



THE BREAKTHROUGH

AJAHN AMARO



THE BREAKTHROUGH

BUDDHIST  
MEDITATION  
AS  
A  
MEANS  
OF  
LIBERATION



AMARAVATI  
PUBLICATIONS

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BY AJAHN AMARO



FOR MY BELOVED AND RESPECTED TEACHERS,  
LUANG POR CHAH AND LUANG POR SUMEDHO,  
IN GRATITUDE FOR THEIR LIBERATING WISDOM.





PREFACE

THIS BOOK IS BASED UPON the talks and meditation instructions offered during a thirteen-day retreat at Amaravati, in the summer of 2012. It was the suggestion of one of the participants in that event that the material be transcribed, with the intention of translating it into Thai and publishing it as a book in that country.

‘The best laid plans of mice and men...’, as is so often the case, did not work out in the way intended; this particularly since an effective translation into Thai was discovered to be far more and specialized work than at first envisaged. So it goes.

The transcription effort was by no means wasted, however, as there was still interest to make these reflections available; an English language volume was thus prepared and then published, through various Thai web-sites, in 2015. For example, at: [http://www.ebooks.in.th/ebook/29835/Purity\\_Radiance\\_Peace/](http://www.ebooks.in.th/ebook/29835/Purity_Radiance_Peace/)

This present book is intended to be something of a follow up to *Finding the Missing Peace*, which was published in 2011 and presented as ‘a primer of Buddhist meditation’. *The Breakthrough* is intended to be a somewhat more specialized toolkit, describing the path of Buddhist meditation in an in-depth way, specifically highlighting the role of wisdom and reflective investigation in the development of insight and thereby psychological freedom.

The title *The Breakthrough* comes from the Pali word ‘*abhisamaya*’. The word, as used by the Buddha, is synonymous with the first level of liberation, known as ‘stream-entry’ – the ‘stream’ in question being the Eightfold Path, which leads to full emancipation, enlightenment. As is

described in these pages, this breakthrough is considered to be a spiritual turning point of great significance. It marks the point on the spiritual journey beyond which enlightenment is assured and freedom guaranteed.

May the words contained within these pages serve to aid you, dear reader, in making the journey to freedom, for your own benefit and for the welfare and happiness of all beings.

*Amaro Bhikkhu*

*Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, October 2016*





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PIRA BUDDHA DHAMMACAKKAMAVATI



A  
FOUNDATION  
OF  
LOVING  
KINDNESS

CHAPTER ONE

IT IS A FACT OF NATURE that the future is intrinsically uncertain.

We don't know what's going to happen as we practise. Extremely challenging and difficult things may come up – perhaps some kind of illness or injury, an obstacle or challenge that you've never had to deal with before, which makes you feel you are out of your depth. On the other hand, your practice may unfold smoothly. You may have a grand time with delightful insights. But whatever happens, the projections or anticipations that the mind produces are not important – the crucial thing is to know right now, here, in this moment, 'This is an anticipation. This is expectation. This is the mind trying to fill up the unknown with an image.'

The mind fills up with a hope, a fear, a belief, a projection – and that projection is happening here and now. It is something we can know directly, fully and completely, without any kind of delusion. We can pay attention to the fact that the mind is creating expectations, creating hopes, creating fears; and in bringing the attention to what's present, what is actually arising, we are in that moment fulfilling the main purpose (and also the main method) of meditation.

The main effort we can make, the effort that will bring the greatest benefit, is simply to train the mind to pay attention to the present moment, to the reality of the here and now, and to see that this is where we can make a difference in our life.

We can't change the past. It's already happened, we can't rearrange that.

The future hasn't arrived yet, so it is beyond our scope. We can't do anything about either of those, but we can have an effect on the present moment.

This is where reality happens – in the present. This is where we can make a difference.

Over and over again, in many different circumstances, the Buddha encouraged the development of mindfulness, attention to the present moment. He encouraged us to learn to see what is helpful and beneficial, leading towards clarity and understanding, towards peacefulness here in the present. And the Buddha encouraged us to look within, in the present moment, and see what is leading towards more confusion, difficulty or stress. It's fairly obvious that by learning to see what brings benefit and what brings harm, we will incline towards development of the skills that lead to more clarity and peace, and we will incline away from those things that bring harm, bring obstruction and increase our confusion.

So one of the things I encourage very actively, whether you find practice easy at the beginning and later find it difficult, or you begin practice with difficulty and later find it easy, is to set the intention – a clear and conscious intention – to learn from whatever happens. Bring the mind to the present moment with an attitude of inquiring: what is this teaching me? What can I learn from this? Things can be very smooth and easy – our body comfortable and relaxed, the mind focused and peaceful and bubbling with interesting and liberating insights. Or the mind can be agonizing over painful memories,

annoying anxieties or terrors about the future. Or your body contracts some horrible illness. It's not uncommon. I've had this experience myself. But rather than getting drunk on the pleasant, easy feelings, or grumbling and complaining and begrudging the fact that we are in ill health, if we are wise we'll ask ourselves, 'What is this teaching me? What lesson is being learned from this particular experience? What has this got to show me?' I find it's very useful and important at the beginning of each day to re-establish, re-affirm this intention: 'Whatever happens today, whatever happens during sitting meditation or walking meditation, it's my intention to learn from that - whether it is pleasant or painful, expected or unexpected, familiar or unfamiliar, it has something to teach me. There are lessons that it can bring.'

Whether it's a horrible illness, a runny nose or a wrenched knee - I've even known one man who suddenly needed heart surgery during a retreat; he went off for surgery on the Tuesday, came back on the Friday, and finished the retreat. That focused everybody's attention. Suddenly there was an empty cushion where this fellow had been . We were all conscious of the fact that he was under the knife in the hospital, having his heart operated. It was right there - a huge teaching on the dependent and fragile nature of the body. Right there we had a teaching on unpredictability.

I am not making any predictions as to whether things will become physically dangerous for any of us as we practise, but I hope you will be able to take that in and see that even being taken off to hospital during the course of a retreat

is not an obstacle to insight, it's not an obstacle to practising Dhamma. As that fellow said afterwards, 'There I was in the hospital and I was thinking of the fifty of you sitting in the retreat centre, so I was continuing the retreat sitting in my hospital bed.'

When we are able to establish this fundamental right attitude towards our experience, we see where the mind creates tension, where the mind creates *dukkha* or suffering. The Pali word *dukkha* literally means 'that which is hard to bear' or 'that which is unsatisfactory'. The definition 'suffering' is deceptive because happiness and good fortune too can be *dukkha*, in that although things may be very sweet and delightful, and exactly as we wish them, they can't stay that way and so they become a cause for discontent.

You might think that's a really sour attitude towards life. 'How can happiness be unsatisfactory? How can happiness be suffering?' But it's quite simply the case. Perhaps in your meditation you've had some sort of wonderful blissful experience; the mind drops into a clear, balanced, bright, radiant state and you think: 'Ah, this is great! This is marvellous! This is what I've been waiting for all these years! My mind is so peaceful and clear, and just utterly content and radiant!' Then at the next sitting you're eager to get back to that wonderful state, and you sit down and think, 'Now how did I get there? What was it that I did? Let's replicate what I did before, because I really want to get back to that state.' You find yourself manoeuvring and manipulating and trying to recreate that experience. The very fact that it was so delicious, so wonderful, so perfect

makes it even more tantalising that you can't get back to it. 'Well, I think there was a patch of sunlight coming through the window, so maybe I can move over so I can get a bit more sun on my face. And I had the cushions arranged just so...' and on and on and on.

There is a story about Leo Tolstoy - I'm not sure if it's apocryphal or if it really happened, but it's a worthy story. Tolstoy, in addition to being an author, was a wealthy Russian landowner, and he used to enjoy going into the fields and harvesting the corn along with the labourers. On one particular occasion he was out with his scythe, slicing and cutting down the corn, and his mind became absorbed into the most wonderful and blissful state as he was rhythmically scything the corn. It was the most extraordinary and beautiful thing he had ever experienced, and by the end of the day he had cut acres and acres of corn. He thought, 'That was wonderful! That was marvellous!' - or the Russian equivalent of those words. The story goes that he spent the next *twenty years* cutting dozens of acres of corn, trying to get into the same rhythm, trying to get the same wonderful experience back again, and never quite managed it because his whole attitude was: 'I want to get it, I've got to have it. It's just over there. Any minute now I'll get there and won't that be wonderful!' This shows how even a pleasant, beautiful and wholesome state can be the cause of dissatisfaction and discontent, how it can cause the qualities of attachment and possessiveness.

I would encourage you to consciously develop the intention to learn what every experience can teach you. Bring that intention to mind at the beginning of each day - whether you're formally meditating, walking from room to room, eating your breakfast or drinking a cup of tea, bring that quality of inquiry and reflection into being. Thus we develop the tendency to examine our life. We notice the mind states that we are experiencing, and whenever the mind moves towards the creation of *dukkha*, the creation of discontent, which is usually built out of complaining, worrying or thinking that life 'shouldn't be this way' and happiness is just out of reach, we notice that if the mind is doing that, it is creating a complaint. It's creating the idea that happiness is somewhere else, that peace and fulfilment are somewhere else, somewhere off in the future, over there, next week.

When you've noticed that thought, things become a lot easier. You can simply say to yourself, 'Well, okay, maybe things *will* be more peaceful and clear in a few days' time, but right now, it's this moment, it's here - *this* is it. This is the big moment. 'Now' is where the Dhamma is to be realized, and this is when we can see how the mind creates anticipation, how it creates complaint, and how it comes to feel that the world is out of balance or shouldn't be this way. We can see the mind creating that tension and stress, all that imbalance. Then we can let go. We train ourselves to let go rather than feed that sense of imbalance. Once we've let go we see things clearly and say to ourselves, 'Of course! How could anything be out of order? How could the laws of the universe

not be operating properly in this particular moment? Everything is functioning according to its own natural law. There is nothing going wrong in this moment.'

I'd like to share another reflection on the word '*dukkha*'. The word is made up of two parts: '*du*', which means 'wrong' or 'imbalanced', 'out of order' or 'incorrect'; and '*akha*' which is related to the English word 'axle'. The *akha* is the hole at the centre of the wheel through which the axle goes. So the word '*dukkha*' is derived from the image of a wheel that's out of balance.

Some of you may have tried to ride a bicycle whose wheel is out of alignment, or had the more common experience of the luggage trolley or supermarket trolley with a bent wheel - your trolley is always slamming into the carousel, or careering towards the rack of fruit juice or into the person next to you. This is *dukkha*. This is the wheel not spinning truly on its axle, the wheel being out of kilter. This is the epitome of *dukkha* - things out of balance. So we train ourselves to be able to notice that imbalance - the mind moving towards complaining, towards longing for the past or longing for the future, regretting the past, resenting the past or fearing the future. We train ourselves to notice what attitude the mind is bringing to the moment, and we train ourselves to let go.

When we are setting our intention to work with the mind, we should also set the intention to maintain an attitude of kindness. We usually think of *mettā* or *mettā bhāvanā* as being a specific meditation or a visualization. But I prefer, and feel it's more helpful, to establish the attitude of loving-kindness as the basic mode in which we work. Rather than *mettā* being a five-minute practice at the

end of the day, like an after-dinner mint, it needs to be the very way that we are working with the mind. Whether we are doing walking meditation or sitting meditation, or just trying to carry out a chore or eating our food in a mindful way, *mettā* is the very fabric, the very substance of the attitude that we need to bring to each moment - the attitude of loving kindness.

In his talks over the years, Luang Por Sumedho would often point out that the English term ‘loving-kindness’ tends to imply the necessity to make ourselves like and enjoy everything. We talk about having loving-kindness toward all beings, and Luang Por would explain that we misunderstand what that means and try to find a way to like everything. But ‘loving’ is not the same as ‘liking’, for some things are impossible to like. If you have a headache for three days, or pulled muscles, or agonizing strained tendons in your knee, you can’t like that. It’s not likeable. To assume or presume that to have *mettā* is to try and force yourself to like the pain in your knee or the three-day headache, or to like some person who has done you great harm, is asking too much of yourself. And you are also asking the wrong thing.

Loving-kindness does not mean trying to like the unlikeable. That’s the same as trying to taste something bitter and pretend that it’s actually sweet. We need to be realistic and say: ‘This is a bitter taste. That’s a painful memory. This is a painful sensation in the body.’ That’s what it is. *Mettā* is not making ourselves like the unlikeable, but rather radically and totally accepting what is here. If there’s a bitter taste, recognize it as bitter - this is something that

can be experienced. We have a tongue and it's able to perceive flavours. There are sweet flavours, there are sour flavours, there are bitter flavours. This is a bitter flavour. That's what it is. Nothing has gone wrong. It's not 'bad'. It's just a flavour that we can experience. Here it is. It's like this.

So this is the quality of *mettā* - a radical acceptance, a wholehearted acknowledgement and recognition. This is what's here. This is a pain in the body or a feeling of regret, or a sense of grief at the loss of a loved one, or the great variety of different painful experiences that we can have, psychological or physical. It's just being able to recognize, 'Here it is, this is what's happening in this moment. It's not pleasant, it's not delicious, but here it is. This is what's happening, this is what's being experienced. There's nothing whatsoever wrong with it. It just is what it is.' It's just a taste, it's just a flavour, it's just a mood, it's just an emotion. You are not trying to sugar it over and pretend that the bitter is sweet, but you are simply recognizing it. It's bitter, but it's all right. It's sad, but it's all right. There's grief, but that's all right. This is a painful memory or a deep regret, or a feeling of loss or of pain, but we can be patient with it. We can be kind towards it insofar as we don't start a fight against it, develop negativity towards it or resent its presence. We can be at peace with it. We can be open to it. We can recognize that it's just a part of the natural order. Fundamentally, it belongs. So even though there may be some painful emotion or painful sensation, we are not creating *dukkha* around it, and thus there's pain but no suffering. No 'wrongness' is being ascribed to it.

*Dukkha* is an attitude of, ‘It shouldn’t be this way. This is not fair. This is not right. The universe is out of order at this moment.’ When we let go of that attitude, we establish the attitude of *mettā*. So our practice is to support that letting go, to establish that quality of acceptance: ‘Well, it’s not pleasant, I wouldn’t ask for this, but here it is.’ Our friend in America who had the angioplasty during the retreat; it’s not what he would have wished for. He didn’t think to himself, ‘How can I make my retreat more interesting? I know! I’ll have a massive angina attack and get a trip to the hospital! That’ll brighten things up a bit!’ We are not looking for more trouble, more pain or more difficulty, but we realize that if we establish an attitude of loving-kindness and radical acceptance, we are able to bring our attitude into alignment with the reality of the way things are. We bring our heart into accord with Dhamma. This is how it is. If we have that attitude of acceptance as a basis for the way we are working, that becomes a very strong foundation for concentration and insight. In my experience you can’t really develop any kind of concentration or insight unless there is a foundation of loving-kindness.

So rather than *mettā* being a sort of optional extra, added on as a secondary practice, it’s more accurate to see it as the bedrock of our practice. It is the attitude needed in order to truly develop concentration and insight. If we don’t have that quality of acceptance, when we try to concentrate the mind we find ourselves fighting against our thoughts, fighting against our memories or fighting against our planning mind. Our thoughts become the enemy. Thoughts

become things that are resented and rejected. So rather than contending against the chattering, thinking mind, against memories or expectations, develop an attitude of kindness and acceptance towards them. Then you will be able to know that a thought is just a thought. You don't have to follow it – you can just notice it's there and let it go. You can steer away from it. It's not the 'enemy', it's not an intruder, it's not an infection, it's not wrong.

There is the An aphorism often used in the world says that 'the end justifies the means', but in Buddhism we recognize that the end and the means are unified. The Buddha recognized that it's impossible to develop peace of mind by using an aggressive and contentious method. If you want peace, peace has to be your method. If you want clarity, then clarity has to be your method. If you want to arrive at a quality of focus and calm, the effort has to embody calm as well as the other wholesome qualities that we bring to it. If you try to arrive at calm by attacking your thoughts, if you turn your thoughts and emotions into the enemy, the mind becomes a battleground. If you want a peaceful end, you must use a peaceful means. If you want to have a mind that abides in loving-kindness, you need to use loving-kindness as the way of working.



SITTING  
AND  
WALKING

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#ONE

BEFORE YOU SIT IN MEDITATION, take a few moments to be consciously, directly aware of how you feel. What is your mood like? How has it changed as the day has progressed? How does your body feel after being up and about, doing walking meditation, or just moving around? We are seeking to develop an ongoing attentiveness, mindfulness of our changing moods, feelings and perceptions throughout the day. When you sit down to do formal meditation, notice what you have brought into the room with you. What's here right now?

Rather than being immediately drawn into the activity of working with the mind, take a few moments to allow the body to settle. Allow the posture to establish itself, letting the spine straighten and lengthen, encouraging

the body to sit upright, to be alert. Bring the attention through the body and allow it to relax. Soften around the spine, so the backbone becomes a strong, firm, central column and the rest of the body is completely relaxed around it. I like to think of the body as like a length of fine, soft fabric draped over the strong pillar of the spine, so it feels like a piece of delicate cloth resting in easy folds with no tension, no tightness – fully relaxed, completely at ease.

When the body is relaxed and the posture is well established, bring attention to the breath – place the rhythm of the breath right at the centre of your attention without trying to do anything with the breath to make it different or special. Simply attend to the body's breathing, the body's own natural rhythm of inhalation and

exhalation. Let that simple rhythm, that pattern, be a focal point, the centre of your attention. If you lead a busy life, you may notice that your mind is somewhat agitated. This is normal. There is nothing wrong in that, but it means you need to relate to the mind with an extra quality of patience and kindness, regardless of how often and how far it wanders. Every time you notice this wandering, be aware of that feeling of distraction, the feeling of being carried away to a thought, a plan, a memory, a fantasy. Notice that feeling of distraction and consciously let go, relax. Bring the attention back to the feeling of the breath once more, coming back to the centre, to the balancing point.

Minute by minute, hour by hour through the day we work to sustain this centredness of attention. We establish

an attitude of friendliness and patience towards our own body and mind – noticing the feeling of distraction, its agitated, tense quality. When we do this, the fact of being conscious of that agitation serves as an encouragement to let go of whatever the mind has grasped and to come back to the centre of stillness once again. The mind is not *fighting against* distraction, rather it is *working with* it; these two attitudes are completely different to each other.

It's just like tending a young child. No matter how many times it runs off and gets busy with things, we gently, patiently gather it back in: kindly, forgiving, patient, steadily creating the conditions where everything can settle, be relaxed, at ease. It doesn't matter how many times we drift off, the mind wandering into memories and plans,

worries, fantasies; it doesn't matter how often the mind slides into dullness with the body drooping. It's always a matter of simply noticing the drifting, noticing that the mind has wandered into dullness, wandered into sleepiness or wandered into busyness and agitation. Being aware of that, consciously let go.

If the mind is drifting into dullness or sleepiness, we don't need more relaxation – bring attention to the posture. Feel the presence of the spine and invite the body to sit upright to help rouse the quality of energy. Bring more alertness into the system. But if the mind is agitated and busy, we don't need to pile on more energy. Instead we incline more towards relaxation – softening, settling. We each have to notice for ourselves what the drift is. If the mind is balanced and clear, no adjusting is necessary. If the mind is

busy or agitated, it should be calmed. If the mind is dull and sleepy, brighten it up. No one else can tell us what to do. We have to see this for ourselves and take responsibility for guiding the adjustment. We have to do it for ourselves.

#### WALKING MEDITATION

For walking meditation, try to find a stretch of level ground twenty or thirty metres long and establish it as the path that you intend to walk on. It's good to make a resolution to keep to that path, and to walk for a set period of time: 'For forty-five minutes I'm going to walk between this tree and that thistle.' This will keep you from constantly thinking that there might be a 'better' place to walk somewhere else and going off to hunt for it. You don't want to be looking for the 'best' walking path, you

just want to look for a ‘good enough’ walking path – just a good enough stretch of ground – and determine that you will use the distance between the two chosen points as your limit, just as the sitting mat is a natural limit for the sitting meditation.

Before you start walking, bring your attention into the body. Stand still for a moment and feel the presence of the body and the way that the body is standing on the earth. And then allow yourself to begin walking. We use the feeling of the feet touching the ground as our basic reference point. In the same way as you have been using the breath for sitting meditation, use the feeling of your feet, the rhythm of your feet touching the ground, as the focus of attention for your walking meditation. Walk at

an ordinary, gentle, natural pace, just as if you’re strolling through a park. You don’t need to walk in slow motion. Doing things slowly doesn’t mean that you’re being any more mindful. I discourage the deliberate and slow form because one of the benefits of walking meditation is learning how to bring mindfulness and attention to an ordinary everyday activity. We don’t need to think of meditation as some special thing we do, but rather as the way in which we refine the attitude we bring to the things we experience during the flow of our days.

So think of walking up and down as a framework, a form that you use for a set period.

If you are walking outside, there are trees and birds and other people;

things are happening all around you. If your mind becomes distracted and you forget your feet, or every-thing below your neck, that doesn't matter – as soon as you notice that you're off in a dream world, that you've drifted away again, bring the attention back to the body and the rhythm of walking. Rather than forcing the mind to concentrate and fighting against the habits of distraction, think more in terms of this being a skilful means to learn how we become distracted. It's like learning how to fail, but in a good and useful way.

We're always failing. We're always losing it. We're always going off track. The practice of meditation is about learning how to fail and then say, 'Okay, I've drifted off, I've wandered away.' We notice this, feel that sense

of imbalance, that sense of being off track, and then consciously let go of whatever has triggered the disturbance and come back to the present. The basic thing we're learning is to bring mindfulness to distraction – to notice, let go and come back. When we come back to the present we come back to reality, and I encourage you to notice exactly what that feels like. What is it like to come back to the present moment, to bring the attention to the body, to this time, this place, this situation?

In this way we become consciously aware of both what it's like to be *out* of balance and what it's like to be *in* balance – and then the attractiveness of being in balance and being attentive speaks for itself. It has its own pleasant and appealing quality.



RECOLLECTING  
THE  
BODY  
AND  
WORKING  
WITH  
PAIN

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#TWO

NOTICE HOW THE MOOD CHANGES as the day wears on. As the patterns of light change throughout the day, so do our moods. You may feel alert, then sleepy, enthusiastic, depressed, comfortable, uncomfortable – make it a habit to keep bringing attention to how things are right now. How does the body feel? How does the mind feel? Bring a quality of freshness, an interest, a clarity of attention to what you’re experiencing. We’re not just drifting along, caught in habit or half-awake while we’re busy with our thoughts, but we’re learning to look, to notice, to consider, to reflect.

At the beginning of each sitting, bring attention to the posture. Don’t just plonk yourself down and be immediately drawn into trying to work with the mind. First establish

the basis of practice – establish the qualities of energy and relaxation in the body in a balanced and integrated way. Invite the body to sit upright and notice any feelings of tension or tightness. Consciously relax that tension and then, when there’s a balanced, integrated quality in your physical posture, bring the attention to the breath. Develop this pathway, this pattern of approach, so it becomes the way in which you work with your mind and body, developing an all round mindfulness – *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness with clear comprehension – not just seeing *what* we do, but also the context in which we are doing it and the other elements that play into it.

Let the breath be at the very heart of your attention, like the calyx of a flower

or the innermost circle of a mandala. For this period of time consciously put all other concerns aside – there is nothing you are required to plan, to remember or to figure out – let the rhythm of the breath be the only object you are interested in.

You can remind yourself of this, saying internally such as, ‘There is only the breath, flowing in, flowing out, nothing else needs to concern me for the next half hour. The world will keep turning regardless.’

There is no need to fiercely cling on, fixating on the breath with tension and intensity; instead let the breath rest upon your attention like a downy feather resting on your upturned palm. Settled, light, gentle – every ready to let go of distraction and to come back to

the centre, to the heart of this present reality, to the breathing.

As the meditation proceeds, work with bringing the attention to settle on the breath. We can become very focused on working with the mind, following the patterns of distraction and letting go, developing more and more of a focus on the breathing. But through getting wrapped up in the world of the mind, we can become oblivious to what the body is doing. The body drifts into the background, ceases to be attended to, so it’s always helpful, to let go of feeling the breath every ten or fifteen minutes during the sitting, and bring attention to the posture for a few moments. Has tension come back into our jaw? Are our teeth clenched or are the muscles around our eyes tightened up? Is our body slumped over? Are we

sitting in a listless, crumpled way? Has our stomach tightened up? How is the body? What kind of changes have taken place while we were busy trying to focus on the mental world? By paying attention to the body and bringing that quality of reflection and investigation into it, you may notice that there's tension once again, even though you relaxed everything at the beginning of the sitting. The habits of resisting, stressing and fretting easily creep in and take over again. So if you find that your stomach has tightened up, let it soften and relax. If the muscles around your eyes are tense and tight, loosen them. If you bring attention to the body and discover that even though you thought you were quite attentive, you're now hunched over, notice that. Arouse more energy; invite the spine to straighten. Bring energy into the body,

flowing up through the spinal column. Re-establish that quality of alertness, attention. Then, once you have re-established that integrated balance of energy and relaxation in the posture, bring the attention back to the breath. In this way we are bringing into focus the realms of both the *rūpa* and the *nāma*, the world of the body and the world of the mind, and respecting how they affect and influence each other.

During the latter part of a period of sitting meditation we are likely to experience physical pain. It's natural for the body to ache and for different parts of our legs and back to hurt and become uncomfortable. So just as we foster a quality of acceptance and loving-kindness towards our thoughts or feelings, it's equally important to relate to the pains in the body in the

same way. Just as we can unconsciously create negativity and aversion towards the chattering mind which won't stop thinking about this and that, we can also easily create negativity, fear and resentment towards pain in the body. So when we experience, say, an ache in the leg or a sore knee, we can find ourselves tensing up against it, resisting it, resenting it, unconsciously creating even more causes for pain.

It's much more helpful instead to cultivate and apply an attitude of radical acceptance to feelings in the body. When you feel discomfort and pain in the back or the legs, or wherever it might be, notice that it *is* having a strong effect, that it really hurts. Bring attention right to that spot. Look and see what the attitude towards that pain is. Is there fear, resistance, resentment in the

attitude? Is there a tightening up against the pain in the body? If we don't simply go along with that habit of resisting and tensing up against pain, but rather consciously relax the muscles in that area, around that knee or in the back, and let go of that physical resistance and tension, this at once diminishes the causes for the pain. So we relax the body in relationship to that area and relax the attitude as well. Pain is one thing, but the suffering we create around it is another. We can, surprisingly, be quite peaceful with pain and discomfort on their own. So we can change our attitude towards discomfort. Simply recognize that although a painful feeling has a bitter, unattractive quality, it is merely a feeling. In itself it's not good, it's not bad; it is just what it is – a pattern in nature, a configuration of consciousness. So the pain is there, but we don't turn it into a

problem; we don't complain about it or resent it, we don't create negativity in relationship to it.

We also have to recognize the limitations of our body. We don't ignore the degree to which our joints or bones or tendons can be put under strain. So it's quite all right to change one's posture during the sitting meditation, but it's always helpful to work with the feeling of pain for a little while, at least a few minutes, before we do so.

Most importantly, if we have this clear and balanced, non-reactive attitude towards the painful feeling, we are much more able to attune to the natural limits of the body. In this way, when we change our posture it's an act of

kindness towards the body rather than an act of aversion and fear towards the pain. These two attitudes have very different effects, since the former comes from kindness and harmony, from mindfulness, whereas the latter comes from aversion and resistance. Accordingly, they naturally have very different results, the kindly attitude being a cause for peacefulness, while the aversive reaction is a cause for further pain and stress.

So as and when you feel pain, see if you can work with it in this way, learning to respond rather than resist, learning to look at the attitude, let go of contention, negativity and fear, and activate a new approach of kindness and acceptance.







MAKE  
WISDOM  
THE  
CHAIRPERSON

CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS THE BUDDHA?

WHAT IS THE DHAMMA?

WHAT IS THE SANGHA?

*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

*Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*

(I pay my respects to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha)

Every *pūjā* that we do, every morning and evening, every ceremony, is built around this gesture of respect and reverence to the Triple Gem: the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. So it's helpful to consider what it is that we are making so pivotal in our lives. Why do we give these qualities such an obvious and dramatic central position? The Buddha image is the highest thing in the room, right in the middle – we all face it, and bow and direct our chanting and our devotional attitudes toward the shrine. On one level this is a set of customs and forms that are used in the Buddhist world, and they reflect our participation in the Theravadan Buddhist tradition. But since over and over again we pay our respects and in this way and remember to use the Triple Gem as the centrepiece of our attention, it's also helpful to consider: what is the Buddha? What is the Dhamma? What is the Sangha? Why are they given such central places in our lives? Why do we give them such emphasis?

Many of us have been around Buddhist teachings and Buddhist practice for a long time, so these are familiar reflections; it's rather like the breathing process – same old inhalation, same old exhalation. But we're quite glad to make use of the cycle of the breath, even though it's the same old oxygen having its same old effect on the body. Yes, it is the same old thing, but it's also our lifeline, our life source. When we bring attention to these words, when we explore and investigate what 'Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha' mean, it can open up whole new layers of insight. It can reveal the deadening habits of attachment and clinging which we didn't even realize were there, and help to awaken the mind to true life and a greater freedom.

Luang Por Sumedho often makes comments like, 'You know, I would just like to spend the rest of my life chanting *namo tassa*. I can't think of anything more pleasant to do than just to sit all day and just chant *namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*.' The rational mind might think that once you've chanted this a couple of times you know what it says, so why would you keep repeating it? But this is not a matter of reason or logic; rather it's an expression of faith and devotion, and freedom from complications.

The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha work together as a single unit. In the English version of our chanting we recite:

*For me there is no other refuge,  
The Buddha is my excellent refuge ...  
For me there is no other refuge,*

*The Dhamma is my excellent refuge ...*

*For me there is no other refuge,*

*The Sangha is my excellent refuge ...*

The words ‘there is no other refuge’ are applied to each facet. This might seem illogical, as the words say ‘there is no other refuge’ but apparently refer to three different ones; but this formulation really points to the fact that they are three facets of the same jewel. We call them the Three Jewels, but in a way ‘Triple Gem’ is a more precise term, since it points to how they share the same fundamental unifying quality. ‘Dhamma’ means the Buddha’s teaching. The Buddha’s words as found in the *Tipitaka* are the *Sutta* teachings, the monastic rules of the *Vināya* and the *Abhidhamma* – these are all the words to which the term ‘Dhamma’ refers. But ‘Dhamma’ also means ‘reality’ or (more literally) ‘truth’. The root of the word is ‘*dhr*’ which means to uphold or to support, so Dhamma is that which upholds, that which supports, that which is the basis, that which is the fabric of reality, that which is the support for our life and all existence.

So taking refuge in Dhamma is, on one level, choosing to be guided by the Buddha’s teachings, accepting the framework of the Buddha’s teachings as the template for understanding our life, our mind, our world.

However, merely remembering some words is not true security. Even if you can recite the whole *Tipitaka*, the words themselves are not a refuge – rather, it is the reality itself, the truth of the way things are, that fundamental fabric of

existence, which is the true refuge. The term ‘refuge’ refers to that which is a safe place, and only the actuality of Dhamma, meaning this fundamental reality, provides the genuine quality of security.

When we talk about Dhamma the descriptions can seem a little vague, because we have to use terms that point to it but don’t exactly explain it. When the Buddha describes the qualities of the Dhamma he uses terms like *sanditthiko*, *akāliko* and *ehi-passiko*, meaning respectively ‘apparent here and now’, ‘timeless’ and ‘encouraging investigation’. That doesn’t give us a lot to chew on, does it? The thinking mind wonders what Dhamma is, but it’s intrinsically hard to define because the ultimate nature of things is beyond the sense world. How can you imagine what is unborn, unconditioned, uncreated and unformed? In trying to form a definition of Dhamma, the thinking mind and the imagination stumble over their own feet and the jaw drops open. It’s hard for the imagination to come up with an image other than empty space – although, that said, Ajahn Chah often used the alliterative Thai expression ‘*sawang, sa-aht, sangoop*’ (Bright, clean, peaceful) to describe the nature of Dhamma – purity, radiance and peacefulness – which sums it up quite perfectly.

The Dhamma is the fundamental nature of mind, of the physical and mental world of all things. The Dhamma is that which upholds, that which is the organic, integrating principle of the universe and the very substance of mind, the very substance of life. And the Buddha arises from the Dhamma.

The Buddha was born into the world – he was born as a *Bodhisatta* named Siddhattha Gotama and became awakened. Taking refuge in the Buddha is therefore the act of looking towards Gotama Buddha as our teacher, as the guide, the one who is the exemplar and the establisher of this tradition. So taking refuge in the Buddha is looking to this individual, this Great Being who was extraordinarily wise, kind and compassionate, and extraordinarily skilled as a teacher, able to communicate and convey subtle and useful qualities to an extraordinary range of people over an extraordinary range of topics – the most accomplished of teachers, clarifier of spiritual principles.

Thus on one level, taking refuge in the Buddha is paying respect to Gotama Buddha; we are honouring the example of his life, his liberation, his total enlightenment and attunement to Dhamma. The Buddha, being fully enlightened, had brought his life, his mind and his being so completely into accordance with Dhamma that in a sense he is the Dhamma made manifest. Indeed, there are one or two places in the suttas where people say of the Buddha ‘he is the Dhamma’ (for example at *Majjhima* 18.12 and *Dīgha* 27.9) and the Buddha himself famously once said, ‘One who sees the Dhamma sees me; one who sees me sees the Dhamma’ (*Saṃyutta* 22.87).

Taking refuge in Buddha is respecting the individual, the great teacher, the establisher of this tradition, as the noblest of human beings. But just as the words of the *Tipitaka* are not a refuge in and of themselves, refuge in the Buddha is more than just paying respect to the person who lived 2,500 years ago.

Luang Por Chah would often say that the Buddha who lived 2,500 years ago is gone, he's not around anymore. You can have the memory or the idea of him, but a memory or an idea is not really a refuge. The root of the word 'buddha' is 'budh' which means to be awake. This was a theme that Luang Por Chah would stress very often. Taking refuge in Buddha is not just bowing to the shrine or revering Gotama Buddha as a teacher. Refuge in the Buddha means that we find safety in the quality of awareness, the capacity of our heart, our mind to be awake. When the heart is awake and in accordance with Dhamma, when it's in tune with reality and there is a clear awareness of the way things are, we experience a fundamental harmony, an absence of *dukkha*. In this we find security.

Luang Por Chah would also say, 'The Buddha arises from Dhamma.' The quality of 'knowing' is an attribute of the fundamental nature of reality, so you can say that the Buddha arises from the Dhamma. The Dhamma is the substance, the Buddha is the function. Or to put it another way, the primary attribute of Dhamma is wakefulness. When the heart is awake and in tune with the reality of its own nature, when there is clear and total awareness of how things are, then there are the qualities of harmony, integration, security and stability. There is purity, radiance and peacefulness.

There is safety when there is firmly established awareness within us.

Once this awareness is present and stable, then whether there is happiness or unhappiness, pleasure or pain, praise or criticism, that awareness remains unconfused. This is the essence of vipassanā (insight) meditation; it is geared

to developing a stability of knowing, a stability of awareness whereby we can experience a pleasant feeling and know it simply as something sweet that arises and passes away. We can experience an unpleasant feeling, a painful memory or an aching sensation in the body, but simply know it as a painful quality arising and passing away, just like images appearing and disappearing in a mirror. The patterns that appear in the mirror may be beautiful, ugly, novel or familiar, but the mirror itself is utterly undisturbed by those images. The images may be colourful or bland, but the mirror just reflects without any disturbance or any kind of confusion. The mirror is utterly untroubled or unexcited by what it reflects. Similarly, when the heart has truly taken refuge in Buddha, then whatever arises – whether it's pleasant or painful, whether it's familiar or unfamiliar, whether it has qualities of happiness or unhappiness – there is pure equanimity, serenity and the heart is completely undisturbed. The effects of praise or criticism, the experiences of happiness or unhappiness, gain and loss, pleasure and pain are still known, the feelings are still there, but the heart is balanced and untroubled, unconfused by the presence of those qualities. So refuge in Buddha refers to the stability of awareness – that wonderful, clear openness within which the heart can receive all experiences without trouble, without difficulty.

Luang Por Sumedho used to describe what it was like to live with Luang Por Chah and how impressive he was as a teacher. It felt as though even if a bomb went off in the room, Luang Por Chah wouldn't be bothered. He would obviously

know that a bomb had gone off but it wouldn't disturb him. He wouldn't blink. He would be utterly untroubled. I know that might seem extreme, but when Luang Por Sumedho spoke of his teacher you could tell he was speaking the truth and from his heart.

Once Luang Por Chah was going to visit a branch monastery down near the Cambodian border. The road through the hills down to the borderlands was very twisting and precipitous. Luang Por Chah was in the front of the little pick-up truck with a young Western monk and the driver, while there were a few other monks on the benches in the back.

The Western monk soon realized that the driver was extremely reckless, and he became convinced the driver had a death wish. They were haring around the steep mountain roads, with enormous drops and blind corners, screeching around one bend after another. The monk sat there the whole time thinking, *'We're gonna die! We're gonna die! We're gonna die!'* and he kept looking over to Ajahn Chah to see if he was reacting, and whether he was going to ask the driver to slow down. Instead Ajahn Chah sat there quite calmly looking out of the windscreen and didn't say a thing.

To the young monk's amazement they got through the hills safely and arrived at their destination. When they got there Ajahn Chah turned around to him with a big grin and said, 'Scary ride, huh?'

## SUBSTANCE, FUNCTION AND MANIFESTATION

I like comparing the Triple Gem to water. Water is a substance formed by the bonding of two hydrogen atoms to one oxygen atom, joining together to form H<sub>2</sub>O. Dhamma can also be considered a substance, the fundamental fabric or substance of reality.

If we use water as an analogy, ‘Dhamma’ represents the *substance* of reality, and would be comparable to the hydrogen and oxygen bound together in their unique form. The quality of ‘Buddha’ represents the *function* of that fundamental reality. In the case of water this is talking about how water works: how it freezes, the temperature it boils, the mechanics of how it forms clouds and snowflakes, its surface tension and how it flows – so in this analogy it means that the *function*, the primary attribute of Dhamma is wakeful awareness.

What, then, is the refuge of ‘Sangha’?

When we recite the verses on taking refuge in the Sangha, we use this somewhat mysterious phrase: ‘the four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings’. Who are these four pairs, these eight kinds of noble beings? It’s not that mysterious really. The words refer to the different levels of enlightenment. The first level of enlightenment is called ‘stream-entry’, the next is ‘once-returner’, then ‘non-returner’ and the fourth level is the *arahant*, the fully enlightened.

The ‘pairs’ refer to those being ‘on the path’ to each stage and those who have ‘arrived’ at it. So the first pair is those on the path to stream-entry and

those having arrived at stream-entry. The second pair is those on the path to being a once-returner, and then having arrived at being a once-returner, and so forth.

On the human plane, therefore, the refuge of Sangha refers to the beings who have reached those levels of realization – trustworthy spiritual companions, those to whom we can look as a good example, as helpful and good spiritual friends, those who can aid us and be our guides, and those who can teach and support us in our spiritual efforts with great reliability.

But of course, having such people around as a refuge isn't always possible. You may be practising on your own and thinking, 'I haven't got any non-returners or stream-enterers here with me, so where is my refuge?'

Well, just as Buddha and Dhamma have an internal quality that is in a sense the real, immanent refuge, the internal quality of Sangha is the capacity that we have to be unselfish; our capacity to harmonize with others; the capacity in us to recognize the wholesome and to live virtuously, to bring our actions and our speech into accord with reality.

If Dhamma is the *substance* and Buddha is the *function*, then Sangha is the *manifestation*. When the Buddha sees the Dhamma, what results is the Sangha. This means that when the mind which is aware sees the way things are, this manifests as action and speech that are skilful, wholesome, unselfish, harmonious and appropriate to time, place and situation.

The refuge of Sangha internally is the capacity to recognize goodness and let go of self-concern and the habits of identification and attachment. Once we have let go of them, we are able to attune to the situation, attune to the people we are with, attune to the other beings who are around, and to live unselfishly in harmony with others. This is the quality of *manifestation*, how the Triple Gem is embodied in the world. This is the immanent refuge of Sangha.

The root of the word ‘Sangha’ is ‘*sam*’, which means ‘together’ or ‘joined’. The Sangha is the unified assembly, different parts joined together in an integrated and harmonious way. The internal refuge of Sangha is always here, always available to us, just as the quality of wisdom is always available and the fundamental nature of reality is always present. The capacity to see the good and to be unselfish is always here. The capacity to let go of self-concern and self-centred attitudes is always here as a refuge, as a place of safety and it is that very unselfishness and virtue which enable beings to live as a unified whole.

This internal refuge of Sangha brings protection, inviolability and stability. When the heart is grounded in unselfishness, we can’t lose anything. If we are not thinking in self-centred terms, then spiritually we can’t be harmed. We can’t be diminished, because the mind is not deluded into thinking that it is the possessor of anything. There is no delusion of being the owner or the controller, or identifying with the material world. ‘When you got nothing, you got nothing to lose’, as Bob Dylan memorably put it.

If the mind lets go of possessiveness, of 'I' and 'me' and 'mine', then who is there to lose anything? Who is there to get anything? Can you own the Dhamma? That would be like saying, 'The sky belongs to me', which is a meaningless statement. When we take refuge in Sangha, we are letting go of a habitual way of thinking. We can't own anything, we can't keep anything, so we can't lose anything. It's a different way of seeing our lives.

When we choose to let go of self-concern, to be awake and to bring our life into accord with reality, then there is a security, a stability, a steadiness, which is why it is called a refuge. It is a safe place. It has the quality of strength and durability, and it is always here. This is why we refer to these principles over and over again in our chanting. We constantly pay respect to these three qualities, establishing them as the focus of our attention.

In our delusion, we identify with personal characteristics and mistakenly think those characteristics are who and what we are – a woman, a man, young, old etc. But that's just one version of the story, one particular set of conventional realities. We don't have to hold on to that, we don't have to cling to it as being something absolute. Taking refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is a reconfiguring of how we see what we are, a reconfiguring of what we take to be fundamentally real, and what is trustworthy and of true value. 'The Three Refuges', 'The Triple Gem' and 'The Three Jewels' are interchangeable terms for a good reason. Aldous Huxley once rhetorically asked in a famous lecture, 'Why are precious stones precious?' I'd say it is because a jewel has strength

and a quality of symmetry. It's something that is durable. Its purity of colour is attractive to the eye. It is rare. When all these qualities are gathered together they make a jewel something that is supremely precious. Remember these qualities as you take refuge. The more we remember to be awake, to see things as they are, and the more we remember to let go of self-concern, the more we are able to appreciate the value and the beauty, the reliability of the Triple Gem, like a beautiful lustrous diamond.

In a sense, we are re-writing our life, reconfiguring who we think we are. This name, this personality, this address, this life story are just a part of the picture. As we bow, as we chant, as we take refuge in the moment to moment spiritual training, we are expanding our view. We are broadening our perception of who and what we are. We are letting go of the habits of self-view (*sakkāya-ditthi*). Our vision is widened and becomes more expansive and encompassing, and we see that Dhamma, not our individual personality, is the fundamental reality.

#### DHAMMA ITSELF IS OUR SOURCE, OUR ORIGIN

Stream-entry, the first level of enlightenment, is described as ‘the change of lineage’ or *gotrabhū* in Pali. Certainly, without our parents we wouldn't be here in physical form. But when we look with insight at this body and mind, and reflect, ‘The body is not self, feelings are not self, perceptions are not self, mental formations are not self, consciousness is not self’ – in other words, if the

body is not self, if that's not fundamentally who and what we are – that puts our physical parents into a slightly different perspective, doesn't it?

The change of lineage is a shift in view – we realize that although our body came from our parents, the source of reality is actually the Dhamma itself. Our physical form comes from our physical parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and so on. But in a more real, complete and profound way, our source, our origin, is the Dhamma itself.

Change of lineage isn't just a nice idea or something to help us gloss over a difficult relationship with our parents – stream-entry is a recognition that Dhamma is our source and that *this has always been the case*. It's not that your physical parents were your real parents, but now they have been demoted. All along our real source, our real origin, the real fabric of our being, our life, our mind, the essence of mind itself, the essence of life has always been the Dhamma. We were just taken in by superficialities and common misunderstandings. We mistakenly accepted conventional reality as being the whole story. But stream-entry is called the change of lineage because it's a radical change of vision. We suddenly realize, 'Oh, that's not what's been happening at all. This changes everything.'

So to complete the analogy with water; Dhamma is the substance, Buddha is the function, Sangha is the manifestation. Water is a physical substance made of hydrogen and oxygen; it has particular properties and functions in certain ways, and manifests in the world in various forms – shaped as clouds, liquid

water, ice, snow, steam... That is how the Three Refuges all fit together: Dhamma is the substance, Buddha is the function, Sangha is the manifestation – when ‘the mind that is aware’ sees ‘the way things are’, this manifests in the world as Sangha, it comes forth as harmonious and noble action and speech.

#### HOW MANY UNIVERSES IN A DAY?

How many universes have we passed through in the last twenty-four hours? How many different moods have we experienced? How many different feelings and perceptions have we witnessed? How much do we change, how radically, and how repeatedly during the course of the day? One moment we’re the enthusiastic meditator, the next moment we’re a whimpering heap, a miserable lump of failure, and so on...

Through the phases of the day – sitting down for meditation, enjoying our food, going for a walk – as we observe our minds we see different kinds of characters appear: the excited three-year-old, the critical rationalist, the useless failed lump of misery, the ardent meditator... we can all fill in the blanks, we know our own minds, we’ve seen these different moods and forms take shape during the course of the day.

It’s very important to establish the quality of wisdom, the quality of watchful awareness, so that the heart receives, knows and participates in all these different moods and modes of being, these different forms and characters. As Dhamma practitioners we’re not trying to grasp any one identity and reject the

rest. We're not trying to be the ardent meditator and push away the cranky three-year-old or the critical cynic. Rather, we are allowing the heart to fully know and be aware of those patterns – to receive and know them as they take shape, to listen to them so that the heart is attending to the flow of mood. There is a quality of openness, of receptivity. There is participation in all the different aspects of experience – inspiration, desperation, excitement and criticism, fear and contentment – it's all taking shape and crystallizing within the mind. Allow it to take shape and dissolve without entanglement, without getting caught up, without identifying with the changing forms within the mind.

I like to call this process 'unentangled participating' rather than 'watching the mind' or 'being the witness' and suchlike, as it reflects how we need to accept completely what is being experienced, yet without confusion or identification. When we talk of 'observing the mind', this can lead to a false sense of abstraction and dislocation, so I prefer to use 'unentangled participating' to describe what it is we are all doing.

Customarily we think of ourselves as being one person. We've got a name and one body, and we tend to think of ourselves as a single entity. But internally it would be far more accurate to describe ourselves as a committee. Around the table we have various different members; the grumpy three-year-old, the bored cynic, the inspired ardent meditator – that whole crowd of personalities we have seen passing through our minds today. The committee is all there, sitting around a table together. The meeting works best if Wisdom is given the role of

being the chair. If Wisdom is the chairperson it will be a great meeting, but often it's the grumpy three-year-old or the critical cynic who grabs the microphone and tries to take over the meeting. But as long as Wisdom is given the role of the chairperson, with Mindfulness as the co-chair, we are able to listen to all those different voices.

This is the human dance. All these different identities belong. We are not trying to identify with some and reject others. They're all here and they are all aspects of nature, they all belong, just like the varied members of any committee, and we experience all these different characters in our minds. I'm not promoting the development of a multiple personality disorder, I'm simply encouraging you to see how we function as human beings.

In the course of a day, sometimes we are parents, sometimes we are children, sometimes we are experts, sometimes we are novices. These different roles are used by all of us at different times. In our practice we are developing the ability to recognize those different roles and identities as they rise up and take shape, without buying into any of them. We recognize, 'This is the voice of the grumpy three-year-old. This is voice of the wise and kind spiritual being. This is the voice of the complaining cynic. Here it is...' That which knows those voices and that which can listen to them is the quality of Buddha wisdom – that is the refuge in Buddha.

We get to know the sound of a particular voice, we become familiar with the contribution of that character to the committee meeting, it has its own quality – *this* flavour, *this* texture. When there's refuge in the Buddha, that's when Mindfulness and Wisdom are in the chair – and when they are chairing the meeting, all the different voices can be integrated. Each can say its piece, and the whole array, the whole variety of experiences and attitudes, can be held in a clear and balanced way.





BODY-SWEEPING,  
MINDFULNESS  
OF  
BREATHING,  
AND  
NON-GRASPING

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#THREE

## WHERE ARE WE STARTING FROM?

The beginning of a new day; the feeling of the early morning. Emerging from the darkness and solitude of sleep, gathering our energies to unify our intention, we recite verses of respect, reverence, gratitude to recollect the qualities of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha – the qualities of wisdom, truth, reality and the quality of virtue.

As you begin the period of meditation, make a conscious note, pay attention to how you feel. What's your mood right now? Do you feel sleepy? Alert? Interested? Sad? What mood is here with you? How does the body feel? Cool? Warm? Heavy? Light? Comfortable? Uncomfortable? Somewhere in the middle?

You might think, 'I wish I was different' or that the conditions for meditation are wrong. But there is no right or wrong starting-place – how could there be? How could we not start from where we are? You never have a wrong mind or a wrong body. The right starting-place is to work with what you've got, what is actually here. So warmly welcome the material that you are working with – this body, this mind, at this time, this day. Take this moment to collect your attention – not jumping into the meditation practice or trying to steer the mind in some particular way before you have checked where you are starting from; similarly, not going along with the habit of drifting right away into the world of your thoughts.

## BODY-SWEEPING

Instead, develop the habit of bringing attention to the posture. What is your physical attitude? To discern this, take time to bring attention to the body. How is it being held? How is the posture? Bring attention to the spine. Let the body stretch up. Invite the spine to lengthen, to grow to its full natural comfortable limit, so that the body is not tense, rigid or tight. Simply invite the spine to stretch and grow, to support the quality of alertness. As the body stretches it is more upright. Notice how that changes the quality of consciousness and alertness. Notice the difference it makes by even some small degree.

With the spine as the solid, firm axis of your world and physical being, the head balanced neatly on top, consciously

allow the rest of the body to relax, to lose its tension. Bring awareness to the muscles in your face, around your mouth and eyes. If you notice any tension or tightness, let it soften and dissolve. Notice the difference that makes. Next, notice the residual habitual tension elsewhere in the body and how it feels. Then relax, let the muscles soften and notice what a difference that makes. Just by loosening the muscles, softening the tension in the muscles in your face, neck and shoulders, the world suddenly seems lighter, more spacious, easier, less burdensome. Let this wave of relaxation move steadily and slowly through the whole body, wherever you find tightness – in the shoulders, your hands, your arms or your belly. Notice the tightness, the tension, then consciously relax. Let the shoulders drop an inch or two. Let the stomach

spread, and as the tension dissipates, notice the effect this has upon the mind.

Thus you can see directly the influence that physical relaxation has upon anxiety. Through just the simple softening of the muscles, our whole being feels at more at ease. It's so easy for our habitual sense of worry and anxiety to live as a knot of tension in the solar plexus. When that's relaxed, when there's no tightness there, how different the world seems.

This softening helps to dissolve the anxious, defensive, armoured quality into which we so easily drift. Let yourself notice that quality of ease. How does it feel? Down through the hip joints to the legs, invite your whole being to relax and settle. When we take the trouble to do this for even just a few minutes at each

sitting, it goes a long way to supporting all the efforts that we make towards developing concentration and insight. This is a way of developing conscious kindness, friendliness towards our own body – we give it permission to relax, to be at ease.

We establish a friendly, benevolent relationship to our own body as a basis, and this supports and informs a friendly and benevolent relationship to the activities of the mind – our perceptions, our sense impressions, our thoughts, our memories. This friendly relationship with our body and mind also supports the quality of *mettā*, loving-kindness, the radical and open acceptance of all things.

It's helpful to always work with the body and the posture in this way. It is only

when you feel a true, balanced, well-integrated quality in the posture that you experience energy and relaxation in harmony with each other. When you feel, recognize and know that harmony, at that point bring the attention to the breath.

#### MINDFULNESS OF BREATHING

Consciously bring attention to the rhythm of the breath, feeling the breath wherever it's most obvious, whether it's in the nostrils, the chest, the throat. Wherever the flow of the breath is most easily discerned, just bring your attention to that spot.

Follow the movement, the flow of sensation as the breath enters and leaves the body. Consciously determine that right now there is nothing you

need to recollect, nothing you need to calculate, nothing you need figure out and nothing you need to plan. For this period of time, the only thing you need to be concerned about, the only thing you need to pay attention to, is the rhythm of the breath. That is all. For now, all your plans and worries, hopes and fears can be put aside. They will be there later, waiting for you if you need them, but right now you can put that all aside and just let the breath be the only thing that is important to you – the rhythm of the breathing here in this present moment. Place the breath at the centre of attention and let go – the breath is the heart of a mandala; the breath is the very centre-point of attention, the breath is your balancing point.

There's no need to do anything special with the breath. You don't need to

change it, to make it deeper or shallower, slow or fast. Simply allow the breath to come and go at its own pace. You are just attending to the body breathing according to its own nature, its own patterns – the body breathing on its own. Just let the breath rest upon the attention, as if it were a soft feather resting upon the palm of your open hand. Let the breath rest gently upon your attention.

Whenever the mind is distracted – caught up in a memory or perception, a sound, a sensation in the body that triggers a flow of association and imagination, carried away, distracted by some feeling or some fantasy – when you notice this, once there’s mindfulness of it, pay attention to how it feels. How does it feel to be distracted, caught up, grasping at a memory, an idea or a perception? How does grasping feel?

And then let go. Come back to the breath again. Come back to the centre. Come back to the heart free from grasping and notice how that feels. How does it feel when there is an absence of grasping? What is the texture of that? What is its quality? How does the mind, the heart feel when there’s no grasping? Let yourself be conscious and fully aware of the heart with no grasping, and contrast that with the feeling of grasping. The message speaks for itself.

#### GRASPING AND NON-GRASPING

There is awareness of the state of grasping, bringing *dukkha*, dissatisfaction, stress and discontent. There is awareness of the state of freedom from grasping, bringing ease, freedom, the ending of *dukkha*, *dukkha nirodha*,

spaciousness and peace. It is so simple, so direct. When there is grasping there is *dukkha*. When there is no grasping, there is no *dukkha*.

We can directly feel, know and recognize the painfulness of grasping, and this recognition in turn supports the intention to let go; it supports our delight in freedom from suffering. We are eager to apply wholesome effort because our heart directly knows the good and beautiful result. It doesn't have to be a theory that we're told about and need to believe; rather, we feel it as a body memory, like how to ride a bike, and we know it for ourselves.

When we experience physical pain or painful emotions of various kinds, it's natural to be resistant, resentful and negative towards those painful feelings.

We want to get rid of them, to get away from them. But as long as we have a body and a mind, pain is going to be part of the mixture. There's a certain amount of pleasure, a certain amount of pain, a certain amount of neutral feeling; that's the way our system works. This is a natural law. It is this way for every living being.

Even an enlightened being like the Buddha still experienced physical pain. When he was an old man he said his body was like an old broken-down cart held together with strings and straps. He was in such discomfort the whole time that the only way he could experience any kind of ease was to absorb completely into emptiness, to completely switch off all cognition of the presence of the body. When he was aware of the body, what

he experienced was pain. But even though the Buddha experienced pain, he knew how not to make a problem out of it.

In another teaching [S 36.6], the Buddha used the analogy of being shot with two arrows. The first arrow is the natural feeling of pain – pain in our legs, pain in the back, headache, or painful memory, painful relationship. Whether it's physical pain or emotional pain, this is the first arrow, the pain that is endemic in our lives as part of the natural order. We have nerves and we have emotions, so pain is going to be present some of the time to some degree. That's the first arrow. The Buddha pointed out that not even an enlightened one can dodge the first arrow. It is inescapable.

The second arrow is the anguish, the complaining, the resenting, the fearing, the begrudging, the negativity that go on around that first feeling. The good news is that we can dodge the second arrow. The second arrow can be escaped.

When the Buddha talks about the ending of suffering, the escape from suffering, it's that second arrow he's talking about, because though we might experience physical or emotional pain, we can establish an attitude of non-contention with it. There can be peace in our relationship to painful feeling: 'It's painful but it's okay.' There's no resentment of it, no aversion to it, no waiting for it to be over, no begrudging or fearing it. It's just known for what it is. This is a simple teaching but extraordinarily important.

So how do we dodge the second arrow? How do we avoid creating negativity, resentment, fear and aversion around all the ups and downs of our lives? How do we remain accepting, open and uncomplaining when we're struck by the first arrow?

When we follow the Buddha's teaching, we find that if things are difficult or painful, we don't act in foolish ways, or try to ignore the pain or do things that multiply the discomfort. We live in an attitude of patience and non-contention, and sooner or later those painful feelings end; and we realize, ironically, that they weren't really a problem even while they were present.

During the day, as you engage in the formal practice of sitting meditation and walking meditation, make yourself

aware, arouse the consciousness of that second arrow: the mind moving towards complaining, regretting, begrudging, contending against what we don't want, what we don't like. Similarly, look at the urge to keep hold of what we do like, the tension and fearfulness of trying to hang on to the pleasant, trying to prevent it from disappearing, trying to repeat the delightful – for that too is a state of *dukkha*, fearfully trying to hang on to the precious and dreading its loss. Train yourself to be alert to that movement, that grasping, struggling, contending habit – to notice and to let go, not to be standing in the path of the second arrow, not to be adding to feelings of difficulty, dislike, painfulness, and to recognize for yourself that even when something is unwanted or painful, it doesn't have to be a problem.

This is not pretending that something bitter is sweet or that something beautiful is ugly. Rather, when you dwell in non-contention, you recognize that which is bitter but you don't make a problem out of it. When you dwell in non-contention, not arguing against the way things are, you will notice how delicious, how beautiful that abiding is. You will notice what it feels like to dodge that second arrow and the joy which comes from that. Things may be difficult or uncomfortable, but how sweet it is when the heart is free of complaining, when the heart is patient,

not waiting for it to be over. Let yourself be fully aware of that how good that feels. Don't gloss over it – recognize the contrast.

The more we allow ourselves to be fully aware of that state of non-contention, non-grasping, the more this acts as a clear, welcoming goal – we know it, we have tasted it. We've seen it clearly and consciously, so it's easier for the heart to orient itself towards it, to be guided by it. We know how good it feels, which makes it easier to incline towards it and to move in the direction of liberation.







THE  
BREAKTHROUGH

CHAPTER THREE

TODAY IS MY BIRTHDAY. At mealtime some visitors came up and somebody wished me many happy returns. Then they asked, 'What do we actually mean when we say that?' I suggested that perhaps Buddhists should wish people 'no more than seven *unhappy* returns', since according to the Buddha a being who has realized stream-entry will be reborn no more than seven times and cannot be reborn in any of the lower realms of existence; it can't be reborn in the animal world, the ghost realm or the hell realms.

When considering the efforts that we are making in our practice, it's useful to reflect on what we are aiming towards. Why did the Buddha put such stress on the quality of stream-entry? It is considered so important because he referred to it as the breakthrough or the turning point in the development of the practice. It's a point of no return, so it's given a lot of strength and importance in this tradition and practice. Once that level of insight and understanding has been reached, you can't un-reach it. It's like having once learned to ride a bicycle; you can't unlearn it. Similarly, stream-entry is a learning that can't be unlearned. It is a change in the way of seeing and perceiving, in terms of attitude towards life, and once something has been seen in that way it can't be unseen.

There is a famous visual puzzle, a pattern of black and white splotches in a picture. If you look at it long enough you suddenly realize it is a black and white Dalmatian dog moving through patches of sunlight and shadow. Suddenly you can see the outline of the black and white dog against the background of black and white patches of light and shade. Once you've seen the Dalmatian

amongst the black and white patterns, you can't un-see it. Every time you see that picture, that recognition will be there. You know that the dog is there. You can't undo that.

These examples – a visual puzzle or riding a bicycle – are mundane; obviously, entering the stream and reaching the breakthrough is something far more substantial. The examples are just to give you a sense of that quality of irreversibility, so that once this point has been passed, it can't be lost again.

In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the Connected Discourses, there is a whole chapter called 'The Breakthrough' which contains some very telling images. It comprises thirteen suttas, all quite short, but they all have the same kind of flavour. In the first one the Buddha is addressing a gathering of monks, and he reaches down and scratches the earth. He says, 'What do you think monks, what is greater: the amount of dirt under my fingernail, or the great Earth itself?' And in the wonderfully understated manner of the Pali Canon, the bhikkhus reply, 'Oh, Venerable Sir, the amount of earth under your fingernail is very small and the great Earth itself is very large. There's no comparison, there's no way you can put the two together. One is incomparably greater and vaster than the other.' Then the Buddha says, 'Even so: the amount of suffering which the being who hasn't made the breakthrough can expect to experience over subsequent lifetimes is comparable to the great Earth, whereas the suffering that a being who has made the breakthrough can expect to experience is comparable to the dirt under my fingernail. There's no

comparison, there's no way to put the two together. One is infinitely vaster, greater than the other'

That sutta is called *The Fingernail*. The sequence of suttas then goes through a series of images; each one employs a different simile, but it's the same fundamental theme.

'What is greater – five grains of sand from the River Ganges, or the Himalayan mountain range?' 'Venerable Sir, five grains of sand is a very small, a very tiny amount of matter, but the great Himalayas are vast, incomparably large. They are the king of mountains, a vast range.' 'Similarly, the amount of suffering that one who has reached the breakthrough can expect to experience is comparable to five grains of sand, whereas that which can be expected by one who has not made the breakthrough is comparable to the great Himalayan mountain range.'

By the time you get to the thirteenth of those images, you have got the point – yes, this is really worth doing, really worth considering, really worth aiming for.

A number of years ago, when Ajahn Pasanno and I were putting together a book of teachings from the Suttas and the Forest Ajahns about the Buddha's words on Nibbāna and ultimate reality, Ajahn Pasanno chose to devote a whole large section to stream-entry. He said this was because when people in the West talk about the goal of enlightenment, they tend to focus their attention on arahantship as being the pinnacle or consummation of spiritual life. But when they consider arahantship in detail, they say to themselves, 'That's way beyond

my reach. I'm just an ordinary person – a lay person with a husband or a wife, with a job and a mortgage to pay and kids to educate. I can't possibly have the time or give the attention necessary to achieve this level – it is way beyond my scope, beyond my capacity.'

And so they place the spiritual life or the fulfilment of the spiritual life as something beyond their grasp, because they are idealistically attracted to the supreme, the best, the ultimate. Total enlightenment is really appealing in that way, but if you look at what is actually involved, you can feel; 'I want to go back to the beach. This is too much for me. I can't do it. It's way beyond me. This is too far outside my range of possibilities.' Ajahn Pasanno saw that people overlook the importance of stream-entry, which is stressed over and over again in the Suttas. In the stories from the time of the Buddha it's pointed out that many people with families and jobs were reaching stream-entry – it was happening left, right and centre. A lot of people managed to realize stream-entry even in the midst of a busy family life – vast numbers, great numbers.

Ajahn Pasanno pointed out that there's an ironic disparity at work here, for when we aspire to the highest goal we may become daunted and demotivated, but if we set our sights on something that is a bit more practical it will serve us extremely well. Once stream-entry has been realized there are no more than seven lifetimes before reaching total enlightenment, and there is no longer any possibility of falling into the lower realms. And the Buddha says this over and

over again. It's not just one statement here and there – over and over again he says that if stream-entry has been realized, total enlightenment is inevitable, if not in this lifetime, within seven lifetimes – absolutely guaranteed. Total enlightenment is necessarily going to be realized.

The important point to make here is that if you set your goals at a more practical level, you can very reasonably aim for stream-entry. And if that's realized, you know you are guaranteed to realize full and complete enlightenment; an irreversible level of insight has been established. You've seen through the puzzle. You've seen that the body is not self – feelings are not self – perceptions are not self – personality is not self. That has been seen and known and recognized, and can't be unseen. This is a very wise and significant point and a point I very much support – stream-entry is a goal, an aim, that can be realized by many people.

Those who have entered the stream reach enlightenment in no more than seven lifetimes, but they are nevertheless still subject to desire and aversion. They still have a propensity to attachment and suchlike, but there's a clearer degree of understanding, a clearer mindfulness. So even as you are becoming caught up in anger, aversion or desire, your inner wisdom, your intuition says, 'This is going to really hurt. You know where this is going, don't you?' – 'Yes, but just once more for old time's sake...!' We are able to see that quality of attachment, but we can't quite let go. Ajahn Chah used to say: '50 to 75 percent of practising Dhamma is knowing that you should let go but you are not quite

able to.’ You say to yourself, ‘This is really stupid. I know where this is going and if I had any wisdom I’d just drop it right now, but even though I’m saying that to myself, I’m not dropping it, am I?’ It’s like being stuck going the wrong direction on the motorway – you know where you’re heading but there are no exits, so you have to keep going until you finally find an exit, and then you can turn round and go back.

The Buddha talks about stream-entry in different ways. Sometimes he talks about it simply in terms of faith – one who has unwavering faith in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and whose virtue is well-established and is committed to wholesomeness, will realize stream-entry. There is also the structure of what are called the Ten Fetters (*saṃyojana*). Fetters are things which constrict or confine us. In this instance they are the ten obstructions to enlightenment and they are listed in a graduated sequence.

The first three are those which obstruct stream-entry, which obstruct the heart from seeing the truth in a clear and irreversible way.

The first of the Ten Fetters is *sakkāya-ditthi*, sometimes translated as ‘personality view’ or ‘self-view’. If you break the word down, the syllable ‘sa’ means true or real; ‘kaya’ is the body; ‘ditthi’ means view. So if you put it all together this term means ‘the view of the real body’, or ‘the view of the person being real’. In ordinary everyday language this is the belief that ‘I am the body; I am the personality; I am a man; I am English; I am this personality; I was born in 1956, on the second of September’ – it is the mind which believes that as an

absolute truth. That is self-view: ‘This is what I am; this is me. These thoughts are mine. These feelings are mine. This is my memory, my emotions, my opinions, my experience – it’s me doing this stuff, me choosing these words, me who is hearing them.’ That solid sense of ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine’ associated with feeling, with memory, with sight, sound, smell, taste and touch; that’s all the fabric of *sakkāya-ditthi*.

If you think, ‘Of course I am my body; of course I am my thoughts and my feelings. They don’t belong to anybody else, so how could they not be me?’ – if that’s taken as something that is unarguably true – then you need to do some more work. However, most of us who have been involved in Buddhist meditation and come into contact with Buddhist teachings on emptiness and not-self are familiar with how not to look at these things in a habitual way. Instead we cultivate a different manner of looking at the body, the personality, and the feeling of self.

It is recognized that in the ordinary conversations of everyday life we have a name, we have an address, we have a personal history. Conventionally speaking, that is indeed who and what we are, but there is also a wider view. There’s a perspective where we can recognize that the conventional world is not the whole story. Yes, there is a body. Yes, there are stories about ourselves that we remember and tell others. But when we develop the quality of insight, when there is a true seeing, we look into that feeling of self, that feeling of ‘I’ and ‘me’ and ‘mine’, and begin to intuit that this is not really who and what we are. And

in time and with application, we see directly that this is indeed not really who and what we are. This body and this personality don't really have an owner.

When we look for the thing that is the 'me', the 'do-er', the 'owner', the 'experiencer', we can't find it. It's like when Winnie the Pooh is searching for his friend Piglet in *The House at Pooh Corner* – A.A. Milne writes, 'The more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there.' The more the self is looked for, the more clear it is that there isn't one to be found. It's absent. We've taken it for granted that a self is present, real and substantial, but in fact it's like an optical illusion or a sleight-of-hand trick by a conjurer. It really looks as if there is a 'me', an 'I', a 'mine' that is a separate independent entity. That has all the appearance of being true, but it's like when you watch how the conjurer did the trick and realize, 'Oh, there really wasn't a rabbit in the hat! It was all a trick, just an illusion. It was just an impression that I was misreading, misperceiving, misunderstanding.' When we practise insight meditation we are looking very closely at those habits of identification. When the mind insists that 'I' am this body, we pick that up, dismantle it and take a look. What is it that we're referring to when we say, 'This body is mine'? What is the thing that's doing the owning? What is it? Where is it? What shape is it?

The second of the Ten Fetters is *silabbata-parāmāsa*, which literally means 'the incorrect or the unskillful holding of virtue'. In the Buddha's time this would have particularly referred to things like the belief that bathing in the River Ganges would wash away all your bad karma, or that sacrificing animals

on the new moon would bring you special magical powers or help you find the right spouse. It was to do particularly with the rights and rituals which, in the Buddha's time, had huge currency.

Luang Por Chah would always talk about *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* as not just referring to attachment to religious rites and rituals, but in terms of attachment to conventions of society generally. For example, for a Thai person it would be unthinkable to sit on the floor and point the feet towards a monk – that would be considered extremely insulting and unthinkably gross. But Luang Por Chah met Westerners who were very devoted and very polite, and yet they would quite happily sit in front of him and stretch their legs out, point their feet towards him and not have a clue that this could be insulting. Because Luang Por was a very reflective and wise person, rather than taking offence, his mind would move towards reflecting, 'That's really interesting. Look what my mind is doing with that! My mind says, 'That's wrong, you shouldn't do that!' But in England this is quite acceptable – why shouldn't they stretch out their legs?' One time when he was going through London, Ajahn Chah saw people standing in a queue at a bus stop. So he asked, 'What are they doing there?', and the monks explained, 'They are queuing for the bus.'

'Queuing for the bus – what do you mean?'

'Well, when the bus comes and, say, there's room on it for six people, the first six people in the queue will get on the bus and the rest will wait there at the stop.'

He said, ‘Really? You mean they won’t crowd in, or push in front and pile onto the bus anyway?’

‘Oh, no, that would be unthinkable. In Britain queue-jumping is worse than pointing your feet at the Buddha – somebody who jumps the queue would be a social outcast!’

‘Ooh, that’s not the same as in Thailand!’

The ability to see this attachment to conventions is the ability to see the things to which we give value, and how those things are given a quality of importance or meaning. If we think that it’s absolutely wrong to point the feet at a monk, not just a convention but inherently wrong, that’s *śilabbata-parāmāsa*, attachment to rites and rituals. The ability to see our attachment to conventions as what it is constitutes a form of insight into self view. It is the ability to see through this attachment to the conventions and value systems by which we live – what we call right and wrong, beautiful and ugly – and to realize that these values are based solely on perspective and conditioning. The heart recognizes, ‘Oh, that’s just what I’m familiar with. That’s just what I’m used to’, and can thus respond to situations with equanimity.

Leaving Britain to live in America for fifteen years was a very interesting experience for me. I had always felt that I was a fairly liberal and open kind of Brit. But when I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area I suddenly discovered all my English home-counties uptightness. The customs and the way that people related in California made me realize I was a lot more English than I thought I

was. Somebody would come up and say, ‘Hi, my name is Steve’, and within five minutes he would be talking about what it’s like to grow up as a gay man in Idaho with alcoholic parents. ‘Erm...and your name was what?’ In Britain you could live next door to someone or work in the same office for twenty years, and they’d never let on about that kind of thing. You just don’t talk about those things, at least in the part of England where I grew up. Home Counties England is the epicentre of the stiff upper lip, a society brimful of things you don’t talk about. It was quite wonderful to be in a completely different environment with a different set of customs. It was as if a mirror were held up to show me my own conditioning and the conditioning of those around me. I would think to myself, ‘They don’t realize that what they’re doing is to my perception very strange. I’m looking at what they’re doing as something that’s wrong or surprising.’ Or, I might have said something I felt to be a completely innocent remark, only to then pick up a collective intake of breath from those around me – ‘What did I just say?’ If you don’t know what the customs and conventions are, you can inadvertently say or do things that are really offensive.

In the early days of Chithurst Monastery it was a very ramshackle existence. The house was a crumbling Dickensian mansion, an old Victorian house that was filled with dry rot. Everything was a bit rough and ready – the tea mugs didn’t match and they had chips in them or broken handles, and the carpets were leftovers from other people’s homes.

However, somebody had given Luang Por Sumedho a very nice blue and white classic Thai porcelain spittoon; it was the nicest piece of crockery in the whole house. So we filled up this beautiful blue and white porcelain bowl with sand and used it as the incense burner on the main shrine. Then one day a senior monk from Thailand made a special trip from London to see Chithurst Monastery. We greeted him at the door and brought him in. He knelt down in front of the shrine, and was just about to bow when he saw the spittoon on the shrine. He froze. You could see he was shocked, and he very politely said, ‘Perhaps you would like to find something else, a different bowl to be an incense burner?’ For us, the spittoon was the most beautiful dish in the house, but to him it was a vessel you put your rubbish in or urinated into. We had no idea that it could be anything offensive, but to him it was like having a chamber pot there.

Sometimes the things we do or say are upsetting to others. Rather than dismissing this as their problem or something they should get over, non-attachment to convention means that we are respectful, that we take an interest in the dynamics of convention, that we’re mindful, attentive and ready to adapt to others’ conventions and standards.

The third fetter is *vicikicchā*, which means ‘doubt’. This is not a trivial kind of doubt like not being sure what to have for breakfast. Specifically, it’s doubt about what is the Path and what is not the Path. The challenge is to go beyond doubt, to see through doubt and find clear recognition of what constitutes the practice of Dhamma. What is the path out of suffering and what is not? What

is the path to recognizing the Dhamma and what is not? When that has been seen through, when the way is really recognized, when there's no further doubt about the path to follow, the fetter of doubt has been broken.

When these three fetters, self-view, attachment to conventions and doubt have all been fully recognized, understood and eradicated, when they have been seen through and there's no doubt about what is the Path and what is not the Path, then stream-entry has been realized.

The Suttas often describe a practitioner's insight by saying that he has seen the Deathless – this is a description of the realization of stream-entry. That person has broken through. The realization of this insight is also described by the Pali words '*Yankiñci samudaya dhammaṃ sabbantaṃ nirodha dhamman'ti*' – 'Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation.' In a sense, that is the key insight and recognition – that everything is impermanent. To be able to see that all things are impermanent, to be ready to apply that in all circumstances; that is the root insight and the fundamental factor for making the breakthrough into stream-entry.

Now, you might think that's too simple, that it's nothing special, nothing new, quite easy to understand. Well, we may understand it as a concept, but the problem is that we are not yet applying it in our lives; we are not seeing the implications of that insight. We may understand conceptually that whatever begins ends, but we are still attached to pleasant, beautiful things that we think

of as ‘mine’. In fact, we even cling to misery because we think of it as ‘my misery’, part of what constitutes our ‘self’. We don’t wish to see it as something that will change, something that will end, something that is not ownable.

There are still degrees of identification and grasping, so we are not seeing that all conditions are intrinsically impermanent. When we are trying to hang on to the pleasant and the beautiful, it is because we are dreading or resenting the painful or the difficult. In that moment we are not seeing the fundamentally transient nature of reality.

The reality is that all things are fluid, uncertain. That is their nature. When right understanding is applied, the mind says, ‘Oh, hang on! – I’ve been making the mistake of thinking that this problem is ‘mine’ and that it’s going to be here forever. Ah ha!’ That ‘Ah ha!’ is the recognition that there is no way this ‘problem’ could be anything other than impermanent and uncertain. And how could it belong to a ‘self’? Ah ha! That recognition, that application of insight – that is the way; that is the Path. There is no more doubt. We know that things always change. And we know what we always need to do in terms of relating to that – the insight into transiency is applied. This approach becomes the way in which every situation is experienced; and when this is effected, it changes our heart and it opens the door to liberation. When there’s no more doubt, that’s the point at which the breakthrough has been made.

It’s not enough, though, just to read these words – you have to pick up these themes and explore them, investigate them for yourself. Words are just

patterns that we perceive, sounds that we hear or ideas that we ponder – but the Dhamma is something that we need to pick up and explore.

For example, we can understand conventions – it makes sense to queue for a bus or not use a spittoon for a shrine – but we can sometimes become attached to them without even being aware that they are conventions. Which of your thoughts are conventions? What are you used to believing in? What do you build your hopes and fears around? Where are your attachments? There are probably some things to which I'm deeply attached without realizing that I'm attached to them. There may be things I value, which I consider good, beautiful or wonderful, but it is just my conditioning which creates that impression. So I ask myself, what do I relate to in that way? What am I attached to in that way? Let's have a look. This is the way we explore our experience.

Ajahn Chah used to use money as an example. He would say, 'Money is just a convention. You have a piece of paper and you print on it 'ten baht', and so you say it's worth ten baht, or you add an extra zero on it and you say it's worth a hundred baht, or another zero and then it's worth a thousand baht. All these pieces of paper are the same size. It's not as if you've got a special paper for a thousand baht note. It's all just pieces of paper. There's nothing special there. You just put an extra zero on it – and zero is nothing anyway.'

Banknotes just represent human agreements. We just agree to call them 'currency'. We say one piece of paper is worth a thousand, another is worth ten, another a hundred; but if we were to change the agreement the value would go

away. The government might say, 'We are printing new currency. After such-and-such a date, the old notes will have no value.' So you think, 'Hang on a minute – last week that note was worth a thousand baht, but now it's just good for lighting fires or lining the bottom of a bird-cage? Where did the value go?' Ajahn Chah used to say that perhaps in the future people would agree to use chicken shit as their currency. A person might collect a big pile of chicken shit and be rich, while everyone else would be fighting and arguing about how to get a bigger pile of chicken shit. By comparing the size of their heaps, they would decide which person had the most value and who was the most important.

This is what we do all the time; we create things and give them value. What things do you value in your lives? If you're in the academic world, value is often about getting published: how many papers have you had published? Perhaps it doesn't even matter if nobody ever reads them; all that matters is how many you have had published. Or if you are into wealth and appearances, how big is your house?

Or if you are into social climbing, what are your children doing? Are they going to university? Are they lawyers or doctors or engineers? Or are your children unemployed and an embarrassment?

Or if social networks are your thing, how many Facebook 'friends' do you have? Even in the monastic life we can have these value systems. How many years have you been a monk? How many retreats have you done? How many ascetic practices do you do?

There are countless different ways in which we can create value systems, and invest in them and judge each other. This is why it's important to be able to see clearly and say to ourselves, 'Look - it's just an empty system that's been ascribed a value; really there's no 'thing' there.

What we call beautiful in one country is ugly in another. As a Westerner in Thailand, I was interested to discover that Thais have a very different way of talking about the body. In the West we might be very sensitive about particular attributes of our body, but in Thailand they're very straightforward. They would come up and say to you, 'You're really fat, aren't you? Wow, I never saw anyone as fat as you before!' And they wouldn't mean to be insulting. Or they would say to Ajahn Sumedho, 'Your skin is very white, it's really kind of horrible'; or 'Your nose is really big. What a huge nose you've got!' Whereas here in the West we would take these as deeply personal remarks, in Thailand they're not considered insulting at all. Conditioning can be strong, so we must understand that and free the heart from it.

Now, with all this talking about stream-entry and realization, some of you who are familiar with Luang Por Sumedho's teachings may also be aware that he would very, very rarely talk about or use the language of aiming for attainment. Just as we can become competitive about who has the biggest house or published the most papers, we can also become competitive or acquisitive about realization. So Luang Por Sumedho would very often point to the absurdity of 'trying to become' a stream-enterer or 'trying to get' enlightened. That very

way of phrasing the issue displays an acquisitive or becoming tendency; we have let *bhava-tanhā*, the desire to become, take hold of our spiritual efforts.

So, in talking about all of this I'm very conscious of the fact that there's a danger in creating a substantial desire to 'become' something special. It's therefore important to notice how, when you set yourself a goal, you start to think: 'I'm not a stream-enterer yet but I want to become one, so what can I do now to become that in the future?' In Luang Por Sumedho's teachings, over and over and over again he would say that one of the root delusions about meditation practice is to think, 'I'm an unenlightened person who's got to do something now to become enlightened in the future.' He saw that he had been setting that up as a paradigm in himself, and he realized that he was creating a false framework.

If we do this, even though we might feel it's a good intention, we are unwittingly building our practice on a basis of *bhava-tanhā*. We can be unconsciously strengthening the sense of self, strengthening self-view: 'I am an unenlightened person and I've got to do something to become an enlightened person in the future.'

What he would always encourage instead is to let go of that whole structure; to let go of conceiving ourselves as a person and simply be awake now, be enlightened now, be awake to this moment. So it's not a matter of starting a stream-entry programme, but rather of being awake in this moment to the feelings of the body, to perceptions, the sounds that you hear, the things that

you see. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch; knowing this is all arising and passing away here and now. If we see that, if we recognize that, then we are being awake right now. Right now there is the quality of wisdom. It's being actualized.

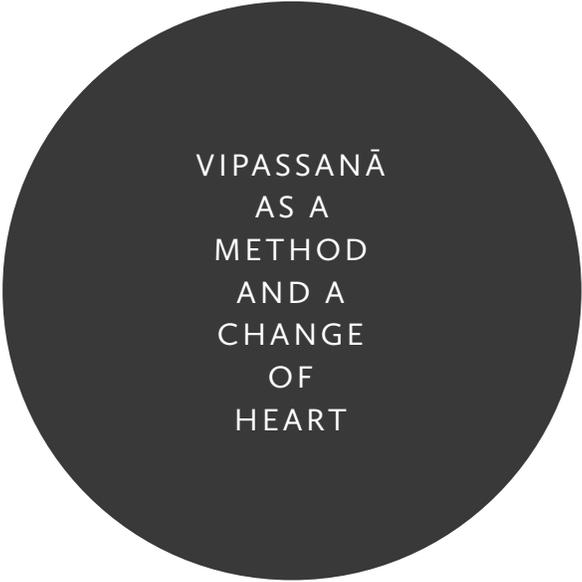
A number of years ago, the last time Luang Por Sumedho gave a retreat in California at Spirit Rock Meditation Centre, I was helping out with the event and I noticed that every single Dhamma talk was about self-view, about attachment to conventions and about getting beyond doubt – every single talk for the whole ten days. But he never mentioned stream-entry once. He never talked about the idea of a realization or an attainment or getting something. It was really striking how he was giving everybody the tools, but not creating a framework that was liable to cause people to be caught up in the gaining mind, or that self-creating habit of, 'I've got to get something that I haven't got yet.' His approach was rather to say, 'This is how you work with self-view. This is how you work with attachment to conventions. This is how you work with doubt. This is how it all operates. This is what you do. This is the set of tools. This is how they work. This is what you do with them. This is what you don't do with them. I was really struck by the wisdom of that. He was giving a full-on teaching to help people acquire the tools needed to support that quality of realization. But he was also working hard to prevent people from becoming stuck in the gaining, the achieving or the comparing mind.

That said, I also feel that it can be helpful to speak about the spiritual framework – not to go against Luang Por Sumedho's way of doing things, but

simply in order to have the roadmap that's there in the Buddha's teachings. In this way we can be clearer about the nature of the task at hand – then it's up to us, having that framework, to be careful not to get entangled and end up grasping at attainment. Be aware if the mind is conceiving, 'I am a person who is not enlightened yet and I've got to do something now to get enlightened in the future'; and as soon as you see your mind doing that, just say, 'Whoah, hold it!' Then, rather than buying into and solidifying that view, take Luang Por Sumedho's advice and step back from it, saying, 'Here is the wisdom mind seeing the way things are, here and now. Here's the Buddha seeing the Dhamma, here and now.' See that we can be enlightened right now, we can be awake in this moment. There can be wisdom, there can be wakefulness; and, in that moment of clear seeing, the Dhamma is recognized, is known, actualized.

I feel these are important themes, and it's good to return to them throughout our practice, to familiarize ourselves with the framework of the spiritual landscape. We look at these areas of identification, where we get caught up, and hopefully we learn how to use these tools and understand this framework of awakening, without turning the framework into another obstacle. Instead of feeding the habits of self-view and the gaining and comparing mind, we learn to be able to see how it all works, to see what the potential is and what the obstacles are, and guide our lives towards what is really beneficial and truly liberating.





VIPASSANĀ  
AS A  
METHOD  
AND A  
CHANGE  
OF  
HEART

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#FOUR

WE BEGIN THE DAY BY PAYING OUR RESPECTS to the Triple Gem – the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha – but the Buddha pointed out that the highest kind of praise and reverence for a teacher was not just to recite their virtues or make offerings of flowers and gifts to them. The highest kind of reverence for a teacher is embodied in carrying out their teachings. Thus to actually practise the Dhamma is the most beautiful and complete way of showing our respect, our gratitude to the Buddha. To embody the Triple Gem is the best way of paying respect to the Triple Gem. So we recite the verses of respect, reverence and homage. We also recollect the essential teachings: going through the Buddha’s analysis of nature, body and mind, learning how to see it clearly, how to understand it as it is, how to examine our experience

– we learn how our mind fabricates its experience of the world, and how to see that process clearly and free the heart from confusion about it.

There are many different ways in which we can explore and analyse experience, but in this particular practice the most useful tool, the approach that is most accessible to most people, is the division of the picture into what are called the Five Groups. These are physical form or *rūpa*, meaning the body, and then the realm of the mind, which is divided into four different sections: *vedanā* (pleasant, painful and neutral sensations); *saññā* (perception – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching ); *sankhāra* (thoughts, emotions, moods, intentions, memories, concepts, ideas, fantasies, fears, the whole realm of mental activity); and consciousness itself,

*viññāna* (discriminative consciousness, that capacity of mind which cognizes and discriminates ‘this’ from ‘that’). This is a simple way of grouping and describing the activities of body and mind: the body, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness – *rūpa, vedanā, saññā, sankhāra, viññāna*. The Buddha points out that it is identification with these five groups, these five chunks of experience, that causes, for example, the delusion, ‘I am thinking, I am remembering, I am experiencing, I am acting’, and this is what is meant by ‘identifying with consciousness’.

This identification – the habits of grasping, in both body and mind – is what causes feelings of alienation, of incompleteness and dissatisfaction. That grasping is the very source of self-view, the engine of *sakkāya-ditthi*. It is the

deep-rooted habit of claiming, ‘This body is mine. It’s who and what I am. This feeling of pleasure or pain is who and what I am. These perceptions, what is tasted, what is heard and smelt, seen – these belong to *me*. These are mine. These ideas, these opinions, these memories – these are *me*, these are mine. These are *my* choices; *my* intentions; *my* ideas; *my* plans. I love. I hate...’ This is all identification with consciousness. It’s the delusion that there is a ‘me’ here who is knowing; a ‘me’ here who is experiencing; a ‘me’ who is a separate and independent individual.

Now, we can take a statement like ‘the body is not self’ and try to believe that it’s true. We can take it that since the statement comes from the Buddha, it must therefore be true. But just believing something that we

hear from outside doesn't really help us. Maybe it's true or maybe it's not. The Buddha's approach was not to make emphatic statements merely so that they would be believed. As in his teachings to his five companions in the Deer Park near Varanasi shortly after his enlightenment, his approach was rather to say, 'This is how it looks to me. How does it look to you? Examine it. Explore it. Investigate it.' The Buddha identified the tools for investigation and the ways to explore, and in this way he helped his listeners to recognize the qualities of all things, whether physical or mental.

Thus instead of trying force people to believe that the body is 'not-self' or that it is 'unsatisfactory', the Buddha encouraged investigating so that we can know what it is by personal experience. In this method the first characteristic

of the body to which he pointed is change, transiency, instability – *anicca*. He asked: 'Is it the case that the body is changing? Can you see that physical form changes?' Then, seeing that every material thing indeed changes, he went on to ask: 'So if something is changing, can it be permanently satisfactory? Can it please us forever?' Well... no. It's either pleasant now, and then it changes and the pleasure ends, or it's already unpleasant now. Therefore no experience can be permanently satisfying. And then he asked: 'So if something is unstable, changing and is unsatisfactory, is it appropriate, is it suitable, to call it 'me'? Is it realistic to say, 'This is what I am; this is my true self?'" The conclusion his companions were drawn to was 'no', because according to classical Vedic philosophy, if something was the true self, the

*atman* in Sanskrit (*atta* in Pali), it would possess the qualities of permanence and blissfulness. Since the body clearly changes all the time, it cannot be ‘*attā*’; rather, it is ‘*anattā*’, not-self. So too with the other four *khandhas*, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness.

These qualities, the characteristics of *anicca* (change), *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) and *anattā* (not-self) – are not just principles to be believed in; they are a means of exploring and examining our experience. They are tools with which to look into the nature of our moment-to-moment awareness of the world, how the world takes shape in our minds. Is something changing? Whether it’s inside or outside, is it changing? Is this experience something completely satisfying? It may be sweet

and delightful right now, but can it stay that way? Does it remain pleasing? Does it become ordinary? Does the attention drift from it? What happens? And what about the feeling of ‘self’ around an idea, a perception or a memory? Can we find what the feeling of ‘self’ refers to? What is it here that’s doing the owning? What is it here that is the experiencer? Is there a self that is the doer, the knower? – or if not, what is it?

These three qualities – *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*: impermanence or uncertainty, unsatisfactoriness or incompleteness and not-self – are like three lenses with different strengths of magnification which we can use to look closely at the patterns of our experience. Whether it’s a sound that we hear outside or a feeling in the body, whether it’s a memory, an idea, a mood, whether it’s the quality

of cognizing, knowing itself – they are lenses to hold up to those experiences. To look. To see: ‘Is this changing? Is this satisfying? Is this really who and what I am?’ Through that seeing, through that direct knowing within our own heart – ‘Look! It is empty. It is uncertain. No matter how hard I search for ‘myself’, the harder I look, the more what I take to be a ‘me’ or a ‘self’ is indefinable’ – we see that ‘me and mine’ is a faulty interpretation. There is awareness. There is a fundamental quality of knowing. But we see that to call this knowing ‘me and mine’, an ego, is a faulty interpretation. It’s a case of mistaken identity.

With meditation, when there’s a substantial quality of calmness and focus, when the mind is stable and can rest in the present moment, when it can stay

with the breath for extended periods of time and attend to the present reality without drifting; when you find that your mind has arrived at that kind of stability, there’s no need to pay particular attention to the breathing. You use the breath as an anchor to help fix the attention on the present moment. The breath acts simply as a marker, a reference point for the present. But if the attention is resting easily in the present, you don’t need to provide such an anchor. You don’t need to fix the attention in place because it’s already stable, attending to the present moment. When you find that the mind has arrived at that kind of steadiness – not drifting off into abstractions about past and future or distracted by sounds you hear or feelings in the body – whenever the attention rests easily in the present moment, allow the breath to become part of the

general field of experience. Open up the awareness to all experience, to know the sounds you hear around you, the feelings in the body, the thoughts that come and go – broaden the point of attention to encompass the whole of the present moment, to include all aspects of experience.

Then whatever arises, whether it's a thought, a sound, a sensation, the way to maintain the quality of clarity, of non-entanglement, is to apply the reflections on change, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. If we hear the sound of a plane going overhead, we maintain objectivity and clarity by reflecting that the sound is changing. Likewise with a feeling in the body – whether we like it or don't like it or it's neutral, just notice that the feeling is changing. The same with a thought in the mind, a mood or a memory. We

use these reflections on *anicca, dukkha, anattā* to maintain that quality of non-entanglement. We are able simply to attend to the flow of experience. We watch the *process* of experience itself, rather than getting caught up with the *content* of what's being experienced. We therefore deliberately let go of the content in order to observe the process of experiencing, to watch the flowing of the river of our consciousness. There are rivers of perceptions and feelings. Thoughts come and go. Feelings come and go. Sounds and sensations come and go.

As we develop the practice, the heart can simply rest in that awareness, rest in that knowing, be that very knowing which receives all experience, participates in it, knows it fully without confusion, without adding anything

to it. There's no need to buy into like and dislike, approval or disapproval. It's the simple knowing of the sound of a passing plane. That pattern of nature coming and going – arising, abiding, fading.

For some the mind might already be quite calm and focused. For others it might be agitated and busy. We have to know the material we are working with for ourselves. We have to decide for ourselves what is going to be useful, appropriate at any particular time. If the mind is still agitated and restless, drifting here and there, we carry on using the breath or the feeling of the footsteps in walking meditation, in a direct, deliberate way, to help establish more of a grounding. We need to use that anchor to help keep the attention here in the present. But if the attention

is already steady and clear, if there's a lack of distraction, you don't need that anchor of the breath.

It may be that you are able to sustain the quality of open awareness for a while, clearly observing the flow of experience, but then the mind is caught by a particular sound or a memory and the attention is swept up, carried away by a string of thoughts and feelings. You get lost. Once this distraction is noticed, reflect: 'This is just another impermanent thought. This painful memory is *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. This changing perception is empty, it's unsatisfactory, it's ownerless. It's not who and what I am.' That might be all it takes and then the attachment dissolves – the heart easily goes back to an open awareness. Or it might be that the feeling, the sensation in the body or the

opinion is so strong that we can't just let it go. It's so compelling and fascinating that a reflection on uncertainty and transiency is not enough to let the clinging, the identification dissolve and fade. In that instance the mind is thoroughly drawn in and carried away. If this is what is discerned, we need to go back to the breath and re-establish the quality of focus.

It's important not to ignore the fact that the attention has been carried away and is caught up in conceptual proliferation. Go back to the posture. Re-establish the balance of energy and calm, re-establish relaxation. Go back to the breath, focus on the present. Establish the clarity of attention. And when those basics have been reformed, re-established, made strong – a well-integrated posture, the attention grounded in the present

– when that's steady and clear once more, again allow the breath to fade into the general mix of experience and see if you can sustain the quality of open awareness once more.

The application of these reflections, of this style of meditation, is called *vipassanā*, insight meditation. But there is *vipassanā* as a method and *vipassanā* as an experience. Recollecting that things are impermanent and unsatisfactory, naming a thought as 'not-self' – applying those reflections is the mechanism of *vipassanā*. That is '*vipassanā* the method'; it is the recollection that all is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. But in a more complete and deeper way there is also '*vipassanā* the experience', the actual change of heart which comes from seeing in a more profound way.

That change of heart is the result of applying the reflection, 'This is impermanent, uncertain and empty of self'. When that illusion is seen through there is a letting go of identification. There is a moment of recognition: 'Oh! How could this be mine? How could there be anything which owns the sound of that plane, or owns this mood...? Oh, look at that!' That change of attitude is a true shift in the heart – there is the dropping of identification. That's the real *vipassanā*, or you could call it the substantial experience of *vipassanā*; it's the insight that changes the world.

This change of heart is what is liberating. Applying the method on its own is not liberating. The method is like the instructions on a bottle. The change of heart is what actually happens when

we take the medicine that's inside the bottle. The change of view, the shift of attitude, the clear seeing – that's the actual quality of insight: the clear seeing of Reality.

So developing *vipassanā* meditation is not just sitting and repeating the words '*anicca, dukkha, anattā, anicca, dukkha, anattā*' in response to every thought and feeling that arises. It is not just a matter of repeating those reflections as we walk, sit, stand and lie down, as we go about our daily activities; instead it is allowing the heart to be changed, allowing our vision, our attitude to be changed. That is the real insight.

When those moments of true insight manifest there can easily be an enthusiastic reaction in us: 'Oh, wow! This is great!' And then the thinking

mind and the self-creating habits can grab that experience. This is a natural enough reaction, but it's useful to make the effort not to buy into it. Rather, when there is that change of heart and letting go of identification, simply allow there to be a realization, a recognition, without doing anything else. You don't need to make anything out of it or buy into any thoughts about it. Just let that quality of vision be sustained, free of self-view. Allow the heart to be that – to rest in that. This is what is meant by realizing the ending of *dukkha*. When the Buddha spoke of the Third Noble Truth, he said: 'The cessation of *dukkha* is to be realized.' When the grasping stops, the heart is free of *dukkha* – free of dissatisfaction, of alienation.

Then there is peace. The practice of the Buddha's path is to simply realize that, to know it and to establish a full awareness of it. Then we can really enjoy the peace of non-grasping. We can enjoy Nibbāna itself.

We can know that peace and taste it fully; this is an opportunity that we all have. Ironically, we can be so busy with the 'doingness' of diligently applying the method that we miss the peace which is the purpose of the whole thing; we miss the point towards which *vipassanā* aims. So please don't miss it. Let yourself notice. Be fully aware how it is when the grasping and the identification stop. How is it? How does it feel?





THE  
I-MAKING,  
MINE-MAKING  
MIND

CHAPTER FOUR

THERE IS A CONTRAST between the mind caught in the habits of becoming, and the quality of right practice, in which we learn how to work towards realization without creating more confusion.

The term ‘becoming’ features in Buddhist jargon. I remember that when I first showed up in the monastery in Thailand many years ago, this was one of the terms that were being used all the time. ‘Becoming’ and ‘views and opinions’ were words that were repeated over and over again. I remember thinking, ‘What are they talking about? What is this supposed to mean? Becoming what? What’s becoming?’ The word didn’t seem to have any kind of substance. There was no clear sense of what it was referring to, and it was a year or two before I began to get an inkling of exactly what it meant.

The English word ‘becoming’ is a translation of the Pali word ‘*bhava*’, which is sometimes also translated as ‘being’ or ‘existence’. It can refer to all those things, but I prefer the translation ‘becoming’ because it conveys the quality of momentum; there’s an implication of movement towards a particular goal or a movement in a direction.

Luang Por Sumedho would avoid talking about any kind of attainments or levels of concentration; he would refrain from talking about reaching *jhāna* or being concentrated, or attaining levels of enlightenment, because of the danger in that kind of terminology. It very easily ensnares the heart in the habit of becoming, in trying to get something or somewhere and thereby creating more

confusion. In the second of the Four Noble Truths, the Buddha defined the cause of *dukkha* (dissatisfaction) as being *tanhā* (craving, desire). Mostly we assume this means desire for sense pleasure, desire for nice, pleasant things, desire for enjoyable experiences (*kāma-tanhā*); but in the very first discourse that he gave on this theme (the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, *the Discourse on the Turning of the Wheel*), together with the desire for sense pleasure, the Buddha also lists *bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā* – the desire to become, and the desire to get rid of. *Kama-tanhā*, the desire for sense pleasure, that self-centred craving, is the one which gets most press, which is talked about most often, and of which we think as being the cause of *dukkha*. I feel extremely grateful for Luang Por Sumedho's teaching because he would point out that in terms of meditation, the real obstructions or difficulties don't so much come from the desire for sense pleasure as from the more subtle obstructions, the quiet partners, the outriders; *bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā*. They are the real troublemakers because they can be disguised as good practice, right practice.

The desire for sense pleasure is pretty obvious. Ajahn Chah would tell the story of how, when he was a young monk, he would be sitting in the meditation hall hallucinating about noodles. If you read or listen to his Dhamma talks, you'll see food is mentioned a lot and he was particularly fond of Chinese noodles. He was so fond of them that when he first opened Wat Pah Pong monastery he banned Chinese noodles, because he could see he had a radical attachment to them. There is still something of a tradition at Wat Pah Pong that one day in the

year they have a ‘noodle day’ – they really let the laypeople lay it on thick, and there are more noodles than you can shake a noodle at.

As a young monk Ajahn Chah also had an attachment to the fragrant bananas called *gluay hom*. He said he could taste them in his mouth, he could feel and smell the bananas during the meditation.

These sorts of sense desires are obvious – trying to meditate when not having had supper, fantasizing that we’re eating something that we like. That’s a pretty obvious kind of craving. But the subtle kinds of craving are the ones that cause more trouble. For example, as I mentioned before, there is the desire to become enlightened, the desire to be concentrated, the desire to attain *jhāna*, the desire to develop insight, the desire to get rid of your defilements, the desire to get rid of your chattering mind and stray habits of thinking.

Now, you might ask: ‘But aren’t we supposed to be doing all those things? If you look at the list of good qualities, we’re advised to developing *jhāna* or develop insight and getting rid of our defilements; getting rid of greed, hatred and delusion, isn’t that what we’re supposed to be doing?’ And when we look at the texts we can see that certainly the Buddha in his teachings regularly stresses the problematic nature of greed, hatred and delusion, and the blessings of concentration and insight and wholesome conduct. So it can be confusing. How can it be that wanting to become enlightened, wanting to become concentrated, wanting to attain insight, wanting to get rid of defilements – how can that be a problem? How can it be an obstruction?

Well, this is where *bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā* come in and how they become a cause for more suffering, because when the heart is caught in that becoming there is always a sense of self involved.

Although it might look as if we're following the instructions given in the texts, or we're trying to do the right thing by following the guidance of the teacher, if there is that 'me' (*ahaṃkara*, the 'I-making' element) and 'mine' (*mamaṃkara*, the 'mine-making' element), then we're in the grip of those presences, of *bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā*. It's 'me' trying to be concentrated; 'me' trying to enter *jhāna*; 'me' trying to develop insight; 'me' getting rid of my defilements; 'me' trying to quieten my chattering thoughts, 'me' trying to become a stream-enterer. Me, me, me, me, me! And that can be so familiar, so common, so ordinary, and so unremarkable that it can take over all the effort being made. The whole effort and intention can be comprised by that I-making and mine-making habit. We're not aware. We think we're doing all these wholesome things, and carrying out the practice and following the instructions. But unconsciously and unknowingly we are feeding the causes of suffering. We're feeding the sense of self. We're building more of a quality of self-view.

So then, as my grandfather would say, 'Vat to do?' The contrast, or rather the complement, to *bhava-tanhā* and *vibhava-tanhā* is Right Effort. In the scriptures the Buddha defines Right Effort as having four parts to it. The first part is restraining unwholesome qualities from arising – *saṃvara* is restraint. Then comes *pahāna*, letting go of anything unwholesome that has already arisen.

*Bhāvanā* is the cultivation of the wholesome. And the fourth part is *anurakkhana* – protecting, maintaining or cherishing wholesomeness that has arisen. *Samvara*, *pahāna*, *bhāvanā* and *anurakkhana* – to restrain the unwholesome from arising or, if the unwholesome has arisen, to let it go; to consciously develop the wholesome and to maintain the wholesome in being.

You might be thinking ‘Hang on a minute – I thought that a moment ago he was talking about how you didn’t want to be doing all that stuff because it could be problematic. So what’s the difference?’ Well, the difference is that when it’s Right Effort there’s no sense of self involved. There is energy being applied. There’s a directionality. There is a recognition: ‘This is unwholesome. Don’t let it arise.’ ‘This is an unwholesome thing that’s already here. Okay, let it go.’ ‘This is a wholesome thing. Bring it into being.’ ‘This is a wholesome quality. Maintain it. Strengthen it. Keep it alive.’ But those efforts, that directionality, are being applied without the involvement of ‘I’, ‘me’ or ‘mine’.

I like to use the example of the left hand and the right hand. On one level they look exactly like each other, but on another level they are complete opposites. The *bhava* qualities, both *bhava*- and *vibhava-tanhā*, can be compared to one hand, and the quality of Right Effort, *Sammā-vāyāma*, can be compared to the other. They look very like each other. Indeed, they can look very, very similar – but essentially they are opposites. One is the troublemaker and the other is the cure.

Almost every time I give meditation teachings, I find it's important to clarify this. I can't emphasize it enough, because otherwise the teaching can be very confusing. Practitioners may think, 'What am I supposed to do? I'm being encouraged to apply effort, but how can you apply effort if it's always going to lead to more dissatisfaction, discontent and alienation?' So we must make a very clear distinction as to whether our motivation is Right Effort or *bhava-tanhā/vibhava tanhā*. When you are making effort, examine the motivation for the action attentively. What is the guiding force behind the efforts being made? Is the effort being guided by mindfulness and wisdom, or is it being guided by self-view? What's the activating, informing principle behind it? Making this subtle distinction in motivation is crucial, because one type of motivation leads to more *dukkha*, while the other leads to the ending of *dukkha*. They lead in opposite directions.

In the practice, learning to recognize when the mind is applying Right Effort and the practice is being guided by wisdom, by mindfulness, there's a particular quality or tone. Effort is being made but it doesn't have a compulsive or driven quality to it. There's no obsessiveness. When effort is guided by becoming, by *bhava*, there's always something of a tone of compulsiveness; the 'I, me and mine' element is in there. We have to become familiar with what those two different qualities are like. It's almost like learning to smell the difference between two different kinds of incense, or hearing two different musical notes or discriminating two colours from each other. Growing familiar with the

spiritual texture: what does becoming feel like? And what does the ending of becoming feel like? What does the heart free from becoming feel like?

#### ADDICTION TO BECOMING AND THE CALL OF COMPASSION

One of our chants recounts the time shortly after the Buddha's enlightenment, when he was invited to teach. Right after his enlightenment, when he became fully awakened, totally enlightened, utterly liberated, he looked round the world and thought he would be unable to teach others. He saw that the world is 'addicted to becoming, relishes becoming, it knows only becoming; but what it relishes brings fear and what it fears is pain.'

All beings in the world are completely addicted and absorbed in becoming. All beings are addicted to existence, addicted to being, being something. The Buddha looked round the world and thought, 'This entire planet is filled with addicts and I'm the only one who's off the stuff. How on earth am I going to persuade everyone else to go cold turkey? Is there anybody who's going to want to come off the drug?' He concluded that the answer was 'No'. The whole world is addicted to becoming. The whole world relishes becoming. It knows only becoming. So he decided that there was no point in even trying to explain or teach because it would only be wearying and troublesome, and that he would not even try. If you were given the job of being an addiction counsellor to a city of ten million people, all of whom were addicts, where would you start? What would you do? The Buddha thought the task was impossible, that there

was absolutely no way of making a dent in that addiction, which is why he concluded that trying would only be ‘wearying and troublesome to me.’ So he inclined towards having a quiet life as a hermit and not even bothering to try to teach anybody.

In Buddhist mythology the Brahma god Sahampati is the creator of the universe. He’s not a Supreme Being as you find in other mythologies, but he has the role of the ‘creator’ deity. This makes him one of the highest of the Brahma gods. It’s said that when the Buddha decided not to teach, the Brahma Sahampati picked up that thought as it appeared in the mind of the newly Enlightened One. ‘Oh no! oh no! The mind of the newly awakened Buddha is inclined towards solitude and inaction. Quick! We need to intervene here at once!’ And so Brahma Sahampati descended from the Brahma world, appeared in front of the Buddha and said: ‘Please, for the sake of those who have only a little dust in their eyes, please teach the Dhamma, because there are some who will understand.’

The Buddha listened to that and, moved by compassion, decided: ‘Let us have another look.’ He cast his vision around the world, surveyed the minds of all beings and realized: ‘Yes indeed – Brahma Sahampati is correct, actually there are a few whose faculties are ripe.’ He used the following image as a simile: ‘Just as in a pond of red or blue or white lotuses there are some lotuses that are born under the water and never rise up to the surface, there are some lotuses that rise to the surface, and there are some that stand up above the surface and blossom in the sunshine, so too there are some beings with a lot of dust in their eyes, some

beings with a medium amount, and some beings with very little dust in their eyes. Those who only have a little bit of dust in their eyes are the ones who can understand.’ So he agreed to teach, and that’s when he set off to the Deer Park in Varanasi to reconnect with his five companions. He found them and explained the Four Noble Truths and the Middle Way to them (as in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*). And that’s why we have the Buddha’s teaching today.

I feel this story is very significant, because to begin with the Buddha felt that every being was completely addicted to becoming. He saw beings caught in this compulsion of identifying with their bodies, their minds, their feeling of existence; and that’s such an instinctive and fundamental attachment that it is like being addicted to some powerful drug like heroin or crack cocaine. It is such a potent and pervasive addiction that it would be hard for any beings to break free. But to our great benefit he decided to give it a try, and then spent the next forty-five years carrying through that compassionate intention – rousing the effort to teach and explain the insight that he had developed, and helping many beings to kick the habit, break loose and be free from becoming.

There’s also a very lovely little exchange between Venerable Sāriputta, who’s the Buddha’s chief disciple, and Venerable Ānanda who was the Buddha’s attendant. They were very good friends, and often had conversations together. Venerable Sāriputta was a very accomplished meditator and Ānanda asks him: ‘Is there a mind state where you can be absorbed in concentration, and the mind is not attending to what is seen or heard or smelled or tasted or touched,

and not attending to any mental activity, but yet the mind is aware?’ In other words: is there a state where you can be completely awake, yet completely dissociated from the sense world? Venerable Sāriputta answers: ‘Yes indeed, there is such a state.’ Ānanda then asks: ‘So what is the mind aware of if it is in that kind of a state?’ Sāriputta answers: ‘At such a time, in such a state, the mind, the mind is aware that *Nibbāna* is the cessation of becoming’ (in Pali, *bhavanirodha nibbanam*).

The cessation of becoming is *Nibbāna*.

That’s a very lovely phrase. When the heart is free from clinging, attachment, identification, the quality of defined existence; when all that’s let go of, this is synonymous with the experience of *Nibbāna*, of peacefulness, of complete freedom and clarity.

When Ajahn Chah was asked to define *Nibbāna*, one of his usual descriptions was, ‘The reality of non-grasping.’ When the heart is free of grasping, even those subtle kinds, the feeling of being, the feeling of ‘I and me and mine’, free of the quality of *bhava*, that is the experience of *Nibbāna*, perfect peacefulness, the true and radical quality of contented ease.

If you have been meditating for a few years, you will have noticed how often the most peaceful and delightful moment of the meditation is when the bell rings. And it’s not just because of relief for your knees, so it’s good to investigate this delight. Pay attention to the state the mind enters when the bell rings. In addition to relief from pain, there is a moment of release because the mind is not

now doing anything. Even though all we were previously doing was meditating, which is built around being peaceful and is a wholesome activity, there was still the quality of ‘doingness’, the presence of ‘me’ doing a ‘thing’. That’s the quality of *bhava*, a quality of grasping and of identification. Ding! Suddenly the mind completely lets go. There’s nothing more to do. It can stop.

When we see and reflect on that, we realize: ‘Hang on a minute! Peace is supposed to be what meditation is for. So how come I keep experiencing it when the meditation stops? Something is going amiss here. Something’s out of kilter if I’m only getting peace when the meditation is over, right? It should be the other way round! The peace should be while the meditation is happening. That’s when we should be experiencing great peace and clarity, not when the meditation is stopping!’

What so easily happens is that the activity of meditation is co-opted, taken over by the habits of becoming, because of ‘me’ meditating. We think: ‘I am doing my practice; I am meditating.’ When we work on clarity, insight or concentration, there is a subtle sense of, *I am working on clarity, I’m developing insight, I’m trying to concentrate.* And even when the mind is clear and bright, and there are indeed insight and concentration, there is a degree to which there is a ‘me’ who is doing the meditation. There’s a ‘me’ who is the experiencer. There is a ‘me’ who is the agent and a ‘thing’ that is being done. There is tension. There is *dukkha*. There is a quality of stress in the heart.

You may have had the experience, possibly when you first began meditating and were concentrating on the breath, of finding that breathing was a real chore, really hard work. I remember having this feeling – breathing began to feel like such a lot of work. I remember thinking, ‘Do I really do this all day long? Have I been doing this my whole life? This is really exhausting!’ It was quite comforting to read that Ajahn Chah had exactly the same experience. Then he said to himself, ‘Hang on a minute – I used to be out working with the water buffaloes, ploughing the fields, and I could breathe all day long and it wasn’t any kind of effort. Ploughing the fields was hard work, but breathing was nothing. And now breathing is even worse than ploughing in the rain with the water buffalo. This is really exhausting.’

This is because of a slip into ‘I’m doing the breathing’. And because there’s that me-ness and trying-ness and doing-ness, because there is the subtle notion that ‘I am doing’, and the thing-ness and the me-ness are symptoms of the habits of grasping and becoming – because of that, even the simple act of breathing ends up feeling like a terrible chore. Many times people have said to me, ‘Ajahn, I’m really worried. Am I going to keel over? What am I going to do about oxygen? I’m really worried I’m not breathing enough when I try to practice mindfulness of the breath.’ It feels so complicated. If one becomes distracted it’s all right; the attention is simply brought back to the meditation object and the breath continues quite happily. But if one is actually focusing on the breath and this subtle notion of ‘I am doing’ creeps in, breathing suddenly feels really difficult

and you begin to worry: ‘Am I getting enough oxygen? Am I going to be all right?’ It’s a quite sincere concern, but its cause is usually just *bhava*.

This is what can happen, but if we work with it we slowly become more and more familiar with what’s happening. Then the sense of self is let go of and the breath is looked upon as just a natural function of the body which is being observed. Slowly but surely there is less interference with the breath. As the practice develops more, the effect of the action of attending lessens and the breath is not affected by the fact that it is being watched.

We guide the practice towards learning to recognize that flavour of becoming – that flavour of attachment to defined being, that way of being I have called ‘doing-ness’ or ‘me-ness’ and ‘my-ness’. The Pali words for this are *ahaṅkara* and *mamaṅkara*. The word *ahaṅ* means ‘I am’ and *kara* means ‘to make’ or ‘to do’, so *ahaṅkara* means ‘made of I am’. *Mamaṅkara* means ‘made of ‘mine-ness’. *Mama* is the word for ‘mine’ – the primordial owning is the mother by the child: ‘mama, mama, mama’. The child owns the mother. These Pali words are directly descriptive of the heart being caught in those identifications.

We learn to recognize that flavour. We learn to recognize that quality of becoming, and in recognizing it and knowing it, we let go. We learn to relinquish, and in a way we are learning how to practise without the meditation being ‘a thing that I’m doing’. This is tricky territory, because yes, we need to put in a lot of effort into our practice – the Buddha said a number of times, ‘The Path that I teach is a path of effort.’ It’s a path of doing. It’s a path of action. And if you

look at the many lists of wholesome qualities which the Buddha gives, such as the Ten *Pāramitās*, the ten spiritual perfections, *virīya*, energy or effort, often appears in them. *Virīya* is one of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and one of the Five Spiritual Faculties and Five Spiritual Powers. Right Effort is one of the factors of the Eightfold Path. In all these lists a lot of doing, energy and effort are involved. It's not a Path of passivity. But the key is learning how to 'do' without a sense of self, how to apply effort without being caught up in attitudes laced with 'I' and 'me' and 'mine'.

There was a teacher in Canada called Kema Ananda who used to describe this aspect of the practice as 'cultivating diligent effortlessness'. That's a useful term to remember: diligent effortlessness. Another friend of ours, a Tibetan Lama named Tsoknyi Rinpoche, calls it 'undistracted non-meditation'. That's another good one to file away: undistracted non-meditation. He would point out that as soon as you call it 'meditation', it seems like a programme you are following, a thing you're doing. And as soon as the mind has a 'thing' it is doing, it becomes caught in that compulsiveness, that directionality which fixes on getting a result. We need to develop the skill whereby we are wholeheartedly putting forth effort but not trying to get anywhere; whereby we're working really hard but we're completely unattached to the goal towards which we're heading. This is not easy to do, but if we are unable to find that path, that way of being for ourselves, we will always be letting our efforts be co-opted by attachment to becoming and getting, having and being.

## THE ENDING OF BECOMING IS NOT STASIS

When we talk about non-attachment or the ending of becoming, it may sound as if we are advocating being passive, or saying we are not supposed to do anything or that we should just be watching without being active. Sometimes the teaching can come across in that way, particularly in some of the language used in insight meditation: ‘Just be the watcher, be the observer, be ‘the one who knows’, the witness.’ Those terms are all valid and useful in their own way, but they can suggest a quality of passivity. We can feel, ‘I should just be watching. I should be aware, which means I shouldn’t be doing anything, I shouldn’t interfere’. We can interpret that quality of just being aware, of being the knowing or just being the witness, as implying that we shouldn’t do anything; that any kind of action is somehow intruding upon that true awareness, and that if we’ve really got it right there will be just awareness and no doing.

I would suggest that this is a misunderstanding of the teaching. There is no kind of action or any kind of intention which is intrinsically disturbing to the quality of awareness. The Middle Way is not to do with being passive or just trying to freeze our involvement in the world. Practice is not about trying to neutralize our lives. We shouldn’t be looking upon our interaction and engagement with the world, the presence of the physical body or our relationship to the planet and other people, as some kind of unfortunate interruption of our pure awareness.

‘Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
 Stains the white radiance of eternity,’ as Shelley put it in ‘Adonais’. Or as in  
 T.S. Eliot’s poem ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock:

‘Do I dare  
 Disturb the universe?’

Rather, awareness is engaged; awareness involves interaction . The Middle Way is a gradual learning that our actions, our intentions and our choices are also part of the way things are. When we are developing a quality of awareness, we are also learning to be aware of our choices, aware of our actions. We shouldn’t look upon those choices or actions as somehow distorting awareness, or as a departure from a pure quality of non-attachment. Rather, if those choices, those decisions of action and speech are guided by mindfulness and wisdom, we will be in accord, we will be in tune with the world around us. We will be in tune with the body, with the planet and the living situation. So that array of actions – what we do, what we say, and the intentions that we have – is not an intrusion upon the way things are. Our actions and intentions are not some kind of departure from harmony, but are brought into accord, into harmony with the way things are.

Pure awareness is not in any way passivity; it is mindful participation. Pure awareness is an attuned participation in the life of our body, our home, our family, our meditation retreat. We are attuning to the time, the place, the situation. So this quality of letting go is not to do with freezing ourselves or

stopping in our tracks, but more about learning how to let our actions, speech and life be in accord with the people we're with, the situation we're in and the needs of the moment. Letting go of becoming is therefore not an exercise in disengaging from society, stopping our thoughts or freezing our emotions. When we're walking on our meditation path we don't suddenly become frozen in place: That's not the point of the practice. The end of becoming is not stopping your footsteps – it is letting go of compulsion, letting go of identification. When it's time to walk, you walk. When it's time to be still, you are still.

In the Buddhist scriptures there is a useful teaching about a wanderer named Bāhiya who was eventually given by the Buddha the title of 'The one who understood the teaching most quickly'. Before Bāhiya became a follower of the Buddha he was under the impression that he was totally enlightened. One night in his meditation a *devata* appeared and said, 'Bāhiya, I can tell you're convinced that you're a fully enlightened being – well, I have to let you know that's actually not the case. You are not enlightened and – I'm not happy to tell you this, but you are not even on the path to enlightenment.'

Bāhiya, to his credit, said, 'Oh. That's interesting', and then he asked, 'Are there any truly enlightened beings in the world?' The *devata* replied, 'Well, actually, yes – there is a monk, the Samana Gotama, who is truly an *arahant*, a fully enlightened being, and he is living near the city of Sāvatti.' Right there and then, Bāhiya set off walking with great vigour. It was a several hundred-mile journey, but after a number of weeks of travelling he finally arrived in Sāvatti.

It was early in the morning and the Buddha and a number of the monks were walking through the streets on their morning alms round.

The wanderer Bāhiya approached the Buddha and said, ‘Venerable Sir, are you the Samana Gotama?’

‘Yes, indeed. I am the Samana Gotama.’

‘Well, I’ve heard that you’re an enlightened being and so I would like to ask you to teach me the Dhamma.’

‘Well, Bāhiya, at this time we’re on our alms round. We’re in the middle of the city out on the street, so this is not a convenient time for teaching. It would be better if you came along to the Jetavana Monastery later on and I can give you some instruction then.’

‘Venerable Sir, life is uncertain. It is unknown when either you or I might die, so please teach me the Dhamma here and now.’

They went back and forth three times, and after a third time a *Tathāgata* has to respond, so the Buddha said:

‘Listen carefully to what I have to say. In the seen there is only the seen. In the heard there is only the heard. In the sensed there is only the sensed. In the cognized there is only the cognized. When you, Bāhiya, can see that in the seen there is only the seen, and in the heard there is only the heard, and so forth, then you will indeed recognize that there is no thing there; there is no substance in the world of the object. And when you see that there is, indeed, no thing ‘there’, you will also recognize that there is no thing ‘here’; there is no being or person, no real ‘I’ in the realm of the subject. You will recognize the

object is empty, the subject is empty. When you see that there is no thing there and no thing here, you will not be able to find yourself either in the world of *this* or in the world of *that*, or any place between the two. This, Bāhiya, is the end of suffering.’ And Bāhiya instantly became an *arahant*.

‘You will not be able to find a self in the world of *this* or in the world of *that*, or in any place between the two...’ Bāhiya obviously had some spiritual potential, since he became an *arahant* right then and there. He then said, ‘Please, Venerable Sir, may I be your disciple, and will you give me ordination as a monk?’ The Buddha asked him, ‘Have you a robe and a bowl?’ Bāhiya was an ascetic who wore clothing made of tree bark, so he didn’t have a robe or a bowl. The Buddha said, ‘If you can find a bowl and robe, I will give you the ordination. Bāhiya went off to try and find a robe and a bowl. And as he had correctly feared, his life was indeed short and uncertain; a runaway cow hit him as it was charging through the street, and he died from his wounds. But he died an *arahant*, so he was right to press the Buddha to give him that teaching.

‘In the heard there is only the heard. In the sensed there is only the sensed. In the cognized there is only the cognized...’ So as we hear a sound, as we feel a sensation in the body, as we smell, taste or touch something, as we have a thought or a mood – if there is just hearing, just seeing, just smelling, just tasting, just touching, just thinking, just remembering, just feeling – if they are known as just what they are, events in consciousness, then as the Buddha said to Bāhiya, ‘You will recognize that there is no ‘thing’ there.’

When we hear a sound, we might think, ‘That’s the sound of Ajahn Amaro talking’, or ‘That’s the sound of a plane going to Luton Airport.’ And we think that the sound is ‘out there’, the plane is ‘out there’. But if we know it clearly and directly, we recognize that the experience of hearing is not ‘there’; it’s happening in this awareness. The plane is in your mind. The experience of hearing is a pattern of experience in the mind. It’s happening here. The mind’s representation of that thing is experienced here and now in this field of awareness. And just as you see there is no thing *there*, that the object is empty, so the feeling of a ‘me’ *here* who is the experiencer can be seen to be empty too. There’s no person who’s the experiencer. There’s just knowing. There’s just the awareness of this moment, the unentangled participating in this pattern of experience.

The Buddha said that when you can see there is no thing *there* and no thing *here*, when you can see that the object and subject are both empty, at that point there is just subjectless awareness. You will not be able to find a self. You will not be able to find yourself in either the world of objects or the world of the subject, or any place between the two. Just this is the end of suffering.

This teaching is extraordinarily helpful, because we often fill up the world, making a ‘me’ here who is experiencing a world out there. We create a ‘me’ here watching a ‘mine’ out there: ‘Me watching my mind; me dealing with my thoughts; me and my practice.’ When that happens we are not attending in the most skilful and complete way. We are creating a subject here and an object

there, both laden with 'I' and 'mine'. So if we bear in mind this simple teaching, it helps us to undermine that I-making and mine-making habit. It dissolves the *ahaṅkara/mamaṅkara* programme. It dissolves the causes of self-view. And the more we are able to let there be just seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching; the more we let things take shape, do their thing, without creating a 'me' here who's experiencing a world out there, or patterns of thought and feeling and memory inside, the more we recognize our experience as being just patterns of nature coming and going and changing.



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PROBLEM

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#FIVE

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DAY we set our intention, we direct our attention towards the Triple Gem and express our respect. We reaffirm our commitment to use these qualities as our guiding principles.

When recollecting these essential teachings I often consider that all the information which we as human beings need to be completely liberated is contained in the morning chanting. All that is required is to know, understand, digest, practise and embody this; through the Triple Gem, the Buddha Dhamma Sangha, liberation will be realized. This is all we need to know. Not much, simply what is here in this small package; but it needs to be fully internalized, fully actualized, made real, brought to life through our practice during the course of the day. Here, in this moment.

Recollect these observations: *dukkha*, *anattā*, *anicca* – all conditioned phenomena are unsatisfactory, not-self, and constantly changing.

When we look more closely at *anicca*, change, we see it everywhere, in both the physical world and the mental world. The body is impermanent. This is expressed in the Pali words *rūpaṃ aniccaṃ*. *Rūpa* includes all physical form, internal or external, whether it's our own body, a building, a tree or a planet; *rūpa*, physical form, is changing. Then there is *vedanā aniccā*. *Vedanā* is the Pali word for sensations, pleasant, painful, neutral sensations. *Sañña* means 'perception'; it is what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch, our sense impressions. These too are changing. *Sankhārā* refers to our mental constructions: thoughts, memories,

intentions, plans, imagination, moods, emotions. All are transient, uncertain, unstable, empty. And finally there is *viññāna*, discriminative consciousness, the fundamental capacity to cognize objects, internal or external, and discern the differences between them. This too is changing. The objects of attention and the consciousness of them are all constantly transforming, moment by moment. These are not just principles to be believed in, but ways of examining our experience, ways of looking at how our mind represents the world. Our experience moment by moment is of how our mind constructs the world. Sight, sound, smell, taste and touch are the faculties through which our mind fabricates an image of the world. Thus we don't experience the world itself; we experience our mind's representation of it, built out of body-consciousness,

feeling-consciousness, perception, thinking and concepts. That which is known moment by moment is our mind's representation of the world. What we experience is a fabricated image of the world, and that image is constantly changing and empty in and of itself.

These qualities of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* – change and uncertainty, unsatisfactoriness, the inherent emptiness of a self and what belongs to a self – we are not trying to make ourselves believe they are true. They are not articles of faith; rather, they are tools with which to explore our experience. 'Is this permanent or is it not? Is it changing or is it not? Is this memory, this idea completely satisfactory?' Even a sweet memory of a beautiful occasion – you might experience a perfect day and think, 'How could that be *dukkha*? That

was the most sublime, unique, perfect of occasions. How could it be *dukkha*? But when we explore and reflect we can see how even the sweetest of occasions, the most glorious of moments is unsatisfactory. Its unsatisfactoriness lies in the fact that it can't make us completely and permanently happy. The sheer act of experiencing a sweet, glorious moment makes us feel that other moments are inferior, not up to the same quality of delight. They can never quite match that wonderful day, that wonderful moment, that perfect holiday – even when you're in the midst of enjoying that perfect place, you can be worrying about how you're going to make a booking for next year and guarantee that you're going to get the same perfect rooms... Right there is the cause for dissatisfaction, the cause of *dukkha*.

Again, we are not trying to make ourselves believe this, but seeing how it works. Take something that we prize as being beautiful, most precious and delightful, absolutely pure and good – we can see it as a cause for *dukkha* when someone comes along and insults it, says that it's ugly and foolish, not beautiful, not pure, that it is inferior. We love the Buddha and admire his teachings above all things. Then someone says the Buddha was a fool, the Buddha was wrong. Even hearing those words – 'How can he say that?' – this is *dukkha*.

These principles, *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, are means of exploring our experience. They are tools for examining our habits of identification and attachment, our habitual views. They are employed to look at what

we take to be self, at the things which appear to belong to us – ‘my’ memories, ‘my’ ideas, ‘my’ body, ‘my’ experience, ‘my’ practice, ‘my’ insights, ‘my’ defilements. The principle of *anattā*, not-self, is not a belief. We are not trying to make ourselves believe that we have no self; rather, this teaching is a lens through which to explore that feeling of ‘I-ness’, ‘me-ness’, ‘my-ness’. What is it that feels as if there is a ‘me’ who is reading these words? What is it that owns these sensations in the body? Is there an owner? How does any being really own anything in a substantial, absolute and real way? How can any ‘thing’ be truly owned? And what would it be that does the owning, the possessing?

These qualities of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* are tools with which to examine our habitual relationship to the mind,

the body and the world: to look and see. They are the supports for looking inward – for *vipassanā*, seeing inwardly.

When we explore and examine experience in this way, we ask ourselves a question: ‘What is it here that is the owner of this feeling in my leg. What is that? Is there truly an owner?’ That active looking and exploring is the method of *vipassanā*. And then there is the change of heart that is the insight itself; that opening, that realization, that expansion of vision when there is the clear seeing of ‘How could there be an owner? How could there be a ‘me’ – a separate individual who is the possessor of an object? How could that be? Of course there isn’t. Aha.’ That is the change of heart. That is the genuine quality of insight – the clear seeing of reality itself. And this change of heart,

change of vision – seeing our lives, seeing the world in a radically different way – is the purpose of this kind of practice.

Now, it is easy to fall into the habit of judging how our practice is going – ‘good meditation’ versus ‘bad meditation’, ‘good sitting’ versus ‘bad sitting’. For example, you might think that your walking meditation is going well but the sitting is going badly, or vice versa. You may think to yourself, ‘During the formal practice I’ve really got it together, but outside the formal periods my mind is all over the place, it is really bad.’ Be aware of the mind judging experience in this way, for this is a false division.

In this practice, the intention is to learn from everything: wished for and not

wished for, expected and unexpected, pleasant and painful. Ajahn Chah often used to say that liking and disliking are of equal value (*‘Chorp, my chorp, tau tau gan’* in Thai [ชอบไม่ชอบเท่าเท่ากัน]). Whether we like it or we don’t like it is not the point. Liking and disliking are of equal value as a source of insight, a source of wisdom. Certainly we recognize that when the mind is in a concentrated, peaceful state, filled with wholesome qualities and generating insights, this is beneficial. But if we attach to it and identify with it, that grasping of insight and clarity can become a cause of suffering. Insight is a wholesome quality, a beautiful quality, but that’s not the only point. The main point is to learn from it.

When the mind is confused and busy, caught up in proliferations, wrapped

up in old anxieties and doubts, regrets, resentments, filled with aversion and restlessness, you might think, 'Well, this is really bad. My practice is falling apart.' But the mind which can recognize these unwholesome states is not unwholesome. That which recognizes entanglement is not entangled. Right there, there is mindfulness. There is wisdom.

When there is a recognition that the mind is all over the place, or that it is agitated or busy, right there is the establishment of mindfulness. Even though the object is agitated or busy, that which knows it is not caught up in it. That which is fully aware of the agitated state is the pathway of release from it. So don't be caught in these judgements of 'things going well' or 'things going badly'. This is just the experience of

different patterns of mood and feeling. Moods change during the course of a day, during the course of a sitting, just like the weather. Feelings change. Things ripen at different times.

You may find that after practising for some time, you settle into awareness and then long-standing attachments and preoccupations rise to the surface. It's not that anything has gone wrong with your practice, it's just that these old habitual attachments are finally being looked at; they've a bit of room to come to the surface at last. Thus it was not that things were 'going well' because you were peaceful, and now they're 'going badly' because an intense state has arisen and there is agitation. It is just that different things have different causes, and because of that they arise and appear at different times.

The precise causes for everything that we experience are not knowable. They are incalculably complex. The precise causes and results of *kamma* are considered to be one of the four ‘Imponderables’ or *acinteyya* – aspects of reality too complex to work out, possessing too many dimensions or with too many factors playing into the equation for them to be understood by the thinking mind. But we don’t need to calculate or figure out why a particular feeling has manifested at this moment. And equally, we don’t need to figure out why at a particular moment all obstructions fall away and the mind becomes bright and clear, open and blissful. Or how, when everything was just fine a moment ago, suddenly there’s raging irritation or lurid fantasy, an agonizing memory or ferocious agitation in the body.

Sometimes things just seem to come out of nowhere. You can’t say exactly what is causing them but what you can know is that they can be met with the heart of wisdom – *sati-paññā*, mindfulness conjoined with wisdom. Wisdom knows that this is changing, this is unsatisfactory, this is not-self. And therefore you reflect, ‘What can I learn from this beautiful feeling? This terrible feeling? This mundane feeling? Is it changing? Is it satisfactory? Can it please me permanently? Does it have an owner? Is it who and what I am? What can be learned from the presence of this thing? What is it teaching me?’

I guarantee that we can always relate to every experience in this way if we take the trouble to try. Thus it is always important and helpful to bear in mind that liking and disliking are of equal

value. Things come together. Things apart are of equal value. Everything will  
fall apart. Coming together and falling teach us if we let it.





OFF  
THE  
WHEEL

CHAPTER FIVE

WHEN WE TALK ABOUT REBIRTH, people often think in terms of past lives, future lives – in what you could call a metaphysical way, beyond the scope of our everyday vision and perceptions. That perspective is understandable, and yet when the term ‘rebirth’ or ‘the cycle of birth and death’ (called the *bhavacakka* in the *Suttas*) is referred to, it is not always referring to a sequence of events over a number of lifetimes.

The Buddha does indeed refer matter-of-factly to our past lives and future lives in many instances throughout the teachings. That’s a very common way of speaking.

But when talking about the process of rebirth, what causes it and how it is brought to an end, particularly the teachings on what is called dependent origination (*paticcasamuppāda*), the Buddha is often referring to more of a moment-to-moment experience. The Commentaries tend to focus more on dependent origination as a process which takes place over the course of several lifetimes, but careful study has shown that in the *Suttas* themselves, a full two-thirds of the Buddha’s teachings on the subject refer to it as a momentary experience, a process that is witnessed in the here and now, in this very lifetime.

In Thailand last century there was a very prominent writer, thinker and teacher named Ajahn Buddhadasa. He emphasized that the way to make the teaching on dependent origination really useful is to understand it and apply it to our everyday life, our moment by moment experience. The Buddha’s teaching is essentially practical, so pointing to the use of this teaching here and now,

discovering how it can help us here in this very lifetime, is much more pertinent than talking about its relevance in past lives or future lives. Ajahn Buddhadasa confined his teachings of dependent origination to how it describes the arising of *dukkha* here and now, how it comes into being in our present experience.

Ajahn Chah shared Ajahn Buddhadasa's understanding of dependent origination. He often talked about how it relates to our experience of the senses, and how it gives rise to feelings of alienation, dissatisfaction and discontent. In one of his most well-known analogies he said that trying to keep track of the process of dependent origination, which is usually described as a sequence of twelve different segments, is like falling out of a tree and trying to count the branches on the way down – it all happens too quickly to allow you to keep track of all the twelve links, but you know that when you hit the ground it hurts! He was a very practical teacher and I think that graphic image is a helpful way of describing the process.

At the beginning of the *Mahā-nidāna Sutta*, a discourse on causality, Venerable Ānanda says to the Buddha, 'I understand that dependent origination is really important and I've fully grasped it now. It is clear as clear can be to me.' As the Buddha usually does in these instances he says, 'Not so, Ānanda. You shouldn't say that dependent origination is 'clear as clear can be' to you; it is subtle, deep, abstruse. This is not something easily understood. You're an intelligent person, Ānanda, but don't say that you understand it. Don't be too glib about it. There are many layers and subtleties within it that you do not yet understand.'

In brief, dependent origination describes how a lack of mindfulness, a lack of awareness of experience, leads to dissatisfaction – the arising of *dukkha*. The first link of the whole sequence is *avijjā*: ignorance, not seeing clearly, nescience. This means that when we don't see clearly, that is the trigger, the catalyst for the entire process. The root cause of suffering is *avijjā*, not seeing clearly. If there's *vijjā*, if there is knowing, if there is awareness, then suffering does not arise – there might be pain, but *dukkha*, anguish, dissatisfaction will not be caused.

As soon as *avijjā* is there, this leads to the fundamental delusion of subject and object.

*Avijjā paccayā sankhārā* – ignorance conditions formations. Luang Por Sumedho used to summarize this very succinctly: 'Ignorance complicates everything' *Sankhārā* means that which is compounded, that which is formed. When there is ignorance, when the mind doesn't see clearly, this creates the foundation for the subject/object division. The subject/object division strengthens in the next stage of the sequence: *sankhārā paccayā viññānaṃ* – formations condition consciousness. Consciousness in turn conditions *nāma-rūpa* – body and mind. A very wonderful Sri Lankan monk, Bhikkhu Nyānananda, calls this 'the *nāma rūpa/viññāna* vortex'. You can create a mental image of this: once there is ignorance there is the seed for the subject/object duality (a 'here' and a 'there'), which is like a whirlpool that gets stronger and stronger until it conditions the world of the senses (*salāyatana*).

The *salāyatana*, the six senses, are conditioned by that separation between subject and object, the knowing and the known. The spinning energy of the vortex makes it seem that seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking are all personal. Once there is the substantial feeling of a subject ‘here’ and an object ‘there’, this gives rise to the impression that there is a ‘me’ who is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Attachment to the senses then strengthens that duality, and the vortex gains energy.

When something is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched or thought about, when one of the sense organs contacts an object, that is what we call ‘sense contact’ (*phassa*). Sense contact leads to feeling, *vedanā*. When there is *phassa* there is an effect from that sense contact, a raw feeling that is either pleasant, painful or neutral. That feeling then conditions craving, *tanhā*. A pleasant feeling coupled with ignorance conditions a desire for more. An unpleasant feeling coupled with ignorance conditions a desire to get rid of. A neutral feeling coupled with ignorance is taken as a subtle kind of pleasant feeling; thus the mind inclines towards desire, and craving rapidly escalates. If these conditions are not seen clearly, if ignorance persists, then craving conditions clinging (*upādāna*) and the clinging conditions becoming (*bhava*). As you reach *bhava*, what you can see is a rising wave of absorption. First of all there is, say, a pleasant feeling. The mind thinks, ‘Ooh, what’s that?’ and then ‘Oh, wow! I’d like one of those!’

Just so this isn't too theoretical, imagine you are queuing up to get food. You see how many slices of cake there are left. As you approach the front of the queue you are trying to be mindful and restrained, but you are thinking, 'There are only three slices left and there are five people in front of me. Hmm... look at that person in front of me. Is he a cake kind of a person? He looks like he's probably on a diet. I hope he is. But maybe he's not...' The mind sees an object; then there's the craving and craving leads to clinging. You think, 'I really deserve a piece of cake. I really *need* to have a piece of cake.' And then that clinging conditions becoming: 'I've gotta have it! I've gotta have it! If he takes that last piece of cake, I know there is that precept about not killing, but...' The mind becomes absorbed, and getting that cake becomes the only important thing in the world. Suddenly the whole universe has shrunk to *tanhā upādāna bhava* – 'craving, clinging, becoming'. The world narrows to that desire object. 'I've gotta have it! I've gotta! I've gotta!'. *Bhava* is that quality of the mind which is committed to getting its desire object. Everything else has been put aside. It is the thrill of riding the wave. When you see that last person in the food queue pass by the cake and you realize, 'Yes! He IS on a diet! I'm gonna get it!', *bhava* is that thrill of guaranteed getting, acquisition.

Researchers have rigged people up with little electrodes, galvanic skin response measurers, and then sent them shopping. The test is designed to indicate the moment of maximum excitement in the shopping experience. You might be surprised to discover that scientists do this kind of thing, but they do

– they measure the process of desire and excitement. The peak of excitement is the moment when you *know* that you’re going to get the desired object. It is the moment when you hand over the money or the credit card and the person behind the counter accepts it. At that moment you are guaranteed to get the object of your desire, but it hasn’t reached you yet. That is the moment of maximum excitement – when you actually get the piece of cake and take a bite, from there on it’s all downhill. The moment of getting is already the beginning of the disappointment.

A. A. Milne, the author of *Winnie the Pooh* and a great philosopher of our age, makes this same observation: “Well!’ said Pooh, ‘What I like best...’ and then he had to stop and think because although eating honey was a very good thing to do, there was a moment just before you began to eat it which was better than when you were but you didn’t know what it was called.’ (That was written in 1928, so probably he hadn’t yet come across a translation of *bhava*).

Even before you’ve got the honey in your mouth you’ve reached the height of excitement – this is *bhava*. This is becoming. And as the Buddha pointed out, living beings are committed to becoming, they relish becoming, they adhere to becoming. ‘Becoming’ is the drug of choice. We love that feeling because at that point life is very, very simple. ‘I want it, I’m going to get it – yes!’

Now, you might be thinking, ‘This is all very coarse. I’m totally beyond that kind of thing. Cake and pots of honey?! Pah! How inferior. That kind of thing doesn’t bother me in the slightest.’ But translate them into your own particular

value system – are you fixated on whether or not your paper has been selected for publishing in a prestigious journal, or whether you’ve won a promotion? Are you compelled by any one of a dozen different ways in which we rank ourselves in the world? Everyone has their own particular desire objects, but in a way the specific object of desire is secondary to the actual process of desire and becoming. All of us will have particular things that we find compelling, where the mind picks that object up and gets deeply absorbed in it. You can fill in the blanks for yourself if pots of honey don’t have any kind of pull on you. Look into your own mind, your own memories. What things really have a pull? The achievements of your children? The publication of your books? The approval of your teacher – that feeling you get if the Ajahn smiles at you? Or it could be getting any kind of affirmation. It can be wholesome or unwholesome, but in that process of *bhava* the mind becomes completely absorbed, though it hasn’t quite got the object yet.

After *bhava* the next link in the chain of dependent origination is *jāti*, which is birth. This is the point of no return. Now you’ve purchased the item, now you’ve got it. Shortly after comes the bill. Having acquired the desired object, there is a price to pay. Suppose you wanted to vent your spleen and complain about someone or become angry with them, so you really let them have it. While you’re letting them have it you feel great: ‘He really had it coming!’ Then after the spleen has been vented on somebody, there’s what follows – *soka parideva dukkha domanassa upāyāsā*: sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

Having got what we wanted, we then get the whole package that comes along with it. If it was something pleasant, we are faced with the desire for more. If you are particularly enthusiastic about wonderful food, once you've eaten it you'll find you are left with an empty plate, and you may think to yourself, 'Oh! Where did that food go? I'd better go get seconds, because I was so excited about the first round that I missed it completely. I'd better go and get some more.'

So we end up with the experience of *soka parideva dukkha domanassa upāyāsā*—sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. There is that feeling of despondency – you got what you wanted but then it didn't really satisfy you, or it wore out, or it was so sweet at the beginning and then it turned into hard work. You thought it was going to be so great that you didn't realize you were going to get all this other not-so-nice stuff with it. As Marilyn Monroe once sang, 'After you get what you want you don't want it any more.' Thus whatever shape it takes, whether it's subtle or coarse, that *dukkha* feeling can be described as sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Perhaps we don't use that kind of language in the ordinary everyday world, only in monasteries, but it's that feeling of disappointment, of desolation, of sadness, of incompleteness; that sense of barrenness in the heart, feeling lonely, unsatisfied, insecure; *dukkha*, in other words.

The classic rendition of Dependent Origination consists of twelve links, beginning with ignorance – each link conditions the next:

- (1-2) Ignorance conditions subject/object formation.
- (2-3) Formations condition consciousness.
- (3-4) Consciousness conditions body and mind.
- (4-5) Body and mind condition the senses.
- (5-6) The senses condition contact.
- (6-7) Contact conditions feeling.
- (7-8) Feeling conditions craving.
- (8-9) Craving conditions clinging.
- (9-10) Clinging conditions becoming.
- (10-11) Becoming conditions birth.
- (11-12) Birth conditions sorrow, lamentation, grief and despair.

The process is mapped out in this way, but as Ajahn Chah said, it is like dropping out of a tree – it can happen very, very fast. The mind is caught by a sense object. There is the thought, ‘Oh, that looks interesting.’ And suddenly you’ve eaten the slice of cake, in spite of the fact that you are supposed to be on a diet. You are disappointed in yourself and think, ‘Well, I’ll have to start the diet tomorrow’ – *soka parideva dukkha domanassa upāyāsā*. The whole thing can happen literally in a finger-snap. This is what Luang Por Chah was pointing out when he described it as like dropping out of a tree – those twelve branches whizz past in a blur and the first thing you’re aware of is hitting the ground.

It is useful to map things out in this way, examining the process of disappointment, dissatisfaction and alienation. It is useful to examine how it

takes shape, and how this multi-part sequence describes it. By understanding the process of our own experience we can come to understand how not to become caught, how not to create the causes of that *dukkha*, how not to be wrapped up in that cycle.

As the process is contemplated, we can recognize that there are different elements to it. There are different ways of breaking free. This cycle is called *bhavachaka*, ‘the cycle of becoming’ or ‘the wheel of rebirth’. It is called a cycle because at its end it leaves us feeling incomplete, lonely or sad, and the way we deal with that kind of mopey unhappiness is by resuming the cycle as soon the possibility of another gratification comes along.

When the wave recedes, we are left slightly frazzled and insecure. Now, the last time when we were really happy, when we really felt gratified, was when we were caught in that thrill of becoming. So when something pops into view that has the allure of satisfaction, we say to ourselves, ‘Oh, well, that last one didn’t work, but maybe the next one...’; and we leap towards the next possibility, the next promise, the next desire object, the next thing which has that aura around it. We delude ourselves into thinking that the next big thing is going to be different – this thing is going to be special, this time it’s really going to work! And around and around we go, chasing that next object and pursuing that next goal. The objects upon which we fixate like this are not necessarily coarse or unwholesome. They could be the next meditation retreat, or even the next meditation cushion – the one that’s going to enable me to sit for hours without

pain. ‘Pain-free zafus! Yes! I’ve heard there’s something on the market, with magic herbs in...’

This is how the deluded mind works – irrespective of whether the object is wholesome, unwholesome or neutral, this is exactly how it works. The mind is caught in these cycles of dependency, cycles of addiction. With his teaching, the Buddha is trying to help us free the heart from this addictive process, the main form of which is addiction to becoming. The bhavacakka, the cycle of becoming – that is our drug of choice to which we are all habituated, whether it is becoming based on a coarse sense-pleasure, or becoming born of noble aspirations or caring for our family. The objects can vary from those which are reasonably wholesome to those which are downright destructive, but the process works in exactly the same way irrespective of the object, and if we don’t understand how it works, we are inevitably trapped in that endless cycle of addiction. The Buddha’s teaching helps us to recognize that trap and to break free from it.

Interestingly enough, maybe the first point exit point is at the point of *dukkha* itself. You’ve already arrived. You’ve woken up. You find yourself barefoot, surrounded by broken glass, thinking, ‘How did I get here? I’m in the middle of this mess again. How did I get into this? What’s happening here?’ The Buddha said (A6.63) that suffering, *dukkha*, ripens in two ways: it either ripens in further suffering in which you just keep repeating the cycles over and over again, or you ask yourself some questions: ‘How did I end up here? How did this happen? I said I wasn’t going to get caught in this again, but here I am again... what

happened here? I know there must be a way to get out of this. I've been going round and round in this cycle for years now – there has to be an alternative.'

There is a feeling, an intuition in the heart, that there must be another way. At some level you realize that freedom from addiction must be a possibility. And that very intuition is what the Buddha refers to as faith, *saddha*. This is how suffering can be a cause for the arising of faith that addiction and endless suffering can't be the only possibility. There has to be an alternative.

Even if you haven't figured out what the alternative is or how to find it, something in the heart is saying to you that there has to be a way to become free of this. So the suffering you experience is a cause for the arising of faith, and that faith is a cause for a sense of delight or gladness – a sense of a possibility, a potential that this addictive habit can be broken. This brings about a relaxation, a calming of the body – the body relaxes and the mind arrives at a quality of *sukha*, happiness or contentment.

Contentment becomes a basis for concentration. When the heart is content and at ease it is natural for the mind to focus on the present moment. When there is *sukha*, it becomes a basis for *samādhi*. *Samādhi* is then a cause for the arising of insight. When the mind is able to settle, focus and attend to the present moment, insight arises naturally. This is called 'knowledge and vision of the way things are'. We are able to attend to the present. We can see how things work. The knowledge and vision of the way things are leads to letting go, non-attachment. The heart sees that everything is impermanent, empty and

not self. Habits of attachment and identification are relinquished. That letting go leads to freedom and to full enlightenment, full liberation.

There is a particular *sutta* in which the Buddha describes this causal chain (S 12.23); it is known as the *Transcendent Dependent Arising* or *Proximate Cause*. It starts off as usual with ignorance and goes through the whole sequence from ignorance to suffering (*dukkha*). But then *dukkha* leads to *saddha*, to faith, and the *sutta* veers off in a whole new direction. Rather than going round and round the cycle – *dukkha* leading to more ignorance and thus to the continuing of the rebirth process – it spins off at the point of *dukkha* and leads to faith, and faith leads to delight, to contentment, to concentration, insight and liberation. So in a way the quality of suffering itself, the quality of *dukkha*, is the most accessible of all exit points.

That is one point where we can hop off the cycle. Another commonly spoken of point where one can break the cycle is the link between feeling and craving, between *vedanā* and *tanhā*. When most meditation teachers talk about dependent origination and how the whole process works, they describe this point as the weakest link. When the mind is able to focus on feeling, there is a capacity for substantial mindfulness. There can be a clear and unconfused mindfulness with regard to pleasant, painful and neutral feelings. But it is only when the mind buys into those feelings, trying to get rid of a painful feeling, grasp hold of a pleasant feeling or actively ignore a neutral feeling, that the confusion really kicks in. Then come craving, clinging, becoming.

But at the point of feeling the train is still in the station, and it is not moving. At the point of *vedanā* you can still get off the train, go and buy a few snacks, look through the newsagent's wares and buy a paper. The train is still sitting there. No problem – you can get on the train, find your seat. But once *tanhā* kicks in, the train has started moving. In theory you could still get off – it's not moving too quickly. But then it picks up speed fairly rapidly. By the time you reach *upādāna* the train is really moving. When you get to *bhava* it is definitely in motion and pulling out of the station. If you get off at this stage it's going to be really nasty. By the time you reach *jāti* the train is at full speed and there's definitely no getting off.

The realm of feeling, then, is the easiest point at which to break the cycle; you can see there is a pleasant feeling, you can see there is a painful feeling, you can see there is a neutral feeling; but the heart is not snared by the feeling, not caught in it.

Speaking of trains, I once had a sabbatical year in India. As I prepared for the trip I wondered to myself what would be a good meditation theme, a good focus for practice. I knew many people who had spent time travelling in India and knew that it can be very physically and emotionally demanding – particularly if you're attached to schedules. When Ajahn Sucitto went on a six-month walking pilgrimage to all the Buddhist holy places in India, the great Chinese monk Master Hsüan Hua advised him, 'When you go to practise in the place of the Buddha, do not find fault with anyone or anything.' I took that piece

of advice and decided that my spiritual programme, my Dhamma practice for India, would be similarly not to find fault with anyone or anything. Along with that I thought a good simple theme while I was travelling would be to spend the year meditating on feeling, to make that my focus – just feeling, because it is very easy for feeling to condition craving, and to go off into wanting to get rid of things we dislike or wanting things to be different from the way they are. And so I thought I would just make that a year to reflect on feeling. I resolved, ‘Whenever feelings arise, I’ll make it my effort just to notice the feeling and not get caught up in wanting more of it if it’s a pleasant feeling, or wanting to get away from it if it’s an unpleasant feeling.’

That was an extraordinarily helpful practice. I wanted to keep it simple, so it was a very useful piece of advice. There you are on a station platform and you are told, ‘Terribly sorry, sir, your train is delayed by eighteen hours.’ Then you recognize it’s the I’ve-been-waiting-six-hours-already-and-I’ve-just-been-told-I-have-to-wait-another-eighteen feeling – it is that particular kind of feeling. But I wasn’t letting my mind get caught up in all the shoulds and shouldn’ts.

Another interesting one is when you go to the train station in time for the eight o’clock train, and find it has left already; and when you ask how come, they tell you that your train was preponed. Then you experience the I-didn’t-even-know-that-‘preponed’-was-a-word feeling. Incidentally, if you look the word up in the Oxford English Dictionary, it is specified as being ‘most frequent in Indian English’.

Luang Por Sumedho has been talking about meditating on feeling in this way for years and years, but even though I had heard him do so dozens of times – hundreds of times, probably – I had never really taken the trouble to apply it. The mind is always drawn beyond the feeling, adding on to it all the shoulds and shouldn'ts, and chasing after how it ought to be – being caught up in the follow-up to a feeling. So this practice is about becoming able to work with the feeling that is present.

For example, perhaps you find yourself in a situation where somebody is very upset about something and is asking you to fix it. Your habitual reaction is to feel you should do something. But if instead you say to yourself, 'This is the feeling of someone-is-really-upset-and-they're-asking-me-to-fix-it – that is what this is', in a strange and mysterious way, you enable yourself to attune more completely to what is actually present. Out of that attunement, what is appropriate and helpful for the situation can arise. If we are busy trying to figure things out, or just reacting from memory and hoping to sort things out without reflecting, we don't notice that we're already caught up in the experience, we haven't noticed our conceptual proliferations, and therefore our response is skewed.

As I say, this is an extremely helpful practice, and you can use it any time – when you're queuing for food, feeling the standing-in-the-queue-at-lunchtime-trying-not-to-think-about-that-last-piece-of-cake feeling; or reading a book and feeling the I-wonder-if-I'm-almost-at-the-end-of-the- chapter feeling; or experiencing the how-on-earth-did-he-know-I-was-thinking-about-that? feeling.

We bring attention to the actuality of what is present, and taking the trouble to do that opens up to us a huge amount of space, psychological space that is always present and always available. Often, though, we are unaware of that spaciousness because we get drawn into trying to fix things – either trying to grab hold or take advantage of a pleasant situation, or trying to fend off or get away from a difficult or painful situation. But if we simply bring our attention to what is here, what is present, then we are able to employ the qualities of mindfulness and wisdom.

Luang Por Dun was a very much beloved elder Thai monk who passed away a few years ago. He was known to be an *arahant*. When he was in his nineties and in hospital for the first time in his life, one of his disciples asked him if he still experienced anger. Luang Por Dun answered that the anger was there, but he didn't accept it. He gave this answer in a very matter-of-fact way. It was as if he was saying that anger was there, but there was no place for it to land. The delivery arrives, but he doesn't sign for it, so it's returned to sender.

Ajahn Chah was very critical of fortune telling and amulets, and all that side of popular Buddhism and folk belief in Thailand. He wouldn't give much time at all to things like palmistry and astrology, or play along with them. One day this fellow who was a palm-reader came to visit the monastery. He knew that Ajahn Chah was really against this kind of thing, but he was desperately trying to sneak a look at the lines on Ajahn Chah's hands. Eventually he couldn't resist any longer, and he went up to Ajahn Chah and said, 'Luang Por, I know you're

probably going to be very upset with me, or critical. I really admire you and respect you a lot, but I'm a palmist and I can't resist asking you – can I have a look at your hands, please? And you can send me away if you like but I had to ask. I've come all this way...' Ajahn Chah gave him a good working-over for a few minutes, telling him this was totally pointless and stupid, and wasn't going to end his suffering for him. But eventually Ajahn Chah showed him his hands and asked, 'So what is going to happen to me? Am I going to find a nice wife? Maybe I'm going to win the lottery.' The fellow looked at his hands and said, 'Oh! Luang Por, you have to forgive me for saying this, but this line here says you have a lot of anger.' Luang Por answered, 'Yes, but I don't use it.'

This is the way in which great beings completely end ignorance. The feeling of aversion and negativity can be there, but there's no place for it to land, there's nothing for it to hang on to. The feeling of aversion or anger arrives at the door, but there's nobody to sign for it. There's no place for it to land, so it does not give rise to any kind of unwholesome action or speech, or anything negative.

This is why the meditation upon feeling is a very helpful practice. Just try to stay in the realm of feeling and watch as feeling tries to drift toward craving. There's a big difference between liking or not liking, and wanting and not wanting. They're not the same thing. We can hear something or feel something that we do not like, we can recognize that we do not like it – it is an ugly sound or a painful feeling – but we don't have to contend against it. We don't have to hate it. Liking or disliking can be completely peaceful. But as soon as they

transmute into wanting or hating, there is a distortion. You can't be peaceful and hate at the same time. That doesn't work. But if there is an ache or a pain in the body, you can dislike it but still be at peace with it. There can be a clarity: 'Ouch, I don't like that.' But no contention arises against it, no hatred towards it. That is a prime opportunity, and an important area of the practice to develop. See how that works. See if you can stay in the realm of feeling, because feeling is innocent. In feeling there is no intrinsic confusion or alienation. There can be a complete and comprehensive quality of clarity and peacefulness in relationship to feeling.

You can be at peace even with powerful painful emotions like grief or sadness, or feelings of loss. Even the Buddha expressed that kind of sadness. There is a very poignant moment in one of the *suttas* (S 47.14) when Sāriputta and Moggallāna have passed away, and the Buddha looks round the assembly and says, 'It's as if the assembly is empty now that Sāriputta and Moggallāna have gone. The assembly is empty now that these great beings have passed on.' So even the Buddha could experience that sense of: 'My old friends have died. They've gone. They're not here any more.' But he also knew how not to make a problem of it. There was no suffering within him on account of that.

The last exit point from the *bhavaṅkka*, which I'll just mention very briefly, is not to let the whole thing begin in the first place. As the mind is trying to drift into *avijjā*, ignorance, notice that. When mindfulness starts to slip, don't allow *avijjā* to come into being. Don't let that dulling or obscuration arise.

This is something to practise when the mind is very clear and awake in meditation. You can see the mind being drawn towards a sound or a memory or a feeling – it is almost like a tugging at your body or your clothes. You can feel the mind being drawn into wanting to attach to this, wanting to have an opinion about that or to remember this, or to absorb into a like or a dislike. Don't let that happen. Don't let that complication arise. Just stay with the quality of *vijjā* – awakened awareness, knowing. Be that very knowing. Watch those urges. Be aware of the mind trying to lurch towards an opinion or a memory or a sound, lurching towards *avijjā*. And then, having seen that, calmly say 'No' – do not allow that ignorance to arise. This is the most subtle, but also the primary and most complete way of breaking the cycle – not to let the cycle arise in the first place.





THE  
SOUND  
OF  
SILENCE

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#SIX

WE CAN USE MANY DIFFERENT METHODS, different objects, to support the focusing of our attention; for example, the rhythm of the breath or the feeling of our footsteps. But these are by no means the only tools available to us.

Most people who bring attention to their hearing and listen closely can discern a continuous, subtle, high-pitched ringing tone in the background. In Sanskrit this is known as *nada*, which just means ‘sound’. This inner sound is something to which we can pay attention, using its continuous, subtle, non-personal quality as an object of concentration. You can bring attention to it as an alternative to focusing on the breath. Just see if you can discern it. Listen inwardly. It is a ‘white noise’ in the background of our listening –

for some it might be quite loud, others might find it impossible to discern at all. Take a moment to listen. Bring attention to your hearing. See if you can perceive that sound.

This tone is also known as ‘the sound of silence’. Over the years it has been a regular theme in the teaching and practice of Luang Por Sumedho. For some people, the use of the sound of silence as a concentration object is a helpful and beneficial alternative to mindfulness of breathing. Sometimes it is easier to focus upon than the breath. It also has many qualities which lend a variety of helpful spiritual supports. Firstly, it doesn’t begin or end. You never hear it start or stop. It is ever-present, continuous. It doesn’t modulate according to your will, whereas the breath can be controlled.

You can deliberately hold your breath, or breathe deeply or in a shallow way, but personal will has no effect on the sound of silence. You can't make it *do* anything. It is just there – beginningless, endless, present.

So in this way the sound of silence is a sense object which is a good symbol for the Dhamma itself: 'Apparent here and now, timeless, encouraging investigation, leading inwards...'. When you pay attention to it, it becomes obvious, but if you are caught up with other thoughts, activities or conversations, the sound seems to disappear as if it had never been there. Thus the *nada* sound is something '...to be experienced individually by the wise'. In this way it possesses these suggestions of the quality of the Dhamma itself. It is a good symbol

in the sense world of that which is transcendent – ultimate reality, the true Dhamma.

It also has a quality whereby if you concentrate on it, it helps to brighten the mind, and the brighter the mind is, the easier it is to listen to the sound. So there is a positive feedback loop. The more you pay attention to it, the easier it is pay it attention; accordingly, it leads to a greater quality of alertness, a keenness of attention. If we use this inner sound as an object to concentrate on, and consciously lay aside all other thoughts, preoccupations, sounds and physical sensations, the sound of silence is a very helpful and substantial support to *samādhi*. We can also use it to support the development of insight, the practice of *vipassanā*. In this latter case we don't focus on it to the exclusion

of everything else, but rather just let it be in the background, as a screen onto which all other experience is projected. Even when you are speaking, you can still hear the *nada* sound in the gaps between the words. It is always here.

When we are aware of the sound in this way, it becomes the wallpaper of our inner space, the screen upon which thought and memory, feeling and sight, sound, smell, touch and taste are projected. Letting the *nada* sound be in the background, yet still apprehended, helps to support a quality of non-entanglement with thought, feeling, memory and our moods. In this case the *nada* sound is an ever-present reminder of the context for all experience, a reminder to us that this flow of perceptions is just the mind's representation of the world.

The mind creates a world out of sights, sounds, sensations, smells, tastes, ideas, memories, moods, imaginings; but the ever-present *nada* sound in the background helps to remind us that these are just fleeting sense impressions, this is just a changing moment in the mind – a mood, a memory, an inspiration, a sorrow. It is what it is – just a pattern of this moment. So in this way, developing listening to the sound of silence directly supports the quality of insight. It helps us see the empty, selfless, uncertain, transient nature of all experience and patterns of consciousness.

The sound of silence is also helpful in developing attention and continuity of mindfulness. When the mind becomes very calm and focused, the breath can grow quieter and quieter. As we relax

the cycles of breath become slower and slower, so there can be long stretches of time between breaths – fifteen seconds, thirty seconds, a minute, a couple of minutes – even to the point where the breath seems to stop altogether. In these situations, if we are meditating on the breath, we find that the object of our meditation has disappeared. We no longer have access to the feeling of the breath if the breath is not moving. Very little if any sensation is associated with it. But the *nada* sound continues uninterrupted, ever-present regardless of the degree of concentration. Here it is – steady, unbroken, fluid like a constant silvery stream. According to their conditioning, some people might not experience this energetic oscillation as a sound, but rather as a physical sensation: a corporeal vibration or a subtle quality of energy in the body, the

hands, the face, the fingers. If we have developed a lot of body awareness, that is how we might pick up this universal vibration. Or someone who devotes a lot of attention to the visual world, a graphic artist for instance, might experience this vibration as a quality of the visual field, a continual subtle scintillation of the visual realm. However we experience it most strongly, that is the zone of perception we can use. That is the way in which it takes shape, so that is what we attend to.

It might also be that you have no idea what I'm talking about at all. You might be completely confused and have no sense of what this refers to. If that is the case and you can't hear any kind of inner sound or feel any vibration, that's fine too. Just continue to use the breath as a primary object of awareness. The point is that we should work with

the faculties and capacities which are available to us. We adapt the way that we work according to the means and situations open to us. The breath or the *nada* sound, or even applying the reflections on *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* – all of these are just tools. The point is to end suffering. The point is to awaken – to know the quality of true peacefulness, to realize *Nibbāna*. Perfecting the methods or applying the methods on their own is not the point, just as learning recipes or even learning how to cook is not the point – the point is eating food and being nourished. It is not enough to be able simply to discern and attend to the sound of silence; the point is to learn to use it as a support for development of concentration and insight, using our meditation object as a context for developing the quality of wise reflection.

In our meditation during the day, whether it is sitting or walking, or as we go about our various activities, if we let the *nada* sound fill our awareness and allow it to be the background of our attention, when the mind is quite quiet and listening to the sound, we can drop in the question, ‘Who am I? Who is it that is aware?’

We listen to the silence, then just drop that question into it.

And then wait.

Notice what quality of attention and awareness is present before any verbal or conceptual responses come into being.

Who am I?

What is it that is aware?

What knows this moment?

Who does this mind belong to?

Who does this moment belong to?

We can vary the question. We are not looking for particular conceptual answers, clever verbal answers or standard Buddhist philosophical answers. We are using the question to help interrupt the habitual flow of self-creation. We are interrupting the habitual pattern of *ahaṃkara mamaṃkara*, I, me, mine-making. When there is hearing of the *nada* sound, what is it that knows that? What is it that knows the sound of your voice? Does this have an owner? What is it that is doing the owning? What can really own anything?

The point is not the question. We are not trying to create more confusion or complicated thinking. We are just dropping these reflective enquiries into the space of the mind. We drop these questions into the fertile silence and

notice that interruption. Notice the silence. Listen to the silence before the question. Then: ‘Who\_am\_I?’ Notice the mental space, the gap, immediately after the question has ended. Notice the space before the conceptual answers start to appear. Notice that hesitation, that pause. In that pause, self-creation is momentarily interrupted.

Bring attention to that pause, that gap, and sustain attention there as fully and completely as possible. Allow the attention to rest in that space, that opening.

When we carry out this kind of exercise we listen to the silence, the inner sound. Once we are focused, we drop a question in – ‘What am I?’ Clearly discern the qualities that are here. What is present just after the question is posed?

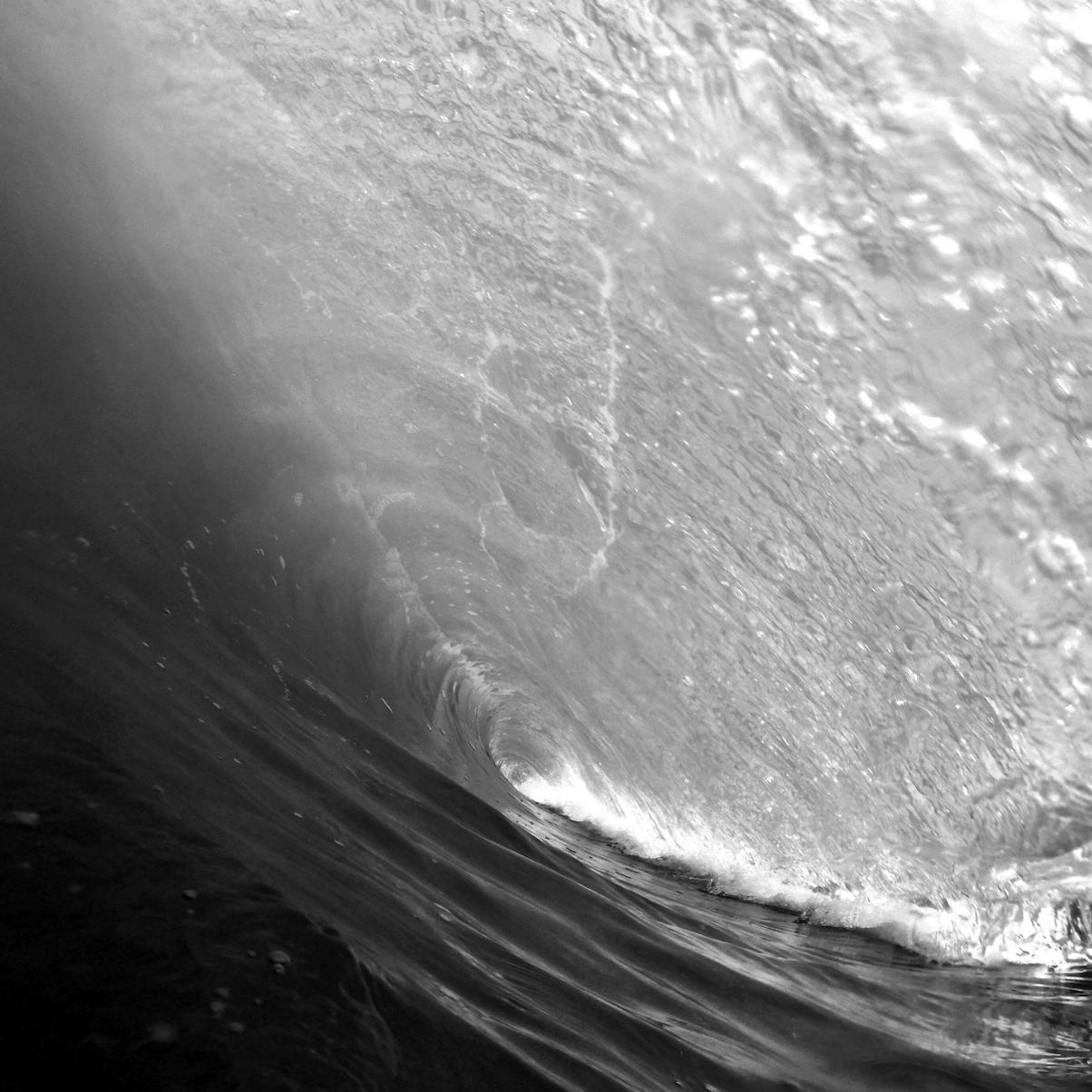
In the moment when the self-creation is interrupted there are brightness, openness, peacefulness and no sense of self. The habitual process of self-creation is broken up and trips over its own feet. For a moment the camera is turned back on the photographer. Catch that moment. Notice that quality. Let the heart rest there. And when the attention gets snagged by thoughts and feelings, carried away by a sound we hear or an idea, bring the question up again: 'What *am* I?' Re-open that space, as if you were parting the curtains.

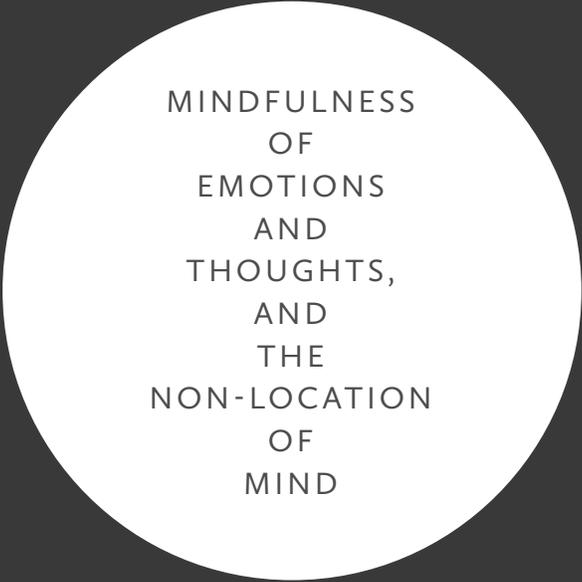
After a while you might find that if you use the same question over and over, the mind becomes inured to it. It no longer has that opening effect. So we can move things round, be creative. Often we have to be quick on our

feet, because the self-preservative habits are so strong, so pervasive, so determined to keep 'me' in charge, 'me' present, 'me' running the whole thing. These 'me' habits subtly undermine a particular question or statement and it loses its power. So we need to keep shifting it around, finding ways to prise that gap open, to part the curtains. You can be imaginative with this. The point is not the question that you ask, and certainly not any conceptual response, but rather the realization of the silence of the mind; the open, bright, clear, selfless mind which is revealed once the self-creating, self-obsessing habits are interrupted.

The silence of the mind is the answer to all questions.







MINDFULNESS  
OF  
EMOTIONS  
AND  
THOUGHTS,  
AND  
THE  
NON-LOCATION  
OF  
MIND

CHAPTER SIX

AS WE FIND OURSELVES more able to establish the quality of inner spaciousness, attending to the present, and as we learn to listen to the inner *nada* sound as a way of sustaining more of an open inclusivity in our mental world, this can help us to develop a quality of greater mindfulness in the emotional realm. If you have watched your mind closely, you will probably have noticed how certain sense impressions, memories, ideas and mental images carry an emotional charge. The mind gets swept away, drawn in and carried off far more easily when there is an emotion present. So it's very helpful for us to apply meditation practice to cultivating mindfulness of emotion; in this way we develop an understanding of how emotion works and how we can work with it.

It's important to recognize that we are not trying to stifle emotions or to steer our lives towards a state where we do not feel anything at all. Buddhist practice is not aimed towards neutralizing, nullifying our emotional nature. It is more to do with understanding emotion, seeing how it works and learning how to guide it skilfully.

Whenever we experience any kind of emotion, whether it's positive, negative or neutral; whether it is an inspiration or excitement, joy or grief, sadness, anger or fear; whether it's wholesome or unwholesome, bright or dark; some kind of physical sensation always accompanies the emotion. There is a physical corollary, a sensation which goes with every kind of emotional state. And in this physical corollary there is no fixed pattern that applies to all of us – everyone has their own particular imprint. The ways in which each of us will experience

emotion as a physical feeling are unique, but everyone will feel some sort of physical sensation accompanying emotional states. And that physicality can be a very helpful entry point, a useful tool for steering the mind towards emotional balance. It helps us to develop mindfulness and wisdom and to integrate them with our emotional experience.

If you have a particular emotional habit that you want to understand – for example, if your mind is very taken up with grief and sadness at the loss of a loved one, or you are particularly prone to irritation and your mind is always grumbling about life, or you are prone to anxiety and fear – you can use meditation on physical sensation to deliberately explore those particular habits and understand them more completely. To give an example, after I had been a monk for about six or seven years, I realized that my basic relationship to life was one of anxiety. This anxiety was so strong, pervasive and unrelenting that I hadn't even realized I was anxious. The anxiety was just like the force of gravity, it was there all the time. What I mean by this is that it suddenly dawned on me one day that my basic relationship to life was, 'If it exists, worry about it.' That was my fundamental response to life: 'Whatever it is, whether it's a brick or a tree or a cloud or a human being, if you perceive it, worry about it.' This discovery was surprising to me, because as a 'full-time' meditator I had been watching my experiences and traits for a number of years. I had been looking closely at the mind and learning how it works, and so I was astonished to discover that I had overlooked such a strong habit. Worry was such a continuous presence that I

didn't even realize I was worrying. It seemed utterly normal. The feeling I had was, 'Of course, if something exists, then you should worry. It's irresponsible not to be worried. You're not doing your duty if you're not fretting.'

I realized I needed to learn about this, to understand this anxious habit and how easily the mind became caught up in it. I was very fortunate to be studying under Ajahn Sumedho's guidance at that time and it was through listening to his advice and following his guidance that I learned how to use the physical sensations of an emotion. He would explain that when you're caught up in an emotion, the tendency is for your attention to go to the thing you're worried about; what somebody thinks about you, or whether you're going to be able to get to the airport in time to catch your plane. The attention tends to focus on the object of worry. But when that happens, you miss the actual experience of fear. You miss what is happening on the *subject* side because the attention is going to the *object*.

To assist in this investigation of emotion and help break the habit of fixating on the object, Ajahn Sumedho used to encourage us to bring up our emotions deliberately in meditation.

First draw your mind to a quality of calm and stillness: focus the attention on the present by using the breath or listening to the *nada* sound and allow as much inner spaciousness as possible. Let the mind relax, be open, attentive and aware and then deliberately bring up something that causes an emotional reaction. For example, if you are working with anxiety, call to mind something that you

know would trigger it, a simple feeling like ‘I got it wrong and people will be upset with me’. When you deliberately launch that emotion you don’t need a whole big story; you just need something to light the fire, as it were. Just take a simple phrase like ‘I’m late!’ or ‘They don’t like me’. Then deliberately take your attention away from all the verbal creations into which the mind starts to launch, draw your attention away from all the conceptualizing and consciously bring it into the body. Where does that feeling of fear sit? Where is that feeling of indignation, desire or resentment? Where is it? How does it feel? What is its temperature? What is its quality, its texture? Where do I feel it?

With fear, I found that there was almost invariably a knot of tension down in the gut, in the solar plexus area. There’d be a tightening of the stomach, the abdomen.

Having triggered that emotion, bring your attention to the sensation itself. It takes effort to maintain focus and not let the mind go into storytelling. This is why it is important to establish a quality of steadiness and clear attention at the beginning. Then you simply use that physical sensation as the meditation object; you notice it and then cultivate a quality of acceptance, a radical acceptance of that physical sensation.

What was really striking to me in this instance was to realize that this habit of fear and anxiety was driving my whole life. I was either doing everything I could to get away from that fear and reach a place where I wasn’t feeling it, or I was hunting for something to lessen the fear, to make it disappear. It was as if this

fear was the most terrible, awful feeling and I had to get away from it. But when you attend calmly to fear, you see that it is Mother Nature's protection. Fear is not a disease. It is how living creatures protect themselves. Creatures who aren't afraid are eaten, fall off cliffs or are hit by oncoming traffic. So fear is useful.

Years ago I was on retreat in the forest at Chithurst. I was sitting on a five-barred gate watching the sun coming up early in the morning and there were deer grazing out in the field, nibbling the young corn. Then I sneezed and the deer poked their heads up, saw me on the gate and ran off across the field. I thought: 'Oh, poor things, their lives so dominated by fear and terror. This innocent monk sneezes and they race away.' And then this thought followed: 'That's how they stay alive. That's why deer have big ears and big eyes, so they can tell when there is any danger around. Their fear helps them to stay alive'.

But fear becomes problematic when it overflows its boundaries. For us fear is not just employed now to keep us from being eaten by sabre-toothed tigers or mountain lions, or shot by enemy tribes – it has become a pervasive, continual and stressful habit.

This is what I became aware of when I brought attention to that physical sensation of fear. After spending so much time, effort and energy trying to get away from fear, when I brought attention to what it is really like, to the feeling of fear as a sensation, as a presence, without any kind of commentary about it, there was the somewhat disappointing realization that fear isn't really all that bad. I asked myself, 'Why do I spend so much time, effort and energy trying to

get away from this? Is it even as bad as a headache or a stone in the shoe? It's not as bad as a toothache, let alone a broken bone or anything like that. It's really not that terrible, not that unbearable at all. It is not pleasant. I am not pretending that it is delightful or sweet, but it is really not that bad.'

It is because of the conditioning and reactive process that we have the sensation of panic and dread which causes us to want to escape fear, to reach a place where we will never feel it. We step back from the edge of the cliff, we get away from where the danger is, we turn the light on: 'Okay, we can see – fine, there are no ghosts.' There is a feeling of relief.

In this practice, once you have treated the emotion consciously, just stay with that physical sensation for a few minutes. Be as fully attentive as you can be and develop an attitude of acceptance. Be open to it. Let the emotion be fully known and felt as a physical sensation, with as little commentary or judgement as possible. Then after five or ten minutes or so, consciously start to let it go. Let the body relax. Relinquish the tension and let the feeling dissolve and fade away. Ajahn Sumedho used to emphasize not being in a hurry to get away from the emotion or wiping it out, but just letting it fade on its own. Sometimes with a particularly strong emotion, long-standing resentment, painful grief or intense regret, for example, it can take just five seconds to trigger the emotion and then forty-five minutes to let go of it. But if it takes that long, then it takes that long. Just let it fade in its own time. Let it end according to its own pace. You allow it to cease rather than trying to force it to end or suppressing it.

When the emotion has finally run its course and faded away, the last piece of this practice is to return to that quality of spaciousness and clarity again, to the *nada* sound. Let there be attention to the open inner space of the mind. In this process you have watched an emotion come into being. It has been born. It has done its thing. It has risen to its peak, it has gone through its whole cycle, and then it has faded away and gone back to nothing again. You have watched the whole life-cycle: birth, flourishing, fading and dissolving. You watched it throughout the entire process. You have seen it come out of nothing and go back to nothing. You have seen the emotion clearly from its birth to its dissolution, and during the course of its presence there has been a quality of acceptance; you have accepted the emotion completely and wholeheartedly, or at the very least you have accepted the physical sensation which comes from the emotion.

And the interesting and mysterious thing is that because we have accepted and had an open and unbiased attitude towards the physical sensation, to some degree we have also accepted where the emotion has come from. The heart comes into accord with that habit of fearing or the source of that conflict, that grief, and to some degree there is an acceptance and a coming into harmony with its origin, its source. It is like drinking water from a stream – when you drink water from a stream, you have also drunk from the source of the stream. You taste where the water has come from. This has a very powerful effect in helping us to work with emotions. Once you have developed this ability in the

quiet and stillness of a retreat or a formal period of meditation practice, you begin to be able to do it more generally.

Once I had learned to use this meditation to identify my fear and anxiety, whenever anxiety arose about anything during the course of the day, I would make it my practice to focus my attention on the solar plexus. I would take a moment to become conscious of the physical sensation of that emotion, and then I would let myself relax. When you start developing this sort of ongoing awareness and bringing it into real-life situations that cause it, you're not just conjuring it up out of your own imagination anymore. You are dealing with real emotions in real-life situations. What happens then is a curious alchemy. Let's use the example of anxiety again: you bring your attention to that feeling in the body, you let the body relax, and then you ask yourself what you were worried about. Almost invariably the mind will take a couple of moments to find the answer; for those few moments it will be at a loss, and during that short time you have unplugged the anxiety programme. There was no 'thing' to be worried about. It truly dawns on you that if you don't make it a problem, it isn't a problem. If I don't create it as a problem, if I don't create a thing to be worried about, there isn't actually anything to be worried about.

The mind makes things into problems. When we are annoyed and thinking, 'It shouldn't be this way! That's outrageous! How can she do that? It's totally wrong!' these are all just creations of our mind, they are our mental constructions. If we don't construct them, they aren't there.

The same goes for an emotion like desire. Once you've let go of that desire, you ask yourself, 'What was I wanting so badly?' And then, even if it's for just half a second, watch how the mind has to reconstruct that desire. At first you were thinking, 'I've got to have it!' but then for half a second you were fine without it. In fact, you couldn't even remember what you were wanting.

Some might think this is a pointless mind-game, but I can vouch from my own experience that it is a very radical way of unplugging those emotional habits. It takes away the causes for emotional reactivity. It is a practice that eases the bondage of the heart to loves and hates, inspirations and depressions, fears and anxieties, reactions, griefs, regrets and excitements. So the identification and the confusion with emotions are radically changed, are altered in a fundamental way.

My habit of fear and worry was extremely strong, so for two or three years this was my main practice. This engagement with the emotion was the main effort I made. Every day at the beginning of the morning sitting, I would set the intention: 'Today, whenever anxiety or fear of any kind arises about anything whatsoever, I will bring my attention to it and be conscious of it, let it be fully known and let go of it.' I would prime myself for that every day. After working with worry like that for two or three years, it had changed quite radically. It had been dissolved, it stopped being an issue. That was quite a remarkable change in my experience of the world. I knew what life was like and I didn't have to worry about it all the time. It felt quite revolutionary at first. Sometimes I would think, 'This can't be right - I'm not doing my job here. The world can't carry on unless

I'm worrying about something.' But then I would realize it was absolutely fine.

Each one of us has our own favourite emotional flavours. Some of you might think you haven't got any problems with emotions. And if that's true – *sadhu!* I feel much *muditā* for you. But if you do feel that you have problems with an emotion, what you are able to do in this practice is understand that problems don't come from having emotions. The emotional world only becomes problematic when there is entanglement, when the heart is caught up and identified with loving, with hating, with fearing, desiring, grieving, regretting or hoping. It is identification and entanglement with emotion that cause the problems. When the identification and entanglement are not there, we simply feel the flow of emotion – happiness, unhappiness, liking, disliking. Emotion can flow through us. We can know it and it can pass through without confusion. Then we can empower, strengthen and act on emotions that are wholesome and beautiful, like kindness, compassion and well-wishing. We are able to recognize emotions like resentment, anger, jealousy, fear as being harmful and destructive. They flow through, but we don't act on them. As Luang Por Chah said about his angry tendencies, 'Yes, I have lots of anger but I don't use it.'

Another aspect of developing this quality of internal spaciousness is that it also gives us a bit more of a perspective on conceptual thought. Mindfulness of thinking is a practice which Ajahn Sumedho would teach in a similar vein, deliberate thought to learn how to watch thought. You deliberately think something – again, this might seem like a pointless mind-game, but it can

be very handy. The Ajahn would suggest taking a simple, completely bland thought like, ‘Today is Wednesday’ – very emotionally uncharged, an ordinary non-contentious statement. First bring the mind to a quality of quietness, spaciousness, stillness; then deliberately think that thought. You watch the thought begin. You notice the space before it, and then you think ‘Today is Wednesday’ or something equally neutral. You notice the space before the thought, then you plant it and notice the space after it. Do this as a little exercise, as if you’re learning a musical instrument. There you have your exercises, practising your scales over and over again – ♪♪♪ ... ♪♪♪ ... ♪♪♪ – so that you learn. You teach your fingers how to make those particular notes. Similarly, you can use a simple exercise like this to train yourself how to watch conceptual thought. By taking something that is totally bland to begin with, like ‘Today is Wednesday’, once you get the hang of doing the exercise with that thought and you can see its beginning, middle and end, you can start with something a bit more complicated, a bit more involved.

You can also teach yourself to notice the space between the words: ‘Today [*space*] is [*space*] Wednesday.’ Even as a thought is passing through, there is space between the words, and in that space there is no thought. This practice of seeing emptiness between and within thoughts is very helpful, because as we have seen with emotion, our attention is caught by objects. The mind goes into the content of a thought, a concept, a memory or a set of ideas, and we become

swept up in it if we don't simply see it as a thought: 'Oh – this is a thought'. Likewise with emotions or feelings; we are swept up in them if we don't see them for what they are: 'Oh – this is an emotion, this is a feeling'. If we don't see these mental activities for what they are, we become swept up in the content and carried away. Conceptual thinking can be very compelling. We start figuring things out, planning things or remembering things, and whoosh! The mind so easily gets swept up in the content.

The ability to watch a thought as just a thought is tremendously helpful. In developing *vipassanā*, the capacity to watch the mind is built around letting go of the content and learning to watch the process. We therefore practise this simple exercise over and over again, learning how to think deliberately – we watch a thought or make a thought come into being, we focus on it as it is present, and we let it finish. We learn how to do this with a bland and neutral thought of our own choosing. Then, when the mind conjures up its own thoughts, memories or opinions, rather than just buying into them, getting caught up with them and launching into a fantasy, a plan, a memory or a belief, there can be clear wisdom: 'Oh – this is an opinion. This is a memory. This is a story my mind likes to tell. That's all.' You don't have to push it away, you don't have to grasp hold of it. You can know it as merely a pattern taking shape in the mind.

Ajahn Sumedho would also recommend using our sensory experience of space. When listening to a talk or reading the words on a page, our attention goes to the words rather than the silences or the spaces between the words. After all, words

are more interesting than silence. It's like the space in a room – the people and objects in the room are more interesting than the space between them. People and objects have names and histories. People have gender, they have ages, they have different-coloured clothing, so our attention is caught by those particularities, but the space between people is pretty much all the same. Spaces don't catch our attention. But if we don't notice space we are missing something. We are always absorbing attention into one condition after another. We are not able to keep a perspective on life because our mind goes into judgement or comparing, into criticism, liking and disliking. So Ajahn Sumedho suggests the simple practice of noticing space. Again, this is not very complicated or demanding. Just take a moment when you come into a room to notice the space around people, the space between people. When you hear a talk or read a book, notice the silence between the words. This doesn't take a lot of attention.

When we bring awareness to what the space in a room is like, we realize that it actually contains more space than people or objects, and that while the space may not be very interesting, it is very peaceful. Space is very calming and delightful in its own way. We can improve our relationship to emotion and conceptual thought by this simple practice; we can learn to keep emotion and thought in perspective by noticing the space around them. We can support this perspective by developing the practice of noticing space in the world around us.

Space is always there, in the places where we go and the things that we do. Even on a noisy, crowded train or bus, even on the London Underground, take a

moment to notice the space. Don't get caught up in the noise, the smell and the movement. Take a moment to say to yourself: 'Look – there is space here too.'

When we notice space there is a levelling effect. Rather than the mind getting caught in the judgement of liking and disliking, and becoming involved in patterns of reaction, when we notice the space that is around and within things there is equanimity, serenity. We are not so drawn in by the details of what is occupying or colouring that space – those details are held within a larger picture.

When we start to develop these kinds of contemplation, contemplations on space, emotion, and experience, we begin to recognize that just as thought and emotion are known within the mind, what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch is also known within the mind. So right now, in this very room, everything you are experiencing is known within the mind. Though you are in a room, you might equally say the room is in your mind. Everything you've ever known throughout your entire life has been known through the agency of your mind. In no way have any of us ever known anything through any other medium. Everything we've ever been experienced since we were tiny babies has been known through the avenue of our minds. So we have only ever experienced our mind's representation of the world. In conventions of speech we say, 'My mind is *in here* and the world is out there', but actually the world we experience is sight, sound, smell, taste, touch being woven together into a (usually) coherent form within the mind. In short, the world is in our mind.

Now, the Buddha-Dhamma is not a philosophy of what is called solipsism, the philosophical belief that there is no world outside our minds, that the world is all just our dream or a kind of invention. Some philosophers have taken this to be true; that if you stop looking the world disappears, that the world is completely invented by our mind. This is not the teaching of the Buddha. The Irish philosopher Bishop Berkeley talked about the oak tree in the quadrangle of his college garden. He used to ask his students whether the oak tree continued to exist if you weren't looking at it. It was one of his proofs of the existence of God; the fact that the oak tree kept existing while you weren't looking at it meant that somebody must be looking at it, and if somebody was looking at it, that somebody was probably God. This inspired a bored philosophy student to write this limerick:

There was a young man who said, 'God  
 Must think it exceedingly odd  
 To find that this tree  
 Continues to be  
 When there's no one about in the quad.'

Which inspired this limerick in response:

'Dear Sir, Your astonishment's odd,  
 I am always about in the quad.  
 And that's why this tree  
 Will continue to be.  
 Signed, Yours Faithfully, God'

Buddhists don't think like that.

We don't say that the world is entirely fabricated by the mind and that other beings don't really exist, that everything is just a dream the mind conjures into existence. For Buddhists, our version of the world is constructed and patterned by our own conditioning; the world that we experience is built up, formed and framed by the experiences of a lifetime. The fact that I speak English, that my mind thinks in this particular language or that I have these particular life experiences is all part of my conditioning as a human being. If I was a spider, this room would be very different; the humans in it would be really boring, but the things a spider can eat would be really interesting. If we are willing to consider the possibility that the world we experience is in fact fabricated, formed by the patterns of consciousness within our minds, we will see that this is indeed true. Being able to experience the world in this way changes our relationship to it. If the world is in our mind, there isn't really an 'out there'. It's all 'in here'. It's all known *here*. It's all patterns of mental events taking place and forming within awareness. When we are able to shift perception in this way, we are able to move the flow of our thoughts and events from 'out in the world', and recognize that it all happens *in here*.

There is a quality of integration, a sense of wholeness, which comes with opening the mind in this way. This integration can be particularly apparent in walking meditation. There can be the feeling that 'I' am walking and the world around me includes trees, birds, grass and the sky, and at night the stars and

planets. But then we recollect that the world is in the mind, that it all happens *here*. There is no 'there'. It's all 'here'. It is all known within the same sphere of consciousness, of awareness.

When you shift the perception in this way, notice how it affects you. Again, you might feel this is just another mind-game, but the point of these exercises is that they change us. We are able to recognize the fact that when we close our eyes the visual world vanishes. When we open our eyes the visual world reappears and everyone again comes into being. We directly know the fact that our experience of the world is fabricated by our senses – the world that we know is all happening here, within this mind. It is known *here*. Through being able to see that, what we experience is a continuous flowing process, a single integrated process. This makes it easier to abide in the quality of knowing, awakened awareness. The heart receives and knows that flow of perception and experience. And along with attending to the different patterns of perception, thought, feeling, of movement, flow and change, there is also a wonderful quality of stillness. Just as the space of this room contains all the movement of all the people who come and go and change within it, and is a framework for the movement, similarly, there is a quality of awareness in our minds which is the framework, which contains and accommodates all the movement.

Towards the end of Luang Por Chah's teaching career, just before he had a stroke and lost the ability to speak, he used to ask people, 'Have you ever seen still water?'

‘Yes. Just like in that glass. This water is still. It’s not moving.’

‘Have you ever seen flowing water?’

‘Well, yes, I’ve seen flowing water.’

‘Have you seen still, flowing water? Water that’s both flowing and still?’

And people would think they had misheard him. ‘Still, flowing water? What is he talking about?’

Luang Por Chah would say that the mind is like still, flowing water. It flows insofar as its perceptions, thoughts and moods, its sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, thinking and emotions, all come and go and change. There is a continuous flow. But there is also stillness. There is that which is aware of all the mental activity of perception, of thought, of feeling – and that awareness is not going anywhere. That awareness is outside of the world of space and time. That awareness is perfectly still. It is not something which is subject to movement or change. It is the ever-present quality of knowing – ‘the one who knows,’ that which is aware.

So your mind is like still, flowing water. There is stillness and there is movement; the two interpenetrate and permeate each other completely and without conflict. This is a helpful image to bear in mind.

We learn to see that there is movement, like the body moving up and down on the walking meditation path, but that which knows the movement isn’t going anywhere. That which knows the movement is outside the realm of time and space. It is ever-present, yet it is not caught up in the movement. While you

are walking, at the same time there is the perception of the body moving. The body is walking up and down, but that which knows the body is always *here*. Just as in your entire life, everything you have ever known or experienced has happened through your mind – it has only ever happened *here*.

Throughout your life, you will always be ‘here’. When you were in the shrine room at Amaravati, or even when you were a little baby in your home town and didn’t think in words, you have always been ‘here’; there was always a ‘here-ness’, wherever you were. So we bring our attention to this quality to which Ajahn Chah was referring, this quality of stillness in the still flowing water of life, this quality that is always happening ‘here’. This knowing quality is free from bondage to the realm of time and space. It is unlocated.

Buddhist teachings refer a lot to *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, and how to use them as reflections to loosen the habits of attachment and identification. Those habits can be quite subtle, pervasive and strong.

The feeling of self is a particularly strong habit. So in our practice we emphasize the importance of clearly seeing the self-creating habits of the mind and learning how to loosen the grip on those habits; how to let them go completely and free the heart from self-view. But those bonds can be invisible as well as strong. Even when the self-creating habit is seen clearly, and even when there is a letting go of it, there can still unbeknownst to us, be a strong bondage.

Years ago when I was on a winter retreat at Abhayagiri Monastery in California, about three or four weeks into the retreat my mind was very quiet and the practice was very steady and strong. It was a very quiet and supportive retreat environment, so it was becoming easy to see the quality of *anattā*. It was clear that all the perceptions, thoughts and memories, the body and feelings, were not-self, not me, not who and what I was. There was a kind of obviousness and naturalness to that insight.

After a while, though, there was a strange feeling of being cramped, a quality of containment or limitation. I thought, ‘What is this about?’ There was clear seeing that things are *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, not self, empty of substance; but there was also this strange limitation, a strange kind of tension in the system. And it suddenly dawned on me and became clear, ‘Ah! It’s all happening *here*.’ I realized that it was the mind creating the feeling of locatedness, that everything was happening in ‘my’ mind, even though the usual crystallizations of the ‘I’ feeling were absent. I realized my mind was attached to the notion that it was happening ‘here’, at this spot.

At the risk of being too abstruse, I feel this is a helpful thing to look at. It was clear to me that until that point I hadn’t actually seen the attachment to the feeling of place or the feeling of location that the mind creates – the sense of ‘here-ness’, in this spot, this geographical centre where things are felt.

I don’t know if any of you have intuited or felt this but it was very striking to me at that time. I suddenly realized there was an attachment to the idea

that awareness was happening in *this* place, *this* location. So I began to look at that very feeling of locatedness and the sense of things happening *here*. I used a very simple and straightforward reflection: bringing to mind the word ‘here’ or saying to myself, ‘It’s all happening here.’ By bringing the attention to it, the word ‘here’ began to seem absurd. Then a whole extra layer of letting go was able to happen.

Awakened awareness, knowing, is free from bondage to the realm of time and space as well. It is timeless and unlocated.

Shortly after that, I came across a sentence in a Dhamma talk by Ajahn Mahā-Boowa. He talked how this very insight had played a radical role in his own spiritual development. It was just after the time when his teacher Venerable Ajahn Mun had passed away. Ajahn Maha-Boowa was doing walking meditation, and out of nowhere this thought appeared in his mind: ‘If there is a point or a centre to the knower anywhere, then that is the essence of birth in some level of being.’

If ‘the knower’ considers itself to have a location or a centre, then that is the essence of birth in some level of being. This means that this is where the mind gets caught. *Avijjā* happens right there. Until that false locatedness is recognized as a quality of grasping, the heart cannot truly be free.

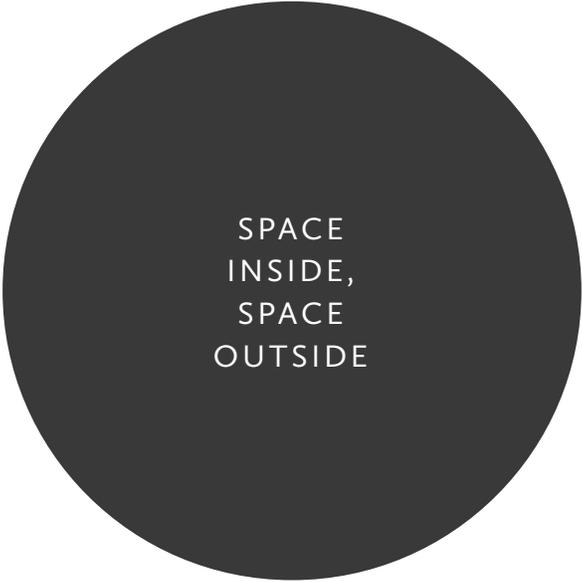
So along with things being impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, I find it is also helpful to recollect that Dhamma is essentially unlocated in the world of three-dimensional space. Location is a useful tool in the physical world, but

in the world of mind location, place does not apply. Three-dimensional space only refers to the physical world, to the *rūpa-khandha*. Mind, the *nāma-kandhā*, does not have any relationship to three-dimensional space, because mind has no material substance. Mind has no physical form; therefore three-dimensional space has no fundamental relationship to the mind.

So where is the mind? This is another helpful reflection and we can use this kind of inquiry to explore the issue as well. Ask the question: ‘Where is the mind?’ This illuminates the presumption: ‘It is here’. For in the clear light of awakened awareness, the wisdom faculty recognizes that even any kind of ‘hereness’ is not it either. So again, at the risk that this may sound abstruse or unhelpful, this is raised because it is important to look all the different habits of attachment and identification, even if they are very, very subtle.

Though we may have no sense of self, it can be that that ‘no sense of self’ is being experienced *here*. And that ‘hereness’ is also to be let go of in the practice of liberation. Dhamma is absolutely real, but it’s completely unlocated. You cannot say that the Dhamma is any ‘where’. You might say, ‘But it’s everywhere!’ But by looking at that whole dimension of experience it can be recognized that ‘whereness’ does not apply. Allow that recognition to have its effect upon the *citta*.





SPACE  
INSIDE,  
SPACE  
OUTSIDE

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#SEVEN

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE DAY, in the cool of the early morning, as light and colour are beginning to come back into the world, bring attention to the quality of inner space, the space in this room and the space in the world around us. Developing that attention, we notice the space that's always here, the space around things, the space within things. This helps us to recollect, to awaken to the inner space, the space of our minds which receives and contains, which encompasses all thoughts, feelings, perceptions, moods.

Bring attention to the inner sound. The sound of silence directly supports the attending, the awakening to the quality of inner space. Awakening to the sound of silence helps remind us that the quality of the heart's awareness is infinitely accommodating. It has room for everything.

Allow the heart to rest in that quality of open awareness, spacious awareness, receiving the experience of sound, sensations in the body, feelings of warmth or coolness, light or dark. Allow the heart to be that receptive, spacious, accommodating awareness, receiving all things without bias, without partiality. The heart is an infinite open space which accommodates all things, rejects nothing, allows everything in and holds on to nothing. Space does not hold the objects in it. In the same way, the space of our minds receives all things, lets go of all things. Sound arises and passes, our moods arise and pass, a feeling arises and passes – there is nowhere for them to land, nothing for them to stick to. Let the moods and feelings be known as they take shape and do their thing, and then as they dissolve, leaving no remainder.

We talk about letting go, we use that kind of language, but notice how it also implies that there has been a holding on, a 'me' who has been doing some holding. But more truly, in a more real and complete way, it is not so much a matter of letting go but of training the heart not to grasp, not to identify, not to create that illusion of ownership in the first place.

A sound arises and passes with no remainder. A word is spoken – we hear it, it arrives, it is known, it is gone. There is silence before the word and silence after it. There does not need to be any kind of remainder. We don't need to let go of a sound. A sound comes and goes on its own. We know we can't own it, hold it or keep it. So rather than letting go, recognize the truth – nothing is ever really owned or possessed by an 'I' or

a 'me'. The practice is sustaining that awareness of the inexorable, incessant flow – the change, the modulation of perceptions, patterns of consciousness, patterns of nature, arising, blossoming, dissolving, following their own laws.

A star a cloud or a sunset can't be possessed, but it can be known. In the same way, just allow the feelings of the body – emotions, moods, thoughts – to be ownerless, to arise, take shape, be fully received and known, and then let them dissolve. Be that unlocated, non-possessive heart of awareness. Be that quality of knowing which participates in all experience, but without confusion, without possessiveness. Develop this so that the layers of attachment and identification, the layers of self-view, are seen more and more clearly, and let go of.

In the *Udāna*, the *Inspired Utterances*, the Buddha says there is that sphere of being, that *āyatana*, where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind, where there is neither this world nor another world, there is no infinite consciousness, infinite space or nothingness. And in that realm of being, that *āyatana*, there is no moon, no sun, no stars. There is neither a coming nor a going, nor a standing still. There is no basis, there is no development, no support. This, just this, is the end of *dukkha*.

When we hear those words they can make us feel insecure and threatened. No sun? No moon? No stars? No development? No support? What is that! You can feel a kind of spiritual vertigo, being suddenly knocked off balance. But all that is happening here is an unplugging, a dissolving of our

familiar patterns of identification and clinging – our clinging to a ‘me’ who is here in this place, experiencing this world which seems to exist around me in three-dimensional space. So these words from the Buddha are threatening to the ego, to the habits of identification with time and three-dimensional experience, but to the heart itself they are greatly liberating, freeing. In that *āyatana*, that realm of being, there is neither a coming nor a going nor a standing still. ‘Place’ does not apply. ‘Here’ and ‘there’ do not apply. Past and future do not apply.

Luang Por Chah used to expound on this teaching by asking, ‘If you can’t go forwards and you can’t go back and you can’t stay still, where do you go?’ This is similar to the question about still/flowing water – it’s a

conundrum, a puzzle that confuses the thinking, rational mind. There is no solution when we are identified with the body, with time and space, the sense world. If you tried to give Ajahn Chah a clever answer and say that you could go sideways or up a tree, he would tell you, 'No, you can't go sideways, or up or down either. Where do you go?' The only way to solve the conundrum is to let go of identification with the body, with time and place. If there are clinging and identification with the body, with three-dimensional space, the conundrum is insoluble; there is no answer, no solution. But if we really take to heart this daily reflection that the body is not self, feelings are not self, perceptions are not self, that is not who and what we are...

If there is non-identification with physical form, with the sense world, with perceptions, then there is awareness – non-identification *is* that unentangled participating in experience. This participation is not tied to a personality, an individuality, a physical spot; this awareness, this knowing, is unlocated.

You might be thinking, 'But I can feel a pain in my knee, I can feel a tickle in my throat; when I cough that cough is happening in my throat, and my throat is right here underneath my mouth, above my chest – that's where it is.' But the mind is constructing space. The mind creates an image of the body as a pattern of consciousness, and it orients the different parts of the body according to the pattern that it has created. When you look and explore, where is your throat? Where is the knee? You see

how the mind has created an internal map. The mind says, 'My knee is down here to the left. My throat is here in the middle where the cough is happening.' To common sense it says, 'Well, it's right here, obviously'. But with the *uncommon* sense of wisdom, we pick that up, explore it, and begin to see that 'here' and 'there' are constructs woven together by our habits and faculties of the mind.

During the day we sit in meditation, we walk in meditation, we go about our business, eat our breakfast, brush our teeth, pull up weeds in the garden. As these daily patterns and events unfold, we can investigate these themes. On one level it seems like 'I am walking forward' or 'I am sitting here'. But see what happens, see how it changes when we shift the attitude and recognize

that there is the perception of the body walking, there is the perception of the hands moving; but that which knows the movement isn't moving. See if you can discern that quality, that mysterious, beautiful openness of awareness which is free from moving forwards, moving backwards, free from standing still in this spot.

In the last message that Luang Por Chah sent Ajahn Sumedho, the letter Luang Por sent just before he had his stroke and lost his ability to move and speak and teach, he said: 'Whenever you have feelings of love and hate for anything whatsoever, these will be your partners in building *pāramī*, spiritual virtues. The Buddha Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This, Sumedho, is your place of non-abiding.'

This was Luang Por Chah's final instruction to his disciple who was setting up monasteries in the West. It wasn't a list of 'do this and don't do that'. It wasn't an exhortation to always remember to follow the traditions. He just reminded him of this one central, crucial principle: non-abiding, non-clinging. When the heart attunes itself to the Dhamma in this radical and complete way, it is able to respond to every situation. When we need to be conservative, we can be conservative. When we need to be creative, we can be creative. When we need to hold steady, we hold steady. When we need to adapt, we adapt. Through that non-

clinging there is a supreme attunement to time, place, situation, to what each moment demands.

So that was the most appropriate and best advice to Ajahn Sumedho as he was starting up these new monasteries in the West – to let go of progress, to let go of degeneration, even to let go of holding steady. The Buddha-Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. It is here in the place of non-abiding, non-identification, no-thingness. It is here in the place of complete openness and receptivity.





REALIZATION  
IS  
HERE  
AND  
NOW

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#EIGHT

WHEN WE ARE LIVING TOGETHER on a retreat, gathered as a human community for a period of time, life is extraordinarily simple. The bell wakes us up in the morning, we gather in the shrine room, chant, sit, meet for breakfast, do the washing-up, go about our chores, sit, walk, eat, don't have to talk to anybody, don't have to make any decisions. Everything is provided for us – shelter, food, good company, safe situation, even gloriously beautiful weather. This is about as simple as human life can get – benign, peaceful, repetitive. Just about as uncomplicated as life can be. And we arrange it this way to create the most supportive conditions for us to be able to see clearly, for us to be able to understand how the mind and how the world work.

What is this strange condition called human life? What is the mind, the body, the universe? How does it work? The simpler the living situation, the simpler our routine, the simpler our mode of being, the easier it is to discern those patterns of relationship. But our minds love complication, don't they? Out of its habits the mind delights in creating complication and conceptual proliferation. This is called *papañca* in Pali. The thinking mind loves to create complication: calculating and elaborating, running off in this direction and that, creating commentaries and opinions and judgements.

*Papañca* is one of the diseases of the mind. One of the epithets of the Buddha is *nippapañca* – one who is free from complication, free from the mind's habitual elaborations. *Papañca*

is considered a disease because in each moment life is extremely simple. There is just this – the experience of the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness, coming and going, changing; sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought and mood coming and going; organic patterns of change, patterns of nature taking shape and dissolving. That is all.

But the mind loves to create complications. The thinking mind takes hold of a perception, and out of memory and imagination, desire and fear, restlessness and frustration, it creates commentaries and sub-commentaries and sub-sub-commentaries, strings of association. The sound of a bird reminds us of a place where we used to live. It reminds us of who we used to live with. It reminds us of who we

went on holiday with, what happened on that holiday, the excitements, the arguments; and within seconds we are off reliving events that happened ten years ago, or events that didn't actually happen at all. We imagine what could have happened on that wonderful holiday if only we had got it right, and we hadn't said some stupid thing and said some wonderful thing instead. Then if this person hadn't been this way, and I hadn't been that way, and then and then and then...

So during the day, when you find the mind wandering off down these long associative trains of thought, drifting away into recreating events in the past, planning events in the future, creating imaginative descriptions about your mind and its workings, notice that feeling of complication, that feeling of

entanglement, of being wrapped up in your thoughts. What does it feel like to be carried away? Notice what that feels like in both the mind and the body. And then follow it back. One way of working with this kind of habit is to simply trace it back. When you find yourself in the middle of replaying a conversation, or how it should have been or could have been ten years ago, follow the chain of causes back to where it came from. Replay the conversation which came from thinking about that person you were on holiday with, which came from the thought that you lived with them at the time, which came from the recognition of where you lived and the birds you heard in the garden – so it all came from the sound of that pigeon; the sound of a bird, that’s where it began. When we trace it back to its source, when we follow it back to its origin, we

realize it was just a sound – that is all, just hearing. In its origin, at its source, the whole thing was supremely simple; and yet once it was up and running it turned into ‘me here’ and ‘the world out there’, and tension between the two of us.

This kind of practice is called following back to the source or tracing back the radiance; following the energy of the mind back to its source. And when you follow a train of thought back to its origin, it becomes simpler and clearer the further back you go, as you return to its starting-point. When we follow it back, we find it was just a sensation in the body, just a sound, just an object that was seen, tasted, smelled – that is all. Once we follow it back to its origin, we notice that feeling of uncomplicatedness, *nippapañca*. Don’t complicate the uncomplicated – this is

one of the Buddha's encouragements (*'Appapañcaṃ papañceti'* A 4.173). When we follow things back to their root, we stay with them simply as they are. It doesn't really matter whether we can interpret exactly what they mean or what their qualities are. Whether it's a mood, a thought or a sensation in the body, we don't have to explain it or figure out its causes. When we bring the attention to it in this moment, all we need to know is that this is the way it is. It is this way, and that tells us everything we need to know.

In the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (D.22; M.10) the Buddha says that all we need to do is bring mindfulness to the present experience of the body, feeling, mood, mind-states – this is sufficient; no more explanation or analysis is really necessary.

Ajahn Buddhadasa, one of the great philosopher monks of Thailand, was very much against superstition and fortune telling, amulets and such, but he did say the one amulet that was worth hanging around your neck was one that had written on it: 'This is the way it is.' That is a really useful amulet. So when you are experiencing great happiness and joy and peace you can reflect, 'This is the way it is.' When you are experiencing the utterly ordinary, mundane, unremarkable – this is the way it is. When you are experiencing pain and anguish, difficulty – this is the way it is. When you are experiencing the familiar – this is the way it is. When you are experiencing the mysterious – this is the way it is. That simple reflection brings the attention right to the felt sense of the present reality – here it is, this is the *dhamma* of the present

moment, the *paccuppanā dhamma*. It's like this. No further description, analysis or qualification is needed, just bringing the attention to this moment – supremely uncomplicated, complete.

Being that aware, awake quality which participates in the present moment; being that Buddha wisdom which knows the way things are, knows this present reality; being the faculty of seeing the way things are, the Dhamma, the fabric of this moment – that is all. And in that pure simplicity are spaciousness, clarity and peacefulness. To the conditioned mind this moment seems ordinary, unremarkable. Back then in the past or over there in the future, we can imagine special things. To the ignorant conditioned senses the future often seems like something wonderful or terrible, but this moment

seems nothing special. But when there is a letting go of creations about the past or the future, and the mind is no longer distracted by its own imaginings and creations, when we fully attend with open awareness to this present moment, then the ordinary blossoms before us as the wonderful.

This moment is full of wonder if we notice it. The Dhamma is always here. It is not over there. It is not off in the past or the future. The Dhamma is nowhere but in this present reality. So in a way, even using a term like ‘the present moment’ is a bit deceptive, because there really isn't any moment other than this one. This is the only moment we have. When we open the heart to this moment, letting go of conceptions of past and future and habits of self-view, when the heart awakens to this

present reality, there is spaciousness, brightness, richness, wonderment.

The Thai word for ‘ordinary’ is *tamadā*, and when you look at how the word is written you realize it comes from the Pali word *dhammātā*, which means ‘of the nature of Dhamma’. So right there in that word is the clue – hidden in the ordinary, *tamadā*, the not special, the average, is the *dhammātā*, the wonderful nature of reality. The ultimate truth of all things is here, disguised as the ordinary. We peel back the veneer of our habitual judgements and perceptions, we let go of the habits of opinion and believing in our conditioning – self-view (*sakkāya-ditthi*) and attachment to conventions (*sīlabbata parāmāsa*). We remove the veneer of attachment to our opinions and views. Underneath that wrapper is the *dhammātā*, the Dhamma itself.

Ultimate reality, the fundamental truth of all things, is here – it can’t be anywhere else.

We don’t have to create the Dhamma. We don’t have to build it or develop it. It is always here. Luang Por Chah would use the analogy of ground-water – you don’t have to put water in the ground, it is already there. All you have to do is to dig a well, and sooner or later you hit water. The Dhamma is like ground-water; it is always here, you just have to dig for it. There is digging through the layers of self-view, attachment to conventions, rights and rituals, habitual perceptions, doubt about what is the path and what is not the path (*vicikicchā*). These are the layers that have to be dug through for the Dhamma to be known and seen. And this takes work. The work

of Dhamma practice is meditation, mindfulness, bringing attention each moment to the mind's habitual beliefs and judgements, and the stories we tell ourselves. This is what obscures the Dhamma in each moment. If it is seen clearly and understood, those obscurations can evaporate; we stop following the train of *papañca*. We bring things back to the simplicity of this moment and see the beliefs, thoughts and judgements the mind creates. We see them for what they are, and we can see through them and let them go. The heart is no longer confused or distracted by them.

As your practice develops, here is something that will help you see through confusion and deluded thinking: when you notice your mind wanting something, fearing something,

resenting something, opinionating about something, just take that simple mental action, freeze it and look at it. Take a particular judgement or thought, clarify it, outline it, and it loses its power to confuse. Maybe you have a cough or a cold and you think, 'If I didn't have this cough I would be really happy. This retreat would be perfect if only I didn't have this tickle in my throat.' As a passing thought that seems reasonable enough, but when you stop it, freeze it, really listen to it, repeat it to yourself: 'If I didn't have this cough I would be happy' – you realize, 'No. A few days ago I didn't have a cough and I managed to be upset, irritated, and agitated by different things.'

'If only I could stop my thinking, everything would be great.'

This method is simple but extremely effective. Just notice the trains of thought you believe in – the judgements, the hopes, the irritations – and clarify them. Notice that it is because we believe in their contents that we create confusion and alienation within ourselves. When we isolate a particular thought or judgement: ‘If only that person didn’t breathe in that really annoying way, my meditation would be perfect.’ ‘If only I could just stop planning, I’d be happy’ – whatever it might be: something about ourselves, something about the world around us, judging something as beautiful or ugly – when you stop it, follow it through and clarify it, its partial, relative and dependent nature becomes obvious.

The mind judges something: ‘That’s awful, that’s ugly.’ The wisdom mind

knows that is just one point of view. What constitutes ugliness? What constitutes beauty in any absolute way? This is a simple conscious act: take a thought, a mood, a judgement; clarify it, isolate it, steadily follow the words through, repeat it clearly and gently within the mind; and then watch it fall apart. Watch what happens in the heart when those kinds of judgements are seen as transparent.

‘I like.’

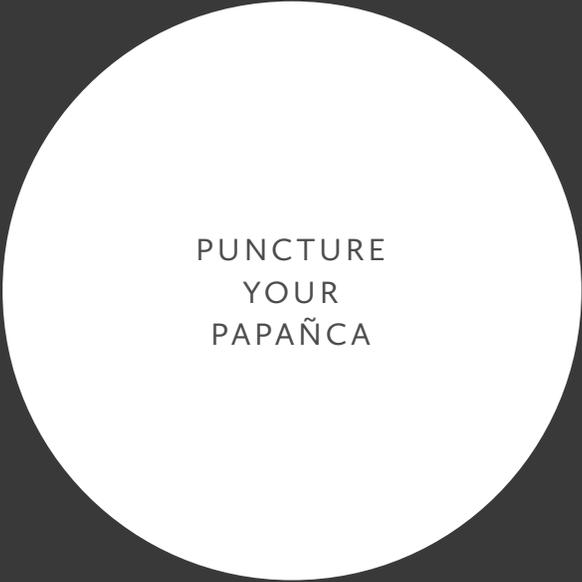
‘I don’t like.’

‘I hope.’

‘I dread.’

When they are seen as transparent, what happens in our heart? Suddenly the heart is back in those qualities of openness, simplicity, purity – a wonderful normality. This is the *dharmatā*, the nature of Dhamma itself, pure, radiant, peaceful.





PUNCTURE  
YOUR  
PAPAÑCA

CHAPTER SEVEN

IN THE TEACHINGS THE BUDDHA describes what in Pali is referred to as *papañca*, or ‘conceptual proliferation’ in English. This is a theme it’s useful to explore and clarify, because it helps us to understand our thinking and how not to get lost in the realm of our mental creations.

One particular *sutta* spells this process out very clearly in detail, *Sutta* 18 of the Middle Length Discourses, the *Madhupindika Sutta*. ‘*Madhupindika*’ literally means ‘the sweet morsel’ or ‘the ball of honey’, because it is such a delectable teaching that upon hearing it, Venerable Ānanda was prompted to say, ‘This is amazing, this is wonderful. This is the most gorgeous, this is the most delectable, the most fantastic, delightful teaching. It is like a sweet ball of honey. What should we call this *sutta*, Venerable Sir?’

The Buddha answered, ‘You can call it the Honey Ball Discourse, Ānanda.’ And that is what it has been called ever since.

This *sutta* explains how things start off with a simple sense perception – the eye views a form, the ear hears a sound, the nose smells an odour, the tongue tastes a flavour, the body perceives a tactile object or the mind perceives a thought or an emotion. For example, take the eye seeing a form: there is the eye, the physical form seen and the eye-consciousness which arises. Those three things coming together are *phassa* or sense-contact. This happens very quickly. The neural impulse shoots down the optic nerve, reaches the visual cortex in the brain and you get a feeling, liking, disliking or a neutral feeling; and this feeling happens even before there is cognition. The Buddha pointed out

that this primary impact of any sense awareness is already divided into ‘like’, ‘dislike’ or a neutral response – dangerous, desirable or don’t worry about it. This is a very primal mode of finding our way in our environment. It is basic sensory activity.

In this way sense-contact, *phassa*, leads to feeling: pleasant feeling, painful feeling or neutral feeling. Following along from that there arises a *sañña*. The Pali word *sañña* is usually translated as ‘perception’. It is related to the English word ‘sign’ – they are connected in terms of their meaning and their origins.

The *saññā* is the designation of a particular sense contact. So again with regard to the eye and visual form, after the initial impact in the visual cortex, the *sañña* would be the registering of red or green or sharp-edged or blurry; the forming of the basic perception before any kind of naming, the primary definition or ordering of what is being perceived.

Then rapidly following *sañña* is *vitakka*. *Vitakka* means ‘to think’. This is where the naming happens – the eye sees a colour and it recognizes black, green, orange, etc. It is the simple naming of an object. So far, so good. This is all very uncomplicated.

Up to this stage, the whole process of experience is not really giving rise to much *dukkha*, insecurity or dissatisfaction of any kind. It is also happening very quickly.

The trouble begins when *vitakka* leads to *papañca*, when thought leads to associative thinking, memories of like or dislike, or opinions. At the level of

*sañña* and *vitakka*, perception and naming, life stays very simple – it’s just feeling, perception and the simple naming of an object: ‘In the heard there is only the heard, in the seen there is only the seen...’ When the mind can stay at that simple level of categorization and apprehending, the receiving of sense objects, everything is fine and dandy, it is all very simple and clear. But as we know, things don’t usually stop at that naming point. What comes next are the strings of association. This is *papañca*. And this is the way our minds work – we are prone to thinking, remembering, conceptual proliferation, prolixity, the mind setting off and running with ideas and thoughts and projections.

There is a wonderful book called *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers* by the scientist Robert Sapolsky, who spends his time partly at Stanford University in California and partly living among troops of baboons in Kenya. He has spent a lot of time with baboons in the last few decades. Much of his book is about baboon life and politics, and he gives all his baboons wonderful biblical names – Rebecca and Obadiah, Ebenezer and Hepzibah.

The thesis of *Why Zebras Don’t Get Ulcers* is that if you are a zebra, you are on the menu for the average lion out on the savannah. When you see a lion coming towards you, you need stress and you need to get stressed fast. You want your heart to start beating, you want that adrenalin to go pumping, you need to get lots of energy to your legs and you want to start running. And you want maximum stress as the lion starts to chase after you. You need to get your system cranked up as much as you possibly can in that stressed situation. You

need to have your anxiety levels very, very high. You need to become afraid, because fear is what is going to save you. The zebras who are nonchalant about lions are the ones who end up as breakfast. The ones who have high levels of anxiety survive.

So zebras need to be afraid. They need to move quickly. They can shut off their digestive and reproductive functions, get as much sugar into the system as possible, get the heart beating rapidly and pump the whole system with adrenalin, so they can move as quickly as possible. And within a couple of minutes one of two results will have happened: either they will have got away or they will have been caught and killed. So they only need to stay stressed for a couple of minutes, and if they get away they don't need to keep the stress reaction going, because the lion has given up and gone after somebody else – somebody else is currently being turned into breakfast and so the worries of Zebra #1 are over. There is no need to sustain the stress reaction because the worst has just happened to someone else. There is no need to be afraid any more, so the stress switches off.

Sometimes on television wildlife documentaries you will see an animal such as a zebra get caught by lions. Its guts are ripped open and the lions are chewing on it. Meanwhile three or four other zebras are happily grazing nearby, just casually glancing over: 'Oh, look – there's cousin George being eaten.' It's quite disturbing, isn't it? You think, 'Don't they care? How can they be so callous?' But it's because they know that if cousin George is being eaten, they are not

being eaten, so they don't worry about it. And because they apparently can't project into the future, they never think, 'Tomorrow that could be me.' They don't make a problem out of it. Hence zebras don't get ulcers.

As human beings, however, we have the capacity to reflect: 'Ooh – George got it yesterday, and if you do the statistics, how much longer is it going to be until I'm on the menu?' We human beings can remember the past and we can imagine a future, so we don't get that stress reaction going for just two minutes – we can keep it going for a couple of months or years, so we get ulcers. The stress reaction is sustained through our *papañca*, through our conceptual thought and our capacity to remember and imagine. Memory and thought are useful things, and the imagination and the ability to project into the future have their purpose, but when these abilities overflow their boundaries and we start incessantly imagining, or we can't let go of painful things that have happened in the past or stop anticipating painful or difficult things that might happen in the future, we create ongoing anxiety. Humans maintain the stress reaction hour after hour, day after day, week after week. We make ourselves ill with anxiety, restlessness, rage, rapacity and depression, the different ailments which beset society.

So if you want to avoid ulcers you need to work on *papañca*. *Papañca* is the habit of buying into our thoughts, believing in them and creating images of past and future, and going off and inhabiting them – building castles in the air and going to live there. That is what causes us so much distress.

This conceptual proliferation, *papañca*, is actually not the end of the whole sequence described in the *sutta*. The last part of the sequence is what's called *papañca-sanñā-sankhā* – ‘the multiplicity of thoughts and perceptions that the mind produces and which beset the heart’. That is a brief translation. *Papañca-sanñā-sankhā* is the whole array of thoughts and perceptions which are prone to proluxity. So by the time you get to the end of the process and have reached *papañca-sanñā-sankhā*, there is ‘me here and the world out there’, and the state of tension between the two – either tension with something I want which I haven’t got, or something I’m afraid is going to get me and want to get away from. There is a duality. And that subject-object duality is rigidly fixed into place, ‘me here’ and ‘the world out there’, and there is the state of tension and *dukkha* arising from that.

This whole process, from the beginning with the simple perception through to the end with ‘me here’ and ‘the world out there’, happens very quickly. So learning to track this process and seeing how it begins requires the development of mindfulness and wisdom. The mind has to be trained not to follow the habitual pathways of *papañca*.

When you see the mind has wandered off into some kind of conceptual labyrinth, into trains of thought and association, take the trouble to follow it back. This is the practice I described earlier of following the string of thoughts and associations back to its origin. It might not seem a terribly fruitful exercise, but in my experience it is very revealing. Over and over again we realize that

the mind gets caught up in excitements or fantasies, fears and anxieties, or gets lost in rewriting the past, and that all this is completely void of substance.

I used to be very fond of rewriting how things might have been in the past. I spent an amazing amount of time in my early monastic life re-scripting how things could or should have been. Often it would be fifteen or twenty minutes before the wisdom factor would wade in and say, 'But it didn't actually happen that way. That didn't happen, it wasn't that way, so there is no need to get upset, there is no need to get excited, no need to get worried. It didn't happen, and it was ten years ago that it didn't happen!'

But our mind does that, doesn't it? We go back and revisit mistakes we made, glorious moments, or things which were memorable or painful – we re-inhabit them and bring them to life. Whenever we are aware that the mind is caught up in a proliferation, we need to take the trouble to catch that process like netting a butterfly. Catch that thought. Actually, a butterfly is a very appropriate symbol, since the Greek word 'psyche' means not just 'the mind' but 'butterfly'. So a psychologist is someone who studies this very butterfly nature.

So we catch that particular fluttering piece of *papañca*, and then we follow the sequence of thoughts and associations back to where they came from. Every time we will notice that it was started by just a random thought that popped into the mind – there was a smell from the kitchen which triggered the memory of a particular food, or the sight of somebody's shawl triggered the memory of Aunt Matilda's dress. Following it back, we realize that it was just a smell, just a

sound, just a random memory. That is all. When we get to the source, the origin, it is utterly unburdensome, uncomplicated.

The string of the *papañca-saññā-sankhā* leads to ‘me here’ and ‘the world out there’, and there is a solidly, definitely divided experience. The further you trace it back to the source, the less there is a sense of a ‘me here’ and ‘the world out there’. There is just hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching. ‘In the heard there is only the heard’, in the hearing there is only the hearing. The same with seeing, smelling, tasting, touching. There is no sense of self embedded within that. It is just the world as it is experienced.

There is a great master of the Korean Buddhist tradition called Chinul who developed this method. The English translation of the Korean term he used for it is ‘tracing back the radiance’. There is a book of Chinul’s teachings, translated by Robert Buswell, which bears this title. The book is a very helpful guide to using the quality of mindfulness and careful attention to unpick the tangles of *papañca*, and to keep bringing the mind back to the simplicity of knowing, feeling, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and then acknowledging how the world feels. What is the experience of the world when it is simply this way, when the heart is simply open to sense perception?

When we do this, when this is carried through, there is a wonderful simplicity, an easefulness and a sense of integration. So I would really encourage this straightforward exercise. It also reveals the tracks down which the mind moves. You can become familiar with your own mental habits: whether you are a greed

type or an aversion type, or whether you are a really good complainer. You realize how even a pleasant feeling or a pleasant sound can lead to criticizing, complaining or grumbling if you are that type. Or if you are a greed type, even a painful feeling can lead to something you are fantasizing about acquiring. So this simple process can help us get to know the patterns in which our mind moves, the patterns of conditioning; and by becoming familiar with those patterns we can free the heart from them.

We tend to think, 'I am in here, the world is out there, and I am perceiving the world.' But I find extremely helpful to keep recognizing that we don't experience the world – we experience our mind's representation of the world. This is something that the Buddha pointed to (e.g. at S 2.26, S 35.116): 'That in the world by which one is a perceiver of the world, a conceiver of the world – this is called 'the world' in the Noble One's discipline. And what is it in the world though which one does that? It is with the eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body and the mind.' That is 'the world' in terms of the Buddha's teaching. Obviously we can talk about this planet as being the world, or the stars and galaxies and space being the world. In some ways that usage of the term is fair enough. It is reasonable. But it is important to recognize that when we are trying to live in the reflective way, develop the qualities of wisdom and understanding and free the heart, the most helpful way of understanding the world is just exactly as I have been describing – the world is sights, sounds, smells, taste, touch. That is the world because that is the world as we know it.

I'm not saying that the whole world is an illusion conjured up by us as individuals. There is a substrate. There is a basis on which our perceptions are formed. But what we know about the world is constructed from the information that our senses weave together. That is the coordinating capacity of the mind. The mind is the sixth sense which draws the first five senses together and coordinates them. The world the mind creates is the world that we know. The world is put together by our minds. These perceptions are all we can know. All we have ever known has been through the agency of this mind.

This shouldn't be seen as a limitation. But we should recognize that this is the programme, this the world we live in and the world from which we learn. And that world is formed, coloured and shaped by the language we have learned and the experiences that we have had.

I feel that Robert Sapolsky's *Why Zebra's Don't Get Ulcers* should be required reading. Another book that is almost as good is called *Don't Sleep, there are Snakes* by Daniel Everett. This book was written by a former Christian missionary who went out to the Amazon jungle on a mission to convert a particular tribe to Christianity, but ended up being converted himself. It is an interesting tale because the language of this particular tribe, the Pirahã, doesn't seem to be connected to anybody else's language in the world. They have a completely different way of symbolizing reality. I won't bore you with the details, because I know that listening to other people talk about books about which they're

enthusiastic can be extremely trying. But here are a few small snippets just to give you a taste.

The Pirahã have no concept of number. Many tribal peoples around the world have a very simple idea about numbers, like ‘One, two, three, lots’; or basic numbers, or numbers up to ten. The Pirahã have no concept of number at all. They can’t think the thought of one or two or three. So you may have believed that mathematics was a sort of basis of life in the universe; you may have thought that everything was organized through ones, twos, threes, fours, fives and sixes and so on. But the Pirahã do not do numbers. Number has no meaning for them.

There’s an interesting little incident in the book. The Pirahã are a very intelligent people and live in communication with other tribes. One day the tribespeople approached the missionary and said, ‘Now, you’ve been talking about this number stuff. We’re really interested because we think that these guys up the river are ripping us off. We know they are not being fair, and we think this number stuff you are talking about might help us figure out how they are not being fair. So can you teach us? We’ll put some effort into this. We’ll really give it a go.’ For eight months the missionary took the six brightest people in the village and tried to talk them through what a number was – one stick, and then there are two sticks, three sticks, etc. After eight months of working together with the half dozen brightest people in the village, not a single one of them could count up to ten. It just had no meaning.

They also can't talk about things that haven't been seen by either themselves or an eye-witness. So when the missionary tried to explain the battle of Jericho and how the walls came tumbling down, they said, 'That must have been a big sound. That must have been really noisy. What did it look like?'

'I wasn't there. That was a long time ago.'

'So you didn't see it? Who told you about it?'

'I read about it in a book. Nobody told me about it. It happened thousands of years ago.'

'So you didn't see it and you don't know anybody who saw it?'

'No. It's a story.'

As soon as it was clear that there was no eyewitness, it wasn't as though they said, 'Well, that's boring' or, 'We don't believe you'; they would simply disconnect. The words would stop having meaning if they didn't relate to something that was personally witnessed. If someone walks down a path and goes round the corner, they can't talk about them because they are not around.

They don't have words for individual colours, so they compare things to natural qualities. Black is known as 'old blood'. They have no way of saying green, which in the Amazon is rather unusual. And they have no language for time.

Interestingly, they are an extremely cohesive society. They are not all saints, they have their problems, but they are an extraordinarily well-integrated society. And their language is extremely complex, so it took the missionary

fifteen or twenty years to really master it, even though it doesn't have things like numbers, colours or time. They have a huge range of different verb forms to describe experiences. So he actually had to become like them, to think like them in order to learn the language, because it was so different. And through thinking like them his relationship to biblical Christianity fell to pieces.

So realizing how differently some people can see the world, free from our familiar constructs, helps put our own fabrications and preoccupations into perspective. We create a world where numbers are real. Numbers have names, you can add them and subtract them, and it all seems normal and absolutely unremarkable. We create a world where things have colours – this is black, that is brown – but these are constructed realities, fabricated perceptions. They don't have any intrinsic existence. 'Number' is something our mind creates. It doesn't have an intrinsic existence of its own. 'Personhood,' 'individuality' and 'time' are constructed. The Pirahã tribe have no real way of talking about the past or the future. But in the West we create concepts of time and then make them real by our communal belief in them. We say, 'Today is Friday and it is nine-forty.' If everyone in our office agrees to arrive at work at 'ten o'clock', we are oblivious to the notion that 'ten o'clock' is a Western construction on which everyone has colluded.

Our name is a construct, as is our notion of individuality. We construct these things and live with them for useful reasons. But the more we take them to be absolute truths, the more we are stuck in *sīlabata parāmāsa*, attachment to

conventions. So next time you look at a clock and recognize that it is seventy-three, maybe ask yourself what that would mean to a member of the Pirahã tribe. What is seven?

A friend in California, a computer scientist, had a daughter who was a brilliant artist but almost completely dis-numerate – numbers meant almost nothing to her. She struggled with mathematics at school. At one point it seemed as if she was improving, but at the age of nine she asked her father, ‘Is four less than seven, or is it bigger?’ Like the Pirahã she hadn’t quite got this number thing figured out. She was an extraordinarily gifted graphic artist, but numbers meant nothing to her.

So we must learn to be able to reflect on the fact that this world is a created world, a compounded world. Learning to see this helps us to be *lokavidū*, to know the world. If we believe that our world is absolutely real, rather than that this is just our own particular version of it, constructed, compounded and dependent, we are always going to be tied to the world and limited by it.

In another very significant *sutta* (S 2.26) there is a dialogue between the Buddha and a *devata* called Rohitassa. This is a teaching of which Bhikkhu Bodhi, who is one of the great translators of the Pali Canon into English, says it ‘... may well be the most profound proposition in the history of human thought.’ The *devata* Rohitassa encounters the Buddha and says to him, ‘When I was a human being in my last life I was a yogi and I had the ability to walk through the sky, I was a skywalker. I could walk from one side of India to the other in no great

time. I made a vow that I would walk until I reached the end of the world. But even though I walked through the sky non-stop for many years, still I couldn't reach the end of the world, and I died on my journey before I had reached the world's end.' And the Buddha said, 'Yes, Rohitassa, that is how it is – you cannot reach the end of the world by walking. But I tell you this: if you don't reach the end of the world you won't reach the end of suffering.'

That's a compelling statement. You can't reach the end of the world by walking, but if you don't reach the end of the world you won't reach the end of suffering. This might sound like a bit of a disappointment, but then the Buddha said, 'The world, Rohitassa, is in this very fathom-long body with its thoughts and perceptions – in this body there is the world, there is the origin of the world, there is the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.' So in this very life, within the sphere of this living experience, the world can be known.

When we recognize that the world is created through our thoughts and perceptions, that we build this world, that it is a caused, dependent thing, we can also see that it arises and therefore ceases. It is a process that is known through our awareness.

You will notice that the formulation the Buddha expresses here is very close to the formulation of the Four Noble Truths. Seeing the world as a solid, separate thing equates with *dukkha* – insofar as we make the world solid and separate, there is unsatisfactoriness, suffering. When that is understood, when

the world is known in that way, when that whole process of arising and ceasing of perception is seen – the world takes shape, arises, forms and then dissolves – this equates to understanding the cause of *dukkha*. We see *dukkha* being caused, we see *dukkha* arising, we see *dukkha* ceasing. Through this the heart is liberated from all *dukkha*. In the same way, once the world is known for what it is, once we have seen the comings and goings of the world – the world is caused, the world arises, the world ceases – the heart is able to be freed from identification with the world, the heart is liberated from the world.

In a similar vein there is another very significant *sutta* from the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Kevaddha Sutta* (D 11). In this discourse the Buddha is teaching a layman named Kevaddha who has asked him some questions. The Buddha tells him the story of a monk who had developed some skill in meditation, but during the course of his meditation a question arose in his mind: ‘Where is it that earth, water, fire and wind fade out without remainder?’ One could also rephrase the question: ‘Is there a place where the world and the things of the world – earth, water, fire and wind – will fade away and not arise again? Where might I find that – the end of the world?’

The Buddha tells Kevaddha how this question arose in the mind of that meditator, and how he was eager to pursue it, so he absorbed his mind in concentration and the pathway to the different heavenly realms appeared in front of him. First he makes his way to the Heaven of the Four Great Kings, the four guardian deities of the world, and says to them, ‘I’ve got a question which

I've been puzzling over. Can you tell me where it is that the four great elements – earth, water, fire and wind – fade out and cease without remainder?’

The deities reply, ‘We're the guardian deities. Our job is to look after the world. We're in charge of earth, water, fire and wind, but that kind of question is well beyond us. You should try upstairs. Go to the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven. Lord Indra is up there and there must be someone, either Lord Indra himself or some other deities in his retinue, who will be able to help you out. This is way too profound for us. We're just the bodyguards here, the bouncers who keep the troublemakers out of the world. We're just the security here, the *lokapālas*– just the muscle, not philosophers. You'd better try upstairs. They are more skilled in this kind of thing than we are.

So the monk makes his way up to the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Deities. He asks his question of the retinue of Indra and they don't know the answer. He then asks Indra himself, who says, ‘Oh, you know, I'm the King of the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Deities, but that philosophy is beyond me. I can fight wars with the *asuras*, and I enjoy a good relationship with the Buddha and I like to receive teachings, but this wisdom stuff is really beyond me; you had better try upstairs.’

The monk journeyed up one realm after another – through the Yāmā Devas to the Tusitā Heaven, to the heaven of those who delight in the creations of others, and all the way up through the seven sensory heavens into the Brahmā world and finally into the realm of Mahā-Brahmā. At each level the deities tell

him they don't know the answer and send him upstairs. Finally, he thinks to himself, 'Okay, I'm now in the Brahmāloka, so I really ought to be able to get some answers here.'

He meets some of the Brahmā gods.

'Oh, Great Beings, you are marvellously glorious, wonderful and beautiful. I am in awe of being in the presence of such bright, brilliant, vast and wise deities as yourselves. I have this question: Where is it that earth, water, fire and wind cease without remainder? Where is it that the world comes to an end?'

And they say 'Well, you've probably come to the right place, but we can't really help you, because this is the kind of question that only Mahā-Brahmā would be able to answer – we're just his ministers. We're the office staff here. You'll need to wait until Mahā-Brahmā manifests. But if you wait a while, maybe Mahā-Brahmā will actually appear. We never know when the Great One will manifest, but if you wait a bit it could be that the Holy One will appear and then he'll be able to answer your question.'

So as you would expect, the monk waited around for a little while, and then a light started to glow in the distance, and Mahā-Brahmā manifested.

The monk approached Mahā-Brahmā and said, 'Oh, Mahā-Brahmā, Thrice Great and Wise One, I have a question I wish to ask you which has arisen in my meditation. I wish to know where is it that earth, water, fire and wind fade out and cease without remainder.' Mahā-Brahmā said, 'I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Almighty, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord,

the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be.’

‘Well, yes, thank you very much... I understand that you are the Great Mahā-Brahmā and so forth, but I didn’t ask about that. I asked where it is that earth, water, fire and wind fade out and cease without remainder.’

‘I am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Almighty, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, the Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be.’

‘Thank you very much again, but that’s not actually what I asked.’

Of course, this being a Buddhist story, they go back and forth three times. It says in the *sutta* that after the monk posed his question for the third time, Mahā-Brahmā took him by the elbow, led him outside and said, ‘Look, you are embarrassing me in front of my retinue. I don’t know where earth, water, fire and wind fade out and cease without remainder, and you have done wrong in coming all this way up the Brahmā world to ask me. You are a disciple of the Buddha, you are a *bhikkhu*, so you should rather go and ask the Master because this is his territory and he is the one who can explain to you how to understand this.’

Duly chastened, the monk shot down from the Brahmā world, returned to the monastery, found the Buddha and recounted the story. The Buddha said, ‘Like a land-seeking bird that flies from the ship and goes north, south, east and west, and eventually has to come back to the ship because it hasn’t found land, you

have eventually come back to me where you should have come in the first place. However, the question you have been asking has been phrased in the wrong way. This is one reason why you were not getting an answer. You shouldn't have asked where earth, water, fire and wind cease without remainder, but rather you should have asked: 'Where is it that earth, water, fire and wind can find no footing?'

He went on to explain: 'The answer is the consciousness (*viññānaṃ*) which is non-manifest, invisible, formless (*anidassanaṃ*), limitless, infinite (*anantaṃ*), and radiant in all directions (*sabbato pabhaṃ*).' These adjectives describe the pure heart, the enlightened mind. 'It is here in this awakened consciousness that earth, water, fire and wind can find no footing, they get no traction. Here also, long and short, and coarse and fine, pure and impure can find no footing, there is no landing-place for them in this consciousness.

In this consciousness, name-and-form, all things material and mental, cease without remainder. Here they are held in check; they are understood and known without delusion.'

In this *sutta* the Buddha uses the Pali term *viññāna* to describe this awakened form of consciousness. This is a very unusual deployment of the term *viññāna*, because it usually means a discriminative consciousness, the mental faculty which distinguishes 'this' from 'that'. In this *sutta* it means instead an all-encompassing awareness. This one term here becomes shorthand for all the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, a description of the enlightened mind. In

addition, the list of adjectives the Buddha uses in the *sutta* describes this consciousness in more detail. The enlightened mind is awake, it is aware. It is invisible. It is non-manifest. It has no form, it is formless. *Viññāna* is infinitely commodious – it has limitless capacity; it is unconfined in its capacity to accommodate all things. This *viññāna* is luminous, radiant in all directions and, in some renditions, this adjective is translated as ‘accessible on all sides’. Either way the terminology works well.

This is the description of the pure heart. It isn’t just something from a 2,500 year-old story; this is your pure heart, this is your mind.

When there is freedom from obscurations in the heart, when the hindrances have been dropped and there is full wakefulness and attention to the present reality, this is what is experienced: awareness, spaciousness, all-encompassing capacity, brightness, luminosity, radiance. When the heart is in tune with Dhamma, in tune with its own nature, this is how it appears – these are the natural qualities of the pure heart, of the enlightened mind: knowing, emptiness, spaciousness and brightness. These are its natural attributes.

In the Thai language there is a similar string of terms which Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Buddhadasa and others would use (they alliterate very neatly): *sawang* (สว่าง) means ‘radiant’, *sa-ah* (สะอาด) means ‘pure’, *sangoup* (สงบ) is ‘peaceful’. Purity, radiance and peace. Ajahn Chah would often say that these are the characteristics of the Dhamma. When the Dhamma is realized, when it is

awakened to, when the heart knows the Dhamma, the attributes experienced at that moment are purity, radiance and peacefulness.

Now, you may hear this description of the awakened heart and question its desirability. No footing is found for the long and short, the pure and impure, the coarse and fine – it might sound like a Teflon heart, a non-stick heart. Whatever happens, whether painful or pleasant, beautiful or ugly, coarse or fine, pure or impure; whatever shape earth, water, fire or wind takes there, it has that non-stick quality, no footing can be found. There is nothing; nothing snags, nothing sticks. You may think this description of the awakened heart isn't very appealing because we like to keep sticking to certain things. But in ground-free non-abiding there is a wonderful open freeness to the flow of perception.

These are just some images to bear in mind. When the heart is free from conceptual proliferation it abides in the quality of *nippapañca*. One of the epithets of the Buddha is *Nippapañca*, 'one who is free from complications'. When you read the suttas and study the Buddha's expositions you might think, 'His mind is so complicated. Look at this extraordinary range of intricate analyses of the mind and the world, and this fantastic array of images and similes, and his incredible knowledge...' But it is important to realize that the mind of the Buddha was *nippapañca*, free from complications. Though the enlightened mind, the awakened mind of the Buddha had extraordinary intelligence and capacity for knowledge and information, his mind was still *nippapañca*. The Buddha's own experience of the present moment was *nippapañca*, free from all complication.

The saying, ‘Don’t complicate the uncomplicated’ is worth bearing in mind. Reality itself, Dhamma itself, is supremely uncomplicated. Do the best you can to refrain from complicating it. The mind has a habit of always wanting to dress things up, to elaborate and explain; these are its habitual complicating tendencies, *papañca*. Learn to recognize the stress of that, the tension of that *dukkha* of complication. And learn to recognize that we don’t have to do that. Just let go. Right here in this moment the heart is free from it and there is an openness to the present. As Ajahn Sumedho says, ‘Ignorance complicates everything.’

When there is *avijjā* we don’t see clearly, there is complication. When there is knowing, there is no complication.



TIME  
AND  
TIMELESSNESS

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#NINE

OPENING THE HEART TO THE NEW DAY, with the pale, dim light of night-time, the moon and the stars slowly giving way to the rising sun, and colour and form coming back into our perceptions, we bring attention to these cycles of day and night. A new day being born like a new breath; an inhalation being born. The day arises, a feeling arises, a thought swells up into being, does its thing and then fades away, whether it is a breath, a day or a lifetime. But that which knows birth and death is not tied to birth and death. It's said the sun rises, but from the sun's point of view it doesn't rise. It is just doing its thing. It is because of the spinning of the earth that we speak of sunrise, but from the sun's point of view it is not going anywhere. Similarly, if we shift our perspective to being the knowing, we are no longer attached to all the births

and deaths, the successes and failures, the springs and autumns. When you let go of that habit of grasping and identification, the heart abides in the position of the sun – central, bright, radiant, unwavering.

Of course, all analogies are partial, imperfect. We could say, 'But the sun is moving, spinning, hurtling through space as well', but for the purpose of this image we take the sun in the context of this solar system as the symbol of wisdom – absolutely pure, with ocean-like compassion, the wisdom, the awareness of your own heart. When refuge is taken in the Buddha, awareness has the central position; taking refuge in the Buddha is being that awareness. The planets, asteroids, moons all spin and circle round it. They come and go and change

and modulate, but that which is at the centre is vast, steady, bright, and all the comings and goings happen around it. Because we are attached to the surface of the earth, we say that the sun rises and sets. Those who are attached to the body and personality say they are born and die. If you let go of that attachment to the body and personality, let go of the surface of the earth, take the position of the sun of wisdom, then what is the difference between the birth of a breath or a thought, and the perception of a body being born and a body dying? Our heart knows there is no difference. How could there be?

Let go of attachment to the body, to personality, to feelings of 'I am'. By letting go of self, by not creating an identification, an individuality, an 'I', we are not creating bondage to the

feeling of self. Let go of the sense of location. Let go of the feeling of place, recognizing, awakening to the fact that awareness is unlocated. Non-locality is the nature of the mind. It does not exist fixed in any one place. Space does not apply in the realm of the mind, the *nāma khandhā*. Here, there, everywhere, nowhere – 'where' does not apply. Let go of self, let go of place and let go of time. In the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (M 131) the Buddha describes the ideal abiding, the ideal solitude. One who is wise lets go of thoughts of the past, lets go of thoughts about the future, lets go of creations about the self here in the present moment. This is the ideal solitude, the ideal abiding, the ideal security of the here and now, of the *paccuppanna dhamma*, the ever-present *dhamma*.

When the heart rests in this quality – this awareness, *vijjā*, this knowing, attentive to the present reality – there is letting go of time. A conditioned mind habituated to Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, to four o'clock, five o'clock, six o'clock, tends to see the past as solid reality stretching off into the infinite behind us. It creates the future, stretching off endlessly ahead of us. Dates that are still to come seem like real days, real months, real years, while the present seems like an insignificant little sliver, squashed between the vast and incalculable past and future, back to the Big Bang and beyond, off into the infinite possibilities of what is to come. This little sliver, this tiny unimportant moment between a vast past and a vast future, may seem insignificant, nothing very much. But this is simply our conditioned perception of time.

When there is wisdom we bring attention moment by moment to the felt experience of this life. There is a watching, a contemplating of how the world is formed, how life is experienced and shaped. We see the past is a memory, constructed here and now. The future is an imagined fantasy. Future and past – these words refer to formless potentialities, concepts that are generated and fabricated here and now. The image of the past, the memory of the past arises here and now. The imagined future is here and now. And the closer we look, the closer it is seen that the present is actually an infinite plain of being – the future and the past are insignificant little threads dangling in the breeze like broken spider webs, nothing very much at all. The absolute reality of Dhamma, the very fabric of nature, is here and now. Dhamma is

*sanditthiko*, apparent here and now, *akāliko*, timeless, *paccuppanna* (ever-present). There is never any moment other than this moment.

It is interesting that the ancient Greeks had two gods of time. Chronos is the god of linear time, represented by an infinite straight thread stretching from the infinity of the past to the infinity of the future. Chronos is the god of the changing seasons, the coming and going of days and nights and the turning year. But Kairos is the god of the present moment. Kairos was represented by an infinite plain through which the thread of Chronos passes; an infinite sheet, a vast, incalculably broad plane of the present through which the thread of linear time passes. This present moment which each of us experiences uniquely is where the infinite plane

of Kairos and the infinite thread of Chronos meet each other. This present is where time and timelessness meet. T. S. Eliot expressed this wonderfully in the *Dry Salvages* in his *Four Quartets*:

*‘Men’s curiosity searches past and future  
And clings to that dimension. But to  
apprehend*

*The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time is an occupation for the saint—  
No occupation either, but something  
given*

*And taken, in a lifetime’s death in love,  
Ardour, selflessness and self-surrender.’*

This is a poetic way of speaking: ‘To apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time is an occupation for the saint’ – or for the average Buddhist meditator. When we gather together to chant, to meditate, that is

linear time intersecting with the infinity of the *akālika dhamma*, the timeless reality, *sanditthiko*, apparent here and now, *paccuppanna*, ever-present.

‘To apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time’, the conditioned and the unconditioned – this is the task. Moment by moment, day by day, the timeless meets with the time-bound, with the attributes of the seeming self – this body, this personality, this name, this role in society. Who am I? The room I live in? My role as a retreatant, as a monastic, as a listener, as a speaker? Those personal qualities meet the fundamentally non-personal. The role of space, me sitting in my spot here on the central cushion, you in your spot, your mat, your place; this is the reality of three-dimensional location meeting the non-locality, the

unlocated quality of mind. This is the task: to attend to this meeting point of self and not-self, time and timelessness, place and placelessness. This is the mysterious Middle Way where we respect both those realities. If there is clinging to the unconditioned or the formless, there is a loss of harmony, a loss of attunement to the realm of form. If there is clinging to the realm of form, identity and time and place, there is a loss of attunement to the timeless reality. The Middle Way is to attend to both; to the meeting point, the mysterious balancing point of the conditioned and the unconditioned, the created and the uncreated.

The word the Buddha coined to refer to himself is *Tathāgata*. It is composed of two parts: ‘*tatha*’ or ‘*tath*’ means ‘such’ or ‘thus’, and ‘*gata*’ or ‘*āgata*’ mean,

respectively ‘to go’ or ‘to come’. The two halves together make *Tathāgata*, but as you can see there is an inherent ambiguity in the word. For millennia there has been a debate over whether the Buddha meant ‘*tath-āgata*’ (come to suchness, come to thusness, one who is totally immanent), or ‘*tathā-gata*’ (one who is gone to suchness, utterly gone, transcendent). Is the Buddha principle totally here or totally gone? Is it immanence, embedded, embodied in the living world, the sense world; or is it totally transcendent, beyond, utterly unentangled? In Pali, the ‘a’ at the beginning of a word means it is negative, so *gata* means to go, *āgata* means to come. What did the Buddha mean? Why did he choose this word to refer to himself? Did the Buddha mean totally ‘here’ or totally ‘gone’?

The Buddha was very fond of wordplay and double meanings. It seems that he coined this word deliberately because of its ambiguity. It means both totally here and totally gone; utterly immanent, fully attuned to the sense world, to earth, water, fire and wind; but giving them no footing – utterly transcendent, unentangled. So the Buddha principle participates fully and harmoniously in the sense world, attuned to earth, water, fire and wind; to conditionality; to sights, sounds, smells, taste, touch, thought, emotion. It is completely attuned, heartfully in harmony with all things, and yet is completely transcendent of all things; simultaneously utterly unentangled, without conflict, without confusion, without division – totally here, totally gone, heartfully participating and totally equanimous, unidentified,

unattached. To the thinking mind this can seem bewildering, but the heart knows that Middle Way, that point of intersection. So we train ourselves to trust that. This is the occupation for the practitioner, the saint, one given to *sanctus*, peace.

‘Something given and taken’; we give our attention to this moment and we receive the gift of this moment, the gift of Dhamma – letting go of self, giving our attention, receiving the presence of the reality of the Dhamma itself. We receive that presence ‘in a lifetime’s death, in love, ardour, selflessness and self-surrender.’

When the left and right eyes operate in a balanced way, they give us a sense of the three-dimensional world. So too, the eye which sees the conditioned and

the eye which sees the unconditioned together give us a realistic orientation in the world of form and the world of the formless. Sustaining and maintaining a respect for both realities is what orients the heart, helps us to know and sustain that Middle Way, being that Middleness itself. The thinking mind can flounder and become bewildered. But we don’t have to figure it out. Balancing on a bicycle or a tightrope is not a conceptual activity, it is a whole-body learning. Finding the Middle Way is not a conceptual learning; it is a whole-body, a whole-being learning, a whole-being training.

When we find that point of balance, when that Middle Way is embodied, present, known, this is the great delight of the heart. There is a quality of freedom and spaciousness. We can

really enjoy our life. In the verses of Hui Neng, the Sixth Patriarch of the Ch'an Buddhist school of China, it is said:

'In this moment there is no thing that comes to be, in this moment there is no thing that ceases to be, thus in this

moment there is no birth and death to be brought to an end.

'Therefore this moment is absolute peace; and though it is just this moment, there is no limit to this moment and herein is eternal delight.'





THE  
PRACTICE  
OF  
DHAMMA  
IN  
DAILY  
LIFE

CHAPTER EIGHT

DURING THIS RETREAT we have formed a little community, a Dhamma collective, and been on the journey together for this time. Conversation in the various group interviews during the last few days has naturally turned toward the possibilities of life after the retreat has come to an end. As we know, all things are impermanent; you've heard about *anicca*.

It is natural enough for the mind to consider a meditation retreat situation delightful. The mind can be so peaceful. Every morning I find myself thinking, 'Another day in paradise.' This time together is very beautiful, very benign, with perfect supportive conditions for meditation – noble company, everyone working very hard, being very disciplined, quiet, contained, a wonderful support team, everybody pulling together in a harmonious and experienced way to support our time together, so the ship runs perfectly smoothly. But though this is very delightful, the downside, the liability, is that we become deeply attached. Some of you might be thinking, 'Oh, no – he's talking about the end already!' You can almost smell the city as it swallows you up. You feel that list of things to do, that huge pile of emails stacking up in the in-tray. And so there is that feeling of attachment: 'I want this to go on forever.' 'Oh, no, it's time to go back to that horrible world out there.' But that would imply an unskilful use of this time and this situation, understandable enough but also not very helpful. We don't create these retreat environments in order to compound our attachments and create more causes for suffering; that's not the point. That might be an unexpected side-effect, but it's not the point.

I see these retreat situations as like learning a musical instrument; sitting in the music room with a piano doing your five-finger exercises, playing your scales. The room is contained, there is nothing else going on, it's just you and the piano; ideal conditions for teaching your fingers where to go. You learn the lessons you need to learn in order to master the instrument. But the real creation of music and the engagement with musical skill take place outside the music room. We don't sit in the little enclosed chamber in order to be there forever, or to make it the only environment in which we can play. Though in a way retreat situations are also like an operating theatre. We create special sterilized conditions in order to carry out a particular kind of task, develop a particular skill. But the usefulness of this is how we use that skill outside. It's like coming out of the operating theatre and going about your everyday life as a healthy being once again.

Luang Por Chah would often say that in practising formal meditation you are learning skills you can take with you into the home, into the school-yard, to the farm, to the office, on the road. When we learn to meditate, the lessons we learn manifest themselves in how we live with our fellow human beings. They are embodied in how we get along with our family, with husband, wife, kids, parents, siblings. I feel it is most important not to try to create meditation as an isolation chamber which we can inhabit, keeping out the cruel world and holding life at bay. Dhamma practice is not a little bubble where we can hide, nice and safe in our tiny box. When we learn to meditate, when we attend retreats and deepen

our practice, we are learning skills we can apply in the rough and tumble of our everyday life – living in the working world and with the family, negotiating with our fellow beings on the motorway, spreading loving-kindness on the train, going through airports, sitting in business meetings. We are learning how to carry the practice of Dhamma into those situations.

In a way it should not be a surprise to hear that Dhamma practice needs to be carried over into the world. As I've been saying over and over again, the world is in the mind. It's not just 'the world of the monastery', 'the world of the shrine room' or 'the world of the meadow' that is in your mind – the world of your business is in your mind, the focus group meetings are in your mind, the train is in your mind. All the various aspects of our world are here in the same place. Our bodies might be travelling back to Germany, Ireland, Thailand, Sri Lanka or other places, but this is just the perception changing. It's not as if Amaravati is the truly real place and the staff room at your school is somehow an inferior reality. The Dhamma can be found in your school. Dhamma can be found on the motorway and in Germany and Thailand – none of this is outside the scope of mindfulness and wisdom, because it's all just perception, it's all happening in the same place.

#### NO ONE GOING ANYWHERE

One of the teachings I have encouraged you to develop is the contemplation of the body. This is definitely something you can continue with as you travel

from the monastery back into your everyday life. The perception of the body moving outside the boundaries of the monastery is experienced. We perceive our bodies getting into cars, planes and trains, and going to other places. As you are pulling out of the driveway of the monastery, recognize that it's not as if anybody is really going anywhere; there are just perceptions of mind which are changing.

In 1983 I asked Ajahn Sumedho for permission to go on a long walk through England. I was living at Chithurst Monastery and we had just started the practice of *tudong*, long distance walks, in Britain – camping in the countryside, living on alms food – so I asked if I could make a long walk between Chithurst and Harnham in Northumberland. Ajahn Sumedho kindly granted me permission to go. There were a number of months of preparation. I got my gear together. I made a pair of leather sandals with the help of another monk who had been a shoemaker before he was ordained. My travelling companion Nick Scott and I roughly worked out the route we would take through the country. We had about half a dozen people who had extended invitations for hospitality. We resolved to include them all, so this made a very long winding route through England. Chithurst and Harnham are about four hundred miles apart as the crow flies, but the route we took ended up being about eight hundred and thirty.

So it was to be a long journey, and my mind was filled with preparations and hoping it would all go well, and figuring out what gear we should have with us. The mind was very much fixed on the idea of this big journey up ahead and

the prospect of setting forth. On the morning when Nick Scott and I departed from Chithurst Monastery in May 1983, one comment of Luang Por Sumedho's really stuck with me – he said, 'Actually, there's nobody going anywhere, there are just conditions of mind that are changing.' It was one of those moments when you think, 'Oh yes! Of course!' Even though I'd heard those kinds of words many times before, that morning there was a wonderful contrast between that clear wisdom teaching and the strong, deluded feeling that I was actually going somewhere, with all the becoming that goes along with that feeling. It held up a mirror. So as we made the journey I kept bringing that same recollection to mind. There is a perception of the feet moving along, blisters arising and passing away, different experiences of sun, rain and so forth – but no one is going anywhere, there are just conditions of mind that are changing.

When you begin to notice and reflect in this way, wherever you go, every place you visit, is always 'here'. When we are practising walking meditation we perceive the body walking up and down on the meditation path. You start at one end of the path and you are 'here'. There is a perception of the body walking for twenty-five yards, and when you reach the other end of the path you are 'here'. You turn around and walk again; and even as you are walking, you are 'here'.

#### WE ARE ALWAYS HERE

Maybe you think this is the ultimate Dhamma nonsense. You think to yourself, 'Be reasonable, Ajahn – I won't always be here. In the real world I have

a plane to catch and borders to cross, places to go and things to do.’ That is true, but although we are respecting those practical necessities – yes, there are bags to check in and schedules to meet – still, even standing in the queue to check in at the airport, where are you? You are here. On a plane, you are here. When you get off the plane in Germany, Thailand or Ireland, or wherever it might be – where are you? Here. Always here.

The world happens in our mind. There is the perception of the body moving around, going about its different activities. Regardless of the complexity of the things which are being perceived, you can recollect that it is all happening in the mind – no matter how comfortable or uncomfortable the situation, how familiar or unfamiliar, there is always that quality of presence. The actuality of the world happening in our minds brings the attention to this moment. Bringing all our experience into this context is a direct and radical way of cutting the stream of becoming, stopping the stream of becoming ‘me going somewhere’. There’s a letting go of that, and in that letting go and recognizing that quality of presence and timelessness, there’s that intuition in the heart: ‘Oh, right. Nibbāna is the cessation of becoming.’ ‘Me going somewhere’ is let go of and right here is peace.

## MICRO-MEDITATIONS

We can develop that practice while there are the perceptions of the body in motion, and we can also make use of just being physically still. So many of

us have a sense of our life being very busy, just one thing after another. From the moment we get up we are racing to the next thing, throwing down some breakfast and getting into the car or on the bus or the train, going to work and following a schedule, and one thing after another after another. This even happens when we are retired – people almost invariably say that after they retired their days became even more full and busy than in their working life.

So one of the simple practices that I like to encourage, particularly if you have that sense of busyness and non-stopness in your days, is to develop stopping points, what I like to call micro-meditations. These are very simple and they really are micro. For example, when you get up in the morning and go into the kitchen to get your breakfast together, before you touch the tap or the toaster or the kettle, just stop and stand in the middle of your kitchen. You might be wondering, ‘What are my family going to think about this?’ Don’t worry about that for the time being. When you come into the kitchen, stop before you do anything, before you touch anything. If you want to have a clear sense of peacefulness and support for this kind of breaking of the stream of becoming, just stop, stand there and don’t move. Just stand there for five seconds. It’s very striking how, if you just stop when you are in the middle of something, five seconds is a long time. Just stop – and then put the kettle on and get the toaster going.

Throughout the day we can stop at different times and be still. When we take a moment to unplug the momentum of the thing we believe we are doing, and

instead attend to the present, the effect is striking. When you get into the car and sit down in the driver's seat, there is no law which says you have to turn on the ignition as soon as you've fitted your seatbelt on or closed the door. That is not required by any government anywhere on the planet. Again, you might be worried about what your friends and neighbours might think of you, but don't worry about what 'they' will think. We spend a lot of our life energy worrying about what 'they' might think, but have you ever met 'them', the ones whose job it is to make judgements about your life? I have never met them. But we worry a lot about what 'they' will think. For the time being, don't. When you get in your car and are sitting in the driver's seat, before you touch the wheel, turn the key or push the button, whatever you do to start a car nowadays, just let yourself sit there and don't do anything. Think of the driver's seat as your meditation cushion; just sit there, just be still – one, two, three, four, five. Then turn the key or whatever.

You can be creative with ways to develop this during the day. You may feel you've no space in your day or that life is just one thing after another, one continuous rush, but when you take the trouble to develop these micro-meditations it is astonishing how much space there really is in the day. It's like this retreat room; you might think it's really crowded, but actually there is much more space than people in this room. We don't notice the space because the people catch our attention. Similarly, there is a lot more space in the day than we realize, and all of us can afford to take five extra seconds half a dozen times

a day. Whatever the pattern of your life might be, I would really encourage this. Some of you may be thinking that it is a total waste of time, absolutely ridiculous. ‘Five seconds? What difference is that going to make?’ Well, I encourage you to try it out and see. Rather than listen to that inner critic, that intelligent cynic who knows best, invite her to sit to one side for the time being. Say to your inner cynic, ‘Thank you very much for sharing – you can sit over there for now.’ And try this kind of thing out.

I lived at Amaravati from 1985-95. That was about the first ten years of Amaravati’s existence, and there was a huge amount of building work and activity. It was a very dynamic place to be living. There was a constant flow of work projects. None of these buildings were insulated when we first came here, they were just scout huts. Originally they were built as a summer camp, so nothing was insulated, nothing was heated. We took the wooden cladding off the outside of all these buildings, increased the thickness of the wall by two inches by putting wooden batons on all the uprights, and then filled the wall with six inches of insulation. We planed off the timber cladding and then nailed it all back up again on the outside, and we did this for pretty much all the monastery buildings.

There was a lot of work going on and it was very inspiring and enjoyable time.

During the course of the day as we were working, I used to stop, take short pauses and practice these micro-meditations. In the same spirit, I would go to the worksite when the work wasn’t happening, for instance immediately after the

morning *pūjā* had finished. At six-thirty I would go over to the building we were working on; the whole hall ripped apart, the place filled with bales of insulator and piles of lumber. There would be no one else around, just saw-horses and nails and hammers. I would sit down on the floor on a bale of insulation in the middle of the worksite, and just take in the silence and the stillness. All the shapes and the smells and all the perceptions of the work scene were there, but no busyness, no people, no ‘thing’ going on. Work began after breakfast. At eight-fifteen everyone would show up. We would all be wearing our work gear and dust-masks, and the whole place would soon be filled with activity and noise, and people and movement. In the midst of this activity, something in the back of the mind remembered the stillness that was here before it all began. In the course of the busyness and activity of the day there was that residual memory.

At the end of the day, at maybe nine-thirty or ten at night, I would come into the area where the work had been going on, and again sit down and just perceive, take in the workplace – the moonlight coming through the windows, nobody else around; just seeing the saw-horses and the hammers and the moonlight shining on them, perfectly silent, still, the smell of insulation dust in the air. And again feeling the silence, the space, the stillness.

Something in the heart recollects the space within which everything is happening, the stillness which lies behind it – that is the effect of this practice. We are reconfiguring the way we relate to familiar places. You can do this in

your home. Stand quietly in your kitchen or sit quietly in your living room and do nothing; don't read a book, don't turn on the television, don't put your earphones in. Go and sit in an unusual spot, on the window-sill, on the carpet; just be there with no one else around and let yourself take in the nature of that space when nothing is happening. Then, when the rest of the family is around or something is going on and there is activity, something in the mind remembers the still space in which it's all happening.

I would do the same thing with business meetings. If there was an English Sangha Trust meeting, with all sorts of decisions needing to be made and people showing up wearing suits and ties, I would arrive beforehand at the place where we were going to have the meeting, and just sit on a chair and take in the table, the notepads, the agenda and the minutes. I might add a few little verbal cues, like saying to myself: 'English Sangha Trust' as I sat in the silence beforehand, or I might just remind myself during the meeting with the word 'silence'. And when the meeting was over and everyone had gone, I would again just take note of the silence afterwards.

There is also the exercise in which we notice the space before a thought, then the thought and then the space after the thought, and this keeps the whole thought in context. We can do this in relationship to our whole world too. If you work in a school, go into a classroom when there are no kids in it, and take in the blackboard, the desks, the smell of the chalk or the white-board marker; become aware of the feeling of the space in the room.

Again, you can develop this and fill in the gaps for yourself, work it into your own living situation, whether you are in a school or a Buddhist centre, between jobs, or whatever it might be. This is the practice of shaking up and reworking our habitual perceptions. What creates that sense of endlessly going from one thing to another, caught in relentless becoming, is our habituation; the mind becoming complacent, becoming conditioned and following habits, caught in a rut. We can use these exercises to help shake up our perceptions and avoid being caught in automatic activity, to see familiar things in a different way.

#### THE VALUE OF SĪLA

Another reason why our hearts and minds become peaceful in a retreat situation is because we are not doing anything to disturb ourselves, we are living by the Precepts. I often wonder what it would be like to hold a retreat where we don't actually do any meditation, but just keep silence and live on the Eight Precepts together for a week. My pet theory is that it would be really very enjoyable, because one of the blessings of a retreat situation is that for its duration no one does anything that is really regrettable. Maybe somebody among you took an extra slice of dessert, but that's probably the worst any of us have done during this retreat. So the mind isn't troubled by having to remember hurtful, selfish, unkind or greedy things we have done. We haven't told any lies. We haven't engaged in any kind of sexual misconduct. We haven't killed anyone...

There is a beautiful quality in living according to the Precepts, and the standard of living by the Five Precepts is encouraged outside the retreat situation. That in itself is not a small thing, because in terms of Buddhist psychology the basis for self-respect and the quality of well-being is the practices of generosity and virtue, *dāna* and *sīla*. They are the basis for what is called in Western terms a 'positive self-image' or a sense of well-being and self-respect. The basis of contentment and happiness in terms of Buddhist psychology is generosity and morality, that is to say, virtue; living in a way that is gentle, respectful and honest. This is how we create the causes for ease, contentment and self-respect. I know people might think this is a very simplistic way to relate to psychology; you might not think there is anything psycho-therapeutic about it. But if you don't do things that are regrettable, you don't have to regret them. If I haven't done anything harmful, selfish or cruel, I don't have to remember having done it, so I'm not feeding the causes of self-criticism. I don't have to remember having done something selfish or harmful because it hasn't been done.

Now, you might be thinking, 'So what?' But it is no small thing. When we are developing generosity as a basic relationship to the world, when we are learning to be unselfish, when we are ready to give our material aid, time and attention to others, when we are living in a way which is honest and virtuous, which is noble, this creates the causes of a great deal of ease and contentment. We don't have to remember anything we have done that is really harmful, dishonest or destructive. We don't have to be worried about that lie being found out about, or

that imaginative treatment of our finances if we have been economical with the truth in filling out our tax returns. If we have been honest we don't need to worry about 'them' finding out. We have nothing to hide, so no anxiety is created.

I met a Thai woman in San Francisco who was a single mother, and she told me this story about herself three or four years ago. Her son was about nine years old at that time and the two of them lived in a small apartment. She worked for an estate agent in San Francisco. One day somebody came into the office who needed to sell their property really, really fast. The client said to her, 'I don't care what you sell it for, I have to sell it as soon as possible. Whatever money you can get for it, that's fine.' They accepted the property for USD 400,000, but she managed to turn it around and sell it on for USD 650,000 on the same day. Because of the client's urgency the property was heavily undervalued, so she was able to sell it on very quickly. At about four o'clock that afternoon, after she had made this sale for USD 650,000 and was feeling very proud of herself, she suddenly realized, 'Hang on a minute, I am the only person who knows about this. No one else is aware that the client got USD 400,000 for it but we sold it for USD 650,000. If I play my cards right, that could be USD 250,000 in my pocket.'

She said she thought seriously about this, but she realized, 'No, I can't do that.' She told her boss the real price she had paid, and also the real amount for which she had sold it. Then she went home and told her son what had happened. Although the boy was only nine, he was pretty good at mathematics. She would help him with his homework and he would help her with the book-keeping for

the estate agency. She would go through the books with him and show him what she was doing, and he liked to help adding up the numbers and doing all the calculations. So she said, 'I have to tell you what happened today.' She described the incident; how the deal had come in and how she had been tempted, and she also showed him in the books how she could have re-jigged the numbers. 'Look, see? All I would have to do would be to change this number here, and no one else would have known. It's not recorded anywhere else'.

The boy remembered that they had been talking about wanting to move into a larger apartment, and a new bicycle would have been nice, so he asked his mum, 'Why didn't you do it?'

'Because I care about you. Because even though we can look at this and say no one would know, the fact is that I would know and I would be worried that someone was going to find out. Then if the truth came out, I would be in jail, and not only would you not have a dad, but you wouldn't have a mum either, and then we'd really be in trouble. But I also wanted you to know because I felt it was important that I'm not keeping any secrets from you. I'm acting in an honest way, and even though we might have less and we might have to live in this little apartment for a bit longer, still it is far better that we can live without any kind of anxiety, without fear of losing what we have or of me being taken away by the authorities. Far better that we live in a smaller situation and have no anxiety, than we have more of what we want but there is a shadow hanging over me. Do you understand?'

The woman telling me this story imitated her son – the funny expression on his face and the way he answered with a long, drawn out, ‘Yeeeah...I get it’ as if he were reluctantly agreeing.

‘Do you understand why I did that?’

‘Yeah, that’s cool, don’t worry about it.’

He really did appreciate it. And I think this was the most wonderful gift the mother could have given to her son. I think the owner of the estate agency was pretty impressed with her too. He probably gave her a bonus for being so honest. I was also impressed that she admitted she was seriously tempted – a quarter of a million dollars – so that was tremendously wise on her part. It is the kindest gift because the young man will remember it for the rest of his life. He will have it as a wonderful example of his mother’s integrity and how much she cares for him; that she was prepared to live in a state of privation and difficulty rather than live in a state of anxiety, risking their well-being, living with a lack of self-respect, knowing that she had stolen the money, cheated and lied.

Also, no matter how sure she might have felt that no one could ever find out, *kamma* tends to work in unpredictable ways. You could see a scenario where two people meet at a party and start chatting together; they discover that one of them lives in the house on Sutter where the other used to live:

‘Gee, it was a real shame I had to sell it in a rush, I only got pennies for it.’

‘Oh, really, how much did you get for it?’

‘Only USD 400,000 – it was worth way more than that.’

‘Really? When did you sell it?’

And the next thing you know, the deception is discovered. That’s how life steers things sometimes.

We can carry the spirit of the retreat environment with us in this way, by sustaining a quality of integrity, honesty and harmlessness. Even if the people around you are scamming left and right, swearing, lying and cheating each other, you don’t have to do the same. Without being uptight and moralistic, we can choose not to join in; we can choose to just keep our own counsel, to sustain our own way of being. It is extraordinary how the qualities of straightforwardness, honesty, gentleness and respect create a basis of calm, a basis of contentment and a real ease within us which are a direct support for concentration. If you haven’t done anything regrettable during the day you don’t have to forget it. You don’t have to let go of disturbing memories at the end of the day when you sit down to meditate. This is a direct and very powerful support for concentration, *samādhi*.

#### MINDFULNESS OF THE BODY; GOING THROUGH DOORS

Also, as you are going about your daily life you can pay attention to the different postures, sitting, standing, walking and lying down. You may be walking along a pavement or a train platform, through a corridor in your office or your school, or across your living room carpet, but it is still completely legal to have your attention on your feet. You don’t have to be fixated on the meeting

you have to attend or the bus you are aiming to catch. You can keep your feet and your mind in unison. Setting that intention at the beginning of the day can be very helpful. This is a kind of practice I've done a lot. As you begin your day in the early morning, set that resolution: 'Whenever I am walking anywhere, whatever the situation during the day, it is my intention to bring my attention to my feet – to feel the feet touching the ground as I walk along.' Though you may forget and be lost and distracted, mostly you'll remember. Use that as a way of grounding the attention, bringing the attention into the present.

Ajahn Sumedho would sometimes develop quite surprising meditation themes. One winter retreat he spent some three weeks talking about going through doors. For three weeks he talked about nothing except mindfulness of going through doors. You would be amazed how much there is to say about this. You may think I can talk a lot, but Ajahn Sumedho can be even more expansive. He asked us to begin every day by setting the intention that we would be mindful of doors. As we approached a door we would be aware of approaching the door; we would bring attention to the sense of not knowing what was on the other side of the door, the sense of arriving at the door, the feeling of taking hold of the door handle, the sense of anticipation as we opened the door and then the sense of revelation as we found out what was on the other side; and the feeling of accomplishment, of moving on, as we went through the door and closed it behind us. The delights of the door are many and varied. You may think, 'It's just a door, it's no big deal', but like anything in life, when we bring attention to

it there is a lot that can be learned from it. So pay attention every time you go through a door, into a car, out of a car, into a building, out of a building, into a lift, out of a lift – notice going through doorways.

## DEVELOPING THE PERCEPTION OF ANICCA

A meditation theme doesn't have to be anything very complicated. You needn't try to make an intricate intellectual analysis of your life. You can focus on a very simple theme and these are often the most useful. For one retreat in the forest at Chithurst, during my tenth Rains as a monk, I made a resolution to focus on *anicca*, impermanence, and to make that a theme for my meditation. At the beginning of a day I set the intention: 'Throughout today I will make the effort to notice the quality of change, whether it is a changing thought, a changing sensation, a changing cloud or a changing mood in other people. I will notice the quality of *anicca*. I will bring attention to the quality of change.'

It is not a complicated programme. It is very simple. You might think, 'What difference is that going to make?' or 'I already know everything is impermanent.' As a kind of theory it is easy to understand, but Dhamma practice isn't just about theory. The practice is the moment to moment recognition of change: 'There's a mood changing. There is a traffic light changing. Traffic is starting. Traffic is stopping. There is a sensation changing. There is a sound changing, a word changing.' We sustain the simple recognition of that quality of change in all experience. Notice that the world is happening in the mind, and recognize the

quality of constant change. This has a profoundly unifying and integrating effect upon the mind. It brings together our thoughts, our memories, the perceptions of the things around us. We keep recollecting, ‘It all has the nature to change. Everything is functioning according to the same patterns, the same laws.’

Luang Por Chah taught us to see *anicca* in two ways: firstly, as the quality of change in the mental and material world. Objects change; if it is a ‘thing’, it is in a state of transformation. Secondly, looking at it from the other side, from the subject side of experience, the felt sense of change is the feeling of uncertainty; we don’t know what anything is going to change into, so we feel uncertainty. Therefore Luang Por Chah would often render the word *anicca* as ‘uncertainty’, *my naeh* in Thai – it is not certain, it is not a sure thing. That is the felt sense of change. When the heart meets with the experience of things in a state of transformation, you don’t know exactly what is happening. You don’t know what they are going to change into. You don’t know what the whole story is, so the feeling is one of uncertainty.

This is the most common way in which Luang Por Chah would talk about developing the perception of *anicca* – consciously reminding yourself that everything is uncertain, particularly around judgements. The mind says: ‘Oh, that’s great.’ But then you say, ‘It’s not a sure thing.’

‘That’s terrible.’

‘It’s not a sure thing.’

‘I’m on my way to a meeting.’

‘It’s not a sure thing.’

‘Things are going really well.’

‘It’s not a sure thing.’

‘Things are falling apart.’

‘It’s not a sure thing.’

‘Not a sure thing’ is applicable to an astonishing range of experiences during the course of a day. Our opinions, our judgements, our memories, our likes and dislikes; calling something good, calling it bad; what shape the world is taking or what things are; we just keep reminding ourselves they are not a sure thing. Luang Por Chah would often say that this is the gateway to wisdom, this is the standard of the noble ones, because if we always recollect that everything is uncertain, this unplugs our habits of attachment. So when you are trying to keep something, the recollection of uncertainty reminds you that it is not keepable. If we are afraid of being affected by something or dreading that something is going to impose on us,

recollecting ‘it’s not a sure thing’ reminds us that it is not going to be so unbearable; it can’t be a permanent difficulty.

When you build a dam you need to have a sluice or a spillway to relieve the pressure if the lake becomes overfull. Luang Por Chah used to compare the recollection of *anicca* to such a spillway. When our hearts become overexcited about what we like or dread, the recollection of *anicca* is the safety valve which keeps the feelings of attraction and aversion in balance; it is the spillway that

relieves the pressure so that the passions are kept from getting out of control.

Everything changes. It might not seem like very much, but it is extraordinary how much this recollection helps when we apply it. The recollection of change brings our world into balance and sustains the environment of Dhamma, whatever the situation in which we find ourselves. Of course, you have to remember to bring this to mind. It can be helpful just to set the intention at the beginning of the day. Say to yourself: ‘Throughout the day, whenever I see anything, hear anything, smell, taste, touch anything, whenever there is an opinion, a judgement, a plan, a like or a dislike, I’ll make the effort to remember it is uncertain, it is not a sure thing.’

Another phrase Luang Por would use and, which we too can use whenever the mind makes a statement or conceives an idea about anything, is to ask ourselves, ‘Is that so?’

‘Well I’m going to be leaving the retreat on Wednesday.’

‘Is that so?’

‘This has been the best retreat I’ve ever been on.’

‘Is that so?’

‘This has really been a challenge.’

‘Is that so?’

Our likes, our dislikes, the familiar, the unfamiliar, approval, disapproval: just keep asking, ‘Is that so? Is that a fact?’ It helps to keep things in context. Like the wonderfully strange and mysterious language of the Pirahã people,

their conception of objects and things, form, colour and suchlike, which are totally different from ours. When we declare, ‘This is a microphone’, or ‘This is Saturday’, we can recall the question, ‘Is that so? Is that the whole story?’ It helps to remind us that this is just my version of reality, my perceived patterns; that this is the language that I use, the set of conventions I am using, but it is not the whole story. Bringing to mind that simple question touches the aspect of the heart which knows this can’t be the whole story.

So developing insight, developing wisdom, is not just for the silence and stillness of the shrine room, or walking up and down under the beautiful blue skies and wispy clouds of the English summer at Amaravati. The opportunity to develop wisdom is always here, no matter how busy or noisy the world might be. The *nada* sound does not stop at the borders of the monastery. *Nada* continues. Even on the London Underground or in an aeroplane it carries on.

The Buddha pointed out that when we are aware of the quality of *anicca*, when the heart opens and is attentive to the perception of impermanence, this directly supports the insight into not-self. When you see that everything is uncertain, that also includes the conception of who and what you are – this body, this personality. Insight into *anicca* directly challenges habits of identification, so that it directly supports the insight into *anattā*, not-self. And when the truth of not-self is recognized, it directly undermines and dissolves the delusion of self-view; it helps the quality of wisdom to see through self-view and the conceit of identity. As the Buddha says in his Discourse to Meghiya (Ud 4.1, A 9.3), ‘When

the heart awakens to the truth of not-self, that leads to the dissolving, the dissolution of the conceit 'I am'. And this is Nibbāna here and now.' When 'I am' is seen through and is recognized as transparent, empty – when self is let go of – that is Nibbāna here and now. So you don't think of Nibbāna as some glorious super-duper heaven off over the rainbow – Nibbāna is at breakfast with your family, on the train, in your Buddhist centre, pottering around in your garden or on the motorway. Nibbāna is that quality of clarity and peacefulness which is ever-present whenever the grasping stops, whenever the heart lets go of that urge to becoming. It is always accessible to us.

So I would encourage you to allow that intuition in, allow it to be truly known and acknowledged and given life, given strength. Then there is no reason why the retreat has to stop when you leave the monastery – it can carry on wherever you are.





MAKING  
DAILY  
DETERMINATIONS

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#TEN

## BRING ATTENTION TO THIS MOMENT.

How do you feel? What is the texture of this present reality? There is no right or wrong, good or bad in what we experience. Whatever the patterns of feeling and perception might be, they are brought into balance by our attitude towards them. The attitude of wise attention is the integrating, balancing agent. This is how the moment is held skilfully. If there is a grasping at or a pushing away of it, we are out of balance. The practice of attending, receiving, fully participating in this moment brings a quality of balance and integration. However we might happen to feel, comfortable or uncomfortable, sleepy or wakeful, when mindfulness and wisdom recognize the qualities of this moment as simply patterns of nature, attributes of Dhamma, the effect is peace, ease and clarity.

## MINDFULNESS OF THE POSTURE

As we go through the day there are many different themes we can give to our practice, many different directions we can take in the efforts we are making. One helpful direction is to take this simple theme: notice what posture you are in at any one time, walking, sitting, standing, lying down. Simply notice the change from one posture to another. When you are walking, what is the intention as you walk across the room, down the hall or along the path? Whenever there is walking, bring the attention to the feet. Throughout the day develop that as a habit, as a skilful training. And as you bring attention to the feeling in the feet and the action of walking, reflect on this: 'Where do I think I am going? Is there anybody going anywhere?' Consider that reflection of Ajahn Sumedho's – in actual fact there

is no one going anywhere, there are just conditions of mind which are changing.

Take a simple theme like that to set as an intention at the beginning of the day. Notice whenever there is walking going on, and then hold that experience of walking within the context of wisdom. Notice the perception of the body walking, but ask: 'Is there anybody going anywhere, or is there experiencing the conditions of mind coming and going and changing?' We take that simple, unremarkable, everyday act of walking, and we turn it into an occasion to awaken to Dhamma; to the fundamental reality that is the very fabric of this moment, of our lives and all things, the universal ordering principle of the mental, the spiritual and the physical.

## DEVELOPING THE PERCEPTION OF ANICCA

If we wish to take a different theme, there is the reflection on *anicca*, conscious development of the *anicca-sañña*, the perception of *anicca*. We can use the day to cultivate that perception, that habit of seeing all things as uncertain. Meet every perception, every judgement with a question: 'Is this a sure thing? Not sure....' Develop this perception, this way of seeing; take this one simple exercise and cultivate it, develop it right where you're sitting, walking from room to room, eating breakfast, pruning the roses, cleaning the bathroom. Whatever it might be that we experience during the day, can we keep bringing this reflection to mind? Can we keep inquiring? Can we sustain interest in uncertainty? Notice how many things we judge, how many opinions we hold to be absolutely real:

‘This is wrong, this is right, this is good, this is bad, I approve, I disapprove, I like, I don’t like, that’s beautiful, that’s ugly.’ In small and subtle ways, hundreds of times each day, the mind leaps into its perceptions and creates them as absolute values – remembering the past, expecting the future, planning, recollecting, approving, disapproving, hoping, fearing, regretting, rejoicing. When you think, ‘That was so wonderful’, ask yourself, ‘Are you so sure?’

‘That was awful.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I really hope...’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I am really dreading...’

‘Why is that? Are you sure it is going to be so bad?’

This is not just using *anicca* as a kind of repetitive mantra – *anicca, anicca,*

*anicca* – but actually asking those questions, changing the view. When you bring that into being, when you change that view and really question: ‘Are you sure? Is that a sure thing?’ see what happens in the heart when that uncertainty is entertained, when that flexibility is recognized. What happens in the heart? See how that catalyzes the liberating insight: ‘Of course all that arises passes away; all things are transient, empty, uncertain; this is the nature of all things all the time.’ In developing the *anicca-saññā* we are bringing our view into accordance with reality, establishing Right View. The Buddha said (S 56.37): ‘Just as the lightening of the sky foretells the rising of the sun, so too Right View is the forerunner of all wholesome states.’ Just as the sky lightens when the dawn is about to come, Right View is the

forerunner of everything wholesome within us.

The core of Right View is the recognition that all things are uncertain. By its very ‘thingness’ there is uncertainty in every experience; there is change, transiency. We can take this uncertainty as a theme for the day, to make it a task: how often, how regularly can I remember to see the *anicca*, the uncertainty of all things, in my actions, my judgements, my plans, my memories? Can this be sustained and what’s the effect? What happens in my heart? What’s the result when that right view is established? Explore. Then we can see for ourselves.

We don’t need to make it too complicated or demanding for ourselves. We don’t have to apply a whole range of different themes or

reflections during the day. Take a single theme which appeals to you, which has meaning, is interesting and has value. Develop that one simple theme for a day; take it to heart, like noticing the act of walking or noticing *anicca*. Just take one simple discrete theme place it at the centre of your concerns for the day and see what the effect is, how that changes you, what it brings.

#### LISTENING TO THE NADA SOUND

A third suggestion might be to see how regularly and completely you can notice the presence of the *nada* sound, not only when everything is quiet, but also when you are walking outside, while you are eating your food, brushing your teeth, pruning the roses. Can we notice it? Can we pick it up? Can we train ourselves to listen to it, to hear it in the

midst of everyday activity? Even as we are listening to a Dhamma talk, can we hear it? Is it present? And in the same way we can consciously develop that, make it a theme, a centrepiece of our efforts to see how often, how completely we can listen to the *nada* sound. What distracts us? How do we lose it? How long are the breaks between the time when we become distracted and the time when we recollect that we have forgotten to listen?

Take a simple theme like this, pick it up, work with it, develop it and see what the results are. If we do train ourselves to attend to the inner sound, what is the effect of that as we go about our tasks and live our day? What is the effect of that inner listening?

What are its blessings? What are the difficulties? What does it bring? Don't make things too complicated or over-involved. Take a simple theme like one of these or another of your own interests, consciously bring it up and work with it for the day. In this way we develop skills and begin to understand what is helpful, what is obstructive, what is difficult, what is easy, what brings benefit or causes confusion and complication. We see for ourselves. We learn for ourselves. This is really the only effective kind of learning we can do. Hearing and gathering information from outside is one thing, but it is the hands-on tasks we do ourselves, and the learning which happens within us that comes from them, which bring about real changes.

## PERFECT IN KNOWLEDGE AND CONDUCT

In all these different approaches to Dhamma practice there is a blending of two particular qualities, awareness and action. When we recite the attributes of the Buddha, one of them is *vijjā-carana-sampanno*. *Vijjā* is awakened awareness, knowing. *Carana* is conduct, action. *Sampanno* means to be accomplished or consummately expert, fully perfected. *Vijjā-carana-sampanno* means one who is perfect in knowledge and conduct, or one whose actions and wisdom faculty are perfectly fused. *Vijjā* is the transcendent, unattached, unentangled element, that which has completely gone beyond. *Carana* is the element which is perfectly attuned, completely in accord with life, participating, belonging to the world, fully embodying the world of the

four elements and the six senses, fully attuned to the material reality and the laws of the natural world; immanently present, utterly here.

So in these kinds of practices – developing mindfulness of the body, listening to the *nada* sound or whatever simple practice we might choose to follow – there is attention to the action (*carana*: the quality of attunement and participation), and there is the quality of awareness (*vijjā*, transcendent knowing) that which lets go of everything. These two work together; that which is fully aware of what is being done, and the care with which things are being done, *vijjā* and *carana*.

*Vijjā*: that which is totally transcendent, which lets go and is unattached to all things. *Carana*: that which is fully

attuned, participating, belonging, that which loves the world and holds it skilfully. The balancing and integrating of these two qualities is the Middle Way itself. Many years ago Luang Por Chah said to the newly ordained Bhikkhu Sumedho, ‘Sumedho, you must find it confusing because Dhamma is all about letting go, and *Vināya* (the monastic discipline) is about holding on.’ And he said, ‘Yes, actually I do.’

The Dhamma side of practice is all about relinquishing, abandoning, letting go, non-attachment. The *Vināya* side of the monastic training is the ten thousand do’s and don’ts of looking after your robes, how to eat and how to relate to people and property. When Luang Por said that, Ajahn Sumedho thought: ‘Okay, now he is going to explain how that happens.’ But all Luang Por

Chah said was, ‘When you figure out how those two work together you will be fine.’

So it’s a conundrum. How do the immanent and the transcendent co-exist? How do *vijjā* and *carana* work together? But they do, and this is the mysterious nature of the Middle Way: how to care about every detail but be totally unburdened; how to honour and respect every convention, how to pay heed to every nuance of right and wrong with sincerity and integrity, and yet be totally unattached at the same time. How do we do that? Yet we can do it. To care and not to care, without hypocrisy, without confusion – we can do that. This is a skill we have the opportunity to develop, the skill of being sincere in every effort, but creating no stress about what we do.

When you discover that mysterious balancing point, that Middle Way, that wonderful middleness which is called *tatramajjhataṭā* – ‘in-the-middle-of that -ness’ – when you discover that wonderful balance, notice how it feels. Let it be fully acknowledged, fully attended to. Notice the quality of that balance. We don’t have to create a concept about it.

It is like learning to ride a bicycle; it is not a concept, but a whole-body learning. The Middle Way is not an idea, it is a mode of being. So when you find those moments of balance, let yourself be fully aware of that feeling, fully attentive to that feeling. What does that quality of balance feel like? How is it? Let it be fully known.





POSSESSIVE  
LOVE  
AND  
LIBERATIVE  
LOVE

CHAPTER NINE

WHEN WE REFLECT on the things which influence our minds and cause our hearts to get tangled up in states of stress and difficulty, for many of us the most potent or difficult area of our life is relationships and families. This may be the territory where we get lost most easily. You may have noticed how you might be working very hard to let go of self-view and have clearly seen through the illusion of identity, but your brothers and sisters haven't. They have not seen your 'enlightenment', and will regularly remind you of all the stories of your weird and mischievous activities, crises, collapses or losses of temper. All the family tales get repeated with great regularity – at least, if your family is anything like mine. My eldest sister just had her sixtieth birthday; we all gathered together for a celebration, and sure enough many of the old tales got rolled out. No matter how hard you are working on letting go of self-view, the family – parents, spouses, ex-spouses, siblings, partners – can all be very active in helping self-view to be rebuilt, maintained and regenerated. So it's useful and interesting to consider family members and how we relate to them.

The aspects of mind related to family, relationships, ex-relationships or would-be relationships are potent areas where the mind is easily snagged. Perhaps our feelings have been hurt, we have been rejected, we long for an unrequited love or we worry about an unfixable conflict. These feelings can be very stressful, difficult and burdensome for us. This is a knotty and tense area of self-view where it definitely feels like there's a 'me', a 'me' who is regretting, a 'me' who is hoping, a 'me' who is wanting revenge.

‘May all beings be happy... except him!’ (or ‘her!’)

We can try to be spiritual people, live a wholesome life, seek to guide our actions in skilful ways. We can put a lot of energy, effort and work into trying to mend those painful broken relationships, or to work out how to live in skilful relationships with each other; with our siblings and co-workers, family and partners, children and parents. With great sincerity and effort we can try to get things right; we can try really hard to create good, wholesome and beneficial relationships in our lives. But the reality of our relationships can be very painful, frustrating or disappointing, because sometimes, no matter how hard we try, we can’t quite get it right; we can’t establish a quality of harmony and mutual benefit. This can be mysterious to us. We might think: ‘I’m doing the best I can. I’m trying really hard, but can’t quite seem to get it right. I can’t quite seem to be able to mend that broken bridge, be understood or understand them.’

Many years ago in the early days of Chithurst Monastery, before the Ten Precept *Sīladharā* ordination was established for the nuns, one of the sisters was planning to visit her parents. They were particularly averse to her being a nun and were very critical, angry and upset with her. They thought she was wasting her life and had made an appallingly wrong choice. They were so hostile to the whole thing that they wouldn’t allow her shaven head to be seen in their house, so when she would go to visit them she had to wear a woolly hat. It was a tense and somewhat anguished relationship.

On the day before she was to set off for a family visit, she asked Ajahn Sumedho for advice about how she could establish a quality of harmony between them all. It was a very sincere and heartfelt question. Ajahn Sumedho said something in reply that struck me very deeply at that time, and which has stayed with me ever since. He said: ‘The kindest thing you can do for your parents is not to create them.’

Now there’s a thought. ‘The kindest thing you can do for your parents is not to create them’ – it was a phrase I’d never heard him use before. I don’t think he had ever heard himself use it before. It came out of the void fully-formed, and he seemed to be surprised to hear it as well. But it was clearly on target. This Sister was trying very hard to get it right. She was very sincere and distressed about how bad things were at that time. And yet she was not seeing that the mind had created a ‘me’ here, a ‘them’ out there, and ‘I’m trying to get it right between us’. Ajahn Sumedho’s comment pointed right at the habit of self-view, creating self and other, and then trying to get the self and the other to work together harmoniously. But that dynamic can never really work, because self-view is based on that which is not real; it’s not actually in accord with Dhamma, with the natural order of things. So if we mistakenly believe that there is a solid ‘me’ here and a solid ‘you’ there, we can never get it right between us. It is only when there is a letting go of self-view, of self-centred thinking, and the mind no longer creates ‘you’ and ‘me’, that real communication can happen.

These are just thoughts to offer for consideration. You don't have to take this to be true, but I would encourage you to pick it up and consider it. The kindest thing you can do for your loved ones is not to create them.

When you have a difficulty in your life with your parents or children, your siblings, partner or ex-partner, or would-be-ex-partner, allow yourself to become aware of how you fabricate yourself and others, how you create a mental image of yourself and the other.

Notice how you may say to yourself, 'She's thinking like this, and he's like that, and when we talk he's going to say this and I should say that to him, and when I say that to him he's going to respond with this, and when he says that then I'm going to say...' I certainly did this a lot with my parents through my teens, and then in my early years as a monk. I would spend a huge amount of time scripting dialogues with my parents that never actually happened.

You spend all this time writing the scripts, and then the other people don't learn their lines! You are all prepared with what you are going to say and how you are going to respond, and then they follow a different script altogether.

You find that you are filled with anticipation or memory, fear or hope. You create a mental image of the 'other', so that when you meet you are not actually meeting the people themselves. You are not really with your father, your mother, your daughter, your son, your siblings; you are with your mental creations, you are talking to your projections. And the more you are talking to your own projections, the more you are abiding with your internal image of

what they are going to be like, how they are going to attack you, or have a weird opinion you don't know what to do with, or a difficult emotion, or that they are going to have another breakdown or they are going to blow up at you...

We pick up memories, projections, imaginations and we build a picture out of them. Then even when we are together in the same place, or talking on the phone or connecting in some other way, there is still a barrier, because there is a 'me' here and a projected image of 'you' out there. That is what Ajahn Sumedho meant by 'not creating your parents', or your children, your siblings or whoever. Notice those habits of creation and projection, admiration, inspiration and fear – notice whether there are love and attachment, fear of loss, irritation or anxiety, whatever it might be.

We feel a spectrum of emotions, but as they arise, see them with regard to both yourself and the 'other' as just patterns of emotion arising. It isn't necessary to see 'a person here' and 'a person there'. It isn't necessary to create a 'self'. All of this is not-self. This is all just feeling, perception, mental formation, consciousness; just patterns of the five *khandhas* arising and passing away.

Obviously, if you are having a deep conversation with your mother, it would be very unwise to say to her, 'Actually, you are just the five *khandhas* arising and passing away.' That would not go down very well. She'd scowl and say, 'Don't do that Buddhist thing on me, please!' You are not trying to create an extra set of Buddhist projections. This practice is more a letting go and an attunement to the time, place and situation; talking the language that your children, parents or

other loved ones understand, letting go of your preconceptions, preoccupations and preconditioning, and attuning to the time, place, and situation. Then you find you have real communication. There is actually a communion, a real meeting.

This is difficult to do. As I said, others will help maintain your self-view for you; people will project onto you. They will see you as the brother, the daughter, the sister, the father or the mother. You receive a pile of projections from others, maybe a pile of projections you don't like or are uncomfortable with. But a part of the practice which is really very significant, and which is very advanced and deeply challenging, is learning how to be misunderstood and misrepresented without feeling you have to jump in and 'fix' it. When someone misunderstands you, misreads your actions and motivations, it is important not to jump in and try to explain: 'No! No! It's not like that!' It can be of enormous benefit to allow yourself to be misunderstood. There's a brief saying of Lao Tzu of which I'm fond: 'Those who justify themselves do not convince.' The very act of jumping in and saying 'No! No! I'm really not thinking that way!' – that very eagerness to jump in and fix it creates a sense of division and solidifies the lack of genuine communication. As Lao Tzu says, one is not convinced.

In this way of letting go of each other we are, ironically, finding a connection with one another. We are finding a communion with others through letting go of them. We are giving ourselves the space to be who we are, and also giving others the space to be the way they are. Sometimes we may recognize that there are things in our relationships which can't be fixed, which just don't work.

There may be things we hold as an ideal or a hope: 'I really want my parents to approve of my being a Buddhist monk.' 'I really want things to be okay between me and my ex-partner.' 'I really want to be able to understand my children, so we are good friends and have a beautiful collaborative relationship.' Those are admirable ideals, but it is important to recognize that sometimes things are broken and can't be fixed. That might sound a bit disappointing or depressing, but it is also realistic. And if this is so, the very effort of trying to jump in and make everything all right can serve to make things worse.

Obviously you have to be discerning and attentive, but consider that sometimes a situation is not workable in this lifetime. It is never going to come right, it is always going to be awkward.

There is always going to be a painful memory. There will always be a hurt feeling about some event in the past or some misunderstanding. Some people in our families are never going to get along with one another, and nothing you do is going to change that.

You might find that a negative or disheartening attitude, but if you look at it and work with it you will also notice a deep sense of relief: 'Ahhhh. What an enormous amount of time I've spent trying to get things right, and yet it's never going to be achievable!' You can't get it right. That rightness is not gettable. But when we let go and try to stop making everything right according to our expectations, when we stop trying to fix things, in a mysterious way they can sometimes fix themselves. We let things be more spacious and that very

spaciousness does the fixing. We've been judging the whole picture according to our own perceptions, preferences or hopes, and when we stop trying to fix things but don't ignore the situation (we don't turn away, we are still attending), we encounter a strange righting at a deeper level.

In Japanese art there is the principle of *wabi-sabi*, the beauty of imperfection. In pottery, painting or calligraphy, *wabi-sabi* is the little bits that are wrong in just the right way. That wrongness makes perfect. It is the beauty of imperfection. You may have noticed that we can spend a huge amount of effort and energy, and create a lot of stress in ourselves, by always trying to get things right, to make things perfect. We become – not exactly a neurotic wreck, but we can certainly stress ourselves out with always trying to get it right, always trying to make things perfect, to fix things and make them good. But that very effort to get it right, to be perfect, to always be doing things in the very best possible way – that very anxiety can cause distortion, disharmony and difficulty. If we see that anxious, fretful attitude and then relax a notch, we can shift into overdrive, fifth gear – still going at the same speed but with fewer revs. Just relax a bit and open the mind to allow there to be imperfection. We allow there to be something not ideal, allow it not to be perfect and then we discover this strange quality of a deeper perfection.

In the Third Ch'an Patriarch's verses on the faith mind, *Hsin Hsin Ming*, there is the beautiful line:

'To live in this realization, [the realization of letting go of dualities] is to be

without anxiety about non-perfection.’ I speak about this because I was one who could be extremely anxious about imperfection at all times. I was a very anxious and worried type of character. I was always trying to be perfect, always trying to get it right and always feeling that things were never quite good enough. I was aiming for one hundred percent perfection in all situations at all times. This line in *Hsin Hsin Ming* jumped out at me during the time when I was trying to work on my anxiety habits: ‘To live in this realization is to be without anxiety about non-perfection.’

‘Oh, it shouldn’t be this way!’

‘Oh dear, she’s upset.’

‘He’s angry again. I should... I must... what am I going to do?’

I must have read that line many, many times before it sank in. Then one day it just dawned on me; suddenly I knew what it meant to be without anxiety about non-perfection. Even though I’d read the line many times, the reality of being without anxiety about non-perfection had never really occurred to me, never dawned on me as a possibility. But when we are able to find the space around non-perfection, that changes the world in a radical way.

Seeing that imperfection, seeing things being not quite right, seeing things out of order, the mind leaps into the situation, the heart surges forward. Not just with relationships; this can happen even with the arrangement of furniture or someone chanting out of tune. ‘Oh dear, they’ve gone flat again. Oh no!’

Notice when the mind moves towards a situation and creates tension and stress. Recognize that movement. Reflect on it.

Be without anxiety about non-perfection.

This isn't advocating laziness or carelessness in the way we relate to others. It is not an abrogation of all responsibility, where we excuse ourselves from engagement by saying, 'Oh well, it's imperfect. I don't need to fix it. Tough luck. You're on your own. Look after yourself.' It's not encouraging callousness, hard-heartedness or carelessness. It's a loosening of that tension, that fretful, anxious tightness in the heart with regard to relationships and situations. See that tension clearly and give yourself permission to relax.

## TWO KINDS OF LOVE

Consider relationships – why do they have such an impact upon us? It is important to understand that there are different ways in which we can love each other. In English the word 'love' has many shades of meaning. In Buddhist philosophy there are two very clear branches, two different ways of loving.

There are a couple of very significant *suttas* where the Buddha talks about relationships. One is called the *Piyajātika Sutta*, *sutta* 87 in the Middle Length Discourses. *Piyajātika* means 'born from those who are dear'. It starts with this fellow who has lost his only son. His child has just died and he is in the local park weeping and wailing, very upset and anguished, very unhappy because of the death of his child. He encounters the Buddha and explains that he's so

miserable, sad and depressed because his child has died. The Buddha says, ‘Yes indeed, sorrow, pain and anguish are born from those who are dear to us.’ The man is taken aback and disagrees: ‘What are you talking about?! Happiness and joy are born from those who are dear to us. Our dear ones are the source of great happiness and all the blessings in our life. You are a fool. You don’t know what you are talking about!’

He goes off and encounters some people a short distance away playing dice and gambling. He says to them, ‘I just met this really stupid monk who said that sorrow, anguish and pain come from those who are dear. I don’t agree with that at all. I think happiness and joy come from those who are dear to us!’ The gamblers say ‘Yeah, of course you’re right. Everyone knows that the great joy in our life is from those who are dear to us.’ This difference of opinion then starts making its way around the city of Sāvatti and eventually reaches the palace. There ensues a dialogue between King Pasenadi and Queen Mallikā about these two different points of view.

KING PASENADI: Well, to me it’s obvious that our children and loved ones, and you, Queen Mallikā, are a great source of happiness in our life. You are very dear to me. You’re a source of happiness and joy. I can’t see any other perspective making any sense at all.

QUEEN MALLIKĀ: Well, the Blessed One has said that sorrow, pain and anguish come from those who are dear, so I think he must be right.

KING PASENADI: Off with you, Mallikā, away with you! Whenever the Buddha

says anything you always agree with him, even if it doesn't make any sense. Away with you! I've had enough, get out of here!

He throws her out of the room in the usual kingly sort of way – so marital relations haven't changed a lot in a couple of thousand years with minor disputes over perspectives on things.

QUEEN MALLIKĀ: You are entitled to your opinion, Great King, but you know the Blessed One is usually right in these things and you do have faith in him as a teacher. There might be more to this than meets the eye.

KING PASENADI: Grrrr!

King Pasenadi grudgingly agrees that when they next meet the Buddha they'll ask him about it. They invite him to the palace, he comes along and they put this question to him.

KING PASENADI: Venerable Sir, I heard what must have been a misreporting of what you have said. I heard you said that sorrow, pain and anguish come from those who are dear to us. And yet that can't be right, because the other opinion is that happiness and joy come from those who are dear to us. That seems obvious to me. Surely you've been misreported, and this idiot queen of mine has misunderstood what you actually said.

BUDDHA: No, Great King, Queen Mallikā has reported it exactly as I said. I did indeed say that sorrow, pain and anguish come from those that are dear to us.

KING PASENADI: How can that be so?

BUDDHA: Well, Great King, is the Princess Vajirā dear to you?

KING PASENADI: Yes, she is my most beloved child. She is very special to me. I love her very much.

BUDDHA: So, Great King, if something happened to Princess Vajirā, if she fell ill or was injured or killed, how would you feel?

KING PASENADI: I'd be very upset. I'd be very angry. I'd be very miserable... aaah!

He gets it, first of all with the Princess, and the Buddha, being the Buddha, presses the point home...

BUDDHA: What if something happened to Queen Mallikā? What if she was injured or hurt? What if she died?

KING PASENADI: I would be very upset. I would be very sad.

BUDDHA: What about the Prince, and the Minister, and the city of Sāvatti and the Kingdom of Kosala?

The Buddha goes through a long list of people and things, one after the other, hammering home the point. Each time King Pasenadi admits that he would feel unhappy, distressed and sad.

Finally, after about a dozen of these examples, the Buddha says, 'This, Great King, is why I said sorrow, pain and anguish are born from those that are dear.'

On another occasion the Buddha was staying at the Monastery of the Eastern Park. Visākhā, who was a great lay disciple of his, was known as 'the great mother of the city of Savatti'. It was said she had twenty children, ten daughters and ten sons, and each of them had ten daughters and ten sons. So do the sums on

that – twenty times twenty is four hundred grandchildren. One day she came to the monastery in the middle of the day, and the Buddha saw that her hair and clothes were wet from ritual bathing.

BUDDHA: What brings you to the monastery in the middle of the day, Visākhā? Your hair and your clothes are all wet – you must have been involved in some religious ritual.

VISĀKHĀ: Yes indeed, Venerable Sir. I have come straight from the funeral of my dearest granddaughter. She has just died, only a little girl, and so I am very upset and unhappy. I came here to see you because I was so distressed about my granddaughter passing away.

BUDDHA: What do you think, Visākhā, would you like to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Sāvatti?

VISĀKHĀ: Well, yes, of course. The more the merrier.

BUDDHA: So you'd like to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Sāvatti – but Visākhā, every day at least ten people in Sāvatti pass away. If not ten, nine. If not nine, eight. If not eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two or one. Not a day goes by without somebody dying in Sāvatti. So, Visākhā, not a day would go by without your hair and clothes being wet from the funeral ceremonies.

She was quicker on the uptake than King Pasenadi.

VISĀKHĀ: Enough of having so many children and grandchildren! It's true – if I had that many, I would always be going to funerals.

BUDDHA: Indeed, if you have a hundred dear ones you have a hundred pains. If you have fifty dear ones you have fifty pains. If you have twenty dear ones, twenty pains, ten dear ones, ten pains – nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one. If you have one dear one, you have one pain. If you have no dear ones, you have no pains.

Now, again, this might sound depressing – you can have no pain, but only if you have no dear ones. But the Buddha is using the Pali word '*piyāyati*' which translates as 'to hold dear'. The word denotes a possessive kind of love. In this kind of love there is a 'me' here and a 'you' there. 'I' love 'you'. You belong to me and I belong to you. I depend on having you around and you depend on having me around. We own each other. Possessiveness intrinsically brings with it the anguish of losing that which is felt to be possessed. That is part of the chemistry to which the Buddha is pointing. When you have ten dear ones, you have ten pains. Five dear ones equal five pains. The mathematics are brutal. It is blunt, but that is the law of it. If we tie ourselves to another human being, if we love in a possessive way, that is the chemistry we are creating. There is a feeling of loss intrinsically embedded in that dynamic.

Many years ago, in the village of Stedham near Chithurst, there was a very dear old couple and sometimes we used to visit them on the alms-round. They had been married for sixty years and had never had an argument. Pause for

consideration – sixty years of marriage and no arguments. Strange but true. They loved each other very dearly. She had terrible arthritis and so she was in excruciating pain a lot of the time. She would make remarks like, ‘Oh, I’ve had enough. I’m ready for the end. When is it going to be over? This is so painful, so awful.’ Whenever she spoke like that her husband would say, ‘Don’t say that. Please, dear. You shouldn’t be wishing to die. It’s terrible bad luck.’ He was very anguished by that. She was simply tired of having so much pain all the time.

Eventually she did pass away and he was left by himself. We would go and see him regularly at that time. He was very miserable. One day when we went to visit and were chatting with him, we asked him how he was doing. He said, ‘Well, I am so unhappy I went to the doctor a few days ago, and I asked him to give me something to make me feel all right. The doctor was a young chap and he said, ‘I’m not going to give you anything. You know what your problem is? Your marriage was too good.’ Cheeky young puppy!’ But he was smiling and chuckling to himself when he said that. “Your problem is that your marriage was too good. You loved each other so much, you depended on each other so much – of course, when your wife died it was going to feel like you’d lost an arm and a leg. What did you expect? It’s completely natural that you should feel this kind of grief. Nothing is wrong with you. You don’t need medicine. What you’re experiencing is natural grief.’

So don’t think that the Buddha is trying to turn us into a bunch of cold fish, that we are supposed to have no feelings and just watch *sankhāras* in an numb,

emotionless manner. When your spouse of sixty years passes away, the Buddha doesn't expect you to just shrug and say, 'Oh, well. All *sankhāras* arise and pass away, there goes another one. I suppose I'd better call the monastery, they can do some chanting.' We're not trying to freeze our hearts.

We are changing the perspective.

*Piyāyati* refers to the quality of 'dearness'; it always brings an element of pain with it because there is possessiveness. It is a relationship of separateness; there is a 'me' here and a 'you' there. 'I' need 'you' to make me feel whole. And when there is the inevitable separation, we feel there is a bit missing, like the old man feeling as if he'd lost an arm and a leg.

By way of contrast, the Buddha points to a different kind of love, a love described as the *brahma vihāras* (the divine abidings). These are *mettā* (loving-kindness), *karunā* (compassion), *muditā* (sympathetic joy) and *upekkhā* (equanimity). This kind of love, particularly the loving-kindness of *mettā*, is abundant, exalted, immeasurable, brilliant and radiant, but it is not possessive. It is not a love that is dependent on another. You can love another person with *mettā*, but when they are not there you do not miss anything. Your love is not a possessive love or a love that is based on a sense of separation, but a relationship of wholeness. When there is *mettā* between a parent and a child, or between siblings or partners, or even in a monastery between monks and nuns, *anaṅārika* and *anaṅārikā*, and the lay community, that is a love which is free and independent. It is a relationship of wholeness. The presence of the

other reminds you of your own wholeness. You love being around others, you enjoy the presence of others, but you don't need the others to make you whole. The presence of the other helps to remind you of your own wholeness, and your presence reminds the other of their own wholeness.

Many years ago I was at a wedding blessing where a Thai monk gave a very good piece of advice. He pointed his two fingers at each other (☞☜) and said that if the two of them spend all their time looking at each other, and if the husband thinks it is the wife's job to make him happy, or the wife thinks it is the husband's job to make her happy, then the couple will be miserable, because no one can make you happy. You make yourself happy. Instead of fixating on each other, if you are side by side – and here he put the two fingers parallel (||) – looking at that which is beyond both of you, you can really work together. Then you are not just fixating on your own personality, your own individual needs or perspectives; you are looking towards that which is beyond both of you, that which is deeper, more real and profound. This reality within each of you is beyond your personalities, beyond your bodies, beyond your personal histories. You are looking towards the spiritual nature within yourself and within the other. In essence, you are looking beyond self-view. You are looking beyond self-centred habits. When you assist each other in doing that, there is a sense of mutual support and collaboration, but not a dependency.

When you recognize these qualities and develop such relationships of wholeness, you enjoy the presence of others, but the absence of others is something you can enjoy too. You don't need to have others around to make you feel complete. This transformation of the way we relate to others is really borne out in the *brahma vihāras*. As we develop these higher forms of love the emotional nature is purified. Emotions take the form of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity. Loving-kindness is the overarching relationship of ourselves to all other beings and to all things, so there is that quality of acceptance and benevolence. Within that, if beings are suffering, what arises is compassion (*karunā*); if beings are enjoying themselves, doing well or meeting with success, you generate *muditā*, sympathetic joy; and equanimity is that stability of heart, that steadiness and unshakeability which are aroused in relationship to agitation, busyness or disturbance in others.

Developing the heart in this way, developing our emotional relationships based on the *brahma vihāras*, is not a clinical procedure: 'I need four units of *mettā*, five and a half *karunā*, no *muditā* necessary. He's crying, he's not happy, so no *muditā* – I'm thinking about seven measures of *upekkhā*.' It is not a calculation. It is the natural responsiveness of the heart to a situation. When others meet with success, the unattached and unentangled heart moves quite naturally in the direction of *muditā*. When another car pulls into the parking-spot you were aiming for, does *muditā* immediately leap forth? 'Oh how wonderful! They must be so happy to have got that parking space, I feel so glad for them.' *Muditā* is

a very rare quality in the world. But when somebody is upset or injured you don't have to think, 'Should I be compassionate here or should I just tell them to get over it?' It is not a calculation. The heart just moves towards that sense of caring and concern for the suffering of another. Similarly with *upekkhā*; if there is a sense of busyness, agitation or disturbance, there is that in the heart which naturally moves towards stillness and being cool; it is caring but is undisturbed in the middle of disturbance.

So this is a natural responsiveness, a sense of our emotional nature brought fully into balance with Dhamma, with the way things are. When we transform the way in which we relate to others, when we let go of the separative, divisive and possessive way of relating to others and cultivate the *brahma vihāras*, there is a natural attunement. There is a natural arising of compassion, kindness or *muditā* according to time and place.

There is a lot more that could be said about relationships, but I also fully acknowledge that I have never practised as a lay Buddhist. My encounter with Buddhism occurred inside a monastery, so I have never tried to live on the Five Precepts. I walked into a monastery in Thailand looking for a cheap place to stay, and didn't realize I was going to be in the monastery for the rest of my life. So I fully admit I have no direct experience that I can draw upon when it comes to giving laypeople advice about relationships, marriages and partnerships. I've had parents, but I haven't had any children. But I have lived in a community for more than thirty years, so in that sense I have a family of parents, sisters and

brothers, children to whom I have given the Precepts, and so on. I therefore offer these themes for you to consider. Explore your own experience of relationship and observe where the stress points are. Reflect on that. Notice how much that stress changes when self-view is let go of, when we recognize those relationships of separateness and partiality, and how they create the causes of tension. When possessiveness is let go of we can know a relationship of wholeness. When we let go of each other, when we stop creating each other, what naturally arises is the flow of loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity, serenity.







FAILURE  
AND  
FORGIVENESS

CHAPTER TEN

SPIRITUAL LIFE NATURALLY INVOLVES A LOT OF IDEALISM. We create an image of how we should be, the best way to live and the most helpful and beautiful attitudes to have. Religious ideals are spelled out and illustrated, described many times in many different places: in Dhamma talks, books, our own minds and memories. We can create very clear and fixed ideals for ourselves. But to quote T. S. Eliot: ‘Between the idea and the reality falls the shadow.’ The ideal of ‘how I should be’, or ‘the perfect me’, or ‘what spiritual life should be like’ is just that, an ideal.

A statue of the Buddha has not had to adjust its posture since it was made. It has not wobbled once throughout its existence. The knees of a Buddha *rūpa* do not ache, the back doesn’t get tired, it doesn’t need to eat or breathe. It is an ideal. It is a fixed form. When the Buddha was alive he had to eat, breathe, walk around and be with people, and so he was subject to the limitations of the physical world and the laws of nature.

When we look at our lives it is good to have ideals. This is why a Buddha statue occupies a central place in a temple. When we look at it, it shows us how we should be – all sitting with utterly straight backs that are neither tense nor rigid nor bent over, utterly calm, serene, ‘radiating kindness over the entire world’, ‘like the sun awakening the lotus.’ Ideals are useful. We put them at the centre. We hold them up. We use the ideal as a guiding principle, in the same way as we use the statue as a reminder of the quality of awakened awareness. We need to be reminded of the capacity, potential and opportunity which we have

as human beings to be fully liberated, to bring our lives to spiritual fulfilment. We can do that. This is what the ideal is suggesting to us; it reminds us of our potential and our capacities.

But we have to move, don't we? We have the ideal, the Buddha-image at the centre, but we have to come and go, we have to eat and breathe and relate with other people. We have the karmic nuances in our lives to deal with. These nuances emerge from our family relations, our particular history, our education, memories of the events of our life, the responsibilities we have, the choices we have made and so on. We have to deal with many details of our lives. The Buddha statue doesn't have to worry about how the Sangha is faring, or whether he has to establish any more rules, or what to say in the Dhamma talk this evening.

When we use ideals and those ideals are brought to bear on our life experience, we find we fail a great deal as human beings. We keep failing. We keep not meeting the ideal. We don't have perfect concentration. Our attention wanders off; the mind gets carried away down various avenues of *papañca*, into different elaborations about the past and future, drifting off into ideas, fantasies and anxieties, rewriting the history of past conversations, scripting future conversations, and so on.

We cannot live an ideal. If we try to do so, we will find that we keep missing the goal. We have random emotions. We become swept up in feelings of anger, grief, excitement, greed, fear or jealousy. As human beings, this is the way we

are. We can't sustain the ideal form because we are not ideal. We are people. That doesn't mean that the ideal is not useful; it just means that if we don't relate to it in a skilful way, we can develop a negative perception, a brand of self-view based on negativity. If we believe that the ideal is how we really should be and we don't meet that ideal, we may think that we are somehow bad or stupid, weak or hopeless. We mishandle the ideal. In a shrine room we have the Buddha-image as an ideal to guide our practice, but we recognize that sometimes we need to change our posture. We need to come and go. That is not a weakness or something wrong. It is the human condition; it is common sense. In fact, if somebody sat in the shrine room for a week as still as a Buddha *rūpa*, I think most of us would be a bit concerned. 'She hasn't breathed since August – I think there is something wrong here! Is there a doctor in the house?'

#### THE ART OF FAILURE

Thus it is important to learn how to fail well; to learn how to fail in a good way, to handle our tendency to get lost, be caught up and miss the point. It is important to learn how to work with that in a skilful way. I like to use the phrase: 'We need to learn how to fail perfectly' or 'to know how to be perfect failures'. This doesn't mean that we don't try, or that we are casual or careless about what we do. It means that we work with things the way they are – we work with our efforts and our aspirations, and we work with our limitations.

When the Buddha established the monastic rule (the *Vināya*), he didn't sit down, work out the whole code and then hand it over to the rest of the Sangha. Each rule was conjured into being for the needs of the community, and out of particular events, actions and behaviour by different members of the Sangha. Each rule came from a particular circumstance. When a rule was established, sometimes a *bhikkhu* would observe or enforce it in a destructive, hurtful or over-zealous way. The Buddha would criticize that person by saying, 'Foolish man [or woman], how on earth could you do that?' And the person who had misbehaved might recognize their fault and say, 'Yes, I am very sorry. I was totally foolish. I thought it would be a good thing to punish that novice by cutting off his ears. I thought that would be a good way to make sure he wouldn't forget the lesson.' The Buddha would reply, 'This is not wise. Mutilating the novices for the sake of giving teachings is not to be done.\*'

The transgressor would recognize the fault and the Buddha would say, 'Well, it is good that you recognize your misconduct and that you see the fault.' (That phrase is crucial). 'To see your transgressions as such and then to endeavour to do better in the future, this is called furtherance in spiritual training, in the Dhamma and discipline of the *Tathāgata*.'

'It is good that you recognize your misconduct and that you see the fault.' That is a very helpful little phrase. It brings us into the best spirit with which to relate to our mistakes. When you do something stupid, your own equivalent of cutting someone's ears off, you recognize your fault as a fault. You acknowledge

\* In fact, curiously, it is only a very minor offence to cut the ears off a novice, even though you would certainly be jailed for doing that nowadays.

the transgression. You don't pretend that it hasn't happened. You don't make excuses for yourself. You recognize your transgression as a transgression and then endeavour to do better in the future. You recognize a shortcoming and take the cue from it to guide your future actions in a different way.

This has a lot to do with what is called *hiri-ottappa* or moral sensitivity. On the doors into the Temple at Amaravati there is a *devata* painted on each side. These *devatas* represent *hiri* and *ottappa*, the two elements of moral sensitivity. *Hiri* is a sense of conscience. When we do something that is harmful, when we tell a lie or act in some gross or indulgent way, or are selfish or cruel to somebody, and are aware of that action, *hiri* is the feeling of pain, that pang in our heart which recognizes that we have been cruel, selfish, greedy, inappropriate, indulgent. It is conscience, our sense of honour. If we tell a lie or are selfish, greedy, and destructive, that is felt as a blow to our honour, our sense of integrity.

And then there is *ottappa*. (You find different renderings of these words, but this is the best way I find to describe them). *Ottappa* is more to do with when you see somebody else acting harmfully. You see someone being cruel or unkind, say somebody clouting their child round the head in the supermarket; *ottappa* is that which causes you to recoil from what is unwholesome. This feeling can also arise when you read in the newspaper about unskilful activities such as suicide bombers blowing people up. The Buddha compared this kind of recoiling to an animal's sinew being dropped into a fire (e.g. at A 4.76) – it will naturally curl up and withdraw from the heat. It will shrink back. In the same way, when

the noble heart encounters unwholesomeness in the form of people who are lying, cheating or behaving unskilfully, *ottappa* is what prompts it to withdraw, saying: ‘No thanks, I don’t want to be involved’, or ‘How could people do that?’ or ‘It’s painful to know of that’.

In relating to our own conduct and our own failures we are aiming to develop these qualities of *hiri* and *ottappa*. In English we sometimes translate *hiri* as ‘shame’, and in certain Western psychological circles the word ‘shame’ is considered a definite ‘no-no’ – you don’t want to feel shame! But I would say, don’t be fooled by that attitude. Shame has its place. When we see that we have done something unwholesome – we have told a lie, or cheated, or acted in ways that are harmful, greedy or inappropriate – to feel bad is good! That shame is a good pain. There are *Hiri* and *Ottappa* standing by the door of the Temple. They are the guardians of the world. Their job is to protect. They guard the world and they guard your heart. The pain they can cause is what protects our heart from being pulled into unskilful action.

Physical pain protects our body. If you were completely numb, with no pain at all, it would be much easier for you to cut or damage yourself. There is a very rare medical condition in which people are born without the ability to feel pain at all. As I understand it, people who have that condition rarely live beyond their mid-twenties because they do so much damage to themselves, breaking bones and having infections and such like; the body has so much harm done to it that it cannot survive for long. So even though physical pain is unpleasant, it

is useful because it protects us. That unpleasantness is good, it is useful, because it is what protects our bodies. *Hiri* and *ottappa* protect the heart.

So when your actions and conduct fall short of your ideals and you feel a sense of failure, don't be afraid of that feeling of regret or sorrow. It is a useful, helpful thing. When it becomes problematic is when self-view grabs hold of it and it turns into a guilt trip. So whereas honour or moral sensitivity is a wholesome thing, when the ego gets hold of it and self-view invests that quality, it turns into something toxic and problematic. We make the mistake of amplifying those feelings and latching onto them; we look at ourselves and create a lot of negativity and self-criticism, saying, 'I'm a bad, stupid person. I'm an awful person.' This then becomes a real burden on the heart. We become oppressed by feelings of guilt and self-hatred. And once we have descended into guilt and self-loathing, we can indulge in various unwholesome behaviours. We may justify ourselves and become shameless, qualifying our actions through bloody-minded self-centredness and saying to ourselves: 'Get over it! It's their problem! They had it coming to them!' Or we can go around hating ourselves. Or we can go numb and drink ourselves stupid to try to forget the whole thing.

I would not recommend any of those strategies because they don't really work. It is more helpful to learn how to relate to that sense of regret, remorse and pain in the heart. Learn to relate to it in the way the Buddha described; see transgressions as transgressions and then let the pain be an inspiration to do better in the future. Pain teaches us; it can become a guide and a resource. Even

with regard to everyday things – our effectiveness as a parent or a student, or whether or not we are good at our job – it is important to be able to recognize our shortcomings without veering towards self-justification or self-hatred. It is important to be able to look at our imperfections without deluding ourselves into believing they are beautiful, or convincing ourselves it is okay to do work of poor quality after having done a lousy job with something.

As we practise the Dhamma we learn to be able to recognize our weaknesses, rather than convincing ourselves that we don't really need to concentrate or develop insight in order to be happy. This happens often – because you feel you aren't very good at a particular aspect of practice, you attempt to rewrite the script of the natural order to fit your preferences. Instead we avoid the delusion and self-justification, and recognize simply and clearly: 'I'm not very good at concentrating'; or 'I don't have a lot of insight, but I can see it would be helpful if that could be developed. Now, how can I go about it?' or 'I feel a sense of having fallen short because I get distracted and caught up, so what can I do in order to work with that? What can I do to guide my mind to be more composed and develop a more profound and solidly-based quality of concentration? What can I do to develop more wisdom in my life?' Do not veer towards self-justification or self-hatred. Take that shortcoming, that failing or that imperfection as a cue to see how you can do better, to see what skilful means you can develop in order to bring more wholesome and helpful qualities into your life, and be more of a blessing to yourself and others.

## THE ART OF FORGIVENESS

In many respects we are learning how to forgive ourselves for not being the Buddha or not being perfect, and also learning how to forgive others for not being perfect. In Buddhist practice, particularly on the social side, living in community, forgiveness is a big part of how we relate to each other. In a monastery there is the custom of asking forgiveness when a person has been residing at that monastery for a few months. When a community member departs there is a formal ceremony in which the member says, 'Whatever I have done through the three doors of body, speech and mind that has been hurtful or inappropriate, and has caused discomfort or suffering for you [the teacher or whoever it might be], I ask for your forgiveness.'

Whatever has been done intentionally or unintentionally that has been hurtful, through body, speech or mind, we ask forgiveness for that. Even if you can't think of anything that you might have done, it is a way of clearing the slate. Or maybe you are aware of something harmful you have done – for instance, perhaps you have been sitting radiating irritation, blame and criticism at the teacher for the last three months. But even if you have not knowingly done anything harmful or negative, it is a way of humbling yourself and recognizing that when we live together with other people in the same place and work situation, wherever it might be, we affect each other. We cause offence to each other, we hurt each other, often without even having a clue that we are doing it.

‘Whatever I might have done that has been hurtful to you, please forgive me.’ And then the teacher or the elder, the one who is being asked for forgiveness, responds, ‘I forgive you, and please forgive me also.’ In this they are recognizing that even if they are in a role of seniority as a teacher or an authority figure, they too can easily cause pain, offence or difficulty for others. This is a very beautiful and important part of the ceremony. The teacher and others with seniority recognize that even without any kind of negative intention, they too are very likely to cause pain or difficulty to others around them. Even if this is someone who is regarded as a totally enlightened being or has been ordained for fifty years, and the other people involved in the ceremony are laypeople or newly-ordained monastics, he will still say, ‘I forgive you, please forgive me also.’ Even the Buddha recognized that some things he said were unpleasant or painful to others and were not always easy to bear. So this is a very beautiful and skilful way of recognizing how we can all cause pain and difficulty to each other and how, when we are parting company, it is good to clear the slate and not carry anything away.

Now, this is a formalized exchange, so it can be just an empty recitation of words. But it is also a very good opportunity to watch your own mind. As you are bowing and reciting these words, if there is something you do not want to forgive – perhaps you have a resentment, a grudge you have been nursing about ‘that guy’ – that resentment will be illuminated as you recite the words ‘I forgive you, please forgive me for any of my shortcomings.’ Even if you can’t quite drop

that resentment, you will at least realize, ‘Oh, right, I still have a stone in my shoe. There is still something being carried around.’

This stylized ritual of forgiveness is a form, but it also points to an ongoing practice of focusing on how we relate to each other – the people you work with, the people in your families, the people we encounter every day. Many of us carry around grudges against our neighbours or the people in the country next door, that lot across the border. We each have our national tendencies. In our own neighbourhoods we might bear a grudge against that person in the house next door who just cut the hedge down without asking. We can carry around a lot of resentment, whether on a national, family or neighbourly basis, or against the people we work with.

A few years ago I read a story in the San Francisco Chronicle about two different sets of astronomers who were trying to establish different measurements of various astronomical activities, in order to finally pin down the exact rate at which the universe was expanding. One group of astronomers set up in the Pacific and the other group in South America. These two groups were vying with one another. They were trying to get their experiments done and their data published first, so that they would be the first to detail the ‘true’ nature of the Big Bang and the expansion of the universe. In the article one of these scientists made a wonderful comment which has stuck with me over the years. He said, ‘They say that gravity is supposed to be the most powerful force

in the universe, but I disagree. It is professional jealousy that possesses that distinction.' I thought that was very insightful. He deserved to win.

We carry with us polarized feelings of 'that lot', 'that company' or 'that family'; we carry grudges, negativity and pain. And we constantly tell ourselves stories, continually reiterating and reviving negativity and resentment. That is why developing forgiveness is critical. Learning forgiveness is learning how to drop all that pain, how not to carry around resentments and grudges. That can be difficult, because our negativities can be very precious to us. We hold very tightly to our unsatisfied resentment or a grudge we have been bearing for years and years, blaming the other, blaming a member of our family, or our bosses, the government or the country next door. But if we want to grow up spiritually, we need to learn how to let go, to forgive and to put things down.

Years ago when Mr. Gorbachev was in power in the former Soviet Union, as he was decommissioning the Communist influence, he was also trying to convince the world that he was sincere. The Americans were extremely suspicious about this *glasnost* and *perestroika* and wondered what the Russians really had planned, because up to that point the US-Soviet relationship was primarily defined by the nuclear arms race and the strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction. Gorbachev, with great vision, had realized this was totally ridiculous, a pointless waste of national resources on both sides. But the Americans did not trust that. They thought the Russians had something up their sleeve. At one particular meeting in Washington DC, the Soviet Foreign Minister Mr. Shevardnadze addressed a

roomful of American officials. He took the microphone, looked around the table with a certain degree of theatricality and said ponderously, 'We are going to do something terrible to you.' The American officials thought to themselves, 'Okay, here it comes now. They've got a secret weapon that they're going to unveil. They've got us cornered.' The Soviet Minister left a pregnant pause to get to the right dramatic effect, then said, 'We are going to deprive you of an enemy.'

'We are going to deprive you of an enemy.' This was not what the Americans were expecting.

What the minister said was delivered very skilfully. It was true that the Americans derived a lot of national identity from living in opposition to the communist threat. I know this is a sweeping statement, but have you noticed that 'communism' is not a big problem anymore, but 'terrorism' is? The Radical Muslim Threat has become the dreaded 'them' which threatens our lives since communism no longer fulfils that role. I won't get into politics here, but just look at how we easily develop a sense of identity on both a national and personal level by carrying around those kinds of pet hatreds – hatred for 'the system', for our bosses, for family members or whoever it might be, our pet peeve.

Take a good look at your pet hate: 'them', 'her', 'him' or 'it'. How cramped and painful it is to carry those things around. How much more beautiful it is to let go, how much more helpful to forgive and not to nurse those hatreds, even though they give us a sense of identity. That identity is only the comfort of a preferred self-view. Instead we are learning to let go of self-view. We are

learning to let go of that habit of self-identification. We don't need some specific hatred to make us feel more alive or give us a sense of identity. We are moving away from that dimension, letting go of all that. So to forgive, to let go and drop our hatreds and resentments is a great blessing to ourselves, a freedom for our own heart and also a blessing for the people around us.

In Thai the word for forgiveness is *a-pai*, which comes from the Pali word *abhaya*, meaning 'fearless'. I used to live in Abhayagiri Monastery in California; in fact, I even gave it its name. Many Thai people would think the name of the monastery was 'Forgiveness Mountain' rather than 'Fearless Mountain'. They would see 'Abhayagiri' and think it must mean 'Forgiveness Mountain', but the name was intended to be 'Fearless Mountain'.

Now you might be wondering what the relationship between forgiveness and fearlessness could be. The Buddha talked about various different kinds of generosity. *Āmisadāna* is the giving of material gifts, but *abhayadāna* is the giving of fearlessness. You give the gift of fearlessness when you stop being a threat to others. You offer others the opportunity to be free from fear by not being aggressive towards them, not acting in a way that is going to harm them, or threaten their property or well-being in any way. By forgiving others, by not bearing resentment towards them, you give them a tremendous amount of space. They don't have to be afraid of you because you are not carrying around anything negative about them. Does that make sense? This is how fearlessness and forgiveness are unified – if I am not carrying around any grudges or

negativity towards you, you don't have to be afraid of me. You won't be thinking: 'He doesn't like me. He's got it in for me. He's got that look about him. He's really resentful. He doesn't like my kind of a person.' There is no grudge, no bias, no prejudice. When you come into contact with a person who is not carrying that kind of thing around, how do you feel? You're glad to see such a person. You are content. You feel fearless. You don't have to be protecting yourself or arming yourself in any way.

This aspect of the Buddha's teachings is not talked about very much. *Abhayadāna*, that giving of fearlessness, is a very beautiful way of operating in the world, so that you send out signals to the people in your family, the people you work with, the people in the street, telling them that they don't need to be afraid of you. They don't need to be concerned about what you are carrying around. You are offering them the opportunity to live free from fear, free from negativity and harm coming from you. And the Buddha said this *abhayadāna* is a superior kind of giving. It is a more noble and beneficial giving than the giving of material gifts. To give others the blessing of security, safety and freedom from fear is a greater blessing than any kind of material offering you can give.

Forgiving others and not carrying grudges around might seem like a lot of work. It is difficult to let go of negativity, opinions, judgements and the typecasting of those who have different political persuasions or nationalities, or whatever biases our mind moves towards. But of course, often the most difficult person to forgive is yourself. I've been talking a lot about forgiving others and

letting go, but forgiving ourselves for not being perfect, forgiving ourselves our own failings, forgiving ourselves for not being as wise, good, noble and good-looking as the Buddha – that is harder, particularly with our cultural conditioning in the West, which can be viciously self-critical.

In a strange way, learning how to forgive ourselves is more important than learning how to forgive others, because it is harder to forgive ourselves. We are constantly accusing ourselves of not being perfect, not being the ideal father or mother, the perfect meditator, the perfect monk or nun. We can be really hard on ourselves. You probably think self-critical thoughts, blame yourself, criticize yourself for being lazy or stupid, or selfish or greedy, guilty of all kinds of varieties of shortcomings. It is important to look at that hard-heartedness, that fierce, almost vicious self-criticism. And it is important to offer that quality of forgiveness and lack of a grudge or negativity towards ourselves.

I'll teach you a little exercise you can use if you do have a habit of self-criticism; if you blame yourself, criticize and hate yourself, or feel guilty for not being a good father, a good mother, a good child, a good friend, a good student, a good teacher. Imagine you have a friend who comes to you and says, 'I've got this terrible problem with self-hatred. I feel I'm so awful. I'm so bad. I'm so useless and such a lazy, selfish, greedy, angry, jealous, cruel, horrible person. I really hate myself.' If a friend came to you and said that, how would you respond? Imagine what you would feel in relationship to a friend who came to you and said how bad and awful he was. What would your heart do immediately? In

my experience, the heart would immediately move towards forgiveness and compassion. You would say, 'Don't worry, you're not that bad. You are a nice person. How could you carry that idea around and create such negativity and hatred? Don't worry about it. Here, we'll have a cup of tea. Put the kettle on'. (In England the primary way of handling suffering is putting the kettle on to make tea. There is *dukkha*; put the kettle on).

This little exercise is very simple, but it is astonishingly effective. Imagine yourself in that situation and notice how immediately the mind moves towards compassion. There is no question about it. If a friend came to you and poured out their heart, revealing the depths of their self-loathing: would you say, 'That's terrible! How could you be like that! I don't think I want to be your friend anymore!' How many of us would do that? If somebody reacted in that way you would feel they were deranged. How could anyone even think like that? And yet we think that way about ourselves. But when we're thinking about someone else, notice how automatically our mind goes instantly to forgiveness. 'Don't make a big thing out of it. You're fine. You're a lovely person. You are very kind and unselfish. Don't worry about it. Drop it. Leave it alone.'

## THE ART OF LISTENING

I feel this is an important lesson for us all. Learn to be able to listen to those inner voices, the voices of the inner critic. Be very patient and respectful towards the inner critic. The inner critic works very hard, puts in a lot of hours

during the course of the day, categorizing all our faults. The inner critic is very active. Listen politely and respectfully, and then say, ‘Thank you for sharing’ (as they do in California) and politely leave the criticism to one side. In that way we do not allow our actions or speech be dominated by the inner critic and feelings of self-hatred. We learn to act from a place of mindfulness and wisdom, attuned to the present situation. We let go of self-concern and are no longer guided by what ‘they’ think – ‘they’ being the external partners of the inner critic, its outside representatives, the mysterious ‘them’: what will ‘they’ think about me as a monk, or as a teacher, a mother, father, or child? Gradually we learn to be unconcerned about what ‘they’ think or ‘they’ will say, because they don’t really exist. Just like the inner critic, these are phantom creations of the mind. Gradually we learn not to feel we have to justify ourselves, explain ourselves or be driven about anxiety, blame or negativity caused by others.

At the same time as I was putting a lot of effort into working with my anxiety habits, I realized I was completely addicted to approval and pleasing people. I always wanted to make everybody happy. I wanted to please people all the time. It used to be that if I said or did something people didn’t like, I would be completely shattered. We had a morning meeting every day in the *sālā*, and Ajahn Sumedho would extemporize on some Dhamma theme for half an hour or forty minutes while our tea got cold. They were glorious times. The whole community would gather round. I began to notice during this period that if I said something that was wise and witty and on the mark, everyone would laugh

and smile, and I would feel this incredible glow: ‘Oh yes! The cat got the cream! Amaro scored a point! *Ding!* Good! Happy day!’ But if I said something which was supposed to be wise or witty, and it went totally flat and everyone started looking at the carpet or picked up their tea and looked away, I would feel as if I was breaking into a million pieces. So I realized that I was very dependent on approval and terrified of disapproval. Having seen that, I recognized that I had made a complex structure in my mind based on worrying about what ‘they’ thought, how ‘they’ felt.

Part of letting go of self-view is letting go of other’s views as well. And so in that development of freeing the heart from anxiety, I worked very deliberately on letting go of the opinions of others. Obviously I tried to be wise and mindful and live in an honourable way, but I would say to myself: ‘Just do what you do and let the world make of it what it will. Don’t worry about how you will be judged. Don’t be so pushed around by people’s imagined opinions and views of approval or disapproval.’

This is all part of allowing ourselves to be misunderstood. It is a very profound practice, to let yourself be misunderstood or misrepresented so you are not always jumping in and explaining yourself or trying to ‘fix’ things, but letting people have a negative opinion of you and not feeling as though you have to leap in and correct it. If there is a signal that someone doesn’t like or approve of you, or is not totally happy about something you have done or said, you don’t have to anxiously jump in and try to make it all right. It was a tremendous effort

for me to leave things alone and reflect: 'Well, that's their opinion. Fine.' There was a part of me that was very uneasy, but I kept with it: 'If they want to believe that, it's fine. Maybe their opinion will change, maybe it won't, but I don't have to carry it around.'

That is a kind of giving. You are giving yourself space, and you are giving others space. There is a tremendous freedom in that. It needs a lot of effort, a lot of work, but it takes us somewhere very spacious and peaceful. A quality of contentment is realized. So I would encourage you to forgive your shortcomings. There is no need to create a whole image of what others think of you in the mind. Learn to trust, have faith and confidence in your own good-heartedness. Do the best you can to be mindful and wise, and then leave it be. Do what you do and let the world make of it what it will. This is not a form of callousness or indifference. You are not being dismissive. You are just not carrying the opinion of the whole world around. You are giving yourself more space and giving others space to have their own opinions. People are totally at liberty not to like you. Quite a lot of people didn't like the Buddha. There were strong objections to the Buddha and his teachings during his lifetime. Statistically, it is impossible to be liked by every single person on the planet. Nobody has ever achieved that, so why do you think you should be the first? It's crazy, isn't it? There will always be a few people who don't like us, and a lot who are totally indifferent, but we don't have to carry that around. If people don't want to like us, fine. That is their business.





SEEING  
SPACE  
WITHIN  
AND  
AROUND  
THE  
'I'

MEDITATION  
INSTRUCTION  
#ELEVEN

WE BRING OUR ATTENTION to the felt sense of the present: the body sitting here, sensations of weight, warmth or coolness, feelings of alertness or dullness; the mood of gladness, anxiety, inspiration, numbness. We feel the body and the breath. We notice the mood. We hear the sound of silence. Here it all is, the array of our experience, here and now.

So much of the practice is bringing our attention to this simple, present, immediate quality of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch; form, feeling, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness. Just this. And we reflect that it is this way. It is this. Such, *tathatā*. There is the quality of suchness. It is simply this way. It is thus. We don't need to add any more words than that. We just reflect: it is like this.

Tiredness is like this.

Inspiration is like this.

Feeling warm is like this.

Feeling cool is like this.

There is the simple recognition of this present experience. That is enough to establish mindfulness, clarity and wisdom. Mindfulness is the quality which integrates all our experience, even the feelings of things being painful or wrong, broken, not working, not right. In the midst of unease there is the recognition: 'This is the feeling of not-rightness. This is the feeling of something that is not fixable. This is the feeling of something not working.' Right here is this simple apprehension. In this receiving of the felt pattern of that experience, right here, in a deeper way it is fixed, it is whole. To 'reflect' is to experience the feeling.: 'Not-perfect feels like this.' It is deeper, more real

than simply reciting some words. We do use the words, but only to lead the heart to open and fully allow an experience of non-perfection.

We give something the label 'broken' 'imperfect' 'incomplete' 'failure' yet these are merely subjective judgements. From its own side a 'broken cup' is not 'broken'; it is just exactly what it is. Any 'brokenness' comes completely from our human perspective. What one animal looks upon as 'waste' another feeds on delightedly; a fallen 'dead' redwood tree supports much more life than a 'living' one.

When that subjective judging is dropped, and words like 'imperfection' or 'broken' are seen as convenient fictions, the heart can rest, spacious and accommodating. This allowing of

experience is where perfection lies. This is the refuge in awareness, the Buddha refuge. This is the way things are, this is the pattern of reality; clearly seeing that pattern of reality is refuge in Dhamma. Therefore there is an attunement of the heart, a letting go of self-view. Harmonization of the heart with that reality is refuge in Sangha. This is the safe place, the triple refuge, the Triple Gem. This refuge is always accessible to us, regardless of time, place or situation. The Triple Gem is our real wealth, our real security – wisdom, reality and unselfishness.

According to the schedule this is our last full day together; the ship is moving towards the destination port, the shoreline appears on the horizon. Soon we will all be parting company, going our separate ways. The different

elements which have made up the body of our retreat will go their separate ways. They will scatter to the winds. So it is natural for the attention to move toward schedules, plans, planes, things to do, places to go. It all feels like a reasonable becoming: 'I have to make a plan.' 'I have to catch a plane.' 'I have to...' This is a prime opportunity to witness that compulsion of the heart to move on to the next thing, to lean forward into the imagined future, towards projected possibilities. Allow yourself to feel that urge of becoming, bhava-tanhā, planning, expecting, dreading, hoping, anticipating. See if you can feel it in the body. See if you can feel that urge, that hunger of the mind to move on to the next thing, the relish of having a really good excuse to get wrapped up in some plan, something that is going to happen. Feel it. Know

it. Sense it in the body and reflect – the sensation of becoming is dukkha.

Peace comes from letting go of all that movement. When the attention does not adhere to all that is coming and going, what is present is the timeless reality, a timeless, limitless, all-encompassing awareness. That quality of simple knowing is bright, vast, unbounded. This consciousness is formless, infinite, radiant, clear. As soon as the attention locks onto a thing, a thought, a plan or a feeling, right there is birth in the realm of comings and goings, getting and losing, approval and disapproval, success and failure. When the mind begins anticipating and planning, this is a prime opportunity to see, feel and know that urge to adhere, to get stuck onto things and into things. A clock is moving inexorably on, the days and

nights are relentlessly passing. Time moves on without a pause, without a break. There are things to be done, spaces to be tidied, taxis to be ordered.

Yes, there are indeed things to be done on the material plane. There are things to be done on the sensory plane. But notice what it feels like when the heart is caught in that sensory swirl, the flush and rush of activity and engagement. There is a gratification, a pleasure in it, but look what comes with it. In the midst of it, see if the heart can let go and be the spacious awareness which provides no footing for long and short, coarse and fine, gain and loss, coming and going, here and there. Be that aware, open, awakened, spacious place where things don't stick. Feel that fundamental restfulness of non-becoming, the heart not caught in that

flow of activity, beginnings and endings, births and deaths. There is a letting go, a non-grasping. And there are moments when there is non-adherence, a non-entanglement. Let yourself be conscious of how that feels. Feel the presence of the heart free from all grasping, not tying itself to the cycles of birth and death, being off the wheel. Feel it. Let it be known. Let that really sink in. How good that feels, like freedom from an addiction, freedom from a debt, free from being locked up. How delightful, naturally peaceful and enjoyable.

During the day perceptions will move towards making plans, anticipating the future, dreading it or looking forward excitedly to it. Whatever the emotional tone, whenever your mind forms the thought: 'I will...'; 'I'm going to...'; 'I've got to...'; whenever you notice that

thought form, freeze it, stop it in its tracks, give it some space to be clearly and distinctly seen and discerned. Take that phrase and freeze it. Repeat it steadily in the space of the mind.

‘I’ve got to...’

‘I am going to...’

‘I need to...’

‘I should...’

‘I have to...’

When we take these simple everyday phrases and isolate them, when we let them be clearly known and heard, we begin to see them differently. The heart holds them in a different way. Notice that change. Look at a simple phrase like, ‘I have to confirm my ticket.’ When you freeze it, give it some space, listen to it, clarify it and highlight the ‘I have to’, there is recognition of an assumption that the universe is incomplete unless some action is taken, the delusion that

my life is not whole until some task is completed. The heart knows how ridiculous that is. How could nature be incomplete right now? How could the universe not be absolutely whole right now? What could be missing?

Yet we are so easily swamped by the list of things I *have* to do, messages I *have* to answer, places I *have* to go – it all seems so real, so important, so compelling. This is a prime opportunity, an ideal opportunity, to see those kinds of compulsions for what they are. When that impulse arises in the mind, notice it. Take the trouble to halt it and clarify it. See the change in the heart when you take a simple phrase like ‘I should’, ‘I must’ or ‘I’ve got to’ and really listen to it. Let it sit there, hovering in the space of the mind.

Then, to develop this further, as you notice that strange and liberating shift of perspective, refine the statement even further: just say the word 'I'. Feel the quality of that word – so ordinary, so unremarkable; and yet, when we bring that simplest of words into the clear space of awareness, how strange it is. Something in the heart, our own intuitive wisdom, wonders: 'What on earth has that go to do with anything real? What is 'I'?' How strange and out of place it can feel. What a weird set of assumptions come with that word. 'I'. Let your attention stay with that weirdness, that slightly unsettled feeling. At that moment the uneasy feeling is coming from the self-view being punctured, destabilized, dethroned.

Here is another way we can develop this. First allow the mind to become as

calm, still and clear as possible, with the attention steady in the present moment. Focus on the sound of silence and then drop your name into that open space. 'Amaro', 'John', 'Sue', 'David', 'Jane', whatever it might be; we bring our ordinary everyday name into the space, the silence of the mind. Just think your own name, with no story, no 'shoulds' or 'shouldn'ts', no characteristics tacked onto it; just your name. And again, notice the strange, unsettling reconfiguration that comes with that. The wisdom of the heart recognizes: 'That's not what I am. That is nothing real or substantial.' At that moment self-view is punctured. It is taken out of the driving-seat. It loses its strength, its centrality. When self-view is dropped, punctured, along with that subtle disorientation come brightness, peacefulness and clarity. This is the

cessation of becoming, the cessation of grasping; the still heart gives no traction to perceptions, habits of self-view, thoughts and moods. Completely empty. Transparent.

This is the quality of suchness – *tathatā*. In a way, all that can be said is: ‘It’s like this.’ We don’t need to have any kind of description beyond that. There is no need to explain or describe, or give any kind of conceptual form to it. Even calling it an ‘it’ misses the reality. It is the heart of non-grasping, openness, brightness and clarity.

Let that be known. Let the heart know its own suchness: ‘It’s like this.’ We don’t need to create any more complicated descriptions or explanations beyond that. Just let it be known. The heart is open, clear, for what is happening

there is simply Dhamma being aware of its own nature. When the heart is completely free from grasping, free of entanglement, what is being known is Dhamma, the fundamental nature of the heart and of all things; and what is doing the knowing is Dhamma also, nature being aware of what that nature is, Dhamma aware of its own nature. And the flavour of that is suchness.

We can let that sink in and soak fully through our awareness. Let it be completely known, tasted, realized. Then it is easier not to get caught by the ten thousand becomings, compulsions and urgencies, opinions and judgements. Their intrinsic transparency, emptiness and insubstantiality are more obvious. The clearer the realization of non-grasping, of suchness, the easier it is and the

greater strength there is to see through the urgencies, activities, busyness and clamour of the world. The light of our heart is brighter, so it shines through and illuminates the dust of the world.





THE  
ENDING  
OF  
BECOMING

CHAPTER ELEVEN

NOTICE HOW IT FEELS to be gathered together for this final time as a group. The sound of a plane overhead is no longer just a noise emerging from the airport. Notice how it can trigger a string of associations: ‘Oh yes, I’ll be getting on one of those later today – travel.’ All of a sudden the sound of the plane has a story to tell. Instead of just being a sound that has come to participate in the meditation, it is a signal of travel and change, of crossing distances, even if the distance we have to travel is only over to the other side of the monastery or to a home nearby. Notice this feeling of our final time together – the resonances of yesterday evening, listening to each other, hearing each other’s poems, stories, experiences. Notice how that has changed us, how differently we see each other. Notice the feelings of eager excitement, anticipation of return to the world of talking, eating supper, seeing the news; *doing* something, *going* somewhere, engaging, and the excitement about or dread of that prospect. In the words of Bob Dylan, ‘How does it feeeel?’

This is the ‘end of the retreat’ feeling. The great vessel approaches the harbour, the passengers and crew prepare to disembark. You can see the shoreline, people gathered on the dock; we have our bags organized and our passports checked. A feeling of ending, closing, completing. Not a good or bad feeling, not pleasant or unpleasant; in and of itself it is just like this. Keep opening the heart to this present reality, to this suchness, the is-ness of this very moment, with its feelings of threat, irritation, excitement, inspiration.

Practising the way of Dhamma is attuning the heart to its own present reality, letting it be awake, open; not pushing things away, but not grasping at them either. Letting the flow of changes come through, we allow our responses to arise from that attunement. In this way, what makes our decisions is not the habit of self-view, usurping centrality of control; rather, the source of our choice is *sati-paññā*, mindfulness and wisdom guiding what to do in each moment.

This is a self-adjusting universe. If you get out of the way, the ‘universe’, also known as your *citta*, your own mind, adjusts accordingly. Self-view and conceit are dropped and our life, our actions, our words naturally attune themselves to what is appropriate and beneficial in the present moment.

It’s important in this respect to recollect that your intentions, actions and choices are all part of the way things are. As T.S. Eliot put it, we don’t disturb the universe by the choices that we make. Our choices are part of the universe, part of the way things are. The more often those choices and decisions come from mindfulness and wisdom, from attunement to the present reality, the more often they will lead to clarity, peacefulness, fearlessness; to a heart which is free of anxiety and compulsions, a heart which understands like and dislike, sweetness and bitterness. That achievement is most complete when there is no adherence to the patterns of the changing world, the changing mind. When there is no grasping at that which is arising and passing away, there is peacefulness. But when the attention is caught on that which is born and dying, coming and going, naturally

we are ‘born’; the mind is dragged along, carried along on by that cycle, just like a burr from the grass becoming caught in our socks. We become snagged and tangled.

The wisdom of open awareness provides no traction, no footing, no source of adherence to sights and sounds, smells and tastes, sweet or bitter, nor to approval and disapproval, gain and loss. This is the great peace. This is the great beauty of life, the establishing of that heart which is free of compulsions, free of reactions. Rather than being pulled by wanting, hating and fearing, it understands the nature of like and dislike. It is not fooled by the stories and lies which it is told. This is a heart which truly understands that when you get what you want, you don’t want it any more. Just as Marilyn Monroe sang, ‘If I gave you the moon, you’d get bored with it soon.’

Something in our heart knows with absolute certainty that when we get what we want, we won’t want it anymore.

This understanding is the bedrock of our being. How simple, how straightforward that realization. Once we’ve allowed it to penetrate, it is the gateway to liberation. Desire is lying. *Tanhā* (craving) says, ‘If you get this, you’ll be happy forever. You will be truly satisfied.’ But the wise heart, which is to be trusted, recognizes that when we get what we want, it changes. This is recognition of *anicca*. Satisfaction cannot be substantial. It cannot last. We grasp at an object of desire and then we just want something else, then something else, then something else... This is the *bhavacakka*, the cycle of becoming.

When the heart knows that fundamental quality of uncertainty, transiency, there is a radical letting go, a non-attachment, a non-entanglement. The heart sees through the illusion; it sees through the lie, it sees through the false promise. Without aversion, without complaint, the heart sees through the trick. And those moments when this is truly seen, when there is that clarity, allow that certainty, that obviousness to sink in.

Let it be fully known. The sheer obviousness of it: ‘Of course! It changes! How could that be kept or owned?’ It is like writing your name on a waterfall with the beam of a torch – there is nothing for it to stick to. It is all in a state of motion. ‘What did I think was there in the first place? Ah, it’s totally obvious.’

When we let that obviousness, that simplicity sink into the heart and fully inform it, our habits of distraction come into sharp relief. Being caught up in schedules, family, people, praise and criticism, gain and loss, sweet and bitter – underneath it the heart recognizes that this is all just froth, smoke and mirrors, foam on the water, nothing to get excited or upset about. This is a simple, direct recognition of *anicca*, uncertainty. This is the gateway to wisdom, to the great truth. This is the spiritual turning point.

Let that realization sink into the heart, be truly known, acknowledged and understood, and the world will be different. Everything will be different. You will see the world, yourself, and others in a whole new way, held with spaciousness and ease. That freedom is incomparable, completely delightful and always accessible to us. If we remember to apply that insight and see in that way, that possibility, that freedom, is always here, completely independent of circumstance.

It is always here.





GLOSSARY

<b><i>abhaya</i></b>	fearless
<b><i>abhaya<span>dāna</span></i></b>	‘giving of freedom from fear’, being harmless
<b><i>Abhidhamma</i></b>	analytical doctrine of the Pali Canon
<b><i>acinteyya</i></b>	imponderable, inconceivable
<b><i>āgata</i></b>	to come
<b><i>ahaṃkāra</i></b>	‘I-ness’, literally ‘made of I-am’
<b>Ajahn</b> (Thai)	teacher; from the Pali <i>ācariya</i> : in the Amaravati community, a bhikkhu or <i>śīladharā</i> who has completed ten rains retreats ( <i>vassa</i> )
<b><i>akālika</i></b>	timeless
<b><i>āmisadāna</i></b>	material offerings, gifts
<b><i>anagārikā</i></b> (f)	monastic trainee who lives on the Eight Precepts
<b><i>anagārika</i></b> (m)	
<b><i>anattā</i></b>	literally ‘not-self, non-self’, i.e. impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person nor belonging to a person; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<b><i>anicca</i></b>	transient, impermanent, unstable, having the nature to arise and pass away; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<b><i>anicca-saññā</i></b>	the reflective perception of impermanence
<b><i>anurakkhana</i></b>	maintaining, protecting; the fourth of the ‘bases of success’
<b><i>a-pai</i></b> (Thai)	forgiveness; from the Pali <i>abhaya</i>

<b><i>arahant</i></b>	a fully enlightened person; according to the Pali Canon, the fourth and final stage on the Path
<b><i>arahantship</i></b>	the state of complete liberation
<b><i>asura</i></b>	the 'Jealous Gods', titans of Buddhist cosmology
<b><i>attā</i></b> (Thai)	literally 'self' i.e. the ego, personality
<b><i>atman</i></b> (Skt.)	
<b><i>avijjā</i></b>	ignorance, not-knowing, delusion
<b><i>avijjā paccayā sankhārā</i></b>	ignorance as a condition for mental formations
<b><i>āyatana</i></b>	sense faculty; or sphere of being
<b><i>baht</i></b> (Thai)	unit of currency
<b><i>bhava</i></b>	becoming, being, existing
<b><i>bhava-cakka</i></b>	the wheel of becoming; the cycles of birth and death
<b><i>bhāvanā</i></b>	meditation or mental cultivation
<b><i>bhava-tanhā</i></b>	desire to become, achieve or obtain something
<b><i>bhikkhu</i></b>	a fully ordained Buddhist monk
<b><i>Bodhisatta</i></b>	literally 'one who is intent on Buddhahood'
<b><i>Brahmā</i></b>	a being in the highest heavenly realms
<b><i>brahmāloka</i></b>	the highest heavenly realms
<b><i>brahma vihāras</i></b>	the 'Sublime Abidings': loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity

<b>Buddha-image</b>	a statue representing the Buddha
<i>citta</i>	mind, heart, psyche
<i>dāna</i>	generosity
<i>devata</i>	heavenly being, angel
<b>Dhamma</b>	the teaching of the Buddha as contained in the scriptures, not dogmatic in character, but more like a raft or vehicle to convey the disciple to deliverance; also the truth and reality toward which that teaching points; that which is beyond words, concepts, or intellectual understanding.
<i>dhamma</i>	mental qualities, skilful or unskilful, that are pertinent to the process of awakening
<i>dhammatā</i>	natural; an aspect of reality
<i>dukkha</i>	literally 'hard to bear'. Dis-ease, discontent, or suffering, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<i>dukkha-nirodha</i>	cessation of <i>dukkha</i>
<i>ehipassiko</i>	encouraging investigation, inviting to come and see
<i>gata</i>	to go
<i>glasnost</i> (Russian)	openness
<i>gluay hom</i> (Thai)	fragrant bananas
<i>gotrabhū</i>	'change of lineage'; another term for stream-entry

<b>hiri</b>	conscience, a healthy fear of consequences
<b>hiri-ottappa</b>	<i>hiri</i> combined with moral sensitivity
<b>jāti</b>	birth, rebirth
<b>jhāna</b>	meditative absorptions; deep states of rapture, joy, and one-pointedness
<b>kāma-tanhā</b>	sensual desire
<b>kamma/karma</b>	action or cause which is created by habitual impulses, volitions, intentions. In popular usage ( <i>karma</i> ) it often includes the result or effect of the action, although the proper term for this is <i>vipāka</i> .
<b>karunā</b>	compassion; one of the Sublime Abidings
<b>khandha</b>	group, aggregate, heap – the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of human psycho-physical existence (form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness)
<b>lokavidū</b>	‘knower of the world’, an epithet of the Buddha
<b>lokapāla</b>	‘protector of the world’, a synonym for <i>hiri-ottappa</i>
<b>Luang Por</b> (Thai)	literally, ‘revered father’, a title of respect and affection for an elder monk and teacher
<b>Mahā-Brahmā</b>	a lofty deity in Buddhist cosmology
<b>mamaṅkāra</b>	mine-ness, literally ‘made of mine’
<b>mettā</b>	loving-kindness; one of the Sublime Abidings
<b>mettā-bhāvanā</b>	meditation on loving-kindness

<b><i>my naeh</i></b> (Thai)	uncertain, not a sure thing; synonymous with <i>anicca</i>
<b><i>nada</i></b> (Skt.)	literally ‘sound’; the inner sound used as a meditation object
<b><i>nāma</i></b>	mind
<b><i>nāma-khandhā</i></b>	the four ‘groups’ that comprise the mental world: feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness
<b><i>nāma-rūpa</i></b>	mind-and-body or mentality-materiality; see ‘ <i>khandha</i> ’
<b><i>namo tassa</i></b>	the most common expression of respect for the Buddha; literally
<b><i>bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa</i></b>	‘Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Perfectly Enlightened One’
<b><i>Nibbāna</i></b>	literally ‘coolness’; freedom from attachments, perfect peace
<b><i>nippapañca</i></b>	freedom from conceptual proliferation
<b><i>non-returner</i></b>	the third stage of enlightenment
<b><i>once-returner</i></b>	the second stage of enlightenment
<b><i>ottappa</i></b>	moral sensitivity
<b><i>paccuppanna</i></b>	what has arisen now, present
<b><i>pahāna</i></b>	relinquishment; the second of the four ‘bases of success’
<b><i>Pali</i></b>	the ancient Indian language of the Pali Canon, akin to Sanskrit
<b><i>paññā</i></b>	discriminative wisdom, discernment
<b><i>papañca</i></b>	mental proliferation, conceptual proliferation, complication

<b><i>pāramī/pāramitā</i></b>	literally ‘means of going across’, perfection. The ten perfections in Theravada Buddhism for realizing Buddhahood are giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity
<b><i>paticca-samuppāda</i></b>	‘dependent origination’. It explains the way psycho-physical phenomena come into being in dependence on one another
<b><i>perestroika</i></b> (Russian)	restructuring
<b><i>phassa</i></b>	sense-contact
<b><i>piyāyati</i></b>	dearness, possessive love
<b><i>pūjā</i></b>	a devotional offering, chanting, bowing, etc.
<b><i>rūpa</i></b>	form or matter; often referring to the physical elements that make up the body, i.e., earth, water, fire, and wind (solidity, cohesion, temperature, and motion or vibration)
<b><i>rūpa-khandha</i></b>	form as part of the mind-body complex, (see <i>khandha</i> )
<b><i>saddhā</i></b>	faith
<b><i>sādhu</i></b>	‘It is well!’
<b><i>sakkāya-ditthi</i></b>	self-view; identification with the body and personality
<b><i>sālā</i></b>	a hall, usually where the monastics eat their food and other ceremonies are held.
<b><i>salāyatana</i></b>	the six sense faculties: eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind
<b><i>samādhi</i></b>	meditative concentration, collectedness

<b>sammā</b>	‘right’, as in the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path: <i>sammā-diṭṭhi</i> : right view; <i>sammā-sankappo</i> : right intention; <i>sammā-vācā</i> : right speech; <i>sammā-kammanto</i> : right action; <i>sammā-ājīvo</i> : right livelihood; <i>sammā-vāyāmo</i> : right effort; <i>sammā-sati</i> : right mindfulness; <i>sammā-samādhi</i> : right concentration
<b>saṃvara</b>	restraining; the first of the four aspects of ‘Right Effort’
<b>saṃyojana</b>	‘fetter’; a list of the ten qualities that obstruct enlightenment
<b>sanditthiko</b>	apparent here and now
<b>sankhārā</b>	mental formations; conditioned phenomena in general
<b>sankhārā paccayā viññānaṃ</b>	‘mental formations condition consciousness’
<b>saññā</b>	perception
<b>sati</b>	mindfulness, awareness
<b>sati-paññā</b>	literally ‘mindfulness and wisdom’
<b>sati-sampajañña</b>	literally ‘mindfulness and clear understanding’; also intuitive awareness, apperception
<b>sawang, sa-aht, sangoup</b> (Thai)	purity, radiance, peace
<b>sīla</b>	virtue, also used to refer to the precepts of moral conduct
<b>sīlabbata-parāmāsa</b>	attachment to rites and rituals, clinging to precepts and practices
<b>sīladharā</b>	‘one who upholds virtue’, a term used for Buddhist nuns gone-forth under Ajahn Sumedho’s guidance

<b><i>soka parideva dukkha domanassa upāyāsā</i></b>	literally ‘sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair’
<b>stream-entry</b>	one whose realization has transcended the first three ‘fettters’ or mental structures that block awakening. These are: identification with one’s personality; attachment to customs and systems; and wavering uncertainty as to Dhamma. Having transcended these, a ‘stream-enterer’ is said to inevitably realize complete awakening within a maximum of seven lifetimes. The other three of the four stages of enlightenment are <i>sakadāgāmi</i> , <i>anāgāmi</i> , <i>arahant</i> (once returner, non-returner, fully enlightened person)
<b><i>sukha</i></b>	happiness
<b><i>sutta</i></b>	discourse given by the Buddha or one of his disciples
<b><i>tamadā</i></b> (Thai)	ordinary
<b><i>tanhā</i></b>	craving
<b><i>tatramajjhatatā</i></b>	literally ‘in-the-middle-of-that-ness’, centredness
<b><i>tathā</i></b>	such, thus
<b>Tathāgata</b>	a term for the Buddha, ‘One thus come/gone’
<b><i>tathatā</i></b>	suchness, thusness
<b>Tāvatiṃsa Heaven</b>	Heaven of the Thirty-Three Deities, one of the heavenly realms, according to Buddhist cosmology
<b>Theravada</b>	literally ‘The Way of the Elders’; the Buddhism of South Asia
<b>Tipitaka</b>	literally ‘Three baskets’ – the Pali Canon or the scriptures of the Theravada school

<b>tudong</b> (Thai)	from Pali <i>dhutanga</i> ; the practice of walking for weeks or months in remote places with no guarantees of food or lodgings
<b>Tusitā Heaven</b>	one of the heavenly realms, according to Buddhist cosmology
<b>upādāna</b>	attachment, clinging, grasping
<b>vedanā</b>	feelings or sensations, of pleasure, pain, or neutrality
<b>vibhava-tanhā</b>	desire for not-being, for annihilation; wanting to get rid of
<b>vicikicchā</b>	sceptical doubt
<b>vitakka</b>	thinking
<b>vijjā</b>	awakened awareness, knowing, insight knowledge, genuine understanding
<b>Vinaya</b>	the monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries on them
<b>viññāna</b>	discriminative consciousness, cognizance
<b>vipassanā</b>	insight meditation, ‘looking into things’ and the quality of understanding that arises from such seeing
<b>virīya</b>	energy, persistence
<b>wabi-sabi</b> (Japanese)	the beauty of imperfection
<b>Yāmā Devas</b>	one of the heavenly realms, according to Buddhist cosmology
<b>yankiñci samudaya</b> <b>dhammaṃ sabbantaṃ</b> <b>nirodha dhamman’ti</b>	‘Whatever is subject to arising is subject to cessation’

**D:** *Dīgha Nikāya*, The Long Discourses of the Buddha.

**M:** *Majjhima Nikāya*, The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha.

**A:** *Anguttara Nikāya*, The Discourses Related by Numbers.

**S:** *Samyutta Nikāya*, The Discourses Related by Subject.

**SN:** *Sutta Nipāta*, A collection of the Buddha's teachings, in verse form.

**Dhp:** *Dhammapada*, A collection of the Buddha's teachings, in verse form.

**Iti:** *Itivuttaka*, Sayings of the Buddha.

**Ud:** *Udāna*, Inspired Utterances.

**MV:** *Mahāvagga*, The Great Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline.

**CV:** *Cūlavagga*, The Lesser Chapter, from the books of monastic discipline.

**Vib:** *Vibhangha*, The Exposition, the main rules of the monastic discipline.

**Thig:** *Therīgāthā*, The Verses of the Elder Nuns.

**Thag:** *Theragāthā*, The Verses of the Elder Monks.

**Jat:** *Jātaka*, The Stories of the Buddha's Previous Births.

**Vin:** *Vinaya Pitaka*, The Monastic Code of Conduct.

**Vsm:** *Visuddhimagga*, The Path of Purification, a commentarial compendium.



BORN IN ENGLAND IN 1956, **VEN. AMARO BHIKKHU** RECEIVED A BSC. IN PSYCHOLOGY AND PHYSIOLOGY FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF LONDON. SPIRITUAL SEARCHING LED HIM TO THAILAND, WHERE HE WENT TO WAT PAH NANACHAT, A FOREST TRADITION MONASTERY ESTABLISHED FOR WESTERN DISCIPLES OF THAI MEDITATION MASTER AJAHN CHAH, WHO ORDAINED HIM AS A BHIKKHU IN 1979. SOON AFTERWARDS HE RETURNED TO ENGLAND AND JOINED AJAHN SUMEDHO AT THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED CHITHURST MONASTERY. HE RESIDED FOR MANY YEARS AT AMARAVATI BUDDHIST MONASTERY, MAKING TRIPS TO CALIFORNIA EVERY YEAR DURING THE EARLY NINETIES.

IN JUNE 1996 HE ESTABLISHED ABHAYAGIRI MONASTERY IN REDWOOD VALLEY, CALIFORNIA, WHERE HE WAS CO-ABBOT WITH AJAHN PASANNO UNTIL 2010. HE THEN RETURNED TO AMARAVATI TO BECOME ABBOT OF THIS LARGE MONASTIC COMMUNITY.

AJAHN AMARO HAS WRITTEN A NUMBER OF BOOKS, INCLUDING AN ACCOUNT OF AN 830-MILE TREK FROM CHITHURST TO HARNHAM VIHARA CALLED TUDONG - *THE LONG ROAD NORTH*, REPUBLISHED IN THE EXPANDED BOOK *SILENT RAIN*. HIS OTHER PUBLICATIONS INCLUDE *SMALL BOAT*, *GREAT MOUNTAIN* (2003), *RAIN ON THE NILE* (2009) AND *THE ISLAND - AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS ON NIBBĀNA* (2009) CO-WRITTEN WITH AJAHN PASANNO, A GUIDE TO MEDITATION CALLED *FINDING THE MISSING PEACE* AND OTHER WORKS DEALING WITH VARIOUS ASPECTS OF BUDDHISM.

THE BREAKTHROUGH

BY AJAHN AMARO

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AMARAVATI BUDDHIST MONASTERY

ST MARGARETS

GREAT GADDESSEN

HEMEL HEMPSTEAD

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