



Servant of Reality

AJAHN MUNINDO

*Disciples of the Buddha
are fully awake,
dwelling both day and night
in contemplation of reality.
Dhammapada verse 297*

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by Ajahn Munindo

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CONTENTS

<i>Introduction</i>	ix
1. Serving Reality	1
<i>Discerning the true Buddha, not becoming a master, serving Dhamma, serving Sangha, spiritual abilities.</i>	
2. A Generative Unfolding	27
<i>Retreats, stages of training, skilful preparation, gardening, self-confidence, samādhi, fearlessness, meeting ourselves, novels and movies.</i>	
3. Regarding the View	43
<i>Right view, spoiling the Buddha's teachings, Four Noble Truths, force of delusion, personal authority, renunciation, love.</i>	
4. Reading the Signposts	63
<i>Disillusionment, essential skills, hindrances, creative approaches, limitations, soft powers, stages of letting go, uncertainty, self respect, psychotherapy.</i>	

5. Sanity in the Midst of Uncertainty	77
<i>Rate of change, technology, wabi-sabi, not-knowing, strategic optimism.</i>	
6. An Apparently Unending Ordeal	99
<i>Right preparation, determination, renunciation, patience, precepts, exercise, food, supports.</i>	
7. Die Before You Die	117
<i>Ego death, the right questions to ask, dealing with old conditioning, letting go, trust.</i>	
8. Wise Surrender	135
<i>Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity, wise reflection, surrendering, sources of strength and protection.</i>	
About the Author	149
Notes	151

INTRODUCTION

Servant of Reality is a companion volume to *Alert To The Needs Of The Journey* (Aruno Publications 2018). Each chapter of this small book stands alone, but readers might also find benefit from reading them in the sequence in which they are presented.

This compilation is offered not necessarily to those looking for instruction on Buddhism, but by way of encouragement to anyone interested in deepening their personal contemplations. Rather than giving answers it aims to highlight helpful questions.

The themes offered here for contemplation are the same as those contained in the talks regularly given in the meditation hall at Aruna Ratanagiri Buddhist Monastery. Audio files of related Dhamma talks can be found at:

<https://ratanagiri.org.uk/teachings>

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Ajahn Munindo
Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery,
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Great Britain
August 2018

1.

SERVING REALITY

Buddhassāh'asmi dāso

Dhammassāh'asmi dāso

Sanghassāh'asmi dāso

I am a servant of the Buddha

I am a servant of the Dhamma

I am a servant of the Sangha

There is much that we will meet on this path of spiritual enquiry that we can expect to find rewarding: welcome states of ease and inspiring insights which uplift and renew us. Then almost certainly there will be those experiences which challenge us, perhaps more than we have ever felt challenged before. Hence the wisdom of preparing ourselves in advance for the unexpected. So where do we look to find strength and support as we proceed?

Considering these lines above from our Morning Chanting, it took more than ten years of reciting these before one day their relevance truly dawned on me. In 1990 I had been asked to assume the leadership role at a new hermitage property being established near Newcastle, a place called Harnham,

just south of the Scottish border. Before taking up residence there I spent the Winter Retreat of 1991 at Amaravati Monastery. Efforts in meditation at the beginning of that retreat were hampered by a disturbing level of anxiety over what I imagined might be waiting for me up north. Try as I might, I couldn't free my mind from daunting fantasies of what I thought could lie ahead. On an earlier visit to Harnham I had met some of the trustees who were overseeing the development of this fledgeling monastery and was left with an impression of a fierce and intimidating bunch. Also, having grown up in green, clean, forested New Zealand, I found the somewhat bare, barren hills of Northumberland uninviting. The grey stone walls and stone buildings, which many seemed to find charming, I found cold and depressing. Then there were contentious issues with the neighbours and a substantial ongoing major building project. That was without even considering the need for giving guidance to the junior sangha of monks, novices and anagarikas.

Then one morning, a few weeks into that winter retreat, I found myself actually hearing the words I was chanting. A wonderful feeling of relief came over me as I recognized how appealing I found the suggestion of being a servant. And how different holding that image in my mind felt, compared to the idea of being a master. It was obvious that I really didn't want to be a master. I began to see the extent to which I had been struggling to try to master everything: trying to master my meditation, master my relationships, master my understanding of Dhamma. It was just deluded personality

yet again trying to control everything. I started to realize that not only did I not want to be a master, but nobody had ever told me that I had to be one. I could be a servant if I wished. With this recognition a burden fell away. The unconscious commitment to compulsively controlling was seen just a little bit more clearly. My vision of Harnham and whatever the future might hold was transformed.

SERVING THE BUDDHA

That retreat was over 25 years ago now. As it turned out, the monastery's trustees were magnificently supportive. And I quickly grew to delight in the stillness and quietude afforded by the thick stone walls of the old farm buildings which we occupied. The spaciousness and big skies were uplifting and I discovered that Northumberland was far from barren. Certainly we did have our fair share of difficulties. Attempting to establish a traditional Theravada Buddhist renunciant community in secular post-modern Britain, was bound to meet with obstacles. But the view that being the leader of this spiritual community was a way of serving the Buddha provided both a sense of support and encouragement.

So long as we are not awakened, we are at risk of taking ourselves too seriously. Our habits of following 'liking' and 'disliking' have a momentum to them which, even after some initial insights, will not necessarily disappear. However, when I remember that I am here to serve this spiritual sanctuary and that it is not my job to make the place fit with my preferences, life flows more smoothly, and my presence

is more likely to contribute to concord and less to confusion. The idea of trying to be a master of the monastery sounds like I am trying to sit in the Buddha's seat, as if I were in competition with him – what a horrible thought! Conversely, the idea of waiting to be called upon to serve the Buddha I find wonderfully appealing. Even if I am not a perfect servant, I am sure he will forgive me.

So let's consider, what is this Buddha to which we offer ourselves in service. It is awareness itself. It is the just-knowing mind. Being committed to serving the Buddha means being committed to beginning again, over and over, however many times we might forget and become lost in the confused world of experiences. The Buddha is the knowing, and the myriad experiences are that which is known. When we forget our commitment to the just-knowing awareness, when we get lost in our attachments to the activity of liking and disliking, we *become* born into some experience. When, for instance, we attach to liking, a happy me is born; then we face the consequences of having taken birth until inevitably we die out of being that happy me. At which point, if we are heedless, we are born once more, perhaps this time into a disappointed, unhappy me. The same is true for when we attach to being successful or being a failure; to being popular and liked, or unpopular and disliked. And so on, and thus the cycle of *samsāra* – birth and death – spins around. When we remember the refuge in awareness, when we remember our commitment to being a servant of the Buddha, we recognize that the point at which we are about to

attach and become lost in the world is the very point where letting go of birth and death can happen; in that moment we won't have to be reborn. Servants of the Buddha train themselves to prioritize awareness over all the activity that arises and ceases within awareness. Because they don't want to live life perpetually becoming disappointed, they train to be open, ready, alert and interested in reality.

FORM AND SPIRIT

Most of us, at least in the beginning, do not always appreciate the difference between form and spirit in practice. For instance, our initial interest in meditation may well have been inspired by hearing that it could help us become more peaceful and help increase understanding. However, if we are not careful about how we engage with the forms and techniques used in developing meditation, we can just end up becoming more self-critical: 'my concentration is not good enough; I don't really feel gratitude to my parents; I don't put as much effort into practice as I should...'. We forgot that the point or the spirit of the practice is increased well-being and contentment, and instead focus too much on becoming successful in developing the form, in this case the meditation technique. This principle applies to the way we relate to all the conventions within Buddhism, including Buddha images, scriptures and the monastic way of life.

An abbot of one of our other monasteries recently shared with me a situation in which he briefly forgot which Buddha he was committed to serving: the true Buddha to be found

in a heart of awareness, or the virtual Buddha to be found in outer forms. A group of generous supporters had visited his monastery and put a lot of time and energy into re-gilding the main Buddha image in the Dhamma Hall. As a precaution the abbot made a point of announcing to the sangha that everybody should take note: the Buddha image in the Dhamma Hall did not appreciate being vigorously polished with Brasso. Gentle dusting only, please! He thought such an announcement should be sufficient. However, after only a few days, as he entered the hall, much to his disappointment he found someone had failed to heed his caution, with the result that a significant portion of the gold leaf had been rubbed off. The beautiful golden Buddha was now a blotchy Buddha.

What do you do with that? Find the offending young novice or anagarika and tear a strip off them? Or remember that that is not the true Buddha? That gilded image is only a representation of the supposed outer form of the Buddha. A servant of the true Buddha gets down on the floor, bows, and recollects the direction in which he is supposed to be paying attention. The outer images are there to point us back in the direction of our own hearts. If disappointment arises, our job is to see it for what it is, to see it in terms of reality: a changing condition passing through selfless awareness. To remember that we don't have to *become* disappointed and act on it, we have the option of abiding as simply knowing.

It is not only 21st century monks who forget the direction in which they are supposed to be looking. The traditional

Buddhist texts mention a monk called Vakkali Thero.¹ This particular monk had an exceptional love and devotion for the Buddha, but had never had the good fortune of actually meeting him. Then, on one occasion, the Buddha became aware that Vakkali had fallen ill and was suffering because of his longing to see his teacher. Out of compassion the Buddha paid him a visit. The Teacher enquired of his disciple how he was coping with the pain and discomfort of old age, and how his mind was; was he plagued with regret or remorse over anything? Vakkali replied that indeed he was plagued with regret. But it wasn't as a result of any wrong action he had performed, it was because of the lack of an opportunity to spend time with the Buddha. His heart was still heavy with remorse over this. The Buddha pointed out that all this time he had been looking in the wrong direction:

If you want to see the Buddha, then train yourself to see the Dhamma. When you see the Dhamma, you see the Buddha.

Focusing on the outer form of the Buddha is missing the point.

From the perspective of unawakened awareness, we readily miss the point of the forms. The function of a Buddha image is similar to the function of a mirror, in that it provides us with a reflection. The reflection we receive back when we bow to the Buddha image is of our faith in the possibility of realizing true wisdom and compassion. Having our faith

reaffirmed in such a manner is nourishment. We are not supposed to relate to external Buddhas as the ultimate authority in our lives. To do so would be like looking in a mirror to examine a wound on our forehead, but instead of applying ointment to our forehead, applying it to the mirror. That is called looking in the wrong direction.

Ajahn Thate once asked his monks,

Our eye uses a mirror to see itself, what does the mind use to see itself?

He answered his own question by saying that *it uses wisdom (paññā)*. The outer forms have a function, which is to give direction to our hearts. They are the maps that approximate the path. But the printed maps are not the path. If we are sensible, we appreciate the function of maps and look after them so we can use them again later as needed, or so others can use them. We don't screw them up and mindlessly push them into a cupboard, we fold them and store them away carefully. Likewise, we relate to Buddha images and Dhamma books with due care and attention. On the other hand, if we project too much value onto the outer structures, we risk falling into superstition and magical thinking. Once again we are missing the point.

Some years ago a young man from Serbia was visiting one of our monasteries in Britain for the first time, and struggled terribly when he witnessed the way monks and nuns were bowing in front of Buddha images. His commitment to

Dhamma was born out of ten years of reading books and articles; he had never seen a monk or nun before. He was shocked when he saw all the ritual practices. ‘What are they doing? Buddhism is not a religion, but a philosophy of life – this is just pointless ritual.’

He started to doubt whether he was in the right place; perhaps this was some sect of religious fanatics! ‘If they ask me to bow and chant, I’m leaving immediately! I don’t want to be brainwashed.’ As it happened, nobody told him he had to fit in with the rituals. He completed his stay and returned home to Novi Sad. Once home he continued his meditation practice. Because he and his family lived in a very small apartment, the only suitable place for sitting meditation was in the kitchen, once everyone else had gone to bed. After four or five months had passed he began noticing that something seemed to be missing. Something about the way he transitioned from his daily-life activity to sitting meditation felt uncomfortable – too abrupt. So he thought back to how it was during his stay in the monastery. How did the monks and nuns move from daily-life practice to formal practice; how did they prepare themselves for meditation? Then he remembered the bowing and chanting. Interesting! At which point he got up and started bowing, as it happened in the direction of the refrigerator.

It didn’t matter that there wasn’t a big, beautiful Buddha image to bow towards, what mattered was that it worked! He found that the space that had previously appeared as if something was missing was now filled with feelings of

gratitude and ease. It was another four years before he was again able to visit the monastery in Britain, but throughout that time he kept bowing and chanting. Recently we were in contact again, now thirty years since that first visit. These days he is living as a lay resident in a monastery in Serbia, still bowing and chanting and finding delight in the morning and evening *pujas*. There is now an added dimension of joy at the thought that others might see and be touched by his devotional practices, and find their faith in Dhamma quickened.

As the Buddha pointed out to Vakkali Thero, paying too much attention to outer forms can lead to disappointment. But this doesn't mean we dismiss the skilful use of forms, just that when we use the various conventions, we remember that these structures are here to help lead us. The wise use of forms can lead to an appreciation of the good fortune that we have. Instead of heedlessly increasing greed for what we don't have, they can help us cultivate gratitude for that which we do have.

Offering ourselves into this path of training will at times certainly feel uncomfortable. Given our previous conditioning, which taught us that contentment was to be found by following our preferences, discomfort is inevitable. But if we work at it, if we learn how to relax into it, we will experience the rewards for ourselves. At times the rewards might be subtle and barely noticeable; at other times they can be profoundly significant, even life-saving. In the book *Rude Awakenings*,² Ajahn Sucitto describes how when he was walking *tudong*³

through a forested area of North-East India, he was set upon by a band of axe-wielding brigands. Thankfully he survived the assault and got away with his life, and a couple of pieces of modest clothing but little else. Gone were his outer robe, his shoulder bag, his passport and collection of precious relics and Buddha image. He describes with beautiful modesty how once the frenzy of the attack had passed he sat down and ‘started chanting softly’. I recently asked him what he had been chanting on that occasion. He told me it ‘was of Refuge, though I can’t exactly remember ... If asked I’d guess it was *Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi*’ (I go for Refuge to the Buddha).

To be able to find such meaningful refuge in the Triple Gem is the result of many years of commitment to training, gradually cultivating the willingness to keep beginning again. Much of the time, progress in spiritual practice may be imperceptible. Often it is only with hindsight that we can see, ‘Aha, that was what all those apparently endless hours of practice were about.’ It is worth considering: though Yehudi Menuhin did start out as a child genius, would he have emerged as a virtuoso violinist without years of consistent practice? Would Sir Mo Farah have reached the level of Olympic champion without hours and hours of arduous training?

SERVING DHAMMA

Reflecting on what the Buddha said to Vakkali Thero, if we want to serve the Buddha then we should serve the Dhamma.

Followers of various other religions honour their teachers by adhering to sets of belief. A committed servant of Dhamma, however, honours the Buddha by training to let go of all attachments to both beliefs and disbeliefs. But let's not suggest that to engage traditional conventions is only for beginners. Letting go of believing and disbelieving does not mean dispensing with the tried and tested modes of training.

When I was a young monk I had an opportunity to visit Wat Pah Bahn Tart, where Luang Da Mahabua was living. It was the tradition in that monastery for all the monks to wait in the main meeting hall before the morning alms-round. I recall being somewhat taken aback when Luang Da entered the hall, immediately approached the shrine and performed three very gracious bows. He had a reputation for being particularly fierce, possibly because in his earlier life he had been a boxer. He was also reputed to be fully awakened. Somehow these factors caused me to assume that when he entered the hall he was likely to start barking orders at the junior trainees and not bother with something as mundane as bowing. That was a mistake on my part.

Let's also remember how, soon after his enlightenment, the Buddha surveyed the world with his superior insight to see to whom he could offer his respects and express gratitude. Finding that there was nobody with an equal or superior level of awakening, but still with his heart wanting to offer respect, he chose to honour the Dhamma.

OUR SPIRITUAL ABILITIES

Because we are interested in seeing ‘actuality’, which is beyond believing and disbelieving, we train to not settle for the ‘apparent’ level of reality. The way things ‘appear’ to be constantly fools us into reacting out of greed, hatred and delusion, causing suffering for ourselves and others. To be able to see and accord with actuality, we have to be able to exercise our spiritual abilities. The faculties of mindfulness (*sati*), sense restraint (*indriya samvara*) and wise reflection (*yoniso manasikāra*)⁵ must be adequately accessible. We don’t start out in practice with these abilities already fully matured, but we do need to recognize their power and potential.

Whole body-mind mindfulness provides us with the frames of reference within which we can confidently receive experience, the thoroughly unlovely and undesirable as well as the lovely and desirable. When sense restraint is well-established it gives us the strength needed so that we don’t merely react out of preference, but are more ready to observe and respond in ways which are skilful and considerate. Wise reflection means we can ask just the right question, at the right time, in the right way, leading to an opening of the heart and the emergence of insight.

Despite the very best of aspirations, if these spiritual faculties are not functional we won’t be able to truly meet and learn from what life offers us. Serving Dhamma means using the forms with which we have been entrusted by our teachers to train our spiritual faculties, so we can appreciate the opportunities we have for learning. Within our own practice we

can see the consequences of not being adequately equipped with mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection. Whenever we become caught in worry, we are lacking in mindfulness. An appropriate level of concern is one thing, but fretting and fussing is an unnecessary addition. We are lacking in sense restraint whenever we allow our heart energy to leap out and land on an object, causing us to feel that we can't live without that object. We need to train our sensitivities so we know the difference between blind repression and skilful restraint. Blind repression leads to stress, but skilful restraint protects us from being overwhelmed or exhausted, at the same time as it allows intensity to build. Wise reflection is lacking when we heedlessly allow our actions of body, speech and mind to be determined by past conditioning. We can't be truly responsible if we are driven by our conditioned reactions, compulsively taking sides 'for' and 'against' experiences; habitually pushing and pulling on life.

In the outer world likewise, there are regrettably endless examples of the consequences of inadequate mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection. When I visited Pagan in central Burma I was told that the area used to be densely forested, but these days what you find is a virtual desert. Dotted around that desert are many handsome *stupas* constructed in a previous era by successive Burmese Kings. The construction of even one stupa required many bricks, and the bricks had to be baked in hot furnaces requiring a great deal of fuel. That meant cutting down a great many trees. In constructing those handsome *stupas* the Kings no doubt

intended to display how committed they were to serving the Triple Gem. If they had had more mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection, they might have found other ways of expressing devotion that had less damaging side-effects.

It still surprises me when visitors to our monastery who helpfully water the plants in the Dhamma Hall, sometimes insist on unhelpfully drenching the artificial plants. Surely it doesn't take a lot of attention to see that an artificial potted fern doesn't require watering. I suspect those guests are not so much overwhelmed by the bliss of devotion as underdeveloped in the spiritual faculties.

We all go through periods of feeling challenged by life. What matters is that we learn as we go along. If our spiritual faculties are functioning sufficiently, we are in a position to actually learn. But that doesn't necessarily protect us from making mistakes. In the time before websites, several of our monasteries used to produce newsletters. Initially it seemed like a good idea to distribute a newsletter regularly to the monastery's many friends and supporters. And why stop at a couple of unattractive sheets of A4 when a fine-looking journal could be produced? The answer is that once you start putting out a fine-looking journal, there is the expectation that you will continue, with the risk of there being no time left for other duties. Without mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection, even our positive intentions can have negative effects. These days most of the newsletters have been replaced with blogs and website updates, hopefully keeping modesty in mind.

Learning from life's challenges means owning up to getting it wrong, which means surrendering those tenacious tendencies to grasp at 'me' and 'my way'. Seeing just this much is the key. Once we have tasted the joy of surrendering 'me' and 'my way', a willingness to commit ourselves more fully to serving the reality of 'this' moment begins to emerge; even if we are not consciously thinking in terms of 'serving'. We really want to see our foolishness. We want to see our heedlessness. We want to stop running from the consequences of unawareness, because we know now that running away only obstructs learning, obstructs joy, obstructs all that is truly beautiful.

SERVING SANGHA

Verse 194 in the Dhammapada says:¹⁷

*Blessed is the arising of a Buddha;
blessed is the revealing of the Dhamma;
blessed is the concord of the Sangha;*

A servant of the Buddha prioritizes over everything else the cultivation of unobstructed awareness; the just-knowing mind. A servant of Dhamma regularly asks him or herself, how can I be more accurately attuned to the reality of 'this' experience, to what is happening right here, right now, in front of me? For a servant of the sangha, the thing that matters most is that our participation in community contributes to concord. Our refuge in sangha is to do with relationships, interactions.

We could think of Sangha in terms of those disciples of the Buddha who are unshakeably established on the path of awakening (*ariya-puggala*); who are completely free from moral faults and unable to intentionally cause harm to any living being. Or we could consider sangha in terms of the conventional monastic community of monks and nuns, committed to an extensive system for training in impeccability. Or we could be paying attention to our own inner truth-seeker. However we might contemplate sangha, if we are committed to serving reality we are interested in how we can act more honestly and more effectively in ways that lead to an increase in harmony.

Such a commitment to harmony includes wanting to see how personally we might be contributing to disharmony. Whatever our walk of life, we all encounter situations where it is clear that we are the ones at fault; at other times it is clear that the fault is due to others. And then there are those situations where it is just not clear who is causing the disharmony. Right training at every stage means being able to hold back, with skilful restraint and wise reflection, and wait until the situation becomes clear.

In some situations it is not really anybody's fault, it is just the general inconvenience and unsatisfactoriness of life. I heard a report a few years ago of an incident said to have occurred when the Dalai Lama visited New Zealand. It is a tradition amongst the indigenous Maori people to offer visiting dignitaries a ritual welcome with what is known as the 'challenge' (*wero*), involving a display of weaponry. The way in which

the visitors respond to the challenge indicates whether they have come in peace or as aggressors. Apparently the fact that Buddhist monks are prohibited by their rule from handling weapons had not been communicated during preparations for the event. Some quick manoeuvring was required to avert a very uncomfortable incident. I am not sure about the exact details of the reported incident, but it illustrates how despite all our good intentions, life is sometimes just untidy.

Someone recently commented that they had been observing the way I ran this monastery and had observed how often I seem to be saying 'no' to people. Anyone who has been a parent or a teacher would understand that often saying 'no' is what is called for. Even saying 'no' quite firmly can be necessary.

But so long as the role of the one establishing and maintaining boundaries is not the only one we play, disappointing people from time to time does not have to be a problem. Sometimes we are liked, at other times we are disliked. What matters is whether we are serving the harmony that arises from living in accordance with Dhamma principles, or serving the disharmony which will inevitably arise when we follow 'my way'. In the short term it can seem easier to simply say 'yes' and try to keep everybody happy. But in the long term being intimidated by the preferences of others benefits nobody. My role as leader of this community does sometimes require me to say things which could cause others to dislike me. So as long as I don't identify too much with that role, saying 'no' doesn't have to define the quality of

my relationships with the community members. Saying ‘no’ doesn’t have to create discord.

What seems to be happening on the outside is not necessarily what is happening on the inside. Serving the form of the spiritual life does often involve saying ‘no’; this is how training in precepts works, including those living the monastic life and householders. On the other hand, serving the spirit of the spiritual life, that is, serving Dhamma, is about saying ‘yes’. ‘Yes’ to everything about this moment. Whether it is agreeable or disagreeable, ‘yes’, and let it be, just as it is, neither pushing away nor holding on. When we can truly let it be, just as it is, that is when letting go happens. This reminds me of how Ajahn Chah used to teach about the difference between Dhamma and *Vinaya*:⁷ training in *Vinaya*, he said, is about holding on, and training in Dhamma is about letting go. The more agile we are in holding rightly when it is time to hold on, and letting go freely when it is time to let go, the more we can live in a trusting relationship with everything that happens within and around us.

For most of us, learning this takes time. We might appreciate the principle on a conceptual level, but that does not mean we can live it. We have to keep making efforts. That special, unique kind of effort is neither trying to get somewhere and become something, nor clinging to a view that there is nowhere to go and nothing to do. If that sounds like a paradox, it is because from the perspective of seeking security in clinging to a fixed position, it is a paradox. From the

perspective of a commitment to serving reality, it is a call to surrender our old ways of struggling more fully.

Stating this in these terms doesn't mean surrendering is easy. Authority issues are a big deal for all of us, whether we are in a leadership position where we are perceived to 'have' authority or are 'under' authority. Many Westerners who take up Theravada Buddhist monastic training find it uncomfortable when they first experience having to bow to their fellow monks and nuns. But even more challenging than bowing to your colleagues can be receiving bows from others. Obviously, this is not a tradition that we grew up in, and no doubt those born into Buddhist cultures find it is less challenging. Yet the fact that we find it so difficult can be a great aid in learning to let go. Why do we feel so uncomfortable when somebody bows to us? Nobody is doing anything bad. It is because we take it personally. Those who are bowing are probably not particularly interested in the personality of the monk or nun to whom they are bowing; it is to the robe and what it symbolizes that they are offering their respect. The feelings of discomfort point to how we are holding to personality belief. Those uncomfortable feelings are the Dhamma teaching us.

In a similar vein, sooner or later after a few years in monastic training, one is invited to start offering something back, to start giving Dhamma talks. The monastic sangha is very generously supported by the lay community, who are understandably keen to listen to Dhamma teachings. Why does it seem so difficult to share in public about the things that

matter most to us? Why should we feel so afraid in the midst of such gentle, considerate and wholesome-minded Dhamma friends? Until we have finished our work and reached unshakeable freedom, there will always be the risk that we might misrepresent the Dhamma. To be afraid of misrepresentation is of course appropriate. But what most of us are afraid of is being judged.

When we are committed to cultivating harmony and concord in community, we won't shy away from training even though we find it difficult. If mindfulness, restraint and wise reflection are well-enough established, we can lean into the fear, we can use fear to find where we are resisting reality rather than serving it. We want to understand fear because we know that when we are caught up in it we speak and act in ways which contribute to disharmony.

That visitors to the monastery are interested in listening to Dhamma is not a problem. That we might be afraid of misrepresenting Dhamma is not a problem; it just helps us be careful. The apparent problems manifest when we add something extra, when we cease serving reality and instead serve our conditioned nature. When we forget ourselves, we readily project our heart energy out and become susceptible to confusion; quite literally, because 'there is nobody home', we have gone out. In the case of a young monk or nun learning to give a Dhamma talk, problems appear when they project too much out onto those listening; they forget that we are all in this together. We are all suffering and we are all interested in being free from suffering. If we can remember

this much, we won't be so afraid. Fear can only take us over when we abandon our own hearts. When we are abandoning ourselves we should be afraid, because then we are in a state of diminished responsibility.

So skilfully reflecting on how it feels when we project our ability out onto others reveals how we can stop doing so, that instead we can choose to stay at home. We can train to rest in the just-knowing awareness, to allow life to unfold and trust.

SERVING THE TRIPLE GEM

We began this contemplation by asking the question, where do we look for strength and support as we proceed with this spiritual enquiry? I am suggesting the answer is in continually deepening and refining our commitment to the Refuges. Let's keep asking ourselves how we can serve more whole-heartedly both the forms and the spirit of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

At the level of form, we express our gratitude to the Buddha by humbly bowing to the Buddha image. On the level of spirit we honour the Buddha by remembering to simply know, simply be aware; making an effort to simply receive the reality of 'this' moment, whatever is happening, adding nothing to it and taking nothing away. When our community of monks first came to live in Britain, Ajahn Chah wrote a letter to Ajahn Sumedho. In that letter he said an abbot should train himself to be like a rubbish bin and collect everybody's rubbish in it. This is how an abbot practises serving the Buddha. A gardener, an academic, will serve in

their own way. Wherever we find ourselves in this life, we can consider what it means to serve the Buddha.

We serve the Dhamma at the level of form by studying the recorded teachings of those who have walked the path ahead of us. At the level of spirit we restrain our heart's exuberance, and study how our body and mind responds to 'this' moment.

On one occasion a nun living at Ajahn Chah's monastery was converted to being a born-again Christian while she was still living as a Buddhist nun. A somewhat incredulous Western monk questioned Ajahn Chah as to how something so unthinkable could happen. Ajahn Chah's response was, 'Well, perhaps she is right'. To believe or disbelieve blindly even in Buddhism is to miss the point. The middle way is to see from a perspective of no fixed position.

We serve the Sangha at the level of form by showing respect and making offerings. On the level of spirit we work on honestly owning up to our self-centred impulses, because we see how they lead to disharmony and discord. The Buddha didn't expect us to start out perfect, but he did praise honestly owning up to our mistakes.

In one of the Buddha's discourses known as the *Dhātu-vibhaṅga Sutta*,⁸ a wandering truth-seeker called Pukkusati spent a night in the same dwelling place as the Buddha, without realizing he was in the presence of the fully Awakened One. This wandering truth-seeker was so preoccupied with the idea of his precious spiritual journey, and

how one day he might actually get to meet the Buddha, that even when the Buddha was right there in front of him he couldn't see him. Only after the Buddha delivered a long and detailed teaching did Pukkusati realize his mistake. Once he saw how mistaken he was, he was crestfallen and immediately acknowledged his foolishness. The Buddha said that he agreed, Pukkusati had indeed been foolish, but having acknowledged his mistake there was nothing for him to be worried about.

Ideas we have about our spiritual journey and what it will be like when we reach the goal can turn into obstructions if we are not looking in the right direction. The opinions and ideas we have about practice keep changing. The way we relate to traditions, rituals and techniques, and what they mean as we move along the path, evolve. But whenever we catch ourselves resisting reality and not according harmoniously with what is in front of us, there and then we have something to learn.

Recently, after a large gathering in our Dhamma Hall I was approached by a very enthusiastic woman who clearly had something important she felt she needed to share. She had not visited our monastery before, but having seen our place she now felt passionately that the dark bronze Buddha image on the main shrine was a mistake. She strongly recommended I paint it white and was convinced that this would attract more visitors to our temple. I listened to what she had to say and managed to catch myself before I expressed how strongly I felt about her recommendation. Not only was her idea

of attracting more visitors a low priority, but I was really rather fond of the patina on our bronze Buddha rupa; I had absolutely no wish to paint it white. Of course, her intention was to be helpful and her devotion to the Buddha was no doubt sincere. In truth there was no problem, but I nearly created one.

Thank you very much for your attention.

2.

A GENERATIVE UNFOLDING

When we are sufficiently prepared, when the basic elements are rightly established, the process takes over and does itself.

Most of us gathered here in the Dhamma Hall this evening are preparing to enter a week of formal retreat. Probably some of us are having thoughts about how it might be as the pressure begins to build up: as we stop talking, stop emailing, stop being so active. How will we handle it? Certainly we can expect intensification. And that is the point of the renunciant disciplines: turning up the heat so dross floats to the surface, is scooped off, and the gold purified.

Some degree of anticipation about what might happen is understandable, but allowing ourselves to become lost in imagining whether we can handle it or not is really not helpful. So let's simply acknowledge as we start out that we don't know. Right now, the truth is that there is very little we can say for sure about the future. What we can say with confidence here and now is that we are interested in seeing

more deeply, beyond the way things merely appear to be. We trust what the Buddha taught about the possibility of being free from suffering, and we choose to be guided by our heart's wholesome aspirations. We can make conscious the wish to offer ourselves more fully into this path of awakening.

The spiritual journey is full of surprises, which is why we study the Buddha's teachings and listen to those who have walked ahead of us. We learn to appreciate that there are stages of training, and that certain preparations are essential. For instance, the kind of effort which is called for in the early stages of training is decidedly different from the kind of effort required later on.

The well-established garden next to our Dhamma Hall here used to be a thoroughly untidy stackyard. It was the last part of the property to be developed after all the semi-derelict stone buildings had been renovated. A stackyard is usually the place on a farm where stacks of hay or grain are stored, but in this case it was mostly where reject farm machinery and the remains of building projects had been dumped. The effort called for at the stage of initial preparation involved removing a large amount of rubbish, levelling the soil, building a stone shrine and constructing a wooden pergola. Once that was completed, we asked the neighbouring farmer if he would let us have some of the large boulders which were strewn around his fields. With a lot of tractor power and man power we managed to place these boulders strategically, giving some definition to the potential garden. A pond was excavated, pipes were laid and then vines, shrubs and ferns

were planted. What happened from that point onwards was not really up to us. Some attention was still required with watering and weeding, but that was a different sort of effort from establishing the basic elements. Once the main structures were in place we needed to step back and allow the garden to grow.

A GENERATIVE PROCESS

It can be helpful to consider spiritual practice as a generative process, generative in the sense that when we are sufficiently prepared, when the basic elements are rightly established, the process takes over and does itself. It becomes less predictable and we need to be ready to step back. To always be thinking that it is up to us to *do* the awakening can create unnecessary problems on the journey. The flowering of spiritual practice is the experience of letting go, and letting go *happens*, we don't do it.

In the initial stages of practice we do need to put effort into building the basic structures. This means working hard on cultivating such qualities as integrity, steadiness of mind and discernment. Integrity equips us with a sense of self-confidence. Without it we readily fall prey to the hindrance of self-doubt. Self-confidence functions like a container within which we can feel safe, at ease and not afraid of being overwhelmed. When right effort is put into disciplining attention it produces a steadiness of heart and mind, and by skilfully exercising wise reflection, discernment develops. These are the basic elements of the path – self-confidence,

steadiness and discernment, referred to in the Pali language as *sīla*, *samādhi* and *pañña*.

At this initial stage there is a degree of predictability in our work. If we get up in the morning and meditate as we have determined we would, we can expect certain benefits; when we manage to keep our precepts there are predictable results. And here it does feel as if we are the ones doing the practice. However, this journey is definitely not a lineal, logical progression. If we continue making consistent, careful effort, it is likely we will reach a point where it feels not so much that we are doing the practice, but that the practice is doing us. At this point we would have already learnt how to make a different sort of effort.

ALLOWING PRACTICE

Recently I have had a number of conversations with people who have described how their practice has turned a corner and how they've discovered a new approach to meditation. Almost certainly all of these individuals had already heard teachings on how trying too hard to overcome obstructions didn't help; how what was needed was a willingness to receive all they encountered along the way and to understand the reality of these obstructions. Being in a hurry and trying desperately hard to overcome hindrances makes them more difficult to deal with.

However, despite their good intentions, until recently the effort they had been making had always involved either struggling to get rid of the apparent obstruction or indulging in it,

followed by attempts to avoid the painful consequences of their limited efforts.

In one of these conversations a young man was explaining how for a long time he had been struggling intensely with painful and humiliating indecision. During periods when his daily activities were not structured, he would often become caught in confusion. If somebody else told him what he should be doing with his time, there wasn't the same problem. The struggle only arose when he had to make the decisions for himself: should he find some manual work to do? should he spend time with his exercise routine? should he make himself do sitting meditation, or walking meditation? Should he be doing more study?

Then one day it came as a surprise to find that instead of fighting with himself and these various options, he simply sat on a chair, tuning into the body-mind perception of not knowing what to do. It wasn't that he had adopted a new technique of 'not-doing' so as to resolve the conflict. He simply found 'not-doing' had happened. After about 30 minutes the conflict had resolved itself and he was at ease. Importantly, he knew that he hadn't *done* the resolution. Nor was he feeling overly pleased with himself for having sorted out his problem. Even though consciously he might not have understood the process, resolution happened because by that stage sufficient self-confidence, steadiness and discernment had been established. It probably couldn't have happened six months earlier.

When practice reaches this stage, a new level of confidence emerges. We could say that faith has been verified, at least to some degree. Now it is more a matter of allowing practice rather than doing it. This is not to say that he won't forget the lesson, or ever fall back into struggling to sort out his practice. If he becomes too stressed or distracted by greed for results, he could well end up caught in a similar struggle. But it won't be exactly the same. He has learnt something valuable.

If we are uninformed about these stages of training, we could make the mistake of thinking that it is all right to try and bypass some of the initial hard work. In our minds we are capable of imagining all sorts of possibilities, but our flesh and bones take longer to catch up. Trying to skip stages is likely to create even more complex obstacles. In the early days of Chithurst Monastery we had a particularly eager young chap join us, very inspired and determined to make progress on his journey to liberation. After only a few weeks he left, telling me it was because he felt all the rules were making him neurotic. It was particularly the rule about not eating after midday that was troubling him. He described how one afternoon he had found a piece of food stuck in his teeth, so he dislodged it and inadvertently swallowed it. Then he fell into despair, thinking he had broken the precept about not eating after noon. If he hadn't been quite so enthusiastic about making progress in overcoming his obstructions, perhaps he would have realized that the precepts were pointing to the place where his approach to

discipline still needed some work. The rules weren't undermining his self-confidence, they were showing him how to grow in genuine self-confidence.

If we don't make the right kind of effort at the right stage, sadly we just cause ourselves extra difficulties. In the case of our garden here, it would have been unfortunate if after three months, in the middle of winter, we had decided the whole project had been a complete waste of time, just because at that stage we didn't like the look of it. Only once we are sufficiently established in self-trust, steadiness of mind and wise reflection are we likely to see the real benefits of practice – that is, moments of true letting go. Some of us learn fast and some of us learn more slowly; hence it helps to have good friends around to remind us of this, so we don't become too disheartened.

MEETING OURSELVES

Not a lot of meditation is required before we uncover aspects of ourselves that had previously been buried in unawareness. I am not talking here about mere mental images, but vivid, visceral perceptions of earlier versions of 'me', possibly arising out of periods in our lives when we weren't ready to fully live through what was happening at the time. These residual, partial 'selves' are like disembodied ghosts, and most of us have some of them floating around in our psyche.

A retreat can generate the pressure which causes such un-lived aspects of our lives to resurface. And it really does matter that when this occurs we should be ready to fully receive these

partial ‘selves’. Meeting these previously unacknowledged aspects of our lives and truly receiving them into whole body-mind awareness is a precious opportunity for letting go. But letting go won’t happen if we are not properly prepared, even though we might like to think we should be able to let go. This is one explanation for why so many of us suffered so badly in our early years of practice. We hadn’t done the work of the initial stages.

The conventional perception of oneself as being someone who is truly dependable doesn’t become established after keeping a few precepts for a week or two. There was one particular year when Ajahn Chah agreed to a large intake of monks who were ordained at his monastery of Wat Pah Pong, mostly just for the three months of the Rainy Season Retreat.

The Ajahn who was responsible that year for teaching the Code of Discipline (*Vinaya*) had the clever idea of reading his instructions into a tape-recorder; he then had the junior monks gather in the afternoon and required them to sit and listen to these recordings. Ajahn Chah caught wind of this style of instruction and turned up one day at the meeting. He made the point very firmly that just listening to recorded talks, and, probably for that matter reading books, wasn’t going to lead to a true appreciation of the *Vinaya*. If you wanted to understand the value of the rules, he said, you had to live by them, consistently and strictly for several years.

Keeping rules requires restraint, and every time we make an effort to mindfully rein in compulsive exuberance, we

invest in building the container which is integrity. When such integrity is established, it is the cause for the arising of a distinct and important ability. This is why, at the end of the procedure for formally determining the Five Precepts there is a short chant which includes the words, *sīlena sugatim yanti* – ‘training in integrity leads to a bright future’. This means more than we are going to feel good about ourselves. Thorough training in *sīla* affords the heart a valuable sense of protection and resilience.

So wanting to be able to let go of hindrances on the path or thinking that we should be able to let go is irrelevant. Letting go is the flowering of practice. It is beyond our control. Our responsibility is to do the ground work, then learn to step back and trust.

DREAMS AND NOVELS

It is not just on meditation retreats that we are likely to meet unresolved aspects of our lives. Every time we go to sleep, our controlling egos lose their power to filter experience. At that point the body-mind has an opportunity to generate dreams which will make us feel those feelings we had pushed into unawareness during the waking state. Of course, some dreams could be caused by influences such as the food in our stomach or the temperature of the room. But there are other types of dreams which have the function of helping our systems restore balance. When we deny feelings we cause imbalance. When we indulge in feelings we cause imbalance. If we are mature in life and have learnt how to receive and

fully feel what we feel, there is no residue and no imbalance. However, not many of us live with that degree of wisdom. So thankfully, nature has given us dreams.

Sometimes when we first awaken from a dream, residual feelings are still apparent, not just on a subtle level, but as sensations in the body. It is worth training awareness to attend to these sensations, to meet and receive ourselves there. Symbolic images which appear in our dreams can mean different things to different people. It could be constructive to keep a diary of these dream images, but there is a lot of benefit in the act of simply receiving the feelings to which these dream images give rise. Once the feelings have been thoroughly received, the dream has served its purpose; we won't need to dream that dream any more.

Possibly something similar is happening when we have an impulse to read a novel. I have sometimes heard meditators confess embarrassment over their fondness for reading novels, thinking that if they were serious about spiritual training they wouldn't be doing such things. Perhaps that desire in fact arises from an unconscious impulse to meet an aspect of themselves that has previously been pushed away. There are some teachers who would say that all such desires are the activity of accumulated negativity within us. This might be true to a degree, but personally I am not convinced that following such inclinations has to be a symptom of our feeding an addiction to suffering.

Wherever the impulse comes from, whether or not we are truly ready to meet ourselves and let go of ourselves, depends

on whether we have done the work of establishing the essential elements of the way. Certainly there are many for whom reading novels or watching movies merely adds to their already surfeited storehouse of denied life.

THE CONTAINER OF INTEGRITY

Some time ago a good friend of our monastery rang me as she was on her way to a court case. The case was ethically and legally complicated, and she was looking for support in her commitment to Dhamma practice. I wasn't informed of all the details of the case and was cautious not to suggest specifically what she should or shouldn't actually say. But what I did recommend was that she intentionally reflect on all the effort she had put in over the years to keeping the training precepts. She later let me know that this was the thing which sustained her most through the ordeal. And that her sense of how she handled the situation hasn't wavered since.

This is similar to the advice I have heard meditation teachers in Thailand sometimes give to their monks as they are about to head out for a period of solitary practice in the forest. Even well-trained monks can at times be assailed by intense fear when they are alone in remote places. One piece of advice the teacher might give them is that if they are feeling threatened in any way, they should reflect on the purity of their training in precepts. Just as the law of gravity applies regardless of any opinion we might have about it, the laws that govern our heart mean that when we make an effort to restrain heedless

impulses, we build a structure that protects us from falling into chaos.

Verse 17 in the Dhammapada says –

*Here and hereafter those who perform evil
create their own suffering.
Mental preoccupation with the thought,
'I have done wrong' possesses their minds,
and they fall into chaos.*

The young man I mentioned earlier didn't fall into chaos as he sat in his chair feeling the feeling of indecision. He didn't get lost and caught in *becoming* confused. The sense of self-trust which protected him from being pulled into becoming wasn't bestowed on him by some imaginary external authority; it was the result of skilful training in integrity and mindful restraint.

THE WAY WE APPROACH OUR WORK

It is profoundly regrettable that there is so little wisdom in our culture regarding training in precepts and renunciation. Typically, even the mention of such words causes people's hearts and minds to contract because they are reminded of shame, judgement and rejection. Why is this? Definitely there is a difference according to whether we have these qualities of integrity and renunciation established within us. Certainly we live with more contentment when our hearts are not burdened with remorse. Perhaps aversion to these

matters is due to the manner in which these principles have been imparted.

Returning to our metaphor of building a garden: if we tried to pick up some of the huge boulders on our own, we would hurt ourselves. Or if we were in a hurry to get the garden finished and spent too long outside in the cold damp weather, we might fall ill. Not washing our hands after spreading farm manure could leave us vulnerable to infection. In other words, it matters not just that we do the work of establishing the basic elements; how we go about doing it also makes a difference.

The work of cultivating integrity and renunciation involves inhibiting the wild impulses, and it is almost certainly going to feel frustrating. The hearts of those who have finished their work and arrived at full awakening are permanently at ease; for them there is no more work to be done. For the rest of us, discipline and renunciation are supposed to feel frustrating; this is how we come to recognize unruly exuberance and grow, spiritually, mentally and emotionally. But we need to be ready to handle the intensity and potential resistance. This requires a spaciousness of awareness,⁶ a well-developed sense of buoyancy in the body-mind and a lot of gentleness. Without these we won't be able to accommodate the feelings of frustration properly; we risk accumulating even more resistance, when what we were looking for was freedom from suffering.

Generally we don't associate developing discipline and renunciation with feeling comfortable. But it is important

that we do feel good within ourselves as we take up any training in intentional frustration. When we feel comfortable, we are relaxed. When we are at ease, we are more ready to address the task of countering our conditioned cravings without hurting ourselves. There needs to be a sufficient sense of ease and good enough level of clarity. The Buddha taught his monks that it was possible for them to hurt themselves seriously if they picked up their training in the wrong way.⁹

We need to know for ourselves whether we are ready to say ‘no’ to the exuberance of our wild nature. We need to know for ourselves the stage where we are on this journey. If our way of saying no is judgemental, if it comes from fear and aversion, we need to be aware of that. This doesn’t mean we should then spend more time cultivating our preferences. Right practice, or balanced practice, means learning to recognize the activity of our preferences as it is happening. It means accurately observing our habitual tendencies to be driven to the two extremes of indulgence and denial. When we are sufficiently aware of how limiting it is to always be defined by our habits, we are more naturally inclined to pick up the training in integrity and renunciation.

If taking up the training is based on *sati* and *sampajañña*, we won’t be putting ourselves at unnecessary risk. The Buddha often mentioned these two words, *sati* and *sampajañña*, together. We all know *sati* means mindfulness. *Sampajañña* means seeing things in perspective, in context. We might be lifting a heavy rock and being very mindful of mental

tendencies to feel angry at others who are not helping, but without clear perspective we could injure our back. Too much concentrated attention is not balanced and compromises sensitivity. Sensitively observing our habitual tendencies is the way to prepare ourselves for the training in discipline and renunciation that leads to the joy of letting go. Once we have seen how letting go happens, we naturally trust more whole-heartedly in the practice. Trust is the fuel that sustains us. Even when our training is not particularly interesting, even when keeping precepts is difficult, we will want to honour our commitment to them. We know that letting go of the obstructions to awareness only occurs when supportive conditions are in place. Even if awakening appears to be a long way away, we can determine never to give up trusting.

OFFERING OURSELVES INTO THE WORK

Acorns don't look anything like oak trees. When you first place acorns in potting compost in the greenhouse, they need a lot of care and attention. Later on, as the saplings are transplanted outside, they need a different sort of care. After some time the guards and stakes can safely be removed; you step back and allow the oak trees to grow. But how do we know for sure when it is the right time to plant the saplings out, or the right time to remove the guard? We can't be sure. But we can listen to those who know more about horticulture than we do.

Similarly, on the spiritual path it is wise to listen to those who see more clearly than we do. There is a story in the scriptures of an occasion when one of the Buddha's attendants

kept asking to be allowed to spend time in the forest doing solitary practice. According to the Buddha's understanding this young monk wasn't ready, so he first refused his request, but after three times of asking told him that since he insisted, he could go. It wasn't long before this young fellow was back again in need of encouragement, having fallen into fear and doubt. He had felt sure he was ready and didn't trust the Buddha's advice. Trust is not a commodity that we can acquire as and when we wish, but it can be cultivated. If we didn't have trust in the way oak trees grow, we wouldn't bother to plant saplings. It is because we trust in the Buddha's teachings on the way of awakening that we keep offering ourselves into them more fully.

Thank you very much for your attention.

3.

REGARDING THE VIEW

The Buddha and all the awakened disciples are fully conscious of the inherent peacefulness of their own hearts; hence for them all suffering has ceased.

Most of the world's major religions emphasize paying attention outwards to an external authority, a deity or set of deities. In the Buddha's teachings we are encouraged to direct attention inwards, to the quality of awareness with which we are living – the state of our own hearts. Obviously this does not exclude directing attention outwards, but it does emphasize that inner observance is primary. Once we have confidence in the way of the Buddha, we don't need to be overly concerned with how others might be conducting their spiritual practices.

It is important, however, that we understand correctly the directions our Teacher is giving us, and how these directions might be quite different from those we received at an earlier stage in our lives. The Buddha wants us to understand that when it comes to the most profound aspects of our lives, we are the ones who have the authority; it is up to us whether

we see the world clearly and live with contentment, or see it through clouds of confusion and struggle.

Until we have fully awakened to the essential purity of our own hearts, we exist in a state of obstructed awareness. It is these obstructions within awareness which give rise to false views about reality, and these views in turn give rise to false thinking. Because of these false views, we feel burdened and are troubled by such thoughts as, 'There is something inherently wrong with me', 'There is something really wrong with others', or 'There is something intrinsically wrong with reality'. We struggle 'for' and 'against' experiences, and can't allow anything to simply be, just as it is. Even when we want peace, often the way we go about wanting it creates more disturbance.

RIGHT VIEW

Everybody who studies Buddhism quickly comes across teachings on the Middle Way, also known as the Eightfold Path. This path begins with what the Buddha called *sammā diṭṭhi* – right view. It is not insignificant that the Buddha began his description of the path with talking about right view. The way we view reality has an effect on all other aspects of our experience, so it is particularly important that we understand what this right view is. The word '*diṭṭhi*', which is generally translated into English as 'view', could also be translated as 'seeing'. The word '*sammā*', which is translated as 'right', could also be translated as 'accurate'. Hence we could say that right view means seeing accurately

in accordance with reality. *Micchā diṭṭhi* means wrong view, or seeing in ways which distort the perception of reality.

In elaborating on what constitutes right view the Buddha pointed to the Four Noble Truths: there is suffering; the cause of suffering is a misperception of the nature of desire; there is the possibility of Awakening from suffering; and there is a path leading to this Awakening. When we see accurately, when our seeing is in keeping with the Four Noble Truths, we don't make the mistakes which create suffering. The Buddha and all the Awakened disciples know these Four Noble Truths directly – they are fully conscious of the inherent peacefulness of their own hearts, hence for them all suffering has ceased.

The implication in this description of the path leading to freedom from suffering is that if our fundamental views are distorted, everything else will be distorted; when our views are not distorted but accord with reality, we see clearly. So the way we see or view all experience matters greatly. For example, if we are not aware of the Four Noble Truths, we could easily assume that the suffering in our lives is somebody else's fault or the fault of some other external authority. We could waste massive amounts of energy struggling against suffering, but to no avail.

These teachings on the Four Noble Truths invite us to pay very close attention to the way we relate to desire: when we grasp desire it burns us. Even when our desires are thoroughly wholesome, if we relate to them by way of grasping they produce suffering.

Such grasping means we identify ‘as’ them; we feel ‘this desire is me. I am this desire’. When we are not grasping at desire there are no problems. Life will still be difficult at times, but that is not the same as having to deal with something that is inherently problematic. In terms of reality, nothing is inherently problematic. Desire is like fire: we can put our hand in it and get burned, or we can sit safely beside it and comfortably warm ourselves, but that doesn’t make fire inherently problematic. We must come to know that our relationship with desire is our responsibility alone, nobody else’s.

However, even studying the Four Noble Truths and arriving at a conceptual understanding of how we so often get burnt by life, doesn’t on its own protect us from suffering. Around 1974 when I first arrived in Thailand, I had become keenly interested in this subject of right view. I was living at the time in Wat Bovoranives monastery in Bangkok, and had heard many opinions expressed as to which of the meditation teachers in Thailand were teaching right view and which were not. Of course, I didn’t know for myself what right view was, but I knew that I didn’t want to live in any monastery where it wasn’t being taught. One day a Western disciple of Ajahn Chah called Varapañño Bhikkhu came to visit. I took the opportunity to ask him what Ajahn Chah had to say about right view.

‘Ajahn Chah teaches that right view means not grasping at any view or opinion.’

On hearing that interpretation, something shifted deeply within me. Not only was it important that we held right view, but it mattered *how* we held it. In that same conversation, or perhaps on a later occasion, I heard how Ajahn Chah taught that even the Buddha's teachings were wrong view if we cling to them. We make them wrong by the way we relate to them.

So just assimilating a concept of right view is not enough to protect us from creating suffering in our lives. It does matter that we understand accurately what the Teachings say about reality, but it also matters that we train our spiritual faculties so that we come to see accurately, so that we can learn from life. Going to an optometrist, having our eyes tested and receiving a prescription for a set of spectacles doesn't in itself mean we start to see clearly. We need to go through the process of ordering and paying for them and then putting them on before we will notice any improvement.

Cultivating right view involves not just the 'views' themselves – such as having confidence in the Four Noble Truths – but how we relate to them. How we hold them will determine the quality of effort we make, the kind of actions we perform and the life that we have. Our relationship to views and opinions determines whether we live with contentment or live with confusion. When we cling to any view or opinion, our perception of reality becomes distorted. When all clinging has ceased, all distortions disappear; life is what it is and always has been, and we will no longer be caught in the drama of delusion.

WHERE SHOULD WE BE LOOKING

Within Buddhism there are many different ways of viewing practice. For some the goal of practice is ‘out there’ in the future. Those committed to such an approach tend to hold to the idea that they need to undergo a very special experience which will change everything. One of the risks of attaching to ideas about the goal being ‘out there’ is that we can lose touch with the truth of where we are already, ‘right here’. In her book *Gentling The Bull*¹⁰ the Venerable Myokyo-Ni relates an incident she heard about from a Thai meditation teacher. This incident involved a young monk who was meditating with great gusto, but it seems not such great mindfulness. When a vision of a beautiful golden ball leaping out in front of him appeared in his meditation, the appearance was so enticing he felt he just had to follow it and see where it would lead him. After he came out of his meditation trance it became apparent that he had actually followed the image of the golden ball, and was now balanced precariously high up in a tree, needing help to get down. When we attach to ideas of the goal of practice as being somewhere ‘out there’, we condition attention to following fantasies and risk losing touch with the ground beneath us; we can inadvertently create obstacles to seeing accurately what is actually already happening in this moment.

In keeping with Ajahn Chah’s way of teaching about right view, we could approach our concept of the goal from the opposite direction. Instead of focusing primarily on the idea of an experience ‘out there’ which we must strive to reach,

we emphasize being mindful of the way we relate to all ideas. Here we are turning attention around; instead of aiming for the future, we develop more of an interest in the present reality. Our goal shifts from an idea about some special experience that we imagine might happen in the future, to paying attention to the quality of relationship we have with the experience happening here and now; are we indulging in it, are we resisting it, or are we accommodating it into sensitive, selfless awareness? Perhaps you have noticed that when we are caught in ideas about the future, we more readily get lost in proliferating about how life should be, and how flawed and inadequate everything is right now. We get pulled into restlessness, and though our critical faculties might be sharp, our contribution to harmony could be compromised.

Clinging to views can definitely give rise to feelings of certainty and generate a lot of energy, but that energy is not necessarily balanced or stable. Fundamentalists of all persuasions – religious, environment, political – may appear convincing, but sounding certain does not mean that what they are certain about is in keeping with reality. Instead of accessing energy by clinging to a fixed view, idea or opinion, we can motivate ourselves in this enquiry by learning to recognize habits of clinging and begin to let go of them. Whenever we let go of an old pattern of clinging, energy is released. I recall the first time I felt I had genuinely acknowledged that one day I would die, that one day there would be no more Ajahn Munindo. This recognition did not cause feelings of sadness or fear: instead I felt exhilarated; it was a

relief. Those feelings of delight were not born out of some distorted death-wish, but because I had stopped lying to myself. We access energy when we acknowledge the truth, the truth that already *is*. I was never going to be an immortal, but because of unconsciously held wrong views I had been acting as if I was, and that habitual falsity was consuming a lot of energy.

The obstructions within awareness that generate wrong views and wrong actions are just these habits of lying to ourselves, just these patterns of clinging. Of course, there are right ways of holding which are appropriate and conduce to progress on the path, but they are completely different from blind clinging. When we cling we lose energy and compound confusion, creating suffering in our inner and outer worlds. This is why even ostensibly noble efforts in practice can sometimes fail to produce the insights we hoped for, instead leading us to exhaustion and disappointment. It is not necessarily that our aspirations were wrong; it could be the way we were holding our aspirations. Holding too tightly spoils things.

GAUGING HOW WE HOLD VIEWS

This raises the question of how I can know whether I am holding in a way which is helping develop right view, or holding heedlessly and making things worse. This is like asking how I can tell if the bath-water is the right temperature. No amount of thinking about the temperature of the bath-water is going to tell us; we put our hand in and *feel* it. The

language of awakening is the language of feelings. What does it feel like in the whole body-mind when we hold in this way or in that way? So long as we haven't learned to read the whole body-mind with sufficient subtlety, we can't expect a clear answer to our questions. This is why it is wise to establish a regular practice of formal meditation.

If it was our aim to learn to speak Italian so that when we visited Italy we could communicate with the local people, we would obviously do more than occasionally glance at a book on speaking Italian. We would expect to have to make some degree of commitment to learning Italian, discipline ourselves, giving the task the time it needed. Formal meditation is the same. We need to give it the time required for reaching a good enough level of proficiency. We get to the point where we feel like we can ask our heart a direct question such as whether we are holding mindfully or clinging, and expect to receive a reliable answer.

Identifying a 'good enough' level of proficiency is again a matter of listening to what the whole body-mind tells us. For some it might mean two or three hours, or even more, of committed sitting and walking meditation every day, without fail, before they can read where they are at. For others it might mean twenty minutes of formal practice a day, six days a week. We are all different. What matters is that we are able to ask ourselves the questions we need to ask and can receive the answers we need to hear. Whether we are actually proficient or not becomes evident by observing whether suffering in our life is increasing or decreasing.

Sometimes monks from our monastery like to leave its confines and spend a few days walking *tudong*.³ Such ‘wandering practice’ is more than just taking a break or having a holiday; it is a way of testing ourselves. Here in Britain we don’t have wild jungles to wander in as monks do in Burma or Thailand, where they are vulnerable to attack by wild animals, but even heading out into the English countryside with little more than an alms-bowl and a bivvy bag can still be an effective way of testing practice. It is often surprising to find how much our sense of security depends on a daily routine. When life becomes less predictable we readily feel less secure, and the reliability of our judgements can be called into question.

Some years ago one of our monks ventured off heading north, following the coastline. There were more villages on that route where he might receive alms-food than if he took a route up the middle of the country. Upon returning to the monastery he told me how he had unintentionally put himself in considerable danger, having misjudged a situation. Just off the Northumberland coast is Holy Island, an important place in the establishment of Christianity in Britain.

It is also a significant place for ornithologists and this monk was a keen bird-watcher. It is possible to drive (or walk) over to the island if you are there at low tide. On the day he arrived at the point on the coastline from which Holy Island would normally be visible, there was a very dense fog, (known locally as a sea fret). His confidence was undaunted, and with determination he headed out into the fog, quite

certain that so long as he just kept going straight he would reach the island. After walking for quite a long while he found himself back at almost exactly the same point on the shore where he had started; he had walked in a complete circle. He had felt *so* sure he was walking straight. As it happened, it was fortunate that he hadn't walked straight, as there was a risk he could have been caught by the incoming tide.

If we want confirmation of how accurately we are reading the messages from our body-mind, it is useful to experiment with setting aside some of our relative securities. Doing wandering practice might not always be an option, but determining to observe the Eight-Precepts¹² for a day can serve the same principle. Turning off our electronic gadgets can also be instructive. We are not renouncing with a view that eating in the evening, listening to music or using technology is somehow bad; rather, we are interested in gauging our relationship with 'me' and 'my way'.

It is natural to want to feel certain, but to what extent does our sense of certainty depend on attachment to getting our own way? We want to feel contented, but how much is our sense of contentment dependent on gratifying desires? If conditions conspire so that I can't gratify my desires, does that mean I am obliged to suffer? We won't know unless we experiment with foregoing gratification to some degree. This is an important aspect of training the heart of awareness. Engaging in intentional frustration is clearly not what the world would have us do, but we wouldn't be following the

path of the Buddha if we were convinced by stories that the world told us. It is popularly believed that if we continually gratify desires, one day we will reach true and lasting contentment. That so many people hold to such a view is one of the factors that fuel the intensity of present-day discontentment. All we find by following that path is more delusion. The young meditator who found himself up a tree believed that following his fascination for the golden ball might lead him somewhere interesting. The monk who headed out into the thick fog thinking he would reach the island really believed he was walking straight. Both were in fact caught in the force of delusion regarding desire.

THE CHALLENGE OF BEING LOVING

Another powerfully significant dimension of our human experience is the way we view what we call love. Meditators not infrequently endure terrible distress over this matter. Some might imagine that to live in a monastery means it is possible to avoid such intense emotions. It is very unlikely indeed that anyone can effectively avoid them; monks, nuns or householders: either we meet them and learn about them, or we tell ourselves stories and deny them, with regrettable consequences. Certainly we are all different, which means that the struggle is going to be more testing for some than for others. But to be completely honest with ourselves in this area is a challenge all of us have to face. This is a challenge that involves issues of social conditioning, biological impulses, as well as the views that we hold on the subject.

On the one hand, we might feel drawn to cultivate the warm-hearted loving-kindness about which the Buddha taught (*metta bhāvanā*), but be afraid of creating further unhelpful attachments. As we contemplate this matter, we should know that it is not the heart of loving-kindness which creates the difficulties, it is our untamed exuberance; our undeveloped awareness that is yet to be informed with an accurate view on reality.

There is no question that love can give rise to beautiful feelings, sometimes exquisitely beautiful, at times profoundly inspiring. We can feel transported into an altogether different world. There is also no question that love can lead to heart-ache which is desperately distracting, possibly even to the point of insanity. What makes the difference? How can we be loving without being consumed by delusion? If we are truly proficient in reading our own body-mind, we will be in the best position to ask ourselves this important question and receive a relevant answer. When we are not sufficiently skilled in asking ourselves such questions and listening to the responses, we will have to contend with believing and disbelieving the stories we have been told.

One of the most prevalent of those stories is that the intensely pleasurable feelings associated with falling in love are somehow ultimate. But anyone who has ever fallen in love knows that the initial euphoria is never ultimate. It always passes. So why is it so difficult to learn this lesson? Why does the fallacy about falling in love being so precious persist?

Perhaps it is to do with the degree of intoxication involved. Pleasure is naturally attractive. It takes highly developed awareness to be able to see beyond the way pleasure appears. If we consider how we are affected by less intense but nevertheless attractive experiences such as eating tasty food and listening to music, we can see how easily we are drawn to follow the impulse to indulge and cling. But we don't have to cling. There is also the option of exercising the spiritual faculties and making the effort not to be intimidated by sense objects.

When a pleasurable impulse impacts on our heart, in reality we have a choice: we can immediately follow it and see where it might lead, or we can meet it by appreciating it just as it is, becoming interested in the reality; rather than being driven by its initial appearance. Certain foods and drink can appear attractive but do us no good at all. Certain ideas can appear attractive but cause devastation when followed. We put ourselves and perhaps others at risk, displaying a dangerous level of naïvety, if we immediately follow everything that seems attractive. Until we become familiar with the potential of the spiritual faculties to protect us from reacting immediately, we might assume that we have no choice but to react. Most young children could not imagine how they would exist without their parents to take care of them, but that does not mean they will never grow up and learn to depend on themselves. When we have developed wise reflection, we will know that we do have a choice.

Conversely, if instead of indulging in experiences we obsessively shy away from and reject them due to some unexamined negative view, this too is undeveloped and unreliable. The middle way means viewing all experience from the perspective of a whole body-mind awareness, and responding in a manner that is neither clinging nor rejecting. When the intensely pleasurable experience of being loving is received into a heart of well-developed awareness, it has the potential to open us up to a new and freer perspective on life. We don't have to judge or be overly afraid of it; nor do we have to be enslaved by it. It is not inevitable that we project our heart's energy out onto that object which triggered the loving feelings and become obsessed with it. The idea, 'I can't live without that object' needs to be seen for what it is.

Approaching love and life with an acute interest in seeing reality can be one of the ways of protecting ourselves from falling into delusion. If we are not at the stage in our practice where we can see with such clarity, we turn to another source of protection, our teachers. The Buddha was unique in arriving at Awakening without having a teacher. The rest of us all need help.

FINDING OUR WAY

Sometimes when I am fumbling around in my cottage trying to find my spectacles, I think this is like trying to find our way out of suffering so long as we still don't have right view. Being able to see clearly would really help in finding them, but I won't see clearly until I find them. So long as we are not

perceiving reality accurately we benefit greatly from having a teacher. To have a teacher in whom we can trust is a great blessing. A wise teacher will see when we are caught in wrong views and are about to head off in a direction that could get us hurt. However, we should be prepared not to always like the directions our teacher gives us. When Ajahn Chah was visiting America and heard about some of what was being taught there in the name of Buddhism, he commented that it was like *people being put into a leaky boat and pushed out to sea*.

I believe he was referring to the fact that some teachers avoided talking about the training in Precepts for fear of deterring their students. Ajahn Chah's view was that without a conscious commitment to training in integrity, there could be very little progress in practice. Indeed, not only will there be little progress but meditators who are careless in matters of morality are liable to get themselves into real trouble. These days I expect he would have something to say about the dangers of teachers paying too much attention to seeking approval on the various social media.

When he was visiting a Mahayana centre in the north-west of England, Ajahn Chah was asked by the resident students to give a teaching on Vipassana. Perhaps these students had heard what a powerful and valuable tool vipassana meditation could be, and were keen to hear about it from such an accomplished monk. On that occasion Ajahn Chah held up a beautiful white magnolia flower, and told the students that practising vipassana meant paying close attention to the

flower and observing as it disintegrated and fell apart. In a well-known photo taken at the time, Ajahn Chah can be seen to have a gentle smile on his face. Even when Dhamma teachings might make us feel uncomfortable, a wise teacher will offer them with compassion. Indeed, when he was giving his Dhamma talk at that centre, Ajahn Chah specifically explained that his words could at times sound sharp and apologized if they were hurtful, saying that such words were sometimes necessary.

Wisdom and compassion are not techniques. Techniques may be used to introduce us to wisdom and compassion, but we need to train our faculties to hear beyond just the outer forms. When our attention falls short of the meaning beyond the forms, we are at risk of misinterpreting what the teacher is telling us. Also, teachings which are appropriate in one situation may not apply in another. Directions given to one person might not be suitable for another person. Remember the occasion in the scriptures where the Buddha taught his monks how to meditate on the loathsomeness of the body,¹³ and then went away for a period of private retreat. Upon returning he discovered that many of the monks had committed suicide after understanding the meditation instructions in the wrong way. Their wrong views meant that they were attached to their bodies; instead of doing away with their attachments they did away with their bodies.

BENEFITING EACH OTHER

As a good pair of spectacles compensates for defects in our eyesight, so a good teacher will help us make adjustments for the wrong views we have been holding.

When we apply ourselves to the advice our teachers give us, we will regularly pause and take stock of the way we view each other. Are we developing a mature sense of gratitude which contributes to harmony and mutual benefit, or are we still entertaining feelings of hostility and envy which lead to disharmony and stress? When we remember that we all share this predicament of suffering, we can feel we are one family. When we ignore the fact that we are in this together and we all need help from time to time, we risk falling into loneliness or perhaps cynicism, becoming lost in negativity.

Cynicism is a completely unnecessary and particularly regrettable form of wrong view, often held by those unaware of the possibility of taking responsibility for their own hearts and minds. The suffering spread around by somebody with a cynical attitude is never an obligation; it is always a choice; even if they don't know that. It is certain that for all of us there will be times when life is painful, but it is clinging which turns the natural pain of life into suffering. If on top of such suffering we add the view that we are victims and don't deserve to suffer, we move even further from the truth. Sadly, if we indulge such views long enough, we create barriers to being able to hear wise teachings.

In the scriptures there is a record of a period in the Buddha's life when he had to deal with two groups of quarrelling monks. These monks refused to listen to each other or even to their Teacher. So the Buddha eventually took leave of those recalcitrant monks at Kosami and chose instead to spend time alone. He later proceeded to where a small group of monks were living, the Venerables Anuruddha, Kimbila and Nandiya, and enquired whether they were managing to live together in a cooperative manner. They replied that indeed they were living together harmoniously,¹¹

... viewing each other with kindly eyes, blending like milk and water.

They went on to describe how careful they were when speaking about each other, publicly and in private, and how their actions were aimed at mutual benefit. They further mentioned that as a result of the harmonious environment, all aspects of their spiritual enquiry were developing exceptionally well.

When our views are in line with reality and not distorted by delusion, our actions of body, speech and mind contribute to the benefit of all beings. The Buddha points out how we misperceive reality. Our teachers help us recognize the ability to take responsibility for our lives and stop blaming external agents for our suffering. Harmonious spiritual community provides the all-important feedback that prevents us from becoming too pleased with ourselves.

Potentially all of us have the ability to experience the entire spectrum of human feelings – loneliness, love, fear, aversion, rage, boredom, desire, gratitude, gladness, remorse.... We must keep enquiring until we see clearly that we are not necessarily defined by any of our feelings, whether positive or negative. As mentioned earlier, feelings are the language of awakening. That does not, however, mean we worship feelings. To do so would be to sell ourselves short; we are capable of much more than identifying *as* our feelings. What we might well worship is awareness itself, or the just-knowing mind. We could worship it in the sense of giving awareness priority over and above all else. Feelings are conditioned and they all come and go. We train ourselves to be interested in feelings because, out of unawareness, we still give them the power to intimidate us and drag us down into delusion (or up into trees, as in the case of the golden ball). Once we know them truly for what they are – as movement taking place in vast, open awareness – letting go happens and we keep moving on.

It can be surprisingly frightening to recognize the ability that we actually have; to see that there is nobody else to blame and nobody other than ourselves to depend on. At the same time, though, if we are ready to truly recognize our ability, it means we are ready to let go of any need to lie to ourselves; which, in turn finds us nourished by an inner confidence less dependent on external influences. This is part of what it means to rightly assume authority over how we view reality. Thank you very much for your attention.

4.

READING THE SIGNPOSTS

There is a path, but it can be a long time before we see a clear signpost. As for myself, this journey definitely takes place in the heart.

AJAHN CHAH

One morning recently, as I was walking down a city high street, it struck me that the only happy faces I could see were those in the glossy printed posters behind shop windows. None of the actual walking and talking human beings on the street itself looked at all happy. Everybody was well-dressed, many carrying designer-labelled shopping bags; they weren't homeless or struggling for any obvious physical reason, but they all seemed sad or somehow troubled. I am certain this had nothing to do with what was happening in that city on that specific morning. Such a perception could probably have arisen in my mind in any city anywhere in the world. Nor was it that I was particularly melancholic, I wasn't feeling down or disheartened about something. There was a sense of disillusionment, but in a clear-minded sort of way.

Mentioning this example here is not to suggest that my noticing the ubiquitous unhappiness of the world is the same thing as what Ajahn Chah in the passage above is calling a clear signpost on the path; however, I do think it amounts to a hint in the right direction.

Most of us will be familiar with the period in the life of the Buddha-to-be prior to his enlightenment, when he received three powerful ‘hints’ which completely changed the course of his life. The shift in perception which occurred triggered a recognition of an underlying discontentment, which led in turn to his pursuit of awakening. These three ‘hints’ or ‘signs’ were old age, sickness and death. They highlighted an inherently unsatisfactory aspect of the human condition, giving rise to the question: are we actually obliged to suffer? Is there any alternative? Then there was the fourth ‘sign’ of a truth-seeker (*samaṇa*) wearing his orange robes, which inspired the Buddha-to-be to begin his quest. Several years of rigorous spiritual discipline followed, before eventually the Buddha arrived at complete freedom from suffering. Those original ‘hints’ were profoundly significant. He later referred to them as *deva-dūta*, celestial messengers, because they had provided him with the information that led to his discovery of what really matters in life. So, in those moments when a sense of disillusionment reveals a new perspective on life to us, when we catch ourselves wondering – is this all there is? – let’s take note. Such perceptions matter.

STUDYING THE MIND

In the talk by Ajahn Chah from which the short extract above is taken,²¹ he says,

'I'm telling you, it's great fun to observe closely how the mind works. I could happily talk about this single subject the whole day.'

He goes on to speak about developing the mind's potential for abiding as the just-knowing awareness, and instructs us to

'... train the mind to watch and know with the eyes of alert awareness. This is how you care for your heart and mind. This is the Buddha's firm and unshakeable awareness that watches over and protects the mind.'

Ajahn Chah was not one for advocating too much book learning. But then again, he didn't dismiss the place of study altogether. He himself had thoroughly studied the theoretical teachings of Buddhism (*pariyutti*). But in his experience it was the study of our own body-mind that produced real benefits. Those benefits are the fruits to be enjoyed after having done the practice. And cultivating this path and its fruits requires considerable skill. All the teachings of the Buddha and the awakened disciples are an effort to equip us with these essential skills.

DEALING WITH OBSTACLES

One specific set of skills that we need to develop is the ability to recognize and deal with what the Buddha called the Five Hindrances (*nīvaraṇa*).¹⁴ Ajahn Thiradhammo has written a very helpful book on this topic called *Working With The Hindrances*,¹⁵ in which he comments in detail on training in this set of skills. Rather than repeating here what he has said, I would like to discuss three distinct kinds of effort which we might employ as we encounter hindrances on the path.

It is wise to have prepared ourselves in advance with the agility of attention, which means we will be ready for whatever comes our way. This is similar to how we might adjust our way of approaching another person depending on what seems suitable according to time and place. For instance, if you were aware that somebody had recently suffered a bereavement, you wouldn't greet them with a big smile on your face and tell them you hope they are having a nice day.

CUTTING THROUGH

The first kind of effort to mention is that of withholding attention: stubbornly refusing to give any attention whatsoever to the obstacle that has appeared. Think of attention as a form of energy. When we 'pay' attention to something, that thing is likely to feed on it. I call this the 'cutting through' approach, because it is a vigorous, decisive sort of effort which has no truck with any degree of distraction. Certainly this approach is not going to work in all cases, but it can be worth trying. We resolutely refuse to allow attention to be

drawn towards that which threatens to disturb our peace of mind. If after making this effort for a while the obstruction still persists, we need to be ready to change our approach. For instance, focusing with warrior-style concentration on a meditation object, attached to the idea that we should be able to overcome all obstacles using just one technique, could do more harm than good.

SEEING THROUGH

There are some obstructions which require skilful contemplation or wise reflection before letting go will occur. I think of this as the 'seeing through' approach, because when we think in the right way we arrive at a new perspective, a new way of seeing. We all have the ability to think, and in some cases intentional thinking is exactly what is required; trying forcefully to withhold attention and focus on our theme of meditation will not always work. Sometimes we need to take leave of the meditation object and engage the thinking mind creatively. Remember, contemplative thinking which we can control, which we can stop and start at will, is altogether different from mental proliferation, which just goes on and on and exhausts the mind.

So for example, we could dwell on thoughts about the advantages of being free from the obstacle, and the disadvantages of remaining caught up with it. Such skilful thinking can at times be sufficient to lift the mind out of feeling hopelessly stuck. Or we could create a contrasting mental environment. If we are on fire with indignation, we could

use our imagination to consider how those whom we blame for causing our hatred also struggle, just as we do. Like us, they too long to be free from the pain of hatred from which we are suffering right now. This is using the thinking mind to generate compassion.

As Ajahn Chah mentions above, it can be great fun to explore and discover what works; it is OK to be creative and even radical in trying different approaches. For example, if your mind has fixated on the idea that you are not capable of performing a particular task, you can experiment with generating the opposite idea, thinking an opposite thought to the one with which you have become obsessed. Tell your mind that not only are you capable of performing the task, but you will be excellent at it. If you are afraid of public speaking and have locked onto the idea that you can't do it, try thinking, 'Not only will I be good at giving this speech, but there is nobody else who could do it better than me.' Of course, this intentional thought is ridiculous but so was being caught up in the original thought. If you are watchful, perhaps there will be a brief moment when you catch a glimpse of the old thought of your inability, and realize how relative it was. It was not you; that movement of mind which previously seemed so important is not as real as it appeared.

All thoughts are relative, and potentially, all thoughts can be let go of. We should understand that this is an exercise in mindfully investigating the nature of attachments; we are not advocating a belief in self-affirmations. Many of us have very tricky, even devious, minds that will endeavour

to sabotage any approach we employ to free ourselves from persistent habits of clinging. Hence the need for agility and creativity.

BURNING THROUGH

Then there is the ‘burning through’ approach. In this case we apply what the Buddha referred to as the ultimate practice of austerity – *paramaṃ tapo tītikkhā* – patient endurance. We might have great admiration for the Buddha’s wisdom in pointing out this essential quality of patient endurance, but when we are actually in the midst of applying it, it will definitely not be what ‘I’ want to be doing. It will feel utterly unfair, and as if there really must be another way of dealing with things. However, in some cases there is no other way. At a different time or in a different place there may well be, but there are stages on this journey when, right here, right now, this is the sole option. All we are left with is the effort to endure this utterly unendurable moment.

Being established ‘here-and-now’ is an important aspect of how we survive that which appears so deeply threatening. If we try to imagine being patient for an hour, or even for ten minutes, we might feel convinced it is too much. So we can develop being patient for one cycle of breathing in and breathing out. It might still *appear* impossible, but somehow we do it.

The Pali word ‘*tapa*’ is generally understood as referring to ascetic practices, but its original meaning is ‘fire’. When we make an effort to counter those currents of craving with

which our minds have been conditioned, we will certainly experience heat. It can feel like being in a furnace. At this stage, remember the image the Buddha gave of purifying gold; it takes a lot of heat before the dross comes to the surface and can be removed. We don't choose to endure the unendurable out of a wish to harm ourselves, but because we care so much about arriving at pure gold.

HONOURING LIMITATIONS

Ajahn Sumedho has spoken many times about the importance of being able to live within our limitations; he calls this ability an aspect of wisdom. But maybe there is still some part of us which believes we should be able to deal with everything, overcome everything. Our teachers tell us that ultimately it is patient endurance which makes this path possible. When everything else fails, it is to patient endurance that we need to be able to turn.

'Patience', 'modesty', 'humility', don't sound as impressive as 'overcoming', 'conquering' and 'attaining', but it may be these 'soft powers' of the spiritual life which make the difference between an ability to surrender more fully into the way, and giving up.

Dhammapada verse 344 says,

*There are those who have begun
on the path to freedom,
yet out of desire
return to being chained.*

After we have already set out on the path and made a lot of effort, it is unfortunate if we give up because we aren't able to acknowledge that we have limitations. I recall an occasion of translating a conversation between Ajahn Chah and a Western visitor in which Ajahn Chah cautioned, 'If all you have is an ox cart, don't pretend you have a ten-wheeled truck.' I had the impression afterwards that perhaps Ajahn Chah was also talking to me and not just to the visitor. But then, such wisdom pertains to us all.

STAGES OF LETTING GO

There is a framed quote of Ajahn Chah's teaching hanging in the entranceway at our monastery Guest House, which says,

If you let go a little you will have a little peace.

If you let go a lot you will have a lot of peace.

If you let go completely you will have complete peace.

The simplicity of this short statement of truth is very appealing. But however much we might admire its profundity, we usually still can't do it; we keep trying to let go because we really want peace, but the trying only makes things worse. Our tendencies to cling sometimes seem so tenacious that they can drive us to tears. Even if we do experience a moment of letting go, we are liable to cling to the joy which arises from it; unless, that is, we were well-prepared beforehand. Then, if we have a modicum of humility, we might catch ourselves before we start clinging again.

It is our conditioned arrogance that makes us think attaining peacefulness is up to us. In truth, as those teachings hanging on the wall suggest, behind the activity of clinging, peace is already always there; we don't have to become peaceful.

In the beginning most of us aren't even conscious that we are suffering, let alone aware that our chronic sense of limitation is the result of something we are doing. Some individuals, however, have accumulated enough wholesome potential (*pañña paramī*), and see beyond mere apparent reality. Sooner or later they start asking questions, and eventually come to realize that they are suffering. They are the ones who the Buddha said *have but a little dust in their eyes*. They are no longer convinced by the world's stories; they are no longer caught, like a hamster on a wheel, making lots of effort but to no avail. Hopefully the questions will keep appearing: questions such as, 'Am I obliged to stay stuck in this repetitive cycle of craving, never ever feeling fully contented?' Once we reach this stage, we have the option to practise Dhamma instead of just indulging in complaining that life has let us down. We can start to relate to life less as a struggle and with more ease.

Once we have admitted our suffering and found the possibility of Dhamma practice, we need to watch out for such thoughts as, 'I have finished with such-and-such a problem now'. If we have truly finished with something, we won't be thinking that we have finished with it. When letting go with regard to a particular issue has come to completion, we will have virtually forgotten that the issue ever caused us to

suffer. A mental impression might remain, but the heart will be cool. We won't need to be telling ourselves that we have finished with the issue.

This is the way it tends to go. In the beginning we are completely unaware that we are active as the agent of our suffering. Once we realize what we are doing, we train ourselves to gently bear with the consequence of our compulsive clinging; until eventually the message starts to sink in and letting go happens. Then we keep practising patiently until all remnants of clinging dissolve and we move on. If we are truly moving on, that means we live in trust.

NO GUARANTEES

The only thing that is guaranteed in life is that we are going to die. And even then we can't predict when it will happen. But if we are fortunate enough, we will discover the ability to live life trusting in reality, trusting in Dhamma. No matter how challenging and difficult conditions might appear to be, we keep turning to trusting with ever-increasing commitment. As we chant at Evening Puja,

'The Dhamma holds those who uphold it from falling into delusion.'

We choose to trust that this is true, not out of naive avoidance of life's difficult questions, but as a considered response to them. We open our hearts and minds to the chaos of the

inner and outer worlds, and at the same time reflect on the inherent order, the Dhamma, within the chaos.

The temptation to return to habits of clinging and manipulating can remain for a very long time, but we train the body-mind to remember that letting go doesn't happen according to our preferences. Hopefully we receive enough hints along the way regarding the benefits of renouncing 'me' and 'my way', to make the Buddha's way appear more interesting to us than anything else. Instead of reactively judging ourselves and others in terms of our conditioned liking and disliking, we become interested in studying the reality of our preferences, and in questioning the reality of the various 'I's' that we experience ourselves to be.

PREPARING THE 'I' FOR RELEASE

Perhaps we sometimes experience ourselves as an 'I' which is bright, light, gentle and in tune. But probably there are other 'I's', those which are contracted, heavy, dense, and hot. With a well-prepared mind and an alert heart of awareness, we embrace all of these 'I's'. We know that until they are all fully received, until they are really made ready, there will be no freedom from suffering. Hence the need to learn how to soften and gentle them, ready them for letting go. When we come across an 'I' that is rigid with fear, we gentle it using patience and kindness. When we meet an 'I' that is heavy with personal history, we train it to soften by using agility. If it is an 'I' that is hot with hatred, we teach it how to be cool by means of compassion. This is what we can do. This is taking

real responsibility for our ‘selves’. We understand that if we don’t take responsibility for ourselves, there is a risk that the pain which created all these ‘I’s’ in the first place might leak out into the world and cause harm to others.

When we practise rightly, our various ‘selves’ begin to align with Dhamma. Sometimes slowly, sometimes more quickly, we feel more in touch with a natural and selfless sense of well-being. Inclinations to blame – ourselves, others or the world – start to fade away. Blaming is what we do when we don’t have enough inner space to receive our suffering. Sometimes life hurts, at other times it feels wonderful. When our body-mind is trained in Dhamma, when we are properly prepared, we receive the pain of life and let it go; and we receive the joy of life and let it go also.

SEEING SIGNPOSTS

Until we really get the message that our suffering is our own doing, we are liable to keep projecting pain outwards. So we continue refining the effort we make in this training according to what works; until we learn to be able to accept everything. Whether it is cutting through, seeing through or burning through; whether it is softening, gentling or cooling, we train the whole body-mind to accept the consequences of our clinging. With the willingness and ability to accept all that life gives us, can arise the wisdom that understands; and it is right understanding which makes a difference.

Training ourselves to accept everything is like a handshake; it is not the whole relationship. We train to accept reality so

we can see reality. Receiving reality is not collusion. Only when we see reality accurately can there be the wisdom to act in ways which make a difference. We might want to make a difference; we might want there to be more wisdom and compassion in the world; but wanting alone won't make the difference. It takes tremendous energy to go against the currents of craving that are the true cause of all the suffering in the world.

It is interesting to see how invigorating the investigation of suffering can be. From the perspective of believing that gratification of desire is the goal in life, an unpleasant feeling such as disappointment can be a sign of failure. But from the perspective of being a servant of reality, the feeling of disappointment becomes the next thing from which to learn.

Such a Dhamma perspective doesn't mean disappointment suddenly starts to feel pleasant. Disappointment always feels disappointing; if it didn't, it wouldn't be real disappointment. To think that right practice makes everything feel good is like saying salt is going to start tasting sweet. If we can accept that salt tastes salty, honey tastes sweet, disappointment feels disappointing and there is nothing wrong with any of that, we will be ready to start seeing signposts on the path.

Thank you very much for your attention.

5.

SANITY IN THE MIDST OF UNCERTAINTY

*Any speech which ignores uncertainty
is not the speech of a sage. Remember this.
Whatever we see or hear, be it pleasant or
sorrowful, just say, 'This is not sure!'*

AJAHN CHAH

Whilst visiting a local school some years ago, I asked a class of teenage students if they could think of anything at all that was genuinely unchanging, anything truly permanent. Encouraging them to consider impermanence seemed like a suitable way to introduce them to basic Buddhist teachings. I wasn't expecting to see any hands raised. But one student did put his hand up and told me there was something permanent, something truly unchanging, and that was the law of impermanence itself. Whether that student was particularly discerning or had been primed by his teacher in advance, I don't know, but it was good to have the opportunity to speak in that environment about something as important as the law of impermanence. The Buddha said that it is wisdom

that understands the law of impermanence, and it is this wisdom which will protect us from undue suffering.

Change and the uncertain nature of things are nothing new. However, what is new, thanks to technology, is the pace of change. And never before have we had such ease of access to information about the changing nature of things; on the microcosmic level, where we might study the dynamics of nano particles; on the macrocosmic level, where we can learn about expanding and contracting universes; and so much more in between.

Naturally we feel grateful for the many advantages technology has provided, such as possibilities for better health care, improved education and a safer society. However, this rapid rate of change is undeniably contributing to a significant increase in the level of collective anxiety. Many of the structures in society which previously provided a relative sense of security now seem less reliable. To name just a few examples: some multinational corporations are even more powerful than elected governments; mass migration of refugees has led to complex difficulties never seen before; block-chain technology is undermining traditional ways of doing business; and the indiscriminate use of antibiotics has created superbugs.

But as we enter this contemplation on uncertainty, let's be careful that we don't assume change itself is necessarily a problem. People living under totalitarian dictatorships live in hope that someday soon things will change. If we are suffering from an illness, we hope that the symptoms will soon change and we will recover. In Japanese culture the

perception of impermanence is central to several art forms: for centuries exquisite poetry has been written about the falling of cherry blossoms; the philosophy of *Wabi-sabi* celebrates ‘the fortunate accident’; *Kintsukuroi* highlights cracks in a broken pot which have been mended using gold.

Sadly though, it is also true that technologically advanced Japan has one of the highest rates of suicide in the world. According to WHO statistics,¹⁶ over the last 45 years there has been a 60% worldwide increase in suicide. This rate is due to double again by 2020. It is clear that no amount of technological advancement, ready access to information, or sublime forms of art is enough to save us from the suffering that arises from fear of uncertainty. While technology itself is neutral, it does have the effect of amplifying whatever it touches. This in turn leads to intensification, and regarding the rate of change, is contributing to people feeling pushed beyond what they can tolerate.

STRATEGIC OPTIMISM

From all the indicators, it would appear that this accelerating rate of change is not going to cease any time soon. For many, unfortunately, this uncertainty leads to becoming habitually pessimistic. However, from the perspective of a commitment to serving reality, our reactions to change and uncertainty need not intimidate us; instead they need to be studied and understood. Allowing ourselves to be defined by feelings of pessimism is not an obligation; it is a choice, even when it doesn't feel that way.

It seems to me that the approach most conducive to progress on the path, and the most skilful way of dealing with feelings of fear is that of strategic optimism. When people ask me how I personally deal with challenging dilemmas, I often tell them that I am a strategic optimist. Of course, naive optimism is very dangerous, as is habitual pessimism. Both these perspectives blind us to a great many possibilities. But when our decision to intentionally develop an optimistic attitude is informed by mindfulness, sense restraint and skilful reflection, it is neither naive nor dangerous. We can choose to adopt such an approach out of a desire to take full responsibility for our actions of body, speech and mind, so as to do more than merely react out of conditioned preference. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we don't *know* that everything is getting worse, any more than we *know* that everything is getting better. But what we can observe is how being caught in negative mind-states affects the way things unfold and, conversely, how cultivating wholesome mind-states can have a positive influence. It doesn't take a lot of study to see that being positively disposed towards the results of our efforts brings beneficial results.

I realize that, to some, speaking this way will sound idealistic, but I am not talking about how things *should* be, but about how things are. How are we relating to reality moment by moment? Are we interested in what works, what helps, or are we merely caught in negative thinking and worry about what could happen in the future?

Thinking is something most of us are quite good at. We tend to do a lot of it. Not-thinking, on the other hand, is probably something we are not so good at and which would benefit from more attention. If talking about paying attention to not-thinking sounds contradictory, that is because so much of the time our attention is tethered to the activity of thinking. But it doesn't have to be that way. Using the various meditation techniques, we can discipline attention to untether attention from thinking. Then we are able to pay attention in a more feeling way – a feeling investigation. Investigating using concepts is powerful, but, as with technology, it has its limitations. When we develop the ability to investigate without the persistent interruption of mental verbiage, we will have access to a different quality of discernment, where discriminative intelligence and intuition can work creatively together as partners, untangling our confusion.

A TRUSTING APPROACH

This type of investigation does require a willingness to trust in our intention, in our sincere interest to discover truth. We have to get used to letting go of craving for certainty, and come to terms with what uncertainty actually feels like in the whole body-mind. The temptation to turn away from such unpleasant feelings can be strong. But if we inhibit our reactions, again using mindfulness, sense restraint and skilful reflection, it is possible that we won't have to turn away, but instead enter into a realistic relationship with what

we feel is challenging us. This approach applies to everything we encounter on this spiritual journey but here we are specifically contemplating our reactions when faced with the unknown.

If we could recall how as a child we learnt to walk, we'd probably realize we didn't think so much about it, we just did it. Later on, when we were learning to ride a bicycle, it wasn't thinking that taught us. Learning life's lessons requires a desire to succeed at them, and trust that success can be achieved. It also takes quite a bit of falling over and getting up again. But many of these tasks don't necessarily depend on thinking. Admittedly, with learning to walk and ride a bike we had the encouraging example of others who were already ably doing these things. In the case of learning to trust that we can accommodate intense fear of uncertainty, there are maybe not so many examples of mature competence around, but that doesn't mean we must assume it can't be done. In the material world there are many inspiring examples of those who have dared to go into the unknown, motivated by trust in their own convictions.

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS

Nobody likes feeling insecure; all beings want to feel safe. Where, then, should we be looking to find real security? How are we to live with an awareness of the changing nature of conditioned existence? The Buddha advises us that regardless of how daunting fear and uncertainty might appear, we should train ourselves to trust in wisdom. Wisdom is what

sees beyond the way things merely appear to be and discerns actuality. If we learn to trust that there is real wisdom, and in its transformative power, that trust can help protect us from falling into despair.

And this wisdom is more than a conceptual level of understanding. The Buddha was talking about a quality of insight that transforms the gnawing feelings of fear of insecurity into clarity and calm. With that clarity comes the ability to accord with any amount of uncertainty. The perception of uncertainty does not have to turn into feelings of insecurity. In other words, the reliable sense of security that we seek is to be found in unobstructed awareness. So long as we don't have such a quality of awareness, such a level of understanding, we will suffer from expecting life to be something which it is not and never can be.

In the early 1970's the wife of the former US ambassador to Thailand was a frequent visitor to a temple in Bangkok where His Majesty the King of Thailand had spent time as a monk. She was a dedicated disciple of the abbot there, Venerable Somdet Nyanasamvara, and regularly came to listen to his Dhamma teachings. One day she spoke with the abbot about the uninspiring state of so many of the monasteries which she had seen. How could it be, she wondered, that when the Dhamma is so beautiful and so precious, there are so many unkempt monasteries, and, for that matter so many unruly monks? Many of the monasteries had crumbling buildings and were noisy and virtually overrun with

dogs suffering from mange. The venerable abbot listened attentively to what she had to say and then quietly replied,

While it is true the Dhamma is timeless and precious, the institutions and structures of Buddhism are subject to the law of impermanence, as are all compounded things.'

That was wisdom speaking. The abbot was not saying we shouldn't try to do something about the dysfunctional state of institutional Buddhism, but was placing emphasis on the fundamental right view upon which all other considerations need to be based.

When we don't have enough clarity and calm, we easily fall prey to misperceiving that which is in front of us. We attempt to find security within that which is insecure. We try to find stability within that which is unstable. On one occasion early in my monastic training, when I was caught up even more than usual in doubt and despair, I went to see Ajahn Chah, hoping he might help relieve me of my misery. He kindly listened to my worries and then commented:

All these worries and doubts that you have are about things that are uncertain. What do you think happens when you try to make something that is inherently uncertain certain? You create suffering.'

Again, that was wisdom speaking. And it definitely made a difference. When we don't have enough wisdom ourselves,

we need to borrow some wisdom from others. Not that all my suffering suddenly disappeared, but it did become more workable. It also helped enormously when Ajahn Chah spoke of some of the ordeals he had endured as he struggled to come to terms with doubt and worry. We benefit from knowing we are not alone in our struggles.

To train our whole body and mind in awareness of the experience of uncertainty is to cultivate wisdom and take responsibility for our reactions to life. If we insist on maintaining our habits of resistance and avoiding how we feel in the face of uncertainty, we perpetuate suffering. Wisdom recognizes the many tricks we get up to and the stories we tell ourselves. And it is in such recognition that letting go happens.

Dhammapada verse 277 says:

*'All conditioned things are impermanent;
when we see this with wisdom
we will tire of this life of suffering.
This is the Way to purification.'*

First, the Buddha is stating the truth of our situation as he has realized it: everything is in a state of flux. Next he tells us what we need to do about it: to train our faculties until we see this truth clearly for ourselves. Then he points to the result: that we will tire of this life of suffering which we are creating for ourselves. This last point introduces a particularly important aspect of the spiritual journey. There is a positive emotion sometimes overlooked by Westerners,

called *nibbidā* in Pali, which we could translate as disenchantment. Our fondness for excitement can result in our failing to appreciate how agreeable it feels to not be excited. We are so used to being intoxicated with agitated feelings of excitement. Our failure is reinforced by all those around us who are similarly committed to being distracted by excitement. If wisdom, not the pursuit of happiness, is our priority, it helps to become familiar with this quieter, cooler mood. It can be likened to having eaten a meal until we felt full and then having more food placed in front of us. Or perhaps a cool breeze in the evening at the end of a long hot day. This coolness is something like what the Buddha says happens when we investigate impermanence and begin to see the world with wisdom. It is similar to boredom, but without the negativity.

Some might ask why we pay so much attention to these ancient teachings given 2600 years ago, when what we need to be dealing with are the challenges that we face here and now. The fact that the phases of the moon were deciphered long ago does not make them any less true today. The Buddha's insight into the truth of the impermanence of all conditioned things is as relevant now as it was when he realized it. He didn't invent the law of impermanence; he identified its importance and taught how not knowing this truth is one of the main reasons for our struggle to cope with uncertainty. It is wisdom which recognizes the law of cause and effect; wisdom sees the causes of suffering and the beneficial effects of letting go of those causes.

On this journey of awakening we can expect to encounter many struggles. When we commit ourselves to serving reality and no longer serving the world of deluded personality, we are guaranteeing an ordeal for ourselves. The views with which most of us were conditioned in our early life do not accord with actuality, and we have to work hard to be freed from those views. For example, we were taught at least implicitly if not explicitly, that we own our bodies, when in truth they belong to nature. If we really owned our bodies, we would not have them become old, sick and ugly. Likewise, we were taught that the pursuit of happiness is a genuinely worthwhile endeavour. In truth, unless we have wisdom, when we do experience happiness we cling to it and sow the seeds for further unhappiness. Very few of us were taught that what is truly worthwhile is the pursuit of wisdom; that which sees clearly the relativity of happiness and unhappiness, and knows how to accord with the changing nature of all things.

When there is wisdom, there is flexibility. In any given situation there is the ability to view what is gained and what is lost; not just one perspective. If there is wisdom, there is the ability to adjust according to what is needed, rather than simply clinging to a fixed position because it suits our preferences; wisdom knows that all preferences are relative. Wisdom produces the kind of flexibility that conduces to well-being for oneself and for others, not the kind

of flexibility which means putting our personal preferences ahead of everything else.

The Chinese meditation master Venerable Hsuan Hua had a helpful way of summarizing spiritual practice:

'We need to be able to accord with conditions without compromising principles.'

Maybe we know people who insist on holding fast to their principles, but have difficulty adapting when flexibility is called for; often it is not very comfortable to be around such people. Maybe we also know those who are quick to 'accord with conditions' but perhaps not very dependable when it comes to honouring true principles. It takes a maturity of embodied wisdom to meet all the experiences which life gives us, without having our conditioned preferences dictate how we respond.

So the solution to the predicament in which we find ourselves, of having to cope with an ever accelerating rate of change, is not to be found in judging our struggles or despairing over them, but in becoming interested in the actual causes of our struggles. And this means having the awareness to see just where, when and how we resist reality.

WHAT IF WE STILL CAN'T COPE?

One of the advantages of living in this age of advanced technology is the access we have to teachings from the various spiritual traditions. It is not just information about the

dynamics of nano particles or expanding and contracting universes that we can access; never before have has it been so easy to obtain Dhamma books and listen to Dhamma talks.

However, what if we find that all these wise words are not enough? What do we do if after listening to many hours of talks, and sitting for many hours, weeks or months in meditation, we still find we are struggling to cope with feelings of anxiety and fear? Is it truly the case that this set of spiritual exercises we have inherited is enough to free us from suffering?

In an incident recorded in the traditional Buddhist scriptures,¹⁸ the Buddha saw that the mind of a certain villager was ripe for understanding Dhamma, so he travelled to where the villager was living to teach him. When he arrived at the village, he saw that this young man was tired and hungry from the hard physical work he had been doing. Before offering him teachings, the Buddha had the local elders make sure the man was properly fed. After having eaten and then listened to the Buddha's teachings, this man awakened to Dhamma. Later on, when a group of monks were discussing what had just happened, the Buddha explained to them that feelings of hunger can hinder somebody's potential for awakening. Most of us don't suffer the pain of physical hunger, but many of us do suffer from a sort of mental hunger. If our fundamental psychological needs have not been adequately met, we can suffer a terrible inner sense of lack which can similarly be an obstacle on the path.

Recently a young monk from Thailand stayed with us for a few days. His grasp of the English language was just about good enough to engage in conversation. One day, with a somewhat perplexed expression on his face, he told us that he had been speaking with a female guest about what led her to visit the monastery. She had told him that she was looking for happiness. The monk seemed genuinely puzzled as to why she felt she had to go somewhere and do something special to find happiness. From what he told us about his personal experience, it seemed that whenever he had difficulties, he would just sit down and stop doing whatever he had been doing, until he had comfortably reconnected with an inner stillness which was consistently associated with feeling happy. Presumably he thought everybody could do that; he said that he had never had to go anywhere or do anything special to find happiness. Happiness had always been there whenever he stopped being busy doing things.

I wonder how many of us find this to be the case. Do we live our lives confidently, knowing that however chaotic and uncertain things might appear, we can always just sit down and wait for a few minutes until self-existent happiness re-emerges, and then be bathed in well-being? It is more likely that we have spent years struggling with self-criticism over our hyper-active minds which refuse to settle; over feelings of low self-esteem; over compulsive worry and doubt. What must it be like to have a nervous system equipped with a sense that the possibility of refreshing and renewing is always available? Compare that with a nervous system which rarely refreshes, but instead stores up stress and an ever-increasing sense of pending doom.

On the outside we humans are all more or less the same; we are born, grown old, fall sick and die. But how we view life and how we process experience are not the same.

A fifteen-year-old computer operating a dial-up modem does not have the same processing power as a brand new computer connected to fibre-optic broadband. They might look somewhat similar, but their inner functioning is very different. The process of conditioning that many of us have gone through in our culture has led to ego structures shaped very differently from that of the young Thai monk. When we stop being busy with what we have been doing outwardly, we are very likely to encounter inner currents of busy-ness. We should therefore expect that as we learn to navigate the path of freedom from suffering, there will be times when we need to adapt some of the practices we have inherited.

HANDLING OLD PAIN

The mental pain which some people have to endure can be even worse than physical torment. We should consider carefully whether the spiritual techniques that we pick up are in fact designed to address disruptive mental turmoil. We wouldn't, for instance, encourage someone to go and see a dietician if we knew that they were recovering from a broken leg and what they needed was physiotherapy. When the Buddha taught about overcoming the Five Hindrances,¹⁴ I don't think he was referring to dealing with an intensely painful memory of abuse suffered as a child; I suspect he was alluding to a rather more refined level of enquiry. So what

do we do if we are overwhelmed by old pain that we unearth in our practice?

In many meditation centres there is a culture which encourages not needing anybody or anything other than a passionate commitment to the meditation technique. I remember a notice nailed to a tree at Ajahn Chah's monastery that stated: Eat little, Sleep little, Speak little. However, I know Ajahn Chah also told overly idealistic Westerners that they should eat more. And there can definitely be times in practice when we should sleep more. And sometimes what is needed is to speak more. Desperately clinging to principles and not being able to 'accord with conditions' is not the way. The way is what really works. If what is needed is to speak with someone with the skills to help us make sense of our confusion, then what we should do is speak.

What I am referring to here is meditators using psychotherapy. Not so many years ago, the mention of the word 'psychotherapy' in the context of a Buddhist meditation centre or monastery was almost heretical. I have heard the opposite was also true: mention within some psychotherapeutic circles of Buddhist teachings on selflessness (*anatta*) was completely taboo. These days it seems that both parties are a bit better informed of how different skills and practices are designed to serve different purposes. A good enough sense of self-confidence is necessary to be able to find our way around in this world, and psychotherapy can be helpful in establishing that good enough level of confidence. But a conventional sense of confidence and happiness does not

mean we will have calm and equanimity when it comes to handling strong feelings of insecurity, or, for that matter, the inevitability of our own death. That takes wisdom, or a transcendent level of understanding. This is where the tools and techniques preserved within the wisdom traditions are most helpful.

Returning to our question about what to do if we come across old pain that is so intense that we find ourselves really struggling to cope: the first thing to check is whether our commitment to observing moral precepts is in order. Are we living in ways that accord with integrity and will give rise to self-respect? If our conduct of body and speech is appropriate, we then need to check whether we are getting enough physical exercise. Sometimes vigorous physical activity can help us deal with strong emotions. Fear and anger in particular can send hormones racing around our bodies, and if we are sitting all day, these chemicals can turn toxic. Exercising until we feel tired can be very grounding.

Then there is the matter of what we eat and drink. Being too idealistic and not getting enough of the right kind of nourishment can exhaust our nervous system to the point where we won't have the stamina to deal with the onslaught of strong emotions. Also, eating too much food, especially sugar, can lead to imbalances that mean we can't accurately read where our energy is coming from: is it authentic or synthetic? Are our eating habits skilfully considered or do we use food as a distraction?

If after checking that we are doing what we can on the physical level, we are still struggling to come to terms with inner chaos, the next thing to do is ask for help. The ability to ask for help at the time it is needed is tremendously important. There is a sizeable body of work comparing male and female suicide rates. Surely it is not insignificant that the rate of male suicide is so much higher than that of females.¹⁹ And surely the fact that many men seem to find it difficult to ask for help must be a factor. How much of that tendency in men is nature and how much is nurture is an ongoing debate, but the fact remains that the inability to ask for help when it is needed is definitely a disadvantage.

Not everyone knows the feeling of needing, or even wanting, help. There are some who experience memories of intense pain, but find they can resolve them without the specific support of others. But there are others who may never reach resolution unless they have help. What matters is not allowing fixed views about whether we should or shouldn't need help to get in the way.

Sometimes I am asked by meditators how to approach a therapist. My recommendation is first to find out if the therapist's life has a spiritual foundation. It need not necessarily be the same tradition as the meditator's. What matters is that the therapist knows deeply that they are accountable to a higher authority. Therapists who don't have confidence in a reality beyond their own personality are dangerously vulnerable to ego inflation. Most of the world's major religions offer their followers reminders that their egos are not the

centre of existence. In so doing they provide them with a degree of protection against becoming completely identified as the ego. This aspect of the relationship with a therapist also applies to that stage in the therapy when the client reaches a new quality of contentment and ease. Welcome as this new-found happiness may well be, it is important to remember this is still at the level of personality and not to become intoxicated by the sense of relief, forgetting the commitment to the spiritual journey. This can happen, but the risk is better managed when the therapist and client share an appreciation for the spiritual dimension of life.

Secondly, it is essential for the client and the therapist to respect each other, and that this respect generates an atmosphere of trust. Possibly the quality of the relationship is even more important than whether the therapist comes from a behavioural, cognitive, humanistic or any other psychotherapeutic tradition. From what I have observed, it is the relationship that precipitates the healing. Of course, I am not suggesting that all schools of psychotherapy are the same; they are not. Some will specialize in dealing with difficulties arising from trauma suffered at an early stage of development, while others are better equipped to address issues that arise from trauma that occurred at a later stage.

Then there is the question of whether to use talking therapy or touch therapy. By touch therapy I am referring to such disciplines as craniosacral therapy, the Alexander Technique or Shiatsu. This might be a case of trial and error. We discussed earlier in this contemplation how to bring discriminative

intelligence and intuition together to untangle our confusion, and this could be an opportunity to experiment. Just as a cook knows if the food has the right amount of salt by tasting it, a meditator determines whether the work with the therapist is beneficial or not by feeling the consequence in the whole body-mind.

Meditators who decide to engage a therapist to support them on their journey do well to remind themselves regularly that they are allowed to be asking for this support. They are not letting down the team. Unfortunately, shaming still occurs in some communities. Some people are simply not adequately informed about the various skilful means needed to deal with obstructions on the path. Hence it is wise to choose carefully those with whom we might discuss these matters.

And it is always wise to remember that it is OK not to know. If we knew how to stop suffering, we would stop it immediately. Our practice is founded on faith in true principles and the skilful effort to accord with the changing conditions in which we live.

When Ajahn Chah died in 1992, we set up a special shrine here in the Dhamma Hall to mark his passing and to honour his life. At the centre of that shrine was a portrait of our teacher, lit by a standard lamp which was left turned on all day and all night. After the traditional seven-day period of remembrance, a large gathering met in the hall to reflect on his life and express gratitude for the many gifts he had given us. During that service I read a translation of one of his

talks called *Not Sure*.²⁰ The quote at the beginning of this chapter is an extract from that teaching. I came to the words,

Any speech which ignores uncertainty is not the speech of a sage.

Then the light bulb in the standard lamp blew out. I am not suggesting that we should read too much into that occurrence, but we would be wise to note how uncertainty and impermanence are constantly being revealed to us.

Earlier I referred to approaching life's challenges from the disposition of a strategic optimist. Another way of talking about strategic optimism is being hopeful. Hopefulness is a form of creative vigilance. When hope is absent we are prone to feeling hopeless, which in turn can lead to depression and despair. If we are hopeful without being mindful, we are easily tricked into having unrealistic expectations of life. But if we can maintain a positive attitude and at the same time embrace uncertainty, we will be protected from collapsing into despair. Hope, mindfulness and an interest in what is real, support the cultivation of the wisdom which sees the way through confusion.

I hope this contemplation has been helpful.

Thank you very much for your attention.

6.

AN APPARENTLY UNENDING ORDEAL

*Just as a sweet-smelling and beautiful lotus
can grow from a pile of discarded waste,
the radiance of a true disciple of the Buddha
outshines dark shadows cast by ignorance.*

DHAMMAPADA v. 58-59

Of the images that this Dhammapada verse offers us, which do we find the more attractive: the pile of discarded waste and the shadows cast by ignorance, or the sweet-smelling and beautiful lotus, and the radiant disciple of the Buddha? Surely we all prefer the fragrant flower and the radiant disciple. Similarly, when we consider our Dhamma practice, it is natural that we prefer to imagine ourselves progressing along the path – increasing in integrity, kindness and understanding. Such images can be uplifting, and so long as we don't hold them too tightly, they support our effort in practice.

However, at some stage we are bound to start feeling as if we have stopped making progress. It is also very likely that there

will be stages when we feel thoroughly obstructed. And it is good if when they come, we are properly prepared, so we don't mistake what we are dealing with. What appears from one perspective as 'a pile of discarded waste' could on closer inspection turn out to be valuable compost. What appears from one perspective to be an obstruction, might be seen from another perspective as an essential element of the journey.

ENCOUNTERING THE UNEXPECTED

Much has been written about aspirants on the spiritual path struggling as they navigate through 'dark nights of the soul'. Perhaps we find the subject matter makes fascinating reading. Some of you might be familiar with a talk by our teacher Ajahn Chah,²² in which he describes spending an entire night all alone in a charnel ground, doing battle with his inner demons, and then in the morning, drenched by the falling rain, leaning against a tree with tears streaming down his face.

When we find that we are the ones crying tears, the matter will no longer appear fascinating, but more likely heartbreaking. When Ajahn Chah told us,

*'... if your practice has not taken you to the point of tears at least three times, you haven't been practising properly.'*²³

He wasn't trying to put us off. He wanted us to be properly prepared, so that when we encounter our own personal piles of discarded waste we will be sufficiently equipped to deal with the situation. By the time Ajahn Chah was subjected to the ordeal in the charnel ground he was well prepared, and as a result reached a new level of profound insight.

In the case of the Buddha-to-be, when he sat under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya on that full-moon night of May and determined to remain seated there until he had fully awakened from all ignorance, he was ready for what he was undertaking. Later he spoke in detail about the years he had spent learning from the best spiritual teachers available. Those years of austerity took a great toll on his body; eventually he decided to renounce some of his ascetic practices because they were not helping him progress towards awakening. Giving up these practices caused his five companions on the spiritual journey to abandon him, thinking that their friend had betrayed their shared quest for liberation. But the Buddha hadn't betrayed anything; he had just stopped listening to what other people told him he should be doing. Instead he turned for guidance to trusting in his own well-disciplined commitment to being free.

It is important that we understand how much work the Buddha had put into preparing himself before he reached this stage. During the night that followed his resolve to stay seated until he had reached the goal,²⁶ he was assailed by many threatening distractions: concerns about his social responsibilities and what he had left behind when

he renounced the home-life, tempting sensual impressions, onslaughts of powerful and frightening images. But absolutely none of them caused his resolve to waver, because he was ready.

When we are not truly ready, noble aspirations will not be enough to sustain us. If our resolve has not been tested and tempered in the fires of determination, renunciation and patience, there is a risk that we will waver at just the point where resolute steadiness is required. By wavering or wobbling, I mean we end up believing in such thoughts as *'This really is too much'*; *'Perhaps I should take a break for a while'*; or *'Maybe I need a friend to keep me company'*. Even if such thoughts did arise in the mind of the Buddha-to-be under the Bodhi tree, or Ajahn Chah in the charnel ground, they quickly disappeared because they were seen for what they were – beguiling distractions getting in the way of pursuit of the goal.

If our attention wavers at the wrong moment, we can inadvertently create serious suffering for ourselves. It only takes a brief moment of clinging to the thought, *'This suffering is never going to end'* to create the utterly convincing impression of eternal hell. In truth, no state which has arisen lasts forever. All conditions arise and pass away. But merely holding to a belief in such an appealing Buddhist maxim is not enough to protect us from our habits of indulging. The truth of such teachings as the law of impermanence needs to have sunk into our bones before we will really be ready to withstand the rigours of the journey.

DISILLUSIONMENT AS A TURNING POINT

Speaking in this manner about struggles which we might meet on the way can sound very daunting. But they need only be daunting if we are not properly prepared. If we have done the groundwork, feeling threatened by, for example, strong feelings of disillusionment, only serves to strengthen and deepen practice.

Ajahn Amaro has helpfully spoken about a stage in his practice when he endured a drawn-out and particularly painful period of disillusionment. This wasn't just a passing unpleasant mood, but a powerful, challenging assault on the sense of commitment with which he had grown familiar, lasting for several months. This ordeal came to a head one day just as he had been invited to perform the fortnightly recitation of the *Pāṭimokkha* rule. Most monks, even if they are in a confident, comfortable space, find that this forty to fifty minute recitation in the Pali language calls for a considerable focus of attention. For Ajahn Amaro it was no small feat to get through the recitation while fending off thoughts about what a farce the whole thing was – all this rigmarole, all this jabbering on in nonsensical syllables. As is characteristic of Ajahn Amaro, to all outward appearances he performed the task impeccably, and nobody was any the wiser as to what was happening inwardly.

He relates how shortly after this incident he had a very revealing dream, in which he found himself tearing off his own fingers one by one, chewing on them and swallowing them. What was particularly noticeable was how flavourless and

bland they tasted. As he registered this fact, when only the thumb and forefinger of his left hand remained, an inner voice in the dream called out, 'STOP! What are you doing?! You are destroying the very things most useful to you.' So he stopped. And there was an acute awareness that what he was actually doing was indeed destroying what was most useful, most valuable to him. That was when he woke from the dream. The rather shocking message which came through, loud and clear, was that seeing life solely from the perspective of his preferences, from the perspective of '*What's in this for me?*' was totally self-indulgent and destructive of anything which was truly worthy. This message wasn't an analysis of the dream, it was a spontaneous realization:

'This is what is happening. This is what you are doing by indulging in your negative, self-centred, disillusioned attitude.'

What he experienced at that point felt like his heart turning 180 degrees; he said that if he was to put what he felt at that moment into words, they would be,

'If all I ever do over the next 10,000 lifetimes is generate benefit for one other person, that will be truly worthwhile and the time will not have been wasted.'

The experience Ajahn Amaro went through was indeed threatening and did feel risky, but what mattered was that

he was adequately prepared. He lived through the experience with sufficient awareness to hear the message which he needed to hear: living life from the view of '*What's in this for me?*' destroys all that is truly good and valuable.

Such experiences are never going to appear attractive, but then again, they do not have to be overly intimidating. If you want to improve your game of chess, you don't pick a partner whom you know you can beat; you pick someone you think might be better than you. Always shying away from threatening situations, too afraid to take risks, means we don't learn. Think of how rock climbers feel when they are about to let go of the safe foothold on which they have been depending and reach out for the next foothold. The situation must feel risky, but if they want to keep progressing with the climb, taking risks is necessary. The question is whether or not it is a wise risk to take.

DEFINITELY NOT READY

As I recall, my own introduction to the Buddha's teachings was by reading a book called *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts. The simplicity and practicality of the teachings struck me as extraordinary. At last I had found a spiritual path that revealed its meaning by way of experience, not mere speculation. Shortly afterwards I attended my first Buddhist meditation retreat, during which for the first time in this life I experienced the exhilaration of a tranquil mind – what a joy, what a relief. I was twenty-two at the time, and probably imagined my life would never again revert to the confusion

and unhappiness to which I had become used. Within a year I was living as a monk in a wooden hut on the banks of the Mekong River, with Ajahn Thate as my teacher. A brief but inspiring period of clarity which emerged around that time introduced me to an altogether new perspective on experience; it felt like a precious gift. Forty years on, I still feel tremendous gratitude.

What I hadn't foreseen were the years that lay ahead, during which I would be obliged to endure indescribable hell. Within a few weeks of that period of exceptional clarity, my love for Buddhism had turned into a visceral loathing. It reached the point where I felt that if I saw another Buddha image I would throw up. On top of that I was racked with guilt and confusion for feeling that way. It wasn't that the relevance of that period of clarity disappeared, but it definitely became clouded. That alone intensified the confusion.

'How is this even possible?' How could awareness manifest as so pristine and then appear so polluted? How was it possible to experience such a sense of freedom and aliveness, and then feel utterly condemned and unworthy? Not only were there times when I felt guilty just for being alive; there were even occasions when I felt guilty for things that others had done, things that were nothing to do with me. In a way it was fortunate that nobody really seemed to notice how disoriented I was. An American psychologist who was interested in doing MMPI tests²⁵ on new monks visited one day and I felt sure he would notice; but he just performed his tests and went away.

Most definitely I was not prepared for such a turn of events, and I made many mistakes as I struggled to get a handle on it all. It took several years before I was able to even begin to speak about the extent of the upheaval. These days, when I sometimes talk with the young monks about how excruciatingly painful most of the first ten years of my monastic training were, I suspect they think I am exaggerating, but I am not.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that it has to be that hard for everybody. I was perhaps a particularly slow learner. But what we should assume is that there will be periods when the path becomes very unclear and unpredictable, and it is sensible to prepare ourselves for those periods.

INTEGRATION OR DISINTEGRATION

At times when we feel threatened by what we encounter in our practice, the thought may arise, *‘Is this process I’m going through integration or disintegration?’* I have pondered this question many times. In fact we can’t be sure, and at least in part, this is why we need to reflect regularly on the teachings on uncertainty – *aniccam*. From the level of apparent reality it can look as if our difficulties are never going to end, but we shouldn’t believe that; we don’t know it is true. As with rock-climbing, taking the next step might feel risky, but we can exercise caution before we act; it is not wise to blindly assume and barge ahead without careful consideration.

An image that comes to my mind is that of inheriting a large, well-appointed and ideally located house, only to discover

that it is full of asbestos. How do we approach this situation? In the case of the chaos I had to endure in those early years, with hindsight I came to see the extent of unacknowledged guilt which I had stored away in my body-mind, before I took up meditation. Resolutely and, as it turns out, naively, throwing myself into the spiritual exercises effectively brought that denied material into conscious awareness. As with sorting out issues involved in dealing with asbestos, considerable care is needed in the way that we deal with something like denied guilt.

Guilt is a toxic cocktail of hatred and fear. Many people are programmed when they are still young to believe that God throws sinners into hell, which is a hateful act but one that we are told is appropriate; so in an (unconscious) attempt to feel righteous, we try to imitate God and indulge in (self-)hatred. At the same time, we are terrified of being cast out and rejected because of the mistakes we have made. And this is for eternity! If at some stage we decide that such a story is insane, we might learn to dismiss it. However, dismissing such conditioning is not the same as transforming and letting it go. Rejected or denied emotional reactions simply disappear into unawareness, where they seethe and fester. By the time they resurface they have often become complex and distorted, and very difficult to understand. Trying hard to understand is not always going to help. In fact, it can be like pulling a tangled knot tighter.

I am not a therapist, but what I do find helpful these days is to have a checklist to go through and see where effort might

usefully be made. Referring back to the asbestos example, just ripping out the toxic insulation, pulling up the poisoned tiles, stripping paint and removing roofing materials without the appropriate safety gear is extremely dangerous (and probably illegal). In coming to terms with toxic psychological materials too, we likewise need to be careful. These days, if anyone were to ask me how they should deal with overwhelming feelings or a sense of emotional obstruction in their practice, I would probably share my checklist with them: Precepts, Exercise, Food, Support – (P.E.F.S).

PRECEPTS

Whatever form our commitment to training in precepts might take, we can always work on our relationship to the principle behind the precepts – impeccability. Thinking too much about the actual rules, what we should and shouldn't be doing, can obscure the spirit of the training. If we are dedicated to serving reality, we need to feel beyond the forms to the principle encoded within the rules. One of the benefits of training in impeccability is that we come to feel towards ourselves as we would towards a dear friend. We respect ourselves and value our own company. That alone is a good reason for upgrading our commitment to training in the precepts. And there are many other benefits.

EXERCISE

How much exercise we should do will depend to some degree on our age and mobility. But as with precepts, there is

bound to be room for improvement; in other words exercise is always something we can turn to. When we feel caught and obstructed by a mood or some mental preoccupation, it helps to already have something simple and practical in place that we can just go and do. Without hurting ourselves, exercising to the point where we forget about the stories we have been telling ourselves, and give ourselves fully into something physical, can be particularly skilful – exercise until we are physically tired. It seems many of us feel resistance to doing exercises, so focusing too much on that resistance is not a good idea. It might be a better idea to register how we feel once we have done our exercises.

FOOD

The subject of food is a tricky one. When it comes to discussing this subject, it seems that we do tend to attach to views about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is not. Even within the various schools of Buddhism, for instance, arguments sometimes take place over vegetarianism.

Nothing in the Theravada scriptures obliges the Buddha's followers to be vegetarian. In fact, there are records of a major dispute caused by the schismatic Devadatta involving this subject, when the Buddha refused to make vegetarianism a requirement. What he actually thought on the matter is difficult to tell, but the fact that he didn't make a clear statement in favour of vegetarianism suggests at the very least that we should be cautious about being too dogmatic.

With reference to whether monks and nuns should accept offerings of meat, he drew the line at whether they were kammically implicated in killing the animal. If the monk or nun neither saw, nor suspected, nor encouraged the killing of an animal, and the food was simply offered as an act of generosity, he said it could be accepted. Personally, having visited an abattoir, and with the impressions of the sounds and smells and the effect all that killing has on the people who work there etched in my mind, I prefer not to be associated with the industry. And, in my observation, there is a greater likelihood we will feel compassionate towards beings when we know we are not complicit in killing them. For health reasons also I find a plant-based diet more agreeable.

As to how our approach towards food affects our ability to practise, again I think it is a case of trial and error. Attaching blindly to views about what we eat obscures the sensitivity we need in order to identify the way we are affected by how and what we eat. Being judgemental is an expression of our clinging to views. If we suspect we are eating too much or eating the wrong foods, and we don't have the compulsive judging mind adequately under control, it is very difficult to honestly feel the effects of eating and make appropriate adjustments; self-deprecating storytelling overrides everything else. We need to remember that kindness and gentleness are essential when it comes to adjusting our eating habits.

SUPPORT

Kindness and gentleness are also central to the matter of how we might go about seeking support. I have mentioned elsewhere how regrettably prevalent in some spiritual circles is the view that we shouldn't have to ask for help, that applying oneself to the meditation technique ought to be enough.

When I think about what benefitted me most during my early years of monastic training, living with several great teachers, of course I recall their wise words and the profound sense of presence they emanated, but possibly even more beneficial was their warm-heartedness. If it had just been their wise words and profundity, I am not sure I would have stayed. When we feel we are in need of help, it matters that we know we are allowed to ask for it. After my first Rains Retreat with Ajahn Thate, when my inner worlds were all turned upside-down, I spent some time in hospital in Bangkok having various physical symptoms checked out. I am glad that once I was out of hospital and returned to Wat Bovoranives where I had originally been ordained, I didn't hide my need for support from the abbot, Somdet Nyanasamvara.

As a very senior monk in a city monastery he spent much of his day dealing with ecclesiastic duties. But despite this, out of kindness, he invited me to join him each evening in his private meditation room upstairs in his kuti. Usually I would arrive before he did. Regularly, when he came in and had offered incense and bowed to the shrine, he would lean back against the wall for a time. Understandably he appeared

very tired. Then after a few minutes, once it seemed he had been refreshed, he would shuffle forward, assuming an upright posture and settle into formal meditation. Usually when I left he was still sitting there. It wasn't what he said to me that helped as we sat together in that small shrine-room. It was the kindness he expressed by inviting me to be there with him.

This is not at all to suggest that kindness and good intentions alone are enough to bring about a return to balance in the heart and mind of someone suffering from significant imbalance. For some a friendly chat with a trustworthy companion could be enough; however, others may need long-term support from those professionally trained in the field. But to repeat again, it is wise to seek out somebody who you know respects your spiritual endeavours; also that the healing begins when you can acknowledge your need for support and are willing and able to ask for it.

WHEN NOTHING WORKS ANY MORE

My P.E.F.S. checklist obviously doesn't address everything that might possibly appear as an obstruction on the path; it is an approximation. What matters is that we don't succumb to being overwhelmed by feelings of hopelessness. We probably set out on this journey with a mixture of motivations, some wholesome, others less so. When we take the Buddha's medicine we don't know what to expect. Healing will look completely different for one person from healing for another. In the time of the Buddha, the Venerables Moggallāna and

Sāriputta had completely different experiences as they travelled the path to liberation. One was characterized by happiness and speedy progress (*sukha pattipatti vimutti*) and the other by suffering and more gradual progress (*dukkha pattipatti vimutti*). One person's path might emphasize subtle states of concentration and another's involve more contemplation. However, each of us will be called to cultivate the skilful means needed to deal with the challenges that we face.

Since many of us bring complex patterns of denied life into this spiritual practice, significant resourcefulness is needed to translate these complexities into clarity. The hints and suggestions I have tried to provide in this contemplation should not be viewed as instructions; they are just that – hints and suggestions. There could still be times when it seems as if nothing works, when nothing we do frees us from feeling obstructed by our pile of discarded waste. What do we do then? We wait. Maybe we go through the P.E.F.S. checklist, but nothing there makes any sense. Nevertheless, we keep waiting.

Often the denied life that we have pushed down into unawareness is addressed by only one thing – patient endurance. It can take hours, days, months, even years of burning until we experience a moment of actual awareness of a feeling, for instance, such as remorse. Previously the backlog of denied guilt meant that whenever a wholesome and suitable moment of remorse arose, with the function of teaching us to be more careful in future, we couldn't recognize it. The

old denied feelings of guilt were triggered and obscured those wholesome feelings of remorse.

Some turn to using drugs to block out all feelings, in an attempt to cope with the agony that such conditioning produces. It is more skilful to resolve that we are going to make use of all the apparently useless waste matter that we encounter and turn it into something truly worthy. Often we will feel alone in our efforts, but let's not misinterpret those feelings.

HEEDING THE BUDDHA'S EXAMPLE

*Few are those who reach the beyond.
Most pace endlessly back and forth,
not daring to risk the journey.*

I appreciate how this Dhammapada verse 85 so unapologetically speaks of aloneness. Our society generally assumes that there is something wrong with being alone. But notice how the Buddha was alone under the Bodhi tree. Ajahn Chah was alone in the charnel ground. Ajahn Amaro probably felt alone in his state of disillusionment. And they all realized considerable benefit in the process. We don't have to equate aloneness with loneliness. Even if we do go through periods of loneliness, as is perhaps inevitable before we reach real aloneness, there is no need to define that as wrong. If we do, we create the perception that there is a problem which we then have to solve; in reality there is no problem. Becoming comfortable with our *actual* aloneness is part of freeing

awareness from obstructions. The verse also points out that it takes daring to embark on this journey. But being daring doesn't make us heroes. It is just that we chose to live this way because it makes sense to us.

From what we have been contemplating here, let's register how important it is that everyone who takes this journey needs to heed the advice and example of the Buddha before making too many wild resolutions. Careful preparation is essential. If we do find ourselves caught in thinking that the ordeal which we are enduring is never going to end, perhaps more groundwork is needed. If we are patient enough, hopefully we will remember that some ordeals really do feel like those long, dark winter nights; they really can appear to go on forever, but in reality they always pass. Eventually winter always turns into spring.

Thank you very much for your attention.

7.

DIE BEFORE YOU DIE

It is in Dhamma that we trust, in the truth beyond the way things merely appear to be. This is why we can afford to surrender and die out of our rigid old habits of self-promoting.

As part of the BBC Everyman Open University series, in 1977 a television team visited Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's main monastery. The programme they eventually produced was called *The Mindful Way*.²⁷ When this programme was broadcast in Britain in 1978, an elderly Englishwoman from the Quaker tradition happened to see it. She was so moved by what she saw that she promptly boarded a plane and went out to Thailand to spend time in the company of this inspiring Buddhist monk. At the end of her stay at Wat Pah Pong, she went to see Ajahn Chah at his kuti, and asked that her tape recorder be switched on and placed in front of him. The American nun who was accompanying her as a translator explained that this visitor from England wanted a recording of Ajahn Chah's voice to take back as a memento. Ajahn Chah took the opportunity to do more than just say 'Goodbye and have a safe journey'; he offered a succinct and profound summary of spiritual practice within

the Theravada Buddhist tradition. This short talk has since been translated and printed under the title *Living With The Cobra*.²⁴ At the end of this talk, but not translated in the printed version, Ajahn Chah says,

'Make sure that you arrive at true understanding before you die. Don't go and die before you understand these teachings. Make sure you die before you die; don't die first!'

For somebody who is not familiar with the language used by those on the journey of spiritual awakening, such a comment could sound confusing. But most of us, I assume, have some sense of that to which Ajahn Chah was referring. We have all probably at least heard of the expression 'ego-death', and understand it to refer to something altogether different from the death of the physical body. But I wonder whether we all have the same understanding of what this expression 'ego-death', or 'die before you die', actually implies.

Regrettably it is not unusual for many to interpret Buddhist teachings as saying we should be trying to get rid of our egos, our personalities. However, if we look a little deeper and think more carefully about it, to attempt to function in this world without a sense of being an individual, differentiated from the activity taking place around us, is futile. Somebody in such a condition would require a lot of help from others, and probably be on medication. To survive we need a sense of individual identity; and with that the sense of individual

responsibility. We need an ego. What we don't need is a deluded ego.

We need to be making an effort to be free from the delusion within our deluded ego; that is what needs to die off, not the ego itself. It is from the state of unawareness that the personality needs to awaken; we shouldn't be wasting time trying to get rid of a personality. There is nothing in the Dhamma teachings that tells us we should feel ashamed about having a personality. Feeling embarrassed about having a personality is like looking in a mirror and feeling guilty when we see a reflection of ourselves. The problem with personality only arises because we believe that the reflection we see in the mirror is who and what we really are. I've often mentioned the example of looking in a mirror to see how to apply cream to a wound on our forehead, but instead of putting cream on our forehead we apply it to the mirror. That is the activity of the deluded ego, the unawakened personality. If we want to cease from suffering, what we need to do is understand precisely where and how the problem arises: it comes from believing that we are the reflection of ourselves and losing a conscious connection with who or what we already truly are.

ASKING QUESTIONS IN THE RIGHT WAY

For most of us, at some stage in life, we find such questions arising as, *Who am I?*; *What is the point of life?*; *Isn't there more than this?* If we are not adequately educated in spiritual matters, such questions can lead to a lot of frustration, even despair. In fact, these are the most natural and

most appropriate questions to be asking. When we reach the point in life where we believe we *are* the mental image that we have of ourselves, we are functioning in a state of seriously diminished responsibility; we are going around drunk. And it is not the reflection's fault that we have become so confused and fundamentally unhappy; to have such a reflection is a perfectly natural functioning of mind. The cause of suffering is our misperception with regard to that functioning. So we should keep asking the question '*Who am I?*', but in a feeling way, not merely conceptually; not merely in our heads. Such an intentional, whole body-mind enquiry is an important part of the practice of freeing awareness from misidentification with the mental image, from attachment to the reflection of who we are. The experience of becoming freed from such a misidentification is a type of death. This is the type of death that Ajahn Chah was encouraging his visitor from England to go through before dying physically.

Until we have had a conscious moment of realizing that we are not the image – that the self-image has functional value, but is not in any sense ultimate – we remain vulnerable to falling prey to the many tricks that delusion offers as a solution to our suffering. Until we see accurately the beguiling force of the self-reflection, we are prone to believing the false stories which we are told, the many synthetic solutions available in the marketplace. And we are likely to continue to feel let down by life: let down, for example, because we believed a particular Guru would save us, or that the passionate pursuit of some cause would provide us with a feeling

of fulfilment, or some sense-treat was going to transform us permanently. In reality, we are never going to feel fulfilled until we stop believing in the self-image. This is why we practise the spiritual disciplines and why we seek out wise teachers: so as to be able to purify awareness from the false views to which we have hitherto been clinging.

THE FUNCTION OF A TEACHER

Maybe we like to think that we don't need a teacher and that we can sort out our suffering on our own. That might work for some, but it might also mean we just keep repeating the same mistakes over and over again. The function of a teacher is not to take responsibility for us; the Buddha was very clear that we are each responsible for our own intentional actions, our own kamma, and nobody can ever take that responsibility away. What wise teachers can do is help us to see where we turn the natural activity of life into suffering.

Another misappreciation of Buddhist teachings is the way people sometimes understand what is being said about desire. Many students of Buddhism think the teachings tell us desire is the cause of suffering, and so they set about trying to get rid of desire. If they look a little deeper and think more carefully about it, that kind of trying to get rid of desire is also an expression of desire. The problem is not desire, but a misperception of the reality of desire.

I had a monk friend who was seriously struggling over whether he should continue with his monastic training or return to lay life. So he made an appointment to see his

teacher, looking for help. When he explained to the teacher how he was suffering because he wanted to leave the robes, the teacher simply said, *If you want to leave, then leave.* To which my friend replied, *But I don't really want to leave.* So the teacher told him, *If you don't want to leave, then don't leave.* End of interview! The suffering was because this monk didn't know his own mind; he wasn't seeing desire in terms of reality and was thus ill-equipped to contemplate it properly. He was attaching to one form of desire and then to another, compulsively taking sides for and against himself; hence the suffering.

The apparently conflicting desires that we experience only cause us to suffer when we hold them too tightly. When we remember our refuge in the Buddha, our refuge in here-and-now, whole body-mind, judgement-free awareness, the myriad desires that pass through our mind need not be a problem; they are simply activity taking place in awareness, like waves upon the surface of an ocean. How fortunate when we manage to see them for what they truly are and don't *become* them. When we forget the refuge in awareness itself, we reactively take sides – one type of desire against another. But deep down inside we are not convinced by such choices, because we know that they are partial; they feel like a compromise. That is because they are a compromise. We are not truly letting go of one desire and choosing another; we are generally just picking one and pretending that the other one doesn't exist.

So long as we haven't seen the selfless nature of this movement of mind which we call desire, we will always be caught up in 'becoming' and taking sides. This is what we refer to as having preferences, and most of us are driven by them, pitting what we like against what we dislike. This habit of pitting aspects of our heart's desires against one another is the dynamic of the deluded ego, of the unawakened personality. And this is what gives rise to that familiar and perpetually discontented sense of a substantial 'me'.

For the awakened personality there is no longer any seeking security in such a state of tension. It has stopped pitting liking against disliking, or at least understands what is happening and knows there is the possibility to stop doing it. Much of the sad and sorry state of our world can be attributed to the fact that most people are totally unaware that they even have a choice in the matter. They suspect that their struggle has no end. Or else they cling to a belief in something, which in effect means they are not truly doing what they are doing; once again, they are in a state of diminished responsibility.

THERE IS AN END

What the Buddha and the awakened disciples tell us is that there is an end. Awakening from the dream of deluded ego is possible. And the shift in awareness which is perceived as awakening does not depend on how much money we have, how many countries we may have visited, or any 'special' retreat we may have sat on; it depends primarily on the quality of attention that we bring to life.

Spiritual teachers within all the major religious traditions have long been advising their followers to cultivate careful attention, because it is in heedlessness that we miss the details, we ‘mis-perceive’ reality. However, over the last four or five decades, with increased affluence and the ever-increasing influence of technology, there has been a corresponding increase in casualness.

I am old enough to remember the time before casual clothes existed; these days casual clothes are worn almost everywhere. And now there is pretty well casual everything. Of course, I am not saying there is anything particularly wrong with having casual clothes or anything wrong with affluence in general, but when awakening to reality is the goal, we need to give specific priority to training attention and learning to be careful in all that we do and say. This commitment requires giving up compulsive casualness. Even though parts of us still prefer to follow distractions, we understand that we can no longer afford that indulgence.

It is excusable that adolescents sometimes fail to manage money skilfully and make mistakes. But as adults we are quite rightly expected to live within our means. Similarly, we only have so much attention energy, and we must decide what we value most: the short-term comfort and ease that we experience when we follow our preferences, or the short-term discomfort and frustration from not following our preferences, but with the longer-term realization of a better quality of attention. If we don’t do the necessary work on

cultivating attention, even if life presents us with a precious ‘dying’ opportunity, we could well miss it.

Remember Dhammapada verse 290 –

*It is wisdom
that enables letting go
of a lesser happiness
in pursuit of a happiness
which is greater.*

By cultivating attention I mean, for example, being willing and able to rein in compulsive exuberance (understanding that willingness and ability are not the same thing), and having the skill to steady and focus attention, without our body-mind awareness collapsing into a state of contraction. Such skills make all the difference in those moments when we are challenged by the various forms of intensity. With mature, well-developed attention, there is a possibility that when under pressure, awareness will expand to accommodate and say ‘yes’ to all the energy that is manifesting, and in so doing harness it in the service of transformation, rather than merely following a conditioned impulse to reject, say ‘no’ and be born again into a state of limited being.

DYING IN PUBLIC

Some years ago a visitor to one of our monasteries told the abbot that he had come ‘looking for a death experience’. It seems that on an earlier visit something had happened, some

interaction had taken place, whereby he experienced the rug being pulled from underneath him, so to speak, and he 'died' in that moment. He had found the experience so beneficial to his practice that he was interested in experiencing it again. To some degree at least this person must have done the work of cultivating attention, otherwise those moments of 'dying' would not have been something he would have wanted repeated.

Those of you who have been coming to our monasteries over the years might be familiar with the occasions when junior sangha members are invited to ascend the Dhamma Seat (*tamart*) and give a formal Dhamma talk. Most often these occasions occur at the end of the Rains Retreat; the regular friends of the monastery enjoy seeing how the monks and nuns they have been supporting are developing in their training. For the junior monks and nuns themselves, this is regularly a case of learning how to 'die' in full public view.

I still recall being invited to give a talk on such an occasion when I was a very junior monk at Wat Nanachat. My grasp of the Thai language was abysmal, my mood was far from positive, the Dhamma Hall was packed to overflowing with faithful laity, and Ajahn Chah was visiting. Shortly after I started speaking, people were disinterestedly lying down, some were walking out, others were turning off their tape recorders. My 'dying' that night on the *tamart* was not very graceful. But if awakening is the priority, we will find a way of turning what might otherwise have felt traumatic into something beneficial.

Not too long after that painful experience, I was relieved when I read in a book from a different spiritual tradition of something similar happening when a young monk was first told that it was time for him to start speaking in public. As I recall, this fellow didn't sleep the whole night beforehand; he was petrified. If you ask most public speakers, or for that matter any public performer, many of them will be able to tell you about occasions of their 'dying' in public. On this path of deep letting go, the skill lies in learning from these experiences – our own and that of others.

NOT LIKE ICARUS

The Greek myth involving Icarus is a great illustration of what can happen when we don't listen to the advice of those who know more than we do. As the story goes, the skilled craftsman Daedalus was imprisoned with his son, and hatched a plan for them to escape. This plan involved flying out of the prison using wings which Daedalus had crafted out of wax and feathers. The wise elder advised his son that once they took flight he must be extremely careful to not fly too low and risk getting the wings damp from the ocean, nor fly too high and risk the wax being melted by the sun; he had to resolutely follow a middle path.

However, the sensation of defying the limitations of being land-bound meant Icarus became intoxicated with pleasure, to the point where he forgot the wise words of his father; he kept flying higher and higher towards the sun, with the tragic consequence that his wings did indeed melt, and he

plummeted to his death. Hubris, the condition of being intoxicated with an inflated perception of our own ability, is the natural consequence of not being prepared to handle intensity. Whether it is fear, sadness, awe, or bliss, if we are really ready to 'die' in terms of letting go of attachments to the mental images that we hold of ourselves, such intense emotions are a gift; if we are not ready, our 'dying' can turn into disaster.

DYING OVER AND OVER AGAIN

Even if you are ready to heed the counsel of those more mature in practice than yourself, and even if you have experienced powerful moments of 'dying' and letting go of the self-image, let's not imagine that is the end of anything. If you find you are able to abide in a state of unobstructed awareness, appreciating the utterly natural and yet extraordinarily special sense of ease which comes with it, don't mistake that for anything more than the beginning of a new stage of practice. It is wise to train yourself to get used to the process of 'dying' over and over again out of the habits of misidentification; being willing to spend the rest of your life integrating insights into other dimensions of human activity.

On the occasion which I mentioned earlier of Ajahn Chah recording a short talk for the elderly visitor from England, it happened that I was with him at his kuti. Besides the simplicity and profundity of his Dhamma teachings, what was also remarkable was the quality of attention which Ajahn Chah consistently offered to his guests. Even now, when listening

to that old and scratchy analogue recording, the warmth and caring in Ajahn Chah's voice are clearly discernible. Each year on January 16th when we meet in our Dhamma Hall here at Harnham to recollect our teacher's passing, we play the recording of that talk. The quality of his concern and caring for the person with whom he was speaking shines through. Ajahn Chah was not someone who after awakening disappeared into a cave and absorbed into a detached state of bliss. His life was a consistent, all-encompassing expression of what wisdom and compassion looked like in everyday life. In many ways and on many occasions, he showed us the manner in which awakened awareness expresses itself. From his example we could see that awakening offers more than just the activity of a mind transformed and ready access to mental clarity. The ability to rest in vast empty awareness is one thing, but great blessings can arise from integrating those insights into the emotional and relational dimensions of life.

It would be understandable to assume that insight on one level of our being will be automatically transposed to all aspects of who and what we are, but perhaps we should question such an assumption. If our initial approach to practice came with feelings of being chronically obstructed at an emotional or relational level, it could require deliberate and determined effort to bring transformed awareness into those areas. Perhaps you have encountered somebody who is visibly able spiritually, who can sit silently for hours in a state of contentment, who can deliver inspiring discourses

on emptiness and liberation, but becomes decidedly less contented if they ever receive criticism. Or perhaps we have witnessed something similar within ourselves. We can learn from this that it is worth investing some of our carefully cultivated attention into the task of integration. Whenever we find ourselves in a situation where our confidence feels challenged and the strength we would normally draw from practice feels threatened, that means we are approaching another 'death' experience, another opportunity to bring insight into the rest of our life.

I often mention to Western meditators the story from the Old Testament which tells of how the Israelites spent forty years in the desert on their journey to the promised land. When I was starting out in practice, the thought of spending forty years struggling certainly didn't appeal. These days, when I consider the process of learning to truly embody the insights we had early on in practice, forty years feels about right. Or perhaps we should be preparing ourselves for forty lifetimes. Recently I referred to a significant insight Ajahn Amaro had, and how he found himself thinking in terms of 10,000 lifetimes. What matters is that we resolve never to give up, whatever happens, however vast the desert might appear.

TRUST AND INTEGRATION

If you have had the good fortune to spend time in the company of someone who is profoundly awake and at the same time thoroughly integrated as a human being, you will know

how attractive that can be; possibly one of the most attractive things anybody could ever encounter. Since we find that so attractive, why is it sometimes so difficult to do what they did; why is it so hard to let go of that which is not real? One of the main reasons might be the backlog of distrust that we have accumulated. To let go on any level requires a trusting attitude. To let go deeply requires an even greater degree of trust.

Many of us, especially in our early life, instead of learning that life is good, that we are fundamentally good, and that we can afford to relax and trust that things will generally be OK, learnt that we are inherently damaged goods, the world is full of threats, and to trust is dangerous – somebody is always waiting to take advantage of us. On top of that, materialism has undermined any intuitions we might have had that there are aspects of existence which we don't understand, that there are universal laws which determine the quality of our life and that to have faith in true principles is wise, not naive. In other words, we have been taught habitual distrust.

It takes a lot of energy – physical, emotional, relational – to be always on the lookout for danger, so much that by our mid-twenties we could well have developed an unconscious tendency to deny these conditioned feelings of distrust. As the years go by, in unawareness, we build up a backlog of denied distrust, repressed doubt. When fear and doubt are denied for long enough, they become distorted and begin to leak out as crazy thoughts and feelings. Alternatively, perhaps we become numb. We find that we are simply unable to

open to life and appreciate the mystery and the magnificence of existence. Becoming numb and insensitive is a normal reaction to having denied feelings of doubt and distrust.

If we apply ourselves to a path of spiritual training, and are energetic in our efforts, sooner or later we will encounter obstructions which leave us no option but to trust: trust in the teachings; trust that freedom is truly possible; trust in ourselves. However, instead of feeling buoyed up by the power of intentional trusting, we could find ourselves overwhelmed by our backlog of doubt, by an irrational and suffocating degree of distrust.

Often our brothers and sisters on this journey from traditional Buddhist backgrounds have difficulty understanding this type of struggle, just as we might have trouble understanding when many of them struggle over their fear of ghosts. Materialistically minded Westerners would think such fear is only for children and even laugh at the idea of adults being afraid of ghosts. But when our enthusiastic commitment to the Buddha's path of awakening is thwarted by obsessive self-doubt and anxiety we are definitely not laughing about it. So we shouldn't automatically expect traditional Buddhists, including our teachers, to always understand what self-doubt, self-disparagement, self-criticism are about. Their self structures are often very different from ours. This means we must be ready to experiment with skilful means to address these distorted expressions of our heart energy.

It is a great pity if we simply believe these distorted appearances. And it is good fortune if we already have a conceptual framework of how these disfigurements might have come about. If we can appreciate that a backlog of denied doubt easily manifests as something twisted and threatening, and that what is called for is great kindness, gentleness, patience and a good friend with whom we can speak openly, there is a better chance that we won't add to them with more worry and doubt. If we were conditioned in our early life to an absence of clear affirmations of our ability to learn to trust skilfully in life, it is perfectly predictable that we find ourselves having to deal with such potent and unreasonable obstructions.

A room may have been completely dark for many hundreds, even thousands of years, yet that darkness can be totally transformed by a single small tungsten filament. That minuscule filament might *appear* insignificant compared to the vast darkness, yet when an electric current passes through it, the darkness disappears.

Apparent reality looks very convincing to a mind obscured by unawareness. But let's not forget that we would never have ventured out on this journey if in our heart we didn't already trust in reality. It is trust that brought us to the beginning of this journey, and there will be times when it is to trust that we turn for support. Don't be deterred if our connection with a trusting heart at times appears inaccessible. That tungsten filament might not appear to have the potential to transform the darkness, but remember it is

the current running through that filament which transforms. It is in reality, that we trust, in the truth which *is*, beyond the way things appear to be. This is why we can afford to surrender our stubborn resistance, why we can die out of our old rigid habits of self-promoting, and grow in a willingness to serve reality.

Thank you very much for your attention.

8.

WISE SURRENDER

*The Buddha's perfection is complete
there is no more work to be done.
No measure is there for his wisdom;
no limits are there to be found.
In what way could he be distracted
from truth?*

DHAMMAPADA v. 179

From the time of his full and final Enlightenment onwards, for the Buddha there was no more work to be done. As we read in the Dhammapada verse above, after Awakening, the Buddha's perfection was complete; his consciousness knew no limitations. The heart of the Buddha was irreversibly free, his mind imperturbably clear.

Given the extraordinary ordeal that he had gone through to reach such a state of unconditioned freedom, it would be understandable if he had retreated to a place of solitude and spent the remainder of his days in restful tranquillity. The force of compassion however, meant that he spent the rest of his life serving those still lost in the unawakened state, serving those still suffering. If we consider wisdom as the substance of Awakening, then compassion is its warmth and radiance.

In an earlier talk I asked where might we look to find strength and support as we progress on this journey of life. We are all well aware of the precious wisdom teachings of the Buddha; we would be wise to attend also to the strength and protection that comes with cultivating a heart of compassion. And we don't have to wait until we are fully and finally awakened to cultivate it.

THE FOUR DIVINE ABIDINGS

When we feel caught in life's struggles, if we are not careful, our mind readily turns to blaming as a strategy for coping. The Buddha specifically recommended that anyone interested in progressing on the spiritual journey should work on developing what he referred to as the Four Divine Abidings, the *Brahmavihāras*. These are potentials we have within us and they protect us from falling into such debilitating states as blaming. These Divine Abidings are states which, when activated, can energize and uplift us: Loving-kindness (*Metta*), Compassion (*Karuṇa*), Sympathetic Joy (*Mudita*) and Equanimity (*Upekkha*). They have the power to generate immediate benefit for ourselves and also provide real benefit for others. Blaming is only what we do when we are not aware that there are other more effective ways of addressing life's struggles.

For many years I believed that my feelings of insecurity were caused by my growing up in Morrinsville, a small country town in an area of drained swampland in the north island of New Zealand. At other times I blamed Protestantism, or

the problems that my parents seemed to have had, or the education system that I went through. Thankfully, eventually, I found out that I wasn't the only one who was feeling insecure, and it wasn't just the fault of where I grew up. To varying degrees everybody is feeling insecure. Everybody suffers, and almost everybody is trying to run away from their suffering. Almost everybody is pretending that they are not afraid.

Fortunately, I also eventually discovered that certain individuals have learned to stop running away; instead they have realized the power and protection afforded by these radiant potentials that the Buddha identified. With the recognition of these forces they discovered that they had the strength to turn attention around and look directly at any such suffering as fear of failure, fear of being unloved, fear of inadequacy, and awakened to that Reality which is inherently secure. They discovered that purified awareness has the potential to receive all experience, that unobstructed receptivity *is* love. They realized that the way beyond suffering is to cease all running away and to receive life, in its agreeableness and disagreeableness; to love that which they hated, and to abide at ease with the truth which is always, already here.

LOVING-KINDNESS

Loving-kindness, or *metta*, could be considered as a conscious well-wishing. In the discourse known as the *Karaniya Metta Sutta*, the Buddha holds up the image of a mother with her only child as a theme on which we can reflect as

we develop this heartfelt quality of selfless caring. So long as we don't truly know that we have this ability to care, we can remain caught in feelings of always needing to be cared for.

Children, quite rightly, have a sense of needing to be cared for. As we grow up we need to recognize that as good as it can feel to be cared for, we also have access to a form of strength which comes from the conscious awareness of being able to radiate caring: being able to *give* kindness. Unawareness of this ability is one reason for our feeling weak and overwhelmed by life. We will always be at risk of being overwhelmed if we are excessively concerned with looking to be loved. Rather wonderfully, once we discover that we can be the source of loving-kindness then reality seems to reciprocate and we find ourselves receiving more of it.

Exercising this ability to *be* loving, to *be* caring, can strengthen us and equip us with a perception of being held, in the sense of being supported. It can also manifest as a sense of being protected. That which we are protected from is actually the danger of our own self-obsession – taking ourselves too seriously. As an exercise, try imagining the difference between being surrounded by those who are indulging in self-referencing, demanding our attention and always talking about what is happening in their lives, compared to being in the company of those who are demonstrably concerned with the well-being of others. Almost certainly we will feel more safe and at ease in the company of the latter.

COMPASSION

We can think of compassion, or *karuṇa*, as empathy felt in the context of pain, expressing itself with the thought,

‘May all beings be free from suffering.’

When we are feeling empathy with beings who are in pain, it is essential that we appreciate the possibility of selflessness which can come from compassion. The thought, *May all beings be free from suffering*, gives direction to our attention, which sensitively observes the way our whole body-mind is responding. Suffering, like cold, can tend to cause us to become tense and constrict our breathing, contracting into a state of obstructed sensitivity. If we are not properly prepared with an ability to remain soft in our bodies, open hearted and alert in the face of suffering, we can find our sensitivity compromised; in place of wishing to help those in need we find our hearts becoming closed and unavailable. When that happens, attention can tend to concentrate in our heads and we start thinking about what we can do to remedy the situation, no longer radiating warm-hearted, compassionate concern.

An instructor in Mindfulness Meditation once asked me to help him with his teaching skills. He explained how although he had the required qualifications to teach the technique, he often felt hindered by fear and worry over whether he was a good enough teacher. I listened carefully to what he was saying and suggested that at the beginning of each

class, instead of diving directly into instructing his students on how to be mindful, he might begin with checking to see that his own heart was imbued with feelings of compassion. I asked him to consider how when we are lost in ideas of having to be successful as a teacher we generate a perception of 'me' needing to impress 'them'. And when we are in such a divided state of 'me' and 'them', a lot of our attention energy can be consumed by heedlessly judging; in the process we risk losing the connection with the people sitting right there in front of us. When a teacher is caught in ideas of having to be successful, he or she will automatically feel afraid and worried, and the students less likely to learn anything. What a contemplation on compassion can do is dissolve, or at least de-emphasize that sense of dividedness and being chronically caught in judging.

We are all struggling and we are all interested in finding ways out of these struggles; it's just that some ways work better than others. When we have a compassionate perspective we are in touch with the possibility of not being so afraid of each other, and, accordingly, not feeling so separate. When we lose touch with a compassionate perspective we easily revert to deluded ideas, resulting in our struggling with anxiety. The students attending those mindfulness classes were almost certainly there because of feelings of dissatisfaction; they were interested in finding a way out. Both teacher and students were experiencing suffering. When we have an awareness of our shared predicament a lot of worries and fears naturally fall away and our attention is freed up to more accurately attend to the interaction in which we are engaged.

It is important that we can see how much stress is caused, just by living with a rigid perception of separation; feeling divided in the outer world – ‘me’ and ‘them’, ‘me’ and ‘nature’ – and divided in our inner worlds – ‘me’ and ‘all that I want and all that I don’t want’. We can be blindly perpetrating an endless struggle.

We each have our own variation on the theme of feeling fundamentally divided. Certainly there have been many occasions over the years when I have found myself sitting in front of a gathering of eager Dhamma practitioners and wondering if I was capable of offering them anything useful. What helped in those situations was reminding myself that those Dhamma students were there because each in their own way was suffering, and I was suffering because I was afraid of failing them. At other times when I have felt threatened or uncomfortable in a public situation – perhaps waiting in an airport or being on a train – what helped dissolve the stress that comes with feeling deeply divided, was not necessarily trying to make myself feel positive about something, but imagining all the tears that had flowed down the faces of those people whom I perceived as threatening; remembering that we all share this predicament of being vulnerable to the pain of rejection, loss, disappointment, despair, and that we are all struggling to be free.

When we are not aware that we are holding perceptions that create these feelings of being divided, our actions of body and speech are defined by those perceptions. We could live our whole lives locked into a sense of separation, feeling

frustrated, irritated and disappointed with life – once again, our struggle to cope with those feelings often manifesting as blaming. Such feelings are not a problem with life. They are something ‘extra’ that we add to life. There is another option, and that is training our hearts and minds with a new perspective on suffering; stop making suffering into an enemy. We can intentionally choose to do the work of beginning each day, each meditation sitting, each conversation, by establishing a compassionate perspective – with a conscious appreciation that all beings suffer and are longing to be free.

SYMPATHETIC JOY

We can consider sympathetic joy, or *mudita*, as empathy in the context of witnessing the well-being of others. If the feeling being referred to here is not immediately obvious then try imagining its opposite, envy. Most of us will be able to imagine the unpleasant state of mind and the feelings associated with resenting the success or good fortune of another. The thought that we dwell on in developing this selfless quality of sympathetic joy is,

‘May all beings not be parted from their good fortune.’

As with the other Divine Abidings, the encouragement is to let this thought give direction to our feeling investigation; sensing inwards for ways of sustaining open-heartedness, or at least being present for the consequences of becoming caught in habitual reactions of rigidity and insensitivity.

Without sympathetic joy there is a risk of being somewhat selfish in our kindness and compassion. In other words our attempts to develop the Divine Abidings can be tainted. To learn to consciously take delight in the well-being of others, gives our hearts a degree of protection. Also it can moderate the risk of becoming demanding with our well-wishing. How, for instance, do we react when, despite our enthusiastic efforts to develop loving-kindness and compassion, beings don't respond in the way that we hoped; when beings insist on acting in ways that increase suffering for themselves and others. Sadly our world has ample examples of this. The strength that comes with activated sympathetic joy can help, but also we need the next of the Four Divine Abidings, equanimity.

EQUANIMITY

Some of you will be familiar with the term compassion fatigue. This is what happens when our heart is exposed to more suffering than it is ready for. If the beautiful and nourishing qualities of loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy are not balanced with the cool-headed clarity of equanimity, we are susceptible to burnout. Equanimity, or *upekkha*, can helpfully be understood as being established with a clear sense of boundaries. It is not, as is sometimes thought, cold-hearted indifference.

Remembering that words are always only an approximation, equanimity seems to come closest to the quality to which the Buddha was pointing when he included it alongside the

other three Divine Abidings. To cultivate this ability we are encouraged to dwell on such thoughts as:

*I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma,
born according to my kamma, related to my
kamma, will abide and be supported by my
kamma.*

And further:

*All beings are the owners of their kamma, heir to
their kamma, born according to their kamma,
related to their kamma, will abide and be
supported by their kamma.*

The strength and protection we receive by establishing our hearts in equanimity arises out of not overstepping the boundary that defines that which is our responsibility and that which is not. Too much concern for others can mean we fall into feeling responsible for the choices that others make. The Buddha pointed out that we alone are responsible for the intentional actions which we perform by way of body, speech and mind. Nobody, not even the Buddha himself, can take responsibility for us.

And trusting in this law of kamma does not mean adhering to a belief system that says we deserve everything that happens to us. Sometimes things that happen are just an accident. At other times things happen simply because of the interplay of the elements of earth, air, fire and water.

‘Deserving’ only comes into it if we think in such terms. If somebody spent too much time in the sun and became sunburnt, we don’t have to say they deserved to get sunburnt. We can view it that way, but we could also look at it as an expression of the selfless law of cause and effect. Cultivating confidence in the law of kamma is similar to learning to trust in cause and effect: if we engage unwholesome intentions then we can expect there to be painful results; if we follow wholesome impulses we can trust there will be beneficial effects. It helps to think of kamma as simply the natural order of things.

Equanimity comes at the end of this list of the Four Divine Abidings. It also appears last in the teachings known as the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, and again at the end on the list of the Ten Forces for Transformation, or the Ten *Paramī*. Perhaps, as is sometimes said, this is because equanimity is so difficult to develop. However, many of the truly worthwhile things in life are difficult to develop. Patience is never fun yet it is necessary; forgiveness doesn’t always come easy. And possibly in the case of cultivating equanimity, it is because it requires renunciation which calls for a unique type of effort.

That which must be renounced before true equanimity is activated, is our identification with the movement of mind we call desire, it means letting go of our habits of clinging. In the development of loving-kindness, compassion and sympathetic joy, we can still be caught up in a sense of ‘me’ and ‘my way’ – ‘me’ really wanting beings to be well. As we develop equanimity we grow in an awareness of where and

when we overstep and spoil the otherwise good effort that we are making. On seeing how we are actively *doing* the clinging, we realize we have the ability to stop doing it. Letting go happens. Surrender happens. Resistance to the suffering that is the natural consequence of our clinging, falls away.

RIGHT KIND OF SURRENDER

There was an occasion when Ajahn Chah was sitting with a group of his senior disciples and he asked the question,

*Have any of you surrendered yet?**

One way of understanding the kind of surrendering to which Ajahn Chah was referring is the letting go of the denial of the suffering of life; surrendering of our habitual resistance; dying out of our uninspected commitment to *my* way, and realizing the selfless ability to accord with *the* way; the way things actually are. In other words he was asking if any of his disciples were unshakably established in Dhamma.

As attractive as the realization of such a selfless ability might sound, we have to remember that we can't make it happen. We can't *do* the letting go. Initial moments of letting go that we experience in the beginning of practice might appear as the result of personal efforts, but the deeper and more significant moments of letting go just happen when the whole body-mind is ready. If we made the mistake of trying to wilfully force such moments of letting go when we are not

*Thai: *Yohm leiw ler yung?*

truly ready, we would almost certainly regret it. And letting go, even if it did occur, wouldn't be real in any case.

So although we can't *do* deep moments of letting go, we can prepare ourselves for them, we can make ourselves ready. We can cultivate a susceptibility to letting go: just as we might build a trellis so the runner beans that we have planted will grow up it and not riotously spread throughout the rest of the garden; or as we would dig adequate drains so as to channel rainwater away from a house that we have built, and not wait until it becomes flooded. In cultivating the Four Divine Abidings we prepare ourselves so as to be ready to receive the suffering of life and be transformed by it, not overwhelmed by it and not fooled by it.

If we were to consider that 50% of the practice of developing the Divine Abidings is learning to stop thinking that suffering is a sign of failure, then the remaining 50% would be cultivating the whole body-mind wishing that beings be well, wishing beings be free from suffering, wishing beings not lose the good fortune that they have, and remembering that which is actually our responsibility. Again, even though at times we might find that this spiritual journey can be challenging, let's remember that the Buddha also found it challenging, and he didn't have a teacher. We have the benefit of the way being pointed out to us, of being shown where to look to find answers and where to find the strength that we need to carry on.

Thank you very much for your attention.

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AJAHN MUNINDO was first accepted into the *bhikkhu* sangha under the Venerable Somdet Nyanasamvaro in 1974 and then later under the Venerable Ajahn Chah in 1975. He came to the UK after approximately five years in training monasteries in Thailand. After an initial period at Cittaviveka Monastery in West Sussex, he moved to Devon where he led the community in establishing the Devon Vihara. In 1991 he became senior incumbent at Aruna Ratanagiri.

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