ourselves blaming somebody else or blaming 'the system.' So we blow up at someone: 'I can't do all this! Can't you see I've got far too much to do?' It may be that the person who asked you wasn't aware you had too much to do, that they weren't intending to torture you. They simply hadn't realized. This is something else that is useful: to be attentive so as to notice irritation, anger, and ill-will as they arise. To return to the theme of how we can prepare for old age, this too can be part of our ageing strategy: learning how to recognize irritability and ill-will before they come tumbling out and hurt somebody, trying to keep the heart sweet. Everybody wants to look after a sweet old man or a sweet old lady, but looking after a sour old lady is a very different proposition!

So as a matter of enlightened self-interest, we should look at how we can cultivate sweetness of heart. Obviously, one way we can do this is to be attentive and notice when the

heart is not sweet, when it is sour. This happens to everybody. I don't imagine there's anyone here who doesn't sometimes get sour and nasty inside. I know many of you have become very skilled at not allowing it to pour out, but I'm sure that even for those of you who have really cultivated an attitude of kindness and beautiful speech, there are still moments of irritability and criticism of yourself or somebody else. We really need to take an interest in this. I talk about it a lot because it's so unpleasant to have a nasty thought, a mean thought, to feel critical and judgemental.

RIGHT INTENTION AND PATIENCE

Until we really understand what the Buddha is pointing to, we may think that Right Intention means we shouldn't have unpleasant thoughts, thoughts of ill-will and so on, but always have sweet thoughts. But the intention that the Buddha encouraged is the intention of mindfulness, of awareness, and the willingness to bear patiently with irritability, anger or ill-will as they arise. This is the intention to allow them to cease in consciousness, knowing that like everything else, they're impermanent, changing and definitely not what you are. You are not an angry person because you have an angry thought. You are not a grumpy person if you have a grumpy thought. If you have a mean, deluded, jealous, despairing thought, such thoughts are not what you are as a permanent, enduring entity. You don't have to worry about them, they are not part of what you are. They're simply passing visitors—unpleasant visitors, admittedly, but not anything that we need to grasp

hold of. We don't even have to struggle to get rid of them. All we have to do is notice they're there, with an attitude of immense patience and kindness. So rather than hating ourselves for hating somebody else, when we find hatred or aversion arising in relation to another person, we need only say: 'OK, this is what's happening right now. I can bear this, I don't have to fight it or struggle with it. It's not that I'm a horrible person; this is simply what has arisen. It's OK.' When we can be present with our malevolence, our negativity, when we can be patient with it, this leads us naturally to sweetness of heart. Through recognizing these things in our own hearts and learning how to not judge ourselves, we become much less judgemental of others. This happens quite naturally. We don't have to force it. All we need to do is attend carefully to our own hearts. I call this 'staying in touch'.

BEING PRESENT IN MEDITATION

In our approach to meditation we may sometimes want to jump ahead and get to the bliss. We want to get the *jhanas*, we want to get enlightened. This is understandable, because these things are said to be very pleasurable, very desirable. The Buddha talked about them as being allowable happiness, allowable pleasure – the kind of pleasure that does not have harmful consequences. However, in order to experience them, we need to cultivate a quality of presence. We need to find a place of well-being and ease in the present.

So in talking about meditation I find it helpful to think

about cultivating a sense of presence, just being fully present with ourselves as we are right now. We can use the breath as a focus for the mind, but rather than struggling with the fact that we may not be perfectly present with each and every breath—and then giving up, because we think we can't do this practice—it can be more helpful to ask: 'How is it right now? What's happening right now? Can I enjoy breathing in? Can I enjoy breathing out? Can I just notice what's happening in my mind?' If you've had a very busy day, doing lots of different things, it may be that the mind is quite agitated. There is probably a lot of thinking, planning and remembering all the things you've been doing, or you want to get into some pleasant state. All sorts of things can be going on in your mind, whereas cultivating a quality of presence is just noticing: 'How is it? What's happening right here, right now?'

So we make this the priority of our life: cultivating a sense of ease and well-being, a sense of presence, a sense of acceptance, a sense of acknowledgement: 'This is how it is. This is how I'm feeling right now, this is what's happening for me right now.' Knowing that this present moment is our Refuge. Being the knowing, being Buddha. Attuning to the awareness of what's happening now, to *Dhamma*, the Truth of this moment. And aligning ourselves to the Sangha, that which aspires to live in accordance with Truth. We make the cultivation of this Triple Refuge the priority of our life, rather than relying on this body, relying on this mind.

PREPARING FOR THE FINAL RELINQUISHMENT

No matter how skilled we become at cooking or giving *Dhamma* talks, or even at meditation itself; no matter how brilliant we are at chanting, able to remember all the chants by heart; no matter how accomplished we become at anything, sooner or later we're going to lose it. I'm not saying we shouldn't do these things, but we need to keep in mind that no matter how good we are at any of them, in due course we're going to have to experience the lessening of these abilities. Little by little things are going to change – until the final relinquishment of this mortal existence. We don't have any choice about that, but we do have a choice as to how we approach it. If we cultivate mindfulness, patience, sweetness of heart, they will be most valuable resources when that time comes. And these are things we can be doing here in this monastery: we can make Amaravati a place of preparation. Ajahn Chah used to say that you come to the monastery to die. In a sense, that's what we have come here for – not that it's going to happen immediately, but we can practise dying to each moment, letting go of each moment. In this way we prepare for the final big one, the final letting go.

I offer this as a reflection, an encouragement. May we all always celebrate this opportunity that we have to practise in this place, and really treasure the situation that we have here. Those of you who don't live here, please come often and make use of this opportunity too. If you have to go far away from the monastery you can take it with you in your heart. This

is what I did in Canada. When I felt lonely I remembered this place and the community here, my brothers and sisters in the holy life. This is how we see that we can have Amaravati with us wherever we go, wherever we are, whoever we're with: we have Amaravati with us, right here in our hearts.

SHADOWS BATTLING WITH SHADOWS

AJAHN SUNDARA

After his enlightenment the Buddha was on the verge of giving up the idea of transmitting the realization of truth that he had experienced. But from the heavenly world the Brahma God Sahampati saw the Buddha's intention. With speed that is described in the suttas as 'as fast as you can flex and open a forearm', he came down from the heavenly realm and with palms joined in reverence, requested a favour of the Buddha: 'There are beings who have but little dust in their eyes. Pray, teach the Dhamma out of compassion for them.' And the Buddha agreed, and so here we are.

Without Brahma Sahampati we might never have received this teaching. Can you imagine? Can you imagine staying in a state of misery and suffering and having no way out, struggling to find a way? We're lucky. I really think we should

express our gratitude to Brahma Sahampati on a daily basis for having been so sharp, so enlightened, so prescient. So that was a good thing. Among all the miseries of the world there are a few good things, like Brahma Sahampati's intervention with the Buddha.

And then there are a lot of things that are not so great. It's not so great having a body that's growing old. It can seem great to have a body when it's young, happy and energetic, but then you start growing old, with grey hair, wrinkles, loss of memory. You start moving more slowly. This is when we meet the heavenly messengers, old age, sickness and death. They're heavenly because from the point of view of the path of practice they really wake you up. When we have not reflected on those messengers old age, sickness and death can be pretty scary – although, in some ways we're dying all the time.

I used play with my mind with thoughts such as 'what would happen to my mind if I knew that I was going to die'. When I was younger, an actor I'd really liked died of a heart attack. He was only about thirty years old. I was only about thirty too. On that day the penny dropped for me: 'Wow! You could die tomorrow! So how are you going to spend the rest of your life?' That really cut out a lot of my troubles. When you start reflecting on death our problems seem to be decreasing by about 80%! It was a blessing to have been suddenly made aware that I could die at any time. The blessing was that most of my concerns about the future would disappear. What a wonderful thing.

If you knew you were going to die within a year, what would you do? If you feel a bit fuzzy and confused about your life, ask yourself, 'What would I do if I were to die tomorrow?' This simple reflection on death has a very powerful effect. It seems to realign your mind, body and spirit in such a way that the Dhamma becomes apparent much more quickly. Sometimes we can't see the Dhamma, we can't see the truth of this life because we are so caught up in mind-states that are cloudy, confusing and murky. And of course that makes us more and more depressed, and we just don't know how to deal with things. Life becomes a real burden. Death is part of life. It is a normal, natural thing. There's nothing we can do about it except live life as skilfully as possible, because every time we go against the harmony of our mind and body, against the truth of the way things are, it hurts, you're wounding yourself somehow.

One aspect of *dukkha* has to do with how we concoct things in our minds. We create mental concoctions that prevent us from being touched by reality or the 'way things are'. There is the habit of the self-concoctions; we create something out of an illusion, and that something is called 'me'. Deep down we know that 'me' isn't real - we're trying to believe something which we really know is illusive, and that can be quite disheartening. We walk around with a little flag that reads, 'I know', when in reality we we don't because life is unknown. For a long time that is the only way we trust. We don't have any access to a deeper source of knowledge.

The *dukkha* of change (*vipariṇāma dukkha*) is probably the easiest *dukkha* to see, but realization of this *dukkha* is difficult to integrate in our lives. It's the constant reminder of how unstable our lives can be, the fact that we don't know whether tomorrow we'll still be the same. As you get older this truth becomes much more apparent. When you are young you think you are going to live forever and you base your plans and hopes on a lot of assumptions that our life is predictable, but that's tragic because things never stay the same. You find yourself constantly looking for stability in a world of permanent change. So even though the *dukkha* of change is not difficult to see, it is the harshest one to come to terms with because it is destabilizing. Our sense of security is based on stability, on what seems solid or so we think. We try to establish material stability by having a job, enough money to live on and enough resources to not be in the street begging. But the Buddha talks about another kind of security, the security of living a good life – not a good material life but a good inner life, a life that is integrated in goodness, in merit, in what makes our heart happy. We can rest in that life as a secure refuge, the refuge of being able to access the qualities in ourselves that are going to bring merit.

In the Buddhist teachings, 'merit' has a specific meaning. It doesn't mean, 'If I give you this, you give me that.' The Buddha taught, 'Do not fear merit, monks, because merit is another word for happiness.' So when the Buddha talks about merit or an action leading to merit, he means happiness or an action leading to happiness.

We're all hooked on happiness. I don't think any of us are really that interested in developing a path of unhappiness. Yet we do that so often – we follow an avenue that leads us to confusion, misery, anger and frustration, and then we say, 'How did I get here?' This is often simply the result of unwise thinking.

The delusion of permanence is very strong. Unless we are mindful of the mind and see clearly how fluid its content is we are stuck in the illusion of solidity. The body seems very solid. The walls of the Retreat Centre at Amaravati seem solid, but if you had a huge microscope you might see just molecules vibrating. That would be an interesting thing, to suddenly see the whole Retreat Centre as just a mass of vibration. Meditation can lead you to see the instability and insubstantiality of what we assume to be stable and substantial. The solidity of self, the solidity of 'me', needs to be seen through. It seems so real, and seeing through this illusion can be frightening. And yet when we believe in the solidity of 'self', 'me', 'mine', we relate to life in a distorted way, and the result is suffering.

Suffering is often the result of not seeing things clearly. So we all suffer a lot when we are not vigilant and mindful. Every time somebody threatens us or says something that we don't like, we can feel wounded or hurt – and having been hurt, our illusion of self immediately starts attacking another illusory self, which is weird, isn't it? We are in a strange world of illusions. Our illusory 'self' is attacking somebody else's illusory 'self' – shadows battling with shadows. It's about time we woke up to this illusion!

But let's not cling to the idea of 'no self' either. This is something else which confuses people; they start believing that you have to find a 'no self' somewhere. But there isn't a 'no self', there is letting go of self. That's *anatta*. You're just not falling into the illusion of self. That's it. It's not a big deal.

In our practice we experience moments when we are not obsessed by 'me and mine', and our stories, thoughts and feelings. We have moments when we are experiencing the five *khandhas* doing what they're supposed to be doing – forms are just forms, memories are just memories, thoughts are just thoughts, feelings are just feelings, sense-consciousness is just sense-consciousness.

In your practice, as you look at this manifestation of 'self', you begin to see that it's constantly moving, changing. Having seen this, we need to start integrating this knowledge into our daily life. Integration means actually acting on what we know. It's not fast work. It's not a speedy sort of activity. Ajahn Chah used to say it's like going at the speed of an earthworm. We don't need to go very fast. We just do what we can. The faster we want to go, the worse it becomes. Ajahn Chah pointed out that we should go slowly, take time and humbly accept the fact that we can't go any faster, that maybe we are slow learners.

So what is our refuge? A mind that is heedful, content, respectful of others, generous, kind – this is our refuge. We listen to the Dhamma and come close to people who are true practitioners – this is a refuge, both internally and externally. Externally we can arrange our life so it supports our Dhamma practice, supports the good that we wish to

support and cultivate in ourselves, the strength that we are looking for, the confidence that we wish for in our life. We move towards situations which can support that. There is a conscious turning of the mind towards the Dhamma. This doesn't happen by itself. You need to teach your mind how to move towards things that are more skilful, more truly secure. We need to gently teach our minds not to depend on external conditions any more, because even good things in our life can change.

Where is our confidence when things fall apart, fall away or disappear? How do we face the truth of change, sickness, ageing, death? Where is our strength at that moment? This is the kind of refuge we want to gradually build, one that's so secure that even when you die you're not going to fret too much. Day by day, continue your practice with great effort and balance; and if you feel discouraged just ask yourself: 'Who is discouraged?'

REFLECTING ON WELLBEING

AJAHN CANDASIRI

One of the things that most interests me is the sense of well-being, so I'd like to reflect on a chant that we do very frequently in the monastery. The Pāli begins: *Aham sukhito homi, niddukho homi, avero homi, abyāpajjho homi, anīgho homi, sukhi attānam pariharāmi* – 'May I abide in well-being, in freedom from affliction, in freedom from hostility, in freedom from ill-will, in freedom from anxiety, and may I maintain well-being in myself.'

The word *sukhito* can be translated as 'happy' or 'blessed' – a sense of blessedness or being blessed. This is something we can consider. We might see being blessed as something to do with angels and saints, or special people. But we can also consider in what sense we ourselves are blessed. In fact, that is something we can bring about simply through the

way we live our lives at the most ordinary level. For example, we can practise generosity, which may involve something as simple as having time for each other, really listening to one another. I don't like talking to people when I feel they haven't got time for me, I'd rather not bother. On the other hand, an extraordinary feeling comes when I sense that somebody is able to take the time to give me their full attention. It might just be a couple of minutes, but I find the sense that a person is right there and able to be with me extremely nourishing; and I realize that when I can do the same for other people, they too will find it nourishing. I think we could solve a lot of problems for each other by just being able to do this; it can bring about a kind of healing. This is a form of generosity whose value we can easily underestimate.

We can also reflect on the goodness, or virtue, of our lives. This is another source of blessing: *sīla*, the way we keep the Precepts – how we use and apply them in our lives. It too can bring a feeling of well-being. We can take care to avoid harming anything – even a mosquito, a slug or a spider that we might not like particularly, that we are frightened of or find repulsive. But they too want to live, they too want to be well. What gradually arises when we live carefully and responsibly in this way is a sense of gladness, which is perhaps what we mean by this feeling of being blessed. It's a feeling of rejoicing in the presence of other beings, in their welfare and happiness. So even very simple beginnings in generosity, kindness, upholding a precept structure, are a foundation for a sense of blessing that we can enjoy in our lives.

We're not really used to enjoying these kinds of things; usually we're more accustomed to thinking about our unworthiness, our faults and our failures, rather than about our worthiness. It's almost as if we're afraid we might become complacent or swollen-headed if we start thinking about how good we are. But I think that if we don't do this, we're missing out on something very important and precious in our lives. It's very important to enjoy life. Now, we can tend to think of enjoyment as being selfish, indulgent or unskilful, but what I'm talking about is the skilful enjoyment of life. So when we chant, 'May I abide in well-being', *aham sukhito homi* – 'may I have an experience of blessing and happiness in my life' – it's not just wishful thinking. It's about creating the causes for blessings to arise, and then allowing ourselves to enjoy that sense of blessing, that sense of well-being. It's quite legitimate to enjoy the blessings of virtue and generosity.

When we go on our alms-round I sometimes think. 'What on earth am I doing? This is crazy, going out and depending on other people for my meal today.' But behind that there's the thought: 'I'm giving people an opportunity to do something that's going to make them happy: to practise generosity. Putting something into my alms-bowl will not only nourish me, but also nourish their own hearts.' As any of you who've participated in this will know, we stand in a place where it's possible for people to ignore us and pass by – and most people do. But with those who actually do come up and offer something, there's always a feeling of happiness, almost a sense of fun, of doing something a little out of the ordinary.

Even when I did this in India and had beggars putting food in my bowl, it was quite amazing to see the happiness that arose from sharing the few biscuits or pieces of bread they had.

Next we have *niddukkho homi*, 'May I abide in freedom from affliction, in freedom from suffering'. We can tend to think that this means, 'Can I please avoid suffering. I don't want suffering, I don't like suffering – may I live free from suffering, not having suffering.' And of course, it would be very nice if we could indeed live free from suffering. But actually it requires quite a lot of wise reflection to live free from suffering – and there are certain sufferings that we can't avoid. We can't avoid the suffering of old age, sickness and death, our own deaths or the deaths of those we love. Then there's bodily discomfort and pain. However, there is also suffering that we can avoid, though it takes practice; it takes wise reflection, it takes effort and understanding. There is the suffering that comes because of wanting things to be other than the way they are. We can suffer because we want a certain position; we want to have our own way; we want people to agree with us; we want people to like us. We want to succeed, not to fail, we don't want to be disappointed or hurt. The list is endless. But the cure is very simple, once we get the hang of it – once we learn how to let go of desire. It's a lifetime's practice, it doesn't just happen. But gradually we can learn how to see things in accordance with *Dhamma*, rather than in accordance with our ideas, our conditioning, our wishes, hopes and longings. We can learn how to see things in accordance with reality, so that we don't pin our hopes, our aspirations, on things that can

never satisfy, can never heal us or bring us any lasting sense of happiness and peace. So *niddukkho homi*, ‘freedom from affliction’ is something attainable, but like everything else it requires effort, reflection and understanding.

Next we consider how we can let go of hostility and ill-will, *avero homi*, *abyāpajjho homi* – ill-will, malevolence, vengefulness, resentment, bitterness, hatred, all these things that cause us misery. One problem is that often we don’t even see that they’re causing us suffering. People can spend hours, or even days, weeks, months, years, feeling resentful about being slighted, ignored or hurt by somebody else. Sometimes our grumbling can bring a kind of gratification; a feeling of righteousness, of being right and someone else or the situation being wrong – but is that really happiness? Is that really well-being? When I look into my own heart I see that it’s not. It’s not really what I want. It’s not really how I want to live my life. This is very important. Sometimes we’re not even aware of our mental habits. I’ve found particularly that I can be quite unaware of how I relate to myself, I’m not aware of the criticism, judgement and ill-will I can have towards this being; there is a tendency to judge and undermine myself whenever I make a mistake. It’s like having a mean parrot sitting on my shoulder, whispering: ‘You’re no good. You could have done that better. Why did you do that? Why did you say that? She’s much better than you, you should be like her – but you couldn’t be, you’re hopeless.’ Probably each of you has a slightly different voice inside – yours might be saying things like this in German, French, Japanese or Chinese

– but whatever language it is, it’s still the same message. It still burrows away into any sense of well-being, blessedness or happiness.

I remember once at Chithurst I was having a retreat, and I was going through the pattern, ‘You’re no good. You should be able to meditate better. You’ll never be any good. All these years you’ve been practising, and still you can’t concentrate. Your mind’s all over the place. *You’re lazy...!*’ I remember contemplating this misery. It was just before the meal-time. I was standing by the back door feeling mildly miserable. Then I began to reflect on one of the qualities of the Buddha, *bhagavā*, which means ‘blessed one’, and I was thinking about what being blessed would feel like. It would be a feeling of fullness, of happiness. Then I thought, ‘Well, you’re not feeling very full and happy, are you?’ I saw that this rather pathetic, miserable, empty feeling was completely the opposite of feeling blessed; and I began to see what I was doing to myself. No one else was doing it to me, it was something that was coming from my own mind – and I realized it was there quite a lot of the time. I saw at that point that I had a choice. I could choose whether to continue to live with this mild misery, or to consciously generate a sense of well-being, or blessedness, that was free from this negativity. I thought, ‘Well, that’s not how I relate to other people. If someone comes to me and tells me their meditation is no good or that they don’t feel worthy, I don’t say to them, ‘Well, that’s true. You’re not really very good, are you?’ Usually, I’d say to them, ‘That’s all right. Don’t worry. Keep on trying. Contemplate the goodness of your life

so you can notice that actually you're doing very well – look at how most people are living!' I'd talk to people in positive, encouraging ways; and I realized that I could talk like that to myself as well, rather than being so mean, critical and nasty. So we can learn how to relate to ourselves in more loving and positive ways. Rather than waiting for someone else to come along and encourage us, we can do this for ourselves.

We also need to be very careful about the ill-will that we can harbour towards one another – particularly when we're right! Maybe someone is making a complete mess of things, and being quite unskilful in the way that they're living. Well, what's a skilful response to that? I remember during one winter retreat at the time of the First Gulf War, Ajahn Sumedho would listen to the news, and each day he would tell us about what was happening during this war. He talked about Saddam Hussein, who was definitely being portrayed as the villain. I noticed in my own heart a tendency to feel a lot of anger, a lot of righteousness, indignation, even quite powerful rage in relation to this human being who seemed to be causing so much harm to others. So as I reflected on this. I thought, 'Well, is this vengefulness that I'm feeling the most skilful response?...' There was a feeling of wanting to punish him in some way for the things he was doing. I wanted to make sure he got what he deserved, 'Well, he deserves something really horrible – and it's up to me to make sure he gets it!' It was a very powerful feeling. I've had it in relation to other people as well, this sense that it's up to me to punish them and bring about justice. This can happen in quite obvious and extreme

ways, but it can also happen in subtle ways. I've noticed it in relation to little things that can happen in the monastery – somebody consistently not turning up for the washing up, or being late for *pūjā* – I can have a similar feeling of indignation, wanting to sort them out, to put them right.

Many years ago at Chithurst when I was an *anāgārika*, I was in the kitchen making tea one day. It was winter time and the kitchen at Chithurst used to be very popular in winter because it was a place where it was warm – everywhere else was cold and damp. Ajahn Anando, who was the senior monk at that particular time, came into the kitchen. He'd obviously been having a very difficult time with somebody; he looked at me, sighed and said, 'Thank goodness I don't have to be concerned with sorting out other people's kamma!' I've reflected on that a lot – the feeling of having to sort people out, and make sure they get their just deserts. But actually we don't have to do that, it's not up to us to punish, blame or take revenge. We can let go of that, and it's such a relief. The law of kamma takes care of it all; we don't need to concern ourselves with judging or punishing each other.

So the good news is that it's not up to us to sort these things out. Our duty is to maintain a sense of ease and well-being. Our duty is to free the heart from suffering. Our duty is to realize complete liberation. That's our duty. Our duty isn't to fall into hell over somebody else's misdeed – we don't have to do that. We have a choice. We don't have to linger in states of resentment, bitterness or cruelty. The Buddha talks about this in the Dhammapada: he says that hatred never ceases

through hatred. You're not going to find happiness if you keep thinking about somebody who's abused you, hurt you, robbed you or beaten you up. That doesn't bring us a sense of well-being. With mindfulness, we realize we have a choice. We don't have to stay in these states. We can let them go.

But sometimes it's not so easy, is it? These thoughts can really get under the skin and obsess the mind. It's at those times that we need to bring out our tool-kit – I often see the Buddha's teachings as a tool-kit of techniques for dealing with particular difficulties. There's a very good tool-kit for obsessive unskilful thoughts of one kind or another. Of course, we have to recognize them as being unskilful – that's a very important first step. Sometimes people become quite overwhelmed when they start to notice these things. They say, 'Oh, I thought I was such a nice person before I started to meditate, and now I see all these mean, nasty thoughts and unskilful habits.' But you can't begin to cure any disease until you recognize that you have it. So when people come to me and say things like: 'I didn't realise how awful I was', I say, 'Well, really it's a great blessing to realize how awful you are! Now you can begin to do something about it. It's a great, great blessing that at last these things are beginning to come out into the light – the dust, the cobwebs, all the unpleasant habits.' So the first step is to recognize this, without tumbling into further aversion, despair and misery; to see the situation in a positive way: 'Ah, OK, now let's see what we can do about it.'

To begin with it's important to see that we don't have to

think these thoughts. We don't have to carry these things around. We can set them to one side. That's one skilful means: to realize that we have a choice. When the thought arises, we can put our attention somewhere else. Sometimes people say, 'Well, isn't that repressing?', but is it? We've recognized the thought, we've acknowledged it, we've seen the harmfulness of it. Now it's time to just allow it to cease, to let it go – to turn our attention to the silence or to the body, to really feel the breath, the body breathing. These are things we can do, and even if we can only do them for a moment before the obsessive, mean, nasty thought comes back again, just that moment is a powerful piece of ammunition in diminishing the power of the obsessive thinking. It puts a real dent into the mean, vengeful storyline that we've got going. So we can just take a moment to enjoy the breath, to feel the body breathing, rather than allowing the obsession to completely fill our whole mind-space.

Another thing we can do is to notice the space around or between thoughts, or to replace a mean thought with a kind thought, say by trying to see things from the other person's point of view. We can try to tune into their suffering. With Saddam Hussein I'd think, 'Well, he's a human being. He wants to be happy, but he's certainly going to have to pay a really horrible price for this cruelty he's inflicting on others.' Just seeing that although someone doesn't want to suffer, nevertheless he's going to suffer, brings a sense of compassion into the heart straightaway. This isn't condoning the cruelty, the unskilfulness of somebody's life, but replacing the

unpleasant thoughts that are sapping our own sense of well-being with something that is more wholesome.

When we chant our sharing of blessings with ‘virtuous leaders of the world’, people sometimes comment, ‘But many leaders of the world don’t seem to be particularly virtuous. Many of them seem just to want a lot of power; they do quite awful things.’ But I’m interested in helping them to be wiser, in helping them to be happy. I know myself that if I’m not happy, I’m not very wise, I’m not very mindful. If there’s a feeling of tension or fear there’s not much mindfulness, and so I tend to make mistakes, to be mean, narrow-minded, selfish, frightened. Skilfulness comes from a sense of well-being. When people are kind to me, when I’m kind to myself, then I’m naturally more kind to others, naturally more in tune with other beings and their needs. So I’m quite happy to share any blessings of my life with dictators and foolish, selfish people, because I see they need all the blessings they can get!

Then *anīgho homi*, freedom from anxiety: worry too can undermine our sense of well-being. I had good reason to be anxious when my eighty-six year-old father needed to have an operation under a general anaesthetic. It was quite reasonable to feel concerned and anxious about him in hospital; would he survive the operation? But I knew that worry wouldn’t help: it certainly didn’t help me, and I had a sense that it wouldn’t really help him either. I became interested in the distinction between concern and worry. Worry seemed and seems to me to be quite unwholesome – it’s like an obsession, and I noticed that when I wasn’t being mindful, the mind naturally went

into worry, imagining the worst possible scenario. Whereas concern was more, 'Well, I am concerned. There's a reason to be concerned, but what's the skilful thing to do in response to this?' So I decided that whenever the mind was beginning to go into worry, beginning to imagine the worst scenario, I would use my imagination, the power of the mind, to imagine a different scenario. When I learned that my father had been in the operating theatre for longer than expected, instead of worrying, I deliberately thought, 'Well, it is a very delicate operation. Probably it's just taking a bit longer, and he's actually making a good recovery. He's doing really well.' And as I was on my walking path, I kept thinking, 'He's doing very well, he's getting better', rather than, 'Well, maybe he's died and they'll be telling my mother.' Every time that thought came, I'd deliberately replace it with, 'Actually, he's making a really good recovery, he's doing really well.' And in fact my father made a good recovery.

How much of our lives do we spend worrying about things, being anxious about things, that haven't happened – and may never happen? Can we really appreciate how much we undermine our sense of well-being through doing this? Can we begin to introduce some kind of skilful means as an antidote to worry and anxiety? If your mind goes into constructing worst possible scenarios, you can try instead to imagine the best scenario, totally amazing and wonderful. Doesn't that make us feel better rather than miserable? When I try it, it works really well.

These are some ways in which we can reflect on well-being, ‘May I maintain well-being in myself’. So when we chant these words, it’s not just a nice idea. These are reflections that have a lot of guts to them, a lot that we can consider in terms of our own practice, in a very moment-by-moment kind of way. It’s not that we’re going to avoid every kind of suffering and difficulty. Having been born into this human realm, we have to experience all kinds of things: pain, sickness, disease, sadness – they come to all of us in due course. What I’m talking about is the kind of suffering that we can do something about, the needless suffering; learning to recognize that and replace it with something brighter and more positive. Then our lives can be a blessing, not just for ourselves but also for each other.

THE GRADUAL PATH

AJAHN METTA

The Four Noble Truths ... a teaching we need to reflect on again and again, until we really understand it, until we reach liberation, until we are actually 'there'. I have asked myself quite a few times: Why was this the first sermon the Buddha gave to his friends after his enlightenment? Why didn't he speak about the bliss and calm of enlightenment, or the four sublime abidings (*brahmavihāra*), which would be quite a different message from suffering? Why did he choose to share his realization about the Noble Truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the path that leads out of it? I think he intended to give his friends a map of the path, the map of his own realization, while describing the experiences and the understanding that actually led him to complete liberation, to Buddhahood. He probably wanted his friends to reach this as quickly as possible for themselves.

The Buddha spent about seven weeks after his enlightenment in the place we know now as Bodhgaya, reflecting on his insights and realization. At first, he did not want to teach. He thought that this realization was too subtle, too difficult for most people to understand. However, he was convinced by Brahma Sahampati (the supreme ‘Father of All’), who said to him, ‘There are people with only a little dust in their eyes. They will understand your teaching.’ After this, the Buddha went off to look for his friends in the deer park of Sarnath. It was there that he delivered the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, and set the wheel of *Dhamma* into motion.

When I first heard the Four Noble Truths, it was a revelation to me. It felt like this was something I had been waiting for all my life without knowing it. Here was a map, a path pointed out for me. I was surprised to find that such a path actually existed. I received these teachings during my first *ānāpānasati* (mindfulness of breathing) retreat in Thailand and when I heard them, it was like a wake-up call. I saw that there was something to be changed, that it was possible to change, that there was actually a way out. Looking at the Four Noble Truths, I saw, ‘Yes, there is suffering, I can understand that. I have had suffering in my life and still have it.’ And I thought: ‘Okay, now I understand suffering.’ But, actually, as you all know, there’s a bit more to it than that! Just understanding suffering with our rational minds is not the way out of the dilemma.

The Buddha pointed out that there are three steps for each Noble Truth. The first step is understanding each Truth on a

theoretical level: there is suffering; there is a cause – craving; there is the cessation of suffering; there is the way out of suffering. However, this theoretical understanding doesn't lead us to liberation and so the second step requires us to practise with each Truth: suffering needs to be understood; the cause needs to be abandoned; cessation needs to be realized; the path needs to be developed. The third and final step is the fruit of the practice; here the tasks have been completed and so we can say 'suffering has been understood', 'the cause has been abandoned', 'cessation has been realized' and 'the path has been developed.'

So, when we look at the first Noble Truth, the first step is the reflection on suffering; what actually *is* suffering? The second step involves directly experiencing, turning towards it. The third is fully understanding it. That means really going into it, opening up to it, being with it, turning towards it. Reflecting on this truth, we need to see what suffering means. The Buddha used the term *dukkha*, 'unsatisfactoriness', for this, or to put it more broadly, something that is hard to be with. You can see three aspects of this. One involves physical and emotional pain. Another involves the pain that impermanence brings into our lives. With change comes uncertainty, and we don't know what will come next. The third aspect of *dukkha* is much more subtle; it is the suffering that comes through subtle anticipations and fears. You may find yourself in situations where everything is going well, but you find yourself asking the question 'How long will it be

like this? What next? What happens when this ends?'. This is the anticipation of change and the fear of stepping into the unknown. It is a kind of suffering which is not very obvious. It underlies the experience of this moment. It lingers in the background, but it is there. When we notice this subtle feeling tone there in the background, can we turn towards it, open up to it, hold it in awareness and allow it to become a clear experience in our mind?

The Buddha pointed out that we can't just skip over this kind of direct experiencing. We have to dare to really go into it. This means that when we feel hurt, or we feel emotional pain, perhaps because somebody has said something to us that we find difficult to take, we don't say, 'Okay, I'll just endure it blindly, however long it lasts and then I'll turn to something else', or 'Let me find something else to distract myself from this unpleasant experience.' Instead, we turn our attention fully towards the physical experience. Where does the tension manifest? Where do we experience the physical sensation of the pain? How does it manifest in the body? Where is the resonance? For example, if we feel hurt, we might experience this as tension, as if there isn't enough space around the heart. Or we may feel a resonance in the body like the hairs standing slightly on end. We may want to create more space around ourselves, space as a form of protection. When we experience suffering, how can we turn fully towards it, fully embrace it? Can we make space internally to be with it? Can we relate to the suffering? Can we open up to it and hold it, without passing from there into the patterns of reaction or denial?

I think we all probably know these two patterns. One way of relating to suffering is not really acknowledging it as suffering. I know this very well. I can find myself saying, 'It doesn't really bother me. I don't need to listen to that. Just put it aside'. But, actually, this is not the way out. I can do it for a while and then it keeps building and building until suddenly something small happens and I find myself overreacting. Take, for example, a situation with people at work, where you might have difficulty relating to a colleague. Maybe you aren't able to address this problem with them, so you have to hold it inside. But if you deny it, if you don't see it for what it is, the energy will keep on building. It might lead to a much bigger problem if you don't address it early enough. It's almost as if everything you have experienced so far has gone into this one situation, which is of course completely irrational. I have experienced situations like this in my own life. The step here, the second step of realizing this truth, means turning towards it, fully acknowledging and feeling it. It's the 'felt sense', rather than not just something that I'm thinking about. I feel it in the body or in the heart. There it is, present at this moment. I experience it now. I feel it now.

The third step is fully understanding it. What comes into play here is mindfulness with clear comprehension (*sati-sampajañña*), seeing the conditions in which suffering arises, recognizing the wider context and how suffering is unfolding in this situation. We need to acknowledge that suffering is part of our life and has its place. Suffering has very bad associations because it is something we don't want. It doesn't

feel good and it doesn't feed our self-image. It does not allow us to feel great or fantastic. It shows us where we still have to learn, where we are not complete. I don't want to say 'weak', because this word suggests not being good enough and this is not what I mean. We all come into this life with a certain amount to learn and this body, this life, gives us the chance to work at this. If we don't listen to the lessons that suffering provides, we can neither learn nor change.

The second Noble Truth is the truth of the origin of suffering and that this needs to be abandoned. The Buddha made it very clear that suffering is related to and arises from desire, craving, attachment, holding on. He explained that there are three main aspects of attachment, or craving. One is *kāma-tanhā*, which is the craving for sensual pleasures. The second one is *bhava-tanhā*, which is the craving for existence, for being somebody, for holding onto certain views or opinions. The third aspect is *vibhava-tanhā*, the craving for non-existence. All of these together are originated in ignorance.

I think we all know *kāma-tanhā* very well. It's very easy to recognize this unfolding. It is when you desire something that you like, something that is really to your taste; this includes the craving for sexual intimacy, the craving for friendship, the craving for physical touch or being close to somebody, and the craving for certain kinds of food or for material objects. There are many different aspects of sensual desire. But when you look at craving, there is not only unwholesome desire; there is also wholesome desire. For example, if we are hungry and crave

food. If we are really hungry, we need to eat and if we don't, sooner or later we will die. Or there is the desire to practise, to free ourselves from the treadmill of *samsāra* (the wheel of life). We need to look closely at this: When does wholesome desire become unwholesome desire? When does it turn into that craving which has the 'stickiness' of attachment? I think this is the crucial point. Again, when we look back at the three steps, what we should do is reflect, and ask ourselves what is wholesome and what is unwholesome desire. The second step is directly experiencing desire; when it arises, we turn fully towards it and experience it for what it is, embracing it, allowing it to be what it is without condemning ourselves.

Another consideration is the fact that desire is life energy. It is what keeps us on the wheel of *samsāra*. When we look at desire, we can see that it is limitless. However much we try to fulfil it, we always want more – it's as simple as that. But the good news is that desire gives us the taste of limitlessness. There is an experience of no boundaries. With desire the experience can be quite unpleasant, but loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity are also boundless, though in a different way. The difference is that these qualities are not involved with serving the self. The limitlessness of desire, on the other hand, aims to fill the bottomless hole of the self, trying to generate itself again and again. When we look deeper into desire we can see that it will never be satisfied. That is the difference between it and the divine abidings; they bring us to the experience of fullness and wholeness, while desire does not bring lasting satisfaction

or completeness, and so therefore it needs to be abandoned.

Desire for existence, *bhava-tanhā*, is the experience of wanting to be; for example, when we attach to a certain self-image. You might have recognized this for yourself. For years sometimes, we chase after a certain image, a way we would like ourselves to be and to be seen by others. And we have certain expectations connected with this. To be, for example, this very diligent nun, this fantastic *Dhamma* teacher, this being that is so compassionate and kind. This is how we want ourselves to be experienced, by ourselves and by others. This is an example of *bhava-tanhā*, wanting to exist in a certain way and attaching to that view of ourselves. We do everything to fulfil that view, until we completely wear ourselves out and finally run out of steam. Eventually, we reach the point where we no longer have the energy to support this false self-image. Another, more positive, example of *bhava-tanhā* is our aspiration for the spiritual path, the aspiration to awaken. We call this *chanda* (skilful motivation). *Chanda*, the energy and zeal for our practice, is what brings us to this path and keeps us on it. If we did not have the desire to free ourselves from *samsāra*, to step out of *samsāra*, we would not be interested in walking this path at all. Here, we want to focus on a goal. We want to be in a certain way. It's the same energy in both cases, but it unfolds in two different ways. One I would call an unwholesome desire, the other, *chanda*, I would call a wholesome desire. The reason I call the first an unwholesome desire is because the belief underlying it is a delusion, an illusion that we have about ourselves.

We also know *vibhava-tanhā* very well. I usually experience it when I'm in a situation that I don't want to be in. I'll to share an example of this with you. One of our practices is to go on alms round. I was with another sister in a town near Chithurst, one of our monasteries. It was cold and we were standing there, waiting to see what would happen. Suddenly, an elderly woman approached us and started to shout at us. 'Why don't you work?! What are you doing here?! You look healthy. Why do you waste your time doing this?' It was very embarrassing and I just had to go to my heart and say, 'Okay, just be with this right now. Just open up. It doesn't feel great but it is just like this'. It was one of those moments where you would like not to be; to just evaporate and disappear into thin air. Of course, we couldn't explain to her what we were doing. She simply had her own views on this. I'm sure you can all think of similar situations, of feeling humiliated or exposed. Sometimes we do it to ourselves! We can put ourselves into a situation like this just by saying the wrong thing, or perhaps saying the right thing at the wrong time. I think we all know that this is one of the experiences of suffering.

So what does the third Noble Truth say? Here, the focus of investigation is the fact that there is an end to suffering. When I heard the teachings about cessation for the first time, that it was possible not to suffer any more, I was delighted! But I also thought, 'this goal is so far away.' There is so far to go to reach complete enlightenment. But again, the good news is that cessation happens every day. We just have to look in that direction. Where does it actually happen in our daily

lives? When do you experience cessation? In what moments do you experience it? And I'm sure you all do. It's just that we don't often recognize it as such, because it's not a big deal. It's not necessarily a blazing light or anything related to the deeper levels of practice. It happens at the end of a sentence, like now... cessation. It's in the end of a conversation with your friend... cessation. It's the end of your meal... cessation. It's the end of an emotional experience... cessation. I think that turning our practice in that direction, recognizing when cessation happens, can bring something very different into our lives. It means we are not bound so much by suffering. There is a way out and we can actually experience it, in this moment.

We can even do this when we go through a long period of suffering; for example, when something really major happens in our life. There might be a lot of sadness or emotional pain, but if we look into this more deeply, we can see impermanence there as well. We can know that it is not constant. There are even quite a few cessations which take place during these longer-lasting experiences. I remember one situation where I felt a strong sense of loss, and it was quite painful. There was the experience of loss, the feeling of hurt, of being vulnerable. When we find ourselves in situations like these, it seems they will never end or change. On the surface, it felt that I was always in that space, but when I looked deeper, I could see that there were moments or situations where the pain was less or even not there at all. Right there is the change, the impermanence. Yes, there is pain and I am in that, but then there are those

times when I am not experiencing it. Remembering this, when suffering comes up I can turn towards it. I can actually hold it, be with it, accept it.

Acceptance is one aspect of cessation and it means that we understand why we attach to a certain experience. There are many reasons. I have just described how it could unfold for any one of us. There came a point in my own experience where I could see that I was afraid of letting go because I was afraid of the unknown. I was afraid of what the next step would be in my life. I knew I had to let go, but I chose to suffer, rather than turn towards that undefined openness. Why do we do this? There is the fear that this unknown openness, the uncertainty of it, might be worse than the pain we are now experiencing. It might mean loneliness or finding ourselves in a strange, threatening place. And the result can be a hesitation to connect with others or with the rest of the world for fear of being hurt again. You can see that there is a lot of anticipation in this, which is itself rooted in a fear of the unknown. It doesn't feel quite safe, and yet sooner or later we have to step into it, we have to let go of our irrational fears and anticipations. I have found, time and again, that my fear of the unknown was so much more difficult to be with than actually stepping into it. This is just one example of how the process works. We have to fully understand why we are attaching. If we can fully turn towards this attachment, acknowledge it for ourselves, then cessation can happen, but only then. If we don't acknowledge the roots of our attachment, cessation can't and won't happen. This is a very important thing to understand .

Naturally, there are different stages of cessation. The first level, where we all are now, is the state of ordinary consciousness. Here our ego structures are unfolding with their full strength, attaching to sense desires, attaching to views, attaching to becoming and non-becoming. With the input of the teaching we are able to turn towards cessation, towards the way out. That is the turning point in this first stage.

Another level of cessation is the point when our ordinary ego patterns are transcended.

'Gate, gate, paragate, parasamgate bodhi svaha.'

(Gone, gone, gone beyond, gone beyond the Beyond – Enlightenment, ah!)

This is a Mahayana mantra which reminds us of the different stages that we will go through. The second stage is 'gone beyond'. Already gone out of this seemingly solid personality, out of our ego-based patterns. It means that we have understood the first Noble Truth, we have understood the second Noble Truth and are moving towards a deeper level of cessation.

This movement is towards letting go of the mental patterns that form our personality, our experience of self. We don't believe in it so much any more. We see through the conditioning and how it works. That goes on until the last turning point, towards arahantship. When full transcendence happens, we can let go completely. We break through all of our delusions and are able to see the patterns of the mind as they are. We can also see this in others, as the two always go

together. You understand for yourself, but if you take a step further you also see it in others. What does this point to? Basically, to the fact that there is no real separation. Whether we want it or not, whether we like it or not, we are all in this together. Our 'feeling separated' is an illusion, a trick of the ego. As we go further into letting go, into cessation, we will realize this. We will experience that we are not separate from others. We can, for example, experience this just sitting in a room with others when we meditate together. In a way, we are one body, one energetic field. (Please take this just as a suggestion.) Full cessation is enlightenment, a complete letting go of all defiled states of mind. It is an awakening to things as they are. There is no longer any clinging. There are no defilements. The enlightened mind is clear, luminous, unwavering, fully liberated.

That is what the fourth Noble Truth points out to us: there is actually a path. There is a certain way that I can follow and which I need to develop, but if I can do this, it will actually not be a 'me' arriving in the end. The 'me' or 'I', will disappear more and more as I travel along this path and, when the end is reached, this self will be transcended. In fact, we will understand that it was never actually there in the first place.

The Eightfold Path is the path of right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right energy, right mindfulness and right concentration. It is divided into three different aspects: virtue, practice (or concentration) and wisdom. Right speech, action and livelihood make up the first aspect. Right energy, mindfulness

and concentration are the second and right view and intentions are the third. Taking all of these together, what these different factors basically do is provide an outline of how you can work with suffering, and how you can develop qualities and skills that bring more understanding into your life. They can help to clarify our intentions, so that we can see what motivates us, what makes us act in certain ways.

What does it really mean to act skilfully, to act wholesomely? How do I recognize what is wholesome and what is unwholesome? This points back to the second Noble Truth. We can see that there is a connection. The wisdom qualities will support us in recognizing this. We can also say that all the different factors of the Eightfold Path are linked together. For example, if you decide to focus on developing right speech, this will involve the development of right understanding and right intention. In fact, right understanding, fully developed, is the realization of the Four Noble Truths. It sums it all up. It is seeing the *Dhamma* in action, in our own actions and in the actions of others. And if we want to develop right speech, all of the other factors are involved in this to a certain degree. This is also true of right action, and so on. The different factors of the path, then, are interconnected. It is a gradual development, a gradual path. You don't suddenly wake up and find you have developed it. You have to put energy into it and you have to make the right choices.

I find it so encouraging to know that the path offers us these tools. We can decide whether we work with them or not, and how we go about doing it. But the map is there, all laid out

for us. It's up to us to make use of the tools and to let the path be a part of our lives.

HANDBFUL OF LEAVES

AJAHN CANDASIRI

The Buddha pointed the way out of the realm of *samsāra*. This is the realm of continuous wandering, searching, following the desire that we all have to find comfort, well-being, a sense of ease. The only trouble is that we tend to look for them in the wrong place. When we feel uncomfortable, we shift the body to try to get comfortable. We feel unhappy, so we think that if we just get rid of those unhappy thoughts, we'll feel better. We imagine that we can find a perfect relationship, and if we find the relationship we have is not so perfect as we thought it was, we move on and look for another one. We're always looking for some kind of ease and well-being in the conditioned realm, expecting to find pleasure and satisfaction through the senses or some kind of intellectual enjoyment.

The Buddha explained that we've had to keep wandering in the realm of samsāra for aeons because of not understanding four things; what he referred to as the Four Noble Truths. I'm sure that many of you have heard talks on the Four Noble Truths, probably many times. But my sense is that it doesn't matter how many talks we hear on these teachings, because each time we hear them they go a little deeper. As we practise, as we live our lives, our understanding changes and we receive things in a slightly different way. Though these truths are actually quite simple in some ways, sometimes it can take a while for the penny to really drop, for us to truly understand what the Buddha was pointing to. So I still love to hear this teaching because each time I hear it slightly differently – I understand it a little more deeply. One could say that it's deceptively simple, but actually very profound... In some ways it could be said that these Four Noble Truths are all we need to liberate the heart, to end the suffering of our lives. If we take them in and really chew on them, we'll find what we need.

In Theravada Buddhism these teachings are described as beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful in the end. They're like the initial practice, the intermediate practice, and the advanced practice, all encapsulated in something that might seem very small. Whereas, the Mahayana schools talk about the Four Noble Truths as the first stage, before you go on to something more advanced; but we don't have anything more advanced than these Four Noble Truths!

Some of you have heard the story of how when the Buddha was walking in the woods with some of his disciples, he picked up a handful of leaves and said to them: ‘Tell me, monks, are there more leaves on the trees or more leaves in my hand?’ And they said, ‘Of course there are many more leaves on the trees and scattered around than there are in your hand. You’ve just got a few leaves in your hand.’ The Buddha said: ‘Well, the leaves on the trees represent all the things that can be known by a perfected one.’ In other words, a Buddha could know an enormous number of things about the universe. But he said: ‘The leaves in my hand are what I teach. The leaves in my hand represent what you need to know in order to free the heart. That’s all you need to know – just the amount of leaves that are in my hand.’ He was pointing out that there are many questions we can ask, but that finding the answers to them won’t necessarily help with the process of liberation. Whereas if you take his teachings and apply them in your lives, that’s all you need to know. In brief, the first teaching is that there is suffering. The second one is that there’s a reason why we suffer. Buddhism has a slightly bad reputation because people say that all it talks about is suffering. However, they forget that the third noble truth is that suffering can cease, and the fourth is that we can live our lives in a way that will lead us, step by step, to liberation from suffering. So: suffering, origin, cessation, path – just four words, and now I’ll say a little about what is meant by each of them.

The Pali word *dukkha* is often translated as ‘suffering’, but in fact its meaning is much broader than that. When we think

of suffering we tend to think of something rather extreme, but the word can also just mean unease or stress; and it might be a very small amount of stress. So the way I would interpret *dukkha* is as anything short of a sense of perfect inner ease and well-being. It could just be a very minor irritation, or a mild sense of disappointment or lack, or it could be something major like a serious illness or bereavement, or losing all your wealth. So we could say that sensing that things are not the way we would like them to be is suffering, *dukkha*.

Part of this first noble truth is that suffering needs to be understood. I find this quite interesting, because usually when we think of suffering we think we need to get away from it. Unfortunately, though, our usual way of dealing with it – by struggling, trying to get rid of it – doesn't actually seem to do the trick. Often our very struggle perpetuates the suffering and strengthens it, makes it worse, more difficult. So it's interesting to contemplate the instruction that suffering is to be understood, because in order to understand something we need to examine it, study it, take an interest in it, rather than simply trying to get rid of it.

Often people ask questions about obsessive thinking: unpleasant thoughts that keep arising over and over again, and that seem to grow stronger the more one tries to push them away or deal with them. But when we look in a deeper way, we notice the tremendous aversion there, the not wanting, the dislike of these thoughts; we see that actually this aversion is the real problem. We see that what needs to be addressed is the not wanting of the condition.

So if there's suffering one of my questions is, 'What is it that I don't want about this situation?', or 'What is it that I'm wanting? Is there a desire for things to be otherwise?' Often, we think that our suffering is because of something 'out there'. We think about it in terms of something external: if only this person didn't exist, or if only I could be with the person I love, my life would be perfect. If only I didn't have a headache, everything would be fine. If only there was this, if only there was that... If only so-and-so wouldn't treat me like that. If only so-and-so would treat me with more respect, or always be kind and pleasant to me. If only so-and-so would understand me better, appreciate me more, or we might notice suffering in our meditation: if only I could just get rid of these obsessive thoughts. If only I didn't have this doubt. If only I didn't have this fear, anxiety, aversion... If only I could get rid of these things, my life would be perfect. I would stop suffering. As I said, these are habitual reactions. But to really understand suffering, we need to notice them, to see that simply reacting to *dukkha* by trying to get rid of it or change it in some way doesn't work. So what is the origin of suffering? Why do we suffer? That leads us on to the second noble truth, the origin of suffering. Suffering begins. It has a cause. There's a reason why we suffer. And strangely enough, it's not 'because of that person who is always so annoying', or 'because I have a headache'. Of course, having a headache is unpleasant, but the suffering is not because of the headache, it's because I haven't got what I want. It's because I want things to be otherwise. It's because of attaching to different forms of desire. Buddhism is

full of lists. We use lists a lot.

This is partly because at first the teaching was oral. The scriptures were not written down for about five hundred years, but people would listen to them and they would remember what they heard. People obviously had very good memories in those days, and they'd remember these lists – one of this, two of this, three of this, four of this, and so on.

So there is the list of three forms of desire. We have the desire for sense pleasures, *kama tanhā* – wanting some kind of sense pleasure: comfort, warmth, delicious food, pleasant physical sensations, wonderful sounds or odours. Sex. Very pleasurable. This is normal. It's nature's way of keeping us on the planet. Eating. Very pleasurable. If we didn't want to eat, if eating wasn't pleasant, we wouldn't bother eating and then we would die. These desires are mechanisms that nature has put in place. But if we attach to the desire for particular forms of sense pleasure, we suffer and struggle when these things are not readily available.

Then there is *bhāva tanhā*, the desire to exist, to be. It's very interesting to contemplate the desire to exist as a permanent entity, as 'me'. I remember that years ago when I was about thirty, shortly after I first met Ajahn Sumedho and had recently come across these teachings, I was very broody. I wanted to have lots of babies – this was a very strong biological sense, a physical sense. But when I looked into it, I saw that there was also a desire to continue. I didn't want to end, and there was a sense that children were a way of continuing. Once I realized this, I also saw that actually it was OK to end. It was OK to not

exist... but I could see that this desire to exist was very strong.

It also manifests in all kinds of other ways – to exist as a personality, to be somebody special. Usually we are so identified with who we think we are that it's difficult for us to notice this desire, until somebody comes along and disagrees with us. You might think, 'I'm fine as I am, and I don't have any desire to be or exist.' But if you make a suggestion and somebody says, 'I don't think that's such a good idea.', you can be outraged! Then you can feel the arising of this sense of self, this *bhāva tanhā*, and you begin to understand why people go to war. It can be very strong, this sense of being 'somebody' existing in relation to other 'somebodies'. So we begin to see how we identify in all kinds of different ways: as being Buddhist or Theravada Buddhist, or as having a particular nationality, being a particular age or of a particular political persuasion – all these identities that we take on when we become part of a group. This isn't to say that these identities are totally meaningless. They have a conventional meaning and they can be very useful, but when we cling to them as an identity they can set us against one another and cause a lot of problems. So it's important that we understand this desire for existence and the way that it manifests in our lives.

The third kind of desire that we can attach to and which causes us problems is *vibhāva tanhā*, the desire to not exist – 'vi-' indicates a negation. Sometimes when life is really awful we may decide we're going to get drunk or stoned, or sleep, or find some other way to stop existing for a while. If we're experiencing unpleasant states of mind, or if a lot of

confusing, difficult things are happening for us, we want to get rid of them – to get away from everything so as to not have to deal with the difficulties of our life. This is the third kind of desire that we need to understand.

So, in summary, the origin of suffering is clinging, the attachment to these three kinds of wanting – wanting to get, wanting to become, and wanting not to exist or to get rid of. Suffering ceases when we let go of these desires. We don't necessarily stop having them, but rather than feeling that we've got to either follow or get rid of them, we can simply accept that the desire is there. This is difficult to explain, but perhaps going back to obsessive thinking is helpful: as I pointed out, the real problem is not the thinking or the unpleasantness of a state, but not wanting that state. When we can relax with these desires as they are, establishing a sense of presence with them, we no longer suffer because we're no longer struggling with them.

Interestingly, Ajahn Chah used to say that it was much more difficult to be mindful of pleasant things than of unpleasant things. When things are really unpleasant or difficult, we can attend quite closely to them. I've noticed that if I've even a little physical pain or discomfort, I can be very mindful, very present with it. But if I'm in a state of bliss I just want it to last forever. I get lost in that desire, not recognizing that every condition is impermanent and changes; therefore it's totally unsatisfactory. It can't ever bring a lasting sense of peace, happiness and well-being. The only real sense of well-being, peace and happiness arises when we're totally present

with change as it happens. In itself no condition can satisfy us forever, and of course it's not who and what we are.

The third noble truth is that suffering ceases when we relinquish the desire for things to be otherwise. When people hear this they sometimes ask, 'Does that mean we just have to accept everything that happens to us? Never do anything about the terrible things that are happening in the world? Never do anything about our illnesses, or the fact that somebody's having a difficult time?' But what the Buddha's teaching is actually pointing to is that we should avoid responses that are a reaction based on desire or aversion, but respond instead from a place of mindfulness, having totally accepted things as they are. Sometimes I can be very upset, even outraged, about things that happen in community, and there are times when I react and say something because I feel so upset. But I've found that when I do that it just perpetuates the problem, because then people get upset with me for having reacted. It doesn't actually solve anything. Whereas if I can just acknowledge that I don't like that thing, if I can come to a place of acceptance and peace in my heart, then I can respond to whatever may have happened from a place of wisdom and compassion. So it's not that we should never do anything to make things better. In fact the Buddha encouraged compassionate action, and he himself demonstrated great compassion in many incidents throughout his life, but it was always balanced with wisdom. It was based on a sense of presence, a wise consideration of how best to respond to whatever it was that he was experiencing or confronting.

The Fourth Noble Truth, the way leading to the cessation of suffering, points to the path of practice in our lives. It points to attitudes, understandings, our meditation itself. This Noble Eightfold Path is to be developed, to be cultivated. Usually when I'm talking about the Eightfold Path, I like to begin in the middle; as I describe it, I think you'll understand why. The middle factors are right speech, right action and right livelihood. This refers to the way that we use speech and action in our lives, and how we live our lives at the most practical level. It relates to the Five Precepts, to *sīla*. It means avoiding harmful speech or action, and avoiding as far as possible a livelihood that harms or exploits others. It means cultivating speech that is encouraging, supportive and doesn't set people apart, that is not cruel, divisive or harsh – learning how to use speech in a way that promotes understanding and harmony. This doesn't mean that we never give feedback if somebody is doing something that is causing harm to themselves or others. We can certainly let them know that, but we try to do it in a way that will be easy for them to hear and receive, rather than a harsh or unkind way. We use our bodies to support and help others in practical ways, rather than just for our own advantage or pleasure.

The Venerable Ānanda once asked the Buddha what benefit there is from *sīla*. The answer that the Buddha gave is interesting. He said that those who cultivate *sīla*, who live according to basic ethical standards, can live without regret. When we learn how to take responsibility for our lives and live in a responsible, careful way, regret or fear is greatly

reduced. Then, when there is no regret, we feel glad about our lives, we feel good about ourselves and the way that we've lived. With that comes a sense of bodily ease and well-being, and with a sense of bodily ease and well-being, of relaxation, the mind collects quite naturally; it settles much more easily than if we're full of fear, anxiety or regret, or afraid of other people taking advantage of us because of something we've done to them. So living the middle part of the path carefully leads quite naturally on to the final factors of the path: right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration (or right collectedness).

These are the factors that make up *samādhi*, which is the ability of the mind to collect and focus. When the mind is collected and focused, we can observe the way it works. We can begin to look into our habits of thinking, and to cultivate right understanding and right intention – which are the first factors of the path. *Sammā-ditthi* or right understanding arises when we've skilfully contemplated our lives, and right intention means understanding how to use the mind in a wholesome way; together, these lead us back to right speech, right action and right livelihood. Once we understand the ways in which we make life difficult for ourselves, this leads us naturally to living in a way that brings about and supports a sense of well-being. Thus *sīla*, how we live our lives, leads on to *samādhi*, the ability of the mind to collect so as to observe the patterns of thinking, and their effects or the reasons why we suffer. Once we understand the reasons why we suffer, that constitutes right understanding and leads to right intention;

together these are referred to as *paññā* or wisdom.

Sīla, samādhi, paññā – they go round in a circle. When we have right understanding, we naturally live carefully. But I'm going around in circles! That's what happens with the Eightfold Path; it leads round in a circle so you can begin anywhere, tho' I prefer to begin in the middle because it deals with the most practical, ordinary things of life. But the factors of the path all connect.

This is a very simple teaching, so we might wonder why we have to spend such a long time practising before we reach the goal, before we experience the perfect peace that the Buddha promises us. Sometimes people say to me, 'I can't believe how long it takes! Why can't I get it? I've been meditating for all these years. I've been hearing these teachings for all these years, and I've been contemplating them. Why can't I get it? It seems so simple...' Looking at my own practice, I realize that one of the reasons is that although the teachings are very clear and simple, the mind has been conditioned. Our conditioning goes very deep. We tend not to believe that things are really going to change, and so we have a habit of struggling. If something unpleasant happens in our minds or bodies, we immediately react, wanting to 'sort it out', to fix it; and we really imagine that if we can just make everything all right, we'll be happy. We haven't appreciated the fact of *dukkha* – that we'll never be perfectly happy if we look for happiness within the conditioned realm. So we're always reacting to things, trying to get things the way we want, and that just doesn't work. We haven't fully appreciated the

unsatisfactoriness of the conditions of the mind and body.

Furthermore, we don't understand the sense of selfhood; we're conditioned to think of ourselves as being somebody. When we're very little, we learn that we're this person. Our parents give us a name, and we think of ourselves as being 'this person' and that we are like this; we build up a whole CV for ourselves based on our experiences. We tend to think of ourselves as being intelligent or unintelligent, or good at this or that, being an interesting personality or maybe not so interesting. We hold on to this view of who and what we are in a very rigid way. We identify with the sense of self that we've created. It can take a long time to recognize the tendency to do this, but then, little by little, we can begin to dismantle this view – the view both of ourselves and of one another, because we view each other like this as well.

This is why it's so important to spend time on retreat, because then we have an opportunity to begin to investigate and to see the way that we've constructed this edifice of who and what we are. We can see the habits we struggle with: how we imagine that if we could get rid of the things we don't like and just get all the things we do like, we would be happy forever. We have an opportunity to begin to challenge some of the subliminal assumptions we make about ourselves and our life.

During a retreat you may have moments of insight, when you say, 'Oh, my goodness, I never really saw that before, I never realized that.' These moments of clarity are definitely something to celebrate. And having had that insight, you may

want to hold on to it – but it's not like that. We have to keep applying ourselves because we forget again; we wake up and then we fall asleep again. We have to keep waking up. Every time we recognize that we've got caught in some pattern of struggle, of *dukkha*, we need to ask, 'What am I wanting right now? What's this struggle about?' We keep looking deeper and deeper, and so this path of practice becomes very interesting. Please don't allow yourself to think of practice as something you've got to 'do' and 'succeed at', or that you'll never be any good at. We can make ourselves so miserable when we regard it in that way, rather than seeing it as a wonderful way of practice that the Buddha presented for our happiness, for our welfare, to liberate us from suffering.

So please don't use your Buddhist practice as a way to make yourself miserable, but as a way to liberate the heart. See if you can find ways to enjoy and be interested in it. It can be like a fascinating puzzle; little by little we can notice the ways we get caught, and gently and gradually unpick them. In the woods at Chithurst there are many patches of bramble, and sometimes they're exactly in the way of where you want to go. If you're like me, you'll decide, 'I want to go through here. I'm not going to let a few brambles get in the way!' So you walk into the brambles and of course you suddenly find your clothes caught on the thorns. You can struggle, which is what we tend to do habitually. But if you do that, you end up tearing your clothes and getting scratched, and though eventually you get through, you're in an awful mess as a result. However, if you're clever, as soon as you notice you're

caught, you stop, you stay very still and you say, 'OK, where am I caught?... Aha! I'm caught here...' and you unpick yourself. In that way, you free yourself without causing a lot of extra trouble or getting yourself even more tangled up.

So the way of practice is just like dealing with a patch of brambles and seeing how few scratches you can come out with. You can also think of it as like a ball of yarn that you're trying to untangle. If you get frustrated and tug at it, the knots become tighter. The best thing to do is to stop, take a considered look and find where you have to begin to untangle it. You untangle that bit, and then the next; sometimes that just gets you a little further, but sometimes the whole thread comes free. And you may find this in your practice. Sometimes you see something and it's just a little step forward, but other times whole scenarios that you've created suddenly collapse. So this is an attitude I would like to encourage.

Finally, just to recap on the Four Noble Truths, this wise, compassionate teaching that the Buddha presented. Firstly, the noble truth of suffering; and what's 'noble' about suffering? It's the willingness to take an interest in it, and to understand it rather than just trying to get rid of it. Secondly, the noble truth of the origin of suffering – looking into what I don't want or what I do want; into the different kinds of wanting, and the attachment to them. Those desires are to be let go of, relinquished. The Third Noble Truth is the cessation of suffering – which is realized when the desire has been let go of. And then the Fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path, which is to be developed.

That's the handful of leaves that the Buddha presented – everything we need to know in order to liberate the heart.

SUFFERING AND ITS CAUSE

AJAHN SUNDARA

While on retreat, hopefully you have experienced some of the fruits of practice – how the mind can settle down and turn inwardly more easily – how you can be with yourself without too much struggle. But this will perhaps be more difficult at home in your own environment with all your familiar things around you, the usual props that keep your life going.

Sometimes we pick up the teachings in a way that may not be helpful. This might be because of the strength of our intellect, or the rigid discipline we've developed over the years, the attachment we have to our little brain. So when we pick up the teachings we create something out of them which might not be so helpful. If Right View is not present, then there's always a discrepancy between what you're experiencing and

what the mind is saying it should experience. There's kind of a gap, and that can actually make life worse than before. Before you might have been deluded but there was no gap – you were just happily hopping along in your delusion. Now you can't do that any more. You know too much.

Again and again, when I meet people on retreat, or when I teach, I notice how much we create obstacles by mishandling the teachings, or not looking at the teachings with Right View. Instead of using them as a means, we turn them into a goal.

Imagine if you had a good recipe for cooking something delicious, and you've heard stories about this recipe from all the greatest cooks in the world. Then you do your little cooking on your little stove in your little kitchen, and it never tastes very good compared to what those great cooks are saying about that dish. If we keep comparing ourselves to all the great chefs in the world then it's a terribly disappointing experience. We keep feeling that we're missing something dreadfully important, that our ingredients are not right, and then our self-esteem just goes down the drain.

It's really important to somehow cultivate a practice in which the 'goal' vanishes: the goal being the shoulds: 'I should be kind, I should be sincere, I should be able to deal with situations, I should be good, I should be loving, caring, mindful, patient, generous.' We don't hear the voice of this goal clearly because it has already somatized, it's already in the body. And the body just feels the stress of that hidden agenda.

Life can end up being an ongoing stressful experience, because it's never good enough. It's never right enough. It feels as if somehow where I am now is not where I should be. You think that not only should you be experiencing something else, but what you are experiencing is incorrect. There's a huge amount of judgement.

You may think to yourself, 'But I should not be like that'. Yes of course you should not be like that. If you were the Buddha you wouldn't be like that. But if you look closely, you can see that there's a hidden conceit there as well. As if we are already thinking of ourselves as being a fully enlightened being, and as a 'fully enlightened being' we should not be like that, we should be mindful, generous, loving, caring.

The goal of the path is not sainthood. We're not here to become perfect people, but to see the way things are. That's a very profound teaching, because many of us are still trying to be a saint or idealised 'good person', not realizing that goodness doesn't come from grasping at goodness. Goodness comes from actually being free – free from attachment to this mind, to this body. So there's a bit of work to do. None of us is free yet. We're still quite attached, not just to the mind and body, but to all the wounds, all the hurts, all the pain that we have experienced through this life. So you can't expect to practise like a Buddha when you're still dealing with the wounds of your life. This is why sometimes the more psychological aspects of the practice are important – we need to attend to the hurt.

Most of you know the teaching of the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha once picked up a handful of leaves and asked his monks, 'What do you think, monks, are there more leaves in the forest, or are there more leaves in my hand?' Of course the monks said there were more leaves in the forest than in the Buddha's hand. The Buddha said, 'The leaves in the forest are how much I know. The leaves in my hand are what you need to be free'. So basically he said: 'You don't need to know everything that a Buddha knows, you just need to know what will make you free'. The handful of leaves is a symbol for the Four Noble Truths.

The whole world suffers, but how many people know their suffering? We just experience suffering, but we don't understand suffering, do we? That's the first teaching of the Buddha – he asks us to practise understanding suffering, to see clearly how it arises and how it ends, how it affects us and how we respond to it, how we react. Our suffering is a very strong identity, and we're very attached to it. As long as we react, that's a sign of our attachment. And you can't understand suffering as long as you're so attached to it.

The teaching of *dukkha* is not just about suffering from a stomach ache or a headache, or separation from loved ones – it's really talking about the whole human predicament. This mind and body is a realm of suffering, a realm of instability, a realm of fear, a realm of desires. These desires keep telling you that you should act in certain ways. And your desires don't get fulfilled – not all of them, anyway.

To understand suffering, to understand anything, you

have to be at some level detached. Do you know what I mean? If there is too much emotion binding the situation that we are observing, then we can't see things clearly because all our perception of the situation is filtered through the emotional response. Emotions are interesting, you know, they come up so suddenly. Maybe you are in a situation where you feel relaxed and confident, and suddenly ... Bang! A button is pushed and you start crying. Sometimes our tears are disproportionate to what happened. We suffer but we don't understand suffering.

So the task we have at hand is to humbly walk the path of understanding – understanding of suffering. Now most of us, we just want to get there, we want to get to the end of the path, we're not prepared to take the first step. We want the results but we're not prepared to set up the causes and conditions – sometimes we're too lazy, too impatient, too careless to actually do what is necessary to establish the causes for that result to arise.

To understand suffering we must understand the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering, according to the teachings of the Buddha, is threefold: the attachment to sense-pleasure, the attachment to becoming and the attachment to non-becoming.

Attachment to the gratification of the senses is a great part of what motivates us, including our motivation to meditate. Meditation can be pleasant – not always, but there's something attractive about it, about just being able to sit still for a little while. There's a sense of pleasure and calm that comes through making peace with oneself.

When I say that the cause of suffering is attachment to sensual pleasure, what does that do to your mind? Does that make you think that you should not have sensual pleasure? Where do we begin with that, given that we're quite addicted to pleasure? See the trap that we create? The Buddha does not say you should annihilate your body, and yet the whole body is a sense receptor with eyes, ears, nose and tongue. Even thoughts are sense objects – the mind is a sense. So, if we want to be liberated from suffering, where do we begin?

Pleasure is the absence of pain. Pain is the absence of pleasure. How about that to begin with?

We're trained to find pleasure, but the pleasure we feel depends on the amount of pain we're pushing away. We are in pain, and we're trying to forget that pain, we're expending energy trying to escape our pain and attain some level of gratification. Pain conditions pleasure. Pleasure conditions pain.

It may be that we remain trapped because we have misunderstood the Buddha's teaching. We think that if the Buddha says that attachment to sense-pleasure is bad, then we have to get rid of all sense-pleasures. But in practising the Buddha's teaching, the looking is what is important. In this classroom, it's you doing the learning. You're not somebody who is free from sense-pleasure, you're not somebody who has seen the conditionality of pleasure and pain, you are not somebody who's seen the end of suffering yet. Sense pleasure is not a problem; sense pleasure is what you are learning about. That's all we've got, we've got nothing else to learn from.

You see what we do to ourselves? We are constantly judging, criticising, hating, moving away from pain, clinging to pleasure, not realising that our real refuge is the awakened mind, the Buddha-mind, the Buddha within oneself – that refuge is the seeing itself, the mind that knows. As you learn about yourself, both the pleasant and unpleasant aspects, that leheavenarning becomes a doorway to freedom. Learning becomes a doorway to peace. Learning becomes a doorway to insight. See the difference? We have very little acceptance of ourselves because we think we should be someone who’s not learning anymore, who has already done the learning. Because our thinking is so fast, we try to jump very quickly to the end of the road, rather than looking at our experiences.

Let’s say that you enjoy a cup of coffee every morning. Perhaps you worry about *kama-tanha*, and you begin to think that you shouldn’t be enjoying coffee because it is a “bad habit”. But actually, your cup of coffee is only a problem if you suffer when you don’t have it – if you can go without your coffee and it doesn’t make you miserable, then it’s okay. The Buddha is pointing to attachment, not to what you drink or don’t drink. He is pointing to the fact that if you don’t get what you are used to and start suffering from it, then that’s where there is work to do – start doing the practice that allows you to be free from this attachment.

So this is why in our monastic training sometimes we do certain ascetic practices, in order to realise from direct experience that we can go without. In Thailand men traditionally take ordination from two weeks to three months.

That teaches them how to be celibate for a few months, and learn that they are able to refrain from sexual activity and not go crazy. The path of practice is the path of understanding attachment. It is not trying to make yourself into somebody who does not have any sense-pleasure. When pleasure arises you enjoy it – that is, you can allow yourself to feel the pleasure of it; when it's gone you don't make a problem about it. When it comes back to you enjoy it, and when it's gone, you're free – you don't go into a rage, you don't have to shut your mind through drugs and distractions. You don't have to repress everything, and you don't have to go looking for the next sensory thrill.

We are in a world where there is a constant alternation between pleasure and pain. When the mind is in pain it pressures you to find pleasure. Once you've had enough pleasure and get bored with it then you start suffering because you're attached to the pleasure. When you start suffering, the mind starts pressuring you in big and small ways, until you finally act, getting reborn into pleasure. Some people have enough money and the right circumstances in their lives to have all the pleasures in the world. Look what happened to the Buddha! He had enormous material wealth, but after a while he lost interest – he began to wake up to the fact that this life is transient, this life is fleeting, and there is really nothing we can hold onto at the end of it. The body is changing. The body is getting old. Sickness can strike at any time. We never know what will happen. Everything is uncertain.

Are we really looking for nibbana or freedom? Or are we

looking for heaven? Most of our conditioning is committed to searching for the realm of sweetness, the sweet dew of the heavenly realm.

The second cause of suffering is the desire to become – I want to become a good wife or a good husband, a good partner. I want to become good. I want to become a good Buddhist! The whole of life is actually a process of becoming – from one year to the next, from one moment to the next there is a constant movement of the mind. That is the becoming. The Buddha is not saying that we need to stop becoming; the Buddha is pointing to *bhāva tanha*, the clinging to becoming, as a cause of suffering – there is becoming, but we don't have to cling to it. We can observe becoming.

Becoming is a natural process. From being small, we become an older child, then a teenager, then an adult, then middle aged and then an older person. Becoming is everywhere – the seasons are a form of becoming. There are the cycles of nature. Every action has a result, but you don't have to be attached to the result, and you don't have to be attached to the actions. You can just respond from the heart, from wisdom, from compassion. This is to do good, and you don't have to be attached to that, you don't have to become good. You do it because it's a normal response from a mind that is not filled with anger, greed and delusion. When it's not filled with those forces, then it responds with kindness, compassion and generosity.

The flip side of becoming is non-becoming. This is probably the strongest habit in the Western mind, is the desire not to

become. It goes together with anger. Instead of allowing things to unfold as they should, as they do, as soon as something is unpleasant we want to get rid of it, we want to eradicate it, make it disappear for good.

Sometimes you could say it's skilful to not allow things, to stop things from becoming, when something is really dangerous for example; but there is a stopping that comes from wisdom and a stopping that comes from aversion – it's two different motivations. Let's say that we become angry with someone, and instead of being mindful of the anger and the flow of this anger, we immediately shut down and try to justify the fact that we're angry, because "they" are misbehaving. We attach to the aversion to this feeling and attach to non-becoming and suppress.

Alternatively, let's say you see something pleasant, a nice cake or one of your favourite sights – instead of learning from the becoming that arises, you say "I want it, I like it, I need it." With sexual energy, when we feel attraction we will often try to suppress it or are swept away with the feeling that we "have to have" that man or woman. Instead, we can allow the feeling of attraction and then let it be, feeling what is there but not clinging to it. When the causes are gone the feeling is gone.

The Buddha says that suffering has to be understood, and we have to abandon the causes of suffering. So these are the three causes of suffering: *kama tanha*, desire for sense pleasure and the attachment to that desire; *bhāva tanha*, the desire to become; and *vibhāva tanhā*, the desire to not become. You'll

notice they have one common word – *tanha*. *Tanhā* itself is really what needs to be seen. Whenever you suffer there's an attachment. Pain isn't an enemy, isn't an adversity – pain in the light of mindfulness and wisdom is a doorway to liberation. And if we really see this then we're fearless.

WHY AND HOW WE MEDITATE

AJAHN SUNDARA

In meditation we learn to look at our mind with an attitude of gentleness and loving-kindness, and to recognize the three characteristics of all experience and phenomena: impermanence (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*) and no-self (*anatta*). Thus there is the realisation that all phenomena are empty of self, empty of substance, empty of solidity, and you witness and examine your mind in the light of those three characteristics. You can observe these characteristics at many levels: on the physical level of the body (*rupa*), on the level of mental and physical sensations (*vedana*), on the level of perceptions (*sanna*), or the level of thoughts and thought-constructs (*sankhara*). These characteristics can also be witnessed and examined at the level of the six senses (sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, thinking) and their respective

sense objects (*vinnana* – sights, sound, smell, taste, physical sensations, thought).

As you meditate, from moment to moment you are aware of what is here and now, whether it be a feeling, a thought, a memory, painful knees or pleasurable sensations. You don't need to chase after anything or look for anything. Just like a dispassionate witness, or an onlooker, you notice how things appear and disappear, how they arise and fall, how they come out of nothing and go back into nothing. And as you sharpen your awareness, then you begin to see how what you thought was quite solid is in fact unstable and fluid. Things come together under certain conditions, and when those conditions disappear then the experience ends.

We examine the nature of our experiences not through a belief-system but through being mindful. We see for ourselves whether what the Buddha spoke was the truth or not. The practice is not a matter of simply believing in the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*, but of using them to investigate.

When we begin our meditation, we start by noticing the mood we're in. What kind of mind-state is present? Are painful or pleasant sensations in the body? What is the quality of mind we sense right now? Is it relaxed, tense, upset, at peace, expanded or tight? It is important to be aware of the changing nature of the qualities of the mind in the present moment. Gradually, we begin to see the details of our mind more clearly – the thoughts, stories, sounds, smells, memories, feelings of

aversion, attraction, sensations, physical pain.

As you shine the light of awareness onto these states of mind, you find that something happens. There is a balancing. You notice that your grasping starts decreasing. At that moment of awareness, you are loosening your hold, you are letting go, and by letting go things change. Instead of clinging to your experiences, you are allowing them to follow their natural course, and that makes a huge difference. Check this out for yourself. When you are aware, the mind inclines towards letting go. You can feel the pain of attaching but your quality of attention gives space for seeing the process that creates and fuels suffering. When you're not aware, your mind clings, your mind sticks – this is *dukkha*. Mindfulness is the difference between clinging and not clinging. Simply by being mindful of each moment you are setting up conditions for things to change and for the mind to be released from suffering. It is wonderful when one can see this clearly. It is a liberating feeling, a liberating experience.

Developing mindfulness and focused attention takes a lot of patience. The Buddha emphasized the quality of patience because every time you turn your attention inward you will be aware of the experience of grasping and the suffering that results from it. Grasping doesn't disappear overnight. Letting go is a long, gradual process – but it is also something that is instant, happening right now in each moment. Right now we can stop clinging and experience the peace of the non-grasping mind. Each time you let go, suffering can come to

an end. But suffering can also return, and we have to be very patient to withstand the painful results of our grasping mind. It is easier once you understand that the way the Buddha taught is really the only way to go. There is no other way. It's either that or suffering and more suffering.

Once you are able to sustain non-grasping for a bit of time, you'll find that a radiance appears in the mind – a radiance and a sense of peace. You will also realise how close we always are to this peace and radiance. On the surface things often seem to be fraught with difficulties and agitation, but the surface is very thin. As soon as you let go even for a short while, you will discover a much deeper state of rest. And this state is not just mental; your body in turn is affected by this process of non-grasping and starts relaxing.

You can use a primary meditation object as a means of anchoring your heart/mind in the present moment. This object can be the breath, or a mantra such as 'Buddho' or 'peace', or for those who can hear it you can use 'the sound of silence'. When you concentrate on those objects, after a while your mind settles down and you can allow the meditation object to slip into the background as a reminder of the present moment. This helps you to keep the mind open – if you notice that your attention has been pulled away from your meditation object, you may also become aware of why this has happened – perhaps there was a feeling of aversion, or you became caught up in memories of the past or the future, or you reacted to an unpleasant feeling.

The sound of silence is a high-pitched drone or hum or

ringing that you may hear in the background when you are still and listen carefully. If you use the sound of silence as a meditation object, you realize that it is always present and does not need to be created. The awareness of this sound may come and go at first. When you hear it, you are listening to a natural sound, nothing else. If you can't hear it, don't make any effort to hear it. You can use another object. You can feel the rhythm of your breath, or feel the body sitting, or use a short mantra.

These are simple things to keep you grounded in the present and sharpen your wisdom and the clarity of your mind. It takes effort to do that, and that effort itself generates clarity as well – just as concentration generates clarity, energy and mindfulness. As you meditate, make sure that your back is kept straight but relaxed. Whatever you are feeling, whether it be sleepiness, happiness, tiredness, misery, notice your response. Is there aversion? Are there any negative reactions or judgement or attraction?

You can sit quietly making peace with whatever arises in your field of consciousness. You can sit quietly making peace with the body. You can see for yourself the nature of *anicca* (impermanence), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) and *anatta* (the insubstantiality of all the events that you witness in your heart). When the three characteristics inherent in all phenomena are clearly seen, your mind calms down, brightens and reaches the place of insight. You understand more deeply that whatever arises and passes away is constantly changing. It is not you or yours. It is *anatta*, not self.

MEETING DEATH¹

AJAHN CANDASIRI

I was struck by the feeling of warmth that arose in my heart when I saw one of the group come back to the retreat. I noticed that other people looked quite happy too. This made me think that in some way, even though we haven't been talking to each other very much, something has happened among us during these days – a sense of community, like a family, has developed. So we felt a bit sad when somebody had to leave early, had to go away, we were concerned about whether they would be alright – and then, when they came back, we felt glad.

My sense is that when we practise together like this a lot happens among people, and mostly it happens in the silence – living together, getting up early, practising meditation,

1 Meeting Death was previously published in 'Simple Kindness' by Ajahn Candasiri. 2012 © Amaravati Publications.

hearing teachings, and also attending to the very ordinary things that need to be attended to, just taking care of the place. I've noticed during these days a sense of appreciation for people's care – feeling really grateful for those who clean the toilets and bathrooms, take care of the rubbish, do the Hoovering, and of course the people in the kitchen; and all the other ways in which we've taken care of each other, just quietly getting on with the things that we've been asked to do, or have volunteered to do. And of course this includes those who work with the computers, or telephoning, making lists and shopping – all those things.

It's as though something has been created through our living together like this; and even though it's just been for a very short time, it can be quite tangible. Of course, very soon there will probably be a different group of people sitting here – and most of us will have gone somewhere else. I find it interesting to contemplate the sense of gladness and joy when thinking about this time together – and then noticing too the slight sense of sorrow, a kind of longing in the heart, at the thought of separating. Sometimes we can think that this is wrong – that we shouldn't feel sad. If we were true Buddhists we would be completely dispassionate, there would be none of these untidy emotions that arise when we don't want them, and which we think shouldn't be there. But as I've said, my sense is that the Buddhist practice is actually a lot more subtle than simply not feeling things. When we talk about dispassion, letting go or equanimity, my own understanding is that it's

much more about not minding what we feel, not struggling with it. If we're feeling glad and happy, we notice that. If we feel sorrow and grief, we notice that. If we feel really irritable and angry and confused, we notice that too, we allow that into consciousness.

When we're growing up we're generally taught about what it's okay to feel and what we shouldn't feel. For example, in Britain when children are growing up, boys tend to be told that they shouldn't cry. It's all right for girls to cry, but not boys, and certainly not for grown men to cry. We're also told that we shouldn't express anger – at least, that was part of my upbringing. And there are probably many other things that we're conditioned to believe are either okay or not okay, so we can become very skilled at repressing, just pushing down the things that are not okay; keeping them under tight control.

However, coming on a retreat is an opportunity for the mind and body to relax, so we can experience all kinds of things, even during a short retreat like this. I think we all need encouragement to not worry about any of it, but simply allow things into consciousness as a very natural process, and then to let them go. Some people call it 'brain-washing' – not in the usual sense in which that word is used – but more allowing ourselves to observe, to notice, all the repressed things as they arise in consciousness so that then we can let them go.

My sense is that during this retreat people have had a chance to experience quite a lot of calm. But some people also

describe enormous amounts of thinking and remembering all kinds of different things. Sometimes people may experience grief that has been repressed, that they could never really allow themselves to experience at the time of the loss. These things may seem disturbing, but really they are quite all right. It's much better to have them up there in consciousness where we can know them for what they are rather than held down below the surface of consciousness.

Sometimes people think they are going crazy when they come on retreat; they have crazy thoughts and weird images arising in the mind. I always think of this as part of the general Spring-cleaning, and nothing at all to worry about. Some people ask about unusual body sensations, the heart beating very fast, or feelings of strange energies in the body. These too are things that can arise when the mind quiets down a bit, and again they're nothing to worry about. The only concern would be if they were so very pleasant that we became attached to them – and then spent the rest of our life trying to get them back again. That would be unfortunate. In meditation all kinds of things can arise: visions of light, or hearing unusual sounds or having strange bodily sensations. These are all just things to notice, to be aware that they've arisen, and noticing also their cessation. Some people experience such things, some people don't.

The cultivation of mindfulness, this way of establishing a strong sense of presence, is a very valuable cultivation. Some people do retreats simply so that they can experience

the calm mind, and they attach great importance to that. But that sense of calm is dependent on quite particular conditions – long hours of meditation, external quiet, and all kinds of other very specific conditions that enable and support a sense of calm. While I have absolutely nothing against those experiences, it is clear to me that in some ways they are quite limited, because we can't spend the whole of our life living under such conditions. We have to interact with other people; even living in a monastery there's an enormous amount of interaction. Most people have jobs. Many people also have family responsibilities, and many live in situations where those around them are not particularly interested in meditation. And so we need to consider how the practice can be sustained in a meaningful way.

As I've already said, one of my absolutely favourite *suttas* is the Discourse on the Greatest Blessings. This was the Buddha's response to a *devata*, a heavenly being who came to visit him early one morning. It is said that this was the time of day that the Buddha used to give instructions to the *devatas*. So this particularly radiant being came and asked him what it is that brings most happiness. The Buddha listed quite a number of conditions; for example, associating with good people, having a suitable means of livelihood – something that doesn't involve any kind of dishonesty or harm, having respect for one's parents and caring for them if that's necessary, caring for one's family, keeping the Precepts, avoiding intoxication or unskilful behaviour, cultivating patience, gratitude and contentment, and contemplating the teachings. In the final

verse, which is the one I really like, the Buddha says, ‘Though living in the world, the heart does not tremble. It is free from sorrow, confusion, and need.’

I find it so inspiring that there is the possibility of maintaining a sense of stability in the world where we have to experience so many different things; good and wonderful things, but also very difficult things or terrible things that can shake the heart, agitating it or making it flutter or tremble. We call those things The Worldly Winds.² But we see that through mindfulness we do have the possibility to hold steady even when the strongest wind is blowing. Now, I don’t think this means that we don’t feel things – I hope not, anyway – but more that we can maintain a balanced perspective with what we are experiencing.

Years ago a little old lady lived with us whose name was Nanda. She was totally deaf. She had a big hearing aid, but we still had to shout very loudly for her to hear anything we said. She really loved the Dhamma, and was totally devoted to Ajahn Sumedho. When she first came to visit us in the nuns’ cottage she was eighty-three years old; from then on she used to come and visit us very frequently. She would have come to live with us permanently, only she had a son to whom she was very attached. She didn’t like his wife very much, and thought that she herself was the only person who could look after him properly. Towards the end of her life she became a kind of honorary nun. There was some question about whether we

2 Loka-dhamma: Gain and loss, honour and dishonour, happiness and misery, praise and blame.

should shave her head; but she had very beautiful white curly hair and couldn't quite bring herself to do it. I think she was worried about what her son would think. So her big act of renunciation was to shave her eyebrows. In the Thai tradition we have the custom of shaving our eyebrows as well as our head.

Anyway, I was very fond of Nanda, and I used to look after her and help her. Eventually she died – hers was the first corpse I ever saw. They dressed her up in pink and put her in a coffin; she didn't look at all like the person I knew. There was a big funeral service, and afterwards I was completely overwhelmed with sorrow. Ajahn Sumedho was there, and quite a few of the other monks and nuns, and there I was crying and crying – feeling quite ashamed of myself because I was sure it was not right for Buddhist nuns to be crying. But I couldn't help it. Then it stopped.

We had another old lady who lived with us. There are even more stories I could tell about her. I also experienced a lot of grief when she died, but I was more mindful by then. And whereas previously the idea of loss and grief had seemed to be something awful, a bad and unpleasant experience, when we had the funeral for this old lady my emotional experience was actually very beautiful. There were moments of great sorrow that would arise with small things, like seeing some object that had belonged to her – but there was also lots of fun. The funeral was a very joyful recollection of this person's life. There was a tremendous feeling of tenderness, and a sense of celebration as well.

We buried her at Amaravati. One of the monks had made her a coffin, and the nuns learned how to carry it. They practised with sacks of rice to start with, so they could learn how to lift it up, and then to carry it without dropping it. There happened to be some builders in the monastery at that time. They had a digger, so they kindly dug the grave for us, and each day the nuns would practise carrying the coffin, and lowering it down into the grave. I don't know what the builders made of it! Then we had the actual ceremony, and everyone joined in. Although I wasn't actually carrying the coffin, I was able to help lower it into the grave. We all threw flowers in, and little things we thought she might have liked. Then we picked up clods of earth and threw them in. There was something wonderful about the sheer physicality: the weight of the coffin, the handling of the earth, and performing this ritual, this ceremony – that was very helpful. It felt like an offering, and a way of dealing with all the emotion that was there. So it felt like an expression of love, and joy, and sorrow, all those things. In a community where people are mindful, are present, there was a tremendous sense of ease around the changing emotions, a sense that whatever was happening was completely all right.

I often think of our emotional life as being like the weather. In Britain we have a great variety of weather conditions – all in one day; wind and rain and storm, and then a sense of calm and bright sunshine, all in very rapid succession – it was very much like that on the day of Sister Uppala's funeral – in fact, with Sister Nanda's funeral it was the same.

After that I wasn't so afraid of bereavement or grief, while before I could never imagine how people could cope with losing somebody really close. Certainly it's not an easy experience, but I've found that when I can be present it is bearable. Also, it's really good to take care in our relationships with each other; it's important to try to resolve any differences, otherwise there can be a sense of regret when somebody close to us dies, a sense that we've missed an opportunity to make amends. In fact, there are ways that we still can, but it's much better to do it before we have to separate physically, if at all possible.

The Buddha strongly encourages us to contemplate our own death. This can be quite a frightening prospect, because most of us don't know what's going to happen. Of course, some people can remember previous existences and previous deaths, but most of us don't have that ability, so for us death is a complete unknown. All we can be certain of is that it's going to happen at some time. I find that a helpful contemplation is learning how to make peace with doubt, the sense of not knowing: 'Should I do this? Should I do that? Don't know...'

Most of us are addicted to certainty. We want to know. We want to know where we are and what's going to happen next. When we're on retreats, one of the things that's most difficult about the Noble Silence is that we can't get the kind of reassurance we're used to getting from each other. Someone might not look very happy, and we might assume that it's because of something we've done, but when we're not talking there's no way to check that out. So we can feel very

uncertain. So we can recognise that sense of uncertainty and how uncomfortable it is in our lives, and instead of trying as hard as we can to find certainty, we can take refuge in the Buddha, in present moment awareness. Life then becomes rather exciting.

I imagine that the moment of death can be truly terrifying if we haven't learned how to make peace with the sense of not knowing what's going to happen next, if we haven't really made peace with that. But if we have, if we can be truly at ease simply with that sense of presence, I think that death can be tremendously exciting – stepping beyond into the unknown. Once I nearly died, and I realised that I could have died without even knowing that I'd died. From my perspective then, it all seemed like a complete non-event. But of course each case must be different, so really I don't know.

During this time of retreat we've had a chance to consider what is really important in life – to review our priorities and to consider how we want to live for the rest of our lives. Of course, I'm not expecting that we've necessarily come up with a detailed plan, but perhaps we have begun to appreciate the possibility of being fully present; actually present to experience life fully and completely, rather than living in a memory of the past or a dream about the future. Of course, we can reflect on events of the past. We can celebrate the wonderful things that have happened to us, or that we've been part of, and we can allow such thoughts to bring a joyful feeling into the heart. We can also learn from past mistakes.

And of course there are times when we need to make some kind of a plan for the future, like how we are going to get back home from the retreat tomorrow. These are practical things that we need to think about, and then, having done that we can focus all our awareness on the here and now.

So if people ask me how they can best prepare themselves for death, my answer would have to be: cultivate mindfulness, presence, live carefully and responsibly, and make sure you enjoy your life. Make sure you do the things that are important to you, so that you don't reach the end and think, 'Oh, why didn't I do that?'

WALKING THE PATH WITH COURAGE

AJAHN METTA

When looking at the qualities of courage and renunciation, you might notice that these are both important ingredients of any spiritual path. In the Theravada tradition renunciation is at the top of the list in terms of practice and training. For monastics, all of our life revolves around this theme. And the five precepts, the ‘training’ of the lay community, are also very concerned with these qualities.

A little while ago I had a conversation with another group of people and I noticed that renunciation seems to be ‘in the air’. It seems to be a quality of the time we are living in. The state of economy at the moment, the crisis we are experiencing, is affecting us in many ways. We probably all have a feeling of uncertainty, not knowing if and how it will affect our lives, realizing that suddenly we may not have

all the resources available that we are used to. We are faced with a situation where we must live with a bit less in terms of material resources. This might bring up some questions: Where is it possible, without too many changes in my life, to live with less, to need less? What has my life been like so far, in terms of how I spend my material income? If we connect this with our spiritual path, we can see that questions like these are related.

When you embark on a spiritual path, or perhaps suddenly find yourself on one, you will notice that when you move deeper into it, it is asking you for some kind of renunciation. It does not matter which of the Buddhist traditions you investigate; you will see renunciation as one of the steps on this path.

I do not want to go too much into the five precepts and how 'we should practise them', but any path you follow will bring up questions like: What are my needs? What are the values I want to develop in this life? What are the values of this path that I have chosen to walk? Can I live these values as much as possible and as much as I would like to? When we ask these questions, this is where courage comes in. Because we do need the courage to change. We do need the courage to look into our patterns. To ask: What parts of my life need more attention, more mindfulness, more kindness or more compassion? I think the very first step is something like an internal check-up. And I remember having done that myself. What do I see in the way I am living that needs change? One

important tool to use here is honesty. Can we be honest in relating to what we find when we do this?

It is up to each of us to make these choices, about where and how we step out of our usual, unreflected patterns of living. We usually become interested in a spiritual path because we see a need and want to change our lives. We look for ways to bring more depth, more meaning, into it. More of the values which are important to us. We look for ways of manifesting them, bringing them to life and living them in our daily experiences. When you make these internal evaluations, you might find things that you really want to change. There are different reasons for this. It might be because they have become meaningless and no longer make much sense in your life. With these internal check-ups, you might also find things that are necessary for walking this path. Most likely, you will encounter the qualities of kindness, empathy, compassion or others that will need to be developed further.

I'd like to share a bit of my own experience with this. When I was in Thailand, many years ago, I came in contact with the Theravada tradition. I had gone to a monastery to do a retreat there and this was when I first came into direct contact with the teachings of the Buddha. Hearing the Four Noble Truths gave me an incredible sense of relief. I had finally found what I had been looking for all my life or, let's say, for many years of my life. It gave me the answers to many questions that had been there for a long time. It also brought up the question of how I had been living my life. What were my values,

what place did they have in my everyday life, how did they manifest? What I found then was that I had spent a lot of time on things and activities to distract myself from what was not so pleasant to feel, from dissatisfaction and suffering. I knew how to distract myself from those areas where I wasn't very honest with myself or with others. I started to notice how I did things, how I related in habitual ways without questioning them any more. Did I really want to relate to this person or to this situation in exactly this way? I noticed the lack of evaluation in regard to this. How much attention did I give to relating to others? Did I really want to be aware of the needs of others, and of my own?

My experience of being in a monastery in Thailand was pulling me out of my habitual way of living. I found myself in a completely different world. At times, I just felt bored. There was suddenly so much time for practice and looking inside, for examining what was happening internally. I found myself in places where I experienced boredom because I did not want to look deeper. My habitual pattern of reaction was: 'what else could I do right now?' Looking for any kind of distraction from this experience. But usually there was just nothing much to do this with. One of the few options was relating to others, making contact with them and distracting each other. But you can't do that for very long. At least not when you are to some degree honest with yourself. Then you notice: I am doing this right now because I don't want to face the unpleasantness of this experience.

That same moment of honesty, that very experience,

brings up the quality of courage. It takes courage to turn away from distraction. To enter that place which is not easeful; to turn towards that which is painful. To acknowledge what needs to stop. To consider a change. It is not an easy thing to do. It involves reflecting on what is really needed here and now. How do we relate to unpleasantness? Of course, I do not mean to say that following a spiritual path, practicing, brings with it only difficult experiences. Of course, it doesn't. Or why would we want to do it in the first place? It does, however, require a lot of courage and determination to maintain our practice.

Yes, you will find very pleasant times, times where you experience peacefulness and ease, a calm that is very new to you. And it feels really good. In my personal experience, that was the attractive side of this path, of this new way of looking at life. But there are difficult times as well. Looking at the areas of pain, sadness, boredom, dissatisfaction and unease led me to question how I lived my life. Is there really a red thread, is there something that carries through? Was there something that made this life worthwhile?

I was fortunate. I was able to stay at the monastery for several months and look deeper into these questions. And I began to look deeper into these possibilities for change, which was what I needed at the time. I discovered that the first step in that direction was understanding how I reacted in habitual ways and created suffering for myself and others. I had to stop for a moment, take a deep breath and look at what was needed right there and then, at that moment. When I look at this from

the point where I am now, it is still a question of coming back into this present moment and connecting with the needs of just this: where am I right now?

Naturally, we can do this most easily during our formal practice, when we have the time to do sitting or walking meditation. But we also need to find ways of integrating this into our ordinary lives. We will find ourselves in situations where change is necessary. In those situations, we need to gather our courage and look at the kind of response that would be appropriate and skillful. One thing we can ask ourselves again and again is: how much do I need? what are my real needs? Or on the more material level: how much do I want to take part in the flow of accumulating material belongings? Do I really need this new car? Do I really need a car at all?

Something recently just came up in the monastery. Our toaster has started to wear out. It sometimes burns our toast and we have been wondering whether we need a new one. And then one of us asked, do we actually need a toaster at all? Look at what it really is that you need. Can one live without a toaster? It's as simple as that. And the answer here is quite clear: yes, of course, we can! And so we decided to just live with it as it is and when it gives out completely, we will do without a toaster. This is absolutely fine. Of course, this is not one of the most crucial questions in this life; just consider it as an example of what we take for granted. How easily we do this without questioning the necessity of the things in our lives! When we ask this question of 'what do I really need?', what we are asking is: How do I want to live this life? How

much energy, resources and attention do I want to put into accumulating material wealth and possessions? This is also related to other areas of our lives, and to our relationships with relatives, friends, co-workers and other people.

We might ask ourselves: How much energy, time and attention do I want to give to the practice? What place does the spiritual practice have in my life? Here, spiritual practice does not only mean formal meditation practice. It also means giving attention to our spiritual friends, spending quality time with people who are on the same path. Giving time and attention to a friend who might need some help, some support, someone to listen. Am I willing to give this? What is your understanding of practice in regard to this? Instead of spending time with your friend, do you say, 'Sorry, I haven't got time for you right now because I need to do some more sitting practice'? Ask yourself this. What is important? Are you still flexible in the way you relate to these situations?

In a situation like this, your answer might sometimes be 'yes'. Other times, you may need to spend some time on your own, and your answer might be 'no'. There might be something that you really need to pay attention to and being with your friend right now would mean not dealing with this. It might be just another distraction. Or you might feel that what you need to do first is allow yourself some nourishment. You may feel that you do not have the resources to give support right now, are not able to give the right kind of attention to your friend's needs. This is a possibility. But most often, your answer will be just to say 'yes'. I can spare some time, I can

be with you. What I can offer is to receive you and hold you in this. 'Holding you here' means giving attention to what is needed right now. That also has its place in our practice. Our everyday life experiences are just as much a part of the practice as sitting down to meditate.

When we look at the internal level of renunciation, what comes up is the question of how much we are able to turn towards suffering. When we look at the suffering in our lives, what are the areas that require more courage in order for us to relate to it? What are the areas where we know we need to develop restraint and what is needed in order to do that?

Let's take a few moments right now to look into this. What are the areas in your life where you feel you need more courage, or where you feel more restraint would be helpful? For most of us, something will come up almost immediately. It could be related to your work. It could be in regard to a relationship with another person. It might have to do with some kind of addiction. It may be an area where you don't feel whole, where you feel something is missing. As you look into it, see if you can take the step toward being with the energetic or emotional experience of it. If it is something that is very strong, perhaps even overwhelming, be aware of how much you move into this, so that you don't lose your foothold in awareness. In that case, just allow yourself to touch it. Be with it just for a little while.

If we aim our awareness in this direction, we will usually encounter the pain, the sadness, the frustration, or whatever emotional experience arises with it. If we make an internal

space for this by connecting with it, with that emotional resonance, it can be brought into a place where there is a direct experience of it. It moves out of an unconscious place in the back of our mind and into the space of what is happening right now. By working in this way, you might also experience fear. Do not be surprised if this happens. See if you can simply acknowledge this. See if you can just make a bit of space for this fear to be part of the experience. Bringing courage into our practice really means that we are able to meet and relate to this fear. We are finding ways of connecting with it. We are connecting with the unpleasantness of the experience. We are trying to find ways where we can hold the experience of fear in a space of kindness. This requires an attitude of gentleness and acceptance.

Courage does not mean the absence of fear. Courage means having the resources and the energy to face the unpleasantness of fear, of painful experiences, and to relate in ways that will help us to take the next step. Look at your personal spiritual heroes. Bring somebody up in your mind. When you look at his or her life, consider what you value in this person. What is it that you respect? What do you admire in them? What is it that makes you look up to them? What is it that inspires you? You might find that it is their courage; their courage to continue where other people stop. Their courage to live up to their own values. To live and embody them.

When we dare to bring renunciation into our lives we experience unpleasantness, especially in the early stages. But we are giving up what we know is unwholesome and

no longer makes sense to us. With courage, we can move into the direct experience of the pain, the frustration, the fear, the dissatisfaction. We begin to understand that these unwholesome states of mind do not support us. By staying with the direct experience and connecting with the present moment, we find ourselves in a different place where they can transform and dissolve. We connect with the places that we find hard to acknowledge and by doing this we come into contact with a deeper sense of being, both with ourselves and with those around us. When you walk the spiritual path, you must learn to use these tools, to work with them. Renunciation does not mean to cut yourself off from what you need. Real renunciation comes from a sense of fullness. It comes from an understanding, the feeling or experience of enough-ness, of fullness, of noticing what it is you really need. It is an experience of abundance, the knowing that we will be able to relate to our needs at the moment when we experience them. We do not have to hoard things just because there might come a time when we need them.

What is important to me in this life? What do I want to put my energy into? How do I want to live this life? When you ask these questions, you are really stepping out of self-centeredness. You are stepping out of your little self and into something much bigger. This involves a shift in consciousness. An internal shift from assuming that you are in control of your life to embracing the unknown, being part of something that is beyond you. Connecting with the wider field of existence. In the world today, practicing renunciation can have far-

reaching consequences. It can help us, for example, to be more aware of the scarcity of our physical resources. This is extremely important at the moment, whether we choose to acknowledge it or not. We should perhaps ask ourselves: How can we continue to live this kind of life in our present society? How sustainable is it? How long can we continue to use our resources in the way we do now? Or, to put it simply: Do we need all the things we are so used to having?

When we step out of our self-centered views in this way, we are obliged to consider not only our own resources, but also the resources of others. If I'm using up so much of these resources, what will be left for others? Renunciation is not just a personal issue but relates to the world around us. How can I share the abundance in my life with others who have less? This question is not only relevant to our own personal lives, but on an international scale. Again, this does not relate only to the material aspects of our lives. It includes our social and spiritual qualities, our goodness of heart. How do we spend our time and how much can we give to others? How much of our time do we waste?

Consider this: What is going on in your mind when you have a day of practice, when you are working, when you are with your friends or your partner, when you are with your children? Are you really 'there'? Are you present? Are you in connection with the people in your life? We need to develop the courage to look at these things, the courage to look at the pain they might bring up. Of course, when we connect with the present moment, we do not only experience pain. But if

we are in connection, it doesn't really matter what we are experiencing. When we put our heart fully into it, we can also experience and share joy, peacefulness, empathy, compassion and contentment, qualities which can nourish others as well as ourselves.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

AJAHN SUNDARA was born in France in 1946. She studied dance in England and in France. In her early thirties, after working for a few years as a dancer and teacher of contemporary dance, she had the opportunity whilst living and studying in England to attend a talk and, later, a retreat led by Ajahn Sumedho.

His teachings and experiences of the monastic way of life in the Forest tradition resonated deeply. Before long this led to a visit to Chithurst Monastery in England, where in 1979 she asked to join the monastic community as one of the first four women novices. In 1983 she was given the Going Forth as a Siladhara (10-precept nun) by Ajahn Sumedho. After spending five years at Chithurst Monastery, she went to live at Amaravati Monastery, where she participated in the establishment of the nuns' community. From 1995 until 1998 she spent three years deepening her practice, mostly in Thai Forest monasteries. In 2000, after spending a year as the senior incumbent of the nuns community at the Devon vihara, she came to the United States where she was based at Abhayagiri Monastery. She lives at present at Amaravati Monastery.

She is interested in exploring ways of practising, sustaining and integrating Buddhist teachings in Western culture. Since

the late 1980's she has taught and led meditation retreats worldwide.

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 Anagārikā.

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.

AJAHN METTA was born 1953 in Germany. She became an Anagārikā in '93 at Amaravati and took higher ordination as a Sīladharā in '96. During her monastic life she has been involved in many areas of the community. She is one of the group of senior nuns leading the Sīladharā community. For the past few years she has been teaching meditation workshops and retreats. Prior to monastic life she worked as a secretary and office assistant. She is a mother of a grown-up son and was living a family life before entering the monastic path. She has been practising meditation since '84 and has experience of living in other spiritual communities in Europe and Thailand (Wat Suan Mokkh).



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