



# Alert to the Needs of the Journey

AJAHN MUNINDO



*Alert to the needs of the journey,  
those on the path of awareness,  
like swans, glide on,  
leaving behind their former resting places.*

*Dhammapada 91*



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by Ajahn Munindo

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## INTRODUCTION

The eight chapters of this small book follow a similar theme to that of *Unexpected Freedom*, published in 2005. The second chapter in that book was titled ‘We Are All Translators’, and was aimed especially at encouraging readers to discern the relevance of the Buddhist teachings as they moved from East to West. The Buddha didn’t want his followers to merely believe in him. And he didn’t teach simply so that scholars might argue over what he said. He was clear in his invitation for all those interested in truth to take the teachings inwards and learn to see for themselves that path which leads to freedom from suffering. The contemplations shared here in *Alert To The Needs Of The Journey* are similarly offered to encourage anyone interested in following in the direction pointed out by the Buddha – and to keep looking until they discover a confidence which translates naturally into selflessly wise and compassionate action.

The contents of this book are not transcribed talks per se, they are more adaptations of talks. The original talks were given in the Dhamma Hall at Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery as part of the regular Sunday evening puja. Most were delivered during the Winter Retreat of 2017 to a gathering of the resident monastic sangha and members of the visiting lay community.

Many friends and supporters have assisted in preparing this material for publication. I am most grateful to them all.

For audio versions of the talks from which this material was sourced please visit:

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

Ajahn Munindo

Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery,  
Great Britain, November 2017





# 1. KEEP MOVING ON

*Alert to the needs of the journey,  
those on the path of awareness,  
like swans, glide on,  
leaving behind their former resting places.*

Let us consider together this short teaching from the Buddha.

When we begin on this journey we are all seeking, in some form or another, an increased sense of freedom. Maybe we were motivated by an altruistic vision of living with greater compassion. Or perhaps it was the clarity and detail of the Buddha's analysis of the human mind that inspired us. For many it was maybe just a matter of trying to find relief from the burden of suffering. Whatever it was that brought us to the beginning of this path, we all benefit from the encouragement offered by those who have travelled ahead of us.

Here, in this Dhammapada verse 91,<sup>1</sup> the Buddha is pointing out the benefit of cultivating a willingness to keep beginning again in our practice. He doesn't want us to settle anywhere short of realizing the goal of freedom. He wants us to keep practising whatever happens.

When we start out we can't know what the journey will be like. There will be periods of gladness and possibly periods of sadness. Sometimes we will feel as if we are making progress, and at other times we might feel thoroughly stuck. At times we will feel confident, and at other times we might feel as if we are sinking in a swamp of doubt. The Buddha encourages us not to settle anywhere, but to keep letting go until the wisdom that knows the way to freedom becomes perfectly clear.

#### TRAINING TO SEE WITH INSIGHT

Fortunately for us, throughout the centuries this Theravada Buddhist tradition has maintained tried and tested teachings on the cultivation of letting go in the pursuit of wisdom. The teachers and the tradition are still readily available to offer us guidance. And there will definitely be times in our training when we need that guidance.

There is a word in the Pali language that we recite in our chanting when describing the qualities of the Buddha: *lokavidu*, which means 'one who knows the world'. 'Knowing' here refers to a direct, transformative kind of knowing. It is not the knowing with which we are generally familiar, a knowing *about* things. This path of practice is characterised not by what we learn about on it, but by the effort we make to develop a fresh, new way of seeing.

When we say *Dhammañ saranam gacchāmi*, 'I go for refuge to the Dhamma', we are saying that more than anything else we are interested in seeing the reality of the world. Here

the world is not just the outer world, but the inner worlds too, all that we create in our minds. Being a knower of the world means knowing the truth of gladness and sadness, confidence and doubt, liking and disliking – and being able to accord with this truth; being at peace with it. There is no limit to the information we can accumulate about the world, but now we are learning to see what the world looks like when we have let go of habits of clinging. We are training to see with insight.

#### NOT BELIEVING

There will be times when we feel love and gratitude towards our teachers and the tradition, and probably there will be times when we don't. I spent the early years of my monastic training, most of the period between 1976 and 1979, at Wat Pah Nanachat in NE Thailand. I recall first arriving there and feeling filled with gratitude; there was a tremendous sense of relief. At last I was somewhere I truly wanted to be. I didn't want to be anywhere else in this whole wide world, and I felt privileged to be received into that community. The monastery had only been established for a few months. To say food and accommodation were basic is an understatement, but the grass-roof huts and the modest one meal a day were just wonderful. To be in the company of the radiant and gracious Ajahn Sumedho and his fellow Western wayfarers was a source of joy and inspiration.

I can also vividly recall wondering months later what it would be like if only I could escape from this hell-hole. One

morning, as we walked on alms-round and crossed over some railway tracks, I stopped for a few moments to feel the tracks beneath my bare feet, and imagined how those railway lines went all the way to Bangkok, and how perhaps there I could be relieved from the intense misery I was having to endure. It can be difficult to release ourselves from the momentum we have generated by following the habit of believing in our moods, including both agreeable and disagreeable moods. Thankfully on that occasion in my training I didn't completely believe in what the mood was telling me, otherwise I would have given up.

Whether we love our teachers and our tradition or not, what training in insight is about is learning to let go of the way things appear to be, to stop merely believing and see that which is true. When we see accurately, we arrive at a true appreciation of whatever there is in front of us, be it our teachers, our moods or anything else. We won't have to be driven by conditioned liking and disliking, and that means we won't get stuck. All this conditioned activity of liking and disliking is what is meant by the world. Insight sees through the world, revealing its instability and the fruitlessness of our habits of clinging. Wisdom sees how the clinging creates resistance and causes suffering. The warm-hearted expression of such wisdom is compassion.

#### BECOMING STUCK

The Buddha doesn't want us to settle too soon, but to keep moving on until we arrive at real wisdom and compassion.

It is because of unawareness regarding the truth of our preferences – our liking and disliking – that our view of the world is distorted. Having preferences is not wrong per se; it is the way we have them which makes the difference. The untrained mind is regularly fooled by the way things appear to be. The Awakened Ones are never fooled, hence they never suffer.

Before his enlightenment the Buddha-to-be was also lost in liking and disliking, he too was fooled by the way the world appeared to be and suffered accordingly. When he felt happy he believed ‘I am happy’. When he felt sad, he believed ‘I am sad’. But eventually, growing tired of the mediocrity of such an existence, he set out in search of a solution. He trained his inner spiritual faculties to the point where eventually he could see beyond all the conditioned activity of mind, beyond the ‘world’, to what he referred to as the unconditioned. From that point onward he knew directly that whatever conditions arose in his mind, they were simply passing through. Nothing could get stuck. He was fully freed and fully available to bring benefit into the world.

The Awakened Ones view all existence according to what is real. Unawakened beings see according to what we project onto the world by way of our preferences. Every time we attach to something, we become stuck there for a while. If we are training rightly, we gradually learn to recognize sooner what we are doing. If we want to measure our progress in practice, it should be in terms of how long it

takes us to remember that we are doing the clinging, we are doing the suffering; it is not something external that is happening to us. Whether gross or refined, the same principle applies.

#### THE DISCOURSE ON THE HEARTWOOD

One reason for emphasizing the importance of establishing practice on the principle of beginning again, over and over, is because the temptation to settle, to get stuck, can arise at any stage. We don't only need to be careful about our coarse fluctuating moods. It is also possible to become stuck in refined levels of concentration.

My first meditation teacher in Thailand, Ajahn That<sup>2</sup> was very adept at abiding in highly refined states of samādhi. He relates how he spent ten years stuck in unproductive states of tranquillity. It took the penetrative insight and helpful support of Ajahn Mun to guide him away from his fondness for samādhi and, by establishing his meditation in body contemplation, to proceed towards awakening.

Some of you will be familiar with the discourse by the Buddha known as the *Mahā-sāropama Sutta*,<sup>3</sup> the Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood. In this teaching the Buddha likens someone setting out in pursuit of awakening to someone going in search of heartwood, the most valuable portion of a tree. Initially spiritual aspirants trust that reaching the goal is possible and are energized into making an effort. However, quite quickly they find that just being on the spiritual journey means they gain increased respect;

their status in society rises, and they decide this level of increased well-being is good enough and cease making efforts. The Buddha likens this to someone setting out in search of the heartwood but settling for a bunch of twigs. In other words, if we find ourselves feeling pleased with the praise we receive, for having impressed a few friends with our spiritual efforts, that is not the place to get comfortable.

The discourse goes on by likening the aspirant who settles for the level of elevated ease and contentment which comes with upgraded integrity to someone settling for a portion of the outer bark of a tree. Then the seeker who grows comfortable with the increased well-being which comes with concentration and tranquillity is likened to someone going away with a portion of the inner bark. Resting at the level of initial insight is likened to the seeker becoming contented with a portion of the sapwood. It is not until full awakening is reached that the Buddha says the seeker has arrived at the heartwood.

#### BEGINNING AGAIN

At any stage of practice we can be fooled into believing that ‘this is good enough’ and abandon making efforts. We manage the risk of this happening in advance by cultivating the wholesome habit of willingly beginning again. This doesn’t mean we never rest or pause to delight in the increased sense of freedom which comes from letting go. Certainly, taking all the time we need to regularly refresh and renew our body and mind is skilful – so long as a pause doesn’t

turn into a fixed position. The pleasure that comes with receiving praise and popularity, for instance, can be intoxicating. Or perhaps the more subtle pleasure that comes from samādhi could tempt you to settle. Maybe you feel it's time to start sharing your wisdom and compassion with the world, and set up your own YouTube channel. But if you feel it is 'my' wisdom and compassion, it would definitely be better to 'keep moving on, leaving behind former resting places'.

And it is not only our own increased ability that might distract us from the path; we could become blinded by somebody else's aura. There are many teachers around looking for disciples, and if they catch us in their spotlight we can lose perspective. Allowing ourselves to become overly impressed by stories about the magic powers and super-abilities of others, however noble they are, does not necessarily bring benefit. As the Buddha advised in the *Mahā-Maṅgala Sutta*,<sup>4</sup> we can learn from 'association with the wise', but if we are truly learning, we will keep letting go.

#### CLUMSY BEGINNINGS

Our ability to keep moving on is not always going to feel comfortable. We won't automatically start out with an ability to glide on smoothly. Especially early on, our excessive enthusiasm can cause our efforts to be somewhat clumsy. When I was living under Ajahn Chah, there was an occasion when I was called upon to translate for a newly arrived novice. This eager young man wanted Ajahn Chah's advice

on how he should set up his practice during the approaching Rains Retreat (*vassa*). He explained that he was determined to practise really hard and intended to take on several of the ascetic practices (*dhutaṅga vatta*).<sup>5</sup> He listed all the various practices he was aiming at adopting. Ajahn Chah listened until I had finished translating, and then advised, ‘What I recommend you should do is determine to keep practising regardless of what happens. No need to do anything special.’

On another occasion Ajahn Chah most helpfully instructed, ‘There is absolutely nothing to be afraid of, so long as you are not caught up in desire.’ Wanting to make progress can feel normal. Longing for understanding can seem perfectly appropriate. But if we haven’t really studied closely the actuality of desire, apparently virtuous motivations might in fact be fixed positions. It takes some subtlety to see the truth of the matter, beyond the way wanting appears to be. If it is true that we are not caught up in desire, there will be no fear. If we are still concerned about having special experiences, perhaps it is because we are being fooled by the ‘apparent’ nature of desire.

The truth of desire is that it is a movement in the mind. It is not who we are, though we readily make a sense of self out of it. We feel happy and think we ‘are’ good when wholesome desires pass through the mind, or we feel guilty and believe we ‘are’ bad when there are unwholesome desires. On closer inspection, these desires can be seen simply as activity taking place. These movements only define who we are when we decide that is so.

## INCREASED HONESTY

Rather than special practices which tempt us to look for special results, it is increased honesty which is more likely to prevent us from settling too soon. Whenever we become attached, we get stuck. It might be attachment to our teachers, to the tradition, to techniques or to the results of practice. But wherever and whenever we cling, we are in effect betraying our aspiration for freedom; in a way we are lying to ourselves. Conversely, every time we make the effort to see through the stories that our mind tells us, to see beyond conditioned liking and disliking, we grow in honesty. Incremental increases in honesty are a more reliable measure of the value of our effort than whether or not we are having special experiences.

Our teachers, the tradition, the techniques, are all approximations. They are like maps to which, if we are wise, we will learn to relate. Fixating on the map, no matter how impressive it might be, is missing the point. If we are walking in the Swiss Alps and focus on the stunning precision and detail of the map, we could fail to see the ice beneath our feet and slip, seriously hurting ourselves. The map won't necessarily show us where the ice is, or if there is an angry mountain goat about to attack and knock us over a cliff.

If we are being honest with ourselves, we admit to the part we play in creating the suffering in our lives. We admit that we are the ones doing the clinging; it is not happening to us. We acknowledge that although all beings experience pain,

suffering is something extra that we add to it. The Buddha and all the realized beings experienced pain, but they didn't suffer. Every time we allow awareness to constrict around an activity of mind, we impose the perception of being limited; that is, we suffer. We are responsible for this. When we are busy looking for results in practice, we risk not seeing what it is that we are doing and then believing that if we are suffering it is someone else's fault. Likewise, if we attach too much value to books we have read or meditation techniques, we run the risk of missing the truth which is in front of us. When we are suffering, the truth is that here and now we are imposing limitations on awareness. If we are honest we won't blame others, we won't blame the world. And we won't blame ourselves either; instead we will investigate. This image the Buddha has given of swans continually moving on, leaving behind their former resting places, helps serve the cultivation of such honest investigation.

And when we are honest, here and now, we will be careful about the risks we do take. One of life's lessons is that when we have acquired a new skill, we then need to refine that skill. It's like learning to ride a bike: in the beginning we have someone holding on behind, but eventually they let go and we can manage on our own. Even if we fall off a few times, at last we learn. Once we have a feeling for the increased ability that riding the bicycle gives us, perhaps at first we get a little carried away and even hurt ourselves, before arriving at a level of competence and safety. Hope-

fully we don't get too badly hurt, but experimenting is normal.

The spiritual journey does indeed involve daring, and we need to know that there is heedful, helpful daring, and heedless, harmful daring. If our effort in practice is smooth and constant, we can rely on our intuition to tell us whether or not daring is safe and appropriate. If we listen carefully to what our teachers share from their experience, that will help protect us from hubris. And we can trust that our commitment to keeping precepts will also protect us and indicate when it is safe to venture into territory where we don't feel familiar. If intuition is informed by modesty and is not an expression of deluded ambition, our daring is less likely to be heedless.

Our commitment to simple honesty gives us a frame of reference. We can trust that impulses to attach and become lost in ambition will show up on the radar before it is too late. On those occasions when we miss the signs and do get caught in clinging, honesty means we will own up to our part in creating the suffering that follows, which in turn means we are best placed to learn the lesson.

## ADDICTIONS

The agility which accompanies simple here-and-now honesty shows us where and when we are hanging onto false levels of security, where and when we are lying to ourselves. It can also help us prepare for the unexpected. Much of this spiritual journey involves meeting the unexpected. We

can't know how or when awareness will reveal our attachments; those places where we hold to fixed positions. And not just fixed positions, but also when we are feeding on praise or popularity, like the person setting out in search of heartwood and settling for a bunch of twigs. Our relationship to power is similar. As years pass by, don't be surprised if you discover you are not as equanimous towards power as perhaps you thought you were.

We might also have to look again at something as basic as our relationship to food. Take sugar. It took me over 40 years as a monk before I really got a handle on sugar. These days I refer to it as low-grade heroin and stay well away from it. I regret that I couldn't own up sooner to what was behind my addiction to sugar.

#### CONSISTENCY

If our effort in practice is consistent and the emphasis is on letting go rather than achieving, we will be in the optimal position to own up to attachments when it is the time to do so. Whether attachments manifest as an insensitivity to how we relate to power, or as addiction to a false source of energy like praise or sugar, or perhaps a subtle identification with some long-standing unacknowledged personal 'problem', they can all be met and let go of. And it certainly makes a difference if we have prepared ourselves in advance with a conscious willingness to keep moving on, however good or bad things might appear.

If we start out from a place of confusion and insecurity, we might feel tempted to settle for a modest degree of increased confidence. Or if we have had to work very hard in our practice, perhaps we feel tired of making an effort and want to give up. But even wanting to give up can be acknowledged and let go of. Wanting to give up doesn't mean we have to give up. When we are able to see desire as a movement in mind, this means the desire is ready to be received and released. Don't assume it defines who we are. Being able to see it is one of the fruits of practice.

Our teachers have shown us what agility looks like, and how it is possible to live without fixed positions. We are most fortunate to have the example of their lives. Regardless of how likeable or dislikeable any experience might be, our task as students of the way is to have the honesty and daring to turn the light of attention around and to face the experience, to see it for what it is, and keep moving on.

Thank you for your attention.

## 2.

## CONFIDENTLY NOT KNOWING

*"Maybe we are not yet confident about what we are trusting in, but that is perfectly fine; we are cultivating a whole new attitude towards life and that takes time."*

Somebody has asked this question, ‘What would be a good death?’ Let us contemplate this together.

When I read this question, the thought that comes to my mind is, ‘I really don’t know what a good death is’. Obviously our death and how it happens to us is significant. But I can’t say I am persuaded by the temptation to speculate about whether or not I will die well; or even what ‘well’ might mean. What I do find interesting, though, is how I can be fully present for the way my body and mind react to this question. Right now, what I know is that I don’t know; the truth that can be known at this point in time is that I am not sure how my death will unfold.

Over recent years I have had the privilege of being with a number of people as they have approached death, and have witnessed some very beautiful, peaceful passings. We all know that death doesn’t always happen like that; there are

those who struggle terribly as the end approaches. With this in mind, I could become preoccupied with concerns about how death might happen in my case. Perhaps I'll fail at it. After all these years of practice, who knows what's going to happen? But what benefit would such speculation bring?

There is another option available. We can cultivate the ability to receive such a question into a quality of awareness which is intentionally established 'here-and-now'; which includes the whole body-mind and is free from compulsive tendencies to take sides for or against whatever might be happening. When we receive such a question into this kind of awareness, something very different occurs. Usually we contract due to fear when confronted with the state of not-knowing; usually we have a distinct preference for the feeling of knowing. But if we train to confidently tolerate the perception of not-knowing, such a question becomes a precious teacher. It can show us how to truly let go.

If we choose the path of cultivating awareness, it will hopefully not be long before we discover that security and safety are to be found in an attitude of trusting, not in following our habitual efforts to wilfully control life. Our addictions to controlling only draw us deeper into the currents of craving. The desperate attempts to manage uncertainty never end. We're all familiar with feeling caught up in wanting to be sure, afraid of being unsure, wanting to be in charge. We know how much suffering that can generate. This teaching is an invitation to train in trusting in

awareness itself, rather than blindly following conditioned desires for certainty.

#### CURRENTS OF CRAVING

Fortunately, we have access to a tradition of teachings which focuses specifically on recognizing and then skilfully letting go of these currents of craving. At the very core of the Buddha's teachings there is an emphasis on letting go. This is not a spiritual journey aimed at accumulating; it is about release and surrender. Enthusiasm and vitality manifest along the way insofar as we open up to the utter uncertainty of existence, not to the degree our attention contracts around a set of beliefs. This is not a teaching about becoming more certain. Rather, we are reminded to come back over and over again to the feeling of uncertainty in the whole body-mind and really get to feel it, not merely replace a disagreeable feeling of uncertainty with a more agreeable but synthetic sense of certainty. At some point we have to learn to be completely OK with knowing that we don't know.

Anyone familiar with the teachings of Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Sumedho will be aware of how frequently they encourage us to cultivate conscious letting go. On the first occasion of my meeting Ajahn Sumedho, I was struck by the simple, but beautiful way in which he was able to say no to a second cup of coffee. That sounds like a small and insignificant thing, but it left a vivid and meaningful impression on me. We had enjoyed an initial cup together, and then his

attendant offered him a second cup. Somehow, he seemed able to say ‘No’ in a way that I had never witnessed before. His manner wasn’t that of a self-conscious somebody, doing something special to get somewhere, which was probably what I would have expected from those living the religious life. It was a plain and simple ‘No, thank you.’ It was new and delightful to meet someone with both a sense of humour and clear discipline. I had known people who were fun to be with but not particularly principled. And I had known those who were seriously disciplined, but certainly not much fun. Here was someone who appeared able to honour a commitment to spiritual training, but without denying life. Here was the result of wise cultivation. Later, when I met Ajahn Chah, I found that he too had both an infectious laughter and an unshakeable but completely uncompromising commitment to discipline.

Of course, saying no to a second cup of coffee is not the ultimate goal for which we strive, but if spiritual training doesn’t include all aspects of life, it is not really worth following. I will always be grateful to Ajahn Sumedho for showing me that it is possible to address these currents of craving and be able to let go in a thoroughly natural manner.

#### RELIEF AND DISORIENTATION

When we give ourselves into this training, a sense of relief may dawn as we realize that the struggle of being someone trying to get somewhere is falling away. As we learn how

to let go, as we learn how to hold our goals more skilfully, more accurately, the journey takes on a very different characteristic; the terrain through which we travel feels as if it is opening up, the air becomes more pleasant to breathe. A trusting heart is beginning to replace deluded ego's dramatic efforts to control. Maybe we are not yet confident about what we are trusting in, but that is perfectly fine; we are cultivating a whole new attitude towards life and that takes time. Entering this territory can feel exciting and invigorating. It might also feel slightly dangerous. Indeed, it is sensible to proceed with caution.

Not everybody experiences this new emerging perspective with gladness and relief. For some it brings increased confusion, possibly on many levels simultaneously. When letting go is the priority in practice, it will eventually lead to a falling away of the old familiar sense of identity which was born out of clinging to mental images of being someone who knows who they are and where they are going. We probably hoped that dropping those old identities would lead to boundless bliss and profound understanding. But for some, what emerges instead is disorientation; extreme feelings of anxiety and of being threatened. If we are not properly prepared, as these old worn-out identities start to fall away and we encounter the unknown, fear triggers a contraction of awareness. At the very moment when what is called for is a trusting attitude – opening our hearts and minds to the wonderful discovery of something new and freeing – our awareness collapses into an agonizing, even

horrifying, state of doubt. If such a collapse occurs, the task of familiarizing ourselves with conscious not-knowing takes on even greater significance.

#### SEISMIC SHIFT

For some, practice is a series of incremental episodes of letting go, leading more or less smoothly to a gradual deepening and increased clarity. For others it is more a case of surviving a totally unexpected fundamental shift in perception, a seismic sort of letting go. These people suddenly find themselves seeing in a way that they have never seen before. That can feel like being relocated to a completely new abiding which they sense to be the *context* of all experience, that in which all activity is seen as *content*. From this perspective, whatever arises and ceases is effortlessly recognized as the way reality has always been and always will be, only there is no longer the familiar relationship with a sense of ‘me’. Any sense of self, agreeable or disagreeable, is perceived simply as activity, essentially irrelevant to the seeing, to just knowing.

We are not talking here about another kind of experience, but about a shift in the relationship to all experiencing. It can appear as perfectly normal, nothing special, but also as profoundly important and utterly transformative. Such an opening might occur in the context of formal practice, or it might happen spontaneously without any apparent preparation. For some who see in this way, such an opening up persists; the clarity remains forever just so. For others,

consciousness seems to revert back into finding identity as that which is in motion: as content, as struggle. In this latter case, what remains is the memory of a powerful shift having taken place. Of course, this memory is not the same reality as what is being remembered, and it can take considerable skill to avoid conflating the two.

However, even when direct access to the pure, just-knowing mind is no longer evident, a powerful intuitive understanding of deeper dimensions of mind remains. A different quality of insight is now accessible. For example, it can make perfectly good sense that there is one kind of activity manifesting at the surface level of the mind, while at the same time another totally different activity is manifesting at a deeper level. One type of desire might be occurring at one level, while at the same time exactly the opposite desire is happening at another. From the perspective of just knowing – from the perspective of awareness itself – there need be no conflict in any of this. This insight makes it much easier to tolerate otherwise apparently contradictory states of mind. In fact, such frustration can now serve as a dynamo generating energy, not something to be viewed as an obstruction.

When we find refuge in awareness itself – and this is a sensitive feeling-awareness, not something abstract and disembodied – apparently conflicting mind-states do not have to be viewed negatively. The apparent conflict provides the fuel that takes our investigations deeper. Feeling conflicted doesn't have to equate with having problems. Ambiguities

and uncertainties can serve as an impetus to let go more deeply, encouraging us to trust more thoroughly. We only struggle when we become lost in identifying as the content of awareness. Awareness itself never struggles. And by receiving into this awareness questions which challenge us and take us to uncertainty, we can now pay attention to what intuition is telling us, instead of just being informed by superficial conditioned thinking.

Once again though, we do need to be careful. The very same fuel that has the potential to ignite insight also has the power to cause burn-out.

#### LOSING CONTROL

These Dhamma teachings that have been handed down to us are like a reservoir of understanding into which we have the good fortune to be able to tap. We live at a time when individuals who have walked the path ahead of us and can offer hints on how to train ourselves are available. If we have the patience and agility of attention to hear and heed their counsel, that can save us a lot of trouble. When I think about the appropriate attitude towards our teachers and this tradition, the word that comes to my mind is ‘reverential’.

Just because you may have touched into deep stillness, that doesn’t mean the momentum of mental and emotional habits will immediately cease and you will find yourself thoroughly transformed. It doesn’t mean you haven’t still got a lot of work to do. Remember, the deluded ego always

loves to be in control. Losing control is the last thing that any deluded ego wants. And since our addictions to delusion have previously been so well fed, the powerful currents of ‘me’ and ‘my way’ are not likely to quietly fade away just because a radically new perspective on reality has revealed itself.

#### ADDICTION TO UNDERSTANDING

These conditioned currents of craving express themselves in many different ways. For instance, if letting go has opened you up to a radically new perspective, it is very likely you will feel you just *have* to understand it. This is a good time to consider that perhaps you are being pulled into the current of craving for knowledge *about* reality. We want to ‘get it’. From the perspective of the old identity, and given the kind of conditioning to which we have been subjected, such an impulse appears perfectly justified. Following the desire to know – read that as ‘control’ – is how we have made our way through life thus far. However, from the perspective of training to trust in the just-knowing mind, in awareness itself, this needs to change.

A commitment to letting go of the craving to control means surrendering ourselves, over and again, increasingly fully, into simply knowing that which can be known here and now. And as we said at the beginning, when the truth is that we don’t know, right practice means knowing just that much, knowing that we don’t know. Let’s not attempt to push past that feeling of uncertainty just because it is uncomfortable.

It has something important to teach us. If it happens that a totally new way of perceiving reality has manifested, let's not rush to secure our old sense of self by grasping for a conceptual understanding *about* it. It is not necessary to understand 'this', even when 'this' seems profoundly new. The same principle applies when your heart has opened to something wonderful and radiant but which then passes. Once again craving to 'get it' is likely to occur; this time we are trying to get the new perspective back again. The clarity perhaps appeared so genuine and felt like the most authentic you have ever been, but now it has passed.

Allowing ourselves to be caught in desire won't help; it will only lead to more struggle. What does help is knowing what we can know, here and now. Learning how to make just the right kind of adjustments to effort in such situations requires great subtlety, sensitivity, humility and patience.

#### FINE-TUNING THE ENQUIRY

Becoming caught in old patterns of compulsively attempting to make ourselves secure with conceptual security is not the same thing as developing contemplative enquiry. We have a natural and wholesome impulse to understand, conducive to calm and deepening. If our impulse towards understanding means we are still struggling to prop up the old sense of 'me', this struggle will disturb the peace of mind that we need for investigation. Contemplative enquiry is more a matter of attuning ourselves to the reality that is in front of us; it is not struggling to 'get' something; it is more like making ourselves available.

And the types of questions that we ask in this process of fine-tuning are important, as is how we ask them. You might try preparing yourself for this level of subtle enquiry by imagining you are sitting in front of the Buddha. He has granted you an interview. You have your burning question; how would you ask it? Presumably not in a demanding way. Probably not in a casual way. You have interest, energy, perhaps tremendous energy, and of course you have respect. The way in which we approach our enquiry makes a difference.

As your practice of letting go proceeds, be prepared for surprises; including the surprise of coming across old emotional content which needs revisiting. Even after years of meditation and hours of therapy, you can still find you have emotional content that is not fully received, not yet fully let go of.

If we are in too much of a hurry to get over the apparent obstructions that we encounter, we run the risk of compounding issues. It is more useful to slow down, learn to receive these apparent ‘obstructions’ and work on a willingness to accept them as they are. Everything we encounter on this journey, both the agreeable and the disagreeable, has something to teach us. Judging what we meet as right or wrong doesn’t help. Regardless of how embarrassing or humiliating the contents of our minds might be, what is called for is an increased capacity to simply receive them all.

Just because we encounter a mind state that we haven't read about in the *suttas*, that doesn't mean it's wrong. These states are only wrong if we make them so. Mind states arise dependent on causes. However raw and unattractive the contents of our minds might be, what matters is whether we react in ways that lead to more clinging and compounding of suffering, or expand the field of awareness, accommodate the conflict and arrive at letting go.

#### DISSOLVING IDENTITY

The spiritual exercises that our teachers give us are specifically designed to dissolve the armour we have constructed around life's pain. Potentized awareness is supposed to dilute the deluding effects of personality belief. Our commitment to personality only became established in the first place as a defence against the suffering of life. Now that we have better tools to work with, we can approach life directly, with all its joys and sorrows, and give up manipulation. We can embrace suffering, welcome it, bow down to it, invite it to teach us what we need to know about reality, and then let it go.

Deep insight does have the effect of stripping away the armour, but what is revealed may not be what we expected. Radiant and uplifting though an open, trusting heart may be, the resulting increased sensitivity can leave us feeling intensely vulnerable. Perhaps we start doubting, and the question arises, 'How could so much fear follow from so much beauty? How come I feel so ungrounded?

ded and threatened after feeling so utterly, effortlessly secure?’ Hence the encouragement to prepare ourselves for not knowing, for absolutely anything: mental disruption, emotional challenges, weight loss, weight gain, relational upheaval. Perhaps we meet individuals with whom we feel we can share as we have never shared with anyone before. Or maybe we meet people we wish we had never had to meet.

Too much thinking about how the path should unfold or too much comparing of ourselves with others, just feeds resistance. Undoing this tangle of self-belief is always unique. There has only ever been one of us. But there are patterns and similarities, which is why heeding the guidance given by those ahead of us on the path is skilful.

#### SOURCE-ORIENTED PRACTICE

The mystery of how the path will unfold for each of us, including how our death occurs, is something for which we can train ourselves with conscious, intentional trusting – trusting in that which is already here behind the habits of resistance, behind the armour of personality-belief.

I have often spoken about source-oriented practice and how it contrasts with goal-oriented practice. Depending on how they have been conditioned, some individuals benefit from having a clearly articulated sense of a goal ‘out there’ to strive towards. For others this approach is a luxury they can’t afford; such an approach means they lose touch with the ‘actuality’ of this moment. For those who find a source-

oriented approach to practice makes more sense, it matters that they feel allowed to relax their hold on any ideas of a goal out there; their emphasis needs to be on expanding awareness so as to accommodate more fully, more willingly, whatever is happening, here and now.

Relaxing a hold on ideas of the goal is like relaxing your shoulders when driving a car. It doesn't mean you let go of the steering wheel or never look at the sat-nav. Source-oriented practice engages the ability to trust and receive, while goal-oriented practice will perhaps give more emphasis to doing and achieving. Generally, those of a source-oriented persuasion are less intimidated by diversity and paradox and can take practice into any situation, while goal-oriented practitioners seem to benefit from stability and predictability, and might be less comfortable with complexity.

When it comes to contemplating death, source-oriented practice means paying close attention to any impulse to control the process, not taking a position against the mind's habitual desire to control, but not indulging in it either; simply trusting in the power of the just-knowing mind. This is not grasping at a belief in the idea of trusting, or trying to convince ourselves that it is the true way. Rather, we are looking at what happens when we let go of our attempts to control and choose to intentionally trust. By way of contrast, we can study what happens when we engage the judging mind, speculating about how it should or shouldn't be. We feel our awareness contracting and release out of

it; feel in the whole body-mind, what that release feels like, and see how much more accommodating it is. We feel how the resistance, the suffering, fades. We see how intuitive intelligence becomes available in open-hearted, trusting awareness, and how it is compromised when we contract and cling. If fear happens, we study fear. Fear of failure for instance, is not failure, unless we say it is. It is simply a movement in awareness that is ready to be received. If you are able to abide *as* awareness – *as* just knowing – there need be no struggle. We don't have to struggle to get anything right or fix anything when we are not identified *as* that ‘anything’, *as* the activity.

#### BE CAREFUL WHO YOU TALK TO

Between source-oriented and goal-oriented practice, it is not that one way is right and the other wrong, but that they are different, just as people are different. And they are not mutually exclusive. Especially in the early stages of practice, we can experiment with aspects of both modes. It is useful, however, to know what works in our own case. It is useful to understand what kind of effort is needed in any given situation. It also helps to be careful whom we talk with about our practice.

Goal-oriented practitioners might consider emphasizing the cultivation of a trusting attitude as heedlessness and argue that the Buddha taught to strive on with diligence. Indeed, we all agree that the Buddha did teach striving on with diligence. But just what diligence looks like is another

matter. If a turtle tried to explain to a fish what it was like to walk along the beach, and how lovely it could be to soak up the warm sunshine before returning to the cool ocean, the fish might think the turtle had a problem, was hallucinating. Of course, in fact the fish doesn't have access to the same reality as the turtle. Each one's perception is valid, but a turtle should be careful about trying to make a fish understand the attractions of leaving the water. Somebody told me recently about conversations they read in online chat rooms, saying that Ajahn Chah didn't know how to practise and had it all wrong. Certainly those whose primary inspiration comes from reading books, reading *about* Dhamma, could get confused by what teachers like Ajahn Chah have to say about the Buddhist path.

#### PREFERENCE FOR CERTAINTY

It is not just followers of theistic religions who look for certainty in how they hold to beliefs. When fear causes a contraction of our awareness, it is probably because we are caught in desire for certainty. Hence our teachers' encouragement to contemplate uncertainty – *aniccam*. Despite all the encouragement, however, many followers of the Buddhist path still grasp at a conceptual understanding of the teachings on impermanence in order to feel secure. Or they grasp at meditation techniques, including those techniques specifically geared to lead to insight into impermanence, to try to give rise to a feeling of certainty.

Just how we relate to the teachings and the tradition is something we must get to know for ourselves. Whether our confidence in this path of practice is truly dependable or not is revealed whenever we feel challenged. Do we revert to habits of propping up the sense of being someone, doing something, to get somewhere? Or do we surrender; open, receive, let go? This could include letting go of the sense of being right – being willing to lose an argument, for instance. Right practice never means propping up or promoting the feeling of ‘me’.

We can rely on our sense of confidence if we find we are able to welcome suffering when it appears. This doesn’t mean that we like suffering or would wish it upon ourselves or another. But, as the Buddha taught, it is mindfulness of suffering that leads to freedom from suffering. How willing and able are we to simply receive suffering?

#### SUFFERING AS POINTING

The impulse to resist and reject suffering might appear to run deep. It is not easy to feel sad or afraid without assuming we are somehow failing. But so long as we still perceive suffering as an indictment of our progress on the spiritual journey, and we believe that perception, we are undermining ourselves. In truth, any time we suffer, to any degree, we are receiving teachings. One evening early on in my monastic training, when we were all sitting in the main meeting hall at Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah ascended the Dhamma seat and began his Dhamma talk by saying, ‘Don’t

feel bad if you are suffering. We all suffer.' I remember being surprised and relieved at the same time. That I was surprised suggests his words conflicted with some view I was holding about practice. This spiritual training is not about trying to avoid suffering. Trying not to suffer is like trying not to wake up in the morning because you prefer to dream. Both sleeping and waking are natural for human beings, and so is experiencing both pleasure and pain. What matters is how we accord with this. How accurately do we perceive that which we experience? This is different from a life committed to following preferences.

Last night at evening puja we chanted the Buddha's discourse called The Turning of the Wheel of the Law, or the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. In this discourse the Buddha explained how to skilfully attune to the reality of the world we live in, all of it, with all its pleasure and pain, its agreeability and disagreeability. The Buddha's Great Awakening was the realization that clinging to anything at all – any possession, any view, any practice – eventually leads to suffering. Attuning to reality or finding refuge in Dhamma means studying suffering until we get the message and experience letting go. When we try to be someone who doesn't suffer, we strengthen the habits of clinging and in the process we create more suffering. Indeed trying to be anyone at all means we are still caught. If we understand this point we can become interested in suffering instead of merely rejecting it. We can become interested in refining our quality of attention, of patience, of kindness, so we can

recognize the reality of whatever life gives us and not allow ourselves to be fooled by the way life appears.

#### VORTICES OF CRAVING

In the process of studying life, whether it be in our daily-life practice or through developing formal meditation, we gradually learn the skills required to recognize the signs which indicate we are about to get caught up in desire. If we don't catch ourselves before we cling, but only find ourselves once we are already born again into being someone, doing something to get somewhere, that is the time to re-establish awareness. That is where we learn. No judgement! When we do find ourselves being dragged down by the vortices of craving, it doesn't help to indulge in judging ourselves for having become lost. Fighting doesn't help either. Nor does mental proliferation about why it shouldn't be this way. What can help is remembering our here-and-now, whole body-mind awareness, and trusting.

Some years ago I was swimming off the west coast of the North Island of New Zealand, near a place called Piha. It's a particular part of the coast well known for good surf and dangerous rip currents. There I experienced vortices of a different but equally threatening kind. Having been a strong swimmer when I was young, it didn't occur to me that I was putting myself in danger by swimming there. A friend and I had been hiking for several hours along the coastal footpath, and since the beach below us was empty, it seemed fine to cool off in the water. What I

didn't notice was that at the point where I chose to enter the water, the waves were not breaking. Had I been better informed about the nature of breaking waves, I would have recognized the absence of white-water breakers as a sign that there was probably a hollow area in the sand beneath the surface of the water, creating a counter-current that could pull anyone or anything that entered there out to sea, and being pulled out to sea is exactly what happened to me. Many drownings result from just such situations, when a swimmer is unexpectedly caught in a rip current and reacts by struggling desperately against it until exhaustion eventually takes over. Initially I definitely struggled, trying to get back to the shore and out of the danger, doing what I was used to doing whenever I felt threatened, trying to save myself. But I realized quite quickly that no amount of fighting to overcome the current was going to work; it was far too strong. What did work, thankfully, was surrendering; I flipped over onto my back and floated; no more fighting, but simply allowing the current to carry me.

Just prior to this incident I had been introduced to a particular breathing technique that involved deep relaxation, deep trusting and a whole-body surrendering of habitual controlling. Somehow in that moment of intensity I remembered what I had learned and found myself drifting out to sea, floating and breathing. My head was filled with powerful conflicting thoughts and images: of being eaten by sharks somewhere between Piha and Sydney; of my parents being upset on hearing that their son had

drowned; of Ajahn Sumedho being annoyed with me for my heedlessness. But at one point, associated with the effort to keep floating, trusting and breathing, came the powerful thought, ‘Let the Buddha take over’, my translation of *Buddham saranam gacchāmi* – ‘I go for refuge to the Buddha’.

It felt like a battle going on within me, between on the one hand strong inclinations towards trying to save myself, and on the other an impulse towards trusting. The thought that I mustn’t give up the struggle to save myself was fuelled by guilt and distrust, and when I engaged it, the rhythm of the breathing was interrupted and my body began to sink. When there was letting go of the contraction of fear and trusting again, the body felt held and supported and I returned to floating. There was no doubt about the intensity of fear coursing through my body; I definitely did not know that I was going to be OK. At times it really did look like I might not be. Thankfully, the intimidation of the ‘not-knowing’ state was outshone by the impulse to surrender into the breathing, to trust, to releasing out of the struggle to save myself. I didn’t drown.

As it happened, the current did drag me out to sea quite a way, but then carried me down the coast, out of the dangerous area, and eventually the waves brought me safely ashore. Once I was standing on the beach again I felt elated: not just because I was now safe, but because I felt I had been given the gift of affirmation of practice. In a modest but significant way, it felt emblematic of what it meant when the Buddha conquered Mara. I am obviously grateful that I was

already equipped with some skill in how to meet the state of not knowing before finding myself in that threatening situation.

#### SILENT CONTEMPLATION

Just reading about what it means to Go for Refuge is not enough. Just studying *about* reality is not enough. We need to refine our enquiry, which means bringing all our sensitivity, all our interest to bear on what life gives us, in daily life and formal practice. In the beginning we read about what the Buddha taught. That can give us a good feeling, some increased conceptual clarity about why we suffer so much. But as we progress, as our investigations deepen, we find that conceptual understanding only takes us so far. We need to find out what it means to investigate without thinking. What does contemplation in silence sound like? What does feeling investigation, contrasted to conceptual investigation, feel like?

For example, when faced with an upthrust of fear, intense ill-will or passionate indignation, do we lose ourselves in it and lose our ability to reflect in the process? Or can we meet it, accord with it, and if necessary ‘ride’ this current of energy until it subsides, and thereby avoid drowning in it? So long as we remain committed to controlling life, we run the risk of being overwhelmed by it, of drowning. But this suggestion that we might sometimes have to ride the energy of these currents is not to say we should follow them and ‘act out’. Because of our commitment to the

basic moral precepts, we have a sense of safety and are able to experiment with investigating what it is like to face the unknown. Our sense of safety doesn't come from not daring to step outside of what is familiar and comfortable. When we are facing death, it is not likely to feel familiar or comfortable. However, if we have cultivated awareness to be here-and-now, to include the whole body-mind and be free from compulsively taking sides, perhaps we will find we have the willingness and readiness to meet the unknown with open-heartedness and gratitude.

At least at this point in time, when there is no indication of imminent death, this seems like a practical way of approaching the matter of thinking about dying.

Thank you for your attention.



# 3.

## THE ART OF MEDITATION

*"We cultivate gratitude and respect for those who helped us get started; we also develop a daring spirit so we can enter the unknown."*

Some of you may have come across the scientific articles around these days extolling the benefits of meditation. Research into the effects that meditation may have on the brain has produced evidence of considerable benefits. I have also recently come across articles disparaging and discouraging Buddhist meditation. These are written by people who have tried but after a while given up, claiming it is dangerous and even life-destroying. And this is not just because they haven't tried hard enough; tourists who perhaps did one *vipassanā* retreat while they were in India and then gave up. Sometimes these were people who had been applying themselves for years to meditation, but still ended up disillusioned. This is very unfortunate. However, I confess I'm not altogether surprised. Having been the leader of a monastery for over twenty years, I have heard from a lot of people about the various approaches to meditation practice.

## INITIAL APPROACH

When we first come across these teachings, we are presented with not just another belief system, but with something we can actually *do* about our consciousness, and this gives us hope. So we enter the path with enthusiasm, confidence and energy. We throw ourselves into developing the technique; and perhaps we get some results. But what do we do next? Once we've had some experience, especially some sort of 'special' experience, it's easy to cling to the memory. If it was pleasant we may try to repeat it. If it wasn't pleasant we may still cling to the memory, afraid that it may be repeated.

It seems to me that sometimes there is a risk that the way meditation is taught over-emphasizes the technique. If we cling to a technique, we tend to also cling to results – leading to just more clinging, even though the Buddha was very clear that clinging is the cause of suffering.

In the beginning we do need techniques and we can learn from them. But the idea that they are all there is to meditation is regrettable. It took me quite a while to realize that a technician's approach wasn't working. I eventually came to see how preoccupied I had become with the *idea* of meditation. The point of the practice, the spirit, is to deepen in understanding and ease. Always worrying about whether or not we are doing the technique right – about stages to pass and skills to develop – can easily lead to narrow-mindedness. Then the next thing we discover is that our efforts in the spiritual life have only served to

make us dull. Naturally, we sense something important is missing.

When we over-emphasize the techniques, we readily forget the place of gentleness. Considerable sensitivity is needed to see the underlying attitudes that lead to suffering. Holding too firmly to the forms of practice can cause insensitivity and rigidity. For instance, if I have the attitude that there was something wrong with me and that these techniques are going to fix me, my effort can make me feel more limited than before. This is because our heart-energy is going into feeding the gaining mind, the idea of never being good enough and always having to get somewhere.

How we pick up the techniques determines how we relate to experience in general. Particularly in the West with our strong, wilful attitude to life, relating to meditation as a self-improvement technique is very pronounced. We need to be careful that we don't bring our wilful manipulative tendencies into spiritual practice – which is surely the most important aspect of our lives. Good health, meaningful relationships, money, food and shelter are all significant, but when we die the most important thing will be our state of mind. So the way we enter our inner exploration is most important, and we shouldn't think that everything is explained in a manual.

#### MEDITATION AS ART

These days I find the contemplative life is more usefully viewed as an artistic exercise or as a craft. In the beginning

we need to learn the skills involved, as we would with any art form, like playing a musical instrument, for example. Initially, applying ourselves to the techniques can be boring, but becoming adept requires repetition. To play a violin well we must learn how to move our fingers, how to hold the wrist. If we hold the instrument incorrectly, we miss out on many beautiful possibilities. Hours and hours of exercise are required in the beginning to learn to play an instrument, or to use the medium of paint or handle a camera. However, once we've internalized the skills required, once they've really become ours, we can let the spirit of the artist flow. I suggest it's similar with meditation.

If you do not see yourself as particularly artistic, you could see it in terms of agility. One of Ajahn Chah's teachers used to advise: if obstructions appear high, duck under them, if they appear low, jump over them. The approach of 'one size fits all' can get in the way of our imagination. If we feel we must adhere solely to what a beloved teacher taught us when we first started out, we could stop learning, and as a result lack the creativity to deal with the obstacles encountered along the way. Unfailing respect and gratitude to those who helped us get started, yes; but also dare to go into the unknown, and with interest in discovering something new. The Buddha tried several different teachers before he finished his work. If he had stayed with the first teacher and meditation method that he found, he might never have become enlightened.

## MIDDLE WAY

So perhaps the authors of those commentaries on the perils of meditation hadn't felt allowed to experiment in their practice. Maybe they felt practice was all about one single technique. Because a famous teacher tells us what we should be doing, that does not mean they necessarily know what we truly need. What is needed is to locate the in-between ground, where we sincerely and respectfully listen to and apply ourselves to the teachings we have fortunately been offered, while at the same time listening to ourselves. That is the middle way: not grasping at 'my' way of doing things, and not grasping at the teacher's way of doing things either, but studying both.

Early on in practice I definitely tried to follow what my teachers told me and had some delightful, peaceful experiences, particularly resulting from concentrating on the breath. But did they really help me deal with the obstructions which I had to face? Only up to a point, and then they failed miserably. I suspect this happens to a lot of spiritual seekers. Meditators get to a point where they feel they're banging their heads against a brick wall.

I would like to encourage listening more carefully to what our own intuition has to tell us. See it as developing a friendship, in the way we would get to know and deeply care about somebody else. Certainly it is suitable to observe the experiences of others. We can learn from looking and listening outside to books, teachers, traditions, but we should also pay careful attention to what comes from inside. I am not

advocating grasping at an idea that ‘my’ personal, unique and amazing approach is absolutely the way, but let’s not assume either that our intuition has nothing to contribute. What matters is that we are growing in confidence and commitment as we progress on this journey.

#### WHERE ENERGY COMES FROM

It matters that we feel allowed to include creativity in our meditation. Generally speaking, our education has encouraged us to use lateral thinking to deal with issues. It has taught us to approach things creatively. If now, in the spiritual domain, we are told we are not allowed to do that, and the tradition insists we adhere solely to one venerable approach, that can stifle interest. And it is definitely not helpful to lose interest. Interest is one way of interpreting what is meant by the Pali word *viriya*. *Viriya* is one of the five spiritual faculties<sup>6</sup> and it is essential to spiritual development. Usually this word is translated as energy, but where do we get our energy from?

As I have mentioned elsewhere, for those who find confidence in letting go of their gaining mind, who benefit from what I call a source-oriented approach, wilful striving doesn’t work. On the other hand, sustained interest in present moment awareness, and trusting in letting go of all goal-oriented striving, nurtures enthusiasm in practice, it generates energy. For source-oriented types, a sense of being creatively engaged in our relationship with our meditation is essential.

## UNLOCKING PRACTICE

On my very first seven-day meditation retreat the teacher taught *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of breathing while sitting; he also taught walking meditation. I remember how on the third day of this retreat I had a wonderful experience, a sudden perception of inner peace. There was a quality of inner quietness like nothing I'd experienced before. I was out in the countryside, walking up and down on a gravel road in a remote part of NSW, Australia. With this perception of peacefulness came an inner voice – the chatterbox who likes to have an opinion about everything – commenting, ‘There’s just awareness’, or perhaps it was, ‘There’s just knowing.’ Then a question spontaneously arose, ‘But who’s aware?’ At that point the mind dropped into a deeper, even lovelier place. I can’t recall exactly how I reported this experience to the retreat teacher, but he didn’t seem to appreciate it as a useful key for unlocking my practice. It took a long time and a lot of struggle before I appreciated it for what it was.

Conscious questioning as a form of meditation is nothing new. Lots of people use it as a way of disciplining attention and exploring the inner terrain. Asking the right question, your own heart-question, can be a powerful part of practice. Such questioning is not coming from the head. There are times when concentrating on a meditation object can be a pleasant, agreeable thing to do, but maybe we should view it in the way Ajahn Thaté<sup>2</sup> taught his monks. He used to tell his disciples that entering samādhi was what monks

did instead of going on holiday. He would encourage it. However, going on holiday is not the work.

Some of the most interesting work I do is asking questions like, ‘Who’s aware?’ I happen to also enjoy thinking about such things as the architectural plans for developing this monastery, but the more valuable work is asking deep questions like, ‘Who is asking this question?’ That’s an extremely interesting question – if it’s asked in the right way, and not because I or somebody else told you to ask it.

Our mind might be longing to ask its important questions. Regrettably, many people approach the activity of their mind as an enemy. All they want to do is make their mind shut up, so they concentrate, concentrate, concentrate, in pursuit of peace. There are other aspects to this exercise besides developing concentration. Maybe you can make your mind your friend. Your friend the mind might really want to share this journey with you and have some valuable contributions to make.

There are spiritual traditions in which teachers specifically encourage asking questions. Asked in the right way, at the right time, in the right direction, our heart-question can be the very thing that begins to tease out the tangled threads of our contracted heart. At one stage in his practice when Ajahn Fan, a disciple of Ajahn Mun, was caught up in fear, he went to consult with his teacher. Ajahn Mun didn’t just say, ‘Go and concentrate on your breath and make your mind peaceful.’ He asked Ajahn Fan, ‘Who is it who is afraid?’ Master Hsu Yun,<sup>7</sup> the great Chinese Chan meditation mas-

ter, used the technique of asking ‘Who?’, called in Chinese *hua-tou*, the profound question practice.

#### ASKING IN THE RIGHT WAY

Remember, these ‘pointings’ to the way are not to be grasped. If we cling to them with the gaining mind, they will once again be deluded ego building itself another shelter. Be careful not to grasp at this idea of asking the question, ‘Who?’

It is not the activity of our minds which creates the idea that there is a problem; it is the deluded notion which expresses itself as self-centredness. That’s the issue; much of our energy is being consumed by this construction. So how can we release that energy, how do we undo it? As we have said, certainly there is a stage when learning to bring the mind to one-pointedness, to steadiness, is needed. But that’s only one part of our training; can we take it all the way? Not necessarily, not everybody. Some people may take that form of concentration meditation nearly all the way; and I’m told that at the very last stage of practice, at just the right time, they ask some very subtle questions and the whole tangle unravels; they find the freedom they’ve been seeking. But that may not be the way for all of us. Indeed, I suspect it’s not the way for many of us. Maybe we need to trust that our mind is not our enemy and make friends with it, learn to listen to it.

Followers of the Christian tradition teach, ‘Ask and ye shall be given.’ When I was a Christian I used to ask all the time,

but I didn't get the results I was looking for. Only years later did I meet a Christian monk who pointed out that it matters how we ask. If we're not asking from the right place we're not going to get the right answer.

If we are fortunate and persist on our inner journey, we might come across our own personal question, the one that will untangle us; but we need to be careful about how we ask our important question. Our questions need to be accompanied by a humble recognition that we don't know. In my first year of meditation, when I was applying this questioning practice, there were periods when I was using it like a sledgehammer. That didn't work well. It didn't help at all, actually; I became very sick. I have some photographs of what I looked like then; they're frightening! We need to ask our questions gently, respectfully, as if we were having a conversation with someone we look up to.

#### IN WHAT IS ALL THIS TAKING PLACE?

Related to this, I often reflect on a question Ajahn Chah once asked. It is recorded in the introduction to the book, Seeing the Way, Volume 2.<sup>8</sup> A group of young monks were talking with him about the Original Mind. He pointed out that they must be very careful not to make this Original Mind into a 'thing'; if they did, that was not the Original Mind. If there's anything there at all, he said, just throw it all out. You can refer to an Original Mind if you want to, but the concept, 'Original Mind,' is not what is being pointed to. He went on to point out that what is truly original is

inherently pure; there's nothing you can say about it. If you do want to discuss it, words are necessary, but don't get caught in the words.

In the course of that conversation Ajahn Chah asked the question, 'In what is all this arising and ceasing?' You can be watching arising and ceasing all the time, *but in what is it all taking place?* That is a powerful question. We can be following some meditation technique, observing arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing, but be so caught up in applying the form of the meditation exercise that we forget our own organic interest in being free from suffering. So Ajahn Chah's asking where or in what it is happening is a helpful tool for getting us unhooked from the technique. All the arising and ceasing is happening in awareness, knowingness, the one who knows or whatever we choose to call it. It requires a shift in perspective to see the context and let go of focusing on the activity. Whatever word we use, of course that's not it.

#### CREATIVE INVOLVEMENT

Carefulness and creativity go together. I learnt one technique aimed at bringing us back to mindfulness in the moment from the teacher Ruth Denison. It involves having people stand on one leg. I have sometimes used it, even when talking on the telephone to someone lost in confusion: 'OK, come on, let's both get up and stand on one leg.' Maybe they think I'm kidding: 'I'm serious. We'll talk about your problem, but right now, let's stand on one leg. If you want

to talk to me, we've got to be standing on one leg first.' So there we are each in the middle of a room, with the telephone at one ear, standing on one leg. That's a very useful exercise, because to do it we have to let go of thinking and come back into the body. After we've stood on one leg for a while, old habits are likely to draw attention back into the head; but then we'll wobble, and when we're about to fall over we have to come back quickly into the body. Maybe they tell me, 'But I can't think about my problem while I'm standing on one leg!' To which I reply, 'Well, that's good, because that's why you rang me, because you couldn't stop thinking about your problem.'

I'm not being flippant when I talk like this; the exercise is useful if you find yourself lost. You can even do it in public situations so long as you are discreet and nobody notices! And again, we're not talking about grasping the technique and becoming one of those Indian ascetics who stand all day on one leg. I suspect they've missed the point.

There are lots of techniques that we can employ to train our attention. Ajahn Chah wouldn't allow electricity in the monastery for many years; he insisted we pull water from the well by hand. I expect he saw that as a good way of embodying mindfulness practice. It also worked well in training monks to cooperate. I was recently speaking to the monks here in our monastery about a Zen temple where the abbot wouldn't allow a washing machine, concerned that the students would become lazy. Eventually the monastery did acquire a washing machine, so the abbot said, 'OK, when

you put your clothes in the washing machine you must sit and watch the washing go round and round in a circle. You may not just push the button and go away and get heedless again, you've got to sit there.'

Ajahn Chah banned cigarette smoking at his monastery, but when I first ordained I lived in a monastery in Bangkok where it was still allowed. But the rule there was that you weren't allowed to smoke unless you were sitting down, so if you were going to smoke you had to smoke fully. Of course, I'm not advocating that particular practice. But the message being conveyed, the spirit that was in effect encoded in that structure, was to do what you're doing fully. If you're writing an email, fully write the email. Often when we are sitting at a computer, we are lost. We forget the body and become stressed. We're not really doing what we're doing. We are not quite all there. Yet we've heard our teachers say over and over that the practice of mindfulness is here and now. The Buddha said, 'The past is dead, the future's not yet born.' The only reality we have access to is this reality, here, now. We benefit from having structures that effectively help bring ourselves back to this moment. But let's remember that the structures are not an end in themselves.

So if the way you already use a meditation technique nourishes your faith and strengthens your confidence, do continue. If a more flexible approach appeals to you, if you feel drawn to a somewhat more creative involvement in your meditation, don't automatically reject that feeling. It might be your mind coming to help you on the journey.



# 4.

## UNAFRAID TO CARE

*"The Buddha and our teachers cared completely, with all of their hearts, holding nothing back. Their understanding meant they could give themselves to caring fully."*

The feelings we have when we care for another occupy a special place in our hearts. To care deeply for another feels like a blessing. Remember how the Buddha taught about cultivating loving-kindness: he asks us to hold in our minds an image of a mother with her only child. He wants us to focus on the mother's regard for her child and give rise to a heartfelt appreciation for the beauty of selfless caring.

Similarly, the feeling of being cared for is a truly wonderful thing. To receive caring from another is like receiving warmth when we are cold, or receiving food when we are hungry. It is a type of nourishment. And it is an essential nourishment.

Now let's look at what may obscure the beauty of caring. We are all familiar with the way in which affection leads to hurt when a relationship is damaged or lost. If we've experienced such suffering after having met the Buddha's teachings on the Four Noble Truths,<sup>9</sup> we have probably

wondered whether it is really possible both to care deeply and be free from suffering. Can we care without becoming caught in clinging and leaving ourselves vulnerable to agonizing heartache?

#### AVOIDANCE STRATEGIES

After being hurt in a relationship, some decide never to leave themselves open to such suffering again. They choose a strategy of closing their hearts as a defence, making themselves unavailable for trusting relationships of any kind. It is understandable that we try to protect ourselves from suffering, but in this case the strategy leads to another kind of suffering – that of isolation, loneliness.

Then there are those who work in what we call the caring professions, who fall prey to a kind of emotional burnout because they find they are required to carry more pain than their hearts could bear. Although they might well have started out in the profession as genuinely compassionate and caring, really wanting to make a difference, over time they find they have become cold-hearted and cynical. That is very sad.

Others embark on a spiritual journey after experiencing more hurt than they could handle, hoping to transcend it all. But if they don't understand 'transcendence' in the way the Buddha meant it, after years of discipline and meditation they could find themselves in a narrow cul-de-sac, facing an intimidating wall of denied suffering. If they are fortunate, they'll eventually realize that the Buddha

meant what he said about mindfulness of suffering leading to freedom from suffering. Our attempts to avoid suffering are definitely not the way. It is no exaggeration to say that the spiritual journey in fact begins when we find ourselves face to face with that which we were trying to escape. Up to that point, we are still only preparing for the journey.

The Buddha's teachings on cultivating caring aim to equip us with skilful defences, which strengthen and protect us without compromising our sensitivity and discernment. They aim to give us the skill to meet life, whatever that might mean in our case. Nobody goes through this experience of life without periods of feeling intensely challenged. What matters is how well prepared we are for the challenges. If our heart faculties are not adequately developed, if our spiritual education isn't sufficient, it is understandable that we feel ill-equipped. However, feeling ill-equipped doesn't exempt us from having to face the consequences of storing away our suffering in unawareness. Accumulated unlivéd life doesn't simply disappear; it lurks in the basement, festering. The fumes emitted by our stash of unacknowledged suffering can have the effect of desensitizing us, leading to dispiriting cynicism. If we have even an inkling that this could be true, it makes sense to stop avoiding and begin looking for ways to start clearing out the basement. Don't be deterred by concerns about how long it will take. The Buddha encourages us to just get started. Many unexpected means of support will be offered to us along the way.

## ATTENDING TO THE WELL-BEING OF OTHERS

The Buddha clearly supported the cultivation of meditation in solitude, but not at the expense of sensitivity to the well-being of others. There was an occasion when he visited a group of forest-dwelling monks and expressed his admiration for their evident degree of cooperation. On this occasion he asked one of the monks, Venerable Anuruddha, how they were getting on living together, and Anuruddha replied that because their actions of body, speech and mind were intentionally imbued with loving-kindness, they lived together in a mutually beneficial, harmonious atmosphere.

The abbot of one of our other branch monasteries recently told me how a young monk there had spontaneously approached him to express gratitude for the time he had spent performing what we call *upatak* duties. Being an *upatak* is akin to being a personal attendant to a senior Sangha member. Ajahn Chah always insisted that in his monasteries this two and a half thousand year-old tradition should be maintained. Everybody, including the Westerners, was expected to observe it. 'Attending to the teacher' was considered the best way for those senior in the training to share the benefits accumulated with those younger. Ajahn Chah praised a lifelong commitment to meditation, but he also gave special emphasis to developing and maintaining harmonious, cooperative community. The technical Pali term is *saddhivihāraka*, 'one who lives along with'. One young monk who arrived at Ajahn Chah's monastery had previously been acquainted only with monas-

teries where solitary meditation was emphasized. When this monk was invited to take up *upatak* duties, which in effect meant waiting on the teacher, that didn't immediately appeal to him. 'Why can't the abbot look after himself? Why does he need someone else to take care of him? He's not old.' It was only after some time that he came to see for himself the point of consciously caring for another.

When we hear that the Buddha taught, 'You should be your own refuge; how could another be your refuge?',<sup>10</sup> we might assume he is saying that we should focus on paying attention to ourselves. We need to listen really carefully to what the Buddha is saying here; if we don't, we might compound our suffering, making it even more difficult to deal with. Being our own refuge does not mean closing ourselves off from others and caring only about 'me'. To be truly our own refuge means to completely let go of ourselves through right understanding. Cultivating a heart of caring, a heart of well-wishing for all beings, nurtures such understanding. There is a rare beauty to be found in the ability to surrender 'me' and 'my way', and to tune into the needs of others.

#### SUFFERING IS A CHOICE

The question of what has the power to obstruct the beauty of caring pertains not just to our relationships with people, but also to the way we relate to things, and to views and opinions. Perhaps for instance, we thought that we were being compassionate towards planet earth, taking good care of her, only to catch ourselves behaving aggressively

towards those we see as exploiting her. Can we tolerate having our views and opinions contradicted without acting aggressively? This is not to say that we should never have feelings of aversion when we witness abuse. To say so would be like saying we shouldn't have an immune system; our immune system is not supposed to be passive. However, we do need to be extremely careful that an appropriate sense of aversion doesn't turn into a thoroughly inappropriate reaction of hatred, causing harm to ourselves and others. Feeling aversion can be functional, but if we cling to that feeling it becomes something more; it becomes ill-will. Once we are possessed by ill-will our faculty of discernment is compromised and we can no longer trust ourselves to make balanced decisions.

Experiencing loss on any level easily leads to hurt. But do those hurt feelings *have* to proliferate into being caught in a state of negativity? It is worth looking closely to see if we unconsciously hold to such a view. There is an adage in our culture which is sometimes heard at times of coming to terms with the pain of loss: 'Suffering is the price we pay for having loved'. The implication is that suffering is inescapable if we really care about anyone or anything. Surely to accept such a view conditions us into a fear of wholehearted caring. That can't be the way!

One of the most important principles which the Buddha's awakening revealed to us is that we are not obliged to suffer; suffering is a choice. It is true that all beings experience pain, both those who are awakened and those who are not;

but turning pain into suffering is something extra that we do. Physical pain or emotional pain, subtle pain or gross pain, are all part of being human. When we resist pain out of unawareness and cling, we are adding to it, we complicate it, we are causing the suffering. The Buddha's teachings are an invitation to question, to enquire, and find out for ourselves whether it is true that we can't care without being caught in clinging.

#### CONTEMPLATIVE ENQUIRY

How then do we enquire into this conundrum of wanting to live with caring and sensitivity, while at the same time honouring the Buddha's awakening, remembering that suffering is not an obligation? We could read up on what psychologists have to say on the subject and look at the experiments conducted on attachment theory, fear of rejection and so on. Or we could discuss the subject with friends and companions. But here, in the context of shared contemplative enquiry, how are we to engage the issue effectively?

The fact that we can even begin to think about these matters shows we already have skill in using concepts. It is significant that we can formulate such ideas as 'caring', 'clinging', 'attachment', 'non-attachment', 'detachment', 'dissociation', etc. One aspect of contemplative enquiry is building on these skills by investigating in detail the relationship we have with concepts. We don't just *use* concepts, we look carefully at *how* we use them. It is essential to understand that the concepts we have about clinging are not the same

as the actuality of clinging. Our concepts about caring are not the same thing as actually caring. We must always keep this in mind: so long as we are working on the level of concepts, we are dealing with approximations, not the real thing.

A related example: I have heard eloquent talks on the subject of emotional intelligence, but found it difficult to sense the being behind the persona that delivered the talk. And I recall an occasion when I received some enthusiastic but not particularly peaceful persuasion from someone who thought I should sign up of a course on non-violent communication. We should not assume that theory and practice are the same reality. Thinking and what we are thinking about are not the same thing. This sounds so simple that it should hardly bear mentioning – but it does bear mentioning, because it matters very much.

Our everyday level of thinking gives access to the initial stages of enquiry. This gets the process started, but it won't take us very far. To equate thinking about clinging with the reality of clinging is like mistaking a printed picture of a mango for an actual mango. Obviously we would not make that mistake regarding a printed picture. No matter how good the camera or subtle the use of Photoshop in adding highlights and tweaking contrast, or the quality of the printer, we would never be tempted to eat the printed picture. But we do consume concepts, mistaking them for more than they actually are.

It has many times been reported that Ajahn Chah discouraged his disciples from reading too much. ‘Just read the Books of Discipline; that’s enough for now. Once you have practised, the true meaning of the recorded teachings by the Buddha, the *suttas*, will be clear.’ His view was that too much reading resulted in accumulating too many concepts, just more knowledge *about* things, which wouldn’t necessarily help. ‘The reason you don’t actually know anything is because you know so much. If you read the *suttas* after having learnt to read your own heart it will be like eating the dessert after the main course.’

Our concepts *about* caring and clinging must be understood as abstractions on the realities of caring and clinging. If we couldn’t use concepts we would be in trouble, but when we do use them we must remember their inherent limitations. If we forget and start assuming that ideas are something more than symbolic representations, we should expect an increase in frustration as our efforts fail to resolve our suffering. We need to do more than merely think about these subjects.

#### OUR SPIRITUAL TOOLKIT

The result we are looking for in contemplative enquiry is the understanding that actually resolves suffering. To arrive at such understanding requires skill in using the tools in our spiritual toolkit. It might also mean we need to acquire more tools. As with any task, if we don’t have the right equipment, we can’t do the work. If we don’t

have access to modes of investigation any more subtle than common-or-garden thinking, we will be disappointed in our efforts. This is what the spiritual exercises of meditation and wise reflection are for: they introduce us to more subtle ways of working with the dynamics of our inner worlds.

There are many ways of talking about the tools required to apply ourselves competently to the inner work. Different teachers will share according to what they have found has worked for them. In my experience there are three main tools: mindfulness (*sati*), sense restraint (*indriya saṃvara*) and wise reflection (*yoniso manasikara*). We could also speak in terms of the five Spiritual Faculties: confidence (*saddhā*), vitality (*viriya*), mindfulness (*sati*), collectedness (*saṃādhi*) and discernment (*paññā*), but in this teaching I would like to stay with the first set of tools. Mindfulness is to do with the quality of watchfulness. An image the Buddha gave to help us appreciate mindfulness was that of a gatekeeper, standing alert at the gate to the city, observing the comings and goings. Or we could think of the doorman at a hotel, watching who comes in and who goes out. The doorman doesn't carry the bags up to the rooms or leave with a guest in a taxi. He stays watchfully at the entrance to the hotel.

Sense restraint is the ability to set boundaries and keep to them. I mentioned earlier our body's immune system, which has the function of saying no to agents of disease that threaten to disrupt our physical health. We also need to be able to say no to any excessive exuberance that threatens to

disrupt our hearts. Excessive exuberance shows itself in our tendency to become lost by either following the feelings which arise when we meet sense objects – sights, sounds, scents, flavours, sensations and ideas – or denying them. These are the two extreme reactions. When sense restraint is well developed we have an ability to contain reactions, neither following nor denying them. Thus the feelings which arise with sense contact are available for investigation, and we don't have to be intimidated by sense objects, the attractive, the repulsive or anything in-between.

Wise reflection is what we do with the new-found perspective on the inner landscape. The benefit of exercising mindfulness and sense restraint is an increase in inner awareness. We start to see in ways we didn't even suspect were possible before; we start to understand what our teachers meant when they encouraged us to read our own hearts. When the faculties of mindfulness and sense restraint are not adequately developed, we have difficulty in seeing what it is that keeps tripping us up. When they have been adequately developed, wise reflection can do its work, which is to look more deeply, to listen more accurately, beyond the surface appearance of things. Wise reflection loves looking for and finding the most relevant questions to ask, those questions which begin to ease the tension and actually resolve our suffering.

## PROFICIENCY IN MEDITATION

Just as all beings long to be free from suffering, so our hearts long to know truth. When we have developed some skill in using the tools in our spiritual toolkit, we can feel more confident in our practice of meditation. Whether we are developing mindfulness of breathing, focusing on listening to the sound of silence (sometimes also called *nada*),<sup>11</sup> dwelling on the theme of loving-kindness or using any other of the many modes of disciplining attention, our practice only prospers once we have an embodied appreciation for how the spiritual tools are to be used. However much we might have read about them and how they might be applied, until we put them to use they are like money sitting untouched in a bank account: they have potential but their value has not been realized.

Much has been said by others about mindfulness of breathing, so here I will just say something about working with what Luang Por Sumedho has called the ‘sound of silence’. Obviously this is a poetic reference to the meditation object in question; of course, true silence has no sound. But as with silence, this sound is always present. In my imagination it is the sound you would hear if you were to wander through a grove of aspen trees which were made of silver; it is what it would sound like as a gentle breeze made the thousands of small, silver, aspen leaves flutter. Not everybody finds they can tune into this sound, but for those who can, this high-pitched ringing is always there behind whatever other sounds we might be hearing, whether the sound of

inner thinking or sounds from outside. It has gentleness, harmony, and beauty; it is natural, not fabricated. Attending to this ‘sound of silence’ gives rise to a very helpful frame of reference.

For some meditators the habitual ‘controlling’ which has become associated with making effort seems to infect their attention. When they ‘pay attention’ to the body breathing, they can’t help but interfere with it. For them there is no such thing as being mindful of natural breathing in and breathing out. Everything is disturbed by compulsive controlling, including the rhythm of the breath. To discover that the meditation object of the sound of silence remains undisturbed, regardless of our habitual tendencies, can be a great relief.

#### BEING HERE ON TIME

One of the very important insights meditation can give us, even early on in practice, is that all the activity of our minds is not who and what we are. We don’t have to have been meditating for many years to see this. It is tragic that most people believe they are just the activity of their minds, their thoughts and feelings, and hence the turmoil of their lives. But once we get a sense of the space within which all this activity is taking place, or the silence out of which all the inner sounds are arising, we naturally start to relax. We begin to see that none of this activity is ultimate. None of it! Not the agreeable nor the disagreeable, not the acceptable nor the unacceptable. This insight gives us an altogether

different perspective, a whole new way of relating to life. Now, when disagreeable sense objects impinge upon our senses, we can study the process; we are not obliged to react.

One year during a period of monastic retreat here at Harnham, we made an exception and allowed a visitor to join us. We are usually rather protective of these periods of structured silence, but on this occasion there was a good reason to make an exception. It turned out that this guest was particularly noisy and I started having regrets. But I recall one afternoon, as we were sitting together in the hall, a brief instant that affirmed the point we are considering here. I was sitting facing the shrine, as I usually do during these retreats; the hall was quite silent. Anyone who had to move during the sitting would do so carefully and quietly. But not this guest. What happened on that occasion however, turned out to be a gift. In the midst of the silence there came a loud 'clunk' as the guest moved the meditation stool off to the side and onto the wooden floorboards. As it happened, at that moment I had enough preparedness, enough mindfulness, enough sense-restraint, to be able to catch what was about to happen before it happened. The sound of the stool hitting the floor was the sound of the stool, I couldn't stop that; but significantly, I noticed that I didn't have to follow the inclination to react with annoyance. I had a choice whether or not to follow the inclination. It was a very brief moment, but with beneficial consequences. In such a situation, if we remain abiding with

quiet watchfulness, the mind does not become disturbed. That doesn't mean we cease feeling what we feel; we feel what we feel, but with greater accuracy. Because the mind is unperturbed, our discernment faculties are unobscured and available to serve the situation according to what is skilful.

This applies similarly when agreeable sense objects impinge upon our senses; we can study the process, but we are not obliged to react. When the pleasurable feelings which are associated with caring appear, if we are prepared, if we have a good enough level of skill in using these spiritual tools, we will sense the space around those feelings and see that we have a choice: to abandon abiding *as* awareness and follow the feelings, or feel the feelings, fully, and allow wisdom and compassion to determine any action.

We should bear in mind that what we are aiming for is a good enough level of skill. We don't have to be the champion cyclist who wins the Tour de France; it is good enough to have the skill needed to enjoy a gentle cycle-ride through the countryside. Being over-zealous in our investigations obscures the subtlety that is required.

#### THE RIGHT AMOUNT

This level of investigation is more refined, more subtle than most of us would have been used to. Previously when we were faced with a question like, 'Is it possible to care without creating more suffering?', we would likely have

reverted to a coarse level of thinking, a kind of internal verbal dialogue. Now we are investigating in a feeling way. Contemplative enquiry is feeling enquiry. This is not saying we are merely looking into feelings, although it could include that; rather, it means we are working with a facility for feeling into and around the activity in our hearts and minds, an enquiry that takes place without thinking. This probably isn't a facility we would have been taught at school. This way of functioning is not generally available without disciplined attention. And here the discipline we are talking about is grounded in the self-respect that comes with living a life of integrity.

With this upgraded set of tools we are now equipped to meet the really challenging questions life offers us, with confidence and unapologetic interest. If nobody else is interested in the questions which our heart is asking, it doesn't matter. We all have our own questions, our own personal conundrums, and it is these precious questions that have the power to awaken us. Though we must keep reminding ourselves of it, we are no longer interested in simply appeasing the pain that life's troubling questions generate. Now we are interested in learning the skill of receiving these questions so that they show us the way to be free. We are not conjuring up just another concept which counters or replaces one fixed mental position with another. We are not arguing with ourselves until we agree to believe in some mental construct. Mental arguments are powerless when it comes to opening the doorways to the

inner dimensions in which we feel free to feel whatever we feel, without being obstructed by those feelings.

Back to our original question: is it possible to care without clinging? The Buddha and our teachers cared completely, with all their hearts, holding nothing back, because they know reality. Their understanding meant they could afford to give themselves to caring fully; they had seen beyond all doubt that clinging is not necessary and suffering is not an obligation. So instead of asking whether it is possible to care without clinging, we should be asking whether we can be *here* quickly enough to catch the clinging before it happens. It is the preparedness that matters.

Thank you for your attention.



# 5.

## THE RIGHT SORT OF PEACE

*“... instead of struggling against some activity which is taking place in awareness, try attending to the quality of awareness itself, the just-knowing mind.”*

There are some who approach Buddhism with the view that progress on this journey is to be measured in terms of how peaceful they feel. Certain circles take this further and speak of Buddhism as a form of quietism. It is of course correct to say that the Buddha encouraged cultivating tranquillity, but to suggest that the goal of Buddhist practice is to hold onto peaceful states of mind is mistaken.

The Buddha didn't want us to hold on to any particular state of being, not even peaceful states. Of course, time spent in quietude can help us do the demanding work of seeing beyond all the stories we tend to tell ourselves about reality – the stories that indulging in pleasure will make us happier, or that finding identity by clinging to the body will lead to satisfaction. What the Buddha wanted, and what he consistently taught, was that we need to know the reality of all states of mind, both peaceful and not peaceful. If we want freedom, we must thoroughly understand that holding fast to anything, any material thing, any story, any view, any

position, will inevitably lead to suffering. So Buddhism is not about becoming peaceful.

It is not even about becoming enlightened. Some of you might have heard that Ajahn Chah once commented, perhaps rather provocatively, ‘Don’t be an arahant; don’t be a Bodhisattva; don’t be anything at all. If you are anything at all you will suffer.’ This way of talking can be confusing for those who hear the words, but not beyond the words to what is really being said. The words that we use to help each other understand are symbols; they are ways of pointing to the direction we need to go to find what it is that we seek. Animals less intelligent than human beings tend to look at a finger which is pointing to something, instead of whatever the finger is indicating. We wouldn’t make such a mistake when regarding activity in our outer world, but how about our inner world? We must remember that we are not supposed to focus merely on the words being spoken, but also on the understanding to which the words refer. When Ajahn Chah says, ‘Don’t become anything at all’, he is pointing to an understanding of the true nature of desire; he wants us to see accurately that being caught up in becoming anything at all is a form of clinging, and all clinging leads to suffering. It is by letting go of any fixed position that we are freed.

And remember, it is all right if we don’t immediately understand what the teacher is telling us; it is OK if we don’t immediately get the message. Some of the Buddha’s disciples took a very long time before they truly heard what he

was saying. Even some of those living closest to him never really got the message. What matters is that we persist in our effort to listen to true teachings.

#### UNOBSTRUCTED RELATIONSHIP

In a previous talk I referred to the Buddha's teaching known as The Discourse on the Simile of the Heartwood,<sup>3</sup> where we are encouraged to keep letting go, whatever is happening in our lives. Don't settle anywhere, however comfortable or uncomfortable things might be, until complete freedom is realized. So long as we live in a state of unawareness, there is always the temptation to forget what it was that inspired us to start out on this journey: that is, the possibility of living in perfect, unobstructed relationship with all existence, conditioned and unconditioned. So long as we still haven't seen through habits of clinging, we will be tempted to settle for something superficial, including relatively peaceful states of mind. Being attached to peacefulness is a bias, and as such obstructs our relationship with reality. When the Buddha shared the fruits of his awakening, he wanted us to know what he knew; that is, that once awareness is free of any imposed limitation, when we have let go of all biases, awareness can and will be able to accommodate whatever arises. There is no level of intensity or mediocrity, no experience or perception whatsoever, that can disturb the heart of one who is fully awakened.

Our spiritual work, then, is to cultivate the whole body-mind capacity that can accommodate everything and any-

thing – peacefulness, aversion, enthusiasm, despondency and any other state you might imagine – without losing perspective, without causing suffering for ourselves or others. We want to be able to look and listen so closely that we stop being fooled. We want to see where the *actual* causes of struggle lie. For example, from a superficial perspective, when somebody says something hurtful it looks as if they caused us to suffer. On closer inspection, we find that what was said triggered the sense of pain, but it is because of what we added to it that we suffered. It is because of our resisting and indulging that we fail to see clearly and feel we have problems. There are no real problems. If problems were ultimate in any sense, freedom would not be possible. Regrettably, many people hold to the belief that their problems and the problems of the world are ultimately real; hence the terrible struggles. Indeed holding on tightly to perceived problems is one of the ways in which many people find a sense of identity. Awakened beings, on the other hand, know that problems can appear to exist, but only because of the denial of reality; all problems disappear when resisting and indulging ceases. The pain doesn't disappear, difficulties don't disappear, but when suffering disappears the natural pain of life is much easier to deal with.

#### NOTHING LACKING

When we don't look closely enough, when we fail to see beyond the surface level, we can make the mistake of believing

there is something wrong with us, that we are somehow damaged or lacking. The idea of attaining wisdom and compassion may be very appealing, but we think that somehow we have to import them. The Buddha's teaching does not promote merely believing in wisdom and compassion, but neither does it tell us that we are inherently damaged goods which need fixing. Nor, for that matter, does the Buddha teach that somebody else has what we are looking for and can bestow blessings upon us if we make sufficient supplications.

With a trusting heart and a mind that is rightly directed, we can have confidence that the wisdom and compassion we are looking for already exist, there in the awareness which has been freed from the distortions caused by clinging. It is a warp of awareness which makes us believe we are somehow lacking, causing us to depend on what is not dependable. In the *Mahā-Marigala Sutta*<sup>4</sup> the Buddha instructed, *pūjā ca pūjaneyyānam*, which translates as 'honour that which is worthy of honour', i.e. orient your life towards that which is truly reliable. Wise reflection and listening to teachings from those who know truth can give rise to the clear seeing which sees beyond false sources of security. This clear seeing has the power to reveal the reality of suffering. Then blaming anyone or anything simply doesn't happen; there is the understanding that blaming only happens when our hearts are held closed in resistance to reality. Fear, anger, anxiety are all expressions of this resistance. It is this closing of our hearts that limits awareness, creating

the impression that there is not enough room for life. And it is not only painful feelings that cause us to struggle. Pleasant feelings too can overwhelm us, resulting in feelings being projected onto external objects, both people and things. We then feel we have become dependent upon them, that we can't live without them. If we were already living in an open-hearted, trusting way, in an expanded field of awareness, we wouldn't have had the perception that 'this is all too much', we wouldn't feel overwhelmed. Projecting our heart's energy outwards wouldn't occur. We would know that reality is never too much; reality is always just so. The feeling we sometimes have that things are all getting too much is the direct result of what we do that imposes limitations on awareness.

#### NO ENEMIES

Holding fast to any fixed position is a denial of reality. Clinging to peaceful mind states and fighting off unpeaceful mind states only leads to more confusion, causing us to feel we are surrounded by enemies and life is always a struggle. By way of experiment, instead of struggling against some activity which is taking place in awareness, try attending to the quality of awareness itself, the just-knowing mind. Another way of bringing about a shift in perspective is to observe the space round an object instead of focusing on the object itself. If you can bring about such a shift in perception you will find that confusion as a state of mind is waiting to be received; like all forms of suffering, confu-

sion is something to be studied. We can learn a lot from confusion. Confusion is not our enemy. When we learn to relate with life like this, we won't feel obliged to be always trying to become peaceful and critical of that which is not peaceful.

Ajahn Chah once suggested that to see the maturity of a monk, you shouldn't observe him when he is sitting in meditation, but watch how he conducts himself on a festival day. For most of the year life in a forest monastery is quite quiet, with very little happening. But for three or four days each year, festivals take place to mark events such as the Buddha's birthday or the beginning of the Rains Retreat. It is on these occasions, Ajahn Chah was suggesting, when large crowds of visitors come to the monastery and the senses are being bombarded with sense objects – sights, sounds, smells, tastes – that you can tell whether a monk has real spiritual ability. When external conditions are agreeable, it is easier to feel peaceful and think we 'have it together'. When conditions challenge us, when we are driven to the edge of our practice, to the growing tip, that is when we really learn. If we hold to our preference for always feeling peaceful, we could miss the opportunity to grow. Don't be afraid of chaos; be afraid of how long it takes to remember to be aware.

#### USEFUL SKILLS

It takes considerable skill to accord with conditions without resisting and thereby causing suffering. But in mindfully

receiving the consequences of our *not* according with conditions we can learn, as we receive without any judgement the suffering we are creating. The willingness to look more deeply, especially at those times when we feel we are failing, serves the emerging understanding.

Take the everyday example of drying clothes in a spin-drier. If we decide the drier has been running long enough and turn the machine off, that doesn't mean the barrel will immediately stop spinning. The movement of the barrel has momentum to it. If you put your hand in and try to force it to stop, you could get hurt. Similar common sense applies when we light a fire in a wood-burning stove: even though it might look black and harmless on the outside, we wouldn't be tempted to put our hand on the stove. Our understanding protects us from getting too close and burning ourselves. Children who haven't yet learnt the need to take care depend on their parents to protect them, hence the fireguards. Once children have learnt the lesson about the risks of getting burnt, they don't need fireguards.

We need to protect our hearts from what we do with life that turns it into suffering. We need to understand that it is not life which causes suffering, it is the way we relate to it. When there is right understanding we are careful. When we are not careful, when we are heedless, we close our hearts, we limit awareness with our habits of clinging, and then feel that we are somehow inherently lacking. But we are not lacking; we only create the impression that we are. And then we believe that we don't have enough of

everything: not enough patience to endure the unendurable, not enough kindness in the face of enmity, not enough perspective to accommodate ambiguity; that we don't have enough room for life. But the good news is that if we can create such an impression, of course we can also cease to create it.

Everybody on this journey forgets from time to time and reverts to habits of clinging. Hopefully the effort we make means we are learning to remember more quickly. Softening our approach to life, being more gentle, more careful, not assuming too much about the way things appear to be on the surface, means that sensitivity matures, nurturing insight. This softness, this sensitivity, is not a form of weakness. When we genuinely admit to how life affects us, without indulging or denying, we grow stronger. The right kind of gentleness leads to a flexible sort of strength, not to increased rigidity. In turn, it supports clarity. As strength and clarity develop, we grow more confident in receiving everything, accommodating everything and learning from everything. This is a very different approach to spiritual practice from one that judges peacefulness as a sign of success and the absence of peace as a sign of failure.

#### STILLNESS IN THE DEPTHS

A state of relative peace of mind is like the ocean without waves or a lake without ripples. When the surface of the lake is still you can see a beautiful reflection, one not there when the wind is blowing and the surface is disturbed. The

beauty of that reflection is like the pleasure of a mind without too many disturbing thoughts or mental impressions. However, we don't expect the lake to always be still, or the ocean to always be without waves. And it is not sensible to expect our minds to always be peaceful. If we have the facility to access such relative tranquillity, we will know the state of joy and ease that can be found there. But we must also know that these states of mind, like the reflection on a lake, come and go and we are careful to not allow them to lead to attachment.

There is another type of peacefulness with which we would be wise to acquaint ourselves. As with the stillness which is always there at the bottom of the ocean and remains undisturbed by the activity above, we can trust that deep within us, there is a dimension of peacefulness which is always there. As practice progresses, an initial quality of trust can evolve into a confidence born of insight. The stillness at the bottom of the ocean is unperturbed even when massive breakers are crashing about on the surface. We can afford to trust that within is a deep stillness which is 'just there', beneath all the activity. This is a peacefulness that doesn't require propping up or sustaining.

If we have some sense of the stillness which is always there, we are less likely to mistake surface turmoil for being anything more than the changing nature of things. When we appreciate the relativity of turmoil there is less chance of infatuation with the drama of the world; we are more interested in seeing beyond the way things appear to be.

There is no end to the waves on an ocean; they are a natural expression of the ocean. It wouldn't be wise to want to stop oceans from having waves. And it is not wise to demand that our minds always be peaceful. When we shed that attitude, we feel more able to accept the forever changing nature of things. It is easier to surrender our resistance to what we don't like and avoid getting lost in what we do like. We stop struggling to change the nature of the world, and work instead on our relationship with the world. When we lose ourselves in the surface turmoil, we tend to incline towards distraction or despair and start complaining that it shouldn't be this way. When we understand the nature of the world accurately we can accord with it, and have a better chance of generating real benefit.

Pointing out the fruitlessness of complaining is not to say we shouldn't do anything. To point to the futility of trying to change the nature of the world is not to advocate apathy. Quite the opposite! Developing the agility of attention which means we have access to stillness when it is needed and the capacity to accord with activity when it is called for, is being responsible. We are positioning ourselves with optimal perspective, so as to see where and when we become stuck, creating the unnecessary impression of having problems. It is in letting go of our attachments to 'me' and 'my way' that we can make a real difference and allow natural selfless goodness to shine.

## CONTRIBUTING WELL-BEING

If we can't unplug from always pursuing preferences, we limit what we can contribute. Clinging to being peaceful and resisting that which disturbs us leads to stress. One of the best ways to increase well-being for ourselves and others is to cultivate mindful agility. Viewing the world from contrasting perspectives can give rise to insight. Getting to know ourselves, both in the midst of peace and tranquillity, and when we are surrounded by irritating and annoying conditions, help us grow. Just as the developing intelligence of a child is stimulated by experiencing contrasting colours, textures and environments, so the accuracy of our view of the world is enhanced by experiencing contrasting perspectives. The richness of a painting, the depth of a photograph, the impact of a piece of music, all depend on contrast. So long as we are attached to being peaceful and reject what is not peaceful, we bolster the divisions in our world. We risk making the perceptions of separateness – 'us' and 'them', 'me' and 'mine' – even more rigid. That certainly doesn't help. If we have trained our minds to sustain clarity and kindness in the context of both calm and chaos, we are more likely to see beyond our conditioned preferences to that which is truly beneficial. This agility of attention helps us discern new ways of handling the chaos, of not being intimidated by how troubled our inner and outer worlds sometimes appear to be.

Thank you very much for your attention.

## 6. SUSCEPTIBLE TO UNDERSTANDING

*"A mind that is fit to receive teachings is a mind that is at ease, sensitive and open to hearing something new."*

A question has been asked regarding why we have Dhamma talks with most of the participants passive, when we could all be engaged in discussion or dialogue on Dhamma. At this monastery we dedicate time to both activities: quietly listening to Dhamma and constructively discussing Dhamma.

There is a way of listening to Dhamma talks which is well-known in the context of Asian Buddhism, but not always so well-known here. Because of the conditioning we have received, we are familiar with engaging in a discussion or in debate, or listening to a lecture. Generally speaking, we are used to having our discriminative faculties stimulated. With quiet listening, or contemplative listening, we give our discriminating faculties a rest and exercise ‘simply listening’; we intentionally enter a more passive, receptive mode. This is distinctly different from the ‘doing’ mode which we know so well. It is important to appreciate that

being in a passive, receptive mode does not mean abandoning or bypassing our discriminating potential, but it does call for a different kind of relationship with a mind that is usually busy agreeing and disagreeing. With contemplative listening it is possible to be aware if the teacher says something we don't agree with, but for the time being 'park' our objection, continue listening and then return to the objection later.

There are times when a Dhamma talk is a form of instruction *about* Buddhism, similar to a lecture. But depending on the teacher's approach, a Dhamma talk can also be a form of induction into a relationship with our inner contemplative. We all have an inner contemplative who has deep and significant concerns, but we don't necessarily all know how to hear what he or she is saying. When we are debating a view or an opinion, we are required to use our discriminative faculties. In contrast, the mode of contemplative listening requires us to relax those faculties. When we listen deeply, beyond just the words, we can receive much more from the teacher than merely the information that the words themselves might impart. Potentially we can also hear the teacher's energy, enthusiasm, confidence, perhaps even freedom.

Disengaging from the mind which is used to picking and choosing, agreeing and disagreeing, can feel uncomfortable at first, possibly even unsafe. But sitting silent and still for 40 minutes probably didn't feel comfortable in the beginning, not to mention bowing! It is worth exercising this

ability by way of an experiment, and learning to set aside the active, doing, discriminating mind. It is understandable that we might feel afraid that relaxing our hold on the thinking mind could leave us open to being brainwashed. Nobody should surrender their analyzing mind until they feel ready to do so. But not being daring enough to try something new leaves us vulnerable in another way. So it is suggested that when a teacher leads a group contemplation, the best way to benefit from what is being offered is to temporarily let go of our conditioned preferences and rest in quiet attentiveness. To some this perhaps sounds like suggesting they go to sleep, which of course is not the point (although it could happen). Rather, it is about how to make ourselves as susceptible as possible to truth, to be able to hear beyond the mere surface appearance of the words. The aim is to get the whole message.

In the Buddha's teaching known as the Discourse on Great Blessings,<sup>4</sup> he speaks about the blessings that can arise from participating in *Dhammasavāna*, which means listening to Dharma teachings. In temples in Thailand on the New Moon and Full Moon Observance Days, a teacher typically begins the talk for the occasion with, 'Today is Dhammasavāna day. Please establish your minds in a way fit for receiving these teachings from the Buddha.' And it is not rare to find that when a talk is being delivering, a ritual fan is held in front of the teacher's face, to encourage the assembly to listen to the message being offered and not allow themselves to be distracted by the teacher's outer

appearance. Whether those listening like or dislike the teacher's appearance is irrelevant. A mind that is fit to receive teachings is a mind that is at ease, sensitive and open to hearing something new. So long as we are functioning on the level of liking and disliking, agreeing and disagreeing, we remain on the surface. As with a lake that is disturbed when winds blow over it, we miss seeing a beautiful reflection. To truly appreciate the offering of a Dhamma talk, it helps to be able to rest in inner stillness, fully attentive. The time for analyzing and debating can come later.

In the Discourse on Great Blessings the Buddha also mentions the blessings that can arise from *Dhammasākacchā*, which means sharing in Dhamma dialogue or discussion. In this case we are making use of our analytical faculties, but for most of us they are probably well enough developed already. To be able to put our mental acumen to one side for the sake of being more available, more receptive, calls for a different type of effort. It is not because we are too lazy to think or too timid to explore that we give our active minds a rest. Nor should it be because we hold the view that a peaceful state of mind is an end in itself. It is because we are interested in what the mind looks like, feels like, when it is still. Do we hear in a different way when thinking settles? It is for the sake of being able to tune in to the teachings on more subtle levels, with greater sensitivity, that we temporarily renounce our critical faculties.

In many traditional Theravada monasteries there are depictions of the Buddha's chief disciples, Venerable Sāriputta and Venerable Moggallāna, usually sitting to the left and right of the Buddha. Particularly in the Burmese tradition, these disciples are depicted with their heads tilted to one side, as it might be when listening attentively. When considering the etymology of the Pali word for 'disciple', sāvaka, it is interesting to find that it literally means 'one who hears'. The disposition of a good student is that of one who listens to what the teacher is saying. There is a misperception often found in Mahayana teachings, whereby these venerable disciples are unfortunately referred to as mere 'sound-hearers'. Maybe the etymology is the source of the misunderstanding. Literally, the translation is accurate. However, these noble disciples could hear way beyond the words the Teacher spoke: to the spirit, to the essence, to Dhamma.

#### CONTEMPLATIVE DISCERNMENT

There was an occasion around 1977 or '78 when I was staying in Bangkok at a monastery called Wat Bovoranives, at the same time as Ajahn Chah was staying just outside Bangkok. A senior Western monk who usually lived in a monastery in Australia was visiting Wat Bovoranives at the time. He was particularly keen to pay his respects to Ajahn Chah, and if possible hear a Dhamma talk. Fortunately, we were able to make our way out to where Ajahn Chah was staying near Don Mueang International Airport. A small

group of other people had gathered there that evening, and Ajahn Chah did agree to give a Dhamma talk. As I recall, he started with the usual encouragement to ‘establish your minds in a fitting mode for receiving these teachings.’ But before he went into the body of his talk, he elaborated on what is meant by ‘a mind that is fit to receive teachings’. Those were the days before mobile phones and MP3 recorders, but somebody had placed a tape recorder in front of him. Referring to this recording machine, he said that listening to teachings was like turning on the tape recorder; we should simply trust that the machine will do its work.

Once we turn to inner quiet, we should trust that what we are ready to receive will be received, rest in open-hearted receptivity and allow the peaceful heart to do its work. At some later period when the need arises, the teachings will be there, stored away in the heart. It is not necessary to try and understand or remember what is being said. In fact, all the trying can get in the way. To give up trying does not mean giving up making effort. We are learning to make a different kind of effort. We are alert, we are attentive, we are not abandoning discernment. But this kind of discernment doesn’t disturb our serenity. It is not the same as listening to a lecture, where we are concerned with accumulating information, or as debating or discussing a point of view. This is contemplative discernment.

As with so many aspects of the spiritual journey, we learn as we go along. In the beginning we didn’t know how to sit and walk in meditation, but we learnt. We didn’t know how to

hold our precepts in a way that was neither repressive nor heedlessly following our habits, but we learnt. Likewise, we can learn to listen from a place of stillness that is attentive and interested but doesn't disturb the calm. I heard recently of an experiment conducted on a group of artists, where the participants were asked how they went about appreciating a work of art. Several of them reported that they simply took it all in as one piece; they simply 'received' it. The artists were then filmed close up, with the camera focusing on their eye movements as they looked at the work. Although some of them thought they were appreciating it in an open receptive mode, just taking it all in, in fact their eyes could be seen to be darting all over the place, selecting various aspects to focus on. Scientists have reported that our eyes are regularly making selections at three times per second.

When we understand this, we can appreciate the tradition of gently closing the eyes when listening to a Dhamma talk. Going inwards does not have to be a gesture of denial of the relevance of human relations. Nor does it have to mean that we are trying to escape into our heads, where we might feel more comfortable. The invitation for us to close our eyes and listen fully to what the teacher is saying, is a way of entering our inner temple, the place to which we take our deepest concerns, our heart concerns. If we have the opportunity to hear teachings from those who wish us to find freedom from suffering and are willing to share their understanding, then of course we want to receive

their offering. If we can learn to listen deeply to our outer teachers, perhaps we will meet our inner teacher. Probably we will find that all true teachers tell us the same thing: hold carefully, but don't cling to anything or any view. If we get that message, it will indeed be a great blessing.

Thank you very much for your attention.

# 7.

## FREE FROM ASSUMPTIONS

*Enlightenment can happen whether sitting, standing, walking or lying down. Some people think a lot, and when they sit in meditation they are not peaceful, but through contemplation of happiness and suffering they can still come to know truth.*

AJAHN CHAH

Readers of the Buddha's discourses will have regularly come across words like tethered, bound, chained, fettered.<sup>12</sup> Such words point powerfully to feelings of limitation, of being constrained. Since the Buddha wanted us to feel encouraged on our spiritual journey, why did he use negative terms so evocative of painful feelings? Because truly wise beings know that only when we see that we are the ones responsible for creating such perceptions of limitation, will we realize that we are also the ones with the power to stop creating them. So long as we still believe that external conditions are to blame for our suffering, we keep looking outside for something or someone to save us. Having spent several years searching outside, the Buddha himself found that such a pursuit was pointless; it only serves to obscure our potential for awakening.

On occasions when a more positive message was called for, the Buddha also spoke about the state of imperturbable peace which he had realized, an irreversible state of inherent well-being that is effortlessly sustainable. And he made it clear that the possibility of achieving this state of well-being is available to all those who cultivate their hearts and learn to see clearly. However, over and again he came back to pointing to that state with which we are all already familiar, the experience of constricted being, of limitation; in the Pali language, *dukkha*.

#### WHAT WE ASSUME TO BE TRUE

There is one particular form of limitation to which most of us are prone, and which I would like to pick up as a theme for contemplation. I am speaking about the habit of holding blindly to assumptions about reality. In many cases it is these uninspected assumptions which are the very cause of our living in a painful state of perpetual contraction, of fear. The task of learning to see clearly how and when we are holding to these troublesome assumptions is a truly important one.

The short extract above from a translation of teachings by Ajahn Chah, points to assumptions some people hold about how enlightenment happens. There are many dedicated meditators who cling to an idea that the attainment of enlightenment depends entirely on sitting meditation. We can spend a lot of energy trying to become enlightened, but if we haven't yet seen how we cling to such under-

lying assumptions, our efforts will sadly fail us. Instead of attaining an increased ability to live our lives fully – both the joyous and the challenging aspects – we end up more limited. Rather than coming to a softening, opening, trusting relationship with life through our commitment to the spiritual exercises, we find ourselves feeling more obstructed.

Besides commenting on how enlightenment happens, Ajahn Chah might also have been referring to the views people often have about what constitutes ‘real practice’. There are many who cling passionately to the assumption that doing the real practice means spending long hours sitting in a painful cross-legged posture – as if going for a walk couldn’t be a form of meditation. The Buddha and many of the awakened disciples used walking meditation as a regular form of practice. Ajahn Chah is pointing out here that all our activity can be included in practice: formal sitting, taking a walk, talking with a friend, cooking or writing.

When we are not careful, uninspected assumptions about reality increase hindrances on the path. If we have looked closely at our views about practice and decided that we should spend more time sitting, that is fine. We are then in a position to take responsibility for the results of our actions. It is when we are not aware of what motivates us that we risk being caught in assumptions about ourselves, each other and the world, and cause unnecessary extra suffering. Instead of doing our own practice, we might easily get lost

in trying to become like somebody else, imitating what worked for them. For practice to really ‘work’, we need to know that we are the ones responsible for creating this tangle of confusion and be deeply interested in untangling it, instead of looking for someone else to take responsibility. All of us – those just starting out and those who have been meditating for many years – are therefore called to keep looking, ever more closely, at any views to which we might be clinging, and find effective ways of letting go of them.

#### LIFE'S QUESTIONS

This teaching by Ajahn Chah is a gift particularly appreciated by those who find it a struggle to make their minds peaceful in formal sitting meditation. He is telling us that we don’t have to feel guilty if we can’t make our minds settle when we sit. Sitting meditation works well for some people; for others it might be more appropriate to travel this journey in a different sort of vehicle, and he refers here to wise contemplation. If we endlessly struggle to make our mind peaceful by focusing on the end of the nose, but the mind refuses to become peaceful, it is fine to carefully turn attention around and look directly at the unpeaceful activity itself. Instead of trying to stop thinking, skilfully direct the thinking towards those concerns which are genuinely relevant to you. For instance, why is it that we keep creating a problem out of happiness and suffering? Why do we keep making problems out of life? The Buddha and the great disciples lived in the same world as we do, they encountered

difficulties just as we do, but they didn't suffer. What are we doing that makes the difference?

Whatever our way of life might be, whether as a monk or nun in a monastery, or a householder, we are all regularly confronted with life's deep questions. We can't escape those questions. We can ignore them, but they are still there in our hearts. We can try very hard to have only happiness, but we will still end up in a conflict between happiness and suffering. Failing to receive our heart's questions into awareness can push feelings of conflict further into unawareness. And when conflicting conditions persist for a long time, they can give rise to another one of those underlying assumptions; that is, that there is something really wrong with me because I am struggling. We might be somewhat aware of such a negative self-view, but nevertheless keep fighting to overcome it by concentrating on the meditation object, hoping the view will go away. If we find that such effort is fuelling the conflict, we need another approach. When we shine the light of wise contemplation directly onto the assumption that there is something inherently wrong with me, perhaps we will discover that it is the way we are holding views which creates the perception of having problems.

We are all conditioned with views about our being better, equal or worse than others, and trying to eradicate all such views is likely to be fruitless. On the other hand, changing the way we relate to those views can be transformative. Contemplating our views, listening to them, learning not

to automatically judge them, helps relax our grasp on them. Then we realize that we can trust ourselves to find our own way out of suffering. It is a great relief when we come to see how we are actually doing the clinging, and that we can choose to stop doing it. While sitting meditation and trying to make the mind peaceful might not have produced such an insight, maybe a more contemplative approach will work. Genuine confidence arises with such a recognition.

I have spoken elsewhere about developing the skill of contemplation, but it bears repeating. Applying contemplative enquiry is not the same as following the everyday undisciplined thinking mind. If we are contemplating a question such as ‘Why do I continually set up happiness and suffering against each other?’ we are aware not just of the question that is being asked, but also of the space around the question, the silence out of which the question arises. We can stop and start the thinking process; we are not being dragged along by it. In contemplation we can intentionally ask a question and then feel what happens. Just as we might cast a pebble into a lake and watch as the ripples spread out, we can feel what happens when we drop our important question into whole body-mind awareness. But to be able to truly receive our whole body-mind response entails inhibiting any habits of disappearing back up into our heads in search of conceptual understanding. The response which interests us in contemplation is one that is felt, not something that is figured out. With compulsive, conditioned thinking, the way we usually ask ourselves questions leads

to internal arguing back and forth between views, until the mind feels drained of energy. Contemplative enquiry, on the other hand, generates energy and ease.

#### INWARDLY ILLITERATE

Recently I have been considering why it was that back in the 60's and 70's, so many of us suffered so intensely as we embarked on our spiritual search. I can see now that at the time I was really spiritually illiterate. I could read books, but I couldn't read inwardly. I couldn't see the views to which I was clinging or what was motivating me, for example, the self-view that gives rise to a sense of entitlement. I still find it embarrassing to think about how I approached things. Sadly, many of us didn't even survive to be able to reflect on our uninspected attitudes. I recognize now the naivety that shaped many of us. We had read books like Paul Reps' *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, or Alan Watts' *The Way Of Zen*; we had been wowed by pictures of Tibetan thangkas; we had heard about what can happen when you practice Theravadan meditation techniques; but how did we approach these venerable traditions and techniques? A lot of us merely assumed that it was going to be easy, and that all we had to do was turn up at the monastery and get the goodies. It was a type of spiritual plundering, like our ancestors who occupied Burma and came away with bejewelled Buddha images to take back to their homes in Britain, but in our case we were looking to 'come away with' enlightenment. No wonder we suffered so much.

Approaching spiritual masters who had spent their lives dedicated to purifying their hearts from defilements, and assuming that we were entitled to take whatever we could get, was a perfect way of developing disappointment. We were compulsive consumers, but didn't see it.

Some teachers misread the zeal of their young Western aspirants and perceived our intense energy as spiritual ability. They had never witnessed anyone suffering from such a desperate condition of deep alienation and acute unhappiness. In some monasteries Westerners were given special conditions; they might be excused from joining in with work projects to repair the meditation huts, for instance. Or perhaps they were allowed to skip chanting because they were so serious about their meditation practice, and were given a special dispensation. Ajahn Chah was not at all impressed with any expectations we had about being special, and gave out no such dispensations.

There was one particularly notable occasion when a Western visitor to Wat Nanachat requested an interview with the abbot. He presented himself to the teacher and began by boldly asking, 'So, what is it Wat Nanachat has to offer me?' This fellow was unaware of his conditioning as a compulsive consumer and sadly allowed a whole set of unhelpful assumptions to get in his way.

## RAMPANT CONSUMERISM

The vast majority of cultures around the world these days accept the assumption that to ‘acquire more’ is to somehow increase our personal value – to consume is good. I did a Google search on ‘rampant consumerism’ and came across a paper called *The Gospel of Consumption*.<sup>13</sup> The article described intentional efforts in the early part of the last century to create a society which was in a state of permanent dissatisfaction, so that producers would have a limitless market for their products. As a result of acceptance by society of such ill-considered social conditioning, most people now drive themselves in endless pursuit of gratification, consuming all they can. They eventually abandon any hope of genuine contentment and, like lemmings, dive off the cliff into an ocean of complacent mediocrity. Because of the collective agreement to collude in this way, most of society is now occupied in slaving away to acquire the means to consume more: material goods, services, information. This blind habitual behaviour becomes a disposition, so that almost everyone ends up caught in constantly consuming. Even sleep is spoken of as something that we either do or don’t ‘get’ enough of. Behind this particular disposition is the belief that one day we will have an experience or acquire a possession which will give us the satisfaction we believe we are lacking. But this consumerist attitude of needing to perpetually acquire more is nothing more than being blindly caught in the vortex of deluded desire.

If we contemplate what is really happening here, and instead of merely following desires apply mindfulness, sense restraint and wise reflection, maybe we will find that we can look craving directly in the face - and then discover that at least for a moment, we have already let go of craving and realized that there was nothing lacking from the beginning. The consumerist attitude is a con. The unexamined assumption of the validity of the consumerist view is only there to keep us dissatisfied and enslaved. With wise contemplation we can free ourselves from this view, and see that what creates the impression of something lacking is our heedlessly following desire. If we allow the energy of desire to return to the source, to remain at home in the heart, instead of always going out after objects, the sense of dissatisfaction will cease.

#### QUESTIONING THE SENSE OF SELF

A more subtle set of assumptions is to be found in how we hold the sense of self, the sense of who we experience ourselves to be. When asked who or what they are, many people would probably refer to their thoughts, their emotions or possibly their bodies, or maybe a combination of them. But if we assume our sense of self is to be found by identifying with our thoughts, emotions and physicality, what happens when we grow old and these things don't function as we would wish? Does that mean our sense of self collapses? Is suffering in old age an obligation? That is a great question. It is one of the questions that occurred

to the Buddha-to-be at around the age of 29 and motivated him to set out on his spiritual journey.

Towards the end of his life, as Ajahn Chah's health was deteriorating and his physical faculties were starting to fade, he helpfully described what was happening for him. He spoke about knowing that he would intend to say something like, 'Sumedho, come here'. But when he opened his mouth the words he heard himself say were 'Ānando, come here'. However, he said this didn't disturb him in the slightest, since he knew it was simply a matter of the physical faculties falling apart. The knowing itself, the awareness, was undisturbed. So where was Ajahn Chah's sense of self located? Or maybe you think he didn't have one!

Is our sense of self a fixed thing? Generally speaking, most of us tend to assume so, and we invest a massive amount of time and energy in promoting it. But which specific self do we think is permanent or real? It doesn't take a lot of introspection to see that there are many 'selves': the happy me, the unhappy me, the alert, together me, the confused, exhausted me. Which one is really real? From a contemplative perspective they all have their validity, yet none of them is ultimate. Ajahn Chah had a series of strokes and his wiring became scrambled, but his awareness remained undisturbed because he knew that none of the conditioned activity of his mind was who he really was.

For unawakened beings, whenever our sense of self is threatened or challenged, we suffer. For awakened beings

there can be no suffering, since they see beyond any sense of self; they know that all thoughts, emotions and physical conditions are simply the continually changing activity of nature. Their sense of who they are is not to be found in the changing conditions.

If we haven't looked deeply into the perceptions we hold about who and what we are, we readily accept the collective assumptions fashionable at any given time. During earlier periods of evolution, human beings seem to have found their sense of identity in terms of the tribe they belonged to, or in their family. More recently, identity has been found in terms of the nation to which people feel they belong. And these days, for many, it is sought by identifying with our individual ego structures: personal patterns of thinking, emoting and physicality. From a contemplative perspective, all this activity of 'self-seeking' can be studied, felt, observed and, hopefully, eventually, understood as simply conditions arising and ceasing. We gradually learn not to cling to any of it. We keep going deeper in our questioning and enquire: in what is all this arising and ceasing taking place? Can we sense the space out of which all this activity appears and into which it disappears? If we train our spiritual faculties<sup>6</sup> in this way, there is surely a better chance that when our physical faculties start to disintegrate, our perspective on reality won't disintegrate with them.

In the meantime we can use formal meditation and daily-life experiences to investigate all these perceptions of self-hood. How 'real' are they? How permanent are they?

Is there a dimension of mind that is free to witness the various ‘selves’ appearing and disappearing? What happens when we try to find a self in the witnessing, just-knowing dimension? Remember, these questions are an invitation to contemplate, to go deeper, they are not questions to be answered conceptually. Following the example of the Buddha-to-be, we embrace these questions and let them guide us until we reach direct understanding.

The first Western woman to join our Sangha in Britain as a nun was Sister Rocana, previously known as Pat Stoll. In a conversation about practice with Ajahn Chah, Pat Stoll once asked the question: ‘Since the Buddha taught *anatta*, non-self, how can we practice concentration meditation? Surely, when we are concentrating, there needs to be a sense of somebody there doing the focusing on the meditation object.’ Ajahn Chah’s reply was wonderfully succinct: ‘When we are developing concentration meditation (*samādhi*) we work with a sense of self. When we are developing insight meditation (*vipassanā*) we work with non-self. And when we really know what’s what, we are beyond both self and non-self.’ If we try to grasp conceptually what Ajahn Chah was pointing at in this statement, we are likely just to give ourselves a headache. This type of pointing is directed not at the head but at the heart, at awareness itself.

#### SELF IMPORTANCE

A few years after our monastic community first moved from Thailand to Britain, a series of discussions took place about

our style of morning and evening chanting. I remember this particularly well because I was not included in the discussions. Various community members thought we should take the opportunity to ‘correct’ the inaccuracies in our pronunciation of the Pali language. Personally, I found our traditional daily chanting an enjoyable and significant part of the monastic routine, and had no problem with employing what is sometimes referred to as poetic licence. There didn’t seem to me to be any need to ‘correct’ our chanting. It seemed fine that when intoning the Pali words for the sake of recitation, we didn’t have to adhere so strictly to rules which would quite rightly apply if speaking the Pali language.

When rumours started circulating that a new style of chanting had been developed, I can’t say I was pleased. The truth was that I felt thoroughly miffed that our beautiful chanting was being replaced with something in which I had had no say. As soon as I heard the new style, I immediately disliked it. It sounded to my ear as if it had been created in a laboratory; much of the warmth and rhythm had been replaced with something that a computer could have come up with.

Around the time I was pondering on how to express my disappointment, I came across an article describing what happened in a Christian monastery when the Normans took over Britain. One of the ways in which the new leaders established control over the people was to replace the Saxon abbots of the monasteries with Norman abbots.

These new abbots insisted on introducing their own style of chanting. In at least one monastery a group of rebel monks refused to abide by the ruling and insisted on chanting in the old style. It seems that no amount of persuasion could make them budge. So it was decided to employ the royal archers to force the change. As the monks gathered for chanting in the sanctuary and commenced their 'old' style, the archers up in the gallery started picking them off with arrows. Reflecting on this lesson from history, I decided the more sensible attitude would be to let go of the assumption that I was entitled to be consulted on everything, and accord with what our abbot was asking.

If we develop our potential for inner enquiry and not just inner proliferation, we find we have a valuable tool. It is a tool that we can apply in the art of contemplation and make use of when addressing life's challenges. We don't have to be so afraid of the feelings of frustration that accompany life's dilemmas. We are allowed not to know how to handle a situation. We are developing the skill of holding dilemmas carefully, sensitively, with interest and patience, and quietly waiting for a solution to reveal itself. And when dilemmas are resolved in this manner, it doesn't feel that 'I' solved them. Humility protects the heart from laying claim to something it doesn't own.

It is wise not to wait until we are faced with a major dilemma before developing this skill, but rather to build up strength gradually. Then, if life presents us with a major dilemma, we are more likely to be able to meet it. We might even

see it as a gift instead of a disaster. On one level we could feel as if the predicament we find ourselves in is absolutely impossible; there is no way out! But on a deeper level, there can be a quiet confidence telling us it is OK to feel that way; we don't have to act on that assumption. Very likely we really want someone else to help us out, 'If only ...', yet we find ourselves all alone. Or we feel it is up to us to make the right decision, but in all honesty can't be sure what the right decision is. With a well-developed ability to hold dilemmas, we can feel the frustration and let it be; no need to make anything out of it. Feeling frustrated is only a problem if we say it is.

Recently I saw an interview with the frontman of a famous rock group. I was genuinely moved by the humility that he expressed. These days this group regularly has 60,000 adoring fans crowding into a stadium to see them; they have been performing now for nearly 20 years. I thought back to how Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison didn't even make it to 30; this frontman is approaching 40. In the interview he spoke about the major dilemma he had had to face as he struggled to find his real self. There was the self he experienced himself to be when he was on stage for 90 minutes receiving intense adulation; and then only a few minutes later, another self was manifest, the one he was when he was a father with his family. What resolved the dilemma for him was learning the skill of being able to sit with these challenging feelings of frustration, of not knowing, and to wait and trust until awareness opened up,

and he found that it was perfectly possible to accommodate both perceptions of self. They were both valid perceptions. There need not be any conflict. His evident modesty confirmed that he really knew what he was talking about. Also, his commitment to an inner life means that he does an hour of yoga a day, fasts one day a week and avoids alcohol and sugar. In other words, he has a committed relationship with his inner contemplative.

#### ASSUMING NOTHING

When the consequences of our past unawareness become apparent, it is wise to welcome them. We don't have to allow them to shape our lives. I hope that this contemplation on uninspected assumptions means we will stop assuming too much about anything and learn to question everything. If we come across a 'no-go' area in our minds, that is a particularly good place to spend time. Only fundamentalists countenance no-go areas. As followers of the Buddha we are encouraged to go everywhere, to look everywhere. And don't be afraid that a keenness to enquire will damage faith. An initial, uninspected sort of faith can feel threatened by our asking our heart's real questions, but genuine faith, reliable faith, is strengthened by enquiry. It certainly matters that we ask in the right way and at the right time. These important questions deserve to be treated with respect. It would be good if we bowed down to them.

Thank you very much for your attention.



# 8.

## EPILOGUE – BE LIKE A TREE

*A Guided Meditation*

Those who regularly read or listen to my Dhamma talks will know that I rarely give formal meditation instruction. There are a number of reasons for this, not the least being that we are all so different. It is true that there are basic principles which apply to everyone – when we cling we create the causes for suffering; when we let go we undo those causes – but just how we arrive at letting go differs from person to person. To suggest that there is only one way to practise properly is to underestimate the complexity of our human condition. And I feel it is unkind and unwise to ignore the individual strengths and limitations of seekers on this journey. I have experimented over the years with a variety of formal meditation techniques, and also with various body awareness and conscious breathing exercises. What it comes down to, in my view, is trial and error; we try to do the best we can and learn from our mistakes. When our actions of body and speech are guided by a commitment to a life of integrity, hopefully the consequences of any mistakes we do make will not be too serious. On this occasion, since it has been specifically suggested that sharing what I

have found works could be helpful, I am happy to attempt to do so.

When I first started out on this path, the effort I was making would best be characterized as controlling. All deluded egos love compulsive controlling, and I was quite good at it. It suited me to hear the teacher speak about sitting meditation as an exercise in concentrating on the breath, and walking meditation as concentrating on the placing, lifting, placing, lifting, of the feet. I was ready and able to apply myself with gusto to these exercises, and I had some interesting results. The benefit of those early efforts was evident in the enthusiasm I felt for pursuing the practice. However, the limitations quickly showed up when the initial delights which can come with a beginner's mind faded away. To progress beyond the fascinating new perspectives which manifest when attention is concentrated required letting go of habits of controlling. A big part of me didn't feel so good about letting go. I liked holding on to 'my way' of doing things. But an ability to concentrate and control is not enough when it comes to meeting the many and varied obstructions we encounter on the way. This fits with what the Buddha teaches us about the Four Right Efforts.<sup>14</sup> To apply the same kind of effort, regardless of the nature of the apparent obstruction, is not likely to be successful.

In all the different approaches to practice which I have tried, the single most helpful meditation instruction I have received is Ajahn Sumedho's teachings on listening to the sound of silence.<sup>11, 15</sup> It was a relief to discover that however

compulsive one's controlling tendencies might be, the meditation object of the sound of silence remained constant and undisturbed. Unlike the rhythm of the body breathing, which can become irregular if we pay attention to it in the wrong way, the sound of silence is always there, wonderfully just so.

It turns out, however, that even this practice of listening to the sound of silence is not always enough on its own. I have found that for many who use this practice, it is quite possible to be paying attention to this subtle inner sound, yet be thoroughly out of touch with the rest of the body and the world around us. It is also possible to attend to this background sound and remain very rigid in how we hold the overall body-mind. Further, as a result of having been taught for years to concentrate, pay attention and focus, many of us have ended up with a very narrow, cramped perspective on life, our field of awareness having collapsed. And all our efforts to fix our perceived problems can lock us into a perpetual 'doing' mode, always going somewhere to get something to make ourselves better. But addressing these symptoms of imbalance does not have to be an onerous chore. I see it as like inheriting a big wonderful house which is in need of refurbishing and redecorating. It can be a lot of fun to commit yourself to such a project.

When I look back over my years on this spiritual journey, I see six key prompts or suggestions which have emerged as significant 'signs'. I find these six 'signs' or 'prompts' serve as helpful reminders and support for an embodied presence. The recollection of these six prompts constitutes

what these days I would call my formal practice. A typical session of sitting could involve intentionally bringing these six prompts to mind and dwelling for a while on each one, and then, depending on which point happens to attract particular attention, resting there for an extended period. After I invest in these prompts during formal practice, the mere mention of one of them in the context of daily life can effect a helpful shift back towards balance. And this is a practice that we can take anywhere. No special conditions are needed.

Perhaps I should mention here that personally I have very little interest in special experiences or special states of mind. What does interest me is the possibility of developing a quality of awareness that is able to meet whatever life offers. Is it possible to be buffeted by the eight worldly winds<sup>16</sup> – praise and blame, gain and loss, pleasure and pain, honour and insignificance – without being blown over by them?

The six signs or prompts are: aligning, softening, broadening, gently listening, simply receiving and the just-so reality. So let's look at these in detail.

#### ALIGNING

Establishing a sense of embodied ‘alignment’ is similar to what some people do with ‘body-scanning’ meditation, but in this case it aims particularly at a perception of being upright and grounded. Try experimenting with suggesting to your mind, ‘Be like a tree’. Consider how the upper

branches and leaves of a tree are reaching for the light, while at the same time its roots are firmly planted in the ground, and both are absorbing essential nutriment. Recollect the Buddha's discourse on meditation on breathing in and breathing out,<sup>17</sup> where he begins by describing how the meditator *goes to a quiet place, takes a seat under a tree, sitting upright, holding the body erect, establishes mindfulness...* For those of us fortunate and agile enough to be able to develop the full- or half-lotus postures, that is good. But the rest of us may apply the principle of 'uprightness', to whatever posture we are able to adopt.

Meditating on this first sign means cultivating a familiarity with a set of specific points within the body which conduce to a sense of being aligned. Begin by bringing attention to the area at the top of the back of your head and feeling the sensations there. Imagine you are being lifted up from that point. As you visualize that, also feel your chin and see if it is being tucked in just a little. Inhibit any inclination to make it happen intentionally by using muscles. See if imagination alone can trigger a subtle shift, with your head neither falling forward nor tilting back.

Now, moving down the body, bring attention to the feeling of the tip of the tongue as it rests gently touching the roof of the mouth behind the front teeth. Remember this is an effort to 'align'. We are using our imagination to direct attention to a sensation. Once you are clear that you can really *feel* the tip of your tongue, not just think about it, go

back again to the top of the back of the head, then return to the tip of the tongue. Back and forth, slowly, gently.

Now move awareness to your shoulders. Bring to mind an image of carrying two heavy buckets of wet sand. Feel your shoulders drop down, way down, and allow the chest to open. When we are misaligned we easily fall into a habit of stressing our tongue within the mouth cavity, clenching our jaw, holding our shoulders up and cramping our chests close, even while we are meditating! Not only do these habits compound the state of stress, but they also waste a lot of energy.

With awareness of the sensation of the top of the back of your head, with a feeling for the tip of the tongue gently touching, with the shoulders relaxed and chest resting open, feel now for the weight your body is exerting downwards onto the cushion or seat where you are sitting. Without forcing anything, allow the body to rock very slightly forward and then backward, and then forward again, until you find the point of maximum downward pressure. Visualize completely flattening your seat just by sitting on it. This is exercising ‘aligning’.

#### SOFTENING

Due to unawareness, most of us grow up gradually accumulating a backlog of unlived life. Sadly, nobody has taught us the difference between the natural pain which all beings experience, and the suffering which occurs as a result of our clinging to experience. As a defence against this increas-

ingly difficult to deal with suffering, we fabricate forms of rigidity. If by middle age we are not already alert to these defences, from about age 40 onwards a type of emotional rigor mortis starts to set in, with a dispiriting insensitivity. Well before middle age many people have already compromised their natural sensitivity, and as a result they feel chronically obstructed when it comes to simply feeling what they feel. Sometimes meditators wonder why, after they have been making so much effort for so long, they are still so unhappy. Being imprisoned behind these rigid defences against denied life might be the cause. Softening helps with this. What we are aiming for is a softening of attitude, but softening in the body is a practical and effective place to begin. To cultivate conscious softening, try suggesting '*Be like water*' to your mind. When you gently immerse your hand in water there is almost no resistance. This perception of no resistance contrasts with our habits of struggling for and against life.

Now bring awareness once more to your head; this time feel your eyes and invite them to soften. Imagine your eyes floating gently, comfortably, at ease, as if they have been set free from having always to be staring at something. Feel your forehead soften, feel your jaw soften. And, very importantly, feel your belly soften. Being soft is not being weak. Flowing water is powerful, yet it can accord with everything it encounters. This is exercising 'softening'.

## BROADENING

From an early age we were told to pay attention and to concentrate on whatever is put in front of us, be it a book, a monitor or a TV screen. No doubt we became very skilled at accumulating information in this way, but an unintended side effect may be to end up feeling as if we had only a very small cramped space to live in, with our subjective sense of the world becoming painfully closed and limited. At least in part, this is why so many people reach a point where they feel they can't take it any more: 'I haven't got enough room to move!' But this 'room' is a fabrication, an imposition on awareness that we are *doing*.

This perception of the personal space which we occupy is not a fixed thing; we can work on dissolving those perceived limitations. Using our imagination, we can expand the field of awareness. We can intentionally generate a sense of broadening by suggesting to the mind, '*Be edgeless*'. As an experiment, bring attention to the temperature of the air touching your skin. Then try feeling a few centimetres outside your skin. Is it possible to sense the temperature of the air around your body? Does it become warmer or cooler the further away you get? Or experiment in the same way with sound. You can hear sounds immediately next to you; now try listening to sounds a bit further away, then further away again. Imagine listening, sensing, a very long way away. What we are feeling for here is the ability to relax the sense of being defined by a perception of rigid, limited space. Using our imagination, we can create an

image of a field of awareness expanding beyond the immediate sensation of our body, outward, ever increasing, with the suggestion, ‘Be edgeless’. This is a field of awareness vast enough to accommodate all of life. This is exercising ‘broadening’.

#### GENTLY LISTENING

If you can hear the high-frequency internal ringing of the sound of silence, by gently listening to this sound you can discover a different way of paying attention. When we send attention out through our eyes, we easily narrow our field of awareness. We often equate paying attention with excluding everything other than the object on which we are focusing. This has its uses when intense concentration is what is called for, but it is distinctly unhelpful when this way of paying attention becomes our everyday mode of operating. It leads to an insensitive, closed-off type of attention, not a skilful, sensitive attunement. If we want to be able to see beyond the deluding stories that we have hitherto believed, we need to be able to tune in sensitively to what life is presenting to us. Being closed off and insensitive is the last thing we need.

Turning attention to our ears and listening, away from our eyes and looking, can relax the way in which we pay attention. Listening is a 360 degree application of attention. Listening is less ‘doing’ and more ‘allowing’; less ‘selecting’ and more ‘according with’. To support easing out of the picking and choosing mode, try suggesting to your mind,

*'Gently listen'.* Intentionally listening in this way to the sound of silence is cultivating a new disposition or attitude towards experience. Instead of always controlling what appears in awareness and trying to 'get something' out of experience, we simply open to what at this moment is available, being willing to learn. This is exercising 'gentle listening'.

#### SIMPLY RECEIVING

When we have learnt to relax the way in which we pay attention and be available to learn from everything that life offers us, this means we have already loosened our grasp on compulsive tendencies to control. If we keep checking to see whether we are still controlling or keep trying not to control, that means we are still caught in controlling. It is only when we have grown tired of deluded ego's dishonest games that our compulsive tendencies to want to be in charge fall away. We don't drop them by trying to drop them. Letting go happens when we see with insight that clinging is fruitless. This is why the Buddha said, *It is because of not seeing two things that you stay stuck in samsāra: not seeing suffering and not seeing the causes of suffering.* Trying to let go only perpetuates the struggle. Rather, make the suggestion, '*Simply receive*' to your mind. Trust that this receptivity has within it the potential to see clearly, to understand, and that it is understanding which brings about letting go. Don't be afraid that cultivating such sensitive receptivity will lead to a kind of passive selfishness. When there is such a quality

of awareness, any expression of selfishness is more likely to be seen for what it is: a tired and painful limitation that we are imposing on awareness.

#### THE JUST-SO REALITY

What we are being receptive to is the just-so reality of this moment. If there is fear, receive fear into an expanded field of awareness and allow fear to be ‘just so’. If there is anger, receive the anger and allow it to be ‘just so’. If there is wanting, not-wanting, liking, disliking, receive it all and accept that it is all just so. There are causes for the conditions of this moment to appear as they do here and now. Our task is to develop the quality of attention which means we can receive this just-so reality honestly, nothing added and nothing taken away. We are not programming ourselves to believe in the just-so reality. As with the other prompts, the suggestion to recollect the just-so reality supports honest, careful, receptivity of this moment.

#### FINDING YOUR WAY

Over the years I have witnessed many meditators trying to squeeze themselves into forms which clearly don’t fit, so perhaps some will find it helpful to know there is more than one way to climb a mountain. Parents lovingly encourage their children to develop according to their abilities. Alert to the individual needs of their children, parents give them permission to experiment and to discover for themselves what works. Wise yoga teachers warn their students against

using force as they become acquainted with the *āsanas*. Hopefully, wise meditation teachers will also tune into the individual abilities and needs of their students, giving them the freedom to find out what works and encouraging them to ask what is it that, for them, truly nourishes selfless confidence.

Thank you very much for your attention.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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 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.



# NOTES

- [1] *A Dhammapada For Contemplation*, Aruno Publications, 2017

[https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/  
a-dhammapada-for-contemplation?language=English](https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/a-dhammapada-for-contemplation?language=English)

- [2] *Ajahn Thate (1902-1994)*

One of the most influential Thai Forest Tradition monks of the last century.

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/thai/thate/thateauto.html>

- [3] *MN 29, Mahā-Sāropama Sutta: The Longer Heartwood-simile Discourse*

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.029.than.html>

- [4] *Snp 2.4, Mahā-Maṅgala Sutta: Blessings*

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.04.nara.html>

- [5] *Dhutaṅga vatṭṭa*

Voluntary ascetic practices that practitioners may undertake from time to time or as a long-term commitment in order to cultivate renunciation and contentment, and to stir up energy. For the monks, there are thirteen such practices: (1) using only patched-up robes; (2) using only one set of three robes; (3) going for alms; (4) not by-passing any donors on one's alms path;

(5) eating no more than one meal a day; (6) eating only from the alms-bowl; (7) refusing any food offered after the almsround; (8) living in the forest; (9) living under a tree; (10) living under the open sky; (11) living in a cemetery; (12) being content with whatever dwelling one has; (13) not lying down.

[6] *Five spiritual faculties*

*Saddhā* (faith, conviction), *viriya* (persistence, energy, interest), *sati* (mindfulness), *saṃādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (discernment).

[7] *Master Hsu Yun (1840-1959)*

One of the most influential Chinese Buddhists of the last two centuries. See his autobiography *Empty Cloud*. Died aged 119 years.

[8] *Seeing the Way, Volume 2*

[https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/seeing-the-way-vol-two?  
language=English](https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/seeing-the-way-vol-two?language=English)

[9] *The Four Noble Truths* by Ajahn Sumedho

[https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/the-four-noble-truths?  
language=English](https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/the-four-noble-truths?language=English)

[10] *Dhammapada verse 160, “Attā hi attano nātho...”*

Truly it is ourselves  
that we depend upon;  
how could we really  
depend upon another?

When we reach the state  
of self-reliance  
we find a rare refuge.

[11] *Inner Listening* by Ajahn Amaro

<https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/inner-listening?language=English>

[12] *Dhammapada* verse 276

The Awakened Ones  
can but point the way;  
we must make the effort ourselves.  
Those who reflect wisely  
and enter the path are freed  
from the fetters of Mara.

[13] *The Gospel of Consumption*

<https://orionmagazine.org/article/the-gospel-of-consumption/>

[14] *The Four Right Efforts*

- The effort to establish as yet unarisen wholesome states of mind.
- The effort to protect already arisen wholesome states of mind.
- The effort to remove already arisen unwholesome states of mind.
- The effort to avoid the arising of as yet unarisen unwholesome states of mind.

[15] *The Sound of Silence* by Ajahn Sumedho

[https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/  
anthology-vol-4-the-sound-of-silence?language=English](https://forestsangha.org/teachings/books/anthology-vol-4-the-sound-of-silence?language=English)

[16] *AN 8.6, Lokavipatti Sutta: The Failings of the World*

The Eight Worldly Dhammas are described as: gain and loss, status and disgrace, praise and blame, pleasure and pain.

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/an/an08/an08.006.than.html>

[17] *MN 118, Ānāpānasati Sutta: Mindfulness of Breathing*

<https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/mn/mn.118.than.html>



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