



'DON'T PUSH—  
JUST USE THE WEIGHT OF YOUR OWN BODY'  
COMPASSION

COMPULSIVE HELPING  
NUMBNESS  
AND  
THE BUDDHA'S TEACHING ON  
CARING IN ACTION

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AMARAVATI  
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## PREFACE

This small book is the second in a series of four, consisting of reflections and practices related to the ‘sublime abiding places for the heart’ – the four *brahma-vihāras*, in Buddhist parlance. These qualities are also known as ‘the four immeasurables’ on account of their boundless nature.

The vision for the series is to explore these sublime abidings via the somewhat oblique approach of looking at what counters or muddies their activity. The four *brahma-vihāras* are listed in the Buddhist scriptures as:

*Mettā* – loving-kindness, benevolence, radical acceptance, non-aversion.

*Karuṇā* – compassion, empathy, appreciation of the suffering of others.

*Muditā* – sympathetic or altruistic joy, gladness at the good fortune of others.

*Upekkhā* – equanimity, caring even-mindedness, serenity amid all turbulence.

In this second book we will be investigating *karuṇā* through the lens of that kind of anxious helpfulness that feels like we're never doing enough, or that wants to fix others so that we will feel better, or the attitude that we don't deserve ever to feel peaceful or happy while others are still suffering. The other three books in the series similarly explore the remaining *brahma-vihāras* through aspects of mind and behaviour that oppose or confuse them.

The material published in this book is largely based on a workshop that was given in the USA in the spring of 2010, at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, California. As they were at that daylong workshop, and as with all teachings offered in

the Buddhist tradition, the words here are presented for the reader's contemplation rather than being intended to be taken as absolute truths. Those who pick this book up and read it are therefore encouraged to consider whether these principles and practices feel true to life and, if they do, to try them out and see if they bring benefit. Do they help you to work with the noble urge to help more easily? Do they lead you to a recognition of the balance of the Middle Way? Do they help you to be a force of blessing and ease rather than one of anxiety and disappointment?

If so, that is to be rejoiced. If, however, these words don't help you, then may you find other wholesome ways of relieving suffering in others and within yourself.





‘DON’T PUSH –  
JUST USE THE WEIGHT OF YOUR OWN BODY’

The words ‘Don’t push – just use the weight of your own body’ come from a letter sent to Abhayagiri Monastery in California after the passing away of a very good friend and associate of ours whose name was Barry Kapke. He was a member of the small group called the ‘Community of Abhayagiri Lay Ministers’ (CALM) who help the Monastery in various spiritual modes around the USA and Canada. He also had the Pali name, Kondañña. As an innovative massage therapist he was involved in developing various types of body-work and he was also one of the early pioneers of Buddhist websites back in the early 1990s. He was ‘Mr. DharmaNet’.

He was one who was very quiet, very shy but very active. He contracted bowel cancer in recent years and, after many ups and downs, eventually died in a lovely hospice in San Francisco. I was with him at the end of his life. We held a memorial ceremony for him at the monastery and a former student of his, called Rachel Starbuck, sent us a very beautiful, touching letter about him:

Kondañña was my teacher. I had the good fortune to study shiatsu with Barry at the San Francisco School of Massage. He really did teach body-work as nothing less than a spiritual practice. He said the heart of our work is simply to offer our presence: 'Don't push, just use the weight of your own body. Don't diagnose, just be aware. Don't try to help, but also don't turn away. Just be with the person. That's all you have to do.' And Barry really practised what he preached. You could see it as clear as day watching him work. It was an amazing and beautiful thing.

When I attended my first week-long silent retreat at Spirit Rock, Barry was there too. The retreat wasn't easy for me, and on the last day I felt quite overwhelmed. I couldn't stop the tears streaming down my face even when it was time for lunch. I remember standing in line holding my plate weeping and embarrassed to be weeping, thoroughly miserable. I took my food to the furthest corner of the furthest table and sat down, but I was too upset to eat. Then I noticed that someone had come to sit with me. It was Kondañña, Barry. He didn't say anything. He didn't do anything. He didn't even look at me. He did exactly what he always taught us to do. He just sat there slowly eating his lunch, being with me in my suffering, neither trying to help nor turning away, but it was so profoundly comforting to me, even now tears come just to think of it.

Some years later, my sister was birthing her first child at home and I was there to assist her. I'd taken a special class on massage for birthing mothers, but once my sister's

labour had started she couldn't stand for anyone to get near her, much less touch her. All she did was scream and scream and there was nothing we could do. Then, I remembered what Barry had showed me. I sat down next to her on the floor. I didn't say anything. I didn't look at her. I didn't touch her. I just sat there with her while she suffered through her labour pains, neither trying to help nor turning away. I don't know how long we sat together like that, but later, after her son was born, she told me how profoundly comforting it had been for her, how my just sitting there had somehow allowed her to relax and feel less afraid.

Now Kondañña has died, but what he taught is still moving through those of us who had learned from him. Now when I see my sister quietly holding her son after a bad dream, neither trying to help nor turning away, and I then see the

comfort he feels as his little body starts to settle and relax, then I see Kondañña's work alive.

That's a wonderful account and a very fine expression of the principle of compassion in action. When we are trying to work compassionately in our lives, to actualize our noble intentions so that they genuinely bear fruit, that's extremely helpful advice to take in: 'Don't push, just use the weight of your own body.' There's a leaning, an intentionality, but we're not pushing. We are not creating an imagined goal, an imagined good place over 'there' that we're trying to reach, and hence ignoring what's actually 'here'. As long as we imagine that there is somewhere we need to reach, we imagine there is something blocking us; there's a knot, an argument, a tension: 'If only this wasn't here, we could be in that beautiful place over there.' We create an imagined 'there' somewhere off in the future and we miss what is actually here and now. When you're walking, if you're day-

dreaming about where you're going, that is when you'll trip and sprain your ankle – and I speak from repeated and painful experience here. We fixate on an imagined goal; our tendency is to push, to press for that imagined future. And so we miss where we actually are.

‘DON’T DIAGNOSE, JUST BE AWARE’ –  
DOING AND NOT DOING

Our thinking mind loves to diagnose. I confess to having a thinking mind that loves to figure things out, loves to have a nice map, a description; this mind delights in lists and even the ‘Tables’ function of Microsoft Word. Certainly the intellect does have its place; it is truly useful to be able to figure out how things work but we can be over-prone to that. We can unwittingly take refuge in having an explanation. The mind can race forward: ‘I know what’s going on! I understand this. I read a book about it. I did a course on this. I know what’s happening here!’ We immediately go to the memory, the idea, the concept and in so doing we again miss what is before us,



what we are in the middle of, what we are part of. Because we have absorbed our attention in the diagnosis, we miss the actuality. I'm not saying that we should never push, make an effort or diagnose. It is not that we should stifle the intellect or suppress our recognition of patterns, rather it's a question of holding these things in perspective.

When we're faced with suffering, particularly other people's suffering, we can feel: 'I've got to do something!' Everything is telling us: 'Don't just sit there, do something!' When we're facing difficulty there is a strong compulsion not to leave things alone. We think that if we leave things alone, that shows we don't care. The very words 'leaving it alone' make it sound as if we're disconnecting or we're not doing our bit. But that urge to help and to do can often be coming from our own insecurity or our own need to be a helpful person. Our need to help may form part of our identity; as CS Lewis once put it:

She's the sort of woman who lives for others – you can always tell the others by their hunted expression.

'The Screwtape Letters', Ch 26

If you are a professional helper, social worker, therapist or Buddhist monastic, your trade is to be helpful, so when you see someone suffering, you think: 'I should be doing something here!' The 'don't push' principle points to that tension in our own heart which is often over-eager. We may be doing what we *think* is the best thing we can yet not realizing what's happening in truth in the here and now.

Ram Dass tells a story about when his stepmother was dying. He is a meditation expert. Death and dying is his area of expertise and he really knows his stuff. At the end of her life his stepmother was lying on her death-bed, her breath quite shallow. She was drifting in and out of consciousness. Ram Dass was giving her extensive meditation instructions, saying to her

things like: 'Go to the breath. Feel it. You're breathing in the universe, breathing in the light of the universe. Breathing out, let everything go. You're one with the tides of life. As the light arises, just go to the light and feel the breath coming and going.' After a considerable period of this stream of good advice, as Ram Dass paused, his stepmother inclined her head toward him and said: 'Ram Dass – be quiet.' He was trying to help, but the tension of trying was marring his effort. He may have been thinking to himself: 'I'm the helper. I've written books about this, this is my trade, so I should be doing something here. She's my stepmother, she's dying, so I've got to help.'

So yes, when there is a need to do something, there may indeed be things that we can do, but that very urge, that agitated tension which wants to jump in and fix something, may be the very element that gets in the way. When we talk about not trying to help, not trying to fix or not trying to diagnose, this

can come across as indifference. But I'm not trying to encourage a quality of dissociation. I'm not promoting a frigid Dhamma that thinks: 'What's the problem? All things are impermanent. Everything arises and passes away. Get over it.' Like Lucy at her 'PSYCHIATRIC HELP' stand: 'Snap out of it! Five cents, please.' This teaching is not a cold distancing or an attempt to alienate ourselves from feeling the suffering of others. I don't advocate adopting some kind of false objectivity; I'm not trying to encourage that. What I am hoping is that through our spiritual practice we can find that place which is fully empathetic with the suffering of others and the difficulties that we experience, while not suffering on account of them.

‘DON’T TRY TO HELP, BUT DON’T TURN AWAY’ –  
COMPASSION IN ACTION

Compassion in action means working with the painful conditions in ourselves and others, and seeing how they mingle. Often a period in our life is not just one single shade of pleasure or one single shade of pain. In many if not most instances we experience mixed feelings, and sometimes a difficult condition, something that we would never have chosen, ends up bringing immense riches with it. Even when we think of things as perfect, we don’t realize that part of their perfection is their impermanence. We have to see the glass as already broken. Ajahn Chah would hold up a glass and say: ‘If you can see that this glass is already broken, then when it breaks you won’t suffer.’

Compassion, *karuṇā*, in Buddhist psychology, is not a state of suffering. The Buddha points out that if you are suffering on account of the suffering of others, that is not true compassion. It is a distorted compassion, a false compassion, a compassion that is not really complete or purified. It is not whole. The English word ‘compassion’ literally means ‘suffering with’. *Passio/passionis* is a Latin word meaning ‘suffering’, as the passion of Christ relates to the suffering and death of Christ. And the prefix ‘com’ means ‘with’. But the Buddhist principle of compassion is talking about something else. It is fully attentive and open to the pain of others, but does not suffer on account of that pain. I think most Westerners would agree that, culturally, this is hard for us to comprehend, let alone achieve. Usually we either turn away and remain indifferent to the suffering of others, or we feel upset or angry on their behalf and desperately try to help. We have an interesting cultural tendency to show that we care by getting angry or upset. But

when we are faced with the suffering of others, or with our own suffering, our own feelings of grief, there is a place we can find in our heart which is fully attentive and appreciative of that pain, but not swept up in a reaction against it or carried along by the current of it, which knows the pain fully but does not suffer on account of it.

One significant aspect of compassion is expressed in the figure of Guan Yin Bodhisattva, who comes to us from the Northern Buddhist tradition. Guan Yin is the Chinese name (the Sanskrit is Avalokiteshvara) for a spiritual entity who is ‘the one who listens to the sounds of the world’. To me that is an extremely meaningful name for a being who is the embodiment of compassion, because it doesn’t mean that he or she is necessarily out there doing anything. The primary role of compassion, its primordial attribute, is not getting out there and ‘doing’. Its primary attribute is listening. The Tibetan name for the same

great being is Chenrezig. In some of the classical iconography the figure of Avalokiteshvara has a thousand hands and each hand has an eye in it. This kind of imagery represents the capacity for 'doing' that arises from having listened but the name has the same meaning. This Bodhisattva is still the one who listens to the sounds of the world.

The quality of empathetic engagement is actualized through the practice of listening. We learn to listen, and in particular we learn to listen to our own thoughts and feelings. We often associate compassion with strong emotions. We associate it with being in the presence of the suffering of other beings, when facing terrible tragedy, but there are also smaller, more local difficulties and sufferings in our lives. The primary quality of compassion, the root of compassion, I would suggest, is learning how to listen, to attend to what is here, to what is present. And from that attending, a capacity to do



the appropriate thing arises. So from the root of listening, the thousand eyes are watching what's going on and the thousand hands can offer help. Guan Yin has a lot of hands to lend. That multiplicity of hands represents the thousands of ways, the ten thousand fingers that can help – but the help stems from the root of listening.

Along with listening to the needs of those around us, we learn to listen to our own thoughts, our own feelings, our own body, and we discern the different voices that we hear – what some people helpfully refer to as the ‘inner committee’. The voice of reason, the voice of kindness, the voice of the three-year-old in a tantrum, they are all in there: the rationalist, the sensitive one, the excited child, the fretful child, the depressed and unhappy cynic, the ever cheerful, and the voices of unbiased kindness and unbiased wisdom.

## FINDING EQUIPOISE

In meditation practice we learn to listen to the different feelings, energies, different thoughts within the mind, and to discern and not blindly react to the things that we feel and hear; instead to find that place of listening, and then let wisdom be the chair of our inner committee. If you have ever chaired or taken part in a committee meeting, you will know that it is important to allow all the committee members to be heard. There is a respectful quality to a well-run meeting where all the voices are allowed their say. But if we have a flailing three-year-old saying: 'I want more ice cream!', we don't necessarily give that voice the chair, or say: 'Let's all do what the three-year-old wants.' Or if a high-minded intellectual member chips

in with esoteric pontification, we may just say: ‘Thank you for sharing.’ We find a way to let wisdom be the meeting point for the different voices of the inner committee, those different feelings and moods.

As said before, we often feel we have to ‘do something’ to make things right. I’d like to suggest that often the most appropriate thing to do happens when ‘I’ gets out of the way; that it is ‘me’ trying, ‘me’ doing, the ‘me-ness’ and the ‘trying’ that is the obstructive element. This is a self-adjusting universe, and if we let the ego-centred perspective drop we can develop a certain trust in its self-adjustment. When we let there be a quality of awareness, wisdom and acute attentiveness to the present, the universe will adjust itself. There is a quality of intuitive wisdom that recognizes when things are or aren’t in balance; it’s our musical ear for the way things are, for the harmonious or disharmonious quality of what is experienced. You might think:

‘Well, I’m tone-deaf so I might as well give up,’ but I would suggest that on that spiritual level none of us are tone-deaf. You wouldn’t be listening to this talk if you were totally tone-deaf. What this means is that when we notice some kind of difficulty or imbalance, some sort of distortion or discord within others or ourselves, we bring the quality of awareness to bear on it. The effort is to be aware; then things will adjust on their own.

Try a little experiment. Put your physical body in a slumped and uncomfortable posture in which you feel out of balance; now bring awareness to that feeling in the body and then let the body adjust itself. Don’t ‘do’ anything to help it adjust. The sole effort you need to make is to bring attention to the feeling of the body, and you’ll find that the body will adjust itself to a balanced posture on its own. Do you see how it works?

Try that until you get the sense of it, a bit like learning to ride a bike – and then apply it to the whole of your life. This

exercise is about learning to bring awareness to the moment and not letting 'me' be the thing that grabs the reins: 'I'm running things! I'm operating this life! I'm in charge here!' If we recognize the voice of 'I, me, mine', loosen the grip and let wisdom say to that inner voice: 'Thank you for sharing, dear, there's your seat' We let 'me' have its say, but invite the quality of awareness to be the guiding principle.

## NATURAL ATTUNEMENT

Years ago I came across a Taoist teaching in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the north of England. It carries the same tone as the advice given by Kondañña.

Close your eyes and you will see clearly

Cease to listen and you will hear truth

Be silent and your heart will sing

Seek no contacts and you will find union

Be still and you will move forward on the tide of the spirit

Be gentle and you will need no strength

Be patient and you will achieve all things

Be humble and you will remain entire

I was particularly struck by this teaching because it has the same sort of paradoxical tone and ring of truth to it as the advice not to push, particularly the line: ‘Be still and you will move forward on the tide of the spirit.’ It’s pointing to that same trusting that this is a self-adjusting universe. The phrase ‘the tide of the spirit’ is not very Buddhist, but it conveys very accurately that natural attunement of our heart to the way things are. When the self-centred habits get out of the way, that attunement, that intrinsic quality of the relatedness of our life to all life and all things, becomes active. That is what guides our actions.

So notice the habit of ‘doing-ness’, of ‘me trying’, ‘me getting’, ‘me hoping’. This habit is so ordinary and everyday that it goes completely unremarked. Buddhist books or guides to meditation instruct: ‘Try to concentrate your mind. Try to let go of your distracted thoughts. Try to develop loving-kindness.

This is the way to bring compassion into being.’ There’s a lot of ‘doing’ and ‘trying’ and ‘making happen’: concentrating the mind, developing *jhāna*, developing insight, letting go of greed, hatred and delusion, and so on. All these instructions can be confusing. If we are supposed to be developing all *this* stuff or getting rid of all *that* stuff, how are we supposed to find a natural easeful attunement? And what is the problem with trying? What is the problem with doing? What is the problem with putting effort in? I’d like to explore the question of what is getting in the way, what is snarling these things up.



THE LURE OF BECOMING  
AND THE MIDDLE WAY

Close your eyes and you will see clearly

Be silent and your heart will sing

Be still and you will move forward on the tide of the spirit

These lines are talking about letting go of the ‘becoming’ urge; that feeling of ‘I-ness’, ‘me-ness’, which we experience from ‘being’ and ‘doing’. When we experience ‘I’ or ‘me’ or ‘this is *mine*’, there is a charge, there is a feeling of movement towards – even on your walking meditation path: ‘I’m going somewhere!’ Or think of waiting in the food line when on retreat: ‘I’m going somewhere (slowly).’ That’s ‘becoming’

When we are in a queue we think: ‘When are we going to get to the desk?’ That is the ‘becoming’ urge, *bhava-taṇhā*. We think to ourselves, ‘How long is the line?’ ‘Are we nearly at the table?’ ‘Are we nearly there?’ This is not the same as simply waiting for the line to move. It is ‘becoming’ and, naturally, there is the suffering that arises from becoming. But let go of that urge and then you happen to be peacefully standing there, and it just happens to be, conventionally speaking, the queue for the food; and yes, people around you are moving, so you move your feet as other people move. You are still moving, but there’s no ‘Are we nearly there yet?’ The more agitated you become in the queue, the more you create digestive problems; and you make the experience of receiving and sharing food much more stressful and difficult for everyone.

In meditation it is exactly the same. You apply effort but you don’t add: ‘I’m trying to get concentrated! I want to get

*jhāna!* I want to get insight! I want to be enlightened!’ Those are reasonable and wholesome goals, but the more we fixate on them and are caught in that becoming, the more we hinder ourselves from allowing that process to develop naturally. This area of ‘becoming’ and ‘trying’ and ‘doing’ is an important aspect of meditation practice, particularly because we tend to shuffle between, on the one hand, feeling as if we are ‘doing’ something and therefore engaged, and on the other hand falling asleep. We are either excited, interested, active, or we feel as if there’s nothing happening and so switch off. We move towards the partner of *bhava-taṇhā* (the craving to become), which is the desire to not feel, to not experience – *vibhava-taṇhā*; the craving to not be, to not exist, to switch off. We habitually shuttle between these two, either thrilled with doing, or disengaged, not connected. But the Buddha’s path is non-becoming, the Middle Way, and this is what we are aiming at. Non-becoming is when the heart is not inclining either

towards the desire to become or the desire to get rid of. The desire to get rid of is a subtle form of aversion because it is a pushing away or a rejecting : ‘I don’t want to be with this.’ ‘I’ve had enough of this.’ ‘I don’t want to feel this, so I’m out of here.’ ‘Forget this.’ This is a subtle form of aversion.

I focus on the Middle Way a lot because I feel it is such an important principle. It doesn’t mean just being excited and stoked up half the time, and exhausted or semi-conscious the other half. It’s not 50/50 – equal measures of *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*. It is not leaning into the next thing half the time and then dozing the other half. It is a different quality altogether. The Middle Way is the point on which the two extremes pivot, it is where they meet. If you picture a pendulum, ‘the two extremes’ are represented by the limits to which the pendulum bob swings, whereas ‘the Middle Way’ is represented by the pivot, the still centre that the pendulum swings from. It transcends both of them. It is a wholly different dimension. This means that in meditation, both walking and

sitting practice, you begin to find a way of steering the mind, like ‘using the weight of your own body’ – there’s an inclining towards concentration, there’s an inclining towards insight, but you’re not pushing. In walking meditation, you are not driving towards the end of the path. You are relaxing and letting the body move along the path. The body does its walking, but ‘you’ are always ‘here’. Similarly with the breath; the breath can be moving but that which knows the breath is always ‘here’. The Middle Way is finding that quality of being still, that awareness which is perfectly still, not tied up with movement and time yet which receives the qualities of change and movement. When we are able to be really aware of that ‘becoming’ habit, we notice it almost like the feeling of gravity on the body or the texture of our clothes on our skin. And when we can see that, feel it, know it, we can begin to let go of it.

## DILIGENT EFFORTLESSNESS

Tsoknyi Rimpoche, a Tibetan Lama I first met back in 1992, has a very neat phrase to describe this approach to mind training: ‘undistracted non-meditation’. ‘Non-meditation’ is an expression of not doing any ‘thing’. We tend to make meditation into a task or some ‘thing’ that ‘I’ am doing. Instead we let go of the doing-ness and the thing-ness. That said, it is not a matter of letting the mind drift all over the place. There is an undistracted quality, a focused quality, but there is not a ‘me’ doing some ‘thing’ trying to get a result, to become focused or wise. A Canadian meditation teacher called Khema Ananda, who in 1975 established the Arrow River Community Center (now a branch monastery called Arrow River Forest Hermitage)

developed a similar phrase, ‘diligent effortlessness’. There’s a diligence, a keenness, but there is not a pushing. ‘Undistracted non-meditation’, ‘diligent effortlessness’ – these are phrases we can use to point to this precious, liberating quality.

I would suggest that all of us know this attitude but it is not a muscle that we regularly use. It is not a resource that we tend to call upon. In our meditation we can develop a sense of that quality. As we meditate, we find that balancing point where there is activity, there is effort being made, there is orientation being given, but there is no pushing; where there is a caring, an attending, but without a compulsion to fix or to help or to change.

This may sound great in principle, but the problem is that we really love becoming. In fact, most of the consumer culture and our careers, our relationships, our lives, are based on becoming.

You’re promoted and you proudly strut around saying: ‘Look at me! I’m somebody!’ We name-drop. We get a real charge out of

it. We love that stuff. Becoming has a huge amount of cultural and societal weight behind it. We love being excited, being interested and especially being *interesting*.



## THE PLACE OF PEACE

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha, after he became enlightened, felt there was no point in trying to explain what he had discovered to anybody because it would go so much against the grain. People relish becoming. They are addicted to becoming. They cherish only becoming.

This world, whose nature is always to become other,  
Is attached to becoming, is afflicted by becoming  
And yet delights in that very becoming,  
Yet what it relishes brings fear  
And what it fears is pain.

(Ud 3.10)

So he said: ‘The world is totally lost in thirst for becoming. There’s no point in my trying to teach anybody. No one’s ever going to understand what I would say.’ The Dhamma seems completely anathema to our ordinary sensibilities. This is a subtle but critical point. In that same discourse the Buddha uses the phrase: ‘Abandons the craving for being without relishing non-being.’ That’s the Middle Way: to abandon the cherishing of being without relishing non-being. Can you find that way by GPS? The pulsing blue dot on your iPhone? Where’s the address? It’s a tricky place. But that’s the place of real happiness, the place of real peace.

Sadly but habitually we shuttle between those two, the cherishing of being and the cherishing of non-being. I speak in this way because I freely confess to being a ‘becoming’ addict. I think there should be a Twelve Step Programme, like those for alcoholics and other addicts, for those of us who are fully acculturated, fully addicted to becoming, because it is

a powerful force in our life. And yet one of the definitions of Nibbāna is that it is the cessation of becoming:

*Bhava-nirodho nibbānaṃ.* (A 10.7)

Perhaps this suggests that all we need to do is: ‘Just let go and allow life to live itself.’ However, this is easy to say but very hard to do; that word ‘just’ being somewhat loaded.

It is important to understand that this ‘letting go’ doesn’t mean some kind of vacant dissociation. It means that the ego and self-centred habits are not allowed to take control. Then life lives itself, and our intentions and actions, guided by mindfulness and wisdom, become part of life living itself. That little gesture of relaxation, letting go of the ‘trying’, letting go of the doing; just that little relaxing of the grip enables us to walk freely. And then the walking does just happen. We’re not going anywhere. We queue easily for our food, but we’re not ‘waiting’. It is a subtle shift of attitude that makes all the difference. It brings a profound quality of satisfaction.

Sometimes this is difficult to express and so we find paradoxical statements which allude to it, like: 'Close your eyes and you'll see clearly, cease to listen and you will hear truth.' What they are pointing to is that if we stop 'trying' to see, 'trying' to listen and to 'get', trying to 'have', if we just loosen the grip, then we will see and hear, then we will truly have. Then the heart will sing; we will know. Then there will be relaxation. 'Seek no contacts and you will find union.' If you're not needing other people, if you let go of everyone, you ironically find yourself connected to everyone. But you're not 'needing' others or for them to be a particular way. When you let go of that neediness, you find yourself at home with everyone. There is a quality of belonging. Be still and, lo and behold, you find yourself moving forward. For myself, I find this is such an extremely useful area to focus on, and so liberating, that it is something I like to bring up and share with everyone. To me it's a defining principle.

## REFLECTIONS ON ALMS-FOOD

Theravada Buddhist monastics live entirely dependent on alms-food. This is not a particularly common term in the everyday world, but ‘alms-food’ means food that is given or donated. That is how our monasteries run, and how monastics have traditionally been supported ever since the time of the Buddha. I’ve been a monk for well over thirty years, so by now my body is an entirely donated body. It’s considered, at least by popular opinion, that all the cells in our bodies are replaced every seven years, so this body has come out of my alms-bowl. This body is built up of all the good offerings people have made over time; it has been donated, and I’m very grateful.

It is good to reflect that our minds are very similar to an alms-bowl. We sit or stand with our bowls and then people come and offer food. As monks in the Thai Forest Tradition we're not allowed to cook or store food, or even give instructions to the cooks. We are very strictly hands-off when it comes to preparing food. So we have to live in a very receptive mode in terms of relationship to eating, and therefore to our life-support system. Part of this is learning to live on faith, but another part of it is learning to appreciate that we do not live nourished by our food preferences; rather we learn to live on kindness, because we are receiving the results of people's kindly acts and generous intentions towards us.

When we receive alms-food, it is our training that we should receive everything with appreciation, but we don't have to eat everything we are given. This is an important dynamic. Learning to receive everything with appreciation is a very good symbol for our approach to our minds and the spirit of

our practice. Whatever shows up in our mind, we receive it appreciatively. Suppose we are having a quiet meditation, and suddenly a horrendously angry impulse comes washing through, or we suddenly feel like throwing up, or have a flash of anxiety such as: 'Oh my god, I did leave the gas on!' All kinds of stuff can show up in our minds, some of it expected, some of it unexpected, some of it predictable, some of it very unpredictable. That's similar to the alms-food we receive. The training is to receive it with appreciation, and that is what we're nourished by.

I feel it's helpful to consider that receiving food which has been prepared by all sorts of people and has come from all sorts of places is just like receiving the thoughts and feelings that come into the mind. They're constructed of all kinds of experiences and events in which many beings have participated, they are not all just due to what we've done or what we like or dislike. They are an intricate complex of materials.

Importantly, as I said, we don't have to eat everything that comes into our bowls. We choose which foods to eat based on whether or not they are appealing, nourishing or helpful. We avoid eating foods that are harmful, destructive or unhelpful in some way. And we make decisions about the right amount to consume of a particular food. Similarly, if you have a wildly angry impulse, you don't have to act on it. If you suddenly have a strong fear reaction, you don't have to jump up and run out of the room. Instead you can say: 'OK, that feeling has this particular quality, this particular texture. So what is it going to bring with it?'

It is just as with the breath: taking things in, knowing them, letting them go, taking things in, knowing them, letting them go. Again, that's exactly the same as with food, or the conversations that take place between yourself and your friends. During a day retreat, I don't insist on people keeping Noble Silence during a meal. People are free to speak. But take in the quality of conversation – listen to each other, and



hear the noise of the mixture of different voices around the room. Recognize that you pay attention to certain voices, and other voices you leave aside. This is how it works.

Another training the Buddha described with regard to food is that to eat appropriately you should eat one mouthful at a time. That may not strike you as a novel concept. It means you eat the mouthful of food that is in your mouth, without lining up the next spoonful in a holding pattern like a plane hovering round an airport or waiting for take-off on a runway. Instead, simply be with the mouthful you are eating. The Buddha also recommended that when five more mouthfuls would be enough, you should stop eating and finish off with a drink of water.

Now, you might think: how do you know when five more mouthfuls will be enough? It is interesting that, if you pay close attention, you'll see your body does actually know how much is enough. If you are able to lay your eating habits and

preoccupations to one side and listen to the body, there's a moment when you know, when intuitive wisdom tells you: 'That's enough.' When gauging how much food is the right amount, the most reliable judge is our own intuitive wisdom. So just pay attention and feel it. Bring the mind to what you're doing and then pay attention to what you notice. The real problem is putting down the spoon or fork when you've had that 'this is enough' feeling, because there may be a voice saying: 'I should just tidy up my plate. I don't want to leave any leftovers. Wouldn't want it to go to waste.' Which is a reasonable intention, but just see if you can listen to what is the 'right amount' and leave it at that. In the monastery, when we've received the food for our meal of the day<sup>1</sup> we chant a blessing. This is not so much blessing the food to make it holy, but rather an expression of our delight in the good that has been done through the giving of the food. It is a traditional

<sup>1</sup> Theravada Forest monastics generally eat only one meal a day, between dawn and noon. In some monasteries there is also a light breakfast.

chant called *Anumodanā*, which literally means ‘rejoicing in the good that has been done’. The sense is that we are delighted for those who have made all this good karma by nourishing us for another day. The Buddha points out that when we create good karma based on generosity, it returns to us in the form of ‘*āyu vaṇṇo sukhaṃ balaṃ*’, which means ‘long life, good looks, happiness, and strength’. He doesn’t say when or how it will return, but it will create these karmic resonances.

## GUIDED MEDITATION

Settle down and feel your body on the chair, the mat, the cushion, the stool, wherever you might be sitting.

Leave the memory of external conversations and everything else aside and turn the attention inwards. Feel the body, the mood of the mind, and the reverberations of the internal conversations. To begin with, don't try to do anything. Notice what is here in this moment, this ordinary, perfectly imperfect life – here it is. It feels like this – this body, this mind, this day. Here it is.

Centre the attention on the body and the spine. Allow the spine to lengthen to its full, comfortable, natural extension. This helps you to rouse the quality of alertness, bringing brightness

to the mind, tapping in to the energizing, brightening, alert quality of our being. And then around the spine, allow the rest of the body to soften, to relax, to be fully at ease.

Take the breath, the natural rhythm of the breath, and let this constellation of feelings be right at the very centre of attention. For a few minutes, consciously lay everything else aside. There is nothing you need to figure out, calculate, plan or remember. Let the breath be the very centre of your world, in the space of awareness – let the breath fill that space, right here at the very centre. Breathing in, brightening, enlivening the mind, arousing alertness, attentiveness. The out-breath relaxing, releasing, relinquishing.

When you feel the attention is centred, stable, when you find that settled steadiness, allow the breath to be part of the whole array of experience – the ambient sounds in the environment, patterns of thought, memories of words said earlier today,

conversations from last week, anticipation of this year, next year, memories of last year, childhood, whatever it might be. Allow the heart to be that open listening space receiving all the different patterns of perception – the heart receives them, knows them, lets go of them, every one, without discrimination.

Now open up the space of the heart in this way.

This isn't just about developing a quietness of mind. This is a fertile space. We call it 'space' or 'empty', but actually it is also full of wisdom – just as the physical space of the universe is filled with electromagnetic waves and the influence of gravity. We can invite different feelings, attitudes or memories into this space, to explore them, to understand them. So bring to mind some memory of an encounter or some incident of the past, some friend or family member; or even a social situation, something on a larger scale that has particularly touched your

heart, that moves you to compassion – a loss in the family, a global issue, family struggles, the death of a loved one, your own failure, your incompetence; whatever it might be that has formed a strong and painful presence in your life. Take a moment to consciously invite that quality, that memory or that idea, the image of those involved, into the heart. To listen. To listen to the cries of the world. Allow the heart to be open to that presence and see if you can find the spaciousness, the receiving of that suffering, your own suffering or the suffering of another. But you are not suffering on account of it now – this is that mysterious Middle Way between being swept along by the current and sinking beneath it, that mysterious point of balance.

When you have brought a particular image or memory to mind, make a deliberate decision to not be caught into the story-ing of it. Instead, come into the body. Where do you feel it? Can you

discern that suffering and your open, compassionate response to it? Can you find that in your body? Can you feel it? However you sense it, whether it's an ache in the heart, a knife between the shoulder-blades or a feeling of weight, just open the heart and bring the attention to that. Allow it to be as uncomplicated as possible. Just rest with the feeling, knowing the texture, the tone, the tenor of it. Don't try to help, don't try to fix, don't turn away, don't diagnose. Just be aware. Your own fearfulness, your own aversion, your own turning away, rejecting; whatever it might be, go to the physical feeling of it, sense it, hold it, see if you can get to know it exactly as it is.

Wherever we feel it in the body – however that perception, that painful memory, that painful knowledge is held – bring the attention to that and then bring the breath to that same area. Let the out-breath, the exhalation, help to carry it away, help to erode it, bring it to a closure, a finality, each out-breath a



relaxation, a letting go. No matter how strong the feeling might be, allow the breath, invite the breath, to encompass it, enfold it, wash it away, like the tide carrying away a sandcastle, wave after wave gently washing in, eroding, smoothing, dissolving. We're not trying to 'get rid of'. We're letting the tide of the spirit carry that feeling to dissolution; being still with it, being patient, and then its dissolution is achieved, the natural erosion of all things. Gently, steadily it fades.

Each out-breath gently, steadily flowing to cessation. Gently fading and pausing before the next in-breath begins, so there's only the rhythm of the breath here in the space of our awareness – with it, the weight of the body, the sounds that we hear, the calling of the distant birds, different resonances through the mind and body. Here it is. This moment. This body, this mind – perfectly imperfect, just as it is.

## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

**Question:** When you were talking about feeling someone else's suffering but not suffering ourselves, it reminded me of a teaching about being 'affected' but not 'infected'. But the word 'infected' frightens me because that is what happens to me. In wishing for this open, attentive, disentangled state, I'm afraid of becoming entangled or becoming infected. So then I get defensive, and when I'm afraid I go blank and dissociate. So could you help me with my deep fear of becoming infected?

**Answer:** The word 'infected' has an alienating tone to it. We all experience diseases, but we forget that in fact our bodies are occupied by all kinds of interesting flora and fauna. We call it

‘my’ body, but it has all these other beings in it. Our body is really a metropolis. The inner committee is not just a mental thing. Our bodies are actually a vast, multi-layered collaboration and need all kinds of glorious intestinal flora as well as other bacterial presences. Some people drink live yoghurt in order to keep their flora going, to keep the inner gardens flourishing. So when we talk about an infection, it just means that some part of the inner population is causing an effect that we don’t like, or is harmful or obstructive in a certain way. But it is a misperception to think that this is ‘my’ body, and that disease means there is some alien thing invading ‘my’ space. Certainly we should look after ourselves, we should try to keep our being as healthy and integrated as possible, but ultimately there is no ‘other’. It is all ‘us’.

So that is one little piece of the puzzle – certainly if your experience is that of fear and threat – the relative nature of ‘self’ and ‘other’ is up front.

Sometimes we may think that if we could just get to a place where we didn't feel this fear problem or this grief issue that we have, we'd be happy. Often we're trying to climb over a 'this' to get to some imagined 'that'; we're trying to climb over the present in order to reach some imagined future where there's 'me' without 'that thing'. I've had to work a lot with this in the past, particularly with fear. I came to realize that my mind would be thinking: 'Somewhere off in the future there is an Amaro who doesn't feel so much fear. And won't that be nice?' I'd think of fear as 'my fear problem' or 'my anxiety problem', and that would lead me to wonder: 'What can I do to get rid of that, get rid of my infection, so that then there will be "me" without "it"? And won't that be grand!'

This was what my mind was doing. And I realized I was casting the whole thing into 'me' and 'my problem', imagining that there was a real, separate, individual person and that there was this real thing which was genuinely owned by that person.

But that is a misrepresentation of the felt experience. Rather than a 'me' who owned this thing and needed to get rid of it or was burdened by it, what was being experienced was simply the arising of fear. Fear appears within awareness. That is what is happening. There is not a real concrete 'me' who is the owner and a real concrete 'thing' which is being owned. That is just a convenient fiction. It is just a way of phrasing things but we have become habituated to phrasing things in that way. However, when there is a direct looking at what we know and feel, we can simply say to ourselves: 'This is a feeling of fear. It is not a permanent presence. It is not my possession or my permanent problem. It comes and goes. It is a cyclical experience - it arises, does its thing, it blossoms and then it fades, like our intestinal flora, like the bacteria on our hands.'

At this moment your thinking mind might be saying: 'But *my* fear is permanent, let me tell you!' But that is just a thought, a habitual impression that arises and ceases; a judgement, a

diagnosis we have become accustomed to: 'I know what's going on here. I do have a fear problem. I'm honouring it.' Which we might genuinely and sincerely be trying to do, trying to be 'real', but what we are actually doing, rather than being real, is reifying that experience. We are believing it to be a solid, permanent presence but when it is explored and reflected on we begin to recognize: 'Oh, look at that. It's not there all the time. That was just my presumption. That apparent continuity was deceptive.' And when you make some close scrutiny of it you see: 'It does arise and cease, like everything else.'

The genuine felt experience is: 'This is a feeling of fear,' and the felt experience right in that moment is the thing to listen to and receive. Know that fear reaction. Feel it. Where is it in the body? Let that be known. The more we are able to feel our emotions or our charged thoughts, the more helpful it is to know them as physical sensations. Where do you feel fear in the body? Is it in the throat? Is it in the belly? Is it between your shoulder blades?

We're all different. We feel it in different ways. I'm a gut person myself, a solar plexus fear person, so I bring the attention to the solar plexus and the gut and think: 'This is the fear feeling.' I feel fear, I know it. When you do this, you can consciously relax with fear. You recognize that it is only an impermanent impression – it arises, it ceases. The thinking mind may say:

'Oh yes? You're just trying to weasel out of it. You've got a real fear problem and you have to take responsibility for it. You can't get out of it like that.' At least, that is the kind of thing my mind would say. That is the blaming, critical, self-creating habit wading in. But that too is impermanent and empty of self. The voice can grow even louder: 'You can't get out of it like that! This is just a mind game!' But then you let the wisdom of your heart calmly say to it: 'Thank you very much for sharing.' You keep coming to the position of receiving the voice and knowing it, recognizing that it is making a valid point. Maybe what the voice is saying is true, but even if it is telling the truth

it is still an impermanent condition that is arising and ceasing. That is what this thought is. That is what this feeling is. It can't be anything more than that.

You are coming to a place of realism with that experience. You are not trying to wish the fear away. You are not trying to just stifle the habit. There is an honouring: 'This has arisen, this is the habit, this is the conditioning. Here it is. This is the shape of it, it feels like this.' You let it come into being. You know it. You know the physical tension and sensations that go with it; you know those qualities, you let it do its thing, and then you let it fade. And then something in the heart, that intuitive wisdom knows: 'Look at it, it does actually arise and cease.' Maybe another fear comes along immediately afterwards, but that too is impermanent. It cannot be a solid, permanent thing that is owned by a 'me'. There is awareness. There is the flow of feeling. And it is like this. In that way you are learning to develop the refuge of wisdom, the refuge of Buddha; Buddha



wisdom – being that knowing. You're not suppressing the feeling, blanking out or trying to get rid of it.

As pointed out before, there are two subtle kinds of craving, self-centred desire. One is the desire to 'become' or the desire to identify, *bhava-taṇhā*. Its partner is the desire to 'get rid of', to blank out, to not feel, to not 'be', *vibhava-taṇhā*. What we set out to find is the Middle Way where 'yes, there is this' but 'no, it's not who and what I am'. It is here, it is felt, it does its thing and then it fades, and we are developing a different way of relating to this.

**Question:** You've explained that fear arises and passes away, but I know that for many of us it arises and it stays. It doesn't seem to be something that comes and passes. Is that because we're setting up a sort of standing wave of thought in our minds, so that we're focused on it and we keep reintroducing it?

**Answer:** Yes, that was exactly how I used to experience it. My feeling was that I was always afraid. I felt anxious all the time. That was the story I told myself, and it seemed quite normal and realistic. It was only when I turned the magnification on the microscope up and looked really closely, that I began to see that I was saying to myself that I had a fear problem, that I was always anxious, because whenever I looked it seemed to be there. But then I asked myself:- Was that really the case? So first there was examination and exploration. Then I began to see how there was a habit of naming that experience: 'This is my anxiety problem.' It was so normal for me to feel anxious that I didn't even realize I was feeling anxious. I'd already been a monk for about six or seven years before I realized that my default relationship to the world was: 'If it exists, worry about it.' That was the fundamental programme: 'If it exists, there is cause for anxiety.' It's funny now, but it was not very amusing at the time! But once I had noticed this incessant anxiety, I found

it astonishing. I noticed that I could worry about anything – even if it was hearing a PA playing a song I didn't like, there was a feeling of: 'That singer must be very unhappy because their song is not popular,' and I'd be upset for them or worried that their song was going to fail. It was not my responsibility, I didn't even like the music, but I was worrying about their song being a failure.

I began to notice that there was an apparently continual sense of anxiety based on every experience. It was the default. Then I began to think I had a 'fear problem' because the fear was so pervasive, it was like the force of gravity. Fear was so normal that I didn't even notice it. Then for a few years I saw it, but I couldn't do anything with it. It just seemed that: 'It's my problem, what do I do with it?' And then there was the feeling of: 'This is my problem and wouldn't it be nice if I didn't have it?' Fortunately, I was living in the same monastery as Ajahn Sumedho. I had heard him give the same teachings

many times. He would say over and over again: ‘It is not “me and my problem”, it is “the Buddha seeing the Dhamma”.’ And eventually I reflected: ‘I think I’ve heard him say this before...’ It was the Buddha-mind seeing the way things were, rather than ‘This is me and these are my problems.’

This is a paradigm shift that we need to make. In the introduction to *The Island*, a book on *Nibbāna*,<sup>2</sup> Ajahn Sumedho says the same thing: ‘We need to make this paradigm shift from ‘me and my problems’ to ‘the Buddha seeing the Dhamma’, the wise mind seeing the way things are.’

So at some point I clicked and realized that maybe this applied to ‘my problem’. I began to look and recognize exactly what I was doing. I had been saying: ‘This is my fear problem,’ thinking there was a real ‘me’ who was the real owner of that

<sup>2</sup> An anthology of texts on *Nibbāna* with commentaries by Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro, first published 2009 by Abhayagiri Monastic Foundation, since reprinted.

real problem. I was thinking there was something real and it was mine. That was the paradigm that was being set up. So I listened to what Ajahn Sumedho was teaching and said to myself: ‘Let’s see if I can deconstruct the problem. Is it really true? Is it really a problem?’ I examined that mind-set closely; because I’d been meditating for a long time, I knew how to do that. Bringing that quality of close attention to the paradigm, I began to recognize that the ‘problem’ wasn’t there all the time. That was just my assumption; all the dots had seemed to join up, but that was just because of not looking closely.

This is like what the brain does with perceptions. Neuroscientists are realizing that a lot of what we think we experience is in fact merely the brain patching in an impression from memory and imagination. When you see two football players kicking the ball to one another, you think you see it going from one set of feet to the other, but you don’t. The visual cortex actually only registers a blur but because you’ve seen a still football before,

your brain says: 'I can see the ball going from that person's feet to that other person.' But that is not what is registering in the brain. The memory patches that image in and creates a facsimile, so that is what we think we see. And that is life – a lot of patchwork, guesswork and supposition, and memory and imagination, that are woven together. So there may be a feeling: 'I'm always afraid', or 'That's always there', but that continuity is deceptive. When you bring up the quality of close scrutiny, you begin to see that the feeling of 'my' problem is just an impression that is arising and ceasing.

The felt experience is that: 'Here is the feeling of fear; it feels like this in the body, it has these kinds of qualities.' That fear is aimed at an object (fear of being caught in traffic, fear of someone not liking me, fear of being late for a meeting, whatever it might be) but the practice is to withdraw the attention from the object and bring it back to the experience itself: 'This is the feeling of fear.'

For two or three years the experience of fear was the sole focus of my meditation. It took that length of time to really home in on it. But by looking at it with that kind of scrutiny and working with it in an active way, finally it was fully clear that fear was just a passing experience. It was a strong habit, but it was not who and what I was. What I used to do was this. At the morning sitting every day I would say to myself: 'Whenever a feeling of fear or anxiety about anything whatsoever arises during the day, it is my intention to take my mind off the object, the thing that I'm afraid of, and bring it back to the feeling of fear itself, and to notice where that feeling is in the body.' I said that intentionally over and over again at the beginning of every day; and I would try to stay with that intention. And over and over again I'd find the feeling was just tension in my solar plexus.

Ajahn Sumedho would talk about this kind of practice a lot. He would tell us to just let go of the feeling and then see if we could relax the body, let the solar plexus soften, and then go back to

the thing we were afraid of and see what it was like. Nine times out of ten, or ninety-nine times out of a hundred, there was a moment of groping to try to remember: ‘Now... what was I worried about? Was it this? No, was it that?’ Without physical tension, fear has a problem taking hold. I’ve been told that one of the reasons why Valium is an effective tranquillizer is because it is a muscle relaxant rather than a psychoactive drug. It works because you can’t keep a good fret going if you’re physically relaxed; you’ve got to be tight to do that. That is why we say ‘uptight’. If you just tighten your gut now, immediately you’ll feel anxious, but then you relax and the world gets better. It’s weird. It seems almost magical.

This practice, for me, took a long period of application and focus, but it worked and I would suggest it is the same for everybody. You need to be desperate, but it does work. Challenge the presumption that ‘this’ is something ‘I have’ that I need to ‘get rid of’, and that ‘I’ am ‘this person’. Challenge



those mind-sets, because if you don't, you're reifying the sense of an individual 'me'; reifying that there is a real problem and that there is a 'me' who can be the permanent owner of it. Bring the quality of investigation to bear and use insight meditation to look at it. Then wisdom itself breaks up those presumptions and you see the reality of mind states. But you can't just snap your fingers and make them go away in the space of one sitting. I was desperate enough to want to apply my mind in that way but it helped enormously. Now I can't get as anxious as I used to – and I was quite a fretter.

**Question:** I find meditation calming and relaxing, but I fall asleep a lot. Do you have any suggestions?

**Answer:** This is one of the great ailments of the meditator, because often it's only when things are exciting or frightening or irritating that we stay awake. And yet the mind's fundamental

nature, when free of all obscurations, is both perfectly peaceful and perfectly awake. With meditation what we're trying to do is uncover that fundamental quality.

To be both peaceful and alert simultaneously might seem anathema to us. If we're alert it's usually because we are excited, interested, frightened, annoyed. We think that the excitement, interest, fear or annoyance is what makes us alert, so if there's nothing much going on and nothing to be excited about, frightened of or annoyed by, we doze off. That's what we think of as relaxation. So it takes a bit of effort to learn to find the place that is totally peaceful but also very alert.

One thing that can help is this: when you meditate, don't close your eyes. Keep your eyes open. Dullness in meditation is a sleep state and sleep works in waves. If you can stay awake during that first wave of going into a dull state, if you can ride that wave and not get swept away by it, it is much easier to stay awake. So keep your eyes open.

It's also helpful to put a lot of attention into your posture, because the more upright the position of the spine, the more that helps the mind to be bright and alert. If you pay attention to the posture, that's going to help too. In addition, if you know that your mind is prone to dullness and you are using mindfulness of breathing as a focus, it is good to lean towards the in-breath, because that is, literally, the inspiration – bringing in oxygen, brightening the mind. The out-breath is more relaxing – letting go, calming. If you're getting sleepy you don't need more calmness, therefore pay closer attention to the in-breath, lean towards it, brightening the mind and sharpening it. That could be helpful.

**Question:** I would be interested to hear you talk about anger and triggers for anger. I am a very calm person normally, but in some specific situations I find myself really struggling against

anger. So I'd be curious as to any insights or thoughts you have about how to deal with that.

**Answer:** It is good to distinguish between being angry and being fierce, because they are not necessarily the same thing. When we are angry there is a definite quality of being lost and a harming intent. Anger is always going to bring a painful and negative result. But we can be fierce and speak in a firm, loud manner from a place of great kindness and with no harming intent, with benevolence in us. We don't always have to be sweet and nice. Sometimes it is necessary to be fierce or act in a forceful way. If your kid is running out into the road, you shout, or you grab the t-shirt and you pull, because you care about the child. Or if your eight-year-old decided it was a great idea to take your four-year-old tree-climbing – loud and fierce words might well be suitable to convey that that should not be done without some safety measures.

Learning to understand anger is a different kettle of fish. We might look at anger and think: 'I've got an anger problem. Wouldn't it be nice if I didn't get angry?' But then we're not actually meeting the experience when we're feeling it. We're trying to climb over it to get to a place where we're not bothered by it or where it doesn't happen. But like other intense or painful emotions such as fear, anger is an intense feeling that has a very distinct object. If we are able to see that there is a bit of space around both the emotion and the object, we don't have to take action immediately. When a feeling arises, just bring the attention into your body and ask yourself: 'What does this feel like? What is the experience of anger like?' You'll recognize that it is uncomfortable and then, on its own, the wise reflection arises: 'Why would I want to dwell in this? Why would I want to do this to myself?' If you can have the presence of mind to remember that, it will help.

If you want to develop this as a skill, it's not very helpful to wait until something is driving you nuts. In the privacy of your own room you can use meditation to deliberately think of an incident where you were made angry, or focus on something that is currently happening which rouses that emotion within you. Bring the mind to a quality of calmness and then deliberately trigger that angry feeling, but withdrawing your attention from the story, the memory or the fantasy. Bring attention into the body. The cause of anger isn't around, nobody else is there, it's just you by yourself, so it's a benign situation. But you are watching, feeling the patterns as they happen. Watch that angry state arise – where is it? What does it feel like? Learn to see it, feel it, know it.

It might come as a surprise but, at this point you often find that compassion arises: you recognize: 'This is really painful. Why do I do this to myself?' This isn't just compassion for those on whom you've vented your anger, but compassion for yourself

– why would you want to make yourself so miserable? Why would you want to harm yourself like this? Then you incline away from that habit not just because it's something that 'I shouldn't do' because it's non-spiritual and bad, but more because: 'Why would I want to stick my hand in a fire and burn it? That's a painful, pointless and destructive thing to do.' The letting go thus comes from a much more fundamental place.

**Question:** I wanted to ask you about feeling fierce versus feeling angry. It seems to me that if you're feeling fierce there's an aspect of benevolence, like the example you gave of rescuing a child. But sometimes, although you might be feeling fierce, the person who is receiving your fierceness may think that you're just angry and out of line. It may be subject to interpretation in terms of who is receiving either your anger or your fierceness. How do you deal with that?

**Answer:** In the long run it depends on being truly unbiased in your intention. You could say to yourself: 'I'm just doing this for their own good. I'm not really angry,' and then let loose with a vicious roar. You're labelling your behaviour as 'being mindfully fierce' or 'being cruel to be kind', but that could be in truth be giving yourself an excuse while what you're really thinking is: 'You need to be punished. I'm going to set you straight.' In such instances the intention is hiding under the cloak of benevolence, but really it is destructive.

My experience is that if you are genuinely coming from a place of kindness, even if you are forthright and fierce in that way, then although the other person may feel threatened or take it badly on one level, something in them knows that you are coming from a place of caring. So it might be that if you criticize someone or you make some comment that they find painful, their immediate reaction may be: 'Who are you to say that? What do you mean? That's not right! Who do you think you



are?’ And then they defend themselves because what they’ve heard is not what they want to hear. But after they’ve cooled down a bit or they’re away from the situation, or sometimes even right in the middle of it, they can have a shift of view wherein they acknowledge to themselves: ‘They were right, darn it.’

If you are on the receiving end of such criticism, often your immediate reaction is to defend yourself, to push it away because it’s not what you like. But if it really is coming from a place of kindness, of a genuine caring, there’s a part of you which knows, which recognizes benevolent intention even if it doesn’t want to, even if it shuts it out for weeks or months or decades.

To give you an example, back in the early eighties when we only had one monastery in England, one of the novices who was supposed to be wearing white robes showed up at the morning meeting one day sitting back among the laypeople and wearing lay clothes. Ajahn Sumedho asked why he wasn’t wearing his

whites, and he blithely said: ‘Oh, I disrobed last night.’ Ajahn Sumedho really let him have it: ‘This is DESPICABLE!’ He did not approve of this because there is a certain procedure to be followed, a polite way of asking your teacher if you can disrobe, rather than just carrying it out by yourself. I was in the room at the time and there was quite a force that crossed the room.

I’d been quite friendly with this *anagārika* and, predictably after this event, he told me that he felt like a chicken with its head cut off. He felt hurt and defensive, and he disappeared, left the monastery within a couple of days. Later Ajahn Sumedho said that when he was giving him that delivery he was trying to control himself from breaking into laughter, because he wasn’t really taking it seriously himself, but something in him knew he had to let the *anagārika* know his behaviour was out of order.

Twelve years later a letter arrived at Chithurst Monastery. It was addressed to ‘the abbot’. It said, ‘Dear Abbot. I used to be

an *anagārika* at Chithurst Monastery twelve years ago. I want to know if you can tell me where Ajahn Sumedho lives, because I want to express my gratitude to him. I left in a pretty bad way and I nursed some pretty negative feelings towards him. I have been going around justifying to myself how bad and wrong and stupid he was. And after all this time it has begun to dawn on me that actually he was right. I behaved in a really stupid way, and I want to express my regret for the way I acted, and express my gratitude for all the wonderful teachings he gave when I was in the monastery.’ So it can take a while. But I thought that was really wonderful, because the novice was a sincere and committed practitioner and had stayed close to the Dhamma community in the States. He’d stayed with that feeling, and slowly something had percolated to the surface. There may have still been a sense of pride, but he had the wisdom and the humility to climb over his pride and make that gesture.

So the main thing, I feel, is being clear about your own intention, and not just listening to the convincing voices of the committee that wants to justify your righteous anger. Ask yourself: ‘What’s really going on here?’

**Question:** Lately I seem to have become the sounding-board for some of my friends’ problems. When they’re stuck in something they’ll tell me at length about their suffering. These are people who don’t meditate. I once heard a Dhamma teacher say something like, ‘If you don’t practise there’s just no hope.’ That’s a paraphrase, but basically he was saying that there’s no hope of really fundamentally changing the mind without paying attention to it. So do you have any suggestions about how to speak to people and comfort them, besides saying: ‘You should really start meditating’ – which I have said many times?

**Answer:** I’d say there’s no fixed formula for the right way to handle this. There isn’t really a single ‘right’ thing to do, apart

from bringing mindfulness. Sometimes what's needed is just to be an ear, simply to listen if someone needs to off-load, and that's the most helpful thing to do – let them go full speed and off-load, and be a good listener. That was Kondañña's teaching, as described earlier. At other times just being there and listening to them doesn't help. Instead it's more useful to chime in and say something like: 'Well, if you want to know what I think about this, what I'm hearing is x-y-z'; stepping in and giving a bit of direction. And sometimes the right thing to do is to say: 'I do care about you but I just don't have time for this right now. This isn't the time or the place. I would love to be able to help you but there's nothing I can do right now.' Sometimes that's the most appropriate thing, if you really don't have time, or you're upset about something yourself, or you're just not in the mood and so not able to listen properly. Then it can be helpful to say: 'Look, I'm terribly sorry, but I'm preoccupied by something else. I would love to be here for you,

but right now this is the limitation I have. Perhaps we could talk about it another time soon? Can you suggest when?' True helping can take shape in all sorts of different ways, and it's most beneficial for us to not have a fixed manner of going about helping, or having a certain agenda, but instead to try to attune to the needs of the situation.

In terms of encouraging people to meditate, setting an example is more useful than telling people that they need to meditate. If someone says to you: 'How come you're so calm?' or: 'You don't get upset as easily as you used to,' or: 'I wish I could be like you; how do you do it?' these are openings for talking about meditation. But people have to want to change. Sometimes when somebody is unloading, and you say: 'Well, how about this...?' and they reply: 'That's no good because of...' And then you say: 'What about...?' and they answer: 'That doesn't work either.' Essentially, whatever you say is wrong, it's not good enough or it's out of place. I've even had the

experience where a conversation goes on so long that you end up suggesting something the other person advocated half an hour before and they say: ‘No, that’s not going to work either.’ You take the words out of their own mouth and repeat them back, and they still disagree with you. Then you realize they just need to have someone to disagree with. When you recognize that kind of thing is happening, you can say something like: ‘I’m not sure how useful this conversation is.’ Or you can carry on, knowing that you are keeping them happy by feeding their need to be a contrarian.

I’m compulsively polite – usually – and incline to trying to please everyone. But I’ve learned to take that little step back sometimes and ask: ‘Where is this going?’ or: ‘How helpful is this? What can I really offer here?’ Mostly, what we can offer above all is our empathy and letting our words come from that place. Sometimes the most helpful thing to say is: ‘I don’t know what to say here,’ because that’s the truth and the person can

recognize that perhaps there isn't an answer; or: 'Why should I be able to tell anyone else what to do?' That in itself can be comforting and helpful. It is a relief.

I come from a quintessentially English family. When my mother was 83 years old she came down with jaundice. Apparently, at that age this means there's some kind of obstruction to the bile duct, probably pancreatic cancer. So my sister took her to the doctor. Because my mother was blind she couldn't actually see her own skin colour. Her friends, being English, of course wouldn't say anything like: 'Pat, you're a very weird colour!' So they said to my sister: 'Your mother's gone a very strange shade of yellow. We think you should go and see her as soon as possible.' My sister popped round and found that my mother was indeed canary yellow. So she said: 'Mum, I think you need to go to see your GP.' Immediately my mother, being very intuitive, knew what was going on, so she had a very panicky ride to the doctor, saying: 'This is the end, isn't it? This is the



end! Let's go to this restaurant – it's my favourite. It'll be the last time I'll ever...' My sister tried to be comforting: 'We're just on the way to the doctor. You were fine this morning. You're probably going to make it to tomorrow. We can go to the restaurant tomorrow.'

Then they got to the doctor, and of course the doctor, also being English, couldn't say to her: 'Mrs. Horner, you've probably got pancreatic cancer.' She said something like: 'Mrs. Horner, this might be serious.' That was the code. That was as much as was ever said. But the doctor knew, and my sister knew, and of course my mother knew. When I found out I said: 'You mean you didn't actually sit down with her and say: "Yes, you've got pancreatic cancer. It's inoperable, untreatable, and you'll probably live no more than six months."?' My sister said: 'Well I talked about it with the doctor, but we both recognized that it wouldn't help.' I thought, that's ridiculous! and I got on my

soapbox and said, 'We've got to have a proper conversation! We need to talk things through!' But then I went over to England and went to see my mother, and sat there with her and my sister, I realized they were right. Everyone knew what was going on, but it was too invasive, too cruel, to say it, because that was her conditioning.

My visits to my family customarily lasted about four days, but that spring I just happened to spend six weeks with my mother, though we never mentioned why I happened to be around. There was this **thing** that we were not mentioning, but that was fine. It was a kind of dance that we did. I kept finding myself thinking: 'If only there was some way that I could help her.' She'd have waves of anxiety and would obviously be a bit unsettled, and I'd think: 'After all these years she has never had any interest in Buddhism and meditation, and it would be really good if I could just introduce a few themes, a little something here and there.' But the more I thought that, the

more I realized there was no entry point. And it was also arrogance on my part, just like Ram Dass with his stepmother, to think: 'I've got the answer for her,' when actually what was needed was to go and walk in the woods and enjoy the spring. It wasn't possible to say: 'This will be the last spring – her last bluebells,' even though everyone knew it. We were all there together walking through the bluebells and thinking: 'This will be mum's last spring.' But we couldn't say that.

It was a strange dance, but I realized that it was far better to go with the flow of what was comfortable and what she felt at home with, and surrender my own agenda to that. It was best to simply be around, to pay attention, to help out, to be supportive. If she didn't want to talk about what was happening, fine. It was her prerogative. She knew what she wanted. In the five months between when she was diagnosed and when she died, she actually got herself ready, in her own

unspoken way. You couldn't say that was what she was doing, but in truth she was preparing herself. Reality had descended so suddenly, out of the blue; she was having an ordinary day and then she became aware she had a date with death. That was a big shock to the system. It really shook her. It took those five months to take it in and digest it in her own way. As her death approached, while I had been away for a few weeks, my sister said they had had some really great times. She'd take both my sisters out for meals. She loosened up. She told a lot of her war stories, some of which we had never heard before. Her life in the army was not quite so pristine as we had formerly been led to believe. So my sisters were privy to a few stories that I never heard about her. She was ending her time in her own way.

Listening to her needs rather than acting from my sense of what she needed was a really good lesson. She didn't need to hear about Buddhism or meditation; she just needed to have

presence and attention and friendliness, and the quality of our ease with what was happening, and our readiness to be with the ending of her life. That was the gift, that was what was most helpful. So pay attention to where the other person is and attune to that as much as you can, and be ready to lay aside your own anxieties or concerns or agendas. Then, mysteriously, this helps in the very best way.

**Question:** I tend to suffer a lot from compassion fatigue. I try to help with so many things – my mother has been a major commitment too – but there’s only so much you can do and, after a time, something in me just wants to switch off. I get exhausted. And the rest of my family can get pretty tired of it as well! Earlier on you talked about a kind of spiritual by-passing – where you distance yourself in a bad way by saying: ‘It’s all empty and impermanent, don’t bother me with this stuff’ – I can recognize that but more often for me it’s an experience of

going numb. I'm not even using 'wisdom' as an excuse, I simply crawl into a mental hole. Any advice?

**Answer:** Ironically, it can be because we care so much that we make it into a problem. As long as there is a solid fixed perception of a 'you' or a 'them' that it's my desire to help, that subtly feeds the solidity of the 'me' that's got to do the helping. The more solid the 'me' and 'you' the greater the cause for burn-out.

Just as, if there is no self-view in the mix it's impossible to become bored; if there is no self-view it's impossible to become stressed and fatigued in the way you describe. If action is energized and guided by *sati-pañña*, mindfulness and wisdom, rather than by 'me trying to do something for you', lo and behold, it all lightens up. I'm speaking about this from experience as a compulsive helping type... When Right Effort is engaged, the process of helping is stress-free. I apply this principle on a daily basis and, for me at least, it really works.

**Question:** I'm very new to practice and I do more walking meditation than sitting because I'm able to be in my body more when I walk. I'm more able to let things arise and let them go. I think, though, that most people do more sitting meditation than walking. I find sitting quite difficult, mostly because things come, and I absolutely can't let anything go. The idea of inviting an emotion such as fear in and dealing with that in my body seems a much more proactive way to meditate than just passively letting stuff hit me like a freight train. Is that how everyone else does it?

**Answer:** It's like the difference between sending out invitations to a party and just having people show up under their own steam. If you've sent out invitations there is some kind of preparedness. I don't know how many people work with emotions in a systematic way, but I've found it extremely helpful because it changes the dynamic and makes the emotions something that you're interested in exploring, rather than the

crisis management that happens when an emotion just kicks the door in and makes itself at home. If you're sending out invitations, you decide who you want to invite and what time you want them to arrive.

**Question:** In endeavouring to develop a constant state of mindfulness, do you ever schedule times for your mind to wander and do whatever it wants, like the antithesis of scheduling meditation?

**Answer:** I've taught it and practised it. But the trouble is that when you try to let your mind wander, it's like having a camera focused on you: someone says: 'Okay, now look totally natural. There's only four million people watching. Just relax.' It is hard. But I have often taught a practice of letting the mind wander. That can be useful because we can be very controlling and think that the practice equals control, and if



things are not in control, not fitting the expected pattern, they are 'wrong' or we 'aren't practising'. We can unconsciously create very narrow perspectives on what 'the practice' is. But sometimes a lack of control, mindfulness of things being out of control, is really important. That's one of the reasons why we have all-night sittings once a week. We have an all-night meditation on full moon, new moon and half-moon nights. When it gets to two in the morning things can become pretty blurry, and strange strings of thought wander through and odd sorts mental images pass by. That prepares you for when you are ill and feverish, when your mind is out of control, when you are exhausted or when the mind is deranged, or when you have Alzheimer's or dementia. If you have learned how to be mindful of 'the mind out of control' you won't suffer in those circumstances, because you won't assume that you are your thoughts.

If we develop that quality of awareness, we can be perfectly aware of an utterly deranged mind without it being disturbing.

I've had that experience. It's quite marvellous. I was taking some Tibetan medicine some years ago. It had an extraordinarily powerful effect. I was living in a little log cabin at Abhayagiri Monastery with a stream running by it, and the stream would produce music – one day it would be Wagner, next day it was Led Zeppelin, then it was Bach, then it was Beethoven. It was clearly audible music playing away all day, all night long. My mind was wide awake, having these bizarre auditory hallucinations of music. I could have thought: 'I'm going crazy,' but instead I thought: 'This is interesting medicine. My mind is hallucinating and creating all these weird perceptions. They arise. They pass away. They are not self.' So it's extremely helpful to be able to simply listen to crazy thoughts and deranged feelings, and to not identify with them.

There's a beautiful little book called 'Mister God, This Is Anna',<sup>3</sup> in which there is a passage of dialogue between little Anna,

<sup>3</sup> 'Mister God, This Is Anna', by Fynn (pseudonym of Sydney Hopkins); Harper-Collins, many editions, including a recent one with a foreword by Rowan Williams.

a visionary five-year-old, and an old guy called Woody who is a 'gentleman of the road', a street person, whom Anna has encountered, gathered with some friends round a brazier. Anna asks him: 'What are you doing up in the middle of the night? Why aren't you sleeping?' Woody says: 'The day is the time for the head and the senses; the night is the time for the heart and the wits. In the day you can only see as far as the sun. At night-time you can see all the way to the stars.' If we let go of the world of the head and the senses and don't make them our refuge, but make the heart our refuge, when the head goes berserk we're fine, because awareness is not affected by that deranged thinking or erratic moods.

All along we've been able to see beyond all this day-stuff; our heart already knows that behind the blue mask of the day's sky lie the stars and the measureless space that is their home.









‘DON’T PUSH – JUST USE THE WEIGHT OF YOUR OWN BODY’

BY AJAHN AMARO

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