

Sanity

in the Midst of
Uncertainty

AJAHN MUNINDO

Buddhist contemplations on: dealing with an ever-accelerating rate of **change**, how to develop a sense of **confidence**, maintaining an **exercise** routine, **diet**, use of **psychotherapy**, ways to **survive** even when we feel like we can't cope anymore, and **other things....**

Sanity in the Midst of Uncertainty
by Ajahn Munindo

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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,^[1] 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 chose 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.'* [2]

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.

WISDOM CULTURE

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,^[3] 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,^[4] 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.[5] 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*. [6] 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.

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AJAHN MUNINDO was first accepted into the *bhikkhu* sangha under the Venerable Somdet Nyanasamvaro in 1975 and then later under the Venerable Ajahn Chah in 1976. He came to the UK after approximately five years in training monasteries in Thailand. After an initial period at Cit-taviveka 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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