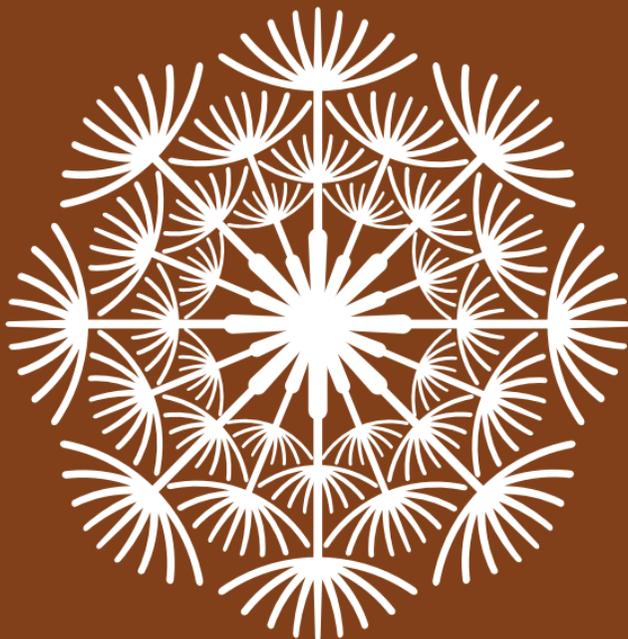
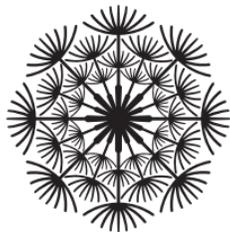


# SEEDS OF DHAMMA



AJAHN SUNDARA

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## DEDICATION

This booklet is dedicated with deep gratitude to my parents, who inspired me to realize the precious gift of our human life.

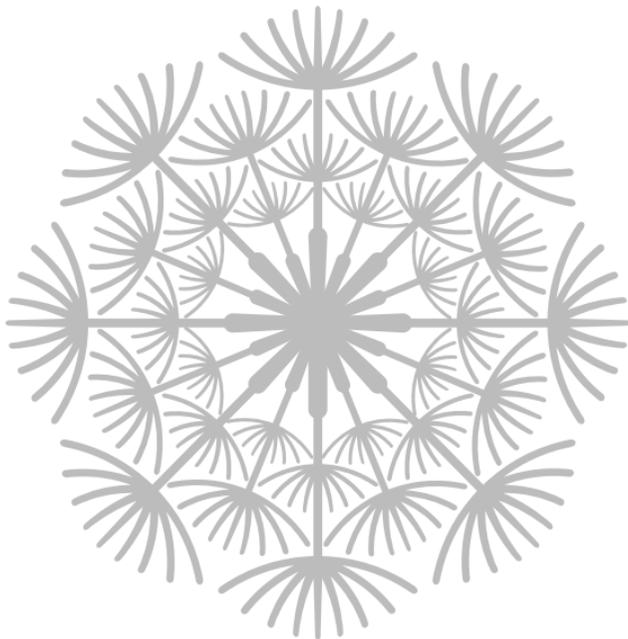


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# SEEDS OF DHAMMA



AJAHN SUNDARA



## A STILL LAKE

The feeling of discontent is not a bad thing. It is not unhealthy. Discontent is a symptom of the heart's yearning for freedom.

When we feel discontent, instead of saying, 'Oh, this is terrible!' simply realize that at that moment we are aware of our limitations. Discontent is a sign that we have come up against the wall of what we can bear, and something in us does not want to go beyond that wall. But we have a choice: we can thicken the wall (or create another wall) by distracting ourselves or we can let go – and by letting go we clear the wall. The more we let go, the more we hack away at the hard 'self' we have to live with. Letting go in this context is not just a synonym for freedom and bliss, it is a very practical thing. Whenever we let go, we are freeing ourselves.

The Buddha did not say we should not have any desires. He

recognized that we live in a world of restless energy, of wanting, of discontent. Out of compassion he gave us a teaching that allows us to investigate the reality of this world. The Buddha taught a path of investigation but we cannot really use the ability to investigate the realm of our mind and body very thoroughly unless we have already cultivated a certain amount of peace, a certain amount of ease.

The mind is often compared to a pond or a lake. If the lake is constantly stirred up, constantly agitated by the elements, it is difficult to see very deeply into the water. We can only see what is at the bottom of the lake when it is quiet and still. Like a lake, the mind too can be agitated or still.

One of the conditions for being able to investigate the nature of our mind is the ability to be still. This is the first step in meditation – learning to quieten down. Unless we do this we will always be in a restless, worried state. Until we have a

certain amount of inner stillness, we will be unable to clearly see the changing nature of our feelings, thoughts and habits and the way they influence us or affect other people.

To begin meditation, we calm the mind by just focusing, bringing our attention to an object that is calming. We can meditate on something very impersonal like a candle flame – just focus our attention, we don't need to concentrate heavily on the flame. Or we can focus our attention on the breath. Again, we don't need to focus heavily on it, just enough to feel the natural rhythm of breathing. Watching the breath doesn't cost us any money and it's always available so we have no excuse for not learning how to calm our minds.

Remember, there is no clarity of mind as long as there is agitation and turbulence. We will never be able to come to the point of deeper insight where the mind is truly transformed for good if we are constantly agitated.

That does not mean we will always be successful in calming our mind. It does not mean that habits will never take over and push us back into the same old rut. But we always have the Buddha's teaching to help us get out of the rut. Eventually, as we become more skilled at seeing deeply and clearly, we won't need special conditions; any situation will be fine.

In the middle of the most outrageous situation we will be able to find a stillness, a still point, the eye of the storm.

## BRAHMA-VIHARAS

There is a saying which expresses the relationship between wisdom and compassion:

‘Wisdom tells me I am nothing, compassion tells me I am everything, and in between my life flows.’

Wisdom teaches us about impermanence and the absence of self-hood. Compassion makes us aware that despite our impermanence and lack of a self, even though we are separate bodies, we are all interconnected and affect each other deeply. When there is awareness and inner peace, there is spaciousness within. When there is spaciousness, we have room to love other people. Skilful and compassionate actions manifest spontaneously.

The love described in the Buddhist teachings is not sensual love; it is not dependent on the six senses. Loving-kindness

and compassion are universal love. That is why the four Brahmavihāras (mettā, karunā, muditā, uppekkhā) are called ‘the immeasurables’. They are universal forms of love, not restricted to anything; not dependent on whether people are big or small, fat or thin, old or young, sick or healthy, stupid or intelligent, white, black, yellow or green. This love receives and blesses everybody. This love is much more understandable once we begin to let go of the illusion of being a solid and permanent self.

Our identification with ‘me’ and ‘mine’ causes a contraction that leaves us unable to love freely. In a deluded state, we become obsessed with a perception of ‘me’ which needs to be defended, looked after, appreciated and praised. As long as we are dependent on this ‘me’, we are caught up in all the complex needs of the mind; needs that arise because we feel separated, cut off and dependent on many things.

The Buddha's teachings speak of four aspects of love: mettā is loving-kindness, karunā is compassion, muditā is sympathetic joy and upekkhā is equanimity. In English the word 'love' covers almost all types of love, but the words 'Brahma-vihāras' open up new vistas of what love actually is and how it can be expanded. This perspective may not be so obvious in western languages. We may not always realize that compassion or joy in the good fortune of others are facets of love.

In the scriptures mettā is represented in this way: 'Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings.'

I encourage you to contemplate the meaning of these divine abidings. They can help you more deeply understand this whole aspect of love, compassion, gladness and serenity.

## A LOVELY MOMENT OF FREEDOM

Our mind is not who we are. It's a mechanism that is out of control much of the time. Although we resolve not to say angry words, we still manage to be angry with somebody. We still manage to say something stupid. We still manage to react. We still manage to think stupid thoughts about ourselves. And then we are judgmental, critical about ourselves. It is very dangerous because whenever we are self-critical, we are attaching to those negative mental states and actually cultivating more of those seeds. We are making them grow through unawareness. They blossom and then we feel more miserable. This why we need to realize that the mind is like an empty field, and through lifetime after lifetime of being totally deluded we've accumulated a lot of miserable seeds!

So now it is time to start sorting them out, to start turning the soil. That is what we do in meditation. We start turning the soil and

sorting out the seeds. Eventually we begin to notice what actually makes us happy and then we want to follow happiness rather than misery.

The practice is much more than just sitting meditation. The training of the mind is extremely comprehensive. It requires effort to notice when habits are present and when they are not; to notice the lovely moment when we are suddenly awake, in a place of freedom. It is a beautiful moment, a moment when we have a choice and can see that choice clearly. Then the mind is ready to go down the right road. It is a moment of awakening – happy and free and joyful. We need to really contemplate those moments of joy that come from a sense of freedom. We notice where we are, and see that at that moment there are many roads in front of us. When we are really mindful and aware, wisdom can inform us.

Wisdom is not self. It is a quality of the heart that is present when there is mindfulness, awareness, concentration and energy. Wisdom

informs. Wisdom is not mechanical, it is responsive. It responds completely to the situation: freshly, completely, out of the emptiness of our hearts, out of the unconditioned part of ourselves.

I wish you to continue to practice and to continue to bring clarity into your heart. Peace will bring deeper clarity. Nurture in yourself the moment of joy and happiness that comes from reflecting on the goodness of your life.

## I KNOW YOU MARA

When the Buddha says ‘*anattā*’, when he says ‘this is not-self’, he points out that our mind-states, whether negative or positive, are not ours. We may like to be happy, wise and compassionate all the time. But what happens? Are we compassionate all the time? Are we wise all the time? For most people, actions don’t usually come from a place of choice and freedom.

It is necessary to reflect on our motivations. What are we motivated by? Is it anger? Are we angry with ourselves and meditate in order to shape up and become confident? Is it greed? Is it our thinking that meditation might generate more money and success and therefore more happiness? Do we imagine becoming beautiful and radiant like those big Babas you see on cushions in India? ‘Everybody will notice my aura! I’ll be able to say wise words now. I’m sure they’ll notice how much I practice mettā!’ Of course, we know what

happens when we think like that – Mara is checking us out. ‘Ah ha! That’s what you think about yourself, eh? Well let’s double-check that one.’

Even with the Arahant nuns Mara was there, just around the corner. These were highly accomplished nuns and the moment before they achieved enlightenment Mara would say to them, ‘What are you doing, you silly one? You are so beautiful. You could have such a good time out in the world. Have babies! You would make your mother and your father so happy. You could generate lots of merit!’ So if Mara would approach the arahant nuns, don’t you think he will approach us too? Even when we believe we are being mindful, something trivial happens and triggers our anger or frustration. This is Mara.

The Buddha was very clever. He didn’t leave Mara out of the picture. He didn’t say, ‘Oh, the evil one should not be part of our world, should not be part of our path. We should not think any evil

thoughts. We should not feel any evil feelings. We should not have any nasty perceptions about anybody. We should always be blissed out, loving, accepting, endlessly patient, totally non-judgmental and completely compassionate toward all beings.’

When the Buddha met Mara under the Bodhi Tree, he just said, ‘I know you, Mara.’ You know? He didn’t say, ‘Get out! He did not start breathing in and out deeply so he could repress or shut out Mara completely. He did not try to kill Mara. He just included it. Mara pursued the Buddha for forty-five years.

Mara is not an evil spirit that hovers over us. Basically, Mara is the state of ignorance. When we are caught in greed, hatred and delusion, we are befriending Mara, we are in the realm of Mara. When we let go of these negativities, we are in the realm of Dhamma. So which realm do we want to be a part of?

## THE PATH LEADING OUT OF SUFFERING

We start on the path of practice in a state of not-knowing (*avijjā*) – passion, greed, selfishness, discontent and laziness are very much part of the make-up of our mind/body experience. When the clear mirror of mindfulness is not well developed, there is a natural tendency to identify with what goes on in the mind.

However through the practice of meditation, looking directly into our various states of mind, we notice that these mind-states arise and pass away. We understand that all we experience is a continuous flow – a flow of thoughts, feelings, emotions, perceptions, memories – empty of any solid or permanent entity.

As we begin to see that everything is inherently *anicca* (impermanent), *dukkha* (painful) and *anattā* (not-self), we begin to understand the suffering of identification with mind and body. We also begin to understand the path leading out of that suffering. This is Dhamma.

## FREEDOM IS A SIDE EFFECT OF A LIFE THAT IS CONSCIOUS

In Buddhism, what we call ‘mind’ (or ‘*citta*’) does not refer just to thinking and the brain. The mind has a much broader dimension. It includes thinking, but it also includes our perceptions, feelings, stories and memories. For example, when I perceive something, I already have an imprint in me, a memory that can help me recognize: ‘this is this; that is that.’

As we become more conscious of the workings of our mind, we free the heart from the causes of misery. Freedom is a side effect of a life that is conscious. We don’t necessarily become happy every minute of every day, but we feel more comfortable in ourselves. We have fewer regrets and less worry because we have lived a life that breathes deeply through the quality of awareness.

Somehow, awareness doesn't leave many traces at the end of the day. We let go of a lot of things which we wouldn't have, had we not been cultivating mindfulness and the skill of letting go.

## FIVE PRECEPTS

The *Vinaya* provides standards of speech and action rooted in precepts. The Five Precepts are injunctions to refrain from harming, to refrain from stealing, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from lying and to refrain from taking drugs and intoxicants that dull the mind.

These precepts are of timeless value, as relevant today as they were 2500 years ago. When we feel lost and confused by a world that is engrossed in promoting values that the Buddha would have considered far away from what is wholesome and truly liberating, returning to the precepts and reflecting on their meaning leads us back to what inspires and uplifts the heart. More than ever, whether living as a monastic or as a layperson, we need to be reminded of these basic conditions for cultivating a kind and unselfish heart.

## WORKING WITH ANGER

Witnessing the mind is not so simple. When we try to be a witness, a knower who watches and observes, it can take a while before we come to the place where the mind settles, where it is relaxed, present and aware enough to actually begin seeing things in the moment.

Even then we might still not be skilled in seeing, it can take a long time. I spent years witnessing anger and letting it go, and it would come back! I would be aware of the experience of anger and I would notice when I was free from anger, but it took a long time to come to the place where I actually saw anger as it was. Maybe some of you can relate to that. The feeling of anger can be so close to us, like our own skin, sometimes we may have no idea that we are even angry. We may only become aware of it when it is extreme, when it is almost taking over the mind.

So, for a long time we miss the subtle quality of anger that is part of our makeup. We haven't yet developed enough space to witness it. We are too much into *being* this anger, *becoming* this anger, without any distance between us and the feeling. When anger is still only a subtle thought, it can quickly and easily invade our minds. Our perceptions become angry. Our feelings become angry. Our reactions become angry. We become irritable. It all started with just a thought, a perception or a memory.

It could take a long time before we are able to get a handle on anger, greed, jealousy or suffering. So for a long time we assume that suffering is caused by something 'out there', outside 'me'. How often do we see the suffering and its source, where it begins? For many years we can respond to our suffering as if somebody is doing something to us. When somebody tells me 'you are stupid', I get angry. When that person says 'you are lovely', I get really happy. Who is reacting? Where does the reaction begin and end? We are doing the deepest work a human

can do. We are unravelling the delusions of mind, unravelling the blind habits and deluded perceptions.

The Buddha's path teaches us how to go back to the source. We ask, 'Who is feeling these feelings?' On the path of awakening we want to liberate our minds from reacting to life in ways that perpetuate delusion and suffering. Are we committed to that? Even an utterly wretched mind can be changed into an awakened, happy and liberated mind. Whether feeling good, bad or indifferent, we can learn to witness the workings of mind.

Nothing is wasted on the Buddha's path. Each moment can be a complete moment of liberation.

## QUALITIES THAT LEAD TO RELINQUISHMENT, NOT TO ACCUMULATION

The Four Requisites are the basic possessions of an alms-mendicant: a set of robes, alms-food, shelter and medicine. A monk or nun may be offered more, but these are the basics. The training is about keeping possessions to a minimum. Based on simplicity and minimal needs, the monastic life helps you to steer away from habits of gathering, accumulation and collection of things that may seem ‘absolutely essential’ at the time but are actually unnecessary.

The secular, materialistic world tends to foster a perennial sense of dissatisfaction, breeding desires and increased need. In contrast, the Buddha encourages us to develop a sense of frugality and contentment – being content with what is given. We also develop a sense of gratitude and appreciation for the life that we have chosen to follow with faith. As long as greed is present

in the mind there is always the danger that we will be influenced by its force, often unaware of how that force may manifest. It is a learning process. Training and practice gradually result in a better knowing of ourselves, being better able to discern those unskilful tendencies more rapidly and letting them go.

We are dependent on others. In living the *samana* life, this is a daily reminder of what is truly important. The training is about being frugal, careful with what one wants, refraining oneself from accumulating possessions, and learning to be content with what is given.

## OUR MIND AS IT REALLY IS

Perhaps we come to the monastery with the idea that we have to develop a self that will become a good Buddhist – kind, compassionate and loving but then we can get into conflict with ourselves because we discover a reality that is quite different. Perhaps we come to experience ourselves as somebody very different from that kind, loving, generous person that we wish to develop. On one level we want to be pure, loving and not driven by sensual desires; we want to be respectful of each other and then we discover other tendencies that we can be so blind to.

For a long time we may think that ‘we’ are in charge of our lives, and can feel quite guilty or blame ourselves when things do not work out. For example, how many times do we feel embarrassed about the way we behave? Even when nobody sees us, we can feel so embarrassed. This beautiful person that we hoped to become is suddenly raging about some silly thing.

We think we are in charge, but as we keep practicing we realize that it is really blind habits that are in charge – blind conditioning, blind responses. They are blind because they are acted upon before our mindfulness can even catch them.

When we are mindful, we are conscious, we can see clearly. But often habits are so strong, they catch us off guard and can manifest like a punch – punching our world, our reality. This is not always obvious to others as habits can be hidden behind a smile, an appearance of politeness. A punch can even look quite sweet.

So in our meditation practice we begin to notice the subtleties of our mind – what is happening right now? Am I at peace? Do I hate what is happening or not? Do I care for it, or not? Do I wish to be somewhere else? Do I force myself to be here? These details are not always acknowledged, and yet this is the material of our practice.

The Buddha said: 'I teach for those who know and those who see.' They are very simple words, aren't they? But for me they mean alot. If we don't see our mind as it really is, there is nothing much we can do.

## QUALITIES THAT LEAD TO CONTENTMENT, NOT TO DISCONTENT

Contentment, *santhutiya*, is the quality of being satisfied, peaceful, accepting and modest. A number of our observances in the Sīladhara discipline deal with the qualities of restraint and modesty. The heading of one of the nine sets of observances says, ‘A sīladhara practices contentment with simple requisites.’ A nun may feel desire for things that she likes, even quietly hoping to get more, but her training lies in refraining from acting or speaking on thoughts which could lead to the loss of faith by a supporter (one of the reasons the Buddha established the Vinaya). Instead she reminds herself that she is dependent on others and must cultivate contentment and modesty. This leads to a beautiful appreciation of whatever may be offered, and brings a deep gratitude.

## WHEN WALLS FALL AWAY

Yesterday we had a very lovely day here at the monastery. We were visited by monks and nuns from all over England. Some were Christian and some were Buddhist, including some Zen practitioners. The theme of the gathering was 'Death and Resurrection.'

It was inspiring to share experiences that came from insight and understanding. It made it clear that all of us have a common foundation in the experiences of the mind and heart. We were sharing the common result of walking a spiritual path that is connected to the human heart whether we practice as a Christian or a Buddhist. When we come to that deep place of knowledge and understanding, the walls seem to fall away. Conventions dissolve.

## LETTING GO

When we first come to the practice, we don't quite know how to let go because we may not clearly see our particular set of habits. We are dealing with a mind that is programmed in certain ways and no matter how much we want it to be different it finds ways not to let go. We can find ourselves stuck. In fact, we may find that spiritual teaching makes us feel even worse because in our determination to practice, everything intensifies a bit, even the desire to let go.

Letting go takes place when we stop entangling ourselves. So first of all, we have to let thing be as they are. Then we have to accept everything as it is. We don't get involved with the things we want to let go of; *just let them be*. Nature is impermanent so if we let them be and don't touch them, they just go naturally.

We needn't be frightened about not knowing how to let go. Don't be afraid of making mistakes, of not getting it right. That is an early

understanding on the path of awakening: accepting that the mind does not know how to do it straightaway.

We may be willing but we are working with blind habits, blind ways of doing things. We just don't know yet. So one aspect of letting go is being with all the things we witness in our minds without getting involved with them.

## IN OUR DAILY LIVES

The Buddha shows us the path to the Deathless. But how does that relate to my daily life in the kitchen with my kids and my dog? Well, check out the mind when it's not clinging: when you are relaxed, not wanting anything, not going anywhere, not wanting to become something, in a moment of profound relaxation, in the now. How does it feel to be in the moment? Check out the peace that is there when the mind is not sticking, clinging or wanting. It is worth noting that peace when it is there. In fact, a primary aspect of meditation is learning to see when the mind is clinging, grasping and holding onto things, and when the mind is not doing that.

We have to really feel this more than anything, just go to the feeling of it. That is one of the beautiful things about Ajahn Sumedho's teaching – vipassanā practice is not just for when we are sitting on a cushion or on a three week retreat in the Himalayas, but actually

when we are at the workplace, in the kitchen, where there are a lot of people with madness all around. The practice isn't just about being in a peaceful, cosy situation. In fact the mind will learn a lot more when it's not in comfort and not in control.

## OUR NEED TO WANT

Compassion is very important in the Buddhist tradition. The first of the Precepts to which all lay Buddhist practitioners commit themselves is to refrain from harming any living beings. That is a way of expressing compassion – not killing, harming or committing any acts by body, speech or mind that might create suffering for other people.

We may think about not harming people in Africa or Afghanistan. Our hearts open when we see children on television suffering in a famine-ridden area, or women who are being abused in certain countries, or even in the West – but often we overlook the fact that we ourselves are suffering. We overlook the aching in our own heart, the yearning for profound peace.

We are part of a society that not only breeds discontent but encourages it. We are supposed to be discontent in order to continue

being a good consumer. If everyone were suddenly satisfied with what they have, society would go bankrupt. So society doesn't want us to look at the pain of discontent; it encourages us to believe there is pleasure in being discontented, pleasure in getting something other than what we have now, whether it is a new bed, a new TV, a new partner, a new house or a new job. It's endemic.

We are told we are okay as long as we keep buying. As long as we keep biting the bait of society's lures, society recognises us as perfectly functional. It is only at times of crisis in our lives, or when we start looking within our minds, within ourselves, that we suddenly feel failed by society – failed by our schools, our parents, our family, our husband or wife. And then that sudden sense of being let down will redirect the attention. Instead of keeping our gaze looking outwards, perhaps we will be forced to look in a different direction. This is what meditation addresses – how to direct our attention properly, skilfully, in the right direction, so that we can really look into that general sense of discontent and its roots.

If ever we have achieved a moment of profound peace, a profound sense of wholeness, of being one with things, one with the environment, one with a partner, can we investigate that sense of peace? What is it? What is its cause? Well, the cause of peace is the end of wanting in our mind. Then we are at peace.

So a social creature in a materialistic society is far from being a perfectly peaceful creature. In a consumer society, being healthy is synonymous with wanting. This mind-set is part of our everyday life and is reinforced constantly. We rarely find room to question it, to challenge the assumption that wanting is a way to happiness. There is something in wanting which is very energetic. If we want something, we feel alive – wanting pulls us, it leads us somewhere. We can feel driven by desire, and you feel that not wanting anything is a deadened feeling. We are not very good at living with not wanting. Most of our energy comes from acting on wanting: searching, looking, seeking. Very rarely do we find peace

through the absence of wanting. So learning to live without wanting comes as something completely new to us.

Learning to really investigate wanting takes us into a completely new realm of values. But unless there is a connection with that new realm, that more profound Dhamma, unless there is insight into the mind, we will rely on wanting in order to feel alive. Rather than to try to cope by searching for something to fill the gap, the hole, the abyss in front of us, we can begin to investigate who is wanting, who is creating this constant wanting experience.

## SITTING AT THE BEGINNER'S FEET

When we first start practising, we may notice the amount of arrogance and conceit that fill the mind. We might think that we need the 'ultimate teaching', rather than a simple practice. We may think: 'Simple practice is for beginners, not *me!*' But I have been practising myself for many years and I am very glad to still consider myself a beginner, sitting at the feet of the 'don't know mind'.

We tend to think, 'Oh, I don't need practice. I've done this before. I've been doing this for ten years.' Well that may be true, but what have we learned from it? Are we more at peace? Is the heart more content? Are we still angry, frightened or greedy? Is there still lust for things? Are we still jealous or envious? Perhaps there is still a little more work to do. Perhaps we have not quite finished, have not yet reached the end of the path.

No matter how long we may have been practising, remember

that the Buddha encouraged his disciples to follow certain ethical guidelines. At the heart of the precepts advocated by the Buddha, we find compassion – not harming oneself, our body or mind, and not harming others – harmlessness. So if we find that it's really difficult not to harm, steal, misbehave sexually, lie or take drugs and intoxicants, if we can't accept those guidelines, at least we can reflect on how we can be compassionate. Am I compassionate right now? Am I respectful of this person? Am I respectful of myself? Am I being kind to myself? When I say something, does it hurt me or anyone else? We call this way of investigation 'wise reflection'. The Pali term for wise reflection is *yoniso manasikāra*<sup>1</sup>. Whatever painful mental state we may be experiencing, whether it is greed, anger, restlessness or worry, is it the result of the absence of *yoniso manasikāra*? If we are reflecting wisely, any painful mental

1 Yoni means 'origin', and yoniso, an ablative form of this word, means 'down to its origin or foundation'. Manasikāra means 'attention, pondering, fixed thought'. Thus yoniso manasikāra means 'fixing one's attention with a purpose or thoroughly.' It is proper attention with thorough method in one's thought.

state can be seen as it truly is through the lens of wise reflection and wisdom.

We can investigate the six senses very easily in our everyday lives. Just looking at something, we can notice our reaction to it – wanting or not wanting, pleasure or pain. Does it bring up tension, anger, frustration? The door to this field of investigation is wide open and it leads to a wonderful path of discovery. We look at a flower or a person or an object, and see how in a space of mindfulness and stillness they resonate in our minds and hearts. The Buddha doesn't say that when we look at something we should feel good, or that if we feel bad we are not really practicing well. He doesn't say we should understand everything at once, or that we should have full clarity straightaway or that you should have no desire whatsoever. His teaching is not critical or judgmental. He simply offers us means to watch, observe and see how we are affected.

Sometimes we may feel intimidated by other people. We want to

look good, don't we? But the goal of practice is not to look good. The goal of practice is to understand what is good and what isn't. Sometimes we may have to bear with looking really silly in order to understand silliness. If you look greedy, don't be frightened by your greedy mind. We don't have to become anything in order to investigate this mind. We can just use what we already have.

## MEETING THE TIGER

All of us are working with strong desire energy and habits. At some point each of us has to meet the roaring tiger within. Don't think monastics are just sitting peacefully on a cushion in a blissed out state. We are dealing with the tiger day and night, the tiger that is always saying 'No, no, this is not good enough, I need more, I need more, I need more!' But in our practice we learn to befriend the tiger.

## LOVE

It is not easy to break through the illusion of being a separate self. We spend a lot of energy trying to fill the gap of loneliness with distractions and passions. We want to be fulfilled, to find meaning so as to lose that sense of loneliness because experiencing oneself as a separate entity in this vast universe is quite frightening. When I was very young, every time I looked at the stars at night I would feel a sense of panic, because it seemed as if I had disappeared. I would start crying because I felt an intense fear of destruction and annihilation. The universe seemed vast and overwhelming, and this little entity felt so small, just a tiny speck of dust. It was unbearable. The sense of death in that moment, the sense of being annihilated, was very strong and powerful. Now when I look at a starry sky, I feel very happy.

Love is perhaps our main way of seeking to overcome this sense of separation and loneliness, and probably the most pervasive theme in our human realm. We seek love. We miss love. We try to figure out how to love ourselves and others. All religions speak of love – Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism. Love is an ever-present theme, whether it is love for a person or an object, divine love or love of truth.

We know a lot about the love associated with attachment, with passion. We know about loving something because it gives us something in return. We ‘love’ chocolates because they make us happy for a few minutes. We love a partner because of the satisfaction we get from the relationship. But we may also come to realize that human love is bound up with attachment, with self-satisfaction, with physical, mental, emotional or sexual pleasure. Love based on something that satisfies us only on the sensory level is ultimately disappointing. This kind of

love is initially interesting, fascinating and exciting, but then we become disenchanted.

The Buddha's teaching of the Brahma-vihāras, 'the immeasurables' or the 'divine abidings', expresses a sense of vastness, spaciousness, limitlessness. These four abidings are loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karunā*), selfless joy (*muditā*) and serenity (*upekkhā*). Giving someone (or ourselves) the space to be the way they are is a form of love. Love is not necessarily a feeling or a sentiment. It is the fruit of acceptance. It is what happens when we stop attaching and clinging to ourself, people or situations. Love then comes quite naturally. Walking the path of liberation is truly an act of love. Taking refuge in awareness and letting go of our attachment to suffering are acts of love. We don't normally call these things 'love', but really they're an expression of deep love towards ourselves and others in the truest sense of the word. When we

are not expecting something in return but are just letting go,  
we open our heart to universal love.

## DISCIPLINE AND WISDOM

The word 'discipline' is not just an empty word. Discipline is something that requires us to use our intelligence, our wisdom, our knowledge of ourselves and the mind, to assess what is really important in life, to find out what our priorities are, even to write them down if necessary. What is really most important in this life? It is so easy to get lost in a maze of other things. Discipline means using the clear mind to sort out what is really worth following and what is not. Discipline means sticking with what we decide is really important.

The wisdom aspect of our life (*paññā*) is vital. Paññā is the ability to think clearly, the ability to see things clearly, the ability to understand what is what and not be fooled by thoughts and moods. When we begin to do a bit of work on ourselves and start seeing through our projections and assumptions, we

will be amazed at the dream-world we are part of. Actually, it is all 'dream-world', but the disconnection we have with reality adds dream upon dream. If they were all nice dreams we might not ever wake up, but at some point they turn into nasty nightmares. That's when we start becoming interested in getting out of our dreams.

The wisdom aspect also entails a certain amount of effort in taking care of the mind, making the mind a fertile ground for insight. So, for example, if you have a confused mind, you don't have to see it as a problem. The fertile ground for insight is seeing confusion *as it is*. It is very simple, but the ego doesn't think like that. The ego is always saying, 'I'm confused, and I feel happy when I'm *not* confused, so obviously I've got to get out of my confusion quickly!' Of course the ego is not very clever, so it usually jumps into another programme of confusion. If it were very clever it could see the way out, but it

doesn't. It jumps into another confusion that feels just a little bit more comfortable. There are uncomfortable confusions and comfortable confusions. We tend to choose between delusions. This is often the ego programme – 'what is the least uncomfortable?'

But don't worry. Liberation is much closer than we think. It is not that far away. Liberation doesn't have a colour or a texture. It is just more space.

## BACK TO THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

We can get lost when we follow the Buddha's teaching because there are many overlapping lists and terms that are difficult to translate. In order to keep things clear and simple, Ajahn Sumedho would always bring us back to the Four Noble Truths as the central teaching.

The First Noble Truth, *dukkha*, suffering – this is to be recognized. The Second Noble Truth, *samudaya*, the origin of suffering, craving based on ignorance – this craving is to be let go of. The Third Noble Truth, *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering – this is to be realized. The Fourth Noble Truth, *maggā*, the path of practice leading to the end of all suffering – this is to be developed.

## RECOGNISING SUFFERING

When we don't get what we want, can we hear the Buddha saying, 'This is the First Noble Truth'? Or do we start on a long tirade of insults, reciting an agonizing litany of reasons why we are feeling this way or that way – because of this, because of her, because of him, because of them, because of me? We don't get what we want, and we blindly react. 'My children are not the way I want them to be! My meditation is not as good as the meditation I had five years ago!' We can think like that. We are mentally stuck on the memory of the good time we had on our meditation cushion a few years ago, and we blame our problems on the inability to return to that meditation.

That is suffering – the First Noble Truth. Recognising suffering is what leads to letting go. If we don't recognise suffering, we can't let it go. We can only truly and deeply release suffering

when we clearly see it as impersonal. Suffering is just something that happens. There is no need to make a grand story about it.

Even though the way each of us experiences it may be unique, suffering doesn't have to be grasped as '*me*' and '*mine*'. Of course we all have different ways of experiencing life – we are from different backgrounds, we were born in different places, we are men and women, different shapes and ages, and the way we experience suffering can seem to be a very personal affair. But the Buddha points to the fact that suffering is universal and simple. Everybody, at some point in their life, does not get what they want.

## NOT SHYING AWAY FROM DUKKHA

Recognizing the suffering of existence is a huge shift, a quantum leap. Some people go through years of psychotherapy and still haven't seen the First Noble Truth, but the Buddha, a fully enlightened being, made suffering and liberation the centre of his teaching.

In a way, *dukkha* is the texture of life on a human level when we have not awakened. The human realm is a realm of pain. Christ called life a veil of tears. That is the *dukkha* the Buddha talked about, but we tend to shy away from it because who wants to look at suffering all the time? The Buddha is saying, 'Look at your life here and now. It is *dukkha*.' What he means is that our life is wanting in wisdom, compassion, awakening, peace and clarity.

Whatever is still not seen clearly, whatever we haven't

awakened to, is dukkha. It is not that your knees hurt, or your stomach is upset, or your mind is depressed, or any unpleasant sensation or circumstance – it has to do with the texture of experience for an unenlightened, unawakened mind. That is why we are swimming in dukkha until we awaken. When we start practicing, the practice itself can be dukkha – but this is dukkha that leads to the end of dukkha; it's dukkha that penetrates dukkha, suffering that leads to the end of suffering.

The maturing of one's path and spiritual life is the realisation that there is this texture of life which is dukkha, and we are ready to take it onboard as it is and to awaken and free ourselves from delusion. This level of maturity in the heart is profound – learning not to mind the suffering that takes us to the end of suffering. This maturity of heart is the joy of life.

## HUMAN EXPERIENCE

We can ask: 'is my body feeling heavy? Is my mind feeling heavy? Are my thoughts restless? Have my thoughts abated? Is there pain in my body? Are there pleasant sensations?' We notice these feelings and whether they are pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

When there is no awareness, there is an automatic tendency to grasp at feelings that are pleasant and to push away feelings that are unpleasant. But when there is mindfulness, wisdom and knowledge, there is the awareness of feelings and the understanding that they will change.

It is therefore important to keep relaxing our body and mind as we sit. Settle down and relax. Theravada Buddhism is a teaching that encourages reflection on the facts of life – we simply pay attention to what is here, what is now. The practice

is a way of turning the mind towards things that one might normally ignore or be averse to. We are educating our minds, familiarizing ourselves with realities that are very much a part of the human experience.

## THE SLIPPERY MIND

‘Buddha’ means ‘one who is awake’. But being awake is not easy to talk about. As soon as we start speaking, we complicate everything. We enter another field of understanding, which is the intellect.

Looking at the mind, dealing with the mind, is slippery business. We have at our disposal an array of tools and skilful means to liberate the mind, but they are competing with the incredible complexities of our ego mechanisms. Ajahn Chah used to say that trying to catch the mind was like trying to catch a fish. If you go too quickly, it just slips through your hands. If you go too slowly, it gets away and you lose track of it. The mechanisms of the mind are so clever that it is difficult to see what is happening a lot of the time.

We can justify almost anything. We have the capacity to reason

out many things, so a lot of our delusion can seem to be very reasonably explained. Our ego is very slippery. We can lie to ourselves quite innocently for a long time. This is why the practice of meditation is a matter of being still. We sit still and witness. As witness, we notice how quick, how conflicting, how changing, how undermining our thoughts and feelings can be.

## ‘HOW INTERESTING ...’

This practice is not to gain something particular. Even though the mind may want to gain things all the time, that is okay; we can observe our mind wanting things. Maybe we want to be more at peace, to be more tranquil. All these desires are cause for suffering, because even though we might get what we want, it is still impermanent.

We are here to experience the unshakable deliverance of the heart. Unshakable. This is what the Buddha talks about. It is not dependent on anything. It does not move because we move. We are learning to get to know the mind that is not dependent on anything, is not shaken by worldly winds – the liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting, love and hate, praise and blame, success and failure. Once we get to know that, we are able to abide in the place of peacefulness in ourselves.

This does not mean that we don't feel things. If somebody praises us, we can still feel happy. Or if somebody says something nasty we can feel an unpleasant feeling. But it happens within the much more spacious context of seeing things as they are. We are interested: 'How interesting.' In fact we don't even have to say so. We are just curious to watch the nature of this feeling, and how long it is going to stay, and whether or not we are going to believe it.

## THE CLOUDS DEPARTING

We are on a great path: the path of liberation. We are involved in something very important, very profound. It needs to be taken seriously. It is not just something we do on the weekend from time to time. It is a refuge. It is where we come from. It is what we manifest.

But it can be hard, *very* hard. Why is it hard? It is hard because we are so keen to live from the right place, the place of awareness, that sometimes the keenness stops us from actually being there. We can be too willful. We continue to have controlling mechanisms that are programmed to grab at what we think we should get, what we think practice should give us.

People become miserable in their practice when they start feeling that it is not giving them the joy or strength that they expect. Then they give up. They don't realize that the lack of

joy and strength could be a teacher. If we bring that sunray of awareness to our lack of strength, lack of confidence, lack of joy, we will discover that those lacks are an illusion. They may *feel* very true and very solid. They may feel very real until we bring awareness and clear mindfulness onto the experience.

As soon as we become conscious and aware and just do simple *vipassanā* practice – body meditation, breath meditation, something that can bring us back to the present moment at the point of stillness – at that very moment we can see the clouds departing.

## HIGHER HAPPINESS

In order to transform the mind, we cannot just jump over misery; we have to consciously go through it and understand it. Letting go does not come from suppression. Unless we have clear insight, clear knowledge and understanding, it is very difficult to detach from the unpleasant. It is even more difficult to detach from that which is pleasant. Why would we want to detach from something that is pleasant?

The Buddha said that we don't renounce something unless we find a higher happiness. People can start beating themselves up about renunciation without understanding what renunciation is about. Renunciation is not about giving up something that makes us happy. Renunciation is about discovering a higher happiness. Finding such happiness cannot happen only through logic and reasoning. Reflecting intellectually on the

drawbacks of certain actions does help, so reflection is part of the practice too. But the reality of practice is to appreciate what is here-and-now; not with a judging mind, not with a critical mind, not through hoping for it to be something else but with clear awareness. This is the texture of reality. The texture of reality is now. It is not tomorrow and it is not our thoughts. It is now, what is happening in this very moment. It is the most real place. It is quite wonderful if you can be in touch with the reality of now.

## SUNSHINE OF AWARENESS

We may notice that when we are really present, what is happening is quite simple. Perhaps we are angry. We notice that we are repressing something. Then we realise that the repressed thoughts are quite empty, *there is nothing there*.

Have you ever noticed that when we are mindful of a thought it quickly disappears? As soon as we bring the sunshine of awareness into things, the problems evaporate. Then we can deal with life as it is. We don't lose our means, we don't lose our strength, we don't lose our capacity to respond to life.

We need to get used to the idea that we can actually respond to life without worrying about it, without even necessarily thinking about it. Sometimes we may think that we need to plan but a lot of the time this is just adding something extra, instead of responding to life from the heart. Ajahn Sumedho

calls this intuitive awareness – the capacity to respond from the gathering of everything. That is enough. Not cutting off the head. Not just going with feelings or collecting data. Just through deep sensitivity.

## DELUSIONS OF EGO

Sometimes people tell me their practice is not developing well, or they are 'losing it'. Sometimes they feel they are losing interest or they just can't do it. They ask, 'What can I do to improve or sustain my practice?'

But practice is not like becoming an athlete. Once we form the intention of becoming an athlete we can see the development. We can see our muscles getting stronger. But we can't really witness the progress of meditation in the same way. With the Dhamma, when we're down in the pit and everything is going wrong, our teacher will tell us, 'Stay there, you're doing very well!'

For much of the world, the idea of improvement is all about making one's mind happy and positive. There is nothing wrong with happiness; it is important to have confidence that we can

access well-being. But what is left out are our the fears that are working in the background – fear of not being happy, fear of not being healthy, fear of not being a success in life, fear of not getting what we want, and so on.

Measuring progress in practice is not easy. When we think we are progressing we might actually be going backwards, and when we think we are going backwards we might be progressing. But even though we may not be able to see progress in the same way as we would see our legs getting stronger, we can notice the *quality* of mind in different situations.

We can begin to be aware of how reactive our egos are. The ego is a mass of reactivity. It is constantly bouncing around, trying to make sense of things, trying to defend itself, trying to avoid presenting the wrong image to others. The ego hates being seen in a bad light.

This is why our teachers will encourage us to keep going with

the practice when things seem miserable. It may be at the time when we are feeling as if we are going backwards, that we are actually penetrating most deeply into the delusions of ego.

## THE EGO RISES AND FALLS

There can be a huge investment in ego and personality. However, personal identity is completely false, even though it is determined to sustain itself. It wants to be seen in a good light.

Sometimes the ego rises up but then it can't be sustained, and it subsides. It is just like any natural process – it rises and falls.

Ajahn Sumedho used to say, 'We cannot just breathe in. We would die if we did that.' So the mind has its peaks and then its troughs. That is quite bewildering because we like the peaks and we don't want to be down in the pit.

## PROGRESS

The agenda of ‘self’ and the agenda of enlightenment are very different. As we develop our meditation and interest in the Dhamma, we keep bumping into the resistances of self. It would be nice to be enlightened and free, and as meditators and dhamma practitioners we put a lot of energy into this. But at the same time we can feel bewildered because there is also a lot of resistance, a lot of forgetfulness, a lot of not wanting to be enlightened, free and happy.

Trying to measure progress in dependence on our notions of worldly success is very frustrating for the ego, because when we get better at our Dhamma practice there is no guarantee that people will notice. From the worldly point of view, when we feel happy, peaceful, loving, caring and bright, it seems that we are doing wonderfully well. That is how the world views it – we’re looking good. People love us because we are attractive, we have powerful peaceful

energy. But progress in Dhamma is not shown through the way things appear to be. We may seem more patient, kind and relaxed, but in my experience the moments that are really powerful and transformative happen when people don't look that great!

## REAL REFUGE

Our worldly interests tend to be geared toward getting things, toward going somewhere, toward accumulating things. This is the energy of the world. It is about thrusting one's self out to get more than we have.

The Dhamma reminds us that our real refuge is contentment and trust.

## OUT THERE

There are not many things we can trust *out there*, because things are pretty unstable. Things change and move, agendas are different from one person to another. We can't control anything out there. It is not possible.

We may not realise how much we are the product of other people's minds. One person says something and we become agitated. Somebody looks at us in a particular way and our lack-of-confidence button is pushed: 'I'm no good. I'm not pretty. I'm not nice. He or she doesn't like me.' All kinds of things can be triggered by just a look. People can have so much power over us. I know the scenario very well.

But eventually we come to the point where we realise that what is 'out there' is not our problem. There is no need to worry about it. In terms of getting to know the Dhamma, we don't need to find out

what everybody else is thinking or feeling (or not feeling) about us. We just need to know what is going on *here*. Who is *this* person? You need to know what is going on here. We need to be with *this* being – connected with ourself rather than trying to figure out what other people are doing.

What are we doing right now? We need to find out. That is what really matters. Are we trying to please somebody because we want to be accepted or loved? There is nothing wrong with that, but get to know it. If we are aware of it, we can learn. If we are not aware of it, we will learn nothing.

## THE TRUSTING HEART

The sense of self can be quite competitive. It doesn't want to be seen as failing, it wants to be seen as succeeding. It loves it. But the trusting heart doesn't worry about fulfilling the ego's intense wish to outbid everybody.

During the Special Olympics, there was a group of Downs Syndrome children who were going to do a run. They all lined up, and when the starter's signal came – bang! – all of them ran, but a few fell over. So the others came back and picked up the ones who had fallen, and then they all ran together holding hands.

I find this such a touching story. It is a great image for our life. If we are always trying to outbid somebody, we don't have much heart. Think of these Downs Syndrome children and see the heart-energy manifesting. Children fell down and the others picked them up and they all started again.

We move in a world where obsessions with success, praise, love and fame play out in our minds. We are simply receptors of those forces. We live in a world that is driven by those forces. The shadow side of those forces is being unloved, being hated, being unsuccessful and so on. If I could help you as you're going through this shadow side, it would be by reminding you of the strength, the power, the joy, the peace, the intelligence and wisdom that knows that your human heart remains not just intact but strengthened by the death of worldly values.

## SUN SHINING ON MIST

The more we see delusion, the more it dissolves by itself. It is like the sun shining on a mist. As soon as the sun's rays touch the mist, it just slowly disperses. This is exactly what awareness is like.

As soon as there is awareness, delusion dissolves. So just sit where you are right now. We don't have to go somewhere special. We are aware of where our hands are, aren't we? Then we are aware of what is happening now. We don't need to look. We don't need to check. We don't need to think to be aware. We know where the door is, we know where our hands are. We might even know what our feelings are. The sun's rays are awareness. The mist is what stops us from seeing. The sun's rays shine through our minds. Awareness shines through our mind and disperses delusion. When we are really aware and conscious, suddenly we can clearly see *aniccā*, *dukkha* and *anattā*.

Of course, because delusion is strong it will create mist again and again. We may even feel more comfortable in that familiar, slightly foggy, misty state; emotionally that can feel much more secure, at some level. That is why people take drugs and drink to distract themselves. It feels more secure than being clear-minded. So although we may not always be able to pay attention very deeply to what is going on, in every situation we do what we can.

## BEING STILL

Can we imagine ourselves not wanting anything? Living in a place of desirelessness? Maybe we are afraid that it would be like being dead. Yet that is what the practice is actually leading us to.

We learn to be held by life, to let life guide us, rather than being guided by desires.

We learn to let trust guide us, to let faith guide us, to let peace of mind guide us. That is a different refuge.

Our normal refuge is thinking 'I'm going to control this; I'm going to want that.' That is very natural, it is what the human realm is all about – I want, I must, I should, I have to. This is what drives the world. We fear that if we never wanted anything, the world would stop, nothing would happen. We have this fear because we don't know how to manifest life without wanting.

The great saints could manifest life without wanting. They could move the world, change the world forever, just by being still.

## INNER SOLITUDE

The path of practice leads to simplicity and solitude – not necessarily the solitude of living in the jungle, but an inner solitude that is more an attitude of keeping the heart disentangled from the restless activities of the mind, able to stand alone and unattached. This is not a state of indifference but an unconfused relationship to life informed by the wisdom of seeing clearly things as they are. It takes mindfulness and restraint to reach this point. Solitude is not merely about being ‘away’ from things or people. It is also the ability of the mind to remain consciously disengaged from the world, not as a refusal of life, but as a commitment to respond to it with wisdom and compassion, from a creative and unbound mind.





# SEEDS OF DHAMMA

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