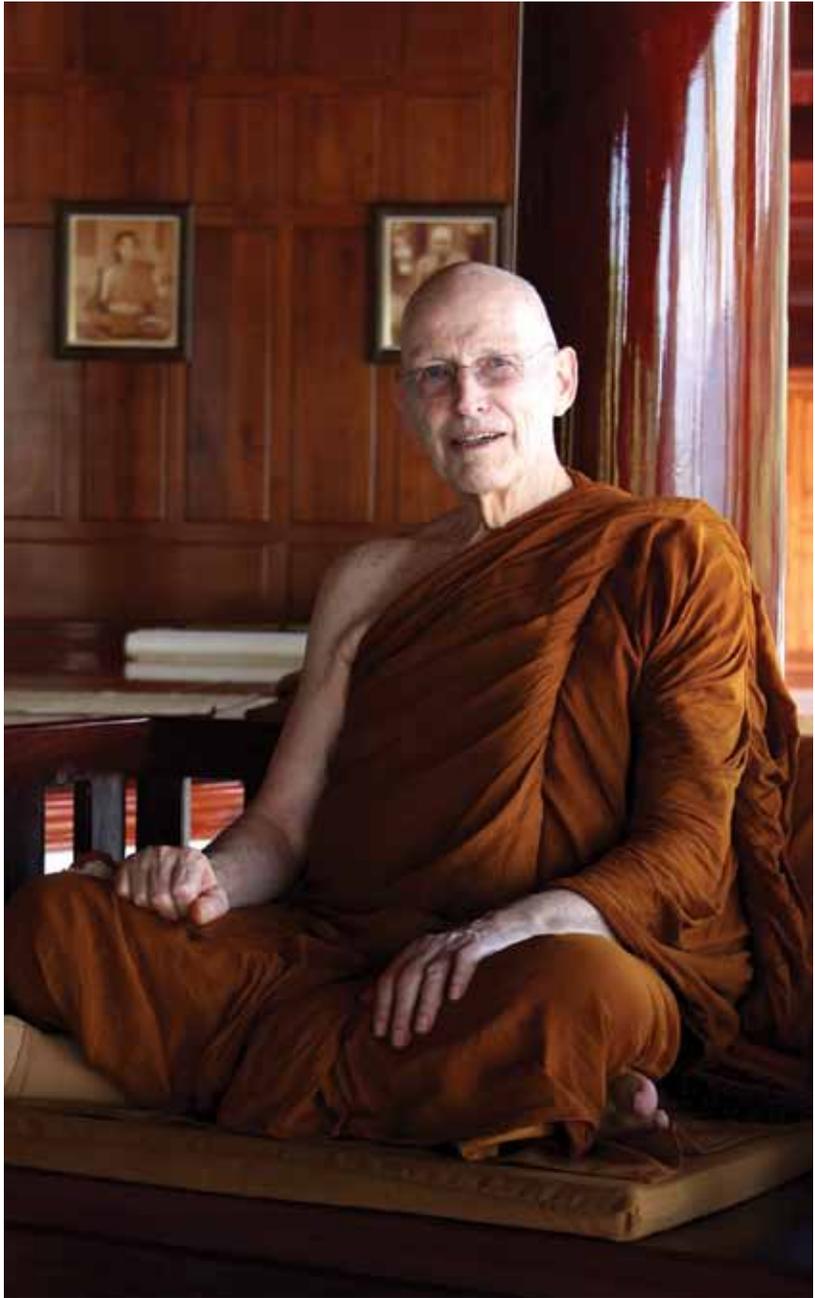


**Ajahn  
Sumedho**

THE  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 5

# The Wheel of Truth





**Ajahn  
Sumedho** | THE  
ANTHOLOGY



AMARAVATI  
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VOLUME 5

# The Wheel of Truth

*The Wheel of Truth*  
*The Ajahn Sumedho Anthology*

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ISBN: 978-1-78432-013-3

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# Contents

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Preface  | xi        |
| <b>I The Ground of the Dhamma</b>                                      | <b>1</b>  |
| 1 Meditation on <i>Dukkha</i>  | 3         |
| 2 Training in Thailand   | 9         |
| 3 Mind Conditions the World  | 17        |
| 4 Going for Refuge   | 23        |
| 5 The Right Attitude of the Meditator                                  | 25        |
| 6 Gratitude for Luang Por Chah   | 33        |
| 7 Personal Responsibility and the Nuclear Age                          | 41        |
| 8 An Awakened Response to Violence:<br>The Natural Purity of the Mind  | 51        |
| 9 Gratitude to Parents   | 57        |
| 10 Death is Like This  | 75        |
| 11 On Messiahs and Other Matters                                       | 79        |
| 12 There's No Place Like Here:<br>An Interview at Abhayagiri Monastery | 85        |
| <b>II Truth is an Open Door</b>  | <b>89</b> |
| 13 The Gates to the Deathless are Open                                 | 91        |
| 14 The Dhamma is Right Here  | 99        |
| 15 Pay Attention to your Life  | 107       |
| 16 Entering the Deathless  | 117       |
| 17 The Bearable Irritation of Being                                    | 131       |
| 18 In Awareness There is No <i>Dukkha</i>                              | 137       |
| 19 Universal Loving-Kindness   | 145       |
| 20 Reflections on <i>Mettā</i>   | 151       |
| 21 Death and Deathlessness   | 163       |

|    |  |     |
|----|--|-----|
| 22 | Self-view, Personality and Awareness           | 175 |
| 23 | Devotion and Gnosis                            | 183 |
| 24 | Space and Consciousness                        | 189 |
| 25 | The Fearless Mind                              | 197 |
| 26 | Embracing the Shadow                           | 205 |
| 27 | Trusting in Wholesome Intentions               | 215 |
| 28 | Where Jackals Cease                            | 223 |
| 29 | Being Patient with our<br>Inability to Forgive | 233 |

|            |   |     |
|------------|---|-----|
| <b>III</b> | <b>Being Awake</b>                                  | 239 |
| 30         | Being Buddha  | 241 |
| 31         | Attending to the Here and Now                       | 243 |
| 32         | Being the Knowing                                   | 249 |
| 33         | Awakened Awareness                                  | 253 |
| 34         | Relaxed Attention                                   | 263 |
| 35         | There is an Escape                                  | 271 |
| 36         | Instinct and Aspiration                             | 279 |
| 37         | The Real World                                      | 287 |
| 38         | Self and Self-Naughting                             | 295 |
| 39         | Silence and Space                                   | 303 |
| 40         | Who We Really Are                                   | 311 |
| 41         | Awakened Consciousness                              | 319 |
| 42         | A Conversation with Jack Kornfield<br>(and friends) | 331 |



## Preface

The title of this book refers to the image of the Buddha's teaching, the Wheel of Truth (or Dhamma). It is a wheel that he set rolling in his first discourse by proclaiming the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path of practice. This teaching remains as the axis of Ajahn Sumedho's teaching and personal contemplative work. This particular collection of his Dhamma talks and dialogues is composed of material that has appeared in various newsletters and magazines before; it derives from different periods in Ajahn Sumedho's teaching career, but it has been gathered into three parts to address overarching themes.

The first theme is one of foundation, of grounding the mind and its actions in the most fertile field for skilful states. It must be stressed that the theme of *The Ground of the Dhamma* is not an introductory piece that we master in year one and then leave behind, any more than the ability to stand upright and balanced is merely for infants. Although standing upright and balanced is the first piece we work on, reference to Refuge, to gratitude and to social responsibility are ongoing practices that sustain right view, without which the Dhamma gets lost in self-centredness.

*Truth is an Open Door* continues the presentation with various articles on meditation and wise reflection. The title refers to a quote from the suttas, ‘Open are the doors of the Deathless’, of which Ajahn Sumedho is particularly fond. In its Pali form this phrase became something he normally recited at the beginning of a Dhamma talk from the mid-1980s onwards, and its theme was the inspiration behind establishing Amaravati as a spiritual centre. His wish was that, for people of any or little faith, Amaravati would provide an opportunity to enquire into the direct experience of life. The collection *Truth is an Open Door* offers some of the standard Buddhist approaches to this penetrative enquiry, as well as more universal reflections and contemplations.

*Being Awake* is the final section and it gathers some of the many talks that Ajahn Sumedho gave (from the 1980s onwards) on awakening in the present. The aim of this theme is to shift the view of the meditator from the attitude of being someone who is striving towards a future attainment. The theme is not intended to negate the need for a Path (it takes time to have a sense of the timeless) but to clear the doubt and sense of inadequacy that comes from the ideas we have about ourselves as we practise. As Ajahn Sumedho often reminds us, as long as we approach the Dhamma from the idea of being someone, of using our personality as a vehicle for awakening, then a sense of inadequacy is bound to cast a shadow on our practice. It is for the elimination of this obstructive self-view that this teaching is given.

This selection ends with a conversation between Ajahn Sumedho and Jack Kornfield on the early years of their practice and their time with Ajahn Chah. As befits the book’s reference to the Wheel, we end where we begin – in a circle that keeps widening and deepening.

Bhikkhu Sucitto





# I | The Ground of the Dhamma



# 1 | Meditation on Dukkha

Suffering is something we all have in common. No matter whether we are male or female, rich or poor, European or Asian; whatever our background we can all agree that we suffer. We experience the suffering of being separated from someone we love; from having to be with others we don't like; from wanting something we don't have. And then there are the natural changes of the body as we grow old, get sick and die. These are the common human conditions that we can reflect on.

So instead of saying: 'I am the all-enlightened one. I have realized the truth', the Buddha gave us the Four Noble Truths, the first one of which is the Noble Truth of Suffering (*dukkha*). This is something that can be realized by you right now, not as a matter of belief but as a direct penetration of suffering: your misery and pain, fears and worries. Is there anyone who has never suffered in any way? Contemplating your own experience is your starting point. You are not trying to realize nibbāna first, or taking a philosophical or metaphysical position. To start from a position of belief, concept or perception means that you will tend to see everything through a bias. If you believe in God, you will see him in everything. If you don't believe in God you won't see him in anything. So, rather than giving

us a position to take, the Buddha points to something which can be easily recognized in our own lives.

I'm a very fortunate being. I've had good parents and have never been badly treated or abused, but just being alive entails *dukkha*. And what is *dukkha*? *Dukkha* is existential anguish. Even when you've got everything, when life is beautiful, when there's absolutely no problem – you have a good marriage, good children, wealth, respect, everything you could want – there's still this existential anguish that goes through all human beings. For instance, one time a man came to me at my monastery and said: 'I've got to talk to you.' I took him to our reception room where he told me that he was miserable and depressed but didn't know what was wrong.

'Well what's the matter?' I asked. 'Have you any particular problems that you're facing?' He replied: 'No. I'm just depressed.' 'Are you married?' He said: 'Yes.' 'You had a fight with your wife?' 'No, no, no. I have a very good wife. No problems with her.' 'Your children? Are they being naughty?' 'No, no. I've got good children.' 'You're in debt?' 'No, no debt.' 'You've been laid off work. You're on the dole?' 'No. I've a good job, I like my job. I don't know what's wrong. I'm really depressed and I don't know why.'

Existential anguish. The anguish of being alive in this condition and not understanding why. This is something we can recognize in our own lives. Some of us have unfortunate circumstances to deal with – maybe a difficult family situation. Others are unable to pinpoint a reason yet the existential anguish is still there. We tend to think that if we have an object we can point to and say, 'I'm unhappy because of that person', we'd be all right, but that's not so. If we get rid of all we don't like and have everything we do like we will still not be all right, because *dukkha* remains. We have a body that is subject to pain, subject to pleasure, subject to heat and cold. The body gets old and when it gets old the senses fail, it weakens, it has illnesses and then it dies. We all know that death is waiting for us and can happen at any moment. This is the first

Noble Truth. ‘Watch your own mind’, realize ‘this is *dukkha*’ – then the first Noble Truth has been realized.

The second Noble Truth is the realization that *dukkha* is something that arises. It’s not an ultimate truth. It’s a Noble Truth but not ultimate truth. That’s different. We’re not saying: ‘Everything is misery.’ Instead, we begin to look at our limitations, the things that we’re attached to that in fact we bind ourselves to. Just by watching your breathing for example, you are beginning to observe a function of this body. You can’t say the breath is what you are. You don’t have to know that you’re breathing. It takes care of itself. It belongs to nature like the rest of the body. The body is something that is born, grows up, gets old and dies, following the law of nature. It’s not a personal thing, though we consider it to be. For example, say you speak to me and I sense something in your demeanour that discomferts me. ‘He doesn’t like my face’, I think. ‘This face is what I am. This is me and he doesn’t like it.’ I may then feel angry. But if I realize this body is not mine, then what people may say or think about my face doesn’t matter anymore.

If we realize this, we don’t have to create problems around how other people are. We tend to create problems with each other when we believe that this is me and that’s you. And if we don’t agree on something we can get into a terrible fight. If we become very attached to each other, have ideas about each other, when one of us behaves in a way that disappoints or does not fit, we feel disappointed, even disillusioned. But everybody is going to disappoint us in some way or another, just as we’re going to disappoint ourselves – because we’re never going to become what we would really like to be. So, when we understand what the problem really is, we can begin to stop making problems out of our lives.

It’s like today. How many of you spent a lot of time making problems out of watching your breath or walking meditation or the heat? It’s hot in here. Don’t make a problem out of it. If you just sit here and be hot, that’s enough. You’re not going to die. It’s not *that* hot. It’s a

bit uncomfortable, but it's bearable. Don't make a problem out of it. When the body starts feeling sweaty and unpleasant, we start thinking: 'I don't want it to be this way, I want to be cool. I don't want to be in here. I want to be out there.' We create a problem out of the existing conditions.

Now when we reflect on this we can just watch this mind, the way we tend to create burdens and problems out of simple situations. You may be ready to endure things you want to endure, but being able to endure what you may not want to endure is even better. Our teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Chah, was wonderful at making us endure what we didn't want to endure. He used to take me to some of those awful festivals where you have to sit up all night and listen to loudspeaker systems, with monks giving talks all night long and blaring sounds. I found it very unpleasant to the ear – really irritating – and I'd get a lot of anger. I couldn't understand the language very well in those days and there would be all this talking and laughing and everybody having a good time, but not me! And that would make me angry. How dare they have a good time when I'm so miserable? I would sit there and I'd feel very critical.

Ajahn Chah knew that I had a lot of pride and that I wasn't going to give up easily on things. He forced me to keep enduring. And I began to see my conceit. I started thinking about my anger and how it would be directed outwards. How I'd start hating Ajahn Chah, or the other people. Then I'd think: 'Are they doing anything really very bad to me? Is there anything wrong here? It's just that I don't like it the way it is, that's all that's wrong. I want to be somewhere else; I don't want to be here. But actually they're all right, they're not doing anything wrong. Everything's all right but me, I'm making that scene in my mind because I want to be somewhere else. I want to go to sleep. I don't want to be here. I don't like that and I don't want it.' So I would endure; and it turned out I could endure anything. And even when I'd be saying: 'I can't endure another moment of this. I'm fed up' – I could always

endure another moment. That surprised me. So when that voice came in: 'I've had enough. This is it.' I would endure. And then I began to realize what a liar my mind is.

Anger is a liar, greed is a liar, delusion is a liar – the mind lies to us all the time. Before I understood this I would try to get away from pain. I didn't want it. Then I started practising enduring pain; just being with the pain and allowing it to exist when I knew it wasn't causing danger to my body. When I saw pain arising from sitting I learned to just endure it, allowing it to be painful rather than trying to figure out how to get rid of it.

Wisdom comes from realizing this. Don't believe the mind that rationalizes and dismisses and gets carried away. Be patient, willing to start again, and be humble. Develop the practice of meditation, as in mindfulness of breathing – just one inhalation and one exhalation. Get down to the kind of simplicity where your practice is just one inhalation at a time, one exhalation at a time, rather than thinking about 'getting *samādhi*.' You'll never get it that way. You need to change your attitude from one of aspiring to get something to one of being patient, slowing down, calming down, being content with one inhalation at a time, one exhalation at a time. When you see your mind wandering away from the breath, just realize it's wandering and come back to the breath and start again. Be like a very simple-minded person who doesn't expect much, who can be content with just following the breath and bringing the mind back when it wanders. Then reflect on what you're doing.

If problems come up such as anger or fear, just allow them to come. Recognize them so that you are not just pushing them aside; but then let them go and return to the breath. The attitude should be one of being very patient, humble, willing to learn, seeing the effort it takes to watch the breath. Concentrate that effort; observe the inhalation, exhalation, inhalation, exhalation. When you are walking, take one step at a time; calm down, slow down, so that your mind and emotions stay with what is going on in the body. Or you can walk up and down

and start hating everybody! Your emotions may go all over the place so that you're not actually with what is happening. Just recognize that you've been carried away by an emotion. It's all right. Don't make a problem out of it. We all do this. But remember then to go back to the walking again, as a way of training yourself so you can understand what is going on when the mind wanders.

Remember: the practice is one of awakening to these things. As a Buddhist you are not here to sort all the problems or to get things – but to just be awake.

(From a talk given at Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery, 3 March 1981)

## 2 | Training in Thailand

Wisdom arises when one reflects on the way things are and how to live in harmony with them. The wise person learns from life itself; the fool waits for perfect weather. Life as it is has highs and lows, opportunities and problems. If we're foolish, we think that because things are not perfect or ideal, we can't practise, develop or progress in the same way that we would if everything were 'just right.' The wise person on the other hand takes advantage of all of it, in order to see that all conditions are impermanent, unsatisfactory and not me or mine.

Before I became a monk, I was teaching English in Bangkok. It was 1966, and there were a lot of American Air Force bases in Thailand. One of the teachers at the language school was an American airman. Once, when he came back after an absence of a week or so, I asked him where he'd been. He said, 'I've been to a place in North East Thailand where the people are so poor they have to eat insects.' I thought, 'I'm never going there.' I imagined myself instead as a monk sitting in *samādhi* on the beach under a palm tree or in a cave among beautiful mountains, realizing the truth. Of course, I ended up as a monk in the North East of Thailand for ten years, and it's true – they eat insects.

The first year I spent alone in a monastery, living in a little hut. I didn't really associate with anybody – just practised meditation. I set my own agenda. As a big, tall American, I could just puff out my chest, look fierce and get almost anything I wanted. During that year, I came to see that I had a lot of arrogance and the sort of character that needed limits. I had always been a very independent person, so I needed to learn how to serve in a community. I needed a teacher who wouldn't put up with my behaviour. Then, by chance, I met a monk from Ajahn Chah's monastery – the only one who could speak English – and he ended up taking me back to meet Ajahn Chah. So I went to Wat Nong Pah Pong in Ubon, Thailand, in 1967 with the idea of training myself in a strict tradition.

The following ten years spent with Ven. Ajahn Chah gave me every possible opportunity to adapt to change and to learn to let go of my personal preferences. The frustration, resistance and annoyance that I experienced were eventually transformed into a deep and profound sense of gratitude and love. The harsh edges of ego and conceit began to wear away as the years passed by.

The Thai Forest Tradition was an ideal I found very inspiring, so at first I was entranced and uplifted, but the realities soon appeared. The weather got hot, the monsoon season started, and everything turned rotten and stinky. I began to hate the place. I remember sitting there thinking, 'Why am I here?'

In those days, Ajahn Chah loved testing our patient endurance to the point where we didn't think we would be able to last another moment. I'd hear myself saying, 'I can't take any more of this ... I've had enough. This is the END!' Then I'd find out I could endure more. I began to distrust this inner hysterical screaming in me. The monastic form and the conditions helped a lot, but being brought up with an egalitarian ideal of freedom and equality, I felt an incredible frustration in being suffocated by the system. I was living in a hierarchical structure based on seniority, and because I was the most junior monk there, I had to

perform certain duties for those who were senior to me. Learning to acknowledge and to take an interest in performing them was quite a challenge. There was a selfish side in me that wanted to live monastic life on my own terms. I was willing to perform duties if it was convenient for me, but much of the time it wasn't. I felt resistance and rebelliousness.

At the same time, the teachings continually encouraged me to acknowledge what I was feeling – the resistance, the rebelliousness, the criticism. I became aware of my stubbornness and an immaturity that grumbled and complained if things didn't suit me. The emphasis was on cultivating mindfulness of what I was feeling: I wasn't simply browbeaten into conformity like it was a military camp. Nobody pushed me into that place; I chose to live there. My agreement was to conform to the discipline, to surrender and learn to adapt to this very strict and conservative monastic lifestyle. This included learning to eat food that I didn't particularly like. Villagers would bring nice little curries with chicken, curries with fish, curries with frog, but in those days, Ajahn Chah would dump them all into a big basin and mix it up. It made me sick to even look at it. Fortunately, it was mango season, and there were big trays of mangoes. I managed to live on mangoes and sticky rice for an entire month, but after the mango season ended I started getting thinner and thinner. Finally, I learned how to eat the food – it is surprising how well we can adapt.

Sometimes all the monks would ride into town in the back of a big truck. We would then walk through town on an alms-round with Ajahn Chah. This was a grand experience, as the entire population of the town lined the main street. People had all kinds of nice dishes ready and would offer them into our alms-bowls. When the bowls were filled up, a man would come around and we'd pour the food out into his big basket and continue walking. When we got back to the monastery, we could choose what we wanted to eat from whatever was left in our alms-bowl. This was such a rare occasion that it made us go crazy. Once, a

woman put a nice little cake into my alms-bowl, and later as I dumped out all the rest of the food into the man's basket, I tried to hold onto the cake. I didn't want him to know what I was doing, so all kinds of devious thoughts came to mind. It was amazing to see the anxiety and the effort I put into holding onto that little cake!

I also found myself obsessed with sweets. We lived a celibate life and ate only one meal a day, often without any delicious food, but we were allowed sugar and honey as medicine, if they were offered. One time, Ajahn Chah gave me a bag of sugar. I was so happy. I thought, 'I'll just take a little taste.' I opened the bag, scooped out a teaspoonful and put in it my mouth. Within fifteen minutes I consumed the whole bag. I couldn't stop myself! Sometimes I would dream about sweets: I'd go to a pastry shop, sit down at a table and order delicious-looking pastries. Just as I was about to eat one, I'd wake up!

Here I was, a monk trying to lead a spiritual life acting like a hungry ghost and dreaming about sugar. But because the greed was so focused, I could easily contemplate it – and I learned to reflect on these desires and obsessions of the mind. It's here that we often need the precepts to stop us from following our habits or whatever is easiest to do. Precepts help us to see our impulses, how we follow them and the results. The restraint and restriction of the precepts give us a sense of stopping. With reflective awareness, we begin to notice how strong the mind's impulses and compulsions can be. We see them as mental objects rather than as needs we must fulfil. Many of the rules of monastic life are based on restraint in order to witness these mental objects and their power.

One of rules that used to irritate me in the beginning concerned the wearing of robes. We were given three robes when we became a monk. The custom in the Thai Forest Tradition is to wear all three robes when going out on the morning alms-round. The mornings were hot, and we usually had to walk quite a long distance through paddy fields and villages. By the time we got back, all our robes were soaking wet with

sweat. The robes were dyed with natural jackfruit dye, so after a while, the mixture of sweat and jackfruit dye began to smell terrible. Life in the monastery centred around robes – using the robes, washing the robes, sewing the robes. I found this incredibly frustrating. I wanted to meditate; I didn't want my life centred around robes, and I spoke with one of the other monks about this. I spoke about how all we needed was one thin robe; it covers us adequately. The heavy double-thick robe is difficult to make. It takes a lot of cloth, and by wearing it every day out in the heat it easily deteriorates. Then we have to make another one – more material, more dyeing, more sewing. I made a very good case for not wearing all three robes, being the very reasonable man that I am, but I was really just whining and complaining.

Well, the monk told Ajahn Chah, so I was called to see him. I felt so embarrassed. Suddenly it dawned on me: 'Why make a problem out of this? Just wear the robes. I can bear it. It isn't going to ruin my life. What is ruining my life is my whining mind: "I don't want to do this, this is stupid, I can't see any point."' This complaining was eating me up from inside – whining, blaming, holding strong views, getting fed up, wanting to leave, not wanting to cooperate. That was the suffering that I couldn't bear. I came to see that throughout much of my life before becoming a monk, even in the midst of a comfortable lifestyle, I had a habit of complaining and endlessly looking at things through a critical eye.

The following year the urge came over me to go to a mountain refuge to meditate alone like a hermit. I told Ajahn Chah this, so he took me to one of his branch monasteries, which was called the Red Mountain Monastery. I was expecting a mountain, so when I arrived I was somewhat disappointed to find only a mosquito-infested hillock. (The Thai word for 'mountain' includes anything from a mound to Mount Everest.) Fortunately, Ajahn Chah didn't insist that I stay there. On returning to Wat Pah Pong, I asked to take leave for six months to go to a beautiful mountain that fulfilled my romantic expectations of a hermit's mountain refuge.

I spent the six months with one other bhikkhu, living most of the time on the very top of the mountain near an ancient Khmer stupa, far, far away from any town or village. We had to descend the mountain every morning and wait at an appointed spot for the faithful villagers to come and offer the day's meal. Receiving the food in our alms-bowls, we would climb back up and eat our meal on the mountaintop.

During those six months, I experienced a severe infection in my right foot that kept me invalided for over a month. I was unable to walk anywhere. I had to stay in a crude tin-roofed shack under the glaring sun in the middle of the hot season. Once a day coarse and unpalatable food and a kettle of water was offered. There I lay, sick, dirty and ragged, with tiny little gnats hovering around my eyes and crawling in my ears and mouth, with nothing to do and seldom anyone to talk to. I'd listen to the occasional airplane flying overhead and a terrible longing for home and my mother, a despairing self-pity and disillusionment would fill my mind. There was no escape from the suffering of the moment. The miserable conditions of my body and mind were unrelenting. There was nothing else to do but to concentrate on the suffering. It was as if the wise powers that be had such compassion for me that I was forced into a cul-de-sac – a 'no-exit' situation. The only relief came through resignation and non-resistance. I just simply let go. Then I realized: 'Ah! I see that suffering is my own creation. It is the reaction to the body, to the conditions of the mind and to the world.' Then there was peace.

The next year, Ajahn Chah sent me to live at another branch monastery, where the senior bhikkhu was one who aroused enormous amounts of aversion in his disciples. The man was ugly, crude and seemingly below average in intelligence, and he regarded formal meditation or practice as a waste of time. He insisted that we all work doing manual labour. Sometimes I felt that I was doing hard labour in a slave camp.

At the end of the work period, or after the alms-round, the abbot would stand waiting for me at the footbath. I had to force myself to run over, kneel down and scrub his feet. At Wat Nong Pah Pong, it was a privilege to wash the feet of my honourable teacher, Ajahn Chah; bowing on my knees to the Ven. Ajahn Chah had been an act of devotion, but here it was a perfunctory duty generating no joy – an act of sheer willpower – and there was such resistance and aversion. So again, the wise powers that be had kindly sent this teacher to expose the origin of suffering in order that I might discover its cessation. I spent two years at that monastery, and by the time I left I had learned another lesson in letting go.

‘See happiness and unhappiness as having equal value’ – this teaching was constantly emphasized by Ajahn Chah. The devotion to one teacher and the aversion to another have equal value. Wanting to stay, wanting to go; infatuation and disgust; the good times and the bad times; formal meditation practice and slave labour; good health and sickness – all of it is teaching us the reality of impermanence and that suffering is our heedless struggle to grasp, maintain or escape from changing conditions.

During those ten years with Ajahn Chah, the experiences, the opportunities, the lack of opportunities, the lifestyle of the bhikkhu, the Vinaya discipline, Thai traditions, the other monks, the laypeople, the forest, the town, the hot weather, the mosquitoes, snakes and ants, the hopes and disillusionments, the ageing process itself, being a disciple and being a teacher, being praised by some and being criticized by others, the successes and the failures – all were of equal value, pointing the way to liberation: the *opanayika dhamma*<sup>1</sup> that leads towards peace, towards calm ... towards nibbāna. Even though the mind sometimes screams, ‘I can’t take any more of this’, the truth of the matter is that we can take more. If we learn to endure and not just be caught by an impulse, then we begin to find strength in our practice. We can’t control what arises in the mind, but we can reflect on what we

<sup>1</sup>*Opanayika dhamma* here refers to the practices that lead ‘onwards’ to liberation.

are feeling and learn from that rather than be caught helplessly in our impulses and habits.

The human heart is filled with discontent, comparing, choosing and making preferences: it knows no peace. The qualities of the conditions of sense consciousness overwhelm it; they seem so dazzling or so disgusting that one is constantly reacting. This struggle is the *dukkha* of the first Noble Truth. To recognize that the struggle itself is the suffering and that it is caused by our ignorance of the nature of things; to realize that the nature of all conditions, regardless of their specific qualities, is impermanence and not-self – when this is understood one no longer needs to react habitually to the conditions one experiences. One ceases to struggle, and when one ceases to struggle, that is the end of suffering. If you reflect on this for a while, then you'll be able to learn from it all: from sentimental longing for the hermit's mountain refuge, and from all teachers and all conditions. Your body and the conditions of your mind can teach you the Four Noble Truths.

Even though there is a lot in life that we can't change, we can change our attitude towards it. That is what so much of meditation is about – changing our attitude from a self-centred, 'Get rid of this or get more of that' attitude to one of welcoming life as it is: welcoming the opportunity to eat food that we don't like; welcoming wearing three robes on a hot morning; welcoming discomfort, feeling fed up, wanting to run away. This way of welcoming life reflects a deeper understanding. Life is like this: sometimes it's very nice, sometimes it's horrible, and much of the time it's neither one way nor the other. The wise person knows that any viewpoint or opinion whatsoever is only a changing condition and that with its cessation there is peace.

(Adapted from 'Training in Thailand' – *The Middle Way*, February 1980; and from 'Life Is Like This' – a talk given at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, summer 2005)

### 3 | Mind Conditions the World

As you try to understand how to live your life, consider that how you live in a place has its effect on your mind – if seen as just a place to crash out, then it becomes merely that. As you develop it into a place for mindfulness, you set up that which supports and encourages your practice. How you think and what you do affect the space around you, for better or worse. The isolated view is that somehow you are an independent creature living life for yourself, without being influenced or affected by anything or affecting or influencing anything. This is a totally alienating view. We can see why in a society where *samaṇas* or holy people live, that society has a quality to it that is lacking in a country where there isn't any encouragement or interest in the holy life. In India, for example, spiritual life is highly regarded, in spite of the poverty and corruption. I personally would rather live in India than in a country that didn't allow religion of any sort, even if the country was well organized, clean and efficient. I think that we appreciate that which is uplifting the spirit, that inclination towards the divine. Then as we lift ourselves up from the ordinary, instinctual survival mechanisms of the body, we find this strong aspiration towards the higher. We reach up to the light or to symbols

of enlightenment, out from the amorphous dark, the nameless terror – aspiring from the bad to the good. We determine to develop a life of virtue. This is lifting the spirit.

In the *Ovāda Pāṭimokkha*,<sup>2</sup> the Buddha says, ‘Do good, refrain from doing evil, purify the mind.’ Do good is the first: right speech, right action, right livelihood. To perfect those three, the moral part of our path, is always a matter of rising up. Otherwise there is inertia, scepticism, laziness, doubt and despair. All this pulls us downward. So the way out is not to reject or struggle with it out of fear or aversion, but to understand the whole process of rising up. Contemplate the Buddha-rupa<sup>3</sup> on the shrine: it’s a symbol of rising up. It’s a figure of a human being with an erect posture; the eyes are open, but they are not gazing at anything, they are not seeking anything – they are simply open. In the same way, using the energy that we can generate within the body, we bring it up to a balanced posture.

In Thailand, the word for going crazy means, in English, ‘thinking too much.’ When you look at Rodin’s statue, *The Thinker*, sitting with his head on his hand, he’s thinking too much. When we think too much, we get pulled into a vortex of thoughts. We might feel elated for a while, but it always ends in pulling us downwards, because thought itself is just like that. If you think too much, you can’t do anything anymore because you have to stop thinking about it to do whatever it is you were going to do: ‘Should I do the dishes? Do I feel like doing them?’ – all the while, you’re just sitting there. Whereas if you take the task and look at it positively – putting your hands in soapy water with bone china – all these are pleasant physical sensations. You’re not getting into the same old boring reaction about washing the dishes – the kinds of male reactions that develop when rebelling against our mothers. And women about men: it’s the same thing, isn’t it? Rebelling against the father: ‘Male chauvinism, trying to dominate and pull us down ...’. Sometimes

<sup>2</sup> The *Ovāda Pāṭimokkha* is an exhortation (*ovāda*) on the ‘common bond’ (*pāṭimokkha*), that prescribes the norms for *samaṇa* behaviour: such as harmlessness, frugality, and inclining the mind to skilful states. It is understood to have first been presented by the Buddha to a gathering of 1250 enlightened bhikkhus.

<sup>3</sup> An image of the Buddha.

we carry that through a whole lifetime without knowing that we are doing it. In our reflections on Dhamma, we begin to free the mind from these very inadequate and immature reactions to life. We find in this 'rising up' to life a sense of maturity; a willingness to participate in it and to respect people who are in positions of authority. When we are mature, when we understand Dhamma, we can harmonize and be of use to the society that we live in.

I remember in my first year at Wat Pah Pong in Ubon Ratchathani, Thailand with Ajahn Chah: I liked the monastery at first, but then I became very critical of it. I wasn't going to give in too easily; I was going to keep my eyes open to see if it really was a good place or not. When people tried to convince me about what a wonderful monastery it was, I'd be very sceptical. Many people would ask, 'Don't you love Luang Por?' I thought, 'No, I don't feel anything, really.' The idea of loving Luang Por at that time had never even occurred to me. Then they went on about how it was such a good monastery, and my reaction when people tried to tell me how good something was tended to be to resist and look for what was wrong. That's an immature reaction, isn't it? I could see that there was this stubborn attitude when somebody tried to convince me: 'I don't care if it is the best: I'm not going to believe it because I don't want you to be right!'

I didn't know very much about Buddhist monasticism, but I still had strong views about how monks should be and was very much aware of that which I didn't approve. But living there, I began to see what an opinionated, conceited attitude that was. I began to let go of these things; I found that I did fall in love with Luang Por Chah. This falling in love came from feeling a tremendous respect and trust. The human heart is a heart of warmth and love, and it can bring joy and beauty into a situation. When the heart is full of love and joy, then that affects not only our own happy states of mind, but also the people around us and the society we're in. When I first went to Ubon, I thought I wouldn't stay very long, but I spent nearly ten years there. To this day, I still see Ubon as a place I'd

love to go to. Not because it's particularly beautiful, but because of what I received there: the support, the teaching and the ability to live the holy life. My mind relates to Ubon Ratchathani as a holy place.

We can see it in Britain now, as people are developing the holy life here. It's no longer the Britain of the Colonial Era; we see a very different side of it. Our way of life connects with living in Britain. I am pleasantly surprised by the openness and tolerance generated towards us in this country – and this causes the rising up of the spirit, too. Before I came to Britain, I'd determined in my mind that I would only go and live in this country if I found I was offering something worthwhile to it. There was no point in just going to see it or going with a missionary attitude. The idea of conversion was repulsive, but the idea of going to offer something beautiful, something that would help people: I felt I could do this. And so I came to Britain to add more sweetness, rather than to divide, create more problems for the country or take advantage of it in any way.

We can look at our lives here in this way, at what we are doing as monks and nuns living in this country. We are bringing something beautiful into the country. It may not seem like that at first because it is different from what people are used to. Many people have the fear that monks and nuns come here to make everything worse and poison the country. But our living of this life in the right way with the right attitude means the whole image changes from being an anachronism, or oddballs who come to cause trouble, to being that which is worthy of respect, worthy of alms. Just the presence of good monks and nuns in society is an offering. It gives hope and inspiration to others, not necessarily to become monks or nuns but to live more skilfully and aspire towards something higher than just getting along in the system. To me, just floating along in the system is a hell realm. It is such a depressing idea: a human life spent floating along. You don't do anything, you don't offer anything, you don't aspire to anything – you just get by.

With our contemplation of dependent origination,<sup>4</sup> we are being with the world rather than believing it to be the world. We are aware of it and understand it as it is – not deluded by it through the conditioning process of perception and culture. The empty mind is receptive; in that way of mindfulness, there is no need to name or call anything anything, unless there is a conventional reason for it. Then as we begin to realize the cessation of the world, we can begin to refrain from frantically creating more worlds (which will cease). We're not trying to create anything because we are content and at peace with the way it is. Contemplate this and know the attentiveness, mindfulness, before the opinions, views, desires and fears start to arise. If you're doing it for the wrong reason – out of desire, fear and ignorance – then, of course, you end up in despair. You feel that you're always going to fail; meditation is a lot of suffering for you, and even when you can get refined states of consciousness, you can't hold onto them. The more you try to convert and impose refinement on the world around you, the more frustrated you feel by the inefficiency, corruption, brutality and mediocrity. You can see how difficult life is for very refined types of human beings. If you have very high standards and very refined tastes, then you're going to be upset even by the style of curtains on the wall.

The empty mind has room for everything: the curtains on the wall, the refined subtleties, the beauties, the coarse and the gross. There isn't any need to run around trying to pick and choose, control and manipulate – that's such a frantic way to live! When you appreciate the empty mind and the cessation of the world, you are receptive to the totality. You begin to just look. This is like a child's mind. I remember as a very young child, walking through empty fields and seeing these beautiful tiger lilies growing wild and being much impressed. Such things are discoveries when you are a child without any perceptions and views about things. You're with the way it is. There aren't these conditioned reactions, such as seeing a muddy field, the fog and the grey sky and the mind goes: 'I don't like it. I want to see sunshine, a

<sup>4</sup> 'Dependent origination' is a teaching that maps out the causes and conditions that arise to generate suffering and confusion – and through the termination of which suffering and confusion cease.

million spring flowers and azure-blue skies.’ The eyes are focused on the muddy field, but you’re not seeing the mud anymore; there’s a total rejection of that. When we talk about meditation and people accuse us of avoiding the real world, you can ask them, ‘What is the world? What is real?’ What is real to many people is just a perception based on prejudice, preference and memories.

That kind of mind is a mind that is conditioned to react in terms of despair and depression. The world that we are attached to and believe in is never satisfactory, and we are never content with it. There is always something wrong with it, and there is always going to be something wrong with it. In the holy life we simply realize that whatever happens, it’s just the way things move and change. We will learn from it, grow with it and be open to it. If difficult and unpleasant situations arise, then that’s part of it: that’s just the way things are. Sometimes it’s very bright and peaceful; sometimes it’s murky and confused. But if you begin to contemplate murky confusion and radiant bliss as just the way things are, there’s nothing to get depressed or elated about, is there? Radiant bliss is just like this, but it’s not me and mine, and it’s impermanent. The muddy field or the azure-blue sky, the heat of the sun or the cold wind of the north: it all belongs in the mind. There is room for everything, and so there is no reason to feel frightened.

(From *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No. 5, July 1988)

## 4 | Going for Refuge

When people ask: ‘What do you have to do to become a Buddhist?’, we say that we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. Long ago, I remember superstitious people coming to my teacher, Ajahn Chah, wanting charmed medallions or little talismans to protect them from bullets and knives, ghosts and so on, and he would say: ‘Why do you want things like that? The only real protection is taking refuge in the Buddha.’ As we begin to realize the profundity of the Buddhist teachings, it becomes a joy to take these refuges.

Even simply reciting them inspires the mind. When we say: ‘I take refuge,’ what do we mean by that? How can this simple phrase become more than a repetition of a few words, but something that truly gives us direction and increases our dedication to the path of the Buddha? It’s a lovely word, ‘Buddha’. It means ‘the one who knows.’ When we take refuge in the Buddha, it doesn’t mean we take refuge in some historical prophet; we take refuge in that which is wise in the universe, in our minds and not something separate from us. Taking refuge in the Buddha, in wisdom, means we have a place of safety. The future remains unknown and mysterious, but by taking refuge in the Buddha we gain presence of mind in this moment, learning from life as we live it.

The second Refuge is in the Dhamma, in ultimate truth or ultimate reality. We may think that Dhamma is ‘out there,’ the Dhamma is something we have to find elsewhere. Really, it is immanent, it is here-and-now. One does not have a personal relationship with Dhamma; one cannot say, ‘I love the Dhamma!’ or, ‘The Dhamma loves me!’ We only need a personal relationship with something separate from us, like our mother, father, husband or wife. But we don’t need to take refuge in someone to protect us and say: ‘I love you no matter what. Everything is going to be all right.’ The Dhamma is a refuge of maturity in which we don’t need to be loved or protected any more; now we can love and protect others. When we take refuge in the Dhamma, we let go of our desire to have a personal relationship with the truth. We have to *be* that truth, here and now.

The third Refuge is Sangha, which refers to all those who live virtuously. Taking refuge in the Sangha means we take refuge in that which is good, virtuous, kind, compassionate and generous – doing good and refraining from evil with bodily action and speech. The refuge of Sangha is very practical for day-to-day living in the human form, in this body, in relation to the bodies of other beings and the physical world we live in. When we take this refuge, we do not act in any way that causes division, disharmony, cruelty, meanness or unkindness to any living being, including our own body and mind.

So reflect on this – consider and really see Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha as a refuge. It is not a matter of believing in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha as concepts but in using them as symbols for mindfulness, for awakening the mind, here-and-now.

(From *Inquiring Mind*, Vol. 27, No. 2, spring 2011)

## 5 | The Right Attitude of the Meditator

Finding our balance through meditation is something we have to learn through practice, because it doesn't just come to us. When a child is learning to walk it has to make certain initial efforts; it grasps hold of things, pulls itself up, falls down and eventually learns to take one balanced step, then another. It's the same in meditation. Learning comes through determination and constant effort. Sometimes we overextend ourselves and fall. Sometimes we don't put enough effort into it and just drift along. There needs to be the right amount of effort, and we only know what is meant by that when we're balanced ourselves. It's through our own use of wisdom and awareness that we begin to see where this balance is. We observe and investigate conditions like depression, laziness, aggression, impatience and restlessness, and in that witnessing and observing of the way things are, we come to know how to practise. We come to know the state of 'being the knowing': being that which is alert and awake.

Our worldly attitudes are all about becoming something. We talk about 'becoming enlightened' rather than about *being* enlightened.

We go to a meditation retreat to gain wisdom rather than to be wise. And so worldly values and ways of thinking that we've developed only confuse and delude us. Many people meditate and yet still cling to their worldly attitudes. They simply grasp hold of a technique, acquire a lot of ideas and manage to recondition themselves as meditators without ever being enlightened through the process. If the attitude is not right, any kind of meditation technique is a mechanical device whereby you develop mental attachments and a lot of opinions and values. In fact, with the wrong attitude you misinterpret even the insights that you have – you grasp hold of them.

Right attitude is the most important thing, the first step on the Eightfold Path<sup>5</sup>: *sammā-dit̐thi*, right understanding. We see that anything we might hear about the attainment of states is coming from a condition of the mind, from an opinion. In my first year of meditation, I had all kinds of insights. Then, the following year, I kept trying to have the same insights again because the memory of them was so pleasant – but you can't have the same insight twice! Insight is an immediate understanding in the moment; it's not a memory. And yet we're so attached to conceptualizing, to having opinions and making interpretations, that we make insight into something remembered rather than just living insightfully.

Suppose we're told that if we do something over and over again we'll become enlightened and we believe that because we trust the teacher. This is still coming from an attitude of believing what the teacher says rather than investigating and finding out for ourselves. Following a teacher is all right as long as you recognize any attachments that form. You may believe that a certain tradition is pure or that you shouldn't have anything to do with any other traditions. Or you may believe you should have nothing to do with religion at all. But these are all just beliefs and attachments to an opinion, aren't they? What I'm saying

<sup>5</sup> The Eightfold Path is the overview of the training that the Buddha presented for awakening. It begins with the wise perspective of right view or right understanding, then encompasses ethics and meditation. It can be symbolized by a wheel in which every factor is a spoke that sustains the whole. In this way, the fruits of meditation will enhance and deepen right view.

is there's a danger in attaching to things, but that doesn't in any way mean that you shouldn't use a particular technique or tradition. You're looking for a way that can help you find a balance: the attitude of 'being the knowing' as opposed to following a certain technique in order to become something. This isn't the same as the attitude that you don't have to do anything at all or that any kind of practice is an obstacle. You are practising being aware, from one moment to the next, of the things that go through the mind and the body, being aware even of our attachment to technique or to opinions about Buddhism.

We can say, 'Theravada Buddhism is the original form of Buddhism, pure and original' – those words make it sound like something, don't they? Then a follower of Mahayana comes along and says, 'We're the supreme; we're the Great Vehicle. Those Theravadins are followers of the lesser ...'. The word 'lesser' – that's not so good, is it? But 'supreme' – that's really wonderful. Then the Vajrayanists arrive and they say that they're the Ultimate! In Thailand some monks say, 'You have to do the *samatha* (calming) practice first and you do that until you gain the first *jhāna* and then you go on to the other *jhānas*, because you have to get to a certain level of concentration before you can even start *vipassanā*.<sup>6</sup> Then there are those *vipassanā* fanatics who say, 'Don't have anything to do with *samatha*: it's dangerous, it's deluding. Just do pure *vipassanā*.' So they even quibble and fight over *samatha-vipassanā*, and yet these are just terms, ways of talking about things that you can witness and know. When calming and insight work together, they needn't be in conflict.

You can also say that the Path is *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*: morality, concentration and wisdom. You start with morality, then develop concentration from it and finally wisdom arises. So it sounds as though one thing leads to another in a set progression, but it's not always the case. When Ajahn Chah was in London, some Asian people came to him and asked, 'Why are you teaching *samādhi* (concentration) to people who don't have very good *sīla* (morality)?' Ajahn Chah replied, 'Wherever

<sup>6</sup> *Samatha* and *vipassanā* are approaches in meditation that aim respectively at steadying or investigating the object of meditation. *Jhāna* means absorption and refers to any one of several levels of deep concentration.

you start, all three will develop.’ And he went on, ‘Here in England, if you start talking about morality, nobody will come and listen. So you talk about wisdom because people want to hear about that.’ Of course, after you’ve been practising for a while, you begin to realize that you can’t progress unless there is some moral discipline. Start from where you are, with what you have, rather than from an ideal about how it should be. Whether you start with *vipassanā* or *samatha*, one will lead to the other. The suggestion here is that you begin to look at attachment. It doesn’t mean that you don’t go on using the meditation techniques that you have adopted but rather that you consider any attachments you may have, any opinions, hopes, expectations or disappointments, as you reflect upon the results of what you’re doing. You focus on this ability to reflect; you’re being that knowing instead of making meditation practice into just another habit.

When you have insight, you understand something that you haven’t understood before and you know it from the centre of your being; it’s not just something that you’ve read and understood with the intellect. Insight will happen with immediacy, in a small or big way, always with a sense of joy and relief. But then we attach to that because we like the feeling. We also like the sense of calm that comes through sensory deprivation when the mind is not stimulated, and we attach to that. So we can learn from this and from other dependencies on conditions, such as those at a meditation retreat. In this special situation everything is set up for you to just follow along, and you don’t have to make any decisions yourself. You benefit from the absence of unpleasant or excessive sensory stimulation, but when you leave to go back to the city, suddenly there’s this demand and impingement upon the senses. If you attach to the tranquillity that you get at the retreat, then you’re going to feel averse to the sensory impingement when you leave. So recognize any aversion that arises – because aversion always comes from attachment.

About greed, hatred and delusion, the three most common human

problems, recognize that your human body is a desire-form and that in order for it to survive you have to feed it. You may feel averse to greed if you've taken a position against greed without understanding the needs of the body. As long as the body is alive there will be desires operating through it: desire for food, drink and sex – these are natural things. They're not-self; they're not any personal failure. With wisdom we recognize them for what they are, rather than attaching to them with fascination, exaggerating them or trying to annihilate them with aversion. So we begin to understand what is needed for the maintenance of the body, how much food it needs, rather than just following greed or thinking, 'I'm such a greedy person, I'm not going to eat anything at all!' That's not wisdom, it's attaching to an opinion.

It's the same with sexual desire. This is a natural impulse because one of the functions of our human bodies is procreation. In the *brahmachariya*<sup>7</sup> life, however, as sex is not necessary for survival, we choose to refrain from any intentional sexual activity. The result of a life of celibacy is a very peaceful mind. Sex is quite exciting; celibacy isn't, so you begin to appreciate peacefulness rather than seeking excitement. As householders, on the other hand, you must come to terms with your sexuality rather than repressing it or blindly indulging it and taking advantage of others. You begin to consider wisely how to use sexuality properly, to understand the forces of nature with which you have to coexist. You can consider how to live in a way that is conducive to self-respect and to understanding, rather than just exploiting these functions or destroying them. Here the precepts provide a helpful standard. If you have no precepts to use, then you just wobble all over the place according to how you feel at the moment. It's easy to say, 'I'm fed up with sex, I'm never going to have sex again' when you're feeling averse to it, but then when you're not, the impulse is there again.

So understand these human bodies with their hunger, pain and sensitivity to heat and cold – these simple things that we all have

<sup>7</sup> *Brahmachariya* is the celibate way of life.

to endure. Begin to be patient and you will find, for instance, that hunger is something that one can easily endure. It's possible to fast for long periods of time with no great difficulty; the physical feeling isn't all that unpleasant. It's the emotional reaction to it that is the problem. Begin to let go, to see that you don't need to follow habitual reactions. When you sleep, how much of it is just a habit and how much do you really need for the sake of refreshing the body? The basics of our existence – sleep, food and sexuality – are to be considered in our meditation as things that we can learn from rather than learn about. We're not studying Buddhism from books (though reading has its place) but learning to practise and to gain understanding from the forces that operate within us – in accordance with what is appropriate to this time and place.

The conventional forms we use in the monastery, the precepts and any instructions or techniques, are for reflection rather than ends in themselves. Maybe you don't like chanting – it's a viewpoint that you can have – and you can see it as just that. What you don't like about it is used for reflection. It's not about whether or not you like or agree with everything, but that you reflect on the mind, because that's the way life is: some of it you will agree with, some of it you won't. If you feel you always have to have things around you that you agree with, then you can't learn from the other half of existence, from all conditions: success and failure, happiness and suffering, praise and blame. If you don't learn in this way, your life becomes a matter of control and manipulation, motivated by aversion and fear. Someone says, 'You're the best teacher I've ever had', and that carries you away. Then someone else says, 'You're hopeless!' and you experience depression and anger. It's not a matter of being the best or of having the best of everything, espousing a Supreme Vehicle or the purest one. You could list all the superlatives in the English language and say, 'Ajahn Sumedho teaches the Ultimate, Supreme, Purest of all Vehicles', and that would be just one more viewpoint to defend, wouldn't it?

How do you know that Buddhism is the best religion? Maybe it isn't. There's the 'Supreme Vehicle', the 'Ultimate', the 'pure': maybe we need a 'modern religion for modern man'? All these are just opinions and views, aren't they? Choose one according to whether you have confidence in it and see if it works in a practical way. Personally, I don't see in what way Buddhism is at all inappropriate to the needs of the present society. It's certainly appropriate to my needs. Then it might not be the same for you. It's up to you to find out. At this time, we have this place and situation – how skilfully are you using these? With right attitude in your meditation, you can reflect upon what attachment is. You can see suffering: its arising and its cessation.

(From *The Middle Way*, August 1986)



## 6 | Gratitude for Luang Por Chah

Ajahn Chah began life as a monk at the age of twenty, in a village monastery where he studied the *pariyatti* Dhamma, the more academic aspects of practice. After four years or so, he decided to develop his meditation practice, and travelled through Thailand seeking out various teachers. He spent some time with one teacher in Lopburi and then with another teacher in Ubon, but most of the time he travelled alone, gradually gaining insight through his practice of meditation. It was during this period that he spent two nights at Ajahn Mun's monastery where his insights were affirmed by the great teacher.

Luang Por Chah liked the style of practice of the Dhammayut sect, one of the two sects in Thailand, in which the monastic discipline, Vinaya, was very much part of the practice. It offered a complete lifestyle and was therefore unusual in Thailand. Much of the meditation in Thailand was taught as a technique and could therefore be quite separate from monasticism. For example, with the Mahasi Sayadaw system it didn't matter if you were a layperson or a monk. It's a technique that works just as well for a layperson. But Luang Por Chah's approach was in mindfulness through ordinary monastic life. It was a way of using the monastic form to develop awareness and reflectiveness. He didn't

encourage study and when I eventually met him he saw that study was the last thing I needed to do. I had been through the university system in the United States and was an obsessive reader – addicted to literature. Wherever I went I always had to have a book with me or I would feel nervous and ill at ease. When I met Ajahn Chah I didn't tell him this, but he seemed to pick it up intuitively because he said: 'No books!'

In Thailand they always ask me: 'How could he teach you?' because when we met I couldn't speak Thai and he couldn't speak English. Ajahn Chah always put a reflective tone into answering this by saying: 'Sumedho learned through the language of Dhamma.' And then people would ask: 'Well, what language is that?' They obviously didn't quite understand that the language I learned from wasn't English or Thai but came through living, through awakening and learning from the experience of being conscious, of having a human body, feelings, thoughts, greed, hatred and delusion. These are common human things; they are not cultural things. This is what we all share, they're common human problems and conditions.

I remember feeling an immediate confidence and trust in Ajahn Chah. I met him through a series of coincidences, or maybe it was good luck – although some people like to think that I was meant to be with him. Anyway, meeting a teacher like Ajahn Chah wasn't what I was expecting. By the time I met him I had been to many other teachers – and it wasn't that I didn't like those teachers or that I was critical of them, it was just that nothing 'clicked.' I didn't feel I wanted to be with them, so I went my own way, became a samanera in Nong Khai in the North East of Thailand and spent my first year teaching myself.

However, while living alone I had the insight that I would be able to get to a certain point with my practice, but never get beyond it; I'd never see clearly unless I learned humility. I remember having a wish that I could meet a teacher – then, almost immediately, Ajahn Chah's disciple, Phra Sommai, appeared. Coincidence? I don't know. He was

about my age, thirty-two or three, and could speak English. When we met I hadn't spoken English for months and months. If you haven't spoken your native tongue for months and months, then the first opportunity is like a dam-burst. You can't stop. At first I thought I had frightened him, but he stayed with me at this monastery for a while and eventually convinced me that I should go and meet Ajahn Chah. My preceptor agreed with this. He gave me *upasampadā*<sup>8</sup> and sent me off to stay with Ajahn Chah.

At that time Ajahn Chah was not well known in Bangkok even by Thais, not to mention the Western community, but he was increasingly well known in the North East of Thailand – an area known as the 'Isahn'. It's strange, because the Isahn was the last place that I had wanted to live. It's the poorest part of Thailand. I had always imagined living down on the coast where all the resorts are now. I had this romantic image of being a monk sitting under a coconut palm tree on a white sand beach. Instead I ended up spending ten years in the Isahn.

What impressed me about Luang Por Chah was his emphasis on teaching the Four Noble Truths. I hadn't come across this before with other teachers, or perhaps I just hadn't picked it up – there was always a problem around language because I didn't speak Thai. Many of the meditation techniques I learned were based on Abhidhamma teaching, which I found very boring. The last thing I wanted to learn was all that incredibly complex Abhidhamma. I thought: 'That's not what I want from this religion.' In that first year on my own, learning from a little book,<sup>9</sup> I had developed a lot of insight into the Four Noble Truths. I found it a powerful teaching, very simple in its form; just 'one-two-three-four.' That's easy enough, I thought. It pointed to suffering – and I had plenty of that. I didn't have to go looking for it. I realized that this was the teaching I had been looking for. And when I met Luang Por Chah I found his whole emphasis was also in developing insight into these truths through daily life in the monastery.

I feel that I have received the very best from life, not only in terms

<sup>8</sup> *Upasampadā* is the act of Admission, or Acceptance, into the Bhikkhu Sangha.

<sup>9</sup> *The Word of The Buddha* by Nyānatiloka Thera (Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lanka).

of the Buddha's teaching, but also in terms of its manifestation in the life of Ajahn Chah. I feel a lot of gratitude to Ajahn Chah, but it's not that I'm a devotee of Ajahn Chah or a cult follower of his. He didn't want us to make him into a cult figure. He never pointed to himself saying that he was a *sotāpanna* or an arahant.<sup>10</sup> Whenever one wanted to find out where he was at – and I don't know how many people asked him if he was an arahant – he would answer in a way that made you look at what you were asking. 'Who is it that is asking? Why do you want to know?' So he'd point you in the right direction, by refusing to answer either yes or no.

What I gained from that ten-year period was a good foundation in practice and in Vinaya. By the time I came to England I had only been a bhikkhu for ten years. I sometimes think that I was crazy to come here having just ten years in the robes. Nowadays we wouldn't think of putting a ten-year monk in such a position. But my confidence in the practice was firmly established during those ten years, and Luang Por Chah obviously realized that, because he was the one who encouraged me to come here.

Reflectiveness is always the way. Once you have confidence in awareness, then whatever happens to you, you can reflect on it and learn from it. I've been in England for over twenty-six years, which has been a time of learning from all the many things that have happened to me: I get praise and blame, things go well and fall apart, people come, people go. And even a teacher isn't a refuge; Ajahn Chah became ill and was incapacitated for ten years. He couldn't say a word and was nursed until he died in 1992. So the refuge is not in a teacher or in the scriptures or in a monastery or in a religious tradition or Vinaya or anything like that, but in awareness. Awareness is so ordinary, so natural to us that we ignore it, we overlook it all the time. This is where we need continuous reminding and wise reflection, so that when tragedies and difficulties happen we can use those very things as part

<sup>10</sup> A *sotāpanna* and an arahant are respectively those people who have realized the first and the final stages of awakening.

of our training, as part of the path of cultivating the Way. This is the fourth Noble Truth.

You only need the confidence to reflect, to be aware – not of how things should be, but of what you are actually experiencing, without claiming it, without adding to it in any way. Thus when I feel sad, if I think: ‘I am sad’, then I have made it more than what it is. Instead, I am simply aware of the sadness, which is preverbal. So awareness exists without the arising of thought. The habitual tendency is to think: ‘I am sad, and I don’t want to be sad. I want to be happy.’ Then it becomes a big problem for us. Awareness is not a special quality that I have more of than you. It is a natural ability that we all share. The practice is in using this natural ability and in being willing to learn from it.

\* \* \*

**Question:** What most impressed you about Ajahn Chah?

**Ajahn Sumedho:** Luang Por Chah had a great deal of *mettā* (loving-kindness), so I felt very welcomed by the way he received me at Wat Pah Pong. When I first met him, I felt he was very interested and I felt intuitively that he was a wise man. I couldn’t understand Thai very well at the time, but what I saw of how he lived his life and his general way of being was pleasing to me. As a teacher, he seemed to pick up quickly where I was at. His teaching was very direct.

He never wanted me to spend much time reading or studying; he just wanted me to practise. He emphasized that, telling me to put my books away and just read my *citta*, my mind.<sup>11</sup> I was quite happy to do that because I was weary of studying Buddhism and I wanted to practise it instead of just reading about it. This is what he was encouraging me to do.

Even though he was giving a lot of talks – which I couldn’t understand for the first two years – he very much emphasized *kor wat*,<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> As this paragraph points out, *citta* can sometimes be more adequately translated as heart or psyche.

<sup>12</sup> *Kor wat* (Thai) is the list of duties to be observed with reference to the dwellings, requisites and one’s fellow *samaṇas*. Used with great care, it is one of the principle means of training in Ajahn Chah’s monasteries.

the way you live in the monastery: paying attention, being mindful with the food and the robes, with the kuti and the monastery. I found him very much like a mirror that would reflect my state of mind. He always seemed to be completely present. I'd get carried away with my thoughts and emotions, and then suddenly discover that just being around him meant I could let go; I could drop what I was holding on to without even telling him. His presence helped me to see what I was doing and what I was holding. So I decided that I would live with him as long as I could since such monks are hard to find. I stayed with him for ten years at Wat Pah Pong and branch monasteries.

**Question:** Did you notice that he had any experiences with psychic powers?

**AS:** He'd kind of laugh at all of that. He was very clear on what the Buddha taught so he didn't encourage any attempt to get powers but to just develop awareness in daily life. Not even a lot of *samādhi* or sitting. It was a more active lifestyle that pointed towards the present – *paccuppanna-dhamma*<sup>13</sup> – here and now. This is what I was recognizing and how I picked up the teaching. When asked about powers, he just said: 'If they come, don't make anything of them. If you don't have them, fine. If you do, don't hold on to them. Don't think you are special because you have powers.'

**Question:** Did you experience times of being happy and also not so happy with him as a teacher?

**AS:** Yes, he could be very charming and make you feel very good but he could also be critical and fierce. But I always trusted him; even when he was being critical of me, I could use that. I could see my feelings of anger towards him. One had to conform with everything at Wat Pah Pong and he would give very long *desanās*<sup>14</sup> in the evening, sometimes four or five hours. And of course, I couldn't understand them. So when he would start to give a talk in Lao, I asked him if I could get up and go back to practise at my kuti. He said: 'No, no, you have to stay and

<sup>13</sup> *Paccuppanna-dhamma* truth that is directly experienced through investigating what arises in the present.

<sup>14</sup> A *desanā* (literally 'a showing') is a talk which presents the Dhamma.

develop patience.’ I thought I’d better do what he said, so I did that. Of course, when you are feeling bored or have a lot of pain from sitting so long, you feel anger. And he’s the one with all the power; he’s the one sitting up in the Dhamma seat and he can decide to stop when he wants to. So, I’d start feeling all this rage, and I’d start thinking, ‘I’m going to leave this monastery; I don’t want to be here.’ But then it would drop very quickly. It didn’t hold, for some reason. I didn’t carry it. One time, I remember I was really angry. He’d been talking for a long time; I was so fed up and tired with the whole thing and then at the end of his talk he looked at me and smiled and asked me how I was doing. I said I felt fine, because all that anger and rage had just dropped away. Basically I had so much faith in him that I could allow him to do things that would push me to the edge, to make me see what I was doing. Basically I trusted him, so I never felt like I was used or abused or exploited because I trusted that he was helping me even when I didn’t like what he was doing.

**Question:** What is your point of view about Luang Por Chah’s way of teaching?

**AS:** It was about getting to know yourself, about looking at your mind, at your *citta*, so you’re aware all the time of what you’re feeling. Know your emotion; do not get caught by your own emotion. Keep observing what you’re feeling emotionally. I had a lot of emotions coming up about being the only *farang* (foreigner) there, feeling insecure and not understanding things very well. Sometimes I’d feel lonely and other times arrogant. I felt that a lot of what they were doing was of no value and I didn’t agree with it. But there was this emphasis on knowing yourself, knowing your emotion, to be the one who knows or *poo roo* in Thai. The *poo roo* style, being the knowing, I found really helpful.

I began to see how I was creating my own suffering by holding on to views or by projecting things on to other monks. When I actually reflected on the existing conditions, I saw they were very good. I had food and requisites, a good teacher, and the monks were basically all

good people. So when I really contemplated the actual situation, I saw it was a very good place. Then because of the *poo roo* style I could see whenever jealousy or fear, resentment or arrogance arose, how I created those things.

Once I could see this, I could let go. I didn't have to hold on. Once I saw that I was the one who created these *arom*<sup>15</sup> (moods), I could take the position of being the one who knows, the one who is aware. I worked through a lot of emotional habits that way. You know how it can be when you're the only foreigner; you don't know what's happening or what they're thinking. I experienced times of paranoia thinking, 'What are they really thinking? Why do they do that?' And yet because of the teaching, the *poo roo*, I could see that I was making it up myself, that my fear or projection of them was what I made. It wasn't the others. It was what I was creating in my mind.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 17 June 2003)

<sup>15</sup> *Arom* is the Thai derivation from the Pali *ārammaṇa* – the dominant condition of the mind or mood.

## 7 | Personal Responsibility and the Nuclear Age

In recent years it has become obvious that all of us on this planet are related to each other just by that reason alone – that we are all planetary beings; and when one group has privileges and another doesn't, this is an imbalance. It will always create some kind of conflict. Wherever there is injustice, unfairness or disequilibrium, there is an increase in the suffering in the human realm as well as in the lives of all other creatures. It's wise now to reflect that we are all interrelated; we are all supporting each other. We are no longer nations that can operate independently, without regard to how we affect the rest of the world.

One of the great attractions of Buddhism is that it offers a way of intelligent reflection on the human predicament. We all experience being born in the human form and having to live up to seventy, eighty, ninety or one hundred years; and during this span of life we have to experience all kinds of things, from the best to the worst, good and bad, pleasure and pain. This is common to every single human being. There is no one exempt from this experience of suffering, of growth, ageing and death. What should I do with my life? Can I just live according to my

impulses, the fashions of the time, and simply do what I feel like doing – or not doing? Do I really have that right? Is it fair? Is it good enough for me just to live my life in safety and security, for my own satisfaction, for my own pleasure? Or is there something I need to contribute? I am a part of the whole, so what is my responsibility to society, and to the planet that I share with all the rest of you?

If I am a selfish, small-minded being, then I think: ‘Get what I can for myself. See what I can get for myself, even if it’s at the expense of the rest of you.’ I have to scheme, manipulate and control circumstances for my own benefit at the expense of everyone else. That’s what some people do. They don’t have a sense of personal responsibility in their life. This has not developed, nor has it been encouraged. In fact, for some people personal responsibility is seen as rather an unpleasant issue, something to be avoided. ‘The government should provide security, all the little perks and pleasures of life, and ensure that I have these for the rest of my life.’ So modern politics often plays upon this selfish interest in the citizens of Western democracy by promising all kinds of advantages, opportunities and securities. And that appeals to us in one way. We don’t feel we are really able to be responsible; we feel that we still need an overriding protector of some sort, some kind of mother or father who will take care of us, pat us on the back, tell us everything is all right, and provide for all our needs. It’s the child in all of us that cries out sometimes for some external force to guide, nurture and comfort us when we are frightened and ill, or feel insecure.

Modern governments are often expected to fulfil that role one way or another. Another thing you notice in Western democracies is how demanding the citizens can be, putting pressure on the government to recognize rights, privileges, and provide all kinds of opportunities – endless heckling and criticism. I’ve noticed in Britain and America how little gratitude there is for the generosity that our governments have shown. We tend to dwell on the threats, the things that might be taken

away from us, the things that haven't been done yet, or the things that are done that we don't like and don't want.

Then sometimes we feel that the government fails us, just like God has failed us, or our parents didn't love us enough. In spite of all the generosity, security and benefits we may have received from our parents, from the government, from God, we still find ourselves suffering; we still find ourselves discontented. It's not enough. There is not enough in the universe to truly satisfy, to give us complete satisfaction and complete contentment. There is no possible government that we can conceive of, or create, that will be able to truly satisfy all our desires for security.

This discontent, which the Buddha pointed to very clearly, is due to the nature of the human mind itself. As long as we are ignorant – 'not knowing the truth of the way it is' (in Buddhist terms, not knowing the Dhamma) – then we operate from this self-view of me and mine: we remain attached to this individual here, all its thoughts, feelings moods, expectations, hopes, fears and dreads. Then we become so involved in the body itself, so identified with the physical form that we can't see beyond it. So one can understand selfishness as the natural result of this form of ignorance, of being attached to these changing conditions of body and mind.

In the West our attachments have become complicated. Not only do we demand physical security, shelter and food, clothing and medical care, we demand all kinds of other opportunities. We demand education and freedom to do what we want, time to live our lives in our own way, opportunity to develop our individual talents and abilities. We expect so much. What can we offer in return? Is there something that each one of us could do in order to give back what we have received? What do we need to know to stop acting like a perennial child, endlessly demanding nourishment and safety from mother?

At this time there are pressures on people to take sides in various ways. Our minds tend to seek a fixed position to hold on to – a political

view that we are very much attached to, or a religious view, a national view, personal view, views around class, race and gender. We adopt some particular position we can use to feel a sense of purpose and meaning in life. And yet, when we attach to a particular viewpoint we become obsessed with our side; we lose perspective and lose sensitivity to the other side. We can be so caught up in righteous behaviour that we lose all sensitivity even towards our own group, towards our own family, not to mention the opposite side. We can be so fanatically dedicated to a political viewpoint that we are willing to destroy the whole world just to hold to this view.

Of course, these are the extreme types. Most human beings have some sense of perspective, in which we tend to wobble and waver. We become confused because we are not quite sure whether we are really fully left or fully right, on which side we should really align ourselves; so we wobble between the two. Sometimes we even feel envy for those who are very sure that their side is absolutely right at all times, and wish we could be that strong, that convinced, that sure. Wouldn't we feel secure if things were as clear-cut as 'this side is absolutely right, and the other side is absolutely wrong'?

But most of our life we have to live between the extremes of right and wrong. Even the most dire fanatic has to come to terms with the facts of life. They have to eat food, find a place to live, clothe the body, get old, suffer from illnesses, lose loved ones, be separated from what they like and want. We all suffer from the desire of wanting things that we don't have. And there is the inevitable death that we all must experience. So, most of our life is in this realm of neither right nor left, where we are just getting on with life as best we can, on the physical plane, trying to get along with the people around us, trying to find some peace and friendship. So much of our life is just a waiting process. We are waiting for things. We are just going from one place to another waiting for something else, the expectation or the fear. A lot of the time we're not accepting life as it really is because we're so caught up with

waiting for the next thing, longing for the next experience, waiting for the bus, waiting to get over the illness, waiting to die.

The teaching of the Buddha, the reflection on Dhamma relates to life as it actually is. It allows all of us to open our minds to life without being forced to take a position. I'm not saying you shouldn't have any viewpoint, any opinion whatsoever, but we need to reflect on this tendency we all have towards being attached to them. This tendency is a problem in Western society: we have become so idealistic, so caught up in theories and views about how everything should be. I notice most people I meet in Britain have very high standards. They want to have everything at its best, whatever that best might be to that particular person. We can conceive with our minds how things should be. And that's why we become so critical: we can see that society isn't what it should be. It should be other than this, it should be better. We can become so aware of the things that have gone wrong: the inefficiency of it, the bureaucracy of it, the injustices that we see and know about. These become dominant in the mind because we have an image in the mind of a society where everything is as it should be; where everything is fair, equal, kind and loving.

But then life is as it is – how is it for you? What is your life really like? In opening the mind to the way it is we are not criticizing or affirming anything, we're just opening up to life as we are living it; we're being truly sensitive to the good, the bad, the justices, injustices, the day and night, the sun and the rain, the heat and the cold. Being mindful, in Buddhist terms. We talk about the way out of suffering; and the way out of this endless realm of suffering, of 'dis-ease', is through mindfulness. The mind is then full, it's open, it's attentive, and receptive. These words describe being mindful.

This is something that each one of us can do. It's not impossible; but we need to really contemplate what that means. At a monastery I lived in for a while in Thailand, they used to teach this method of mindfulness where you walk very slowly. And one afternoon they had

a meeting in the hall there. All the monks were supposed to come. The meeting was scheduled for two o'clock. Those of us who were not doing this kind of meditation were there by two. But those who were doing this meditation – we had to wait about half an hour for all of them to move slowly from their little huts. Of course, we could be mindful of the irritation we were feeling at that time! But one wondered whether they were mindful of the fact that they were late and keeping everyone else waiting. Or were they just so busy concentrating that they didn't take into account what was necessary for that particular time and place?

So if we fix on a view of what is mindful, then that is a delusion. We become heedless, insensitive, if we consider mindfulness to mean doing something in a special, stylized way. If we think mindfulness is doing things slowly, then when we have to move quickly, what is that? Are we being heedless when we move quickly? Even if you read a definition of it in a book, even though you can recite the definition of mindfulness, still you may not be mindful at all. So mindfulness – my definition of it – is the mind being open, receptive, sensitive, not fixed on any one thing, but able to fix on things according to what is needed in the time and place. With mindfulness we no longer are forced to take positions, take sides, get caught up in the quarrels and problems of our families, organizations, societies; with mindfulness we can open the mind to this whole conflict. The mind is capable of embracing both sides, of being sensitive to everything, of being open, receptive and clear, in regard to the right, the left, and the good or the bad.

Now getting back to personal responsibility ... we regard ourselves very much as a personality, we have a strong sense of being a person. Our identities are limited to this body, this particular creature here; even family identities have no priority for many of us. The trend today is to live life on your own terms, and there are advantages and disadvantages to that. Living solely for yourself means you end up feeling totally out of communion with anyone else and incredibly lonely. There is tremendous depression and loneliness in people's lives

now because many people no longer know how to unite, how to have communion with another human being. We get introverted, isolated in our own self-view. One can be living in a society of abundance, surrounded by friends and relatives with endless opportunities and options for self-fulfilment and freedom; yet the more one indulges in all that and locks into the self-view, the more isolated and desperate one begins to feel.

However, taking individualism to an extreme can also take us back to something else – to an identity on a grander scale, a sense of communion with all beings. From one extreme – from being totally isolated in this wretched body, with these boring old thoughts and emotions that just keep bashing away inside, the bleak, dried-up mental state and the hopelessness of that – from there one can find the way to the grandeur of feeling in communion with all beings. This is through opening the mind, through mind-full-ness, to where the universe is in the mind. The mind can embrace the whole universe, rather than my mind, with my little thoughts, my opinions and views, what I think, what I want for me. That small, wretched little self is released and allowed to fade out in this wholeness.

Religion is the convention for that type of realization. I'm sure all religions are meant to take us to that realization of wholeness and total union, rather than just to be a divisive force – cast as a Buddhist against the Christians, or taking sides with this group against that group. It's quite common for Western Buddhists to do this in fact – to take sides on schools of Buddhism or sects – because our mind is conditioned to do that. Even with the grandest, most altruistic views of oneness and wholeness, we sometimes manage to grasp and to become sectarian Buddhists.

This is not an opening of the mind to the whole, is it? We are caught in this unfortunate delusion of self that has to choose a side and then be pitted against the opposite. Whatever side you choose, its opposite will attack you in some way or another; you will feel threatened by it. As long

as you are fixed, attached and bound to one view, you will be threatened by its opposite: views about men and women; about capitalism and communism; views about Christianity and other religions; racial views, or class views – all of these. Even if we are attached to the grandest view, that attachment binds us to a viewpoint and does not allow us to be mindful. As long as we are bound to a viewpoint we are no longer mindful, we are insensitive. Then we do not develop the full potential of our reflective aspect, which is towards enlightenment.

We have receptive minds. The opinions and views we have encourage us to look, to investigate. We want to find out what we should do and how to live our life. When I first taught in Britain, I was trying to talk about morality in Hampstead – but it was getting me nowhere. ‘Morality’ was a word that in 1977 people did not use, except as a kind of disparaging sign. ‘Morality’ meant you were narrow-minded, you were prudish, you were something from the time of Queen Victoria. ‘Morality’ was not a word that people liked or wanted to hear. They wanted to hear about having more and more freedom to develop themselves, to live their lives, to do what they wanted. And in those days people hoped that if they became Buddhists, it would give them more freedom and more ability to enjoy everything. You could just take a course in Buddhist meditation where you could get over all your inhibitions, all your fears, so you could fully enjoy everything all the time. That was not so long ago. But now I find that ‘morality’ is quite an acceptable word!

For a Buddhist, the Pali word *sīla* implies a morality for reflection and wisdom. In teaching, we try to present morality not as something that I impose on you and judge you by – ‘you should refrain from drinking, from promiscuity, from this, from that, and if you don’t the result will be that you will fall into a hell-realm!’ – and then out of fear you blindly obey or disobey. Buddhist moral precepts are standards to be reflected upon. Morality is not an absolute fixed position that one takes. It is a convention. The *sīla*, the five moral precepts of Buddhism, delineate a moral convention to be contemplated and considered so

that you begin to open your mind to what morality really means. It's not a horrible limitation placed on you, taking all the pleasure out of life. It is a kind of freedom to have the wisdom to know that doing certain things – like killing other human beings – will only lead to increasing misery of all kinds.

Just that alone – the first precept of non-killing, non-violence – is the most important moral precept and should be adopted at an international level. Just think – so many of the problems of the nuclear age could be solved just through refraining from the intentional killing of other human beings, from violent behaviour towards other beings. If more human beings (or even nations) resolved to keep that precept, then of course the need for nuclear armaments could cease. There would be some foundation for trust. But there is no foundation for trust any more, in the nation itself or in an international setting. There is no way that any country can trust another country because politics has degenerated into power struggling, into force, intimidation and blame – all conditions which create fear, suspicion and hatred.

Just look at your own life, in your own experience: the more you blame somebody else, the more you connive and live in a dishonest way with yourself and with others, the more suspicion and fear you feel. The more violent you are, the more you mistrust others, the more you expect violence to come to you. What you are obsessed with you see in everyone else.

Non-violence: to refrain from violent action or violent speech, from doing things that disrupt, that breed fear and suspicion; this is what I mean by 'personal responsibility.' It is something we have to start doing in our own lives. Our offering to the society we are in is our willingness to try to live in a way that does not create fear in our own life or in the minds of those around us. We can actually move towards that in daily life, to live in such a way that we can respect ourselves. We feel respect because we are living in a way that we respect. And when we do that, we find that other people respect us. And when other people respect

you they listen to you, they pay attention, they emulate and they follow. So, more and more people begin to feel the joy and the freedom of being responsible for their lives. Of course this is the foundation of any society, isn't it? A society is a group of individual human beings; it's made up of individual human beings. So to try to teach morality from the top, to impose moral laws on a society, can be tyranny. If suddenly the British government decided to punish everyone who was immoral in Britain that would be tyranny, wouldn't it? So in Buddhism, *sīla* has to come from wisdom and growth within. It has to come from personal responsibility and personal knowledge of oneself.

(From a public talk given in September 1986)

## 8 | An Awakened Response to Violence: The Natural Purity of the Mind

Those who live in awakened awareness see the suffering of others but do not create additional sorrow around it. We acknowledge the contact with this human experience of life's inevitable suffering and the questions that immediately arise: what can we do about it? How should we regard this? The answer of course is mindfulness. With mindfulness, we feel what is impinging on our mind as unpleasant or unfair because that is simply the way it is – but we have the opportunity to choose how to respond. Usually, we just react; we hear bad news about the persecution of innocent people and we feel indignant or outraged. We want to punish those perpetuating these indignities on others. This is our conditioned reaction – when we hear bad news, we feel angry; when we hear good news, we feel happy. But when we are mindful, we can respond instead of reacting. With an awakened mind, based in right understanding or right view, we can liberate ourselves from the momentum of habit and reactivity. When we are mindful we enter the natural state of

the mind, pure and unconditioned, and we can respond to life with wisdom and compassion.

The four *brahmavihāras*, called ‘the divine abodes’, are the natural responses that come from this purity of mind. They are universal qualities; they aren’t personal qualities that we have to create. In other words, we don’t try to feel compassionate through conjuring up ideas of compassion or sentimental attitudes about love. Compassion, or *karuṇā*, is the natural response to the misfortunes and unfairness that we see or hear about. *Mettā*, generally translated as loving-kindness, is our response to the conditioned realm, a patient acceptance of everything whether good or bad. Accepting the good is not so hard, but it is quite difficult not to hate the bad and seek revenge. We aren’t compounding the bad with hatred or the desire for revenge. *Mettā* offers a response based on kindness and patience, rather than one of habitual reactions to unpleasant experiences. *Muditā*, or sympathetic joy, is the spontaneous response to the beauty and goodness of the world we live in. *Upekkhā*, or equanimity, is a state of composure and emotional balance. It is the ability to know when it’s time to do something and when there is nothing that can be done.

If we approach the state of the world on an emotional level it’s just too much: the genocide, the exploitation of the Third World, the devastation of the environment, the unfairness that is part of every political and economic system in every country in the world. The situation doesn’t seem to be getting any better, and we have strong feelings about this. There’s so much to get angry and indignant about. What can we do? How can we help? How should we respond to these situations? One thing we can do right now – one thing that will benefit all sentient beings – is to maintain awakened awareness. This is not something we need to put off until next week or next year. This is helpful right now to all those in all the places on Earth where ethnic battles are taking place. The simple act of awakened awareness is a way of transcending all our ethnic and cultural conditioning, our

biases, prejudices and our kammic tendencies. When we're in a state of awakened awareness we're touching into a universal reality, a natural purity that connects us to all beings everywhere. Each one of us has the power to pay attention, to wake up, listen and be receptive. That much we can do, right now.

This is important to realize; otherwise, we might sit here thinking we can't do anything, or we might worry about it, hating and blaming in anguish and despair, doubting our ability to help in any way. We may even begin to think that sitting on a cushion meditating is just indulgent and not for the welfare of anybody. It can look like we're shutting down – and it is possible that some of us might be shutting down. But what I'm recommending, and how I experience meditation, is as an opening up of the heart and mind. As we open, we move beyond our personal kamma and the sense of self-importance that goes along with it, learning to relax and surrender into the state of pure, attentive awareness. We enter into a universal reality rather than living out of our personal habits. From this state, we can spread loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity.

You could say this way of responding to the suffering in the world is very 'grass roots.' Each one of us is a blade of grass. We want all the blades of grass on the planet to be healthy, but it can seem overwhelming. There have never been this many people on this planet in the known history of human civilization. The mind boggles; it can't cope with so many blades. But this one blade of grass is something I have some control over. This one conscious being is something I can work with. We each reflect the potential for all human beings to become Buddhas. We each reflect the potential for all human beings to live in a state of awakened awareness, channelling the *brahmavihāras* through our human forms, acting with compassion and expressing love and joy.

We've seen this potential for awakening realized in various teachers, in people we know or in people we've heard about through the ages – the saints and bodhisattvas, the *sādhus* and enlightened beings, human

beings like ourselves who have realized their natural purity to become channels of compassion. I've experienced it with my own teacher, Ajahn Chah, an ordinary monk from a remote corner of Thailand. He wasn't a prince or an aristocrat but a man from a rice-growing peasant family. Through his own faith and efforts, he was able to free his mind from selfish intention and delusion, revealing the potential we all have as human beings. Yet he wasn't living in an ivory tower: he was a very realistic, practical person, aware of injustice, corruption and social problems. His response was always one of compassion to the suffering of others. Through the power of *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā* he affected millions of people.

Those of us who grew up during the Second World War were certainly aware of genocide and slaughter. We thought once the war was over that we were going to have peace. But the conflict keeps on going, doesn't it? We still experience the effects of hundreds of years of indignation, anger and resentment and a whole list of wrongs to which each side in the conflict clings. Where does it end? Where can it end? There are meetings, conferences and formal forgiveness ceremonies, but hatred is still latent within the hearts of human beings. We're culturally conditioned; we acquire the biases of our own ethnic groups. I've never been to any place where there hasn't been somebody to hate, some group at the bottom of the pile. 'They're the stupid ones!' 'They're the country cousins!' 'They're the evil empire!' The tendency of the human mind, the conditioning of the mind is to blame our suffering on another group.

The Buddha's teaching points to the realization of the pure mind beyond cultural or religious conditioning. The simple act of living in awakened awareness is very powerful and worthy of great respect. And this power is universal. By learning to let go of our conditioned reactions to violence and hatred, all of us can learn to respond with the natural purity of the mind. Awakening our minds allows us to get beyond the conventions of race, religion or culture and our tendencies to blame

and react with violence, so that the power of love and compassion can arise unimpeded and spread. It's up to us to realize this, to try it out, to begin to awaken ourselves to this realization.

(From *Inquiring Mind*, Vol. 16, No. 2, spring 2000)



## 9 | Gratitude to Parents

*Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other shoulder and so doing should live for a hundred years ... Moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth, abounding in the seven treasures - not even by this could one repay one's parents. And why? Bhikkhus, parents do a lot for their children. They bring them up, they provide them with food, introduce them to the world.*

*Yet bhikkhus, anyone who encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents, and settles and establishes them in morality; or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in generosity; or whoever encourages their foolish parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom - such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due to their parents.*

Āṅguttara Nikāya 2.33

Gratitude, *kataññū katavedī*, is a positive response to life. In developing this, we deliberately bring into our consciousness the good things done to us in our life. So on this day especially we remember the goodness of our parents and we contemplate it. We are not dwelling on what they

did wrong; instead, we deliberately choose to remember the goodness and the kindness that our parents had for us – even though in some cases, generosity might not have been there at all times.

A life without gratitude is a joyless life. If we don't have anything to be grateful about our life is a dreary plane. If life is just a continuous complaint and moan about the injustices and unfairness we have received and we don't remember anything good ever done to us – all we do is remember the bad things – then that's called depression. This is not an uncommon problem now. When we fall into depression we cannot remember any good that has happened to us. Something stops in the brain and it is impossible to imagine ever being happy again: we think this misery is forever.

In Sri Lanka and throughout Asia, *kataññū katavedī* is a cultural virtue; it is highly regarded and cultivated. Being able to support and look after our parents is considered to be one of the great blessings of a life. This is interesting for those of us who come from a Western cultural background, because Western values are slightly different. Many of us have had fortunate lives, but we can tend to take a lot for granted. We have privileges and benefits, and a much better life than a good portion of people in the world can ever hope to expect. There's a lot to be grateful for, a lot to feel *kataññū* for when you live in a place like Britain.

I think back to when I was a child, and the way my parents devoted their lives to look after my sister and me. When I was young, I didn't appreciate it at all. As a child in the States, we didn't think about it; we took our mother and father for granted. We could not realize what they had to sacrifice, what they had to give up in order to take care of us. It's only when we are older and have given up things for the sake of our own children or somebody else that we begin to appreciate and feel *kataññū katavedī* for our parents.

My father was an aspiring artist before the Depression in 1929. Then the Crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he

had to take a job selling shoes. My sister and I were born during the Depression and he had to support us. When the Second World War started, my father was too old to enlist in the military. He wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in New Seattle. He worked in a shipyard. He didn't like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the war effort. After the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store. Talking to him when I grew up, I found that he had never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. The sacrifice of his own preferences was mainly to support my mother, my sister and me.

I had a much bigger choice, much better opportunities. My generation had a whole range of possibilities available to us when we were young. My parents did not have such opportunities; their generation had to get on with their lives and start work when they were still quite young. When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers and what they had done to cause ME to suffer now. I didn't realize then that suffering was a natural thing for human beings. My mother was not a perfectly enlightened being when she had me, so naturally there were things she could have improved on. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love and care were all there – and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my sister and myself as good and as happy as could be. It was a dedication – she asked very little for herself. So when I think back like this *kataññū*, gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father. Now I can hardly think of any of the faults that used to dominate my mind when I was young; they seem so trivial now, I hardly recall any.

If we just go on with the force of habit and conditioning we remain more or less stuck with all kinds of things instilled into us – with habits that we acquired when we were young – and these can dominate our

conscious life as we get older. But as we mature and grow up, we realize that we can develop skilfulness in the way we think about ourselves, and in the way we think about others. The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us by our parents, by our teachers, friends and others and to do this intentionally – to cultivate it, to bring it into consciousness quite deliberately – rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

When I became a Buddhist monk in Thailand I was very fortunate to meet a teacher, Luang Por Chah, who became the catalyst for the *kataññū* in my life. At that time I was thirty-four years old and I must say, *kataññū* was not yet part of my life's experience. I was still very much obsessed with myself, with what I wanted and what I thought. However, after training as a Buddhist monk for about six years, I had a heart-opening experience that was very much the experience of *kataññū katavedī*.

I had been a Buddhist for many years before I met Luang Por Chah. I was attracted to Buddhism about the age of twenty-one, so I had tremendous interest and faith in Buddhism as well as an eagerness to study and practise it. But it was still coming from the sense of me doing it, me studying it, me trying to practise it. When I became a monk there was still this dominant interest in my mind: 'I want to get rid of suffering, I want to be enlightened.' I was not much concerned about other people, about my parents or even about Luang Por Chah with whom I was living at the time. I was grateful that he was helping me but it was not a deep gratitude.

There was a conceit, an unpleasant kind of conceit: I had the idea that life owed all this to me. In my kind of middle-class situation we take so much for granted. My parents worked hard to make my life comfortable, but I thought they should have worked harder; I deserved more than what they gave me. Even though this was not a conscious thought, there was the underlying attitude that I deserved all I had: it was right to get all this, people should give me these things, my parents

should make my life as good as possible, as I wanted it to be. So from that viewpoint, it was Ajahn Chah's duty to teach and guide me!

Sometimes I had the conceit that my presence was a great blessing and asset to the monastery. It was not all that conscious, but when I began to contemplate things in my mind I could see this conceit and became aware of this insensitivity. We can take so much for granted and complain that life is not as good, as abundant, as privileged as we would like it to be; or else we think that others are much better off than ourselves.

In Thailand, I practised with diligence and was determined in my monastic life. After five *vassas* a monk is no longer considered to be a novice and can get away on his own. I felt that being with a teacher was fine but I wanted to go away on my own, so I went to Central Thailand from North East Thailand. Then after the *vassa* I went on a pilgrimage to India. This was around 1974, and I decided to go as a *tudong* bhikkhu – that is, to walk from place to place as part of my practice as a monk. Somebody provided me with a ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta, and I found myself in Calcutta with my alms-bowl, my robe and that's all. In Thailand it had been easy but in India it seemed that wandering around with an alms-bowl and no money would be quite frightening. As it happened, the five months I spent in India were quite an adventure and I have very pleasant memories of that time. The life of an alms-mendicant worked in India. Of all countries it should work there, as that's where the Buddha lived and taught.

It was about this time that I began to think of Luang Por Chah. My mind began to recognize the kindness he had extended to me. He had accepted me as his disciple, looked after me, taken an interest, given me the teachings and helped me in almost every way. And there was his own example. If you wanted to be a monk, you wanted to be like him. He was a full human being, a man who inspired me, someone I wanted to emulate – and I must say there weren't so many men that I had had that feeling towards. In the States, the role models for men were not

very attractive to me: John Wayne or President Eisenhower or Richard Nixon were not men I wanted to emulate. Film stars and athletes were given great importance, but none of them inspired me. But then in Thailand, I found this monk ...

He was very small; I towered above him. When we were together sometimes that surprised me, because he had such an enormous presence. He seemed always much bigger than I was. It was interesting, the power, the aura of this little man. I didn't really think of him as a little man; I thought of him as a huge man because of the *mettā* (loving-kindness) in his life. He was a man of enormous *mettā*. There was this feeling about him that attracted people; he was like a magnet and you wanted to be close to him. So I found myself going over to see him at his kuti in the evenings, or whenever it was possible; I wanted to take every opportunity I had to hang around. I found that was the way most people tended to behave towards him. He had an enormous following in Thailand, both Thai and Westerners, because of his *mettā* practice. I asked him once what it was that drew people to him and he said, 'I call it my magnet.' He was a very charming person; he had ebullience, a radiant quality. And he used his magnet to attract people so that he could teach them the Dhamma. This is how he used the charismatic quality he had: not for his ego, but to help people.

I felt a great sense of gratitude that he should do this – that he would spend his life taking on laypeople and difficult monks like myself, having to put up with all of us endlessly creating problems; we were so obsessed with ourselves, with our desires, our doubts, our opinions, our views. To be surrounded day and night by people who are endlessly irritating takes real *mettā*, and he would do it. He could have just gone off to a nice place and had a quiet life. That's what I wanted to do at the time. I wanted to get enlightened so that I could just live a nice peaceful life in a happy way, in a pleasant, peaceful place. I wanted everyone in the monastery to be harmonious, to have the right chemistry and to harmonize with me so there would be no

conflict or friction. But in a Thai monastery there are always problems and difficulties. The Vinaya Pitaka<sup>16</sup> presents all the background stories of what the monastic community used to do that caused the Buddha to establish these disciplinary guidelines. Some of the rules deal with horrible things. Some of those monastics around the Lord Buddha were abominable.

After his enlightenment, the Lord Buddha at first thought that the Dhamma was too subtle, that no one would understand it so there was no point in teaching it. Then, according to the legend, one of the gods came forth and said, 'Please Lord, for the welfare of those who have little dust in their eyes, teach the Dhamma.' The Buddha then contemplated with his powerful mind who might understand the Dhamma teaching. He remembered his early teachers but through his powers realized that both of them had died. Then he remembered his five friends who had been practising with him before and who had deserted him. Out of compassion he went off to find these five friends, and expounded his brilliant teaching on the Four Noble Truths. This made me feel *kataññū katavedī* to the Lord Buddha. It's marvellous: here I am – this guy, here, in this century – having an opportunity to listen to the Dhamma, and to have this pure teaching still available.

Having a living teacher like Ajahn Chah was not like worshipping a prophet who lived 2,500 years ago, but was actually inheriting the lineage of the Lord Buddha himself. Perhaps because of visiting the Buddhist holy places, *kataññū katavedī* began to become very strong in me in India. Seeing these holy places and then thinking of Luang Por Chah in Thailand, I remembered how I had thought: 'I've done my five years, now I'm going to leave. I'm going to have a few adventures, do what I want to do, be out from under the eye of the old man.' I realized then that I had actually run away. At that time there were many Westerners coming to our monastery in Thailand, and I did not want to be bothered with them. I did not want to have to teach them and translate for them; I just wanted to have my own life and not be pestered

<sup>16</sup>The collection of texts that concerns itself with the history of the early Sangha and the procedures and guidelines that the Buddha laid down to give it form.

by these people. So there was a selfish motivation in me to leave, on top of which I had left Luang Por Chah with all these Westerners who didn't speak Thai. At that time, I was the only one who could translate for the Westerners, as Luang Por Chah could not speak English.

When I felt this *kataññū katavedī*, all I wanted to do was get back to Thailand and offer myself to Ajahn Chah. How can you repay a teacher like that? I did not have any money, and that was not what he was interested in anyway. Then I thought that the only way I could make him happy was to be a good Buddhist monk and to go back and help him out; whatever he wanted me to do, I would do it. With that intention, I went back after five months in India and gave myself to the teacher. It was a joyful offering, not a begrudging one, because it came out of this *kataññū*, this gratitude for the good things I had received.

From that time on, I found that my meditation practice began to improve. That hard selfishness cracked in me: me trying to get something, my desire for harmony, me and my desire to practise and to have a peaceful life, me not wanting to be responsible for anything but just to do my own thing. When I gave up all that, things seemed to fall into place. What used to be difficult, like concentrating the mind, became easier and I found that life became joyful to me. I began to enjoy monastic life. I wasn't just sitting around thinking, 'You are disturbing my peace, I don't like this monastery – I want to go to another one', as I used to do. Nor did I feel as resentful as I had before: 'This monk is disturbing my practice, I can't live here', and so on. This grumbling used to be an obstruction in my practice, but now suddenly these things were no longer important issues.

In fact I thought that when I went back, I would ask Ajahn Chah to send me to a monastery to which no monk wanted to go, like a certain branch monastery on the Cambodian border. It was called Wat Bahn Suan Kluey, 'Banana Garden Village Monastery.' It was in the backwoods, it had no good roads and it was in an undeveloped part of Thailand where the people were quite poor. It was very hot there

and all the trees were shorter than myself, although I didn't see many bananas around! It would have been like being exiled to Siberia. When I returned, I suggested to Ajahn Chah that he send me there.

He didn't, but he did encourage me to go to Bahn Bung Wai, which was a village about six kilometres from the main monastery. In 1975 we established Wat Pah Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery near this village. Before we went there the place had been a charnel ground, a cremation area for the village, and it was believed that the forest was filled with ghosts. At first we didn't realize exactly what the place meant to the villagers. Then I became aware that I was staying at the spot where the most fiendish ghost in the forest was supposed to live, so the village headman used to come and ask, 'You sleep all right? Seen anything interesting?' I didn't see anything at all; the ghosts didn't bother me. But that experience helped me to prove my worth as a monk, and that was due to *kataññū*.

When Luang Por Chah asked me to come to England in 1977, I was determined to stick it out and not just follow my own particular feelings and moods; I felt pretty awful that first year and was ready to go back to Thailand. But because of this sense of gratitude, I wasn't going to follow a personal whim. *Kataññū* gave me a tremendous sense of duty, of service, but not in a heavy way. It meant that I did not stay here out of a sense of duty – which makes life unpleasant – but out of a willingness to sacrifice and to serve. This is a joyful thing to do.

This reminds me of an interesting story. The monk who took me to see Luang Por Chah, Phra Sommai, was the same age as I was; he had been in the Thai Navy, and I had been in the American Navy during the Korean War. He could speak pidgin English and had been on *tudong* – wandering from Ubon province, where Ajahn Chah lived, to Nong Khai where I was. It was my first year as a novice monk and he was the first Thai monk I had met who could speak English, so I was delighted to have somebody to talk to. He was also a very strict monk, adhering to every rule in the Vinaya. He would eat from his alms-bowl

and wore dark-brown forest robes, whereas in the monastery where I lived, the monks wore orange-coloured robes; he really impressed me as an exemplary monk. He told me that I should go and stay with Ajahn Chah. So after I received bhikkhu ordination, my preceptor agreed that I could go with this monk to stay with Luang Por Chah. But on the way I began to get fed up with this monk – who turned out to be a pain in the neck. He was forever fussing about things and condemning the other monks, saying that we were the very best. I could not take this incredible arrogance and conceit, and I hoped that Ajahn Chah would not be like him. I wondered what I was getting myself into.

When we arrived at Wat Pah Pong I was relieved to find that Ajahn Chah was not like that. The following year the monk disrobed and he became an alcoholic. The only thing that had kept him off alcohol had been the monastic life, so he fell into alcoholism and became a really degenerate man with a terrible reputation in the province of Ubon. He became a tramp, a really pathetic case, and I felt a sense of disgust and aversion towards him. Talking to Ajahn Chah one evening about it, he told me: ‘You must always have *kataññū* towards Sommai because he brought you here. No matter how badly he behaves or how degenerate he becomes, you must always treat him like a wise teacher and express your gratitude. You are probably one of the really good things that has happened to him in his life, something he can be proud of. If you keep reminding him of this – in a good way, not in an intimidating way – then eventually he might want to change his ways.’ So Luang Por Chah encouraged me to seek out Sommai, talk to him in a friendly way and express my gratitude to him for taking me to Ajahn Chah.

It really was a beautiful thing to do. It would have been easy to look down on him and say, ‘You really disappoint me. You used to be so critical of others and think you were such a good monk, and look at you now.’ We can feel indignant and disappointed at somebody for not living up to our expectations. But what Luang Por Chah was saying was: ‘Don’t be like that, it’s a waste of time and harmful; do what’s really

beautiful out of compassion.’ I saw Sommai in the early part of this year, degenerate as ever; I could not see any change in him. Yet whenever he sees me, it seems to have a good effect on him. He remembers that he was the one responsible for me coming to stay with Luang Por Chah, and that’s a source of a few happy moments in his life. One feels quite glad to offer a few happy moments to a very unhappy person.

Now I look back and feel *kataññū* for all those who have been responsible for encouraging me and helping me when I needed it. What they have done since then, or whether they have lived up to my expectations is not the point. Having *mettā* and *kataññū* is about not being critical or vindictive or dwelling on the bad things people have done; it’s about being able to select and remember the good they have done.

Having a day like this when we consciously bring to mind thoughts of our parents with gratitude is a way of bringing joy and positive feelings into our lives. Taking the Five Precepts and offering the food to the Sangha as a way of remembering our parents with gratitude is a beautiful gesture. At a time like this, we should also consider expressing *kataññū* to the country we live in, because usually we take this for granted. We can remember the benefits made available to us by the state and society, rather than thinking of what’s wrong with it. *Kataññū* allows us to bring into consciousness all the positive things concerned with living in this country. We should develop *kataññū*, even though modern thinking may not encourage us to do so. It is an appreciation and expression of gratitude for the opportunities and the good we derive from living in this society. We’re not thinking always that this nation and society owe us everything, caught in the ‘welfare mind.’ We are grateful for the welfare state, and also recognize that it can breed complaining minds, minds that take things for granted.

So today is a day to develop *kataññū*. Do not think it is just a day to be sentimental. *Kataññū* is a practice to develop in daily life, because it opens the heart and brings joy to our human experience. We need that joy; it’s something that nurtures us and is essential for our spiritual

development. Joy is one of the factors of enlightenment. Life without joy is a dreary one – grey, dull and depressing. So today is a day for joyous recollections.

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**Question:** How do people who have a lot of anger towards their parents develop gratitude towards them?

**AS:** This is not an uncommon problem, because I know that teaching *mettā* on too sentimental a basis can actually increase anger. I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading *mettā* to her parents, would go into a rage; then she felt very guilty about it. This was because she only used her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of *mettā*, but emotionally felt anything but that.

It's important to see this conflict between the intellect and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in our hearts we feel: 'I can never forgive them for what they've done.' So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we go into rationalizations: 'Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can't forgive or forget', or: 'There's something wrong with me, I'm a terrible person because I can't forgive. If I were a good person I would be able to forgive, therefore I must be a bad person.' These are the conflicts that we have between the intellect and the emotions. When we don't understand this conflict, we are confused; we know how we should feel but we don't actually feel that way.

With the intellect we can figure it out in an ideal way; we can create marvellous images and perceptions in the mind. But the emotional nature is not rational. It's a feeling nature; it is not going to go along with what is reasonable, logical, sensible. So, on the emotional level, we have to understand how we actually feel. I've found it helps to have *mettā* for my own feeling. When we feel that our parents were unkind

and unloving to us we can have *mettā* towards the feeling we have in the heart; not being judgemental, but having patience with that feeling – to see that this is how it feels and then to accept that feeling. Then it is possible to resolve that. But when we get stuck in a battle between our logical perceptions and our emotional responses, it gets very confusing. Once I began to accept my negativity rather than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, then we can let it go and free ourselves from the power of that particular thing – not through denial or rejection, but through understanding and accepting that particular negative feeling. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate what life is about.

My father died about six years ago. He was then ninety years old and he had never shown love or positive feelings towards me, so from early childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling through most of my life; I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was always a perfunctory: ‘Hello son, good to see you.’ He seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would say, ‘Remember, this is my house, you’ve got to do as I say.’ This was his greeting – and I was almost fifty years old at the time. I don’t know what he thought I was going to do!

In the last decade of his life, he was quite miserable and became very resentful. He had terrible arthritis and was in constant pain; he had Parkinson’s disease and everything was going wrong. Eventually he was completely paralyzed and had to be put in a nursing home. He could move his eyes and talk, but the rest of his body was rigid, totally still. He hated this and was resentful of what had happened to him because before that he had been a strong, independent man, able to control and manage everything in his life.

My first year here I remember discussing my parents with my sister. She pointed out to me that my father was a very considerate man. He was considerate and thoughtful towards my mother. He was always eager

to help her when she was tired or unwell – a very supportive husband. Because I came from a family where it was normal for a man to be like that, I had never recognized those qualities. My sister pointed out that it is not often that a husband is supportive or helpful to his wife. For my father's generation, women's rights and feminism were not the issue. 'I bring in the money, and you do the cooking and washing,' was the attitude then. I realized then that I had not only completely overlooked these good qualities, I had not even noticed them.

The last time I went to see him, I decided that I would try to get some kind of warmth going between us before he died. It was quite difficult to even think this, because I had gone through life feeling that he didn't like me. It is very hard to break through that kind of thing. Anyway, his body needed to be stimulated so I said, 'Let me massage your leg, you'll get bedsores', and he said, 'No, you don't have to do it.' So I said, 'I would really like to do it.' He said, 'You don't have to do it.' But I could tell that he was considering it, and he said, 'So you'd really like to do it?' and I said, 'Yes.' I started massaging his feet, his legs, his neck and shoulders, his hands and his face, and he really enjoyed the physical contact. It was the first time he had been touched like that. I think elderly people really like being touched, because physical contact is quite meaningful; it's an expression of feeling.

I began to see that my father really loved me but, because of his upbringing, he didn't know how to say it. He'd been brought up in an Edwardian time in a very formal environment. His had been a 'don't touch, don't get emotional' sort of a family; feelings were always controlled. Now I realized that my father was quite a loving man and I had this great sense of relief. I couldn't understand him when I was young. I did not understand the consequences of having such an upbringing, and that once you are conditioned in that way it is difficult to break out of it. When I looked back, I could see that behind the behaviour of my father there was love, but it always came out in a commanding or demanding way. It was the only way he knew how

to talk. When he said: ‘Remember, this is my house, and you have to do what I say’, maybe it was because I saw him as an old man losing his control, and he could see that and felt I was a threat. He probably thought: ‘He’s going to think I am a hopeless old man, but I’m going to show him.’

Life is a difficult, ongoing experience; you keep learning until you die. You keep thinking that it should not be so, that it should be easy. Now, I think that life should be difficult because that’s the way we learn.

**Question:** Can you explain what you mean by the four *brahmavihāras*?

**AS:** The four *brahmavihāras* – *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā* – are called the Divine Abodes. They are pure states of mind, natural responses of the pure mind. The mind is pure when we free ourselves from selfish interest – greed, hatred and delusion. When the mind is not caught up in these, the *brahmavihāras* are its natural abiding place.

*Mettā* is a general attitude to living creatures – a sense of patience, loving-kindness and the absence of fault-finding. *Karuṇā* is more like compassion and pity; it’s about feeling the suffering of others, recognizing what suffering is like. This is where we feel compassion and empathy, different from feeling sorry for others in a sentimental way. *Muditā* is translated as sympathetic joy, the joy we find in the happiness of others, in the beauty of the goodness of others. It’s an antidote to jealousy. Often when we see someone better off, better looking, we feel jealousy, but *muditā* is the lovely quality of delight and appreciation for the beauty and success of others. *Upekkhā* is the serenity of the mind – the serenity and emotional balance of the mind.

These are the divine qualities and they can be experienced in the human realm. I find it is easy to feel compassion for those who are worse off: the downtrodden, the animals, beings less fortunate than myself. I never enjoyed harming or bullying others, but my weakness was that I used to feel envy and jealousy for those who were better off; I used to criticize them, wanting to bring them down. It is very difficult to wish somebody well when they are better off than you are. *Muditā*,

to me, is a very important virtue to contemplate. It's very beautiful to delight in the goodness, beauty and success of others. So, I contemplate it and cultivate it a lot in order to bring this virtue into my life.

Of these four virtues, *mettā* (loving-kindness) is a basis, and *upekkhā* (serenity of the mind) is the result of that loving-kindness. *Karuṇā* and *muditā* are responses to the life around us, to the suffering and the beauty of our lives. I used to feel anger and indignation when I heard some terrible news, such as the holocaust or the slaughter of the Cambodians by the Khmer Rouge. I can understand what it feels like to want to get even, to be vengeful in such instances. But in contemplating these feelings, I realize that they are not something I want to act on, because revenge and vengeful feelings just keep these terrible things going on. 'If you hurt me, then I'll hurt you, and when I hurt you, you'll hurt me and then I'll kill you. Then your relatives will come and kill my relatives.' We can see it in these civil wars; they go around seeking revenge and killing each other's people – it goes on and on. So it has to stop here. These *brahmavihāras* are reflections and ways of developing the forgiving mind and the qualities of our life that can bring beauty and perfection to our humanity.

**Question:** How do we develop equanimity in the face of all the suffering we see in the world?

**AS:** We reflect on our actions and the intentions of these actions, and contemplate their results, both good and bad. If I contemplate something like the beggars and lepers in India, it seems callous to say that they are like that because of their kamma. It seems like a cop-out. It's just not wanting to be bothered by it and using the law of kamma to push things aside. I was in Delhi last June and it was really hot – 46°C. I was in a car with the people I was staying with, and they stopped at a shop to buy a Coke. Then I saw two young leper women, one pushing a cart and the other one sitting in the cart and holding a little girl. They were begging outside the shop. Both women were attractive; they had a brightness about them, a humour. Their hands were leprous and

even though their physical ailment was disturbing, I got the impression that they were coping quite well. Whereas here, you often see people who are not handicapped in any way but are totally depressed, full of negativity; physically they have nothing wrong, but their minds are not well. You find this depression among the richest people. They find their lives meaningless, and they are stuck in their obsessions. That's what I call real misery. I would rather have the leprosy than the depression!

In the book, *City of Joy*, a Polish Catholic priest goes to live in the worst slum in Calcutta. It's a slum where the poorest of the poor and the lepers live, called Anandanagar, the City of Joy. The book describes the lives of the lepers and the joy and spirit of these people. In spite of the poverty, misery and tragedy of their lives, they are full of spirit. We can feel a great deal of respect towards humanity when there's something that does not get ruined even under the worst conditions. There's one story of a rickshaw puller who had to work like a slave to get enough money to marry off his daughter, so that she did not become a prostitute. This is not the kind of dilemma most of us have to face – pulling a rickshaw in order to get a good husband for our daughter. But he did actually succeed in finding a suitable husband for her. This kind of thing is noble; you see the spirit of honour behind such people.

But then there are brutal wars where a kind of demonic spirit seems to take over and it's as if humanity disappears. The perpetrators are ordinary men taken over by hatred, where they can commit atrocities against women and children. Where's that coming from? That's also possible for us. It is within the range of possibilities of human behaviour.

I contemplate my own mind at Amaravati. People can complain a lot at Amaravati; the mind does complain about what we don't like. But as Buddhist monks we train ourselves to contemplate what we have, that is, the four requisites: the alms-bowl, the robes, medicine for illness and shelter. Then I contemplate: 'Well, I've had my meal for the day; I have my robes and a place to sleep.' Then I think: 'There's the Dhamma teaching and the possibility of living with good people.'

And so I appreciate what I have, rather than getting caught up in some irritating situation that could take me over if I let it.

We tend always to think of the ideal situation, of how life 'should' be. Then we can only feel that there's something wrong with life the way it is. But life is seldom at its highest peak. We have peak moments, but we cannot sustain them for too long. Most of life is not like that. In our meditation we learn to watch the flow of life, and we learn from that, rather than think there's something wrong with it if life's not at its very best.

In our meditation, we're letting go of all the habits and resistance to life. We can get so caught up with our own busyness and compulsiveness that we don't see that to live as a human being we don't need very much. We all think we need to have a high standard of material existence with all kinds of comforts, but actually, if we had to give them up, we could still be happy. We don't have to go and live in the City of Joy to prove it; we can see it in daily life. The quality of life really depends on how we think and act. If we can cultivate a comfortable mind, we no longer have to dedicate our lives to buying things, or to making life secure and comfortable. Once we have a comfortable mind, no one can take that away from us. But the comfortable house can burn down, squatters can move in, a motorway could pass through your living room; all kinds of things could happen!

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in the 1990s)

## 10 | Death is Like This

In certain hospitals in Thailand they allow Buddhist monks to contemplate autopsies. One time we went to one of the big hospitals on a Monday morning, because there are a lot of murders and accidents on the weekends and many grim, gruesome corpses to autopsy. The man in charge of the autopsy room said: 'Oh, do I have something for you!' I thought: 'What does he mean by that?' He took me to a special room and opened the door. I nearly passed out from the odour of a putrefying human corpse before I could even see it. The smell was horrible. I felt myself not wanting to go in, but forced myself. Inside the room was a bloated corpse that had been found in one of the canals. Worms were crawling in it. It was hideous. When I looked up at the ceiling, I could see where previous corpses had exploded and guts had gone flying. I thought: 'I hope that doesn't happen while I'm here!'

This was a test of mindfulness, because the first reaction was, 'Let me out of here!' Staying with it, observing the revulsion and aversion to this rotting corpse, I could be aware of the feelings. After a while, the aversion ceased. I became accustomed to the odour; I found it bearable. After I stopped reacting to the odour, I hardly noticed it. I was no longer suffering. It was very powerful to see a human corpse in that

state, because you seldom get such an opportunity. It was hideous and grotesque. I didn't know what age it was. It was probably a youngish male who had drowned in the canal.

After the aversion and proliferating tendencies ceased, I began to observe the decaying process. Strangely enough, I found it quite beautiful – the way nature disposes of things. Judgement of beauty are created on a conventional level, but in the here and now – being with the aversion and the disgust – I didn't feel repelled at all by the process of decay. It was quite marvellous to watch how life consumes and takes away. The human body was being recycled into the ecosystem. Noticing the colours and the maggots and the worms, I began to appreciate the process of nature in operation. Not only can we learn from the joy that comes from beauty, we can begin to open ourselves to life itself and all that it includes – not just the nice side but also old age, sickness, death, decay.

So many of our modern societies want to deny death or shut us away from it. When my mother died I was giving a retreat in California and I had to leave in the middle of the retreat to go to the funeral. It was a Roman Catholic ceremony. When I got there, the coffin was covered with a nice cloth. The priest gave a nice funeral sermon, which made us feel good. He spoke of how wonderful my mother was and said that she was no doubt up in heaven with the Lord. That was also rather nice to think, since that's where she wanted to go. Everything was very cosmetic. Nothing was depressing. We weren't really looking at death or examining our feelings of loss. We were sentimentalizing – talking about how nice my mother was and about her reward in heaven.

Next we went in a procession to take her body to the Catholic cemetery. They had it all set up. The hole had been dug, with false green grass covering it and the coffin propped above. The priest came, said a prayer and sprinkled water over the coffin. We were then told to leave. I decided I wanted to help bury my mother, so I stayed. The men in charge, the gravediggers, came over to me and said: 'You have to go.' I replied: 'I'd like to help bury her.' But they insisted: 'No, we

can't lower the coffin into the hole until everybody's gone. That's the rule.' This is how Americans are treated – like it's beyond our ability to endure such traumas. If we were to see the coffin going into the grave, we'd faint or have to spend the next twenty years in therapy.

In Buddhist terms, death is a natural event. The Buddha encouraged us to observe, to contemplate death. Funerals in North East Thailand where I lived were very meaningful because we actually contemplated what happened. We could see the body and it wasn't made up to look beautiful. They didn't put lipstick and powder on it. It was just a dead human body, and we meditated on that. We made the reality of death conscious: the death of the body is like this.

This was not depressing or traumatic for me. When Ajahn Chah held these funerals, I didn't faint. I found it a very powerful experience. I never had such opportunities in the United States, to bring death and loss into consciousness and to really look at a human corpse. We live in a society that wants to deny death and cover it up. It's not polite to even say the word 'death' in public. We use euphemisms that make it less stark, less shocking. But awareness includes the whole process – from birth to death, from the peak moments of life to the worst – the climb up and the slide down. By reflecting and observing, we free ourselves from the fears, the reactions and the projections that we create around the flow of our lives, around our own bodies, around the loss of our loved ones.

When my own mother died, I focused on being with the feeling of loss and grief. It can be witnessed. I wasn't trying to ignore my feelings – they interested me. To have this ability to accept my feelings, I had to train myself because my conditioning was the reverse. On a cultural level, I'd been conditioned to suppress feelings, to deny or ignore them. It has taken intentional, deliberate effort to look, observe and allow feelings of loss or grief into consciousness. This doesn't mean a grasping of feelings or wallowing in emotions. It's seeing things in terms of Dhamma. It is what it is. The death of one's mother is like this.

Of course, now her death is a memory. But when it was still a shock, during the funeral experience, I was confident enough in meditation to use the experience of loss in terms of Dhamma. Instead of rejecting or denying the unpleasant side of life – death or decay, ugliness, unfairness and all the miseries that one experiences – I have found that all of these, when seen through awareness, are the most powerful learning and strengthening experiences one can have.

We have to determine to recognize and open to that which is emotionally fraught, that which is very powerful, overwhelming, frightening or threatening. Yet through the confidence of awareness, we begin to observe how these difficult situations affect the mind, the heart. What is the feeling? It's not right or wrong – a feeling is what it is, and only we can know it. If we trust our awareness, we know *it's like this*. We don't need to have a word for it or define it in any way, because it is what it is. This is not cultural conditioning or the ego. It's direct knowing.

(From *Inquiring Mind*, Vol. 25, No. 1, Fall 2008)

It's very attractive to think of a Messiah coming and saving us, because there's a feeling somehow that's the only thing that can work now. One can be quite depressed with so many things going wrong in the world, so many problems – you know that feeling: 'Please let the Messiah come and straighten up the mess we've made.' But we can realize that we have to straighten up the mess we've made in ourselves. Wanting somebody else to come and do it for us seems like a sign of immaturity. I remember as a child making a mess and then hoping my parents would come along and straighten it out and make everything right. Hoping for the coming of the Messiah is part of that kind of thinking. It's not that I'm against the idea; it would be very nice to have a Messiah come, I'm all for it. But I don't demand it or even expect it, because I realize that it's more important to learn how to be your own Messiah rather than to expect some external force to come and save you or the world.

There are different ways of looking at our current situation. There's the 'gloom and doom' way: 'Everything's hopeless! We've polluted the planet and we've made a mess; there's nothing much we can do, it's too

late', and there's the New Age approach, full of hope: 'It's all changing; consciousness is changing; human beings are becoming aware of totality and the oneness of all sentient beings.' That kind of thinking is very positive and inspiring to the mind. It gives a direction of hope and optimism to one's life – we aren't stuck here in a cold universal system we've made a mess of, where it's just pollution and misery until the whole thing collapses. Certainly being positive and optimistic about things will make life more pleasant, but the way out of suffering – which to me is the perfection of our existence as individual human beings – is through the realization of truth. Rather than choosing one approach and rejecting the other, both sides are seen for what they are; one is transcending and no longer identifying with the conditioned realm or expecting anything from it. In the mind that isn't attached, there is an ineffable understanding of truth, beyond words; it's something you can only realize for yourself.

There's the view that we've passed the Golden Age when everything was perfect. Nevertheless there is this aspiration of the human heart for individuals, communities and nations to somehow get back to that perfect paradise on planet Earth, where everything is fair and just, beautiful and true and perfect for us. And while we can point to the mess we humans have made, we have to recognize that Mother Nature is also good at making messes on this planet. Reflecting on Dhamma allows us to see that even the Earth itself is impermanent: hurricanes, volcanoes and the whole geological history of planet Earth is, in human terms, pretty horrendous. So, it's just the way things change and move in nature. There's a mystery to it all: a planetary system existing in a universe. Our curiosity is taking us towards the furthest reaches of the solar system, but even with all our cleverness, all we can say is that it's very mysterious and wonderful. All we can do as human beings, really, is open ourselves to this mystery in wonder, because we can't solve it with the puny little minds we have. Since we can't solve the mystery, the only thing to do is either to reject it and

busy ourselves with trivial and foolish things, or to consciously open ourselves to the mystery.

This is what we mean by the ineffable realization of Truth. It's the opening of an individual's mind to the mystery. There's no demand for any answer. Just opening your mind and surrendering with total openness and receptivity – that's what we can actually realize within this human form. When you're at one with the mystery there's no suffering, but as long as you are frightened by it or seeking to solve it with the puny perceptions of the mind, you'll just end up in doubt and despair, fear and anxiety. But, we can contemplate our own existence. We can contemplate the mystery of life and the universe. What is that about, anyway? One can dismiss it as much ado about nothing, or one can actually investigate and open to it. Then there is the realization of true peacefulness that you can never have when you're trying to find peace in some thing or some person or some place. You can try looking for a peaceful place and, maybe, you find your Shangri-La and live happily ever after ... but it's more likely you'll discover the American Air Force has low-flying jet practice over Shangri-La or the people in Shangri-La are so high-minded they never clean the toilets! There's always a snake in the garden, or a worm in the apple; there's always going to be something un-peaceful about the conditioned realm.

It's the same with the idea of finding Prince Charming or Cinderella: 'Once I meet the right person, then I will live happily ever after.' That's an illusion too. So with no place to go, nobody to save you and fulfil you, and nothing you can do about it, you could end up creating a world all of your own – living in a kind of deranged mental state. It isn't through any objective realm, through thought, perception or through the material realm that you'll find the way out of suffering, but in transcending it. Transcendence doesn't mean escaping or rejecting suffering, but moving to that still centre of being where there's perspective and receptivity to the conditioned realm. There's no longer any identification with the objective conditioned realm.

I get indignant at the injustices and stupidities of the world. There's so much to feel indignant about, so many things not right, terribly wrong. They *shouldn't* be that way, and people *shouldn't* do such horrible things – it's righteous indignation. One can really get caught up in indignation. But if you contemplate that experience of righteous indignation you find great suffering in your heart, because even though you're right you're not wise. You're creating suffering about the way things are. You are right, things shouldn't be that way – but they are that way! Or the opposite can happen, you think: 'It doesn't matter,' and close your eyes, plug up your ears and try not to see or hear anything wrong. That's one way of handling the problem, but it tends to be a very inadequate and miserable thing to have to do.

There's an expression that Ajahn Buddhādāsa used: 'This is the way it is' or, 'The world is this way.' It isn't a dismissal – uncaring or disregarding unfairness – it's a kind of acceptance. 'The world is like this. It's always been like this.' There has always been greed, hatred and delusion, jealousy, atrocities, horror. The Greek legends are full of cannibalism and rape, gods doing dreadful things, yet this was immortalized in Greek mythology. The archetypes of humanity are recorded in legends and myths, Asian as well as European. So we realize that this is the way it is: human beings can be like this. We can be vengeful and jealous. We can be very selfish, and we can get angry and murderous; we can be stupid and indifferent, full of doubt and worries – we can do all these things – or we can transcend it all.

I used to ask myself, 'What's the good of asking anyone else to transcend all that if I don't?' I can see that being righteously indignant about the state of the world is a way of saying: 'I want you to not be that way. I don't want you to be the way you are. You shouldn't be angry and you shouldn't be jealous', and then I'd look at myself: *me* demanding that *you* not be that way. It's kind of childish really: 'Please be something that I want. Don't say things that upset me.' Then there's the insight that what anyone else does or doesn't do is none of my

business. All I can do is move in the direction of transcendence in my own life. 'That's the way it is' isn't pessimistic indifference, it's a skilful reflection. *The world is like this and human beings are like this* – this isn't judging humanity as bad, but instead recognizing that human beings do these things – they always have. To expect everyone else to change their behaviour is only going to make you miserable, because that's beyond what you can do in this life. How I practise with that is to see what I do have control over – what I am capable of working with.

It's about being aware and knowing what you can do as an individual being, in this form, with its characteristics and qualities. It's not about thinking: 'If I were stronger, or more intelligent, or healthier or better looking, or this or that, then I would be able to do something.' Wisdom, in the Buddhist sense, is being able to see how to work and use what you have, the way it is, even if what you have isn't very good. Maybe you're crippled or have some disease, or you're old, or you've had a miserable life – but that doesn't mean you can't be enlightened, you can't be awakened to the truth. With wisdom we learn how to use what we have. If you're someone who thinks: 'For me to do it, I have to have the best', then you'll never get anywhere, while the wise person can use even rather inferior equipment and get a very good result.

In a community like Amaravati, accepting it the way it is means you begin to look and investigate and maybe see ways of improving, making it a better place. And if there's nothing you can do, you just patiently wait until the right time for improvement comes. Accepting other people in your life doesn't mean you like everything about them, but you accept the whole of them for who they are. Then you can see that a lot of your irritation is your own problem; it's not that there's anything particularly wrong with the people – perhaps you're someone who's easily irritated by certain things. Or if they've just got bad habits you can, through your acceptance and patience, find an opening in which improvements and directions can be given in a suitable way. In saying, 'That's the way it is', the mind accepts and allows things to be

the way they are. In that acceptance you can understand and, through understanding, you can guide things in a better way. There's wisdom operating in that openness.

(Taped during a community tea break with Ajahn Sumedho at Amaravati. His remarks were a response to a question about the human spiritual longing that manifests as hope in a coming Messiah.)

## There's No Place Like Here: An Interview at Abhayagiri Monastery

***Fearless Mountain:*** You've spoken a lot about your experiences as a young monk in Thailand and how significant it was for you to be in a Buddhist country. What are your thoughts on how different it might be for somebody ordained here in California who may never spend any time as a monk in a Buddhist country?

**AS:** Well, I know people think that you can't really live as a monk in the West, or that it's better in Thailand. I try to keep an open mind about it. I have enormous gratitude and appreciation for my years in Thailand. I also recognize that in one's practice, hanging on to views and opinions is the real problem, not the actual place or situation. The practice is about the mind. It's about learning how to use what you have. It's often difficult to see this. Because people can travel so easily, they don't develop much contentment with the place they're in. When they feel discontented they can easily move on. This is a problem when Western people become monks or nuns. But I've realized from my own experience that learning to be content and grateful for what I have is the essence of the holy life – not always looking for some better place

to go. To get this across to people and for them to really appreciate it is another thing. Even though they can understand those sentiments, to actually feel them takes a real transformation of character, especially in a country where people have so many options and alternatives. So I'm simply encouraging the practice without holding up any place as being better than any other place.

**FM:** I remember the story you tell in which, while still in Thailand, Ajahn Chah asked whether you'd return to America. When you said you didn't think it would be possible to live as a monk in America, he asked: 'Why not. Aren't there any kind people there?'

**AS:** Yes. To me, there seemed to be a real difference between living in an Asian country and a Western country. But the significance of Ajahn Chah's statement was to point out that I could go wherever there were good-hearted and generous people – it wasn't a matter of whether they were Buddhist or not. Having trained in Thailand, I was connecting my experience as a monk with a culture, with a people, with a situation. Because of that, I felt that my situation depended on these things. Eventually going to England, which is not a country with a strong connection to Buddhism, I found I had no problem in terms of support or respect. It's given me a strong sense of the value of Buddhist monasticism as something that brings out the better qualities in humanity in terms of giving, looking after others, helping out, living in a contented way and so forth.

**FM:** You're touching on some of the ways in which the monastic community can provide a connection to the teachings and point out beneficial ways for laypeople to practice.

**AS:** Because the monastic system is dependent on the lay community for requisites like food, we are connected in a very basic way. This draws out the generous qualities in people, simply to provide a meal or other requisites for the monastics. In affluent countries, the monastic lifestyle also provides an opportunity for people to reflect on what they really need in life. Doesn't contentment come from the heart rather than from

having everything you want? This sense of gratitude and contentment creates a mental state that's pure and conducive to seeing clearly. Our society is restless, critical and very aware of what's wrong. We're always thinking of ways to make things better than they are. So I think Buddhist monasticism is a good example for Americans to reflect on.

Abhayagiri Monastery also provides an opportunity for people to make a short-term or a lifetime commitment to monastic life in a country where monasticism has never played much of a role or exerted an important influence on the culture. And even if it doesn't in the future, monasticism represents the goodness of humanity – letting go of things, being responsible for how you live, being kind, taking only what you need and practising to free your mind from the causes of suffering. Just to have these operating in this country is a very hopeful sign, especially at a time when the message in the media is one of gloom and doom. We can see the panic of the age: fear of the future is coming from wondering what kind of monsters we've created and how they're going to affect us. We've developed the intellect, the ability to experiment and the wonders of modern science, but we've done it mostly out of curiosity and greed. If we had developed wisdom as well, then our intelligence would work in harmony with nature rather than exploiting it. But real wisdom can be detected only in very rare people. I think this is one reason why Western people are finding Buddhist meditation such a necessity in their lives. They realize it offers a way of training the mind and developing human potential that our society has never even thought of.

**FM:** Spirit Rock Meditation Center and the lay *vipassanā* community are already very strong in this area. I'm wondering how you think the monastery can relate to this established lay community and what it will have to offer.

**AS:** I've been very impressed with Spirit Rock as a meditation centre. Jack Kornfield first took me to look at the land before there was anything there, and I've seen it develop since then. It's wonderful to see

something come out of seemingly nothing. I find it joyful to see what's happening here in California and wish to encourage everybody to keep going to Spirit Rock. Among the lay teachers, I've also seen what seems to be a real interest in and appreciation for connecting to a tradition. Oftentimes, Buddhism is seen as just meditation techniques. Really though, there's a whole tradition that has grown from the time of the Buddha up to the present. We are a part of something that reaches back to its founder in India 2,600 years ago. There's a sense of belonging and continuity – that this isn't just some kind of New Age movement or fashion of the moment. It's something that has proved itself as being of benefit through rising and falling kingdoms, empires and civilizations. The remarkable thing with the Buddha-Dhamma is that it's still very pure. The teaching has never been corrupted or really damaged. It's based on a truth that is still valid for this time.

(From *Fearless Mountain Newsletter*, Vol. 4, No. 2, Summer 1999)

## II | Truth is an Open Door



## 13 | The Gates to the Deathless are Open

In Buddhism there are three stages: *dāna*, *sīla* and *bhāvanā*.<sup>17</sup> *Dāna* is the very basis of spiritual development: a generosity that conveys a sense of getting out of your own personal problems and obsessions to offer something to somebody else – an act of supporting that which is good and moral, kind and worthwhile in our society. In Buddhist countries *dāna*, this sense of generosity, is an important virtue. To be generous creates a sense of joy and happiness. To go out from ourselves and offer things to others brings into our lives the experience of gladness. We're not making deals; we're not trying to get anything – we're just engaged in the act of giving unselfishly and the resulting experience of joy. It's not the happiness of getting what we want, of succeeding. It's the happiness of giving. Here there is an insight into the spiritual path: it's a giving of ourselves, a moving out of our obsessions with ourselves, with our own group, our particular views – moving out of that narrow world of selfishness into the more generous attitude of serving and helping. In a materialist society such as this, where you can get everything you want but still don't experience that real sense of

<sup>17</sup>These three mean generosity, morality and cultivation (i.e. meditation).

joy, there is all the more reason to cultivate this virtue. If our spiritual life is not being nourished by anything and our life is based only on self-fulfilment we become cynical, disillusioned, depressed. A life based on just ‘getting what I can for myself’ only leads to incredible bitterness and disappointment.

The idea of the Sangha, of developing your life within the restraints of Vinaya, is quite new to the Western world. Celibacy, selfless service and living in a way where you have to continuously give up your own desires and think of the welfare of the greater community – this is generosity. The Buddha-Dhamma spreads out from this being, sitting here, to all sentient beings throughout the universe. *Mettā*, loving-kindness and goodwill, is generated for the welfare and development of all beings everywhere: seen, unseen, born, not born yet, animals, devils and angels, the whole lot. The whole cosmology of possible sentient beings is included in the practice of *mettā bhāvanā* (developing loving-kindness).

It is quite interesting to think of spreading goodwill to demons, devils and hungry ghosts because we tend to think in terms of goodwill for the good ones and want the bad ones to be punished. That’s how our Western minds seem to work. At first we feel a bit bewildered by this and think, ‘They don’t deserve it; it’s just going to increase their wickedness.’ But when goodwill is generated, something in us opens up and we let go of those unwholesome tendencies, the misery we create through greed, hatred and delusion. We relinquish all of this and feel the sense of joy, of love, of increasing fearlessness – a kind of courage in which we can open out and face everything in a way that we can trust. We have an unshakeable heart and mind – the true purity of our being is then realized.

The Buddhist teachings are pointing to the way things are, to our direct experience – a situation in which we can begin to observe. In that state of wakefulness and attentiveness, we begin to realize through the development of wisdom and awareness the ultimate purity of our

being, which is ineffable. We have to realize it, each one for ourselves. It's not something that anyone can give to us. The Buddha couldn't wave a magic wand and zap his disciples so that they were suddenly enlightened. He could only point the way toward that ultimate reality which has never been separate from us, never been lost – just something we forget all the time. We get so overwhelmed with our kammic tendencies, our habits, our emotions. All the fascinations of the worldly *dhammas* tend to pull us and intimidate us. We get pulled into all the conditioned characteristics of society, of family. Much of the suffering that we hear about in the news or see around us is generated from this ignorance, this forgetfulness of the ultimate reality.

In the suttas, there's the Pali phrase, '*Apārūta tesam amatassa dvārā*',<sup>18</sup> 'The gates to the Deathless are open.' The Buddha was saying it's here and now. We begin to take refuge in that ability of awakened awareness, of developing wisdom – listening, watching, observing, investigating. The Buddha-Dhamma isn't a religion of belief, in which we just have to hold on to teachings given to us by priests or scriptures. It's for encouragement, pointing, helping us to awaken. That's what we're taking refuge in when we say, '*Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi; Dhammam saraṇam gacchāmi; Saṅgham saraṇam gacchāmi.*' It can be an empty formula we recite like a parrot, or it can be a reminder of that true state of purity, of 'awakenedness'. The Buddha means 'the awakened one', that which is aware and wise, but we're not worshipping Gotama the Buddha who passed away 2,539 years ago. The Buddha wasn't pointing to a human form; he was pointing to a state that is natural to our human condition – the state of awareness, mindfulness, attention. When we don't pay attention to life, we get caught up in all the emotional habits we've developed and ignorance in all its various forms tends to take over. We suffer accordingly because that realm of grasping desires and fears can only lead to despair, sorrow, anguish, disappointment and depression.

<sup>18</sup> For example at *Dīgha Nikāya* 14.3.7 and *Majjhima Nikāya* 26.21. See 'Entering the Deathless' below.

I've lived here in this country as a Buddhist monk for twenty years now and it seems to me that the suffering that people have here is usually around the attachment to various forms of ignorance, various forms of greed, hatred and delusion. Our life isn't one where we are being outwardly persecuted and oppressed by an unfair society; our suffering comes through our own ignorance. We create endless problems around all kinds of things: the family, the marriage partner, the children, grandchildren, class identities, ethnic identities, political or religious identities – you name it, we can make it into a big problem. And I know this from experience because in my life I was very good at making myself totally miserable over silly and ridiculous things.

But there's something in us that aspires beyond this earth that we are living on. We can't be content with just eating, sleeping, procreating, having a good time on the sensory plane – it's not enough. There's a quality in us that longs for something beyond that. It's a religious aspiration that all human beings have in their own way; whether we're highly educated modern human beings or tribal people in the Amazon jungle, that aspiration is there. At this time there's a multi-religious experience going on. I find it very inspiring because we are beginning to not just look through our own particular religious conventions and symbols, but to relate more to direct spiritual experience. We have a common bond of understanding in our spiritual aspiration; those who are actually realizing that truth and getting beyond the conventions that define and describe the conventional world find the religious experience as being very much the same thing. It's not like the Buddhist ultimate truth is something different from the others. We are pointing to an ultimate reality that is with us all the time; it's not cultural, it's not Buddhist or Christian, it's not Asian or European, it's not male or female. We're transcending this conditioned realm – not rejecting it, but seeing through it to that ultimate truth which, in Buddhist terms, we call the *amata dhamma* (deathless Dhamma).

The gates to the Deathless are open, and the deathless reality is realized through paying attention to life. We realize it; we can actually know the deathless Dhamma directly, through awakening our mind and paying attention to whatever is happening within us or outside us. So we are learning to look at ourselves in a different way rather than the highly personal way of ‘I’m this person, I’m this nationality, I’m this class, I’m this gender, I have achieved or not achieved, I have attained or not attained’, or ‘I’m a good person or a bad one’, or good-looking or ugly or whatever. We can no longer use these terms to describe experience in this highly personal way because awareness is bringing us to a universal reality that’s transcending the conditions, the conventions.

The second line of ‘*apārūta tesam amatassa dvārā*’ is ‘*ye sotavanto pamuñcantu saddham*’ – ‘let those who can hear bring forth their faith.’ *Sotavanto* is one who listens, a listener. It’s when your mind is open and you’re paying attention. It doesn’t have to be listening for any particular thing; it’s a state, a way of being present. You can pay attention to things externally, or you can listen to yourself thinking or feeling something. You can trust that listening and begin to take refuge in your ability to listen. You begin to hear yourself and the kind of things that go on – the complaining, the resentment, the fears, the doubts, the worries, the jealousies, the anxieties that we produce in our minds. We no longer see any need to grasp; we no longer want to grasp them. Just by paying attention to them, our relationship with it all changes. We are not becoming someone that’s angry, discouraged, depressed or worried. We no longer grasp the conditions so they drop away. They cease, they change, they dissolve in the mind and what is left is that state of natural purity, of radiance, of silence, infinite space.

Amaravati Temple is for that kind of contemplation, and you are welcome to come here with this idea of letting go of the world – not to bring the worldly problems you have with you, but to see it as a chance to offer, to give food, robes or medicines to the Sangha, or to come and

meditate, to determine to live by the moral precepts. This is all part of our spiritual development – the *dāna*, the generosity, the *sīla*, the moral restraint, and the *bhāvanā*, the spiritual development. Sit here with the Buddha-rūpa in an act of blessing. This particular *mudrā*<sup>19</sup> of blessing has a *Dhammacakka*<sup>20</sup> in the palm of the hand, the symbol for the teaching of the Lord Buddha, the Four Noble Truths. This is the *mudrā* of the Buddha-rupa that our teacher in Thailand, Luang Por Chah, brought to England when we first came here in 1977. He brought a little rupa made of brass with this particular *mudrā* and gave it to us when we lived in the Hampstead Vihara in London.

The temple is the mind itself, that natural state of purity, but a bricks and mortar type of temple is also a symbol for that. It's bound into the earth; it's got very deep foundations and is going to last 1,000 years at least. This mortal form of a temple, this structure made out of bricks, mortar and wood, rises up to this enormous roof that goes on up to a fine peak at the very top. In this lovely golden point at the top of the structure there are Buddha relics enshrined. So it has this sense of pointing up to the Deathless, to the infinite, to the sky. The sky is a symbol for the Deathless – it goes on and on and on, it's not contained, it has no form. It's a symbol to contemplate because it reminds us of our true nature. We have these elements, just like the bricks, the tiles and the wood; we have the earth, fire, water and air, the four elements to live with and to respect. How do we relate to them? Do we relate to them in a selfish, confused, ignorant way, or do we relate to them with wisdom, with compassion, with understanding? These elements comprise the body with its eyes, ears, nose and tongue and the mind itself with its thoughts, feelings and emotions. We begin to relate to all this in an honest, direct and wise way, rather than being merely caught up in the momentum of thinking and the emotions without reference to anything outside of that.

<sup>19</sup> A *mudrā* is a particular gesture of the hand that presents a spiritual meaning.

<sup>20</sup> The icon of the teachings, symbolized as a wheel.

Con-temple, con-template: contemplation is a good word because with meditation you're opening your mind. You're listening, and you are not taking a stand or holding to any viewpoint. Your mind is spacious and open, awake and aware – it's receptive and then you realize the infinity of mind, the all-embracingness, the underlying unity, that which embraces everything. When we open ourselves in that way with mindfulness, then we're one. We're not this person, that person, this group or that group. Through our refuge in the Dhamma, we get beyond the limitations of our own human form and human conditioning.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in 1996)



## 14 | The Dhamma is Right Here

We all have the ability to reflect, to observe and watch the mind – to be the observer of mind-states rather than becoming lost in them. All these mind-states we experience can teach us – they are important messages. We live not only with the results of our own kamma but also with the character tendencies of those around us. And, until we learn how to watch the mind in the right way, we suffer unnecessary fear and anxiety from the endlessly changing conditions within and around us.

Soon after I joined the Sangha I was taken by Ajahn Chah to meet a very senior monk, Luang Por Khao. Somebody had given Ajahn Chah a Philips tape recorder. This was back in the sixties, when there were only reels, not even cassettes. Ajahn Chah loved gadgets so when we visited all these old Ajahns in the North East, Ajahn Chah would record them. At this time I still couldn't understand the Thai language very well, so on that occasion I didn't understand much of what was being said and just sat there until it was time to leave. Eventually Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Maha Amorn, who was with him, got up to leave but Luang Por Khao, who was sitting in a wheelchair, beckoned for me to come over. He couldn't speak English, but he gave me a profound sermon. He said, in Thai: 'The truth of Dhamma is here', and he pointed to his heart.

It was a brilliant teaching. I couldn't understand the language very well, but I could understand that. It has stayed with me ever since. That message is the way of reflective observation of suffering, its causes and the absence of suffering. You see and know the Dhamma in your heart, not from what people tell you or by reading about it in books.

Over the years, in various ways, all of us have at times been caught up with and carried away by our feelings and reactions. Take a moment to observe how these things affect us; whether it's in reaction to the people you live with or the society you live in, the way people look or what they say or their tone of voice and so forth. All of this has its effect on you – you feel something coming from them. The awareness of feeling is 'Buddho'; in other words, the Buddha knowing Dhamma. When we don't observe the feelings and reactions, we're caught up in reaction to them. We're helpless victims of our feelings. When things are going well, pleasing and pleasant, we feel one way. When people are insulting or abusive, then we feel another way.

Ajahn Chah always emphasized reflecting upon the eight worldly *dhammas*.<sup>21</sup> We investigate these eight worldly *dhammas* and see that in each case one is the positive and one is the negative. Take success and failure: we want to be successful and we dread failure. Ajahn Chah, however, would say that both success and failure are of equal value when you're contemplating from 'Buddho', rather than from personal preference. Consider praise and blame: when people say you're a wonderful teacher and they'll do anything for you, it feels one way. When they say you're hopeless and they can't understand anything you say, it feels another way. That's *tathatā* (the way it is). Things are as they are. Both forms of feedback are of equal value. However your attention is such that, on a personal level, you want people's praise, respect, appreciation, gratitude and love, and you don't want their blame, disappointment, aversion or resentment. That's the ego manifesting by way of inclination towards the

<sup>21</sup> As is outlined in the talk, the 'worldly *dhammas*' are the forces that spin the mind around: pleasure and pain, praise and blame, gain and loss, and fame and ignominy.

pleasant and aversion to the unpleasant. But in terms of *Buddho*, *Dhammo*, *Sangho*, awareness embraces everything. ‘Buddho’, through awareness, is observing the pleasantness of being praised and the unpleasantness of being blamed.

To some people, the Middle Way sounds like a mediocrity in that you just compromise with everything – no extremes, just living in a way that is pusillanimous. I like the word ‘pusillanimous’: it means ‘small-minded’ or being a cowardly person who doesn’t have much presence and is just trying to get by. Is that really the Middle Way? In terms of dualistic extremities like praise and blame or success and failure, does the Middle Way mean that we shouldn’t delight in success or praise and we should just ignore blame or failure? On that level, one is opposed to the other. In the Middle Way, it’s ‘Buddho’ – the way of looking at the extremities through the cultivation of awareness, rather than a way of promoting oneself as a person trying to succeed in the world, or of just drifting out of it, fearing it, getting lost in pusillanimity.

Ajahn Amaro recently referred me to a note by Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu on the Pali word *sama*. The word *sama* means ‘on pitch’. It’s a word for harmony or sound which is ‘on pitch’, and *visama* is ‘off pitch’. Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu says that throughout ancient cultures, the terminology of music was used to describe the moral quality of people and acts. Discordant intervals or poorly tuned musical instruments were metaphors for evil, and harmonious intervals and well-tuned instruments were metaphors for good. *Samañña* – a related word – means ‘evenness’. There is a passage where the Buddha reminds Soṇa Koḷivisa, who had been overexerting himself in the practice, that a lute sounds appealing only if the strings are neither too taut nor too lax, but evenly tuned. This simile also adds meaning to the term ‘*samaṇa*’ – which is translated as monk, monastic or contemplative. So the true contemplative is always in tune with what is proper and good.

Using the words ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in relation to ‘right understanding’ and ‘wrong understanding’ is too strong I think.

They're too fixed: 'This is right and that's wrong.' If you say that one thing is right and another is wrong, and you want the middle point between them, you get a bland mixture – it's mediocrity. With *sammā-diṭṭhi*, you see right and wrong – not from trying to blend them together, but through seeing them from this position of awareness so one is in harmony. One can relate to actions, speech, livelihood and responses to life through wisdom and through being aware of the appropriateness of time and place. This comes through wise intuition, through harmony, through seeing things with a sense of balance and transcendence, with the unconditioned awareness of the conditioned.

The word 'transcendence' sounds like you're above it all – but that's not what I mean. When I use that word, transcendence is more like seeing both the Unconditioned and the conditioned, which go together and are not opposed to each other. In this moment – here and now – as a conscious entity, we have to deal with the conditions of the physical form: with the senses, emotions, memories; with our kamma and our habits. If it is said that we shouldn't be attached to the conditioned, it sounds like we've got to get rid of the conditioned, and then what we're left with is the Unconditioned. Does that mean then, that if I let go of the body, it disappears? Or do I just go into a trance and no longer feel anything? Or, is it that the unconditioned mindfulness includes the body, the feelings, the reactions that I experience through praise and blame, success and failure?

The conditioned and Unconditioned are not opposed – that kind of dualism doesn't apply. Our practice offers a paradigm of wholeness, completeness. It's developing a harmonious balance where we can respond to contingencies in various ways that are appropriate to the particular situation in the moment. This is not narrowly defined in terms of moral conduct as 'right livelihood, right understanding, right action, right speech', which is what we read in books. It's about having the ability to respond to conditions in the present through discernment; that is right understanding or *sammā-diṭṭhi*.

It's very important to see how we tend to absolutize the extremities of experience. Take heaven and hell: heaven becomes an absolute, hell becomes an absolute. True and false, right and wrong, good and bad are the same. Religious terminology can do this also: 'My religion is right and if you don't agree with me then your religion is wrong.' This is one of the problems we face in the world: each person fixes and absolutizes the extremities or the conditions.

The Middle Way is important, but really it's the practice or the *paṭipadā* that is the point. *Majjhima paṭipadā*: being present here and now with the conditions that you're experiencing. That is, watching here, being aware here. This can sound like becoming a cold observer so that when people say 'you're wonderful' or 'you're terrible', you abide in a superior indifference to both praise and blame. Practising mindfulness, however, does not involve thinking we are immediately beyond all the worldly *dhammas* and have nothing to do with them any more. It's rather that, as we develop the practice of mindfulness, we begin to operate from spontaneity and from wisdom rather than from personal views about right and wrong or what someone else says or what society wants. For example, we might begin to observe how we become self-conscious about what the neighbours think – if they praise or blame us. We try to act in a way that is praised by the society, out of fear rather than out of understanding or wisdom. We worry about offending people or saying something wrong or 'rocking the boat.' It's a continuous experience of disease, to always be worried about what other people think. This can be recognized as we learn to watch our minds.

When we're truly aware of our own sense of worry about what people think, we can discern that what is aware of the worry is not the worldly *dhammas*. Awareness knows the worldly *dhammas*, the ego and the sense of 'me', right and wrong and good and bad. This insight into the Noble Truths, then, gives us *sammā-ditṭhi*. Mindfulness brings us into a harmonious relationship with all conditioned phenomena, and this means that everything we experience through consciousness can

be seen for what it is. Our response then is appropriate to the time, the place and the people we're with.

The escape from the born, the created, the formed, the conditioned, therefore is mindfulness. It is the escape hatch to the Unborn, Uncreated, Unformed, Unconditioned. It has no quality – it isn't something a scientist can prove – you have to know it yourself. It's an intuitive awareness. The third of the Four Noble Truths is the recognition of the cessation of conditioned phenomena. In other words, to let conditions cease we have to let go of them, because all conditions are born or created; they arise and if we just leave them alone, they do their thing and subside. In other words, what arises, ceases. We're the observer of its presence and absence. That is a level of awareness that is not blocked or obstructed by attachment and ignorance.

Awareness is a discerning ability; it sees how not to create suffering around the conditions that we experience in the body and in the conditioned mind. The Unborn, Uncreated, Unformed, Unconditioned and the born, the created, the formed, the conditioned are not opposed to each other – one holds the other. Without this paradigm, we'd be helpless victims of conditioning with no possible way to deal with it. We'd just be programmed early in life and continue to operate like a computer, until somebody changed the program or the batteries wore out. But through cultivating mindfulness, even in ordinary situations, discernment arises. As we recognize it and appreciate it, this discerning ability becomes self-sustaining. The rigorous volition involved in structured practice begins to fall away. What's left is awareness and the relationship to the *vipāka-kamma* (the result of previous intentional action) that we're experiencing in the present, whatever it might be.

With mindfulness we can see desire. This realm is a desire realm. This is a desire form – its nature is desire. It's *taṇhā*; it's always seeking rebirth. When we investigate *paṭīcasamuppāda* (dependent origination), we begin to see how as long as there's *avijjā* (ignorance) we tend to be caught up in the desires. Desire is always seeking rebirth:

when we are bored or disillusioned, we want something pleasant; we desire to be reborn again in a pleasant or exciting sense, whether it's mental or emotional. This is a form of rebirth – a desire moving towards a womb of some sort, towards something to get born into.

The Buddhist teaching is to get to know desire. It's not about getting rid of it. It's not condemning desire as something bad, or something that we've got to conquer or get rid of. As human individuals, we have desire forms and this is a desire realm. This is the way things are. Desire, for example, is the conditioning that motivates us to seek to procreate the species, or to do many other things. The only possible way we can recognize the deathless reality is through mindfulness. We can't create the Deathless, and it's not something separate from us that has to be found. Practice means recognizing it, waking up and observing. Just by trying to imagine deathless reality and looking for it, we miss it because we're not aware of it yet.

In the film the *Little Buddha*, there were fantastic scenes of the Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree before his enlightenment as various beautiful, frightening and monstrous temptations, running the whole gamut of fear and desire, presented themselves. The forces of Māra were saying, 'Who are you, sitting under the bodhi tree. Who do you think you are? Get out of here!' Then Torani, the Mother of the Earth, came forth and said, 'He has my permission to be in this place of enlightenment', and out of her hair came a flow of water. She washed away the conditions and the ascetic Gotama could reflect.

On becoming enlightened, another deity appeared, urging the Buddha to go forth and teach the Dhamma, 'as there are those with only a little dust in their eyes.' This is quite significant, because trying to teach the Dhamma is not an easy thing to do; it's so easy to get caught in the intellect and to hold on to dogmas and religious positions. In fact, when the Buddha realized the Dhamma at the time of his enlightenment he initially thought: 'Nobody can understand this because it's intuitive knowledge.' How do you teach intuition to

somebody? How do you formulate it? Words themselves are so limited; they're about extremities. You get tangled up in your thoughts and views, and we're all highly conditioned to see things from cultural attitudes and personal kamma. But read the Buddha's first sermon – which is the Four Noble Truths – and notice the skilfulness of that teaching. I have a great respect for this brilliant teaching, but it does take *paṭipadā* – it takes sincere practice. It's not just a nice idea or Buddhism *per se*; it's actually a clear pointing in a specific direction – at your heart.

Watch your heart, observe. Be the observer, be the knower, not the condition.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in 2010)

## 15 | Pay Attention to your Life

When we take up *vipassanā* meditation, we investigate conditioned phenomena with its three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, or impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. These three characteristics are common to everything from both the subtle to the coarse, so they are a way of examining experience whilst not getting caught up in the different varieties, qualities and quantities of conditioned phenomena. Like the breath with its arising and ceasing, all conditioned phenomena begin, reach a peak and then cease.

Now this allows insight into the futility of trying to find permanent happiness in conditioned phenomena, because the result of good *vipassanā* practice is what we call ‘world weariness’ (or in Pali, *nibbidā*). This is not depression, and it’s not from the ego where life’s disappointments may cause one to not care about life or the world. It’s a spiritual realization about the world we live in, the body we inhabit and the conditioning of the mind, which are all conditions that arise after we are born. We realize that the idea that we can find happiness in any of these is an illusion.

There’s a romantic longing for life to be perfect and ideal; to seek fulfilment in finding the right person, the right form of government,

the right social system, the right economic system. But now in Europe, I think we could become very cynical, critical and negative. None of us are finding great liberation and enlightenment from living in England despite its fairly good economy, political and social systems. And as for finding the right person: now you are free to choose whomever you want to share you life with, and divorce is on the increase.

This is not a cynical put-down, nor does it mean that there is anything wrong with our system; it is just a way of noticing that the nature of all conditioned phenomena is unsatisfactory. All that you see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think is in a process of change; there is no possibility of finding anything truly satisfying, trustworthy or permanent in that which is basically impermanent, not-self and unsatisfactory.

The Buddha's teachings help us to see very clearly the way it is. Through the teachings we come to understand things as they really are and realize that through the development of wisdom we can cut through the defilements that cause endless suffering in our lives. This suffering is not that of old age, sickness and death, but the suffering that comes from not understanding the process of suffering itself.

So far on the retreat we have become aware that this is a very sensitive and vulnerable form we inhabit, always being irritated and agitated in some way by the things that keep pressing onto it, impinging onto the senses and onto the body. Basically we are born into a realm of irritation and agitation, so when we've expected to be satisfied and fulfilled and haven't been, it is because we have never examined life, never looked very deeply into it. We must reflect on the way things are, on the unsatisfactoriness of conditioned phenomena; and to be able to contemplate impermanence we need a level of awareness, of *sati* (mindfulness) in which we can have perspective on the conditions we are experiencing in the present moment.

Thoughts move very quickly, but emotion lingers. If you get angry, that feeling of anger has inertia to it, and if you are not mindful then you just say, think or act from that angry feeling. But as you develop

awareness and mindfulness, you can detach from the emotion of anger and observe it as something that has arisen. You can observe its presence and then, as you sustain your awareness, you will become aware of its cessation. This awareness is what we call ‘The path to the Deathless.’

This Deathless is to be realized and this realization is what we are doing with our practice of *vipassanā*, as we break down the illusions we have formed around death-bound conditions. For this we use the categorization of experience as being made up of five *aggregates* or *khandhas*: body (*rūpa*), feelings (*vedanā*), perceptions (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhārā*) and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). We place everything that is experienced through sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and so on, as well as all emotions, into these five aggregates or groups.

*Rūpa* is *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*. Obviously this bodily form was born and is in a changing state. We all acknowledge this, yet if not examined we can just operate from the assumption that it is a solid lump. So we practise body sweeping and after an hour or so we become aware of tingling, the vibrating quality of the body, and we start to recognize that it isn’t as solid and fixed as we had perceived it to be. Yet the body is more permanent than emotion, thought or feeling, isn’t it? Feelings change and shift, emotions and thoughts go by quickly. So mental phenomena don’t have much seeming solidity to them, whereas the body does have an appearance of being a rather solid lump that we can depend on. But it’s not much of a refuge, is it?

There is always something going wrong with the body. Do you find your body satisfactory? I have a fairly good constitution that has lasted through fifteen years in the tropics and twenty years in England living on alms-food, so I am not complaining; in fact I’m very grateful to this condition, but certainly I’m not going to take it as a refuge. My body is getting pretty old now and it’s not going to last too much longer. As a refuge it’s not something I’m going to believe in, nor are the sense experiences that we have: the *vedanā* of life – the pleasure, pain and neutral experiences received through the senses. When you examine

*vedanā*, or sensitivity, you know it's forever changing; you can't really fix it into anything that lasts very long. So *vedanā* – pleasure, pain and neutrality – is obviously impermanent. When you try to take refuge in happiness, what success have you ever had? We always have to go and look for happiness because it doesn't last very long before it's over and we have to go looking for some more. Happiness is part of our experience but it's not our true nature. It's not a happy realm and it's not like being a *devatā*. When you get reborn as a *devatā* in a celestial realm then that's happy, but this human realm is not a happy realm. There is happiness, we experience it, but its nature isn't really happy because there is so much pain, irritation and agitation in a physical body. Don't you wish you had an ethereal body like one of those *devatās*? We could find more happiness through an ethereal body, as the physical body is quite heavy, coarse and gross; it grows old, gets diseased and has pain – that's part of its nature. So happiness isn't something that we can depend on as a refuge in the human realm.

In addition to the body and all that it brings, we have retentive memory and language. We can remember the bad things done to us in the past and make ourselves very angry, indignant and resentful in the present. Many of us suffer a lot of resentment over the injustices we've experienced in our lives, the unfairness, the mistreatment, the misunderstanding, the abuse that we can remember. We have a retentive memory and it can be a curse to have to remember all of this. Or we can remember the good old days, the happy times; but then, because we do remember and experience life within the present, the future becomes very important to us. What's going to happen in the future? We don't know what the future holds for us so we worry about it, we create mental states in the present. We have hope and dread, expectation, anticipation, longing and worry. These are the mental states we create out of ignorance about the future, so even if we have everything in the present, we can still be utterly miserable and sick with worry about the future because we might lose it all. As one friend

of mine in Italy once told me: ‘Ajahn Sumedho, now I have everything: I have a beautiful wife, a child, I have a good job, marriage is wonderful, we love our daughter, I love my work, I meditate, I have a nice house, I’ve got everything. I’ve never been so happy in my life, but I worry because I know I’m going to lose it. It’s going to change, I can’t sustain it, something’s going to happen.’ It was quite insightful of this man to recognize that even when everything is just the way he wants it, it’s unsatisfactory, it’s changing and you can’t fix it; you can’t petrify it into a peak state that will stay for very long in the same way.

So contemplating *anicca* impermanence, is a way to develop wisdom. In terms of the present the future is unknown; we can speculate because there are probabilities of all kinds, but the only thing we can actually know right now is that we don’t know the future. Knowing past experience is just memory in the present – remembering yesterday, remembering last year – that’s just memory arising and ceasing in the present. Memory is impermanent, it’s always in the present where it arises and then ceases. So in terms of experience, the past is nothing more than a memory in the present. The future, in terms of experience in the present, is the emotion we create around anticipating, speculating: maybe, could be, possibly, this or that might happen in the future; so we spend a lot of time in these states of speculating or worrying about the future. What’s going to happen to me when I get really old? And things like that. Ajahn Viradhammo and I are now equipping Amaravati with ambulatory ramps because we are anticipating old age and I might have to zoom around in a motorized wheelchair sometime soon!

When you reflect deeply, you can observe the sense of ‘I am’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’, ‘what I think’, ‘my life’ – all of this – as something that arises and ceases in the present. So in this reflective awareness we are breaking down the illusions that we have about self. If we just operate from cultural conditioning then we hold fixed assumptions such as: ‘This person was born, has a birth certificate, has a passport, is a man, is American, is a Buddhist monk, is Ajahn Sumedho.’ We suffer

because we identify with what we look like, with our national origin, our educational qualifications, and so on. We can get conceited and arrogant or we can be offended or hurt if we identify with the five aggregates as our self.

The suffering created around conditions is endless. Here in England, for example, there is so much suffering around political views, resentments, worrying about being part of Europe, or whatever. We manage to endlessly proliferate on potential suffering and imagine what would happen if we do this or don't do that. There's no end to it, and there's no way out of it until we break through the illusion acquired through the cultural and social conditioning. Now, in Dhamma practice we are educating ourselves in terms of experiencing the way things really are. So the personality and the sense of being a person, an ego, is something that arises and ceases in the present. We observe the feelings of self and ego and vanity and personality that come with thought, with memory, with emotion and the conditioning of the mind. When we're paying attention in the present that is the entrance, that is the path to the Deathless because that state of pure awareness, pure attention, is not cultural; it's before you become a person. When you're at that stage of pure attention you can hear the ringing silence, a state of just listening, attentiveness in the present. There's no sense of a self in this, it's quite pure and it's intelligent; it's not like you're hypnotized or in a trance.

So *appamāda* (heedfulness, paying attention in the present) is the way to realize the Deathless; to recognize the body as a death-bound condition. When you're attached to your body as your self, where is it taking you? To the funeral pyre, to the grave. When you are attached to yourself as a personality, with your accomplishments, your achievements, a worldly person, where's that taking you? To death. You're going to lose it all when you die. Your DPhil from Oxford – what good is that on your deathbed? All the money that you've spent your whole life hoarding up, what good is that? You're going to lose it. We

have this reflection: 'All that is mine beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me.' Everything. If you get Alzheimer's disease, even before you die you forget who you are and who your wife or husband is, your mother and father. You might have had a brilliant intellect when you were young but it all goes. Reading the biography of former President of India, Radha Krishnan, a brilliant intellect and philosopher who wrote books on philosophy, I learned he spent the last seven years of his life without intelligence. He just couldn't remember anything. So, putting so much emphasis on what is learned and on worldly attainments is definitely clutching at death. When you examine this, when you really investigate, you will see it as something changing, unstable and impermanent

For me the beauty of this kind of practice is that one can realize the Deathless before death, and this realization is like awakening to reality. What is reality for most of you? Your thoughts, your feelings, your body, your family, your possessions? You talk about the real world. Where is the real world? 'Having a house is the real world, having a job, having a family is the real world.' Well, that real world is very unstable, ever changing, impermanent and unsatisfactory. Reality then is to realize Dhamma, to realize the Deathless, to awaken. This awakened state is what we are using when we pay attention in the present. If you are in a state of pure attention it is like listening; and those who listen, who pay attention to life, trust in it, relax into the trust and stop worrying about the future. So don't worry about the future and the things you have done in the past; don't endlessly try to hold on or control or manipulate the conditioned realm around you; don't be anxious about the possibilities of failure, of misery or loss in the future; just pay attention in the present, take refuge in this attentive listening in the present. It is the only thing you can really trust, because it will get you through whatever happens to you. Whether you experience success or failure, praise or blame, whatever happens won't really matter because that's no longer what you are

attached to – nor will losing everything, sickness, loss, failure, being blamed, being despised; these are not obstructions to enlightenment. What obstructs enlightenment is heedlessness, not paying attention to life. There is no way you can realize the truth through heedlessness, through just wallowing, getting caught up in the endless proliferations of your mind and believing all the worldly delusions. There is no hope of enlightenment as long you do that.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't make money, have a family and all that; I'm not preaching against these at all, just pointing out that they cannot be real or satisfactory refuges for you. This kind of insight allows you to participate in life in a way that is of benefit to yourself and to everyone else. Just think how hopeless it would be if enlightenment were impossible and there were no awakened beings, no enlightened human beings in the world. It would be just an endless struggle based on our conditioned patterns, our cultural arrogance, our fixed views and blind beliefs. But 'the gates to the Deathless are open' for those who pay attention, those who listen, those who observe, who look into experience in the present. I want to encourage you to develop this investigation because it is something that will benefit you through your whole life. With this you'll understand and learn from what you experience in life. You'll learn even from sickness, loss, old age, humiliation and failure – the conditions we dread.

We've all heard stories about people in Africa who have lost everything. Or of people being brutalized, like in Rwanda; and of men who have tortured and brutalized others – which would be worse, wouldn't it? I'd rather be brutalized than brutalize somebody, because you'll always remember your actions, and having to live with those memories would be a nightmare. Actually, I haven't done anything all that bad in this life – but I've done enough stupid things to know what it's like to remember them and that's bad enough, that's enough misery. Imagine having to spend your life having memories come up of murder, torture or killing of all kinds of people.

In terms of Dhamma, even if we have done pretty horrible things in the past, we have the possibility of resolution in the present through mindfulness. We aren't just helpless victims of fate but have this way to pay attention, listen, develop and awaken to life. The teachings of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are a helpful tool to get perspective on all conditions, because these conditions are what we regard as the real world in this deluded society. So we're not condemning it, but we're seeing that this is not really the way it is; the real world is not the conditioned world. The conditioned world is what it is, conditions are what they are. So I'm not applying any kind of judgement on them – pleasure is just pleasure, beauty is just beauty. But if we don't know this, then we tend to create all kinds of attachments and fantasies and we build a whole world around the conditions with the inevitable disappointment and loss.

So in terms of the Buddhist approach, the Buddha pointed to the nature and state of suffering, its causes, its cessation and the way of non-suffering. As we develop and understand Dhamma, then we realize how to live and participate in life in a way that does not create suffering around the experiences or the *vipāka-kamma* (the results of previous intentional actions) that we have. We all have personal, individual kamma, and if we don't realize the Dhamma then we can create a lot of suffering around our kammic inheritance as it ripens.

One good example in the suttas is the story of Aṅgulimāla who was a serial killer. He wore a necklace made up of 999 fingers, one finger cut from each of his victims, and he intended to take the thousandth finger from the Buddha. But while Aṅgulimāla was in pursuit of the Buddha, the Buddha managed to stop him. Then, on listening to the Buddha's teaching he subsequently became enlightened, an arahant. But Aṅgulimāla was not immune from his *vipāka-kamma* and wherever he went people threw rocks at him and called out abuse. Aṅgulimāla accepted his kamma; he didn't get angry or throw rocks back or feel sorry for himself. He just recognized that this was his *vipāka*, the result

of his previous actions, and he accepted it quietly and with equanimity. So in our own lives we will receive the results of our kamma; but whether we react in a foolish and ignorant way or respond to it with understanding will be determined by the wisdom we acquire as we travel on the Path.

(From a retreat at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,  
14 September 1997)

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa ...*

*Apārutā tesarū amatassa dvārā*

*Ye sotavantu pamañcantu saddham<sup>22</sup>*

These days there are many people in the West wanting to know how to get enlightened or how to be liberated from suffering. Nibbāna, liberation, freedom: all these words imply an ultimate realization in which we break through the delusions that we have about ourselves and the world we live in.

When we investigate this realm that we're living in, it means we refrain from making value judgements about it. Yet, this realm that we're in is actually a painful one to be born into. Being human beings on planet Earth entails the experience of sensation: it's sensitive and so it's painful. We have to live with pain, anguish and despair, grief, loss and separation from the loved; we have to bear with irritations, aggravations, frustrations and miserable situations. There's the ageing the body goes through and the variety of pain and sickness, disease, death. All this is a part of this realm. This is normal. Now I'm not complaining about it or imagining we can somehow transform the

<sup>22</sup> Mahāpadāna Sutta (Dīgha Nikāya 14.3.7) The meaning of this passage is explained in the talk.

conditioned realm into something that would be permanently better, more beautiful or more pleasurable. In Western Europe over the past fifty years there's been an enormous effort put forth in trying to create that kind of materialist world of luxury and stability. Yet although the materialist and hedonistic approach goes to all kinds of extremes, still, even at its very best, it can't really fulfil us.

Instead, people's lives become meaningless and purposeless. Often people take to drink or drugs, just to get a break from the endless concoctions of negativity: the fear and desire, the doubt and worry, the anxiety, the selfish obsessions, the blaming or the fear of being blamed – and all the rest of it. Then there are the wars, persecutions, atrocities and endless quarrels that we experience or hear about. In this century there has been just one war after another, plus all the innumerable conflicts that go on that get called police actions or *coups d'états* or whatever. Whatever you want to call them, they are forms of misery! What are the causes of all this? Why do we seek to solve problems or try to create a better society through such violent means?

The Buddha points directly at the delusion we have as the problem: the ignorance of suffering and its causes, the cessation of suffering, and the Eightfold Path leading to the cessation of suffering. The delusion and ignorance is not having investigated, contemplated and reflected, not having penetrated with insight the truth of the way it is. As long as we seek to attach and identify with this realm of the body, the feelings, the perceptions, mental formations and the sense-consciousness, then our relationship to the world and to each other as individuals, or to the society as a whole, will always be a source of suffering.

Yet there's still something marvellous in this universe. Even in a world in which people are struggling to survive, trying to control diseases, living with a sense of loss, with fear of the future and fear of death, we still have an aspiration towards the ultimate realization; we still have the basic religious impulse: the intuitive feeling that somehow there's more to it than just this individual existence that we're experiencing.

So in the religious life we start looking at the war that goes on in the mind in daily life, at the conflicts that arise because we have ideas about how things should be. We would like everything to be harmonious and everybody to be honest and helpful. We would like everybody to be courteous, thoughtful, generous and moral. We would like the society we live in and ourselves to live up to these high-minded ideals, and yet emotionally we can feel just the opposite. We can feel mean, selfish, critical of ourselves and of others, deceiving ourselves and getting caught in very gross forms of desire so that we have a lot of conflict in our minds. I used to find it very difficult before I understood what was going on because I had high aspirations, high standards and ideals for my life and yet always seemed to be pulled down by my emotions. I'd get caught in very immature or selfish reactions and emotional habits and yet ideally I didn't want that. I wanted to be kind, generous, good and all the rest of it, so then I'd end up with all this judging going on, judging the emotions as bad or thinking that there's something wrong with me for feeling like this. There'd be a critic saying, 'This is bad. You're a bad person for thinking like this, feeling like this.' And so the conflict goes on. You try to justify it, you rationalize – you may manage to deceive yourself a good part of the time, but still this confusion arises, an endless emotional confusion in which one just feels a sense of despair. There's the sense of hopelessness that comes through trying to solve one's emotional problems through the intellect or trying to suppress the emotions or refusing to acknowledge them.

Monastic life can be just based on an ideal of the good monk or nun and on trying to live up to the standards that we read about in the scriptures. We long to be a really good monk, so then we're shocked and disgusted by our own emotional reactions or desires: low, selfish, animalistic desires that we identify with and try to get rid of and deny. So the Buddha used mindfulness as the means to solve this dilemma. Mindfulness is a key word in Buddhist teaching: it means that when we practise meditation we use the intuitive ability of the mind. We're

not rationalizing or analyzing anything, even though we can do these things when necessary, because meditation isn't an analysis or a critique or a suppression or a denial of anything; it's a willingness to embrace the moment. This intuition is the ability that we have when we're receptive and fully awake and aware.

The first line of Pali that I chant at the beginning of my talk, after the '*Namo tassa*', means 'the gates to the Deathless are open.' This has been my theme since I came to Amaravati, the 'Deathless Realm', thirteen years ago. In the next line, the *sotavanta* is the one who listens or sees, pays attention, is awake. So I use these lines to remind us that the gates, the doors or the entrance to the Deathless are open for those who listen, who pay attention. This kind of sustained awareness, this listening, is an expansive state of mind, isn't it? It's the conscious experience in the present which embraces the moment rather than discriminates – as we do when we concentrate on one thing and shut out all the rest.

The meaning of *pamuñcantu saddhamā* is to trust or relax into this present moment with faith. It's a simple ability; it's not a complicated, difficult thing to do. You don't have to spend years trying to be mindful and trying to get it; it's not like that, it's a natural state that is relaxed and attentive, open, receptive, in the present. So then when we trust in that we begin to recognize the way it is – in the body, the feelings, the mental states, and with the *dhammas*.<sup>23</sup> These comprise the Four Foundations for Mindfulness, and they are present here and now.

So how do you experience your body? If you conceive of it in scientific terms, that's one way of trying to analyze the body. But when we just open and observe the way the body is in the present, that's an intuitive ability where the mind is embracing or being with the way the body is. It's an intuitive awareness rather than a rational analysis. And so we use the four postures and the breath – the breath is 'like this', sitting, standing, walking, lying down is 'like this.' It's not criticizing or saying how it should be, but whatever way it is, whether you're walking

<sup>23</sup> In this instance, *dhammas* refers to all mental phenomena that are relevant themes for mindful attention for awakening, hindrances on one hand and enlightenment factors on the other.

straight or crooked, sitting erect or hunched over, whether you're feeling pleasure or pain or whatever – we're just noticing, beginning to trust in our ability to observe the way it is, 'like this.'

Then, in that moment, the body is seen for what it is. Our relationship to it has changed: from seeing it as we might when we look at it in a mirror with vanity or from seeing the body in scientific terms to seeing it as a conscious experience in the present. It is this intuitive ability of the mind that enables us to let the body be a conscious experience in the present.

The second foundation is feeling (*vedanā*), either pleasurable (*sukha*), painful (*dukkha*), or neutral (*adukkhamasukha*) sensations. These are all experienced through the senses: through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, mind. The mind with its mental states gives us pleasure or pain or is neutral, as well as sight, sound, smell, taste and touch. With mindfulness we're now intuiting feeling, meaning we're not judging it or criticizing it, but noticing 'it's like this', pleasure is 'like this', pain is 'like this', neutral sensation is 'like this.' When we look at beauty, pleasure is 'like this.' We feel this pull towards it; we feel attracted. When we look at something ugly or repulsive, repulsion is 'like this', and neither pleasure nor pain is 'like this', and so it's 'the way it is.' We're not trying to fit experience into ideas we have about it; we're actually observing with awareness the way it is.

Then in the third foundation, the state of mind, of *citta*, is 'like this.' Whether we're feeling inspired or depressed, elated or frightened, angry or greedy, jealous, doubtful, confused, miserable, stressed out, whatever – there is the intuitive awareness that allows us to recognize 'this is the way it is' without judging. This I find particularly challenging because when you're feeling angry or uncertain and confused, there's so much resistance, wanting to get rid of it and change it. We begin by releasing, letting go into the present moment. We're not trying to make anything out of it, just let it be what it is – 'like this', a miserable mental state is 'like this.'

The fourth foundation is of *dhammas*. This comes about with the recognition of the conditioned realm as changing, unsatisfactory and not-self. This takes us to the ultimate realization, where we realize the Dhamma is 'like this' and the Deathless, the *amata dhamma*, is 'like this.'

We use the signs of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self, *anicca, dukkha, anattā*, as reminders of the way it is, not as ideas we put on to life. I think one of the problems with insight meditation (*vipassanā*) as Westerners practise it is that they tend to project the idea of impermanence. People can project impermanence or unsatisfactoriness, so that they're really conditioning their mind to see everything through their projection rather than trusting in their ability to observe. But these three characteristics of existence aren't positions we take in order to interpret experience, they're reminders to help us to observe these characteristics as they're happening now. So we're not trying to convince ourselves that beauty is unsatisfactory, but observing that beauty is attractive, it's 'the way it is.' We're not making any value judgement about it; beauty is impermanent, but that's fine. The only suffering you have is when you want beauty to be permanent, then you create suffering around beauty.

Misery and pain are impermanent, but they tend to seem permanent. When you're in pain you're always afraid that it's going to last forever. That's a mental state, a hell realm that you have when there's physical pain or discomfort or even mental pain. But with intuitive awareness the mind is in a receptive, non-critical state of embracing the present: the pain or the ugliness, the pleasure or the beauty. Then our response is through accepting it for what it is. It's 'like this'; we say that the way it is is 'like this'. There's no judgement in that; it's a way of reflecting. So as you start accepting the pleasure you're feeling but not indulging in it, you're really aware of it: 'Pleasure is like this, pain is like this, neutral sensation is like this.'

In the silence of the mind is where the world and eternity meet. That's an interesting reflection for me; I've contemplated that a lot

because in the present moment one can be very much aware of the world in terms of the physical sensations of the body, the emotions or the state of mind that one is experiencing. And when that dominates our attention, it just goes on and on. The world has this feeling of endlessly going around and around and around, and so as long as one's attention is caught up in the body, feelings and mind-states, then one is continually processing conditioned experience and one thing just goes on to the next.

Intuition is the ability to embrace the world and eternity in the present. Now that may sound pretty grand, but if you reflect on it, it isn't such a rare or impossible thing to do. Thinking of it in terms of abstract thought it does sound difficult but in terms of experience it's quite a normal, natural thing to be able to do. 'The gates to the Deathless are open.' So in that state of intuitive awareness, that's the entrance or point – the intersection of time and the timeless, and that's what we're able to realize in this human form. Within the limitations of our humanity, we can actually realize and learn to trust in that still point in the present – the point that has no boundaries. It's a point; it has no circumference, yet it's unlimited. And that's where we give up the thinking, analytical mind and experience it, realize it through this way of contemplating and opening to life. Meditation, in Buddhist terms then, isn't an attempt to control and to filter out all the coarse, unpleasant things in life, nor is it about only supporting the refined aspects. It brings around a willingness to flow with life, because with intuitive awareness we no longer feel the need to control experience.

If we're caught in the worldly *dhammas* – the patterns of mental behaviour – we get so upset or confused by this or that, that we do have to control and exert a lot of effort to try and survive in the world. It gets too frightening; there are too many aggravations and frustrations. But with the enlightened mind, then there isn't the need to control because we're no longer stuck in something that just goes from one thing to the next. We have the escape. There is an escape: 'There is

an escape from the born, the created, the originated.<sup>24</sup> The world, the body, the feelings, the mental states and all that; there's an escape. The word 'escape' doesn't mean escape out of aversion; it doesn't mean we hate or blame the world. It's not that kind of escape but it's the escape through wisdom, through seeing the nature of things as they are – 'like this.' It's the escape through realizing that as long as we're bound into the conditioned realm, identified with it, attached to it, lost in it, then the best we can do is try to control it for our own benefit: make lots of money and try to buy a nice cottage in some pleasant place and try to avoid any unpleasant scenes, unpleasant people and so on.

So instead of having to do that, we look at our lives here as mendicants, which means giving up the ability to control everything. We don't have any money, we have to accept alms-food and we've given up our ability to arrange and manipulate conditions for our own benefit. We're at the mercy of the society we're in. Fortunately this society is fairly merciful, so now we have this nice temple we can sit in and good food every day and many other benefits. Yet still we're dependent on the mercy of this society for basic survival, for the four requisites. So that means we're deliberately choosing not to be in control of all that and taking the risk of meeting hard-heartedness, indifference and abuse. There's no reason why anybody should respect me because I'm a Buddhist monk, especially in a non-Buddhist country, but the fact is there's never been a problem, for me, living in Britain because there is good-heartedness. This *samaṇa* life does seem to bring out the goodness in others. It brings out the merciful virtue.

However, our occupation as *samaṇas* is not just to survive on alms-food and all the rest. This isn't an end in itself. It just takes care of the basic necessities of life, so then we don't have to spend our lives trying to survive or having to support ourselves. We can live in a simple way and develop the meditation, the *bhāvanā* (cultivation of mind). This means learning to relax and listen, pay attention, both internally and externally. Externally we are not making judgements as to whether we

like this or that, but observing the way things are, and then internally we can observe our fears and desires, or the way our conceit operates, the way various emotions arise and cease. And as we explore our own minds, we become aware of the edge where thinking ceases.

My intellectual mind is programmed to endlessly criticize my moods and habits, so if I have no cessation of thought, then all I can do is just try to rationalize my existence as a monk. This is not a liberating experience. So first of all I recognize the cessation of thought. I investigate the state of not-knowing, the experience of not-knowing where the thinking process ceases and suddenly you're aware: non-thinking is 'like this.' There are gaps between thoughts. Also I use the sound of silence, and have found it very helpful as a sign where the thinking mind ceases. When you're at the edge and no longer caught in the conditioning of the mind, and you rest into that sound of silence, then you can really know what you're feeling. You can know the level of *citta* that you're experiencing in the present: whether the mood is happy or sad, pleasant or painful, or just confused. One afternoon fairly recently I was feeling some strong emotional state and my intellect was busily trying to analyze this emotion and making judgements about it, so I just practised embracing both the intellectual desire to figure it out and the actual feeling of that emotion. The result was confusion and so I stayed with the confusion. Then the confusion dropped and I became aware of the cessation. So you can realize the cessation of emotional habits, not by getting rid of them or suppressing them, but by being aware when they're no longer present. Mindfulness is a factor that isn't going up and down with the conditions that you're experiencing, and so we have a refuge in awareness. And whether things are crazy or sensible or stupid or whatever, we're not judging, we're just noticing that it's 'like this.'

So there is the escape from the created, the conditioned, the born, the originated because there is the Unborn, the Uncreated, the Unoriginated. That's realization; it's not a Buddhist philosophical theory,

it's realizable, it is reality. There is the realization of the Deathless; there is the realization of cessation, of not-self and of emptiness.

Now, through my experience in monastic life over the years, I'd say this has to be something practical. Often religious teachings get exalted to the point where you feel you no longer can make them work. Nibbāna is one of those words in the Buddhist world that gets exalted. Realized beings like arahants and *sotāpannas* are put on pedestals – they're so high most of us think that realization is beyond our ability. But then, is that what the Buddha was teaching? Worshipping something on a pedestal? That we have faith in something up on a pedestal? Is that what he was teaching? You might as well worship beautiful golden goddesses on pedestals, if you're into worshipping things on pedestals! Nibbāna isn't something refined, but it is subtle; it's asking us to pay attention rather than to refine ourselves. So 'the realization of cessation': how does that work in your life in practical terms? Well, I try to witness the way things end in my mind, and I notice that cessation when I really pay attention. It's easy enough to see this in the case of thoughts because thought moves quite quickly, so I develop the skill of thinking in a very slow and deliberate way. Then I can observe the gaps, the spaces between thoughts, and the end of each thought.

But then the emotions linger, don't they? They hang around. They have a lot of inertia and don't move so quickly. Often you're stuck with moods and feelings in your mind such as sadness or despair or resentment. Then the intuitive awareness of that feeling is that it is 'like this' and you go right into the feeling, totally embracing the emotional feeling, not judging or analyzing but just letting it be 'like this.' Take grief, for example, the loss of somebody you love: it's 'like this.' When my mother died I explored that sense of loss rather than trying to smother the emotion or ignore it. I *determined* to grieve, to really know this feeling and to embrace the whole emotion of grief. Then through that, it naturally ceased. It wasn't repressed or forced. I realized the cessation of a condition. I witnessed; I was there when

it ended. So that's putting realization into a practical context. It's nothing fantastic or all that difficult. It just takes your willingness to do it and your trust and confidence. Then to recognize that when grief ceases there is peace: when that emotion had finished, then there was a sense of real peacefulness and bliss. Not a blissed-out high but a lovely feeling of emptiness, of non-attachment and realization that it's 'like that'. So you're informing your conscious life with wisdom all the time, both with the presence of the conditioned, the attachment to the conditioned and the non-attachment to the conditioned – to know both, with no preference.

We can get greedy: 'I just want to live in the state of non-attachment and emptiness.' We attach to the idea of emptiness and to the memories we've had of those moments, but that doesn't work. This is because, as far as our kamma goes, we're 'like this'; we're at that point of intersection where the world, the conditioned realm is a strong experience for us – having a physical body, having sense organs and so on. This is what we have to accept: the conditioned realm as it is. Rather than try to escape because we don't like it and don't want to suffer, we recognize it, realize it – and we recognize and realize non-attachment to it. When there's attachment it's 'like this'; when there's non-attachment it's 'like this.'

With meditation too there are so many theories and views and types that we often make it sound difficult, as if it would take years and years of hard work and sacrifice. If that's what we think, then that's probably what we'll experience. That's the world we create, so that's what we tend to experience. But it's not about getting enlightened quickly, either. Any position you take, you can be aware of. We can even attach to the view of not being attached: 'You shouldn't be attached to anything', or we can attach to all the views about meditation: 'You have to get this *samatha* first, and then do *vipassanā*', or 'just do the pure *vipassanā*.' The views aren't necessarily the problem, it's the attachment, the taking refuge in views that blind us. Even attachment to the view of non-attachment will blind you.

I've tried deliberately being attached to things just so I could realize and know what attachment is like, rather than deny attachment and live my life in a furtive way. I used to experiment with my attachments and really watch and feel them, feel what it's like to be attached to things or people or ideas. If you do that, you realize the suffering that comes through attachment. Then seen with wisdom, your non-attachment doesn't come from some idea that you shouldn't be attached, but through understanding. You know when you grasp fire – it hurts. In the actual experience of it, you naturally let go. You naturally don't attach to things when you know that it hurts. So attachment to Buddhism, attachment to monasteries, attachment to traditions, methods: it's not the things that are a problem, it's the blind attachment to them.

So do you know what attachment is? What does it feel like to be obsessed, to be really attached to views or opinions or people or places, to the extent that you feel very anxious or angry if they're ever threatened? Or you worry because 'this' changes or 'this' might be threatened? And you feel yourself going crazy with resentment or anger? That's attachment!

We're not trying to get rid of attachment but to understand it, know it, feel it, experience it so then we can know what we're talking about. You *know*. Then your letting go isn't through aversion or fear about attachment; it's through understanding and through realizing non-attachment is 'like this.' Non-attachment is cool and it's joyful. I notice I get a lot of joy from monastic life when there's no attachment to it. When I start attaching to anything in this monastic system then I don't get much joy out of this life. I could blame the monastic life, blame others but then I know better. I know that if I'm experiencing monastic life as onerous or difficult, then it's because of an attachment I have. Where is that? What am I attached to then, that's making my life so joyless and so miserable? And then I try to see, to investigate.

Tonight is the Observance Night, and it's very auspicious to have Ajahn Sucitto and the monks and nuns from Cittaviveka with us. The

value of the Sangha is in providing encouragement and the underlying support of a common goal with a common tradition and form that we can use. Our Dhamma-Vinaya is something that we have in common despite any differences in terms of character or nationality. So we have an opportunity to practise together and discuss practice for the next few days. We stay up until midnight tonight. You are all invited to participate.

(From the *Amaravati Temple Opening Booklet*, July 1999)



## 17 | The Bearable Irritation of Being

One way to bring the mind into the present – to ground ourselves in basic meditation – is to meditate on the body and the breath. We can do this whenever we get lost or carried away by thoughts or feelings. Just remember: ‘I’m still breathing, the body is still here.’ That will ground you; it will establish mindfulness in the present. Emotionally we may resist this simple practice. Maybe we’re looking for something else. It doesn’t seem important enough just to reflect on the breath, on our posture, or on the feeling of the body as it is; we tend to dismiss them. But I encourage you to have complete faith in this practice of ‘just the present moment’, just what’s happening with the breath and with the body.

Contemplate the body. Such consciousness allows an intuitive awareness that the body is in the mind. The conventional way of thinking about the mind is that it’s in the body. The average American would say, ‘My mind is up here; it’s my brain.’ In the West we’re so obsessed with thinking and with intellectual accomplishments; it’s all up in the head. In Thailand, they usually point to the heart when

locating the mind. Either way, we think it's inside us. But there is another way: contemplating the body as being in the mind. You can be mindful of the body just by listening or watching or opening to the feelings of the body. When you think about your right little finger, that finger becomes a conscious experience. It's very good for the body to be allowed, to be accepted into consciousness rather than to be dismissed, misunderstood or exploited. We usually either ignore our body or exploit it for pleasure.

Instead, we can listen to its rhythms, contemplate its feeling, its sensitivity – through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body. This sensual realm that we're born into is something we can contemplate. The mind can observe sensitivity: heat and cold, pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness, harmonious sounds or jarring noises, fragrant smells or horrible odours. Salty, sweet, bland, astringent, bitter – it's all sensitivity. We feel good or bad, depressed or elated. With the body as a focus, I have found it very helpful to get in touch with neutral sensations as well. Contemplate one hand touching the other or the pressure of the clothes on your skin. Human beings usually notice only the extremes of sensory experience – when the body is feeling really healthy or in great pain. We don't notice neutral sensations unless we really pay attention. We also have a way of ignoring the mildly unpleasant sensations. When we feel slightly uncomfortable, we just ignore that feeling – at least until it becomes too irritating.

This realm and this form – this whole cosmos we are now experiencing – is a sensitive realm. We can contemplate the body as in the mind. This means that we can bring it into consciousness: feet, hands, head, face, shoulders, chest, back, waist, hips, the whole lot. This reflection on the body is one of the foundations of mindfulness. 'Foundation' means that it's something you have all the time. The body is with you until it dies. It's something here and now. Mindfulness of the body is a way to see the body in terms of Dhamma rather than in terms of personal attachments. We tend to take sensitivity as a personal thing

when it's just a natural thing; it's nature. To notice sensitivity means to reflect on it – otherwise we're just caught up reacting to pleasure and pain, praise and blame, liking and disliking, heat and cold. To reflect means to notice: this is the way it is. Having a human body is like this. It's going to be a source of continuous irritation no matter how much we try to make it comfortable. Americans have done marvellous things over the past hundred years to make life increasingly more comfortable – but we're still constantly irritated.

What I mean is that because this is a sensitive realm, it's also an irritating realm. Something is always impinging on us in some way. Even when we close our eyes, we hear noises or feel bodily pains. There's always something disturbing consciousness, some irritation. Even pleasant conditions are agitating when we contemplate them. Any sensual experience basically activates the mind. This is the experience of sensitivity. The conditioned realm we live in during the lifespan of the body is a state of sensitivity, and this implies that we're going to be bothered by this until the body dies. But we can endure it. It's bearable. There's nothing wrong with irritation; it's not bad. It's simply something to contemplate and to accept for what it is. When you don't accept your experience and look for something else – a way of life where you won't ever be irritated again – you're wasting your life, looking for paradise in a realm that's not paradisiacal.

The world we live in is like this; we're going to experience pleasure and pain. Society is going to praise us and blame us. Are there any people who have never been blamed or criticized in their life – only praised? We all want to be respected, to have good fortune and success. We all dread being a failure, despised, rejected. We tell ourselves: 'I want to be successful and happy. I want to have good health. I want to be attractive, acceptable, respected, loved, praised, wealthy, secure.' We don't want to get sick, look ugly, lose our hair or lose all our money. These are worldly values: always trying to get the best and avoid the worst. When we reflect on this, we realize that good or bad, success

or failure, praise or blame are of equal value in terms of meditation. Spiritual development is not dependent on being successful, happy, healthy, wealthy, or being liked. In fact, sometimes we learn the most from the other side: from sickness, disappointment, disillusionment, a broken heart, unrequited love, and all the rest. We can gain a lot of strength if we are willing to contemplate these experiences.

When I look back over my own life, I'm grateful for all the experiences I used to feel resentful about when I was younger. Even for much of my monastic life I carried around the thought that certain things had been unfair and should never have happened. Whenever I remembered those events, I would feel the resentment inside me. But through contemplation, I now feel grateful for the misfortunes of my life. When life gets tough and things aren't going right, something has to rise up; you have to take on and survive what you most despise or believe is unfair. Those times, the ups and downs of human experience, have given me a lot of strength. Life is not easy. We're in a realm of *dukkha*, of experiences that irritate us and cause us to create suffering if we're not mindful. So this mindfulness is what the Buddha expounded as a way to realize non-suffering. He didn't say non-irritation; he was still irritated by life after his enlightenment, but he didn't create suffering.

The way of realizing this non-suffering is through mindfulness, through watching and listening, through bringing attention to the body and the breath. Train yourself to do this when you're meditating and when you're washing the dishes, working in the kitchen, or walking from one place to another. Everywhere. Just keep remembering: "Where am I? What am I doing?" Integrate the sense of bringing your attention to what's going on right now rather than rushing from here to there. We usually want to hurry to get the dishes done so we can go and do something more important, like meditating. But doing the dishes is part of conscious experience. When you're doing the dishes, that's meditation too. Don't see things as obstructions to practice but as opportunities for integrating mindfulness into a flow of life.

Formal meditation – sitting still for forty-five minutes – helps us develop this ability to be mindful. We learn to deal with pain in our legs or back, with unpleasant thoughts or a wandering mind. None of us wants pain, restlessness or any unpleasant experience, but our practice is not a matter of trying to get rid of them. Instead, we learn to accept them for what they are. By contemplating the sensations in the body, we see how they change by themselves. They're not permanent. They're not the ultimate reality. We learn how to be patient and endure emotionally what we thought we couldn't take. We can bear with physical pain, with hunger, with heat and cold, with praise and blame, with any irritation. It's not a wilful practice: 'I'm going to break through the pain barrier' or 'I'm not going to give in to weakness.' It's more of a faith-oriented practice. Just observe and witness. Contemplate the various sensations and reactions, physical and emotional, that you're having in the present. This helps you to bear with it. When the mind is saying, 'I can't stand this any longer' – we *can* take it. We can endure everything and anything.

(From a talk given at Cloud Mountain Retreat Center, June 1995)



In awareness there is no *dukkha*, no suffering. There is discerning wisdom (*paññā*) and simply a knowing: ‘Suffering is like this ... and this is what non-suffering is like ... self is like this ... and this is what not-self is like ...’. It’s discernment that tells you: ‘Attachment is like this ... and this is what non-attachment is like’, etc. It’s a way of informing yourself so you know clearly the way it is. In this way, the Path is apparent: the Path of non-suffering is non-attachment, not-self. If we find there is ‘self’, there is suffering, attachment, and we’re back in the realm of *dukkha*.

The teaching of dependent origination, *paṭiccasamuppāda*, is a worthy one to reflect on, remembering that it’s not meant to be an intellectual theory: it’s something we have to internalize. The first part of the *paṭiccasamuppāda* is about the origination of suffering, the second Noble Truth, and the second half is about the ceasing, the third Noble Truth. When there is *avijjā*, ignorance of Dhamma, this is the cause of suffering. If we’re coming from *avijjā*, from self-view, from conceit, from liking/disliking, from the created world, then the result is always going to be suffering. If I start out with *avijjā* and I’m sitting

here with pain in my knees, trying to practise meditation in order to become enlightened, after an hour of sitting here I end up with *dukkha*! Start with ignorance of the truth, and it affects everything: your emotional body, your emotions, the five khandhas. So you have *avijjā paccayā saṅkhārā* – dependent on ignorance are the mental formations. *Saṅkhārā* include all phenomena, conditions. Then: *saṅkhārā paccayā viññāṇam* – consciousness (*viññāṇa*) is affected by this *avijjā*. And then the whole process starts operating, affected by *avijjā*, so that the way we perceive and experience life is going to be the experience of *dukkha*. How could it be otherwise?

The teaching goes on to explain that when we have impingement on the senses, feeling comes from that, and then there is clinging – if it's pleasant we want to hold on; if it's unpleasant we want to get rid of it. We have desire (*taṇhā*), attachment (*upādāna*) and becoming (*bhava*) – we become that. Then we are 'born' (*jāti*) into the state that leads to sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (*soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassa-upāyasa*). Explore it and see.

This is a way of reflecting on experience here and now. Then there's the third Noble Truth, *nirodha*, cessation. With right understanding, the whole thing disintegrates. You awaken, the whole process stops, just ceases. And for me, this is stillness of the mind; there is no self. It's not that I've studied Buddhism for years and come out with some theory about not-self, it's simply that in the emptiness of the moment is not-self. There is no suffering, no *dukkha* as a result. Consciousness is there and ignorance ceases at the very moment you awaken. You're mindful, in other words.

The second Noble Truth offers insight into letting go. This Truth has three aspects. The first is that the causes of suffering are *avijjā* (ignorance of truth), the three kinds of desire and attachment, and the identity that comes through that ignorance. Then the second aspect is that the insight is to let go, to release yourself from that trap of desire – not suppressing it, but accepting it and letting it be. With awareness,

you begin to see desire as an object rather than seeing it in terms of a person attached to desires that can't be abandoned. Just let it be. Desire is what it is, and it ceases. Then the third aspect of the second Noble Truth is the realization that letting go has been accomplished. It's not just some idea and you're trying to let go, you actually *know* the reality.

This takes us to *nirodha-sacca*, the third Noble Truth of cessation. You can let go of desire because it is in the nature of desire to cease; it arises, it ceases, and that's how you can have this perspective on cessation. You're letting the natural flow take place: the arising and ceasing of *saṅkhārā*. You're no longer trying to control things, to hold on to what you like or get rid of everything that's painful and unpleasant – the *dukkha* caused by that resistance to life. It's an endless struggle and you will always lose, because *avijjā* is the cause of suffering. Practice isn't about getting rid of anything. It comes from allowing things that have arisen to cease – and realizing cessation is like *this*. There is the end of suffering; it should be realized. In this natural state of poised attention, you see things as they are and there's receptivity, a knowing. It's not coming from concepts, theories, views or feelings; it's insight knowledge, *ñāṇadassana*, a profound wisdom-knowledge.

Explore how you can create yourself intentionally. I used to create myself in all different ways – my good side, my conceits and my fears – and listen to this personality. Self is like that; it's a creation. I have to think and to create myself to be my personality. I have to get lost in the conviction that this body, my feelings and memories are really me – and then I operate from this sense of me being like this, and what I think and what I like and don't like. It's not peaceful; I can't create a peaceful *Sumedho* – because the very creation of the self is changing and unsatisfactory.

I'm not doing this from some Buddhist theory about everything being suffering, but from observing what is suffering. To become a self means always creating yourself as something unsatisfactory, unfulfilled, death-bound. But as not-self I stay in this stillness, this

silence. I'm letting go of the concepts, the memories, the identities with the five khandhas. The consciousness is still present but I'm not projecting anything into consciousness. It's still discerning; I don't go into a trance, I'm not blissed out in any way, lost in some heaven realm or just out of it – I'm fully present. This is *paññā*, discerning: 'Not-self is like this ... *anattā* is this way', 'non-attachment is like this ...'. If I create myself, I'm going to have to attach to the perceptions and memories about myself as a person. But consciousness is complete, full. There's the knowing, discernment: the difference between suffering and non-suffering, self and non-self, attachment and non-attachment.

Nibbāna is the realization, the reality of non-attachment. The path of suffering is attaching to everything, believing in your self as these limited conditions and wallowing in misery. You could take that direction, but I assume you're trying to find a way out of that trap and into non-suffering, nibbāna, liberation, enlightenment, whatever word you want to refer to. It's not looking for anything. It's non-attachment, not-self; it's not projecting, wanting or expecting. It's recognizing: 'Reality is this way and the illusory world is created through attachment.' We think we all live in the same world as personalities, but every one of us lives in a world of our own creation. We have certain things in common, but so much of our life is personal and unique to ourselves. That world we create is not the objective world we believe we're living in. That's why relating to each other is so difficult, isn't it? We're coming from different worlds – you feel, sometimes, you're living with a bunch of aliens!

We create our worlds and project them into consciousness. When we stop doing that and start letting go of the world, the natural state of being is consciousness. Wisdom and consciousness are aligned and we can instruct this conscious moment with wisdom rather than with ignorance and views. This is cessation, the third Noble Truth. This is emptiness, Deathlessness – because the Eightfold Path then appears. You know: 'This is the Path.' It's not theoretical anymore; you're not trying to find it, you *know* it. This is it: non-suffering, not-self, non-

attachment. Cultivating this awareness in daily life: this is what monasticism is all about. It's a conventional form for cultivating the Path, an expedient means. The Buddha established a monastic Sangha not in order to create an elite priesthood or make us into some caste, but to create a convention that, if used properly, helps develop this Path. The symbol of the robes, the alms-mendicancy, everything around us is not meant for grasping but for cultivating awareness.

We sometimes experience blissful states in meditation and may think we're enlightened: stream-enterers, *sotāpanna*. I remember being in a very blissful state for a long time when I was a samanera; I started thinking, 'This must be what it's like to be an arahant. I've never felt like this before.' I stayed that way for quite a few days, and then I had to go to the immigration office and have my identity papers stamped! I don't know what happened to the arahant then; it disappeared. It doesn't make any sense: you don't become anything like that – you don't 'become' an arahant. The spiritual path is all about relinquishing, not attaining. It's about learning to let go of everything. You can get to sublime experiences and elevated, conscious, blissful states, but anything you get, you're going to lose. These states are not sustainable because they're created; they're dependent on conditions. This awareness, this Path, is not dependent on conditions being a particular way, but language does give that impression: they do sound like attainments. So you have to recognize the limitation of thinking and language.

Don't start thinking *paṭiccasamuppāda* is a complicated theory about the 'three lives' or 'simultaneous arising' that you have to believe in. It's not an intellectual process we're encouraging here. We're using the intellect to look at the reality of this moment, to awaken to it. This is about the realization of cessation – the reality of this moment, when all conditions cease. Cessation, *nirodha*, is like *this*. When suffering ceases, when the self ceases, when there's no attachment – and then? After it all ceases, what's left? There is consciousness. Cessation is like *this*,

with mindful wisdom and consciousness in this present moment, here and now.

This is not just flippant tinkering with consciousness and playing with words. It's a discernment and recognition: knowing what becoming this ego means and what 'self' is, noticing when you are attached to desires and the suffering that results. You really know this, you're not just reacting – this is not part of some wish to get rid of it. Explore suffering, open up to it, receive it: this is the first Noble Truth. Accept it, investigate it and understand: the cause of suffering is desire. You can't just get rid of desire; you need to know desire. You can know and observe desire as you're experiencing it. Desire rises up: I want something, I want to become something, I want to get rid of something. And what is it that observes and knows this desire? Awareness can observe desire as a mental object. Desire arises and ceases according to conditions – you don't have the same desire as a continuum, forever, in your consciousness. Desire arises and ceases according to conditions presently affecting your conscious moment. So the aim is to realize this consciousness and inform it with *paññā*, to know the difference between conditioned and Unconditioned. The conditioned is like this ... the Unconditioned is like this ...

This is how it is: I'm watching and observing, just noticing the body sitting here. This form is a condition. If I start attaching to it, thinking that 'I' am this body, it sets off the whole drama of being this body. The whole world of being arises: 'I am an old man who some call Sumedho.' But if there's awareness, that world doesn't arise: things are as they are, the body is still here, it's seventy years old, etc., and it's like *this*. There's non-attachment, not-self and non-suffering, and by means of this reflective investigation, we see the Path – it's clear and precise. To know this Path you have to use *paññā*, wisdom, not just ideas about whether this is the Path or not, because then you're back in the thinking process again, with your ideas and the sense of yourself. That way is not the Path. In other words: 'Heedlessness is the way to death', whereas

being heedful, being mindful, being present – that’s the Deathless.

Not being mindful is the way to death: attachment to the body, identifying with it, adopting self views, and all the *saṅkhārās*. By identifying and limiting yourself to that, you always have this fear of death, fear of loss, fear of suffering. You have fear of everything because that’s going to happen sometime in the future: you get older, the body weakens and then it dies. In terms of the conditioned realm, this is just the way it is. As long as my identity is with death, I’m caught in this fear. But in discerning the Deathless, that fear is no longer a problem because you know the Deathless is the reality and you are no longer so aligned to death-bound conditions. You let them go and release yourself from that limitation.

(From a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 28 June 2005)



## 19 | Universal Loving-Kindness

*Mettā*, loving-kindness, is an all-inclusive practice. Although liberation comes through letting go of our attachment to the conditioned world, if we concentrate on this alone, the tendency will be to see conditions solely in terms of not being attached to them, or even trying to get rid of them – an excluding, nihilistic attitude. But with *mettā*, we are relating to all conditioned experience with an attitude of kindness, accepting things as they are. Consider what this does to the mind as a practice. We contemplate all phenomena, all sentient beings, in terms of loving-kindness rather than in terms of what is best, what is worst, what we like and what we don't like.

*Mettā* is non-discriminatory. It doesn't mean liking one thing rather than another. It isn't a question of singling out: 'I love this person, I don't love that one.' Ours is a highly critical society; we are brought up to emphasize what's wrong with ourselves, our family and friends, the government, the country, the world at large, and so we become very conscious of the negative. We see what's wrong with people or things and become obsessed with that, and are no longer able to see what's right about them. In practising *mettā*, however, we deliberately avoid clinging to faults and weaknesses. We're not blind to them, we're

not promoting them; we maintain an attitude of kindness and patience towards defects in ourselves and in others.

In contemplating the law of kamma, we realize that it is not a matter of, for example, seeking revenge for the victim but of practising *mettā* and forgiveness for the victimizer – because, truly, the most unfortunate of all is the victimizer. There is justice in the world. If we do wrong, we may not be discovered and punished by society, but we don't get away with things. We must be reborn again and again until we do resolve our kamma. We don't know how many lifetimes we have had so far, but here we are in this incarnation, with our own particular character and kammic tendencies. We have had the good fortune to come across the Dhamma, and so we have been given great gifts with which to resolve things. But how many people have such opportunities? Considering the billions who now live on this planet, there really are very few who have that chance.

The urge to seek revenge is a common human reaction, but in terms of the law of kamma we can contemplate it and ask, 'Is that really how I want to conduct my life? Isn't it better to forgive and to develop compassion towards all sentient beings – demonic, angelic, whatever they may be?' Where we can get confused is when we have idealistic concepts of what we should be: 'I shouldn't want to get my own back, I shouldn't have vengeful feelings for victimizers. I should have *mettā* for them!' Then we might feel, 'No, I can't, it's too hard. I can have *mettā* for everyone else, but not that person. He's totally hateful.' But we can have *mettā* for that very feeling – an attitude of kindness rather than criticism. We know it for what it is; we don't indulge it or repress it, we are simply patient with that particular state as it is in the present moment.

The basic pattern of Theravada Buddhist practice is *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā* – generosity, morality and meditation. *Dāna* means simply that one tries to be a generous person, not selfish, able to share what one has with others; this is the basis for being a good human being.

Generosity is highly developed in countries such as Thailand; and in general, Thai people like themselves rather than hate themselves – as many of us seem to do in the West. Generosity is, of itself, better than mean-heartedness. There is a joyfulness to it; sharing brings gladness into our lives. With *sīla*, morality, there are precepts to be kept, actions to refrain from. As we practise this, we learn to take responsibility for our actions and speech. The two together, *dāna* and *sīla*, bring us a sense of self-respect. Then there is meditation, *bhāvanā*, through which we begin to relinquish all the delusions we have about ‘self’. The whole process is one of purification. As we meditate, we can even be glad when unpleasant states keep coming up. By having *mettā* for these wretched creatures we lock away inside ourselves, we’re opening the door of the prison. We’re letting them go, but it’s out of compassion rather than the desire to be rid of them. If we contemplate it in this way, these things can be accepted, because we are looking at them with wisdom, rather than seeing them as ‘me’ and ‘my problems.’ As long as they are ‘mine’, I can only hate myself for thinking or feeling that way.

We are not trying to say an unpleasant state is something it’s not, but with *mettā* we allow it to just be. We’re willing to be with it, and as its nature is impermanent it does not stay. In that willingness to let things be what they are, we liberate ourselves from them. As we become increasingly skilful at releasing these habits, there is a sense of lightness because the heart isn’t burdened by guilt, dislike, blame and all the rest. In the Western world especially, it is very important to develop this attitude of patience and non-aversion to everything about ourselves: our fears and desires, our emotional habits, our sicknesses, our physical aches and pains; non-aversion to all the mental and physical phenomena we experience, non-aversion to arthritis, cancer, crumbling bones, old age, all the rest of it. This doesn’t mean we don’t try to heal the body. To do so comes quite naturally and we do the best we can. Trying to make the body feel well can be an act of loving-kindness towards it. But to hate the body because it’s sick or painful

or old leads to misery, and is an obstruction to spiritual development. Practice is always in the present. Noting our experience, seeing it clearly, is in the present. We begin where we are now. We need to trust more in liberation in the present.

By reminding ourselves to have *mettā* for the feelings we experience – not thinking about them or analyzing them, but by going to the place they are felt in the body or to the mental quality and really embracing that – by being willing to feel those particular emotions, feelings become bearable. By changing our attitude to one of acceptance and interest rather than rejection and wanting to get rid of them, we find that they are things we can tolerate. Then they cease on their own, for all conditions are impermanent. We are changing our attitude from, ‘I don’t like this in myself, I want to get rid of it’, to ‘Oh, so this is what I’m feeling’ and having patience and a willingness to experience what is, in the present moment. This willingness to feel, for example, jealousy or anxiety enables us to take an interest in it as experience – because that which is aware is not worried, is not angry, is not the condition that is present. We start to develop confidence in this state of pure awareness. Through that patient attitude, the conditioned realm stops being an endless struggle to control or get rid of things. More and more there is a sense of resting in the silence of the mind, in that pure state of being in the present.

In terms of Dhamma, it isn’t a question of justifying our own weaknesses; it isn’t some kind of cop-out. It’s understanding that this is the nature of humanity, it’s how things are. We are not ideals. Ideals are static, pure, unchanging, yet we hold to them as how things should be and despise ourselves because we can’t be an ideal. But when we contemplate ourselves in terms of Dhamma we see that the body, the feelings, the consciousness, are all constantly changing. We have so many things to deal with: there are the instinctual drives of our basic animal nature – the need for food, for survival, and so forth – then our whole emotional range, and all the different things that have happened

to us or that we've done. We tend to be so involved with life and to interpret it all in a very personal way. Sexual desire, for instance, becomes a personal problem rather than a natural energy that comes simply from having a body. The natural state of the body is soft, with blood coursing through it; it has nerves and various bodily functions and we have to live with it. It's not a cold, sculpted piece of marble that holds its beauty under all conditions. We have to bear the changing and ageing of this body and of the world around us. That is why meditating on impermanence helps us to break out of the assumption that somehow things should be fixed in an ideal state.

Through seeing the impermanence in things and understanding that in this realm there can be no such thing as perfection, we begin to realize we don't have to try to control life, to force it to fit our fixed ideas. To attempt to do that is exhausting and debilitating. When we realize there is no need to do it, we can begin to have this sense of flowing with life, and then we feel, 'This is my path, these conditions I experience are my kamma and I'll work with them', rather than thinking, 'Oh, these conditions shouldn't be happening, I shouldn't have them. They're an obstruction to my path.'

(From *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No. 42, October 1997)



## 20 | Reflections on Mettā

When we use the reflective capacity we can see the way things are – even in the most ordinary way. If we forget and get caught up in our desires and fears, we don't really notice the obvious; we're just caught up in a world of our own creation. Things can be wonderful on a conditioned plane sometimes, but if we're too lost in fear or desire, we're not even aware of the way things are. I see that in many people; everything's perfectly all right, nothing wrong, but they're completely caught in a mood. So they're not aware anymore, not mindful; they're lost in proliferations, which they create. Because our tendency is to do this we need to keep reminding ourselves, establishing mindfulness around the way things are right now.

Reflection allows us to see that all our hopes or fears for the future are merely what they are in the present: they're perceptions that go through the mind. They're not anything to give any great importance to. Some things seem more significant than others, but that's just the way it is; it's not anything we need to grasp. So our way is always being fully with the way it is now: with the body the way it is now, with the world the way it is now, the mood, the conditions of the mind – to know them as they are now, for what they are. Anger is just

anger; it's no longer a person. If there's anger in the present, then it's just that.

In your meditation, as you feel calm and your mind starts feeling very peaceful and serene, then maybe nasty, angry thoughts enter your mind. And of course, in contrast to the more exalted feelings that you might be having, these are not wanted, are they? But 'reflection' means that we see them just as they are, whether it's an exalted thought – some lovely, altruistic thought – or some selfish, petty thought. When we reflect on it, it's just what it is: it arises and it ceases. So we can bear with the pettiness and the irritations. We can be patient and reflect on it rather than suppress it or react to it.

As we begin to understand the mind more and more and abide in the purity of being in the present, we can feel a goodwill, or *mettā*, towards all creatures. I like this word 'goodwill', *mettā*: a positive radiance of mind where we're extending goodwill outwards, wishing people well. It's a generous act, a giving forth – willing that which is good towards people. We have this power to will things, don't we? When our life isn't a reaction anymore to pleasure and pain, when it's not conditioned by indulgence and suppression, then we find we can use our willpower, not for any personal gain but for the welfare of all others – for compassion. The heart radiates outwards because there's no personal interest in it any more. It's all-encompassing; it goes towards everything, rather than dwelling in selfish interests. It's like a prayer. Willing the good, the best and the kindest, the most beautiful wishes and feelings to those we feel gratitude towards. *Mettā* has this radiant quality.

The sun itself is a symbol of this: a radiant star, the focal point for our solar system. Its warmth, its brilliance keeps everything alive and growing. If the radiance of the sun went out, all of it would fall apart. In the same way, when we're introverted and fall into selfish desires and fears, we have no radiance. We turn sallow, our faces go flat and we become quite ugly. The radiant quality is locked up in miserable states

of selfish desire and fear. Selfish people, caught up in their desires, have more of a repelling quality than an attractive one. They try to make themselves attractive for lustful reasons or for ego reinforcement, and it looks gross. When you see the true radiance of the heart, then that other thing is quite repulsive because it's a mask; it's coming from self-view, *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi*.

As spiritually developing beings, we have to contemplate how to develop the right relationship with people in our lives, with our parents, our relatives and friends and with society. This includes the willingness to forgive any wrongs done, the willingness to completely let go. Even though emotionally these things might still be painful, we accept the pain. We're willing to suffer, to accept this unpleasant feeling in the heart. We learn how to bear with that, how to even welcome it, so it's no longer something that we dread or resent but something that we fully accept and embrace. And on the conventional level – of mother and father, husband, wife, children, friends, enemies, all this – we practise *mettā*. We can radiate this quite intentionally, in the sense of actually concentrating from the heart and radiating goodwill outwards, good thoughts.

This is a devotional practice from the heart rather than from the intellect. But we need both: one doesn't cancel out the other. Sometimes in religion we tend to think that either it's all love or it's all wisdom. 'God is love, everything is love, the way is love' – that's the heartfelt form of religious experience. And then, the way of wisdom: that can seem like impersonal, cold-hearted analysis of the mind, and we feel a sense of loss in regard to the intuitive feelings of love and compassion. But remember that we're transcending; we're not attaching to love and compassion as ends in themselves, nor to wisdom. It's the way of non-attachment, so that both are valid practices. If you have just a practice of love and compassion alone, without wisdom, there's no way of understanding things as they are. You're merely developing a way of loving-radiance. So when it comes to being able to explain or to fully

understand the truth of the way it is, you don't know it. All you can do is practise your devotions and that often tends towards a sliding back into superstition. If it's not combined with wisdom, it becomes merely a series of rituals and rites, and you start feeling guilty if you aren't praying every day or radiating *mettā* throughout the universe. All these can become very fixed in the mind if you haven't developed wisdom to understand the nature of the mind.

But then you can have wisdom without love. If we're just looking analytically, we can understand everything theoretically but on the level of feeling we've repressed. We don't have radiance; we just have a brilliant understanding. We can figure it all out and come up with some really impressive theories and insights. But on the level of everyday life, we can't live in an abstract world. We have to relate to unknown things, to the flow and flux of being, to the infinite variety of the sensory world of changing conditions, to types of people and qualities. We can't spend our time trying to fit everything into rational terminology, thinking that that's the way to understand.

The opening of the heart allows us to be in the flow, the movement and the change: to be with conditions as we perceive them. Conditions are impermanent: they arise and cease. And to be fully open to the arising and cessation of the conditioned world, we have to be with it rather than trying to perceive it. We can perceive the beginning and the end, but most of what we are actually experiencing is beyond perception: it's just as it is. The perceptions we have arise and fix on a certain quality, a certain position, but with mindfulness we can be with the changing-ness of the sensory world, which has no perception. That's why we have to use words like 'suchness' and 'as-is-ness' to remind ourselves to be with the flow and movement rather than to be attached to perceptions as reality.

The rational mind tends to think, 'Well, I'm spreading *mettā* to my mother over in California, but is she really benefiting from that? If we could get some kind of electronic instrument we could hook it

up to my old mother, and then while I'm spreading *mettā* over here, see if there's any visible qualitative effect upon her over there.' The rational mind wants to measure because if she's not feeling it then why bother, why pretend? The rational mind thinks in terms of quantity and quality – and if something doesn't have a quantity or quality, then it's worthless! But I know this: that if I tell my mother I love her, if I say, 'I've spread *mettā* to you every day', that makes her feel happy. I see it in her face when I visit her and I don't have to have a special instrument to measure it.

It's just good sense, isn't it? Mothers like to be told that they're loved. So, when I'm sending goodwill every morning to my mother in California and wondering if she's really feeling it, it doesn't matter. That's just the desire to have a result and to know for sure about something; it's not the quality of faith (*saddhā*) and trust. To me, it's a lot better use of time to send *mettā* to my mother or to other beings than to sit around thinking of myself. And yet we might think it's worth spending the whole day thinking about ourselves rather than radiating *mettā* because we find ourselves, understandably, more significant than anyone else.

At first *mettā* needs to be something we radiate to ourselves, willing good to this being here, because this creature is the most significant one for us. Maybe we'd rather have *mettā* for our mothers or for some inspiring figure, and it's easier sometimes to send goodwill to some wonderful person or to masses of people in some distant country. But we have to admit that in this lifetime, this being is the most significant being for ourselves, the one we're with all the time. Having *mettā* for oneself is not a selfish practice; it's just the willingness to respect and to learn how live in the right way with these conditions. But *mettā* has no limits: first it's directed towards oneself, and then it radiates outwards to all beings. And so we can visualize in our minds: our parents, our teachers, the rulers of the country, friends, enemies, the sun and moon, the seen and the unseen. Anything we can imagine: all the unfortunate

beings in the world, the beautiful, lovable beings, the animal kingdom, the fish in the ocean, the birds in the sky, the heavenly beings and the devils. Using these terms is a way of expanding our consciousness to where the thoughts can't reach.

The Buddhist cosmology is a scheme of perception, taking us to the extremes of positive and negative, of ultimate refinement and ultimate coarseness. And because *mettā* means using our ability to radiate thoughts of goodwill, then of course thoughts are what we're using. We're thinking of, say, the animal kingdom, of animals like cats and dogs, budgies and horses: the animals that we don't eat, but that we love. Then there are the animals that we eat and that we exploit, like sheep and cattle, goats and chickens. Just think of battery chickens, caught in unmitigated misery for their lifetime. These chickens are providing eggs, and we eat their eggs. Then there are sheep: we eat their meat and we use their wool. All these are animals that we use just for survival in the human community. So, *mettā* for them – they give a lot to us, don't they? Sending goodwill to them and expressing gratitude for all the good things we get from these animals.

Gratitude is a beautiful quality to have in our mind, to really bring into consciousness what a benefit these animals are to us and how little we recognize this. Well, we could get a rebellious, revolutionary impulse and go over some night and let all the battery chickens out! It might seem to be a kind act, but those chickens are not ready for freedom; they would be terrified and lost. But we can reflect and send goodwill to them – nobody can stop us from doing that. And we can develop a way of life so that eventually this sort of unkind, exploitative activity will lessen. The more we are aware and compassionate, the more we realize there are all kinds of ways and means of letting go of exploitative activities and unnecessary cruelty.

Here in Britain we can reflect that this country allows us to live as Buddhists; it's a benevolent country. Even though we might have views

and opinions about it on the negative side, overall it's all right. It's not perfect, but we're not looking at it critically; we're not examining the political, economic and social problems. This kind of overall reflection isn't one of denying the faults and flaws in the system. I think the majority of people would rather have goodwill for each other; they want justice, fairness and mercy. Whether they feel like that all the time in every situation is something else, but that's the general ideal of the population as far as I can tell.

So how can we help the government of this country? *Mettā* is something we can spread every day: sending goodwill to the members of Parliament, House of Commons, House of Lords. Wishing them well, so that as we approach each other with goodwill then all the fears, anxieties and threats diminish. If we look at the prime minister with a critical eye, it's just the same as if I were to criticize you all the time – then what would happen? You'd dig in your heels and become stubborn; unless you were really mindful, you'd become more difficult. This tendency to dwell endlessly on what's wrong and blame others creates the conditions for a deepening of misery. But when we regard people as intelligent, mature beings – even if they aren't that way all the time – we give them the benefit of the doubt, and most people will rise to a situation if they have the opportunity to do so.

In the course of your practice, you can start contemplating your relationship with your parents. It would really be good to let your parents know that you love them, which doesn't mean that you agree with them or like everything that they do. *Mettā* means that you're not going to create a problem about the flaws and the weaknesses they have. You're not going to say, 'I love you, but you did this, and then you did that. I didn't approve of it and you've ruined so many things – but I still love you, yes!' What does that do to your heart? Saying 'I love you' quite openly and honestly will release things within you. You're not asking for them to even like it. You're not saying, 'I love you', and then expecting them to change suddenly overnight and be what you want

because that isn't love, is it? That's a deal! 'I love you if you love me; if you don't love me, I don't love you.' *Mettā* isn't a deal we're making with anyone: we're not expecting anything back from it. We're not demanding any good result, even for ourselves. There's no radiance to that because that kind of *mettā* – although it's better than nothing – still lacks the radiance of a mind that makes no demand. With this kind of a mind you're not even asking to be happy or have any happy moments in your life whatsoever because you're willing to just work with life, to forgive and give forth goodwill.

When we relate to each other like this, it has a good effect on our minds. But that's not what we're doing it for – it's worth doing in its own right, just as it is. If we're doing it for a good result it will be disappointing because immediately selfish thoughts come in (and that's not a good result!) – there will always be some form of suffering, or *dukkha*, associated with it. Then we become discontented: 'Well, I've been sending goodwill to that person for years now, and they still hate me. I haven't got anything out of it, I had better stop!' Then our goodwill is being sent with the idea of gaining something, expecting that they will appreciate it.

That's why it's important to understand the nature of the mind, so that you begin to see the problem of self-view (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*). It is going to put a damper on every experience and spoil every moment of your life as long as you're deluded in this way. You could be with the Buddha himself and yet, with *sakkāya-ditṭhi*, you wouldn't even know it – you'd still be wretched. If Gotama Buddha came in here right now and sat down and you were filled with self-view you'd be saying, 'Venerable sir, why aren't there any Buddhas around?'

With people towards whom we have a lot of resentment or bitterness, *mettā* is a way of forgiving and reminding ourselves to let go of it. It's not dismissing or suppressing, but a reflection on forgiving and letting go of the perception. Start perceiving these people with *mettā* rather than being overwhelmed with bitterness and resentment. Even if you

can't feel any real positive thing, *mettā* needn't be all that magnificent. It can be just being patient and not making any kind of problem about it. It doesn't mean you like people who have been rotten and unfair to you or those whom you can't like. Yet you can be kind to them, you can forgive – even if you don't like them.

'Liking' is something else. To like somebody, you have to feel attracted. You don't like your enemies. If somebody wants to stab you, that perception isn't one that makes you like them. If somebody wants to do me in, I'd rather keep a distance; that's only natural. But then we can rise above the sensory reaction towards *mettā*, which is a way of being patient, forgiving, doing what is appropriate to that situation. If somebody whom I don't like comes in and I start thinking, 'I don't like you, and I don't like this and I don't like that', then I'm creating something extra; I'm getting caught up in a mood of aversion. But if I can be fully aware of this impulse of dislike, not denying it, I can accept that feeling without adding anything to it. Then I can do what is appropriate, what is kind or generous in this circumstance. That's from the cool mind, from the mind that is open, receptive, not caught up in selfish view. *Sakkāya-ditṭhi* will say: 'You did this and you did that and you shouldn't have and you should have. And you don't really like me, you never understood me ...'. When *sakkāya-ditṭhi* rants away like this, don't trust it. *Sakkāya-ditṭhi* is totally untrustworthy.

It is important, in our lives, to straighten out any wrongs we've done. When I became a samanera in Thailand, a Thai monk told me, 'Before you take on the samanera training, you should try to straighten everything out. Anybody you've done any harm to or any wrong to, you should write to them or see them and ask forgiveness.' I thought, well, having had a very unhappy marriage in which I did a lot of unkind things, I'd better write to my former wife – so I did. I used to blame her a lot for everything, but I realized then that it wasn't a matter of blaming her because that would just end up in arguments. So I wrote this letter, apologized for any wrongs that I did and wished her well. I

wasn't expecting any reply or for her to respond in any positive way – which she didn't, not for ten years, anyway. Ten years later I got a letter from her! She apologized to me – a very lovely letter.

In this way, even if we are one per cent at fault and the other person is ninety-nine per cent definitely at fault, then we apologize. We take the attitude that we are totally at fault, and we apologize for that and say, 'Please forgive me for being so stupid, selfish and foolish.' Because if you say, 'I apologize for my one per cent at fault. And you were ninety-nine per cent, but I want you to forgive me for that niggling, not-very-important one per cent', that would make them even angrier! It's not a matter of weighing how much one is at fault; it's the way it's done, the sincerity, the *mettā* behind it. It's a thing of the heart, not of the head.

This usually helps to change the situation, and people will suddenly say, 'Oh yes, well, I wasn't so good myself. I did some pretty horrible things; I want you to forgive me.' It gives them the opportunity to rise to the occasion. You're giving them that opportunity; whether they take it or not is up to them, but at least you're not putting them in a corner by making any demands. You're just asking for forgiveness, apologizing. And that's a relief for the heart, because if you don't release its tensions the body just gets more and more tense and miserable. It's only through this going to the heart of the matter, this practice of *mettā*, of being able to forgive and ask for forgiveness in humility, that this whole formation is allowed to relax. Then we can develop our spiritual life and not be caught in these terrible, unresolved, worldly problems.

There's pride involved, isn't there? You can see pride arising and that's not easy to admit, especially if you feel that someone else was at fault: 'His fault mainly – of course I'm a little bit to blame too, but it was really him so why should I apologize to him?' That's pride, isn't it? That's self-view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. As long as we're coming from ignorance then even if we're not the one who does the greater wrong, we certainly

do a lot of foolish things that call for an apology. There's no black and white in any relationship.

I was talking to my mother a couple of years ago. She's in her eighties and a very calm and peaceful woman now, although she hasn't always been this way. She told me that about ten years ago, when she was in her seventies, she decided that she would try to straighten out everything in her life. Anything she was feeling guilty about, anything she felt she'd done wrong no matter how long ago, she wrote to the person concerned and asked for forgiveness. I remember when I was a child, I was aware of a lot of tension between my mother and the woman in the next house. Something had happened, one of those neighbourhood problems, and I'd forgotten all about it until my mother told me that she had written to this woman and asked forgiveness for her stupid behaviour. The woman wrote back and said she'd forgotten all about it, but was so glad to hear from my mother and would certainly forgive anything! I could see the effect this had on my mother: she has a very easy mind now. She'll probably die in a little while, but her mind is clear and there's no bitterness in it. Her heart is peaceful. This is the result of really looking at our life and seeing what we need to do, how to set things right. Then, rather than having anxiety, guilt and remorse in our heart, there's a fullness and peacefulness.

(From a talk given at Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery, 1990)



## 21 | Death and Deathlessness

We tend to think of enlightenment or nibbāna as something extreme because language tends to make it seem like that. ‘Nibbāna is the highest happiness’ makes it sound like an ultra-refined kind of happiness. And enlightenment tends to sound like some magnificent experience: ‘The earth shook and trembled, the universe quivered’ and so forth. It’s the kind of hyperbole that religious scriptures often use. However, language is a dualistic function of the mind. Contemplate the thinking process: one thought follows another – just one thought-moment at a time because we can’t think two thoughts at the same moment. Thinking is a time-bound condition, an artifice we have created. It’s dualistic: we have ‘right’, so we must have ‘wrong’; good and bad; day and night; heaven and hell. We talk about death and the Deathless – they are still words, aren’t they? This is language. But notice when we’re talking about Death-less, Un-conditioned or Un-born, it’s a negation, the opposite of what is conditioned, born, created.

Many of us are obsessed with our own thoughts, caught in the endless cycle of our own thinking which goes on and on and doesn’t ever seem to stop. In our thoughts we create ourselves, our personalities. We identify; we have concepts, definitions and evaluations – good/bad,

right/wrong – that we apply to ourselves. We describe ourselves, define ourselves and analyze ourselves endlessly because this is how we’re conditioned. Our culture is like this; it’s a culture based on ideals, on what should be and shouldn’t be. It doesn’t really provide us with the gate to the Deathless as a concept. We may talk about immortality but that’s about the Greek gods like Apollo and Zeus, human-like gods who are immortal. They don’t die, but that’s just another ideal we create.

When we talk about the Deathless in Buddhism, we are not talking about a concept – it’s not something we’re supposed to ‘believe’ in. The Deathless is something we need to recognize and realize. The reality of the Deathless, the reality of the Unconditioned, the reality of the Unborn – try to figure it out. Try to think about what ‘Unconditioned’ could be and you may end up with a zero. It’s the same with Theravada Buddhism. If you just take it on an intellectual level, it sounds nihilistic or isolationist: ‘Nibbāna is extinction’; ‘there’s no soul, no God, no self’; ‘enlightenment is extinction.’ Because of the limitations of language and the approach that the Buddha used, it’s almost the opposite of a theistic structure for religion. In theistic religions you start from the top: there is God, or ‘I believe in God.’ Metaphysical dogma is their doctrine and the rest flows from that. The Buddha’s teaching, on the other hand, is not based on metaphysical dogma or doctrine, but on an existential reality: ‘There is suffering.’

The first Noble Truth of suffering is not a metaphysical dogma. It’s not propounding or proposing that everything is suffering and impermanent and that the whole thing is terribly depressing. The Buddha isn’t making that kind of statement about suffering. He’s saying: ‘There is *dukkha*’, and he puts it in the context of a noble truth, to be understood, to be reflected on, to be recognized. You can see it for yourself. It is different from trying to get rid of suffering; instead, you are going towards an understanding of it. And to understand something, you have to receive it. To understand yourself, you have to accept yourself as you are. To really understand somebody else, you

have to accept them as they are. Understanding is like ‘standing under’ or receiving something even if it is unpleasant, painful or dirty.

The Buddha’s teaching on suffering takes you to the reality of the Deathless. It’s not a metaphysical kind of abstraction or a doctrine. A difficulty people have with Buddhism in the Western world is that they are used to seeing religion in terms of metaphysical doctrines and because Buddhism doesn’t do that, they don’t see it as a religion. But the purpose of a religion is to connect or direct you to a convention that leads to the Deathless or to the ultimate truth – ultimate reality. You can put it in terms of God if you want; they’re just words, concepts. God tends to be personified in Judaism and Christianity. It’s an anthropomorphic God, a patriarchal figure. In Buddha-Dhamma, God is not personified: you can’t make a Dhamma-rupa in a human form. You can make a Buddha-rupa but not a Dhamma-rupa. Usually a wheel, the *Dhammacakka*, is a symbol for the Dhamma. You aren’t anthropomorphizing anything; you’re recognizing or realizing the Deathless. It’s real, not just an abstract idea or concept.

The reality of the Deathless is through awareness. Very simple and direct – but it’s not easy for us because we complicate everything. We think and with our thoughts, we become clever, we become reasonable and we become so many things. We create endless problems: doubts, fears and conditions that we cling to and identify with. We may become neurotic and out of touch with natural energy. We can be totally disconnected from our own bodies sometimes; ‘up in our heads’ and resisting any recognition of the body until it screams and makes endless demands through pain and illness. Then we have to pay attention to it. We go to the doctor and say, ‘How can I get rid of this pain or this disease? I want to be in my dream world and I can’t sustain the dream if my body is so miserable.’

So, we’re including the body in awareness. The Deathless, the Dhamma, ultimate truth, isn’t against the body. We’re not trying to negate it but to be aware of it. Use the physical body sitting here

right now; use it for awareness. The body needs to be recognized and received for what it is. It's a part of the path: the way it is. And of course, the human body is a very irritating condition to live with. I've often considered the fact that from the day I was born I've been in a constant state of irritation because of this body. It's not a complaint about the body. It's just recognizing that having a physical human body in this sense realm that we're experiencing right now is the experience of being unrelentingly irritated. This is just the way it is. The body is a sensitive form, this is a sense realm, and sensitivity, sensuality always conveys this dualism of: pleasurable and painful, beautiful and ugly, pleasant and unpleasant, sweet and bitter, melodious and cacophonous. We don't have that much control over what contacts this body by way of the senses, through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body. It's not that we can live in a special situation where only the beautiful and the pleasant impinge on us. The body itself is total sensitivity. It's a sensitive form and this of course means that it's being continually irritated.

How do we relate to this sense world? Instead of trying to drug ourselves into a state in which we don't feel anything, in meditation we can open up to our feeling. We are not trying to stop it, get rid of it, control it or deny it; we're learning from it. We are trying to understand *vedanā*, feeling, the sensitivity of the body. This is the path: being a human being, having a human body, having the senses and so forth. If we see these in terms of what they are, in terms of Dhamma, then everything is inclining to enlightenment, to *nibbāna*, to the Deathless. Anything – any thought or feeling, no matter how refined or coarse, how good or bad – when you're willing to receive and recognize it and not judge or criticize it, but see it in terms of Dhamma, what arises ceases, then all conditions are impermanent, *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*.

The only way we can ever do this is through awareness. That's the gate; that's the opportunity we have within this human form in this sense realm. That's the only possibility to not create suffering and to be liberated from delusion. It can't be done through refining, trying

to create or control the situation to where only the ultimately refined possibilities are experienced. If we get too refined, then we suffer even more. Totally refined people suffer in their relationship with ordinary things. What if the Deathless is ordinary rather than some high state – so ordinary that you don't even notice it? This is a contemplation that's for reflection. We're conditioned to seek extremes and to seek happiness. We tend to pay attention to only the extremities of our: pain, thoughts, fears, anger, confusion, and doubt. We pay attention to what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think and so forth. These are always moving towards extremity and what's ordinary tends to go unnoticed or unrecognized. Happiness in this sense is an extremity – the opposite of suffering. Consider modern materialism, the American Dream: the right to happiness. We should be happy all the time; we have a constitutional right to it. But we suffer a lot, we complain a lot because it's our right. If we're not happy, then we blame it on the government.

Ordinariness is – as Ajahn Chah would describe it – just ordinary. In the Thai language when you talk about nature, like trees and mountains and so forth, you call it *dhamma-chat*; the word 'dhamma' is in it. The word for 'ordinary' is *dhamma-ta*. It means not extreme, nothing special. Ordinariness is quite difficult for us to accept because our personalities are based on extremes. Our desires, our identity, and obsession with wanting and not wanting take us to extremes. Wanting happiness, wanting success, wanting to be loved, wanting to win the prize, to be the winner. Of course we have to live in fear of being a failure. We dread being poverty-stricken, homeless, rejected, unloved or sick. These are the extremes that we create with thought. Being 'ordinary' isn't a quality that we can recognize. It's not like yellow or blue and it's not pretty or ugly. It's ordinary and we have no way of expressing neutrality except to consider it as a mediocre compromise – a tasteless porridge or dreariness.

The Deathless is ordinary and *sandiṭṭhiko dhamma*, apparent here and now. If you're going to the toilet, it's here and now. The Deathless

is not dependent on being in a Shrine Room. It's not a place and it's not dependent on conditions being a certain way. The Deathless is apparent here and now and *akāliko dhamma*, timeless. Time to us is real. Our culture is very much bound to time as our reality. We identify strongly with our age – the age of our bodies, the memories we have of the past and our plans for the future.

'*Sandiṭṭhiko, akāliko, ehīpassiko, opanayiko, paccattaṃ, vedītabbo, viññūhi*' are words we chant every morning. Translated into English, *ehīpassiko dhamma* doesn't have the same punch as it has in Pali: 'The encouraging of investigations' just doesn't do a good job. It's more like an invitation: *ehīpassiko* – 'Come and see! Right now! Wake Up!' *Ehīpassiko* is like, 'Now!' It's not: 'I want to encourage you to investigate, now.' *Opanayiko-dhamma* is translated as 'leading onwards' or 'inwards'. Once you recognize Dhamma, then it leads – you begin to rest in it, you surrender to it. You are that Dhamma rather than this mortal creature, this personality, and everything you think you are. You find your refuge or true nature in the Deathless, not in the physical body or in concepts, emotions, memories, or whatever else you might be experiencing. *Paccattaṃ vedītabbo viññūhi*: *paccattaṃ* is like, 'You have to know it for yourself.' It's not just believing it because somebody tells you about it or thinking you're a Buddhist so you have to believe in the Deathless Dhamma. To believe in the idea: that's no refuge. It's like tasting honey. If you've never tasted honey, then when people tell you what it's like, you don't really know. They say, 'It's sweet, like sugar.' Hmmm? Like sugar? You don't really know, but as soon as you taste it then you know for yourself. That's like *paccattaṃ*: you taste the Dhamma; and no matter what anybody tells you, once you've tasted honey, people can say, 'Honey tastes like broccoli', and you know they're wrong.

Deathlessness has always fascinated me. This has been my sole aim in these years of practice – intuitively I can sense that. Yet there are the habits of thinking, conceptualizing, and then the inevitable doubts that come from being attached to thinking, reading, listening to others, and

getting caught up in confusion, intimidation or whatever. So the aim early on in practice was to stop thinking. Now, how do you do that? When I was a new bhikkhu with Ajahn Chah, I'd think about how to stop thinking and end up getting nowhere because trying to wilfully stop thinking doesn't work. You can stop it, but it rebounds very quickly. You can't sustain it because you're just repressing thoughts.

The only way is awakening, paying attention, *sati-sampajañña*, and to me that means listening. I thought I'd listen to myself thinking and use it as a skilful means. I had to think and listen with the intention of listening deliberately: 'I am Sumedho Bhikkhu, and I'm listening to myself thinking that.' Whereas if I was just trying to stop it: 'There is no Sumedho Bhikkhu, everything is *anattā*, and how can I stop thinking? By trying to repress it?' I would get nowhere because I would be clinging to the idea of not thinking and not-self. It doesn't work because you're just clinging to a negation. If you're going to cling, it's better to cling to a positive thing like 'All is love' or 'God loves me' – at least that will probably give you some moments of happiness. Listening to thinking means you're paying attention to the thought process that you've created and by doing that you begin to get perspective. That which is aware and listening is not thought.

I noticed that as I paid attention to myself intentionally thinking, I could see when there were no thoughts. In England, the best way to get English people to stop thinking is to say, 'Are there any questions?' The whole room stops thinking at that moment but they don't notice it. It's not that we are thinking all the time. It's more like we're not conscious of when we're not using our consciousness to notice when there's no thought. In the gaps between thoughts, like 'I am Sumedho Bhikkhu', before I even think, 'I', there is a blank there – no thought. And then deliberately thinking 'I', and then there is an empty space. We don't notice that when we're caught up in thinking, 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho, I'm Ajahn Sumedho', and it goes on and on. I can talk about myself and give you my whole life history and not notice any gaps between the words.

Deliberately notice this space, the intuitive intelligence, which doesn't depend on thought. Being more conscious – *sati-sampajañña* – allows a connected awareness in consciousness. It's not just fragmentary flashes of this or that. You have a sustained attentiveness with consciousness to recognize the presence and absence of thought, or a concept or a memory. This is a way of exploring and investigating your conscious experience in your mind, the mental habits that you have – the good ones, bad ones, whatever. The point is not to have just a good experience, it's also putting into perspective what you call your dark side because conditions don't last forever – and that means the good ones, the bad ones and the neutral ones. This is what the gate to the Deathless is: *sati-sampajañña*, intuitive awareness.

I like the word intuition because it implies that an intuitive moment isn't a thought moment. It's more like a receptive moment to this moment now – the way it is. Intuition receives this moment without judging it or dividing it in any way. We are intuitive but intuition is mostly ignored in Western society. We usually regard intuition as something not trustworthy and prefer things that are rational, common sense and reasonable. But if we were just rational creatures, we would be like reptiles and wouldn't feel anything. Rationality is a valuable function but it's an unfeeling one. You may have noticed that people who depend on their rational mind oftentimes don't actually feel life. They tend to live in the realm of ideals and concepts. Concepts and ideals have no feeling – they have no *vedanā*. But in our conscious experience we're in a feeling realm, the sensitive realm: *vedanā* is very powerful in our lives; we feel things. When we live in a world of ideals and ideas, rational thought admittedly has great value but as a refuge it tends to cut us off. If we lose our feeling, if we don't open to feeling, to sensitivity, then we can be monsters; we can be cold-hearted scientists that can abuse anything for the sake of scientific advancement and discovery. In Buddhist meditation, so much of the practice is being aware of feelings of pleasure/pain, heat/cold, etc., of

how things impinge on our consciousness and how we create suffering around that impingement.

In reflecting in this way, we begin to see that we create suffering. Being human, being born in a human form in the sense realm, is about birth, death and sensitivity. Attachment to any of it is going to mean suffering because you can't only have pleasurable sensations. Sensitivity always means both pleasure and pain. The peak moments are not sustainable in life. Peak moments: they reach their peak just like your inhalations. And you can't just inhale, can you? You inhale, it reaches a peak where you can't do it anymore, and then it conditions the exhalation. This is the pattern of conditioned phenomena. It all works on that same principle of arising and ceasing. But what is sustainable is awareness. If there is awareness and reflection on arising and ceasing then there is no arising and ceasing. Awareness, once you recognize and cultivate it, is self-sustaining. You don't create it; it's not dependent on conditions supporting awareness. In your meditation, rather than seeking extremes of blissful states or getting high on tranquillity, you can be open to the conditions you are experiencing. Open to the pain, to the doubt, to the frustration or open to the ordinariness – ordinariness isn't normally recognized for what it is. Whatever you're feeling, see it as an opportunity for awareness rather than as something to drive away.

As a way of being open to these feelings, I developed a practice of welcoming difficulties and discomfort. I used to be very much a controlling person, putting so much effort into trying to get rid of the things I didn't like: mental conditions, certain thoughts, memories and emotions. I spent most of my life ignoring, trying to get rid of, or just reacting to these feelings. So I developed 'welcoming' for when these negative, unwanted states would start impinging on consciousness. It works if you really mean it. But if you're 'welcoming' unpleasant conditions in order to get rid of them, it doesn't work. This is where you have to be quite sincere in welcoming and make sure you're not

just trying to fool yourself. The practice of ‘welcoming’ allowed me to look at something I’d spent most of my life avoiding or rejecting: mental or emotional habits. You can become so used to denying or resisting them, you don’t even know you’re doing it until you start paying attention and observing the way it is.

Many times, people consider Buddhists as not facing the real world. We monks are accused of this all the time: ‘You’re not living in the real world!’ You look at most peoples’ lives, the real world they’re referring to, and what is it? Television, Internet, playing golf: this is the real world? Monastics are facing reality; if it’s a practising of Dhamma and reality is the Deathless reality, it’s real. It’s not an abstract philosophy. That reality is to be recognized, to be cultivated. And it’s not that you cultivate reality, you cultivate the awareness of reality. Remember that the power of our habits tend to pull us back into *samsāra*, the habitual patterns. Meditation practice, religious ceremonies, icons and symbolic objects can all be supportive of awareness because they remind us of what we are doing. In monasteries, Buddha-rupas are all over the place because every time you see a Buddha-rupa, it awakens attention. You see the Buddha-rupa in this way and it will always be a helpful object; it’s there to remind you about the awareness of reality. It’s so easy to forget and get carried away with the problems of the world. We can create problems around everything. You don’t avoid problems by becoming a monk or a nun. Some monks seem to be good at creating problems around the most trivial things. You should go to a sangha meeting in Thailand: sometimes things can get quite heated, with some monk expressing strong feelings about whether proper monks keeping the Vinaya can use perfumed soap. Or whether they shouldn’t ...

But then you can look at the Buddha with an awareness of this – the very awareness of one’s own view. You might have a preference and, if you’re a purist kind of monk, say: ‘No Perfumes Are Allowed in This Monastery! We’ll have to get only Ivory soap or Lifebuoy! No Lux Soap allowed!’ Then others say, ‘It doesn’t really matter: soap is soap.’

When you start listening to your own opinions, you realize you're not going to create problems around soap – at least I'm not. We're so easily inclined towards preferences. And we need to see how we all have certain inclinations and tendencies on a conditioned level. Once seen, we strive so that these are no longer grasped and made into issues and causes for bad feelings, accusation and division among the Sangha. The aim of monastic discipline is awareness, not ultimate refinement of discipline or an ascetic practice. It's for awareness, for awakened attention to the present.

(From a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 25 June 2005)



When I was a teenager in the United States, to say that someone didn't have a personality was considered the biggest put-down. If you said, 'Oh, she doesn't have any personality', it was a real insult. Personality is terribly important if you're an American, to be a charming, intelligent and attractive person. A lot of social conditioning goes into being that: trying to become 'personality-plus.' But now if I heard someone saying 'Ajahn Sumedho has no personality', I'd be flattered, honoured.

When they hear of the Buddhist teaching on letting go, people might think, 'If I let go of my personality what will be left? Will I just be a zombie? If I don't have any personality, how am I going to relate to anybody? I'll just be a blank, a totally empty form that sits there.' It's very frightening to think of no longer being a personality of some sort. Even a negative identity would be better than that, to be able to say, 'I'm a neurotic man because I suffered abusive conditions in the past; because of misunderstandings and unfairness I have a lot of emotional and psychological problems in the present.' That would make someone interesting in a way. Even with a negative identity, I could still take an

interest in myself as a personality. So, it is difficult to think of letting go of your personality. If suddenly all those views and opinions that make me into an interesting person were to disappear and I become nobody, it could be rather frightening.

However, the Buddha's teaching on *anattā* presents the reality of non-self in very simple ways. It's not a practice where your personality totally disappears, where you no longer have any emotional feelings whatsoever. *Anattā* is a practice for ordinary, everyday life; you notice when personality arises and when it ceases. You can see that personality is a changeable thing. Are you the same person all the time? You might assume that you are. But in observing the actual nature of personality, you'll notice that it changes according to who you're with, the health of the body and the state of mind. When you're at home with your parents, when you're in a sangha meeting, when you're chairman of a committee, when you're just a junior member of the sangha: what happens? Personality of course adapts itself to those roles and those conditions.

So then what is awareness of personality? I ask because my personality can't know my personality. To know the personality, I have to abide in awareness, in a state of openness and reflectiveness. It is not a vacuous, zombie-like mental state. It's openness, intelligent and alive, with recognition, discernment and attention in the present.

I used to make it a practice to play with personality rather than merely trying to let go of it as the cause célèbre of practice. To think, 'I've got to get rid of my personality and not attach to my emotions', is one of the ways we grasp the teachings of the Lord Buddha. Instead, I would become a personality quite intentionally, so I could listen to and observe this sense of me and mine. I would practise bringing up the thoughts, 'Me, what about me? Aren't you interested in what I think and how I feel? These are my things; this is my robe, my bowl, my space, my view, my feelings and my rights. I am Ajahn Sumedho. I'm a disciple of Luang Por Chah', and on and on like that. I would listen, not to knock

it down or criticize it but to recognize the power of words. And how I could create my self and, more and more, find refuge in awareness rather than in the conditions of my personality – in the fears, self-disparagement, megalomania or whatever else that happened to be operating in consciousness.

In communal life, your personality is constantly being challenged in some way. The structures that we use, being monks and nuns as well as the hierarchical positions – being *ajahns*, *majjhima* monks, *navakas*, *samaneras*, *anagārikas*, *sīladharā* – are positions we can take very personally. If we're not mindful and developing wisdom, then life in the community becomes one of developing an ego around being a monk or a nun.

When the Buddha pointed to *sati-sampajañña*, he was bringing attention to the reflective capacity. For this I use the phrase 'intuitive awareness.' Although 'intuition' is a common enough word in English, I use it to refer to the ability to awaken and be aware, which is a state of reflection. It isn't thought; it's not filling my mind with ideas, views and opinions. It's an ability to receive this present moment, to receive both the physical and mental conditions as they impinge on me through the senses. It is the ability to embrace the moment, which means the acceptance of everything. Everything belongs here, whether you like it or not. Whether you want it or don't want it is not the issue. It is the way it is.

If I get caught in preferences, views and opinions about what I need for my practice, I'm not seeing it in intuitive awareness but instead I'm seeing it as an ideal: 'It has to be like this, I have to control the situation. I have to calm myself. I have to make sure that the things around me aren't challenging me in any way.' I become a control freak. Having an ideal of what I want, I try to make it an experience for myself. I feel that if those conditions aren't present, I can't possibly practise. I could start blaming: 'Too many people here, too much going on, too many meetings, too much work.' Then I go into my, 'I want to go to my cave.' I

have this troglodyte tendency, wanting to be a recluse in a cave. People are challenging when you're living in community because we affect each other all the time in one way or another. That's just the way it is; it's nobody's fault. It's the way communities are.

In the Buddhist tradition, the third refuge is in Sangha, which for us means this community. Sangha is the Pali word for 'community'. Then you might say, 'Well, that means only the Ariyan Sangha: the *sotāpannas*, *sakadāgāmīs*, *anāgāmīs* and arahants. So I need to find a community where I'm only living with *sotāpannas* at least, and if there are *sotāpannas*, hopefully a few arahants will be around too.' But then try to find a community where that exists ... With a grasping mind, even if you found it you wouldn't recognize it because even arahants can be irritating. So instead of trying to find the ideal community, I use the community that I'm in. And in this community, people affect me; my personality arises together with various emotional reactions. The refuge, however, is in the awareness of this, in trusting my ability to be aware. When we are committed to awareness, then whatever happens, it belongs. When we are confident in awareness, there's nothing that can be an obstruction except ignorance and forgetfulness.

The style of practice that we use here always points us to the present. It is about learning, recognizing, exploring and investigating. What is the self? What is personality? Don't be afraid of being a personality, but rather, be conscious of it. Personality arises and ceases in consciousness. It changes according to conditions. But awareness is a constant thing, although we might forget it and become lost in the momentum of emotions and habits. So it's helpful to have ways of reminding ourselves, like the mantra 'Buddho' that we use. 'Buddho' means 'awake', 'wake up', 'pay attention', 'listen'. When I listen, I listen to myself and I listen to the sounds that impinge on my ears: the sounds within and the sounds without. This attentive listening is very supportive to intuitive awareness. So I listen to the rain. I listen to the silence. When I listen to the silence, I listen to the sound of silence.

If you consciously notice this awareness and appreciate it, you move more towards being nobody, towards not knowing anything at all rather than being someone who knows everything about everything. To be nobody knowing nothing is scary, isn't it? But this attitude helps to direct us because there is a strong desire in us to become, to attain and achieve. Even with the best of intentions, if that kind of desire is not recognized, it will always control you whether it is the desire to become something, the desire to control things, or the desire to get rid of bad thoughts or irritations around you. So trust in this awareness, this openness, and question the personality.

Somebody sent me a lovely card the other day. It had a quote that says, 'There is no way to happiness: happiness is the way.' Simple as that. Happiness is the way, or mindfulness is. How do you become mindful? Maybe you still don't have a clue what mindfulness is, even though you've got it all figured out. So stop trying to figure it out. Trust in your awareness in the present even if you feel you're someone who can't do it. You think you're a heedless person with too many emotional problems or you think you have to get this level of *samādhi* before you can possibly attain anything. Listen to that. That's all self-view, *sakkāya-ditṭhi*. No matter how intimidated you are by your thinking, trust in the awareness of it and not in the judging of it. You don't need to get rid of it. Just recognize: thinking is like this; views, opinions, attachment to views and opinions are like this. Then you'll begin to see what attachment is – as a reality, as a habit that we've developed. And you'll see personality: when it arises and when it ceases, when there's attachment to it and when there's non-attachment.

Personality is not the problem. The problem is the attachment to it. You're always going to have a personality, even as an arahant; but an arahant has no identity with the personality and no attachment. So we have ways of speaking and doing things that might seem very personal or unique. That's not a problem. It's the ignorance and attachment that is the cause of suffering. *Sati-sampajañña*, intuitive awareness, is

not something that I can claim personally. If my personality started claiming it, then it would just be more self-view, *sakkāya-ditṭhi* again. If I started saying 'I'm a very wise person', then it would be self-view claiming to be wise. So when you understand that, how could you claim to be anything at all? Of course, on a conventional level I'm willing to play the game. When they say, 'Ajahn Sumedho', I say 'Yes?' There's nothing wrong with conventional reality either. The problem is in the attachment to it out of ignorance.

*Avijjā* is the Pali word for spiritual ignorance. It means not knowing the Four Noble Truths. In the investigation of the Four Noble Truths, *avijjā* ceases. The awakened state takes you out of ignorance immediately, if you'll trust it. As soon as you are aware, ignorance is gone. So when ignorance arises, you can be aware of it as something coming and going rather than taking it personally or assuming that you're always ignorant until you become enlightened. If you're always operating from the assumption that 'I'm ignorant and I've got to practise in order to get rid of ignorance' and you grasp that assumption, you're stuck with it until you see through the grasping of that view.

I encourage you to develop this simple immanent ability. It doesn't seem like anything and it's not an attainment. Maybe you conceive of it as an attainment and think you can't do it. But even if you can't do it, be aware of the view that you can't do it. Trust in whatever is going on. Because when I talk like this, people accuse me, 'Oh, Ajahn Sumedho's been practising a long time; he always had good *samādhi* and so he can talk like that.' They go on like that, thinking that I'm a highly attained person and that that therefore justifies their position. They compare themselves to their projection of me without seeing what they're doing. They don't know what they're doing and are lost in views about themselves and about others.

Trust in the immediacy, to give enough attention – not an aggressive wilfulness but a relaxed openness, a listening and a resting. More and more through practice you learn to recognize it rather than passing it

by or overlooking it all the time. Then you can focus on whatever you like, on the breath or being aware of what's going on in your body for instance. If this awareness is well established, you can decide what to focus on in any situation, being aware of time and place. If I want to be aware of just bodily experience in the present and I do that in the wrong place it doesn't work. Right now giving this talk, I might want to go and do my sitting practice but I know it's not the right time and place. When I get down from here and go back to my meditation mat, it might be a good thing to do: to be aware of the physical sensation, the tensions or the breath – without judging or criticizing but just noticing, 'It's like this', allowing things to be what they are.

Once you see through self-view, the development of the path is then very clear. Trust in this awareness, in non-attachment; attachment is like this, non-attachment is like this. When you attach to things, do it consciously and really attach, so that you get the feeling of what attachment, *upādāna*, really is. If you just grasp the view that you shouldn't be attached to anything, you get attached to the view not to attach. So do it knowingly, be really attached to being this or to having a view. But observe the attachment and be aware of the power of attachment: the *upādāna* of ambition, wanting to get something, or wanting to get rid of something. And then, once you really see attachment, you can inform yourself to let go of it. Let go. Let it be. You are more accepting of things and they fall away. You can't keep anything; things are always changing. Even if you delude yourself that you can keep something by holding on to it, you'll eventually see that that's impossible.

Finally, in practice we're left with the existential reality of our humanity. We've still got these primordial drives but now we know better than to make them personal. With *sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi*, we're always judging our sexual desires, aversion and fear and making them very personal. But now we can look at them for what they are. They're energies; they're a part of being human, of having a human body

and being in a sensitive and vulnerable space. We begin to see and understand the nature of lust, greed, hatred and delusion because we have taken the *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* out of it. We see that these energies arise and cease according to conditions. However if you still haven't seen through *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, then your whole life you'll be celibate and feel guilty about sexual desire, anger and hatred. You'll become neurotic through identifying with those energies and forces that are in fact part of human reality and are not personal.

We all have these primordial drives as human beings. They are common to all of us. They are not a personal identity. Our refuge is in awareness rather than in judging these energies that we're experiencing. Of course our religious form is celibate so that when sexual energies arise, we're aware of them and don't act on them. They arise and cease just like everything else. Anger and hatred arise and cease. When the conditions for anger arise, it's like this – likewise fear, the primal emotion of the animal realm. But the awareness of lust and greed, the awareness of hatred and fear – that is our refuge. Our refuge is in the awareness.

(From a talk given in July 2003; published in *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No. 67, January 2004)

## 23 | Devotion and Gnosis

The words 'spiritual, holy, pure, good' and 'true' are important in any language because they remind us of the aspiration of our human heart. We aspire to be good and to be pure. And yet we can easily forget the whole purpose and opportunity of being human ... to realize the true, the beautiful and the good. Sometimes we can become cynical and think that these are naive daydreams of people who don't know anything.

The purpose and importance of human life can get lost in the Western world – a world of middle-class values and affluence. We can get what we want these days, but even when we do get everything or much of what we want, there's still this sense of the meaningless or purposelessness of our lives. Depression is a common experience in affluent countries. Why is this? If we get what we want, surely we should be happy! This is where our ability to reflect on the way things are makes it possible to open our hearts to spiritual enquiry.

You can see religious paths as being of two kinds. There's the devotional path and the wisdom or gnostic path. In Hinduism, Bhakti is the devotional path and *nāṇa* or Raja Yoga is the path of knowledge, profound insight or wisdom. Theravada Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia and Laos emphasizes the gnostic path, and

yet if you went to a country like Thailand you would find most of the people devotional. Modern Christianity has become very devotional and wisdom is not highly developed in modern Christian institutions. Yet ultimately, devotion and knowledge meet. It's not that one cancels out the other, and yet – like everything – if we choose one and reject the other, then something is lost. We can't just be wise without some level of devotion and to be truly devoted means that inevitably we will become wise.

Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism are generally regarded as orthodox traditions, meaning that they come from the revelations of prophets or sages. They have given powerful direction to human beings in realizing and fulfilling their aspirations towards the immortal Truth, the Divine, the Absolute, or whatever one chooses to call the ineffable, ultimate reality. The definition of religion is 'that which binds an individual being to the Divine', thereby engaging the whole life of that being. To be religious means that you engage your whole being with that one aim of ultimate realization; it's not just an apathetic, dilly-dallying with religious symbols or ceremonies. However, so much of what we call religion is a half-hearted adherence to culture or tradition. When you ask English people about the Church of England these days, they will usually say it doesn't make any difference whether you believe it or not; it's more a matter of having a cultural identity to hold on to. But the real aim of religion is to transcend cultural identity of any sort.

Even though, as a religious seeker, the individual human being aims and aspires towards ultimate reality, that ultimate reality is not personal, not individual; it doesn't belong to any religion. It's not something that one religion has and another hasn't. There is so much misunderstanding amongst religions because of the tendency to think, 'Our way is the only way.'

This is human blindness. We must have enough confidence in the religious form we're using to engage our whole being, to give

up everything for that ultimate truth. Then we can devote our lives to realization and, once we've set our aim, whatever happens on the worldly plane of conditions is part of the Path. The good fortune, the misfortune, the successes and the failures in this conditioned plane, we use because we are no longer identifying with the conditioned realm or demanding that the conditioned realm be anything other than what it is: part of our experience of life and not an end in itself. And we learn from this experience. We no longer try to exert control when things move and change. We don't try to hold on to what we want and get rid of what we don't want. We are trusting and confident because our goal is no longer a worldly conditioned goal. It's an absolute ultimate goal.

Any gnostic religious form is a reflective, contemplative practice. In Pali we use the word '*ñāṇa*' (profound knowledge). Devotional practice aims at total commitment and engagement towards ultimate reality, and gnosis, or *ñāṇa*, is the ability of the human heart and mind to contemplate existence and the way things are. When we use gnosis, we are not starting with any *a priori* assumptions. We're not taking a position that 'There is (something)' or 'There isn't'; we are watching and witnessing what we're experiencing at this very moment. We're contemplating, thinking in a reflective way about the meaning of life. 'What is its purpose? Why was I born? What happens when we die?'

These are reflective questions. We can't answer them in the usual way – like asking, 'Why was I born?' and somebody might say, 'You were born to love the Lord.' When you're a child, that's all right. When you grow up you start questioning it. We develop a way of dismissing such reflective questions about existence and ultimate reality: 'Don't bother with that, you have to learn how to pass your examinations and become number one. You have to become a success.' We hold up all these worldly goals and ultimate reality and enlightenment are not anything worth bothering about.

Let's try to create the perfect society – a harmony between all human beings, a United Nations built on ideas of justice, mercy, ecology

and conservation, sharing and goodness – all aimed at life on planet Earth. Yet even if we could take our earthbound ideals to complete fulfilment, it would still not be enough because of a deep discontent arising from the basic misunderstanding when the ultimate truth is not recognized or realized. Modern material values may be attractive to masses of people yet underlying all that, there is still the recognition of that aspiration of the human heart.

The Ultimately True and Beautiful: these are words that point to that in each of us that aspires to something beyond the changing conditions of the sensory world. Changing doesn't mean it gets better and better. Sometimes it gets better, then it gets worse and then it can get better again. Things don't just get better and better, and they don't just stay the same either. They may change in ways that we cannot control or in ways that we don't like. It's the same with the human body. The body doesn't change in the way we want it to; it changes into the way we don't want it to – until we have perspective on the ultimate reality. Then the changing-ness of the sensory realm can be perfect for us. We begin to open up to life in its totality, its pain and its beauty. We are quite willing to endure the pain and the misfortunes, the blame and the meanness of human existence when we realize it as change rather than some personal threat or terrible disillusionment with God: 'God shouldn't have created the world like this.' He should have created it perfect according to the way 'I' think, where things don't change but remain in a permanent or static state of beauty and pleasure. But sensual pleasure – one moment after the next to eternity – sounds horrible doesn't it ... because pleasure is unsatisfying. Imagine just being praised for eternity ... or being able to live for five hundred years – that's eternal enough – with a crowd of obsequious sycophants saying, 'You're wonderful ...' 'I love you ...' 'You're the best.' Five hundred years of that!

With gnosis or 'insight knowledge', we remember that the human experience is the experience of knowing. Consciousness is a way of

knowing things; when we are conscious of something, we know it. Just like seeing an object with the eye. I know what it is. It's conscious at the point where the eye contacts the object; that's a kind of knowledge, one of many levels of knowledge. But gnosis takes the ability to know to an Ultimate position beyond interpretation. From the basic assumption that 'I am this body' and 'I am a person', whatever I know about my experience is interpreted from a very personal position: how it affects me, whether it pleases or doesn't please me. My ability to see and to know individual people on a personal level is tinged with infatuation or aversion, prejudice, opinion. All these come in and distort my knowing. Even though the eye sees, if there's 'me' and 'mine' and the assumption of 'me' and 'mine' accompanying that visual consciousness, then I interpret everything in a very personal way. The various biases or prejudices influence that knowledge.

Gnosis in Buddhism is realized only through mindfulness. We can't study it in a book; it's not conceptual. We can't read a gnostic text and suddenly become enlightened. The Buddhist teachings, as gnostic teachings, are to encourage a total engagement with the Dhamma or the ultimate reality through reflecting on the way things are. We can reflect on the way things are within the limits and conditions of having a human body. What are the limitations of being human? The Buddha encouraged us to reflect upon old age, sickness and death, because this is what happens to every human being. Through a lifetime, from birth to death, there is always a certain amount of pain and sickness along with the inevitable death of this body. From the personal position, we try to hold onto youth because society adores the youthful who can do things and get things done. But if we reflect on the way things are, we see age as restraining. And anything that restrains and limits is helpful as a reflection. We can use age as Dhamma rather than create suffering around it as a personal failure or problem.

On the emotional plane, what can I expect in this life as an individual being? Things are going to be good and bad; there's going to be praise

and I will be criticized. I will experience happiness, suffering and the loss of loved ones. So I can reflect with wisdom using the limitations of human experience, the limitation of masculinity or femininity, and the limitations of age. In monastic life, we use voluntary limitation as a form for restraint and relinquishment. We use it to reflect, to develop more and more of this profound insight into the ultimate truth, the ultimate reality, the *saccadhamma*. The *saccadhamma* is that which is ultimately true and real, ultimate reality. The sense of devotion is fuel to keep us going with loyalty and commitment and love. These come from the heart; devotion is not just intellectual idealism. We feel it in our hearts. We long for and aspire towards realization and offer our lives to realize and be free from all delusions. We are willing to endure the inevitable changing process of this sensory realm in order to learn from it, from whatever happens, because whatever happens is the Path for a gnostic and a devotee of the Dhamma.

(From a Sunday talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,  
20 August 1989)

## 24 | Space and Consciousness

If we contemplate space, we see it's not tactile, it's not remote, it's here and now– but we just don't notice it. We give so much attention to the forms and the things in space: we like this, we don't like that; we compare one thing with another. The thinking mind is endlessly moving with the conditions. To recognize space, we need to notice it, pay attention to it. We need to withdraw our focus and absorb into the conditions in the space. To see space, I don't need to ask everyone to leave this room and only then can I really contemplate space. Instead, I just withdraw my attention and I'm no longer focused on this and that. I'm no longer absorbing myself and moving from one thing to the next. I'm noticing, in this wide spectrum of vision, the reality of space as experience. It contains everything: the red and the green, the purple and the blue – there is the male/female, good/bad, right/wrong, beautiful/ugly – space doesn't have any preferences. Reflecting on the reality of space in this way gives us a perspective on the forms and the conditions in the space.

Consciousness, *viññāṇa*, also has no boundary. We put boundaries into consciousness through attachments to our sensory feelings: pleasure, pain. Our emotional habits that we've acquired since birth create a

boundary, but of course it all arises and ceases. It has no permanence. It comes and goes: happiness, sadness, anger, greed, fear, jealousy, love or hate. When we're attached to thinking, to thoughts, to perceptions, to sense objects, to our feelings, then we're always in this state where there's something imperfect, unsatisfactory, or inadequate about everything. Even with all the wealth in the world and all the power that a single human being might be able to acquire, the problem is still there: ignorance, attachment. There's the feeling of inadequacy, of *dukkha*, of lack, of something incomplete or unfinished. And we take that personally. We say, 'I feel incomplete or unfulfilled or unsatisfied.' If we attach to unsatisfactoriness, how can we possibly be satisfied? The missing factor is the awareness that suffering is caused through ignorance or not understanding the Dhamma. The cause is the attachment, the way we cling to conditions out of ignorance. The insight is to let go; this letting go means to abandon or to release your grasp. This doesn't mean you annihilate or throw anything away. It's not annihilation. It's letting things be what they are. You're letting it go, not holding on.

The practice is to notice attachment. Being fully conscious of attachment is the way to let go of it. We don't let go because we've got the idea that we should let go. That's just attaching to the idea of letting go. If we cling to ideas of renunciation, getting rid of everything, becoming a kind of homeless wanderer – this is grasping an ideal of letting go. Letting go is an insight, it's not an ideal. The only skilful way of letting go that I've found is through allowing everything that arises to be conscious. All thoughts, memories and feelings that arise and impinge on us – allow them to be conscious and then they go. We could say that consciousness is a vehicle for these kammic conditions to manifest. They arise and they cease and we don't have to force them out, resist them or try to get rid of them – just allow this natural process to take place. In that space, the relationship to conditions is no longer influenced by judgement. It's not about getting rid of or trying to destroy or annihilate anything; it's about understanding the causes of suffering. This is the

insight: to let go of the causes. Desire can be understood as a natural energy that we experience. We're living in a desire realm. The sense realm and the bodies we have are desire forms, they're for procreating the species. We see what is beautiful and there is the desire to have it or else we see something we don't like and there's the desire to get rid of it. But desire, *taṇhā*, is not the problem. The problem is the ignorance.

We can bring awareness in by reflecting on desire – recognizing, acknowledging desire. Not judging it, because once we judge our desire, we've got to get rid of it. The idea that 'I have to get rid of my desire' is an attachment to that desire: 'Desire is something that I've got to get rid of in order to become enlightened.' This is a delusion; it arises out of ignorance. Awakening is about *recognizing* desire. Desire is energy: it moves, it arises and it ceases. The awareness of desire allows it to be seen and consciously recognized.

The three kinds of desire are: *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, and *vibhava-taṇhā*. *Kāma-taṇhā* is sensual desire, which we experience through the senses. It arises through sensing the attractiveness of something beautiful or pleasurable. *Bhava-taṇhā* is the desire for becoming, the desire to achieve and obtain. That's often what we're doing when we think we're meditating – we're trying to become something. *Vibhava-taṇhā* is the desire to get rid of things, to annihilate and destroy – we can be sitting in meditation trying to get rid of sad thoughts and negative emotions. You can observe all these kinds of desire. When you observe, you're not annihilating or getting rid of anything; you're informing your conscious experience here and now with wisdom in order to be free from ignorance, *avijjā*.

So in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths there's the letting go of desire. You're not trying to destroy it – to let go of something you have to know what it is. Even if you have the idea that you *should* let go, you're always going to fail, to feel despair and hate yourself even more. Instead, we're awakening, observing and knowing *taṇhā*. You can feel the desire: wishing for, wanting, wanting to get rid of. And

what is it that knows this – that can know desire? It's the awareness, the awakened state – and that takes us out of the desire realm. Then we get to see the desire – even the desire for enlightenment – not as something to annihilate but something to let go of. You no longer see yourself as someone who is ignorant wanting to become somebody who is enlightened. Through awareness, you're actually returning to or realizing a natural state of being.

Ajahn Chah referred to this as 'our real home.' This is where we really belong: a natural state of being that isn't conditioned – a state that's realized through awakened attention/awareness. I've found that when you're aware of this moment in a state of awakened attention, you can begin to notice what I call 'the sound of silence', a background vibration – a high-pitched, kind of electric vibration. At first it seems like tinnitus, a condition of the ear. I've heard meditators fighting against it but it's not something to get rid of – it's not really a sound, it just seems that way. It's this broad spectrum of listening, though not to anything in particular. It's in the background and, once you recognize it, of course it's a vibratory stream, a flow and it's always present. It's always here and now but we don't notice it. Even if we do notice, we tend to dismiss it because we don't know what it is. It's always very strong when you're in places where there is falling water, the sound of rain, or the sound of waves at the ocean. If you notice and listen to the sound of waves, rain or a waterfall, you'll find that the *nāda* sound, the sound of silence, is a continuous natural sound behind all the sounds the water is making.

It's a point you can't get beyond. You can distract yourself from it by absorbing into something like focusing on an object, then that sound of silence is no longer remembered. But if you recognize it, then it's the centrepiece, the eye of the storm. It's a still point that includes, rather than excludes, everything. It isn't a sound that destroys, it gives perspective. You hear it in the background when you're listening to music. It's like space/consciousness/infinity; there's no boundary.

And when you know how to develop that, it can be very useful. Notice also, when you are in that space or in that sound of silence, that you stop thinking. The mind is empty, contemplating space; your mind is spacious. The sound of silence is silence, even though it seems like a sound – the sound of silence. You don't create it, it's not a creation; it's not imagined, it's self-sustaining. So it's not up to you to try to make it happen. Just recognize it by listening and by being fully open in a relaxed attention.

So from this place of silence and stillness we have perspective and we can begin to clarify what 'self' is. *Sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi* – personality-view, the ego, or the created self – is the first of the three fetters that block stream-entry. From the stillness, we begin to see how we have created this 'self.' This stillpoint is not-self; there's no person there. If we just rest in the stillness and in that feeling, there's no person. There's consciousness, that's all. There's not anybody there. To be somebody, my personality has to start thinking, 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho.' I just assume I'm Ajahn Sumedho and you assume I'm Ajahn Sumedho all the time, don't you? But when we're really aware, it changes from assuming we're the same person all the time – because we're not. In reality our personality changes and adjusts to conditions and will adapt to suit the situation we're in, the people we're with and the duties we're performing. We adjust; our personality adjusts itself.

*Sakkāya-dit̥ṭhi* can be seen through and then we no longer believe in our personality as ourself. There's pure awareness, pure subjectivity through this sound of silence. It's conscious, empty, *anattā* – not-self is like this. I'm encouraging you to inform yourself in this way, to really notice so that you're consciously recognizing *anattā* as reality and not just some kind of Buddhist idea that you're not quite sure about. This is *anattā*, this simple, stillpoint of awareness. It's sustaining and because it's self-sustaining, our attention to it is buried. We're not used to it, so we tend to ignore it or we tend to identify it with very special conditions – like here when everybody is quiet, calmed down a bit and settling

in. We're just using the retreat conditions to learn to recognize this. Then when we leave the retreat, we begin to notice the sound of silence everywhere: in the city, in the noise of traffic, in committee meetings, when we're with others, or when we're alone – because it's here and now. It's always present but we just don't attend to it. Instead we get caught in the responsibilities, the duties and the problems of the world.

Ajahn Chah used to say: 'This is where the world ends.' So notice that the end of the world is peaceful. Not being anybody, not-self, is peaceful; it's a relief, isn't it? To have to support yourself on the grounds of a personality is exhausting. You have to defend yourself and prove yourself, and be self-conscious, and frightened, and worried – to be endlessly self-concerned is real torture. Being a person is a lot of suffering and it goes on and on. But that non-person – *anattā* – is simple, pure and very natural. It's just not recognized, not noticed. And if you don't notice the sound of silence, don't worry; don't make it into a problem. You notice it through relaxed attention, opening, but when you start conceiving it you start looking for something. I know people on retreats who talk about the sound of silence and spend the whole retreat trying to find it. They can see it's something special, so they're looking for something unusual and then they'll come to me and say: 'Am I right? Is it that buzzing thing?' I think they're looking for some sublime, angelic chorus!

The sound of silence is like a conscious stream sustaining itself – it's not created. We can react to it as boring – just not interesting. You listen to music, it's stimulating; it can make you feel excited and exhilarated or sad and so emotional. We're not prepared for this silence. It's subtle and we tend to overlook it – just like space/consciousness. We're not aware of consciousness; we don't recognize it unless we put something like a form into it. We're conscious of the attachment to things but consciousness without attachment is this stream, the sound of silence. Then the rest of it falls into place: emptiness, *suññatā*, *anattā*, *nibbāna*, non-attachment, desirelessness.

The second fetter is *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*, attachment to cultural conditioning and conventions. It's our whole cultural programming, the assumptions added to what we acquired through social conditioning – assumptions we make about purity and heaven/hell, and even Buddhism; we can be attached and cling to these conventions. For example, my living in Thailand and adjusting to a completely different culture meant that the American conditioning became very apparent. Most of it isn't all that conscious. You acquire most of your conditioning when you're an innocent child.

Sceptical doubt, *vicikicchā*, is the third fetter. It's caused through thinking and conditioned by language – and languages are not created out of wisdom by enlightened masters! When you try to figure out Dhamma and liberation, you'll end up sceptical and doubtful. Notice that these first three fetters are human-made conditions – they are artificial, like the self. The cultural conditioning and language – these are human creations. We don't create consciousness but we do create these conditions and then experience consciousness through these creations. So we need to see through these first three fetters to realize the Path of stream-entry and have insight into the Path. With this way of reflecting, you begin to get a clear perspective on the Path – and what is not the Path. As you clear away the illusions you've created around yourself as a person – your cultural assumptions, conventional attitudes and the thinking process itself – you're getting outside of thinking, cultural conditioning and the ego or personality. And to do that is learning to reflect upon this and seeing these conditions as objects. Be in the awareness, be in the stillness itself, where the conditions arise and cease. Your personality will come and go. Your assumptions, cultural attachments, the thinking process itself – when all these things are inoperative, there's stillness, which is bliss.

(From a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 26 June 2005)



## 25 | The Fearless Mind

The realization of truth is an ineffable experience. Truth is to be realized. It isn't something you can define or point to as an object, or give as some kind of doctrinal teaching. So when the Buddha taught: 'There is suffering; there are the causes of suffering; there's the cessation of suffering and there's the way of non-suffering,' he presented four Truths about direct experience rather than metaphysical truths.

The Four Noble Truths are about *dukkha*, or suffering. There's nothing fantastic or special about suffering. It's the most common human experience; everybody, absolutely everybody suffers. So why did the Buddha take suffering as his essential teaching? This was something that fascinated me because I'm from a Christian background where the idea of love is the most inspiring thing that you can teach. You can uplift the mind by talking about love, forgiveness and compassion in the ultimate degree. But the Buddha didn't do that. He established the essential teaching on recognizing the basic problem that we all share: suffering caused as a result of ignorance.

We're now looking at the suffering we experience as a Noble Truth rather than as something that is 'wrong' or something that we want to get rid of. We suffer if we are sitting too long; standing, walking

or lying down too much or whatever. Irritating things are happening all the time. Pain in the knees, pain in the back, pain in the neck. And there is one common form of suffering that we all share: old age, sickness, death, separation from the loved, loss of the loved. We all share this wanting of things – a kind of longing for things that we don't have. We're not saying that it shouldn't be like this. We're investigating this, looking at what not wanting something is like, or wanting something we don't have is like; looking at it as experience. We're looking at the sense of loss, the feeling of grief and loss of the loved. The death of somebody you know or somebody close to you. This is common to every human being. In our lifetime we experience this as part of our kamma.

So in the first Noble Truth, suffering, we understand this; we stand-under it. We're not trying to avoid, or deny, or resist it. We accept and fully experience suffering in a willing way. With grief, for example, there's a lot of grief in the human experience even before anyone important in your life dies. If you notice, if you really look into your heart and get acquainted with yourself you can see that even in these slight separations from people we love, there's a kind of grief and a sense of loss. When my mother died, it was a Roman Catholic funeral and the priest said, 'Now she's up in heaven with the Lord.' That makes you feel good: she was very old and it was a good thing she died because life was getting very difficult. So it's nice to think she's up in heaven with the Lord. And probably if I'd asked him he'd say, 'And if you become a Christian again you'll probably meet her when you die.' So, we do have ways of making things soft and making ourselves feel good, and not having to bear the barrenness and the rawness of suffering. But what is life all about? What is the purpose? What is it really? We want to investigate – so suffering is to be investigated, to be examined, to be understood. And to understand something you have to accept it, even though the natural reaction is just to try to get rid of it. You can't understand anything if you don't accept it first.

If we're just resisting suffering, pain, loss, irritation, frustration and trying to look for happiness, for a utopia where everything's pleasant and there's nothing you don't like – if we're doing that, it's a child's dream, isn't it? The realm we live in has the beautiful birds, flowers, trees and mountains, as well as the pain, loss, frustration and irritation. So we have to prepare ourselves to understand suffering: to determine to accept this experience, whether it's physical or emotional. We embrace it: suffering is like this, grief is like this, and pain is like this, loss; irritation, frustration and exasperation feel like this. Wanting something, and not wanting something – it's like this. We're training ourselves to be present, to develop ways of paying attention to what's happening now, and we do it through reflection on the posture, the mindfulness of the breath, the sound of silence, the sensations of body, sweeping through the sensations. We examine these sensitive states.

Another aspect of this reflection on acceptance of conditionality is *mettā*, loving-kindness. *Mettā* is unconditioned love. You don't have more *mettā* for the nice things and not as much for the bad things. *Mettā* is evenly distributed to our beloved friends and our detested enemies. The action of *mettā* is one of patience and non-aversion. We accept the pain, disappointment, failure, blame, persecution, abuse and all the experiences we can have in a lifetime. We begin with: 'May I abide in well-being', starting with yourself. It's an attitude of acceptance and patience with the way it is; an acceptance of the anger, resentment, aversion, and pettiness. Speaking from my own experience, I like to think in terms of grand gestures and generosity; so pettiness, mean-heartedness, and spitefulness are emotions that I don't like. When they come in, there's a tremendous resistance and a feeling of guilt along with ideas such as: 'This is bad. I shouldn't be like this. I shouldn't have these kinds of thoughts.' *Mettā* is applied to that resistance. It's non-judgemental. It's a patient acceptance of the way it is, even if that means the mean and silly and stupid. We don't like it or approve of it

but we can accept it. We embrace it and that allows us to understand it in terms of the first Noble Truth.

Be willing to allow into consciousness those emotions you think you can't bear: the petty, mean-hearted nasty little thoughts or emotions you think you shouldn't have. To really understand emotions like this means to accept them. They are *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*; you can see them for what they are. They're stupid and silly, or they're intelligent, refined, they're grand or they're mean and nasty, whatever; but they're still all *anicca* and *anattā*. So you're reflecting on this without dismissing or denying the quality of it. And it's got nothing to do with this being 'good' or 'bad', or wise or stupid – because wise thoughts and stupid thoughts, nasty, mean-hearted emotions, and grand visions and altruism are all *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*.

What we can do is have *mettā* for whatever we're thinking or feeling. This is a skilful means to relate and respond to our experience in the present. Take jealousy, for example. In my early years as a monk in Thailand, I was trying to get rid of this jealousy because I was ashamed of it. 'I don't want to be a jealous person, I hate that emotion, I can't stand it, and don't want it.' So, whenever I started to feel this emotion, I'd have so much desire to get rid of it – but I didn't know what to do. Somebody said, '*Muditā*, sympathetic joy; practise *muditā* and you'll get rid of jealousy.' So I practised *muditā* – but I didn't get rid of jealousy. It was like I was just trying to whitewash over something; trying to pretend to have sympathy and joy for somebody I was jealous of – and it just didn't work. Then I began to see the problem was really with the aversion to jealousy. There's always this resistance to it; that was the suffering I was creating. Once I saw that, I stopped trying to get rid of it and hating myself for having it. And I began to just feel it – and then I found jealousy to not be such a problem. It's a natural human emotion that comes and goes so don't make it into a problem. Human experience is like this. We have some very basic drives and instinctual tendencies that come with birth and this human physical form.

As coarse and maybe as frightening as some of these impulses and energies might be, we're liberated from their power through understanding them. As long as we refuse to really accept them, then we just go on suppressing them. But it's because of not understanding ourselves, the forces, the drives, and the nature of the mind that we have this potential for violence, war and the most horrendous acts. When we understand these impulses, even if we experience them, they no longer have power to delude us. We see things for what they are; we understand the human condition. So when emotions, fears and desires start coming into consciousness, don't think of it as something going wrong. See it as a chance to investigate suffering, understand it, and liberate yourself from your habitual reactions to it.

The second Noble Truth is the truth of the causes of suffering. It's about desire which is very interesting to contemplate. Desire is an energy that we all have – we're living in a desire realm. We see beautiful things and we desire them. We see ugly things and we have the desire to get rid of them. We have desires and ambitions to become things that we're not. There is desire for power, desire for wealth, desire for fame, desire for happiness. We're always wanting something that we don't have or else wanting to get rid of what we have that we don't want. Desire is the cause of suffering, the second Noble Truth. So we have to let go of desire – remembering that it's the attachment to desire we have to let go of.

Grasping desire is the cause of suffering. You have to know what desire is as an experience in order to let go of it. Do you really know the energy we have that always wants something? Or the desire that wants to get rid of something, *vibhava-taṇhā*; that also creates suffering. Look at the celibate life of monastics – the situation of wanting to get rid of sexual desire or suppressing or being frightened of sexual desire because of our celibate commitment. Suppression is based on the desire to get rid of something. But letting go of it isn't done through suppressing desire, but through understanding, through knowing

desire as desire. The part of us that can recognize and know isn't desire. Desire is something you can observe. It's an object, not what you are – you're not desire. Desire can't see another desire, but you can. You can witness, understand and recognize desire: whether it's sensual desire, the desire for becoming or the desire for getting rid of.

So start observing this desire to get rid of, to prevent, to resist, to deny or to push away. If you're just trying to get rid of the desire to get rid of, that's hopeless, isn't it – you just run around in circles. So instead, see desire as something to get to know. Recognize it and know what it's like when desire becomes conscious. You know it when desire arises; when it's there, you're no longer deluded by it. Through recognizing, through examining the experience of desire, you have the insight into letting go. Not following, not grasping, but letting go of this attachment to desire.

There are three kinds of desire. *Kāma-taṇhā* is sensual desire: the seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting or touching of something beautiful and experiencing the desire to have it. Then there's *bhava-taṇhā*, the desire for becoming, such as, in monastic life, the desire to become teachers, to become seniors. Through becoming one of these we get a lot of attention and praise. The desire to become enlightened doesn't help if you're just lost in desire. It's another ambition based on the notion: 'I'm not good enough the way I am now, and I've got to practise in order to become somebody who's enlightened in the future.' That's how we're conditioned to think; you don't see that desire for what it is. If you've never detected or understood *bhava-taṇhā* even after years of meditation retreats, monastic life, renunciation and all the rest, you feel the whole thing is a disappointment, and think: 'I'll disrobe and become a hairdresser or a therapist.'

So, *bhava-taṇhā* is to be understood. What does it feel like? This is the question: what does it feel like, this sense of: 'I want to become something else.' The more you awaken to the way it is, the more you open yourself in the present. You're not becoming somebody who's

enlightened. You're actually being that way: using enlightenment as a means rather than trying to become someone who's supposed to be called enlightened. Even in scriptures you'll find expressions like 'became enlightened ...' but in terms of actual meditation experience, it's not like that. You don't 'become' that way.

The third desire is *vibhava-taṇhā*, the desire to get rid of. We want to get rid of anger, jealousy, fear, desire. We want to get rid of everything; the defilements. Get rid of the *kilesa*, get rid of the hindrances, get rid of the obstacles. We have these words: 'obstacles', 'defilements', 'hindrances', and we want to get rid of them because that's how the worldly mind thinks. It's a righteous kind of feeling too. It makes you feel you're doing the right thing by getting rid of these bad things. Instead, just notice it: 'I know what it's like to feel I want to get rid of something. I can't stand this. I want to get rid of this emotion, get rid of this thought, or get rid of this situation.' This investigation and understanding of desire as desire is a direct knowing; feeling the desire and knowing what it's like when the grasping of that desire is present.

The insight into the second Noble Truth is letting go of desire. It's like letting go of this small bell I'm holding. I'm not getting rid of this bell, I'm just letting go of it. I'm putting it down and it's still there. You might think letting go means getting rid of it – say I throw it out of the window. But what good is that? It's a nice bell and I like the sound of it. It is useful for certain situations so it can be kept, but not on the basis of desire and attachment. Letting go is based on wisdom, understanding, and insight into suffering and the grasping of desire. Once you realize that when you grasp fire, it hurts, you let go of the fire.

Then contemplate the spacious mind that is welcoming experiences rather than always trying to control experience. There are, of course, concentration practices which develop skilful means to concentrate the mind on positive objects. But that's not going to liberate you. That's merely going to give you some concentrated experiences and refined consciousness. *Samatha* meditation is like that.

But in terms of *vipassanā* – insight – we’re no longer controlling but rather we’re embracing the moment. So even the repressed emotions, the fears, the desire, and the whole gamut of emotional experience – from good to bad, refined to coarse – is seen and witnessed in terms of *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. And by doing this we also get over all these fears that we bring with us: the fear of anger, desires, emotional habits, and instinctual drives; as well as the fear of our bodies and of the world around us. If we’re just trying to control it all, then fear will pursue us. But through understanding the way things are, through investigating these Four Noble Truths, you develop a fearless mind because there’s wisdom now rather than ignorance. And you know how to deal with temptation, with evil forces, with anger, with sexual desires, and with all the rest of it. You know it, you understand it, and it can’t delude you any more so you don’t fear it.

Then there’s the realization of the third and fourth Noble Truths. The third Truth is the cessation or the realization of non-suffering in the present; realizing the Deathless. The fourth Noble Truth is the Eightfold Path – the way of non-suffering – which means the way of realizing the Deathless. Because our conscious experience of life includes the Deathless, we’re not just caught in the endless proliferations and change of the conditions and experiences that we have through the body and through the senses.

(From a talk given at a retreat, 15 September 1997)

## 26 | Embracing the Shadow

Tonight I've been asked to give a Jungian *desanā* – not that I know very much about Jung. But the Jungian reference to the shadow or the dark side is something I found very interesting because whereas in Buddhism there are lists of defilements, in Western civilization the emphasis is on the light and the dark and the repressed passions and energies that we all have. And with psychotherapy we've become aware that many human problems come from this repression of negative states that are called the 'dark side' or 'the shadow.'

I was brought up in a Christian family and my parents were very devout High Church Anglicans. So the attitudes I grew up around were very much Christian-based ideas of what is right and what is acceptable in terms of human behaviour and values. My parents were not arahants and did not see things in terms of Dhamma but they were basically very moral people who had a lot of respect for each other. That provided a stable environment for my sister and me to grow up in.

But my parents were turn-of-the-century type of people who never asked deep questions about what they felt or what their purpose in life was. They more or less believed what they were told and didn't have any doubts about God or Jesus Christ, or what the priests or the

Bible said. So, in that kind of social milieu, certain emotions like anger were not allowed to be expressed. My father was a businessman so he provided a fairly comfortable home for us but, as he wasn't at home much, his relationship with his children was pretty remote. Mother was a devout Christian and she also had her limitations. So I found as I grew up that if I were going to fit into this family as a member then various unacceptable emotions and feelings and habits had to be suppressed.

These would come out in various ways as I got older. I began to notice that I was good at repressing anger but then I'd blow up over some trivial matter. Somebody might just say something at the wrong time and all this repressed anger would explode – and when I explode it's rather frightening. I'm a big person and I've got a loud voice, and I can make a lot of noise and look pretty horrible. Although I didn't want to do it, I'd get pushed to a point and then blow up and upset everybody. Some people to this day have never forgiven me. I'm not violent or abusive but this incredible anger accumulated – and then it reached a point and exploded. This is the dark side: the unresolved negativities, the resentments and sexual desires that had been either repressed or denied.

Being good and honest, truthful and generous, moral and responsible – these are what one is supposed to be. But as a child I noticed some rather frightening experiences when I was aiming to be a good person. I wanted to be honest, I tried to tell the truth, and I never enjoyed cruelty – I basically had a good character yet, in spite of this, I remember having some really horrendous thoughts enter my mind. One of the most terrifying ones – I must have been about nine or ten years old at the time – was when I was on public transport in Seattle. The trolley car was filled with people and suddenly I had the most demonic thought and vision enter my mind. It was so horrible that I began to wonder if I was possessed by something really evil; my logic being that a good boy would never have such a terrible thought in his mind. I was worried because I thought there

was something dark and black inside me and this created a kind of fear that it might happen again.

Being High Church Anglican we would have to go to confession once a month, and every night before I went to sleep I'd check through a list of sins and if I had done something wrong, like telling a lie, then I would mark it down. I was very diligent at listing all my sins – even marking down ones I wasn't even sure were sins. I just wanted to be certain that I'd covered everything. Then my mother would take me to the priest and I'd get purified and absolved and take Holy Communion, and try to do all the right things, be a good boy, and obey my mum. My father was always so busy and tired I just avoided him, not wanting to disturb and annoy him. I was a good student in school and tried not to cause any problems. I think I was probably a little too good, bordering on goody-goodness. But then, as puberty approached, other forces started influencing consciousness.

What was I supposed to do with all the feelings and sensations that arose at puberty? I believed I had to fight off the bad and be on my guard because if I didn't the Devil would take me over. It was an ongoing problem, as it seemed the fear of evil led to increasingly horrible thoughts. This was before people went to psychotherapists and I didn't go around talking about it either because I was so ashamed. Then, in the 1950s while studying psychology in university, I came across the works of people like Erich Fromm and began to get some perspective on the repressed, dark side of humans. In fact, I was quite relieved to see that my problems were fairly normal and to realize that people didn't admit to these states because their social conditioning had them play a role that would make them acceptable.

Becoming a monk and practising meditation was a dream come true because it opened up the way for me to address the dark side clearly. The thing that really appealed to me in Buddhism was its attitude towards morality – that immorality is acted out through action and speech but not through thought. Previously, I had believed that just

looking at a woman with lust meant I had committed adultery – so there was no hope for me! And the tendency to want to control my thinking and repress bad thoughts had led to these outbursts of frustration. But through our monastic training rules, the Vinaya, I learned to guard both my actions and my speech, and to break through the conditioned mind; though bhikkhus still have passions and fears, repressed desires and resentments, and all that comes into consciousness in our lives.

For over thirty years now I've not done any heavy kammic actions. The bad things I've done have been relatively minor; usually wrong speech or a tendency to exaggerate. But with regard to thinking bad thoughts or having demonic visions, we don't regard these as offences against morality or believe they make an immoral person. So we can begin to accept this side as it becomes conscious and see it in terms of Dhamma.

The way I see it now, the Buddha taught that as your kamma ripens you start experiencing dark stuff, like fear. I found myself experiencing a lot of fear but then I recognized that it was not because of anything in particular. Suddenly this tendency to deny or repress fear began to lessen and it was allowed into consciousness, where I could examine it.

At one time, I was living in a grotto of rocks in which one of the village men had built a platform. I would sit on this platform at night and, though usually I'd sit with my eyes closed, one night I lit a candle and suddenly began to see frightening shadows all around me. I looked up and there was a huge owl staring down at me. The atmosphere was eerie and it was really frightening. I kept contemplating: 'What could be out there? What is so frightening about the dark?' But the flickering candle flame continued to cast weird shadows, the mind would create frightening things in the surrounding darkness, and I felt fear and terror. So then I deliberately tried to think of the most frightening thing that could possibly be out there. It all became a bit comical and I started laughing. My mind went a bit over the top in terms of creativity, eventually the absurdity stomped out the fear, and I was just laughing

at myself. This gave me insight into darkness and how the mind creates things when you can't see anything.

In the *dhutaṅga (tudong)* tradition we make umbrellas, which are called *grotes*. All they are is a big umbrella fitted with a skimpy little mosquito net suspended from the rim but, with a candle lit inside it, you have a sense of being secure. The candle lights up the area where you're sitting, and although the *grote* won't protect you from tigers or snakes or ghosts – or anything else, for that matter – the sense of being in the light makes you feel secure. It's like when you're in a dark room and don't know what is in it, but as soon as you switch on the light you get a sense that everything's all right and you feel OK. So taking that sense of lightness, I'd keep looking at this darkness, noticing 'I can't see anything; my eyes are open.' And then I'd think: 'But I can see darkness.' So there's light, isn't there? That which sees darkness is light and then I rested in the light of seeing rather than in a perception of darkness. This took me back to that centred place again: the stillpoint of awareness that is the light where we see clearly the way it is rather than creating all the things in the unknown blackness around.

In modern life we depend on the convenience of electricity. We wake up at night and just switch on the light – so we don't have to experience being in the dark for very long. Also, when we switch off the lights we usually go straight to sleep – so darkness isn't an experience that we meditate on or understand. But in meditation we're bringing darkness into consciousness because light and dark are the dualism within us.

For example, there are the harboured resentments over having been mistreated or ignored, made fun of or misunderstood. The resentments from these common human experiences linger in the mind and although we can ignore them, they still come up and surface as cynicism. You find yourself speaking negatively, feeling jealous or envious of people you think are being treated better than you are, have had more opportunities or a better deal in life. But by embracing

this dark side – by bringing it up into consciousness – one can grow to recognize and accept it for what it is.

Actually, my character is one that avoids difficult situations. If something is unpleasant or unwanted, my nature tends to withdraw, procrastinate or run away from it. So this embracing practice is a skilful means I've developed in order to counteract this tendency and learn to embrace the darkness. When I looked into the darkness and contemplated it, I had to accept the darkness first before I could actually contemplate it. It's the same with a dark mood.

When Ajahn Anando disrobed years ago, people were very upset. So I'd ask, 'Well how do you feel about it?' The first person I asked said, 'Well he was a wonderful teacher and he worked so hard and gave so much we should always be grateful to him.' And I said, 'But how do you really feel?' And she refused to answer because she was coming from the 'proper' response to the situation – which is to be grateful and compassionate, and that's the grand gesture and a good response. But in terms of how you really feel, you have to look into the heart where you may be feeling hurt, disillusioned and disappointed, but refusing to acknowledge it. So this was an opportunity for people to investigate the difference between the ideal – the grand gesture and virtuous response – and what they actually felt in an honest way as it came up into consciousness.

So, in the Four Foundations for Mindfulness what we are doing is bringing into consciousness the feelings in the body and the mood of the mind. Whether we are experiencing disappointment, betrayal or anger we do not indulge or blame ourselves but simply recognize them as emotional reactions in the present moment.

Right meditation is not about sitting and holding everything down, but about letting everything come up. In my first few years of meditation, a lot of that repressed dark side would come up! When I was a samanera it was a relentless, hellish experience for about two months; I was feeling angry and hating everybody. It was all so ugly

that I thought I must be doing something wrong – because surely meditation is supposed to make you blissful and happy, and here I was sitting with relentless, inexorable, anger and hatred coming into my consciousness. However, I intuitively knew that I had to accept it and I knew that it wasn't immoral to have these states since I wasn't going to act on them. So I learnt to trust and be patient and stay with it.

Then one morning I woke up and everything looked ethereal – something had been resolved. I didn't create this sense of beauty; it just was a natural state. That morning there was no anger or hatred, nor any need to hold anything down. Because there was no repressive resistance to anything, the mind was in a natural state of beauty. I began to experience beauty again because this was the state of my mind. My kuti, the little hut I was in, was all right but it certainly wasn't very beautiful. Each kuti had a crude little toilet and a water basin. Mine had a purple plastic dish containing water and a jar to be used as a dipper. The sun was shining through the lattice work of the bathroom into the water in this purple plastic dish and it was utterly, breathtakingly, beautiful! Because the mind itself was in a state of purity, everything seemed to be touched by this ethereal radiance. This lasted for a few days.

I was due to renew my visa because I didn't have permission to stay in Thailand for more than three months at a time. I was in Nong Khai, which is where you cross over to Laos, and the head monk of the province had arranged for me to renew my visa at the immigration office there. Foreigners were supposed to go to Bangkok to renew their visas but he had pressured the immigration officer to renew mine in Nong Khai. I started on my journey in this pure and tranquil state where everything looked so beautiful. I walked from the monastery several miles to the immigration office in a very heightened sense of awareness in which I could see the pain in people's faces – and as I walked into the immigration office I sensed a wall of hatred.

The clerks and the officer didn't say anything or make any threatening gestures. They just stamped my visa but because of my

being that sensitive and open, I could feel their resentment of me and of having been pressured. I went rushing back to the monastery, but that radiant ethereal quality had disappeared and through experiencing that hostility I was now in a shattered state. But I kept remembering the blissful state and I kept trying to get it back. At the time, I'd thought I was probably enlightened – and then I found out I wasn't. The grasping mind kept trying to get it back. So I'd struggle and do all the things I did before but the desire and the grasping were always the obstruction. Accordingly, over the years I quit trying to renew enlightenment experiences, but began to just observe the things that would become conscious and try to be with life as I was experiencing it. Yet even though I understood intellectually, it has taken many, many years to be able to do it naturally because one easily falls back into old habits.

I began to see the value of why the Buddha established the Vinaya training. It's something that carries you through and prevents you from doing anything too heavy. Of course some monks would say: 'All you have to do is study the Dhamma. The Vinaya doesn't matter as it is just a set of old-fashioned rules that were applied in India 2,500 years ago. The Buddha was a good philosopher but he didn't make very good rules.' And of course when one studies the Vinaya, one comes across rules such as the one about having a little rug that has to have goat's wool of a certain colour in certain places – and other protocols of that nature – and part of you thinks, 'This is ridiculous! We don't have these anymore anyway!' It's easy to make a case against and dismiss the Vinaya.

But I didn't trust that because I can be extremely reasonable and justify anything I want to do. I'm a rational person and I find that if I want to do something I can find reasonable justifications for it, no matter what. I could justify robbing a bank. My rational ability could justify just about anything really – but if you have a moral base then it gives you some standards you will not go beyond. The training develops mindfulness. It's not a matter of rule-keeping in a very literal sense but establishing the right attitude, such as learning not to manipulate the

faithful lay supporters in order to get what you want, or do things that might upset, be an inconvenience, or disrespectful to lay supporters. Abiding by the Vinaya trains you to live in a more restrained way; being content with a minimum and being responsible for how you relate to other monks, to nuns, and to the lay community around you. But this restraint brings up your emotional reactions. I'd go through a period of feeling suffocated by all these rules and restrictions. I'd feel like I was being smothered to death – and then I'd let that feeling of being suffocated become conscious and realize it was just my emotions coming up. So I began to notice the rebelliousness and the complaining, and began to feel it in my body. As I became aware of these emotional habits in regard to restriction, morality, responsibility, relationships with others and began to train myself through wisdom, then I started to feel a sense of joy, a radiant quality that is quite natural to the present moment.

This way becomes quite ordinary as you stop struggling, resisting, controlling, blaming, feeling sorry for yourself, trying to get things you don't have; or getting lost in grief at the separation from the loved, or getting overwhelmed by the anger and hatred, the blame and projections that you might be receiving from the society and the people you're living with. You begin to trust and rest more in this still place within. Even though it is like a stillpoint, it's really our entire universe. It's like one little point – but yet it embraces everything.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,  
early-mid 1990s)



When someone becomes a bhikkhu, the ceremony states that it's in order to realize nibbāna and be free from all suffering. It conveys that intention. You might think, 'How do I dare make such an intention? It's too great, too grand and too high for me.' That's your ego talking. Recognize this and learn how to use your rational mind as a guide so that by making the intention in a very deliberate and rational way, it sets the tone of your life; it helps you to make your life worthy. It will also reflect your feelings of unworthiness or inability, views and opinions, doubts and despair – all the valleys of despair and boredom and disillusionment that you have to go through. But having made this perfect intention, if we put our trust in this intention, we're no longer attaching to this tendency to doubt.

When this deliberate, cool intention is established in your mind, trust it. Put your faith in that perfect intention, make it a guiding star. However, be careful you don't fall off the edge of the cliff because you're looking at the star too much and can't see where you actually are, or what the dangers are right in front of you. You need the star as

a direction. It's high, it's beautiful and so you move in that direction – but you're also taking into account where you are now in terms of the obstructions and difficulties.

Trust yourself: you're the conscious being that's experiencing life. Learn to trust in your own ability to observe and learn from what you do. We don't always do everything in the right way but we learn from our mistakes – that's wisdom. Wisdom doesn't mean you're going to do everything right and all your decisions are going to be incredibly wise. That's not the way we learn. We often learn through taking risks and sometimes making a mess of everything before we can make it right. But the willingness to learn, that's the important thing. It's like setting out on a journey and finding yourself going around in circles before you get going in the right direction. If you've already established your goal and you have that guiding star, then you begin to see what you are doing and go in the right direction again.

In trusting yourself, you're not trusting your ego or your opinions with an inflated kind of belief in everything you think or feel. Thoughts and emotions are the conditioning of the mind arising out of ignorance (*avijjā*), not understanding the Dhamma. The thinking process is a habitual flow of proliferating thoughts and reactions to things: *my* opinions and views and feelings about this person or that thing. So I never regard the thinking process as something to trust but I do trust my ability to pay attention. I'm willing to put forth the effort to learn from life through this mindfulness and trust in my ability to listen, wait and be patient.

In this kind of awareness, we're getting beyond the momentum of our habits, the traps of the mind and our cultural conditioning. Living in Thailand as a foreigner in a very different culture, for example, helped me to reflect on my Western conditioning. Then living here in England helped me to reflect on my American conditioning – that whole set of assumptions that comes from your parents and the society you live in. Even before you can read and write you start picking up on all these

cues about who you are, what is important, what you should be like, how you should act, and how you should think. This is the cultural conditioning process.

With mindfulness we begin to see beyond this. We begin to notice the way we tend to react to things and the assumptions we have about ourselves or others or the world we live in. When I first went to live in Thailand I was very critical of American ways. I loved Thailand, the people and the culture, and I was very patronizing about Thailand being much better and nicer than the West. I was generally making a big thing about what a wonderful place Thailand was. Of course, it was difficult at first: the monastic life in Thailand is highly developed in morality and discipline, and quite different from the American ideals of freedom and individuality. You have your duties assigned according to the hierarchical structure. This is difficult for an American because we're brought up to think in terms of equality: egalitarianism is the best way and hierarchies are not appropriate.

So I had to adjust my feelings and my emotional reactions to living in this kind of hierarchical structure. I was junior, at the end of the line. I was a foreigner and I was also taller than all the other monks. Everybody noticed me – they'd always say, '*Phra farang*' (foreign monk). Every afternoon the monks had to go out and draw water from the well in old kerosene tins on pulleys and then carry these containers of water around on a bamboo pole held between two monks. All this was very primitive and I was quite entranced by it at first because it was new, but I could see my American mind thinking of ways to improve the system. In America we'd do much better – too much time spent in laborious tasks and I'd rather be sitting in my kuti in *samādhi* than having to draw water from a well. It took me quite a while to see that the teaching was to reflect on the way you are feeling. I began to notice my opinionated views and a lot of conceit that I didn't think I had – an underlying tendency in the cultural conditioning process I'd acquired in the West.

How to work with this – how to use this situation with mindfulness

and wisdom – is quite a challenge. When are egalitarianism and equality appropriate and when is the hierarchical structure appropriate? When is it useful and when is it counter-productive? This you can't just conclude from opinions but through noticing and through trial and error, trying to learn from experience. It's not a matter of saying this is right and that's wrong. It's beginning to reflect on how to use these things in the right way.

When I first came to England I was so much a part of the Thai conditioning and the Thai monastic life. Even though I'm egalitarian culturally, my monastic life has been very much an intense training within the hierarchical structure, so it was interesting how at first I felt threatened in England by having to deal with so many things I couldn't control. Living in Thailand as a monk was just part of a whole cultural attitude where you knew your place, you knew what to do and everybody knew what they had to do. They knew what was right and what was wrong. It gave you this tremendous security and sense of safety. The first two years in London I was never quite sure what to do, and how far to go and how much I should adapt or how I should change. I wasn't sure when I was just getting intimidated or if the hierarchal structure was being useful. I didn't know what was wise or what was just holding onto old traditions – or was it adapting in a wise way? Should one go all the way or just half the way? All these kinds of feelings and thoughts – I had to take it day by day really, hoping that it would be all right.

I just didn't know – nobody knew how to survive as a Buddhist monk in England. What to do? There were a lot of opinions: 'You can't wear those robes in London', and 'You can't go on alms-round; English people don't like bowing, don't ask them to; they won't like chanting and they don't like ceremonies.' However as it turned out, life in the Hampstead Vihara was very different from what I'd expected: there weren't any real problems about bowing or ceremonies or chanting. In fact, people wanted them. At first we decided not to even do chanting,

then people asked, 'Why don't you chant? Teach us to bow.' So it wasn't us forcing our customs on them. It was people taking an interest and wanting to know what to do in that kind of situation.

Ajahn Chah was also criticized by some Thai people who said, 'You know, you're teaching meditation to these foreigners and they don't even have good *sīla* yet. They're not even moral and yet you're teaching *samādhi*. First you've got to establish the *sīla* (morality), and when you get good *sīla* then you can go into *samādhi* and *paññā* (wisdom).' That's how it's usually written in the scriptures: *sīla*, *samādhi*, *paññā*. Ajahn Chah's answer to that was quite marvellous, he said, 'Look, you've got to start from what people are interested in. These people don't come here for *sīla*; they come here for *samādhi*. So teach them *samādhi* and eventually they'll get around to *sīla*.' It's not like you can have one without the other but, he said, 'You've got to know what people are interested in, what they're inspired by, and what they have faith in. Through that you can communicate; you can reach them and eventually they'll get the *sīla* and see the necessity of moral responsibility.'

Trust in the ability to learn from trial and error. Learn from taking risks and seeing what works and from letting go of your own fears, opinions and prejudices in order to be more open to the experience. All the stereotypes that are usually part of one's cultural conditioning – let go of them and learn to trust in the ability to pay attention to life in the present. Learn to incorporate the good things and to develop and encourage the goodness within this culture, so that the monastic tradition is a force within the society and not seen as a divisive, alienating cult. Learn how to be a Buddhist monk within a society that's mostly not Buddhist; don't get caught trying to convert or criticize or cause more divisions within the religions of this country. In ways like this, you're beginning to trust in your capacity to learn from this ability to pay attention and observe. It's more intuitive; it's not a rational approach. It's not based on any views you might have as to what British people are like, what they need, and what they don't like.

What we're doing is opening up on this intuitive level where we're aware of the forces around us, what we're feeling and the way things are. And if we trust more and surrender more into that intuitive attentiveness to the present, then we tend to respond in more skilful ways than we do when we're caught in habitual reactions to experience. Habitual reactivity means you're conditioned to react in certain ways. It's like pushing the buttons – push this button and you get that reaction; this happens and we react. We can live our lives just reacting to things and such reactions just reinforce reactive habits.

In this mindfulness practice you're using the awakened state, the one who's aware. So you're listening. You're putting yourself into that state of attentive awareness where intuition operates, where there's wisdom, where you begin to tune into ultimate reality: 'The doors to the Deathless are open.' This is not clearly defined in terms of thoughts and ideas. So you have to trust and have faith – because if you're trying to figure it out then you're back following your reactions, the conditioning of your mind, so you tend to see things through the filters of your own opinions, views, prejudices and biases. When you stop doing that, you begin to understand things through intuition and through wisdom – and you tend to respond more appropriately to experience.

The important thing is working with your own mind, keeping it in that state of awareness and keeping it from going into speculation as you're dealing with the things that you have to deal with – monasteries, temples, monks, nuns, laypeople – whatever it is that you are experiencing. The strength of the practice is in the mind; it's not dependent on external conditions. One can respond to the external conditions from that still place within, rather than just react. You can then avoid getting confused or fed-up because you can't control the external world to fit your ideals of how things should be.

I've always wanted to be a hermit: to get out of the whole thing by living in a cave and not have to be in a state where there are many demands. Something in me doesn't want to take risks. It wants to be

certain and sure. It wants to live in a place where everything is fixed, a place where you know exactly what's right and what's wrong, what you should do and not do. There's something in me that would feel very secure in that situation but then, because I've lived here for over twenty years, I've had to develop trust in myself and in the practice of meditation. This means I can be of use and of service and a good influence in this country, without being weakened by any difficulties. In fact it's been strengthening. I've gained strength from having to work with my mind in confusing, disappointing and difficult situations.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 9 May 1997)



## 28 | Where Jackals Cease

There is a place where there is no sense of ‘me’ or ‘myself’. It’s not excited, depressed, bored or whatever; it’s just empty, a clear, direct knowing. This is where you have to trust in awareness because your thinking mind is going to doubt endlessly. It’s only you that can know what you’re doing. Only you can know what’s really happening in your mind. Recognize that in terms of this present moment, here and now, this is awareness; it’s not your thinking mind. The thinking mind will imagine anything – anything you think could be possible. You can doubt yourself, doubt your motives, doubt your ability, and doubt Buddhism. Doubt is the result of thinking – stop thinking and you stop doubting.

There is this obsession with trying to figure things out – trying to know things through concepts, trying to get proof, to get facts and figures and the word of authority and experts. Recognize that this is the thinking mind. We might be highly intellectual, trying to understand Buddhism on that intellectual level, but we’re never able to figure out how to practise. So notice in this paradigm of the Four Noble Truths – there is *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti*, *paṭivedha*<sup>25</sup>– these three are

<sup>25</sup>These three terms refer to the stages of Dhamma-penetration. *Pariyatti* means ‘theory’ – getting an intellectual grasp of a teaching; *paṭipatti* means putting that understanding into practice; and *paṭivedha* means realizing the Dhamma in oneself.

an insight paradigm. The statement – and it is an intellectual statement – is that ‘There is suffering.’ And ‘It should be understood’ – this is the second insight. Even the intellectual recognition, ‘There is suffering’, is an insight. You might say, ‘Oh, suffering ... let’s not talk about that – let’s talk about happiness or something inspiring. Let’s not dwell on that – old age, sickness, death!’ Suffering does sound a bit dreary but it can be an insight. It goes much deeper than just a complaint or a dismissal. Saying ‘there is suffering’ is a positive recognition of it. It’s not a cynical or ‘sour-grapes’ type of statement.

Coming back to the second insight: ‘Suffering should be understood.’ This is the *paṭipatti* – the practice. And we put it into practice; we look at suffering. We receive something and look at it. If you’re always resisting suffering, you’ll never understand it because you’re just reacting to negative feeling, fear or pain, and you resist it. But if you see it and you can look at it – even something that’s ugly and nasty – you receive it rather than reacting and trying to get rid of it.

The third insight: ‘Suffering has been understood.’ We are reflecting on the way it is; it includes both the practice and the result of the practice. *Paṭivedha* is the result. Now, applying that to the third Noble Truth of cessation, *nirodha-sacca*: ‘There is the cessation of suffering.’ This is a statement, a kind of insight that you get through observing suffering.

Then the fourth insight, the practice, *paṭipatti*: ‘The end of suffering should be realized.’ This is the practice of realizing the end of suffering. In using the sound of silence and these skilful means that I’ve been suggesting to you, you can see the end of suffering. There is the doubting mind, the aversion, the resistance; whatever form or quality your suffering might have, you put it in the context of the sound of silence and it ceases. So you’re realizing that – its absence.

We’re living in a blaming society. When something goes wrong, the first thing is: ‘Who’s to blame? Whose fault is it?’ It’s almost automatic. It seems like it’s an important thing to put the blame on

somebody or to blame oneself. Everybody is looking for a scapegoat. We're frightened of what people think and we fear rejection. That's the way the mind works: we live in a society where we can be blamed for things. If something is missing, if something goes wrong and I might be involved, then I'm subject to blame and I tend to blame myself. In my own practice, I recognize this creature that says, 'You're to blame. You did it!' and points the finger, nagging and accusing. 'It's your fault Sumedho because you didn't do this or you should have done that or ...'. This inner tyrant is what they call the Jackal or the inner critic.<sup>26</sup> It can always find fault in what you're doing.

I've had to learn about this creature when giving talks and Dhamma reflections because when you're giving a talk, you're putting yourself in a place where you feel vulnerable. You sit on this high seat and you're supposed to say something wise and profound – then the Jackal, the inner critic, gets you thinking: 'I'll say something stupid and make an utter fool of myself.' You feel shy and frightened and the sense that people will see you as a fool. There is this fear of what others think of you and of criticism or rejection – but I've stopped that whole process through the awareness of the sound of silence. I don't allow it to take me over. Or, if I forget and suddenly get into it, I know it well enough to stop it as soon as I realize I'm into that pattern again.

I've been a teacher for thirty years now. When you're a teacher, people start expecting you to say wise things, not disappoint them and so forth. People tend to criticize, give their opinions and views, but I'm already prone to self-criticism – so if anyone else criticizes me, I'd get shattered, hurt and angry. It could be very hard to criticize me in any way because I was not open to it – I'm a big guy; I have a loud voice and can shout people down or bully them. But these are not skilful means! This is not the kind of person I want to be. Being self-critical and terribly frightened of what others think, I get put on a high seat and become a focus for community – an international one at that.

<sup>26</sup> Here Ajahn Sumedho is referring to the figure of the Jackal in Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication.

A couple of years back, I had a sabbatical and just about wherever I went I avoided Theravada monasteries. In India I decided to go the South because I had never been there and there aren't many Buddhists! I thought I'd go to Hindu ashrams, so we went to Sri Ammaji's ashram – the Hugging Mother. She was away at the time, so we walked into the ashram and got to the place where they meet and this young lady came up and asked, 'Are you Ajahn Sumedho?' I didn't recognize her and then I realized that I'd met her on a trek in the Pyrenees Mountains with Ajahn Sucitto about seven or eight years before when she was only twelve years old. Now she's a devotee of Ammaji! Then we go to Tiruvannamalai to the Sri Ramana ashram. I thought: 'Nobody is going to know me there'. It was time to eat the meal and sit down but then a man sitting nearby looked up and he said, 'Ajahn Sumedho!' I later walked into the ashram and I heard somebody, 'Ajahn Sumedho!', and there was another friend who was staying at Sri Ramana ashram. While I was there I met several more. I was hoping that nobody would ask me to teach anything but when we went to Varanasi we kept running into Thai monks on the *ghats* who would invite me to meals. I'd try to get out of it because I knew it would put me in this position of having to be the teacher again.

During that year I wanted to get some perspective on it. It wasn't about not teaching or hiding away; it was about solving the problem from within. And I feel I've been successful with this. I can stop creating myself, stop being a 'teacher' or being anybody and move into that stillness where the thinking ceases. As thinking ceases, self-consciousness ceases and the concern about what others think ceases. The worry and the self-criticism cease. There is awareness and one is speaking from this awareness rather than from being a teacher or thinking I'm some authority, meditation master or anything like that. I don't create those kinds of images because even if they should arise in consciousness, I stop them; I don't want to identify in any way with any

concept. I trust in the awareness itself – in the emptiness I experience as the sound of silence.

There are many questions here about the sound of silence – in Sanskrit or Pali it's called *nāda*, which means sound. I came across this sound by accident in my early life as a monk. It's not really stated in any scriptural text that I've found in the Pali Canon. I developed this reflective capacity and started noticing that what I call 'the sound of silence' is going on all the time. If I can't hear it, it's just that I forget it's there; I get distracted, I start thinking about things and I don't notice it anymore. As soon as I'm aware then I notice it again. I began cultivating awareness around the sound of silence – or whatever it is. There is some debate about what it is, whether it's the cilia in your ears vibrating, your blood vessels rattling around or whatever – it doesn't really matter. If I tune into that vibration, I stop thinking; it's the cessation of thought at that moment, and I can be aware of it. This is realizing cessation; it's just *this*. It's not one of these big moments where everything collapses and you see the *kalāpas*<sup>27</sup> and things. For me that's too dependent – a sense of cessation that's too concentrated. This sound of silence is happening all the time. This can be integrated into daily life and I don't need to remove myself and concentrate for days in order to realize cessation. It's a natural happening that takes place whether you recognize it or not.

I went to live in the UK in 1977, having spent ten years with Ajahn Chah in Thailand. We started Wat Pah Nanachat in 1975 because so many Westerners were coming to Ubon at the time and there were problems about teaching them. I accepted the position of abbot from a sense of gratitude to him and wanting to help. I wasn't concerned about my own peace of mind and my practice anymore. I only had eight years as a bhikkhu and I didn't feel particularly ready for such a position but because it came up as a way of supporting Ajahn Chah, I accepted it.

Two years later in the role of 'Ajahn Sumedho', I was in England where I really started developing the sound of silence. If I was going to

<sup>27</sup> The *rūpa-kalāpas* refer to experiencing the physical body as breaking up into myriad minute particles, reported in the intensive practice of insight meditation.

survive in the UK as a Buddhist monk, I thought I needed the cessation experience. It was in London that I suddenly remembered the sound of silence – something awoke in me. We lived in the north-western part of London, the Hampstead area, and walking down a hill one afternoon, this sound of silence suddenly smacked me right in the face! From that point on I've developed this practice, cultivating this *nāda*. So it was in London, on a busy street; it wasn't in a remote hermitage where it's all very quiet. It just happened to me – as they say, 'When you're ready, the teacher appears.'

I was developing this sound of silence over the years, even as I became president of the Buddhist Society and was put in all kinds of important positions, given important titles while people recorded my teachings and put them in books. I became quite well known. People became interested: 'What are you going to do with this?' It was the kind of feedback where people are expecting so much wisdom and you're getting caught in this trap of becoming well known. Everybody then projects their expectations onto you because you're now Ajahn Sumedho, you're a meditation master. This tends to be very isolating. So the question is: how to accommodate this kamma without in any way attaching to it?

The third Noble Truth is the obvious answer to that question. In that emptiness there is no person and this is the knowing of the *nāda*. It's not trying to pretend I don't care about what people call me. I know through investigation that this emptiness is non-suffering. Attachment to personal habits, identities, positions, fears, self-consciousness means I'm back into *samsāra*, the realm of suffering – immediately, I'm there. But because of the cultivation of the sound of silence, I can stop it as soon as I realize I'm back in it. I know exactly how to empty this, how to let this suffering cease in consciousness. It's not a matter of running away, hiding or controlling anything, but of understanding how your mind works.

This is where you're really becoming skilled in thinking and it doesn't make you heartless and unfeeling, but it does open up the

whole realm of sensitivity and then this sensitivity is received. It's not suppressed. Sensitivity is fully received but not identified with. I don't allow this proliferating sense of 'me' to operate. When things happen, like the grief when my mother died, I did feel what we all know as 'grief' because we only have one mother. So this feeling of grief was there but I didn't proliferate around that feeling. It's a natural emotion that comes from loss; it's part of our human condition. I felt this but I didn't create any problem around it.

In our lives as human beings, we are free to feel. It's not like you become an emotionless zombie that no longer feels anything. This is a feeling realm, a sense realm, and the sensitivity is even heightened because you're not trying to control emotions anymore. You're more aware of your sensitivity, of how things are received and what is sad and what isn't. It's not depressing; to get depressed I have to cling to sadness, negativity and self-loathing. Through awareness practice this is no longer possible because the awareness transcends and embraces it all. One is abiding in awareness, not in the objects that you're aware of. And also, you're not judging the object that you're aware of. You're not allowing the Jackal, or the inner tyrant, to say, 'You shouldn't feel like that' or 'That's a bad thought.' You don't allow that to happen; not through suppressing but through knowing how not to give room for that habit to continue to proliferate.

This is how I experience the reality of cessation, the third Noble Truth. And cultivating that in the fourth Noble Truth: there is the path of non-suffering; there is the Eightfold Path or Middle Way. This I know because of the insight and the cultivation of this way. People praise you or blame you, or your loved ones die, your teachers die; loss of friends and all kinds of odd things happen in your life. There is physical pain and so forth, this is what we call *vipāka-kamma*, resultant kamma – it's the result of being born. Old age is the result of birth – if you're never born, you never get old. Death is the result of birth. The body is born, matures, gets old and dies. And this is so obviously true, yet we aren't

really aware of this reality: all that is born, ends. In the desire realm, we're not allowing ourselves to see cessation of anything; as soon as anything gets a little unpleasant, painful or boring, we seek rebirth in something else.

Notice how you are trying to figure things out all the time. The state of doubt and that intensive pushiness of the mind – this is *dukkha*, suffering. It's unpleasant to be caught in it and then you just drift on to something else. Just look at your life; as soon as you get bored or feel a bit restless or uneasy, you go on to something else: eat something, have a drink, switch on the TV, go on the Internet – or you change the subject, do anything to be distracted. These are like a rebirth process; we never allow ourselves to experience cessation because we're so caught up in it. In this sense, rebirth is this looking for something to be born into again. These are mental rebirths. And if we observe this, stay with the mental birth, then we see the cessation, rather than running from one thing to the next.

If you can notice it in this way, you can use these trivial experiences to realize the end of *dukkha*. That's why, in the Four Noble Truths teaching, cessation is to be realized. Cessation is to be recognized, known, it's like *this*. It's as Luang Por Chah says: 'You die before you die.' The ego is dying all the time – let the ego die and what's left is awareness, emptiness, non-self. It's pure, not tainted with anything. This purity is a natural state for us and yet we fail to recognize it. Cultivating the Eightfold Path is cultivating awareness until you can prove and know this for yourself; this insight is a profound understanding of this reality. It's not theoretical. The doubting mind no longer has control over your consciousness. This is awakened consciousness of a human individual. This is wisdom – universal wisdom, not personal wisdom that we acquire from other sources. This is natural wisdom – this is Dhamma. It comes through this reflectiveness, through investigation of Dhamma and these twelve insights into the Four Noble Truths.

For this, we're practising with the ordinariness of human consciousness. Recognize that a lot of our suffering isn't from real tragedy or due to brutality or terrible abuse; it's just from the way we think. It's the way we regard ourselves, the critical mind – the self-disparaging tendency to see ourselves in negative terms.

What I've been sharing with you here is for your consideration. You have to apply it yourself and see if it works for you. You will be completely beyond doubt if you know this reality yourself. The proof of the pudding is in the eating, so have you really seen the way of non-suffering? This you have to recognize for yourself.

(From a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 28 June 2005)



## Being Patient with our Inability to Forgive

In Buddhist meditation it's through attentiveness to life, awakened awareness and mindfulness that we realize the Deathless. Without mindfulness all our identities are with death. If we identify with the body as that which we think we are, then we are identified with death. If we identify with our emotions, feelings, thoughts, memories – which all constantly change, arise and cease – then we are identifying with what is dead or dying.

For much of our life we are quite deadened. We can drift along, putting in no effort and trying to stave off boredom. Our focus is always outwards, trying to be stimulated or awakened by external things: television, people, drugs, drink and sex. We're always dependent on something 'out there' to wake us up and if we can't get that, we sink into depression, boredom – into a deathlike state. Meditation is boring in terms of worldly values: nothing could be more boring than watching the breath, looking at the body sitting for an hour, or listening to the sound of silence. We notice the neutral feeling of our clothes touching our skin and it's a boring sensation, isn't it?

But with mindfulness we are paying attention and the effort is coming from within. The practice is about developing this attentiveness here and now. We realize that we can pay attention to life, that we don't need stimulating things all the time, and that we are not dependent on good health, fascinating friends, success or pleasant activities for our happiness. Then we can use whatever experience we have in life and, no matter how unpleasant it is, we can still pay attention to it; we can still accept it.

Such acceptance is unconditioned love. This is the practice of *mettā*, loving-kindness. *Mettā* brings into consciousness and recognizes the totality, which includes all conditions. It doesn't make deals or prefer or like: it accepts. This is the religious experience: to be able to accept the totality – absolutely everything belongs. The Devil belongs; all the bad, good and neutral things belong. We can even accept the critical mind that says we should get the good and get rid of the bad, the dualistic thinking that keeps us resisting and struggling with thoughts and feelings of anger, jealousy or fear. We allow things to be what they are; we don't condemn them. And when we aren't trying to get rid of these feelings anymore, they go by themselves. That which arises, ceases.

I have found this very helpful when reflecting on things because there is much in this world – and in my experience of life – that I don't like and I can get into righteous moods. In the religious life it's easy to become righteous because we are dealing with morality and loyalty to a religious path, to Truth – to very altruistic and marvellous ideas. We are very moral, having dedicated our lives to spiritual realization; we are celibate and mendicant. All these things can be very inspiring but if we attach to any of them, we become hypocritical and full of our own superiority. We can feel ourselves to be somehow better than people who are not so strict or who have not dedicated their lives to spiritual development. If we are celibate, we can think that anyone who has sex is slightly tainted. But there is no *mettā* there, is there? It's just attaching to virtue and purity with this ignorant sense of self. This

makes one an unbearable prig, a religious hypocrite – there are plenty of those in any religion.

But I can have *mettā* for the righteousness. This doesn't mean I approve of such attitudes but I can learn how to accept them. *Mettā* practice is learning how to be patient with and accept the totality: the good and the bad – everything belongs. And that changes our attitude because much of the time we think the bad should not be happening. But this is what *is* happening: the good and the bad, the right and the wrong ... so *mettā* has to be non-preferential.

This is a way of training our conscious experience not to be caught in revengeful thought, resentment or being frustrated over the way things are in the world. We can also direct this *mettā* towards ourselves. We might think of somebody who has hurt us badly and say to ourselves, 'I can never have *mettā* for that person but I can have *mettā* for the feeling of bitterness that I have towards that person.' We can have *mettā* for our own moods and patience with our own inability to forgive. As we grow more patient and come to accept our own negative feelings, that patience expands until we get at the root of the problem, which is in the mind itself – and eventually we can forgive.

I remember one time a monk was giving a *mettā* retreat and, in the evenings, everyone would spread *mettā* to their parents: 'May my mother be well, may my father be well.' One person on this retreat had such a great hatred for her mother that every time 'mother' came into the picture, she felt rage. Then she started feeling guilty and very upset because she couldn't cope with the anger and rage. But we are not trying to make ourselves feel *mettā* but to have *mettā* for the emotion we're feeling. If we feel that we cannot forgive our mothers and just feel rage, then we can have *mettā* for the rage and resentment that we are feeling now.

If we're trying to have *mettā* for our mother without actually feeling it, something within us resents it because intellectually the ideal might be very proper and nice but emotionally we might want to do harm

to her! We can feel like horrible people for having such a terrible thought but we can have *mettā* for that thought. It's easy to feel loving and kind towards all beings in an abstract way but if someone is giving us a bad time, the closer that person is the more difficult it is to feel *mettā*. The real challenges are with our families or a community like the monastery. When we are living close together we can really irritate each other. Somebody doesn't show up at the right time to wash the dishes as they promised and we can be outraged. But if we practise in this way, we find that we can stop being caught between our emotional problems and the ideals of what we should be like.

*Mettā* is about being willing to bear with even our own foolish selfishness. I remember in Wat Pah Pong, some mornings we would have readings in Thai where we would hear the ideal: we're alms-mendicants, we're happy with what we are given – alms-food, a roof over the head, a robe and medicine for illness. We practise selflessness, harmlessness and loving-kindness towards all creatures. But I am six feet two inches tall and they put me in this tiny kuti where I was unable to stand up straight! I was always hitting my head on the doorframe. And although there were these ideals of what a monk *should* be, the first few years of monastic life brought up immature emotions and negativity for me. The problem was that I tended to think I shouldn't be like that. I'd feel envious and I'd think that I shouldn't be envious: 'A good monk should have *muditā* (sympathetic joy).' If a new monk came to the monastery and they gave him a nicer place to live in than mine, I should have been filled with *muditā* for that monk: 'Oh, I'm so happy for him that his dwelling is nicer than mine!' That's the ideal. But instead I felt: 'How come they gave him that? I've been here longer!' Then I'd feel guilty: 'I shouldn't be envious or resentful.'

So it can get complicated. We have the emotion and we have an aversion to the emotion. With contemplation, I began to see that so much of the problem was not with envy but with my aversion to it: this thing in me that hated the envy in myself, that hated myself for

not being what I thought I *should* be. And I realized that I needed to have *mettā* for the inner tyrants – to be with them, willingly. Then they cease! This is the law of Dhamma: what arises, ceases.

In mindfulness, we are accepting the totality – whatever it is – because the mind is so vast it can embrace everything. Everything is changing, conditions are changing, and when we are accepting things for what they are, it's in their nature to cease. It's part of the process of change. We're not trying to make them go away. We're letting them do what they're supposed to do: that which arises ceases of its own accord. Letting go, not making more bad kamma with our emotional habits. If we follow an emotion like envy, we make kamma; if we resist this emotion, we make kamma. But if we accept it, recognize it and let it be what it is, then we are not making any kamma with it and because it has arisen it will eventually cease.

With this way of reflecting we can pay attention to the body, to the breath and to the mood we are in. We can look at the mental state we're in right now and have *mettā* for that mood, accepting it for what it is – even if it's terrible. We don't suppress it; we just recognize it. And with that acceptance and patient non-judgement, the problem solves itself. We're not making any kamma with that mood. But we're always paying attention to the present moment, to being here – it's all very immediate. It is not about doing 'this' in order to get 'that' result. It is what exists in the present and with *mettā* the result is present experience. As we develop mindfulness this becomes our refuge, more and more. We see the changing conditions as just our experience of what's happening rather than being caught in the liking and disliking of it.

(From a retreat at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, November 1995)



## III | Being Awake



## 30 | Being Buddha

As long as you conceive of yourself as someone who has to do something in order to become something else, you will get caught in being a 'self' and never understand anything properly. No matter how many years you meditate, you will never really understand the teaching; it will always be slightly off the mark. The direct way of seeing things – that whatever arises, passes away – doesn't mean that you're throwing anything away. It means that you're looking at things in a way you've never bothered to look before. You are looking for a perspective on what's here now rather than looking for something that's not here.

Your meditation will be a really strenuous effort – and always a failure – if you come into the meditation room thinking, 'I've got to spend this hour looking for the Buddha, I've got to be a good meditator, I've got to get rid of all these bad thoughts, to sit here and practise hard.' If instead you come into the meditation room and simply become aware of the conditions of the mind, you'll be seeing from a perspective of *being* Buddha rather than doing something in order to become Buddha. You'll see the desire to become, the desire to get rid of, the desire to do something, or maybe the feeling that you can't do it or that you're an expert. You begin to see that whatever you're

experiencing is a changing condition and not-self. When we talk about *sati*, mindfulness, this is what we mean.

Gotama Buddha was one whose wisdom came from observing nature, the conditions of mind and body. Now, any of us can do that – it's not impossible. We just have to watch mind and body. It's not as if we have to have special powers or that somehow this is a different time from that of Gotama Buddha. Time is an illusion caused by ignorance. People in the time of Gotama Buddha were not any different from people now – they had greed, hatred and delusion, egos, conceits and fears, just like people nowadays. If you start thinking about Buddhist doctrines and levels of attainment, you'll just get into a state of doubting. You don't have to check yourself with a list in a book – know for yourself, until no condition of body or mind deludes you.

People say to me, 'I can't do all that – I'm just an ordinary person, a householder; it's too much for me.' I reply: 'If you *think* about it, you can't do it. Don't think about it, just do it.' Thoughts only take you to doubt; people who think about life can't do anything. If it's worth doing, do it. When you're depressed, learn from depression; when you're sick, learn from sickness; when you're happy, learn from happiness – all these are opportunities to learn. Keep silently listening and watching as a way of life, then you will begin to understand conditions. There's nothing to fear. There's nothing you have to get. There's nothing to get rid of.

(From a talk given at Cittaviveka Buddhist Monastery,  
September 1981)

Bring your attention to this moment, here and now. Whatever you're feeling physically or emotionally, whatever its quality – this is the way it is. And this knowing of the way it is, is consciousness; it's how we experience the now. Be aware of this. When we're fully conscious and aware of here and now with no attachment, then we're not trying to solve our problems, remembering the past, or planning for the future. And if we are doing these things, then we stop and recognize what we're doing. Non-attachment means that we're not creating anything more in our minds; we're just aware. This is reflecting on the way it is.

When we're thinking, planning, dreading or expecting something in the future, this is all taking place in the here and now, isn't it? These are mental states we're creating in the present. What is the future? What is the past? There's only now, this present moment. We may then wonder: 'What is it that knows?' We always want to define the subject: 'Is that the real me? Is that my true self?' This subjectivity, questioning and wanting to find some identity is also a creation in the

now. If we trust in the silence, there's nobody. We can't find anybody in the sound of silence. The whole problem ceases.

How much substance does any memory have in the present? Does it have any permanent essence? Is somebody you remember really a person? Think of your mother right now. Even if your mother passed away many years ago, you can still think of 'mother' and perceptions and memories come up. Where is your mother right now as you're thinking about her? She's a perception in the mind. Knowing that memory and perception are created in the present is not a criticism or negation; it's simply putting thoughts into a context of what they really are.

We often live in a realm of time and self and believe in it totally, lost in our own creations. But in seeing the Dhamma, we're finding a way out of this trap of the mind. Our society totally believes in these delusions so we can't expect much help from society. For instance we love history, don't we? 'You know, Buddha was actually a living human being. It's a historical fact.' That makes it real to us because we have all the confidence in history. But what is history? It's memory. If we read different histories about the same period, they sound very different. I studied British colonial history in India: an account written by a British historian is very different from an account written by an Indian historian. Is one of them lying? No, they're probably both honourable scholars but they each see and remember in different ways. Memory is like that. So when you explore memory, just observe that memories come and go. And when they're gone, consciousness is what remains. Consciousness is now. This is the path: here and now, the way it is. Use what is happening now as the path rather than going along with the idea that you are somebody from the past who needs to practise to get rid of all your defilements in order to become enlightened in the future. That is just a self you create and believe in.

We suffer a lot when feeling guilty about memories of the past. We remember things we've said, done or shouldn't have done and

feel terrible. We hope everything will go well in the future and then worry about whether everything will go wrong instead. Things could go all wrong or they could go all right – or partially right and partially wrong. Anything could happen in the future. That’s why we worry, isn’t it? People go to fortune tellers thinking the future may be very frightening, not knowing what the result of their decisions will be: ‘Have I made the right choice?’ And the only thing that’s certain about the future – the death of the body – is something we try to ignore. Just thinking about the word ‘death’ stops the mind, doesn’t it? It does for me. It’s not particularly polite or politically correct to speak of death in casual conversation: ‘What is death? What will happen when I die?’ Not knowing upsets us. We have various theories – like reincarnation, being rewarded by a better rebirth or being punished by a worse birth. Some people speculate that once you’ve attained human birth you may still be reborn as a lower creature. And then there’s the school that says no, once you’ve taken birth in the human form you cannot be reborn as a lower creature. Or the belief in oblivion – once you’re dead, you’re dead: that’s it. Nobody really knows, so we ignore it or suppress it.

But this is all happening in the now. We’re thinking of the concept of death in the present. The way the word ‘death’ affects consciousness is like *this*. This is knowing the not-knowing in the now. It’s not trying to prove any theory. It’s knowing: the breath is like this, the body is like this, the moods and mental states are like this. This is developing the path. Saying it’s ‘like this’ is a way of reminding ourselves to see this moment as it is rather than be caught in some idea that we have to do something, find something, control something or get rid of something.

Developing the path, cultivating *bhāvanā*, is not just formal meditation. It’s about observing how you practise in daily life – at home, with your family, in the workplace. The word *bhāvanā* means being aware of the mind in the present moment, wherever you are. Developing sitting meditation means spending so many minutes every morning and every evening. It means having the discipline to create

time in your daily life to stop your activities, the momentum of duties, responsibilities and habits, and spend that time in sitting meditation. And it also means reflecting and paying attention to the here and now.

It's so easy to be planning the future or remembering the past, especially when nothing really important is happening right now. But so much of life is not special: it's like this. People suffer over things they've done or shouldn't have done in the past. All the guilty moments of the past can come flooding back and people get stuck in a hell realm they've created for themselves. This is all happening in the present and this is why the present moment is the door to liberation, the gate to the Deathless. Awakening to this is not about suppressing, dismissing, defending, or blaming; it is what it is, attending to a memory. 'This is a memory' is an honest statement. It's not a dismissal of the thought; it's no longer regarding it with such personal attachment. Memories when seen clearly have no essence. They dissolve into thin air.

Try taking a guilty memory and deliberately sustaining it. Think of some terrible thing you've done in the past and then determine to keep it in your consciousness for five minutes. Keep thinking about it and you will see how difficult it is to sustain. But when that same memory arises and you resist it, wallow in it or believe in it, then it can hang around the whole day. A whole lifetime can be filled with guilt and remorse. So just seeing it the way it is, is a refuge. Every time you're aware of what you're thinking – not being critical, even if you're thinking something really ugly and nasty – you're getting to be an expert. This is what you can trust. As you develop this and have more confidence in it, your awareness will become a stronger force than your emotions, your defilements, your fears and desires. At first it may seem like emotions and desires are much stronger and it's impossible to simply be aware. You may have only a few brief moments of awareness and then go back into the raging storm. It may seem hopeless but it's not. The more you investigate and trust this awareness, the more stable it becomes. The seemingly invincible power of the emotional qualities, obsessions and

habits will lose that sense of being the stronger force. You will find that your real strength is in awareness, not in controlling the ocean and waves and cyclones and tsunamis and all the rest that you can't possibly ever control anyway. It's only in trusting in this one point - here and now - that you realize liberation.

(From a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 3 July 2005)



## 32 | Being the Knowing

In the morning chanting we reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. These reflections are not just about Buddhist doctrines and the immediacy of practice. We reflect on the Buddha – that which is pure, mindful, knowing; it's not personal. In being alert there is no person. What we're practising here is just that attentiveness. We reflect on the here and now of this day. Yesterday is a memory; everything that has happened before is a memory. Try to remember something from yesterday: deliberately remember it, and you will see that the memory arises and ceases in the mind. In meditation practice you can use the memory of yesterday to take you to emptiness rather than indulging in it or suppressing it. You can see that what you remember is not what you are and 'yesterday' is merely a condition of the mind that we can experience. Similarly, 'tomorrow' is the unknown – and we open our mind to not-knowing.

There is what we remember: the past. There is what we don't know: the future. And now is the knowing; right now. Knowing the way it is now is like this – the suchness. We are not giving it a quality; there is no description but rather we are pointing to this awareness, this mindfulness. We can reflect on the qualities – whether our bodies are

feeling good or not so good, whether we feel high or low, whether it is hot or cold or whatever. We reflect on the qualities that we might be experiencing: 'This is the way it is.' So whether we feel inspired or depressed, vigorous or tired, sickly or healthy; whether we are happy or miserable; whether we feel too cold or too hot or just right, or hungry or not hungry; whether we feel confident or uncertain – these are all in the perspective of 'now' as the knowing: being here, being now.

When you don't know something, what is your mind like? What will happen tomorrow? What will happen ten years from now? Will the world still be here or will they blow it up? Or maybe the Golden Age will begin. These are all speculations about the future. But what you can know right now is that 'ten years' time' is merely a perception of the future and that we don't know what will happen then. It's the unknown. But we can be the 'knowing' – knowing the unknown, knowing the known. This 'being the knowing' is the way of the Buddha.

People often ask about what happens when you die. Death, the unknown; we don't know yet, it hasn't happened to us. This not-knowing is what you know for sure. Anything else is a speculation about what might happen – where your soul goes and so on – and we might choose to see it in a certain way, but that's something else. The truth of the matter is that right now at this moment and being completely honest with myself, I can say I really don't know what happens when anybody dies. But I can be open to the not-knowing; I can know that feeling of not-knowing. I can know living. I can recognize the body is alive. Life is like this; life is this way. Having a human body is like this. It has feelings and emotions and has eyes, ears, nose and tongue. It's sensitive and is aware of things – it gets tired, it gets sick, it gets old. All these things are part of being alive, of having this living body.

So we reflect on the way it is, on being alive and what that's like, and we recognize death – not by denying it but by realizing that it's what we don't know. Right now we can contemplate the life of a body. The body is alive and there is consciousness, feeling and sensitivity.

There are desires that come and go; there are fears. And all these things come and go in the mind. Then there is the emptiness of the mind, where conditions arise and cease. We can know mentally where things begin and end. So we use mentality as a study of the microcosm: being the knowing, being that which is alert to the arising and ceasing of mental states.

Notice what happens when you are empty – when there is no thought in your mind, no thought of the emptiness even. There is simply awareness. When there is emptiness like that, is it a kind of nothing state? What is it? Is it an unpleasant, annihilating state? Is it oblivion? Attention is still there, as are alertness, awareness, and mindfulness but with no thought, and you are not following feelings or moods. Then there is the sound of silence which is very peaceful, still and calm. We move towards that stillpoint of calm, of non-attachment, rather than just following the habit formations, pulled along by everything – controlling and manipulating. In this stillness of the sound of silence, there is clarity, there is intelligence, there is knowing. It's not a dead, black hole of nothingness – which is what some people are frightened of. They're frightened that if they aren't busy going from this to that, they will be annihilated or drop into a black pit. But that is a fear that you create – an image you create out of fear – it's not the way it is at all!

Think for a moment about the feeling of wonder. When there is wonder, what is that? It's as if you are open to some great mystery. It's wonderful: you are not trying to understand it and control it and name it, you just open to it – open to the mystery of life and death, to the way things are. It's a wonderful feeling in the sense of being wonderful. It's open, alert and humble. When you are innocent and humble, you are not trying to control or grasp it any more. In the same way, 'nibbāna' is merely a concept for something that is here and now, for non-attachment. To be aware of non-attachment, you have to be alert now. So don't see nibbāna as a state you will attain in the future if you work hard now. It's not a case of 'I'll be alert, I'll realize nibbāna next

year'; somehow that's missing the point. See it as what is immediate and near to you instead of conceiving it all as very far away and difficult and remote.

I present these images for your reflection. I hope the thoughts and concepts will help you to contemplate your own experience.

(From a retreat at Amaravati Buddhist Centre in 1985)

## 33 | Awakened Awareness

We have this opportunity to reflect on the Dhamma. This ability to ‘reflect’ should be emphasized: just notice how everything affects you. Using awareness as your means, just be present and aware; be fully here and now. When we listen to Dhamma *desanās*, we can use the thinking mind to see whether we agree or disagree – but it’s not about whether you approve or disapprove. Whatever reaction you have, just be aware of it. It is what it is. Be the knower of that which is aware of the way it is; this sense of awakening attention in the present. This is the only possibility we have to free ourselves from delusion and suffering. As long as we follow our likes and dislikes and our approvals or disapprovals, then we’re caught in that realm – the duality of our thoughts.

Reflect on what thinking really is. We have language and a retentive memory – the natural part of our human state. Thinking is a dualistic function of the mind: good/bad, right/wrong, heaven/hell. Thinking is for comparison; it’s a critical function. We think about what is the best or the worst or how things should be or shouldn’t be. Of course our conditioning is based on thinking, on developing thought as the highest human attainment, so we develop reason and our rational abilities – but notice that thinking is a creation. We’re very strongly

identified with and bound to our own thoughts and this limits us, binds us to a system that is basically unsatisfactory.

The Buddha pointed to suffering or ‘unsatisfactoriness’ as a Noble Truth, saying that as long as we bind ourselves to what is unsatisfactory, we can never feel satisfied, complete or whole – we’re always identifying with what is incomplete and unfulfilled. But there is the opportunity in this present moment for awakened attention. This phrase refers to the simple immanent ability of being present – of attentiveness, of opening to this conscious moment. We’re not trying to define or judge it, but to recognize the natural ability we all have to pay attention: to be fully here. We can be fully present without projecting anything of our self or ideas onto this moment. Projection is based on thinking how things should or shouldn’t be, or what we like or don’t like.

This present moment is all there ever is. There’s nothing more than this moment. In the present we can conceive of the future and we can remember the past, so we regard time as our reality. We’re bound to calendars and clocks. Our sense of our self is a time-bound condition. With this condition, I am this body and I’m seventy years old because this body was born seventy years ago. I don’t remember being born and just assume that it happened, and right now this is the result of that birth. We’re experiencing consciousness at this very moment through this particular conscious human body. It is a seventy-year-old form and has been conditioned by culture and language to think and perceive things in certain ways.

When we’re born, we’re experiencing consciousness in a separate form. But notice that the body is a natural condition; we didn’t create it. We don’t create consciousness. What we create is the sense of a self, an identity within the conditioned realm. As we grow up, we become bound to this limited condition of the physical form we have and we attach to the memories, the cultural conditioning, our ethnic background and gender. This conditioning process is artificial; it’s made by humans and in the long run it’s very unsatisfactory. There’s always a sense that

something is missing, that something is incomplete. There's a lack of something in our lives. So we start going around trying to fill up this emptiness – through seeking others, or position, power, wealth and so forth. We may think that if we acquire wealth or develop a relationship with somebody else, this will fulfil us in some way and this sense of lack will disappear. But it doesn't. What's really lacking is mindfulness. The Buddha pointed to this in a very direct way and the Buddha's teaching has been propagated in the world for 2,547 years – but not many of us have gotten the point. Sometimes we identify with the conventions of Buddhism rather than using the conventions for awareness. All the forms, symbols, icons and traditions are for awakening, for developing awareness in order to free ourselves from delusion. If you're identifying with any form of Buddhism, it's still a delusion.

Admittedly, we have to start from delusion. Years ago when I first started to meditate, I had this idea that 'I am a very confused, unhappy person and I am going to practise meditation in order to become enlightened in the future, if I possibly can.' So I started out from an assumption that I was an unhappy person who needed to do something called 'meditation' in order to become something called 'enlightened' in the future. That's how it seemed for me at the time and I just operated from that assumption. Buddhist meditation was what attracted me at the time so I pursued that with the idea of attaining enlightenment in the future by really working hard. I gave my all to meditation: 'Go wholly into it, become a monk, give yourself totally to Buddhism and meditation, then you might, possibly ...'. Sometimes it seemed impossible because my personality created endless problems even with Buddhist monasticism. But that starting point at least got me going, so in 1966 I became a samanera in Thailand. I spent that year by myself in a little hut in a meditation monastery in Nong Khai in north-eastern Thailand. They brought food every day, but outside of that I had hardly any human contact. The first night I remember sitting there thinking, 'Oh, now I'm alone

at last and I don't have to be part of the world anymore!' It was like going to heaven.

But when you're alone for a long time, you get lonely. I started remembering everything that happened to me in my life. I was brought up in a family where we were never allowed to show anger, so we developed the means to repress any angry thoughts or expressions. I suppose it was because I had been repressing anger for thirty-two years that when I was alone in this little hut, I found I was angry all the time. I couldn't stop it; it was pouring out. But this was exactly what I was trying to get away from: I wanted to become a monk in order to attain peace. I imagined that living alone in a little hut in the forest, I'd sit there and go into a state of still peacefulness and hopefully stay there. But instead I found I had very few moments of peace. I had what seemed like anger for about three months. There was an unmitigated hatred and anger toward myself and everything.

What was it about? There wasn't any reason for it. I couldn't blame it on the place or the people. But I did have an intuitive sense to stay with it – so I just put up with anger, resentment and hatred. And then it all stopped. Three months in living hell and then suddenly, just by being patient and not trying to repress it – it was gone. I did try suppressing the anger for a while but as soon as I stopped, it would all come bursting forth. I also tried every possible distraction during that time: I'd spend time arranging and rearranging the things in my kuti, desperate for distraction. I had only one book, *The Word of the Buddha* – a collection of the teachings on the Four Noble Truths. So I read that about a hundred times in that year. I started taking this teaching of the Four Noble Truths and applying it to my experience in the present. I really explored the Four Noble Truths – a lot of suffering, I had plenty of the first Noble Truth.

There was this sense of really looking at suffering. Not thinking, analyzing and trying to figure out: 'I'm suffering because I'm from a dysfunctional family and I had to repress my anger when I should

have been allowed to freely express my feelings.’ Not trying to figure out why, just really opening to this anger: recognizing it and consciously accepting that feeling – not making it into anything more than what it was. This is what mindfulness is about. It’s our ability at every moment – and the present is all there ever is – to pay attention to the heart, the ability to be fully conscious and awake. This is the real ‘Buddha knowing the Dhamma.’ This Buddha is internalized because the word ‘Buddha’ means ‘to know.’ Buddha is the knower; consciousness is knowing.

We experience this realm through the senses, through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and through the mind. It has its pleasures, its pains, its goodness, and its badness through what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think. But the knower of this experience is not personal. Your personality is created. On the other hand, consciousness is a natural state that we’re experiencing now. It’s not something that we create or something that we can call ‘mine’. With consciousness in its natural state, we can see things as they really are. We can be aware of thinking: it becomes an object in consciousness. Thinking arises and ceases; as we pay attention, we see the Dhamma or the truth of the way it is. That’s not defining the way it is, it’s pointing to the way it is. So if we want to know the way it is, we pay attention, now. We trust that natural state of awakened attention and, in the immediacy of this moment, we know the Dhamma as it is right now.

In the Dhamma teachings, the Buddha pointed to all conditioned phenomena as impermanent, *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*. When we practise *vipassanā*, *anicca* (impermanence) is to be observed and not to be projected onto our experience. We’re not trying to prove that everything is impermanent as if this is some Buddhist doctrine that we’ve got to prove and believe in and perpetuate. We’re just awakening to the natural flow as it’s experienced here and now. This takes *sati-sampajañña* – mindfulness and our ability to pay attention – a spectrum of awareness that includes everything in this moment.

When you're thinking, you're caught in that sequence of one thought connecting to another. But in an intuitive moment of mindfulness awareness, everything is included – everything belongs in this moment. This intuitive awareness is our ability to receive this moment; it has a sense of receiving, a sense of a relaxed state of attention. It's not about trying to pay attention as some kind of imperative: 'I've got to be mindful and pay attention to this moment' – whatever we think this moment is. It's about learning to trust yourself in a way that you can't if you just keep creating yourself as a personality. If you keep believing that you are your personality, you'll end up full of doubts and you'll read various other scriptures or books and get full of other ideas. Just remember, scriptures are words and man-made.

In *sati-sampajañña* we're tuning in, in a way that isn't dependent on language. I encourage this and the appreciation that it is a natural state for us. It's not a state that requires refined conditions or suitable environments to be able to be mindful. Mindfulness is here and now. It's natural; if we were never mindful, we'd all be dead by now. The fact is, we are mindful but we don't recognize it. Our society doesn't appreciate or value it. We want the successes and the power and the happiness and the freedom and rights and privileges and the best of everything. We don't want the worst. We don't want tyranny, injustice, unfairness, poverty – no, we don't want any of that! This is our society based on ideals and ideals are created through thinking: you can easily conceive of what is the best. At least, I can. I know exactly how everything should be. I know how I should be and I know how you should be. I know how the United States should be. But that's so frustrating, isn't it? I can idealize what a perfect Buddhist monk should be – but I've never been able to be that! It's an ideal, a creation, and ideals don't feel anything.

But in awakened awareness, there is the experience of total sensitivity. Sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thinking – all this is about sensitivity. This is a sense-realm; this is what we're experiencing right now. It's not an ideal moment. It's an experiential moment. We're

feeling something through this body such as pressure or pain or discomfort, or we're aware that we don't notice feeling, or we're feeling something emotionally. This realm of sensitivity is to be reflected on. This is what the Buddha was pointing to – awakened awareness, *sati-sampajañña*, as our ability to receive this moment as it is: physically, mentally, emotionally or however it is. Learn to trust this awareness, this attentiveness to the reality of the moment. It's what's present here and now and it's boundless like space. There's no boundary to consciousness that we can recognize at this moment.

We can contemplate the reality of this moment, not through defining it in personal terms but through using skilful means to help us to observe the way it is. Having a human body is like *this*. We contemplate the four postures: sitting, standing, walking and lying down. These are ordinary. We contemplate the movement of the body through the day and night, and the breathing, the reality of posture, of breath, of sensitivity. We bring attention to the way it is. This is a way of instructing yourself in the present to awaken to the most obvious reality that you're experiencing. We're not idealizing how the body should be at this moment. We're learning to look at what the reality of this moment is, without criticizing or judging it.

Look at emotional experience: we really believe our emotions are ourselves. When we're happy or sad, when we're depressed, when we're frightened, or jealous, envious, resentful, bitter, lustful – there's an awareness of it. I can be aware of whatever emotion I'm experiencing. If I pay attention, if I watch, if I open to it, I can be aware of feeling desire or aversion or fear or anxiety. It's like *this*. This awareness then is willing to embrace the emotional experience of this moment, willing to allow it to be what it is. It's not making any judgements; it's encouraging you to receive them. The emotional energy of this moment is like *this*. In this way we instruct ourselves to pay attention to our emotional world – how it can be so much 'me' and 'mine': my feelings, my desires and my anger. How it creates such a strong and convincing sense of self.

We also identify with our appearance in a very powerful way. What we look like, our health or disabilities are so important. We can get completely lost in aversion to pain or sickness or old age. We can want good health, vigour and youth and desperately create the illusions that make us feel we're young, healthy and good-looking. But you can't sustain that illusion – especially when you're my age. But with 'this is the way it is', we're not making any criticisms about the ageing process of the body; we're receptive, allowing and discerning.

Our ability to discern is wisdom, *paññā*. Discerning isn't saying whether it's good or bad, it just knows the way it is. When we use awareness, when we begin to recognize and cultivate this awareness, then the wisdom faculty starts operating. This wisdom is not a personal ability to think and figure things out. It's a natural discerning ability that operates when we let go of the ego and our delusions. So it doesn't make any sense to claim that wisdom is something that 'I' have attained. The best I can say is that in practising to let go of the ego and of the delusions, then the wisdom is naturally there. It's not an attainment because it's not something I lack or I've ever lacked. It's just something that maybe I've never noticed before or have never allowed to operate.

When I was operating from my personality, it was always creating endless problems for myself and the people around me. I liked the idea of wisdom and I wanted to become a wise person – but it seemed such a remote possibility that I had no hope I'd ever become wise in this lifetime. I was thirty-two years old then with a critical, sceptical mind, very childish emotional habits and a tyrannical, judgemental intellect. That's the dilemma: you've got the intellect and also the emotional world. The intellect is hard line, it says things like: 'Don't be so selfish. You shouldn't act like this. You shouldn't think like that.' It knows everything about how you shouldn't be. Then you're always feeling guilty or inferior or inadequate. So there is confusion. How do you resolve this conflict between the rational mind and the emotional one? For me, there was attachment to the ideal of 'not being a selfish person'

and yet much of my personality was conditioned to be very selfish. I thought of myself first. I was very much caught in self-aversion and guilt around my own vanity and self-centredness. How do you resolve that issue?

It seemed then that the way of dealing with this could only be done through what we call meditation. When I use that word ‘meditation’, I’m pointing to what we call in Pali, *bhāvanā* or cultivation of awareness. This means cultivating the Eightfold Path. Now you might like the idea but do you really know what that entails and do you trust it? In the teaching of the Four Noble Truths, it means you begin to explore the first Noble Truth of suffering and investigate the insecurity, confusion, or jealousy and to look into both the strong emotions like anger or greed, or just the loneliness and boredom. It’s about recognizing: ‘It’s like *this*’ and opening to it. It’s not about trying to get rid of it or analyze it, but allowing it to be fully conscious and in allowing anything to be fully conscious, you can then let go of it.

In the second Noble Truth there is the insight into letting go because the delusions we have are around identity and attachment to desire. This is ignorance of these Four Noble Truths. So applying the Truths to experience here and now is a skilful means for looking at the reality of this moment in a way you might otherwise never think of. Suffering is the most ordinary human experience you can ever conceive of: loss of the loved, not getting what you want, not liking what you have. This is a universal human condition and it’s through exploring and investigating these Four Noble Truths that you have the insight into letting go into non-attachment. This is the third Noble Truth: the realization of non-attachment, the reality of non-attachment.

The fourth Noble Truth is the cultivation of awareness. It’s a connected awareness. Awareness isn’t a creation; it’s not a dependent state. It’s not a refined experience. It is natural and self-sustaining. Once we recognize it, it sustains itself. It’s not up to ‘me’ to make it happen. It’s not ‘me’ trying to be mindful anymore. Just recognize the reality of

mindfulness: *sati-sampajañña* is just *this* and trust in it, surrender to it. Then investigate the experiences you're having, physically, mentally, emotionally – whatever they might be.

The ability to meditate then is about breaking through the illusions and cultural conditioning that we are conditioned with. Mindfulness gets us beyond the cultural conditioning. It's not a culture and doesn't belong to any religion; it's not male or female and it's not Buddhist. It is natural, it's here and now. Awareness has no quality other than awareness. As we recognize it, we awaken – merely through the ability to pay attention – with this state of poised receptivity in the present that includes everything, both the pleasant and painful, the wanted and unwanted. This then is the way out of suffering. This is the Path. This is the gate to the Deathless, to the ultimate reality.

(From a talk given at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, 18 June 2005)

## 34 | Relaxed Attention

There is this sense of a non-striving, relaxed attention, an opening and receiving. But if we grasp at the idea of it, then even the word 'relaxation' can be an effort or a compulsive striving to relax. Don't grasp at ideas and then try to make life fit into what you're perceiving. Just be aware of that sense of having to strive or get something and then return to the sense of relaxed attention, *sati-sampajañña*. It's an attentiveness to being present, a relaxed state of being held by an intuitive effort. It's like balancing yourself - if it's too much on the right or too much on the left, you just know. You find that point of balance through intuitive awareness rather than through someone telling you how to do it.

Notice how children learn to walk: they experiment, they crawl and pull themselves up on the furniture and they learn how to balance. They learn by intuition and not through their parents telling them how to walk. If you've never done it before, even the best advice doesn't mean very much until you get the feeling for it yourselves. For myself, I've found the sound of silence to be a balance point in consciousness. It's self-sustaining. You don't create it. You just open to it, recognize it and relax with it.

There are these factors of the Eightfold Path to help you find this balance point: right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, *sammā-vāyāmo*, *sammā-sati*, *sammā-samādhi*. It's open, balanced and receptive and once you recognize this it seems effortless. But the momentum of habits is strong and it's easy to forget. The thinking mind starts doubting and we get distracted from this relaxed attention. At the point when you suddenly recognize this distraction, start again from the present and don't give it a second thought; don't get caught in self-criticism. It's not a matter of trying to be perfect – to get something and sustain it – so that every time your mind wanders you condemn yourself for not being mindful or not being a good meditator. That's another trap. The thinking mind is such a strong force in our lives that we're easily caught in thinking that this is some personal defect. Actually there's nothing wrong with thinking – but we need to learn to not be caught in that habitual thinking process with its proliferating tendencies. As soon as we recognize we're thinking then return to the silence. Listen out for the sound of silence. Train yourself to do this more and more and begin to recognize the balance point, the naturalness of it and the ordinariness of it. We might think of it as some kind of spiritual attainment or some kind of intense meditative state; such ways of thinking make it into something extreme. Don't think about it. Don't try to make it into some kind of rare experience or spiritual attainment. Just use it in a very practical way until you feel at ease with it.

With relaxed attention focused on the sound of silence, even chanting begins to become more developed. '*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato*' stops the mind from wandering and has a reflective quality. We begin to recognize that these are beautiful words expressing beautiful concepts. So why worry about thinking and getting caught in proliferating when you can think of beautiful words like '*bhagavato*' and '*arahato*'? This is how I developed a devotional side to my religious practice. So when we think of '*bhagavato*' – 'the Blessed', what does

blessed mean? What is blessed? We translate *bhagavato* into the English word – but what does that really mean right now? A word like this is quite powerful when you make it conscious; such words convey very beautiful states of mind. And when I'm in this sound of silence, I feel blessed by the chanting because it stops that proliferating, nagging, tyrannical superego I have. The tyrant ceases and there's this state of being blessed. Blessings are always present – it's whether you're aware of them or not. And when I'm caught in striving and complaining about life then of course I don't feel blessed.

But what is it that knows this? It knows when I'm in my complaining, negativity, blaming and so forth. I'm not just trying to suppress this tendency but to really feel the effects of thinking negative thoughts. I notice if I start complaining then I feel this way. It's like an intuition, an awareness of the negative state. Knowing this is not pleasant at all, it's not peaceful, and it's not a state I want to cultivate. I don't want to be reborn in this life as a complaining, critical person because it's a kind of hell realm. So then the devotional side of the religious path becomes more apparent but not through sentimentality or blindly working oneself up into ecstatic states. Devotion arises through using the reflective capacity of thought, as in: 'What does blessing mean? What is blessedness at this moment?' It always means something good, something beautiful; you don't feel separate and isolated and lonely and complaining. So in being blessed by this stillness, this still-point, then words like '*bhagavato*', '*arahato*', '*sammāsambuddhassa*', that are at the heart of the traditional Theravada mantra: 'Homage to the Blessed, Noble, and Perfectly Enlightened One' suddenly offer a beautiful reflection. Chanting '*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*' in the context of the sound of silence is not just perfunctory parroting of Pali words. I can hear it in the stillness.

Now if you're coming purely from willpower ... 'I've got to get this ...' and 'I want to attain the *jhānas*', then this kind of effort is a joyless wilfulness. It's 'me' – at least this is how I experienced it. In the

beginning, a lot of it was pretty joyless because I was so wilful. That's all I knew: how to operate from striving, making myself do things, disciplining myself and trying to attain states. This idea of attainment – getting something – was a very strong, very habitual pattern, but it was also joyless; it made the monastic life a joyless grind. There was too much intensive 'me' trying to get something from it and demanding results. And so I wasn't developing the requirements of *jhāna* practice in any way. I started from reading the *Visuddhimagga* and trying to attain these levels of concentration according to what I read in books. It was interpreted by the ego and put into practice through sheer wilfulness, with me trying to succeed and 'get' something. Even when I would be concentrated, there was always this sense of loss.

The lack of joy was particularly obvious when I had malaria. I felt a kind of despair because up until then I really thought I was getting somewhere with my *samādhi*. I was disciplined, sitting many hours a day concentrating the mind, really getting somewhere and then I started to feel weak and enervated – couldn't meditate, couldn't concentrate, couldn't do anything. Then came the suffering of: 'I had something then and now I've lost it', and 'This malaria is the problem.' But Luang Por Chah's reflection, when I complained to him about it, was: 'Malaria, that's your practice. Learn from that.' So I did. Rather than just complain about it and resent it: 'How can I get rid of this malaria so I can get my practice together again because it's disrupting it', I started observing: 'What's it like to have malarial fevers and the physical sensations that come from having this disease?' It's a different way, isn't it? Luang Por Chah did not see any kind of problem with malaria as being obstructive to mindfulness. So the Path isn't obstructed through disease. The big obstructions are ignorance and self-view and all the rest. These are the fetters, the fetters that obstruct the Path, not the malaria, not anything else – it's the way we understand things. Right understanding then is where the Path becomes apparent. This Path is not obstructed by any of the conditions that we're experiencing.

In the monastic life you have what they call *samaṇa-saññā*, which means the attitudes and demeanour of a renunciant. So this is encouraged through reflections on an alms-mendicant lifestyle. The Buddha allowed four requisites: the robe, an alms-bowl to collect food, a shelter for the night and medicine for illnesses – four basic requisites. One way of developing a monastic lifestyle is to reflect on these four requisites, which leads to contentment. Contentment with what you have is a very basic mental state leading towards understanding, towards happiness, towards developing *jhānas*. The *jhānas* are quite easily developed not through ‘me’ striving to get them but through contentment, a basic sense of contentment and gratitude. Before I began to feel contentment or gratitude, my attempts at meditation were coming from the ego: this sense of ‘me’ striving, proving myself, getting something. And then resentment when I’d lose what I had gained. That was not joyful! I didn’t experience joy in monastic life when I was operating like that, just trying to use meditation to get something for myself.

In the life as we lived it with Luang Por Chah there was a lot of this *samaṇa-saññā* reflection. This helped me to appreciate it because the alms-food that people offered, the robes and the shelter for the night were not always of the highest standard – but there is the practice of being content with whatever is offered. So if nobody offered any nice material, then the Buddha would allow monks to go and take refuse rags (*paṃsakula*) or the cloth used to wrap a corpse. But every year at the end of the Vassa, the rainy-season retreat, there are Kaṭhina ceremonies. This is when laypeople buy or weave material and offer it to the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis so they don’t have to go out into the charnel ground and get some disgusting kind of cloth that a corpse has rotted in. This reflection brings about a sense of gratitude to the lay community for always offering the best material they can find. When you reflect in this way on the effort and generosity extended by the lay community, gratitude, *kataññu-katavedi*, arises. It is a powerful experience.

This is the foundation for the holy life: not the attaining of *jhānas* or getting to nibbāna but the humility of simple gratitude for the alms-food offered. As an alms-mendicant on *pindabaht*, you accept whatever people drop into the bowl and you feel grateful for the food that's offered. I found this to be very helpful because when you live in Thailand, you are the receiver of so much goodness and generosity every day. Where I lived, the village people in rural Thailand were often very poor but what they had they shared quite joyfully – not only with the Thai monks but also with the Western monks. Contemplating the four requisites in this way, one can only feel gratitude.

There is the tendency to be always wanting something you don't have: a higher standard of living or in meditation, some kind of attainment. What is it like to always feel you're not good enough and you have to get something that will improve this? So that even when you come to the meditation hall, you're sitting in meditation in order to obtain something. That pushy movement of the mind: it's very unpleasant when you see this attitude of 'I've got to get something I don't have; I've got to get rid of my bad thoughts, my bad moods.' You're always having to do something. This is the *bhava-taṇhā*, *vibhava-taṇhā*, the second Noble Truth, the cause of suffering: grasping, desire for becoming or desire to get rid of something. Wanting something is always based on idealizing or remembering.

But that which is aware of this puts the 'wanting' into a perspective where you can see it and recognize the suffering you create by attaching to it, being caught in these desires, and enslaved by these desires. It feels like something's always wrong; and when I get something, wanting to keep it and then getting very upset if somebody disrupts my concentration. I used to get very selfish and annoyed in the meditation hall about really minor things: somebody moving around and making a noise like people coughing and nylon jackets with Velcro fastenings. You recognize that it's like this because you don't want that; you don't want that noise or disruption. You're trying to get or

keep hold of something you like. *Bhava-taṇhā*, *vibhava-taṇhā* causes a control-freak attitude. It's something that meditators often get. It's not a peaceful state; it's always under threat. If I lose control or if somebody misbehaves, then my mental state is affected and I'm controlled by resentment or anger.

So in developing this sense of contentment and gratitude, I find it brings me into a place where the *jhānas* are coming from, a more stable foundation than from my personal wish to accomplish something. These *jhāna* factors are quite available: *vitakka-vicāra*, *pīti-sukha*, *ekaggatā*. There's *vitakka-vicāra*, bringing the subject into consciousness, the thought itself. The subject of *mettā* practice or loving-kindness leads to *pīti-sukha*, rapture, well-being and mental happiness, which leads to *ekaggatā* or one-pointedness. All these are coming from contentment and gratitude rather than from 'me' trying to attain something that I want. This is very much what Luang Por Chah was pointing to in the monastic life that we lived in Wat Pah Pong: developing this foundation of contentment and gratitude. I used to get into a tearful state – tears come to your eyes through the joy and happy mental state of rapture. How blessed we are by the generosity of the laypeople that allows us this opportunity to practise the Dhamma! Reflecting in terms of devotion makes one's life a very joyful and beautiful experience.

(From a retreat at Spirit Rock Meditation Center, 30 June 2005)



## 35 | There is an Escape

I'd like to begin by first saying a few words on the third foundation of mindfulness, mindfulness of the state of mind. With this, I've found it very helpful to contemplate what mood I am in. My character is one that wants to have a nice life where everybody is smiling and saying, 'Everything's OK' – even if it isn't. Life can be lived on that level: not daring to bring up or admit, let alone contemplate, the way things are because we feel threatened or frightened and a part of us doesn't really want to know. We aren't ready or we don't feel we can take it. Or we don't know ourselves or understand things to the extent where we can deal with what seem to be bad habits or personal problems. There's also the fear there could be something basically wrong with oneself: 'Maybe there's a screw loose or I've missed out on something when I was born.' This is the problem: when you look at yourself you don't really understand why you are this way.

When I was young, men never admitted things; we played roles, we acted out the macho style: 'Nothing frightens me, I'm not afraid of anything', and we gave the appearance of being invincible and tough. In the Navy, I remember, everybody was playing this role; everybody was saying they were tough – but I was scared to death. Nowadays

people are more willing to admit these kinds of things to each other and to themselves – in a listening rather than a confessional way. But I really couldn't bear to feel confused. I always wanted to know exactly how things were supposed to be and have everything neatly arranged so that I'd feel secure. If I didn't, there was this uncertainty and confusion and I'd resist that feeling. I'd always try to get rid of it. What I suggest now is: when you do feel uncertain or insecure or confused by anything, take the opportunity to contemplate the feeling, just look inward and ask, 'What is it like?' Just observe the mood as an object of mind without judging it and see what happens.

One can bring up the mood of doubt to stop the thinking mind. So in not knowing something, or in not being sure, or in using a question like 'Who am I?' (or any question that will put you into the state of doubt), you can be aware of that gap in the mind where there's no thought. You use doubt as a skilful means to develop the ability to know *not-knowing*. So notice the space between the words, for example, 'I am a human being.' Before you think it, there's a pause, then 'I', and there's a gap, 'am', and there's a gap, 'a', there's a gap, 'human', there's a gap, 'being'. In this way, you get used to noticing and paying attention to that place where the thinking mind is not. It helps you to develop connected mindfulness in which the mindfulness isn't just coming from being aware of sensations or things, but also from being aware of no-thing and of the background, the emptiness, the space, and the silence. You have to awaken to notice that because the mind is not conditioned to noticing it, even though it's obvious. But you can suddenly notice and awaken to the way it is.

So by contemplating the mood: 'What kind of mood am I in?' I can go into the body and see if there's anxiety or if I feel dissatisfied, ill at ease, happy or positive. Whatever the mood or the kind of internal atmosphere, I can be aware of it as an object. Normally we manipulate our moods and try to think positively in order to feel better because it seems like there isn't an escape from the condition. But getting used to

observing the mood means we're no longer a victim of moods nor are we resisting or indulging in the moods we're experiencing. This ability to know what state of mind we're in and how it is in terms of its quality, is mindfulness of the state of mind. With this, there is an escape from suffering; there is an escape from the conditioned and the born and the created and the originated:

*There is the Unborn, Uncreated, Unoriginated. If there were not the Unborn, Uncreated, Unoriginated, there would be no escape from the born, the created, the originated. But because there is the Unborn, the Uncreated, the Unoriginated, there is an escape from the created, the born, the originated.*  
(Itivuttaka 43)

This kind of escape is encouraged: to free oneself from being bound and caught in the death-bound state – death-bound because if you're attached to the five khandhas, you're attached to death. Everything in these khandhas – your thoughts, your memories, your feelings and your body – is going to die. When people think they're attached to life, they are really attached to death. They love life, are fascinated by the conditioned realm, and have a fairy tale or naive hope that the fulfilment of desire will be the answer to their suffering. But it doesn't take that much reflection to see that as long as desire is your attachment and your delusion, it will perpetuate itself. You get momentary gratification; that's about the best you can expect. Then it starts again looking for something else and it goes on and on because the basic problem is the identification with and attachment to desire. But our true nature isn't desire, isn't death. There is the Unconditioned, Unborn, Uncreated, Unoriginated. So if it's timeless and apparent here and now, then what can it be in terms of experience at this moment?

Practising in order to get something in the future or practising for personal improvement always takes you to suffering. The way to realize or to be enlightened is to: awaken to the present, trust your ability to

listen, and just be in a state of simple awareness in the present. It seems difficult because we're not used to sustaining that. We're programmed for passions, for going up and down the scale of greed, hatred and delusion in all its permutations. But there is that which is aware of the passions and the extremities; that which is established through mindfulness of body, feeling, mind-states and mental phenomena. With mindfulness, examination and reflection on the five khandhas allows us to change our attitude towards them. Instead of seeing them in this personal way as 'me and mine', we can contemplate their changing nature.

The constant requirement in all these experiences is mindfulness. You can be aware of the arising of a condition like an inhalation – it begins, reaches a peak, then the exhalation begins and it ends ... *and there is that which is aware of the arising and ceasing*. Similarly, you can be aware of whatever mood you're in as changing. When you are patient enough and willing to sustain attention, a mood is definitely impermanent; it isn't a solid block. Yet if we don't recognize our moods, we're always either indulging in them or resisting them and they have a great influence on how we experience life.

If I just follow my moods and mental conditioning, I go all over the place. But as soon as I wake up and pay attention then my relationship to the conditions changes. I'm no longer caught in the conditioned realm. I'm observing it. I am the state of knowing and am aware of the changingness of conditioned phenomena. And behind all conditioned phenomena is the Unconditioned. The silence is a background. It embraces and is not a condition in itself that will annihilate another condition. With a condition you can only have one at a time; you can only have either A or B or C. When you're using intuitive awareness, you are in the embracing background where the conditions are in perspective. They are the way they are, they feel and they move, they seem to be whatever, and they're like this. Then they end, they cease.

On the personal level I can be afraid of all this. Even thinking about enlightenment or realizing the Deathless can be seen as deluded

overreaching. We prefer to think of ourselves in negative terms. We feel humble and think that by admitting our faults we're being honest. People like to think of themselves in terms of their blemishes and faults – but we have to let go of that luxury of being a damaged person, a helpless victim of circumstances, the cult of the victim. 'My mother never loved me and that's why I am the way I am.' If you're attached to those roles, you'll always experience life in that way. There is a release from the suffering of delusion and from the power of the conditioning. But we may think: 'Yes the Buddha did it but that was over 2,500 years ago, so maybe it's only hearsay.' But it doesn't even matter whether the Buddha ever existed because if you practise and develop mindfulness, the teaching works. We're not demanding historical accuracy – we just want to know: does it work? Is there an escape from suffering? When does this happen? Do you know when there is no suffering?

This realm we live in as human individuals is basically a place that is forever changing and is kammic. Everything depends on everything else and it's all interdependent and interconnected. So having a human body connects us to the condition of ageing and natural suffering, natural unsatisfactoriness. I didn't create this body; this is not my creation; it's a condition that operates according to the laws of nature. I could create suffering around the ageing process of this body if I want. People pay for cosmetic surgery to get the lines out, look younger and so forth because when you're identified with the body and it starts getting old, you suffer from what is natural.

When we feel pain or discomfort, or when things go wrong and we get blamed for things we haven't done, or maybe when a loved one dies – the pain is a natural feeling but we don't have to create suffering around it. That's the way it is, the kammic inheritance in the present is like this, and suffering is caused through attachment to these conditions. When there isn't any attachment, although we still feel the discomfort and there's the kammic inheritance of our life, we don't create anger, resentment, resistance, blame, self-pity, fear, or desire around it.

So I advise people to try to simplify things, not to fill their time with activities but to allot more free time to develop meditation in daily life. View mindfulness as something to really treasure and respect. If you regard meditation as something you just do when you have the time, after a while you won't have time for it anymore – I guarantee it! Everything else seems much more urgent than meditation because meditation looks like you're just sitting there not doing anything. Your family might think: 'He's just sitting there, not doing anything – what good is that? He should be doing something.' That's the kind of society we live in; that's just the way it is. But if you're really interested in developing meditation for yourself, then give it an important place and develop a lifestyle in a way that gives you opportunities for silent reflection. Develop *samatha* and *vipassanā* and then integrate them into daily life. Then you can learn a lot about the way it is.

As insight into the mind develops, you can be aware of what you're feeling about other people, your family, the people you work with or the neighbours. If you feel anger towards your husband, you can at least notice that right now there's anger – it's like this – rather than getting caught up in blaming him or trying not to admit it. Admitting it doesn't mean it's permanent or anything other than 'it's like this', but that helps to relieve the tension because you're not caught. Consider how when you're infatuated with somebody, you don't want to think there's anything wrong with them. Even if they have their faults it doesn't matter; you brush that aside. But when you're blaming someone, it's hard to remember anything good they've ever done. All you can remember accurately is everything bad they've done.

In this practice of mindfulness we can be willing to bear with the bad thoughts, resentments and all these kinds of negative emotions – willing to let them be conscious and come to trust in our refuge. We can just let mind-states be the way they are and not create guilt or resistance around them. It still feels this way – so if it's a bad thought it still feels bad – but your relationship to it is one of kindness or patience

and that allows the condition to cease. It's resolved and it ceases. So if we recognize and understand our moods and the effects they have on us, we do not create suffering around them or in the relationships that we have with other human beings.

(From a retreat at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,  
19 September 1997)



## 36 | Instinct and Aspiration

Our instinctual energies are to be reflected upon and understood for what they are. We must understand that the human body is an animal body. So we have the instinctual drive of the animal kingdom to procreate the species and to survive but in this society we seldom think of our sexual desires and survival mechanisms in this way. We are afraid to look at ourselves as basic instinctual creatures having those kinds of energies. We like to think of ourselves as being on a higher plane, as a person or a personality. We don't like to think that when it comes down to survival, as in a battle for example, we tend to revert to the instinctual realm. And in such a situation when there is no inclination towards a higher ideal or sense of personal integrity and morality, we can quite automatically resort to even brutish behaviour. We have to recognize this. We can't go around feeling superior and looking down on people who participate in a war. How do we know how we would act under those same conditions?

From my own experiences in the military I know that having a sense of personal integrity is very important. Even though I can recognize primordial drives and tendencies, what is even stronger with me is an aspiration for something higher than that. Within the human state there

is also something that aspires. We intuitively know that there is some higher purpose that we can realize in ourselves. That is what religion is about and why human beings have created it. Religion is the attempt to express that intuitive feeling, the mystical sense or aspiration. And yet in a moment we can revert back to primordial behaviour. The conditions are there if we are not aware. And if we regard our basic survival as the most important thing then that very individual sense of 'me' as a person becomes apparent. A sexual impulse can be interpreted as something uniquely personal rather than as a natural impulse. We can even regard our feelings of physical hunger as 'our' greed or we might likewise regard a feeling of aversion to something nasty and ugly as a personal problem.

We need to recognize instinctual nature because if we don't acknowledge it, we tend to suppress or deny it. Then, not quite understanding what has happened, we can become neurotic or confused. The self-view – thinking about ourselves as personalities, as completely separate individuals – is an alienated view and leads to endless complications. When I interpret things personally, everything that I feel and experience has significance and is distinct, even alienated, from everyone else's experience. As a personality and as an individual, I am stuck in being 'me' for a lifetime and that entails being a body – a vulnerable, sensitive and separate creature – and having an identity that can be hurt not only physically but also emotionally. I can be insulted, rejected or despised. Even if others don't actually do this, I can imagine someone may not really like me or may even despise me – whereas they might not be thinking about me at all. Or I may be projecting my attitudes, prejudices and biases onto the people that I live with, thereby affirming or reinforcing my assumptions about my personality. Even when we are living in a protected and efficiently run society, we can still imagine demons and beings that are ready to attack us or take advantage of us. We find ourselves experiencing all kinds of fears and desires interpreted by a mind that is conditioned from the personality-view.

Take a simple personality-view like 'I am my body.' With this, the body is 'me'. It's no longer a condition in nature that follows the natural law – it's 'me'. If it's a male body then I identify with all the things that a culture or civilization produces around manhood/womanhood. And being 'a man' can be a great source of worry to men. We can feel quite concerned about our lack of manhood, our weakness or our vulnerability. We have standards connected with how we should appear to the society around us: moral standards and ideals as to how things should be.

In a similar way, those of us who aspire to mystical union or to ultimate realization can establish very high standards for ourselves – ideals we would like to be able to attain. We'd like to be a person who is enlightened. We'd like to become a Buddha or a saint, or somebody who is not frightened any more, or who is very kind and loving, free from all desires and fears. We may have high standards for our personality – that we should be generous, noble and virtuous – and if we have any feelings lower than that, we feel guilty about them. 'I shouldn't feel like that, I should never get angry, I should be a loving warm, compassionate person.' This is how the mind is programmed and conditioned by the ideal of being the perfect person. It's merely a conditioned reaction, a habitual thinking behaviour, programmed to go off like that. It's not as if there was something wrong with you, as if it were something you shouldn't be or shouldn't feel, that you shouldn't react to or think about. So realize that you can never live up to the high standards you might have for yourself as a person because the standards are simply ideas and ideas are conditions of the mind.

When you fully appreciate through insight the fact that your thinking habits are conditioned and are not-self, you will no longer be so easily hurt or upset by the contents of your thoughts. Your thinking isn't so important because it's not a personal attribute. What we think and how we are feeling isn't going to be interpreted as 'me' and 'mine'. It is what it is. When we feel hateful and miserable,

that's simply what it is – it doesn't need to be interpreted from the personality-view. The way you think or react and what goes on in your mind can be witnessed as Dhamma and seen for what it is. It's not what 'I am', as a person. So we can free the mind from these blind, conditioned reactions.

One of our great desires is to find happiness; it's a condition we have all experienced and would like to have more of. But as Buddhists we sometimes tend to think, 'I'm not seeking happiness; I want to understand suffering', and we create a personality that rejects happiness: 'Let me just watch my mind and understand *dukkha*.' But that's still based on this sense of 'me' wanting to achieve or to understand something. Similarly with the aspiration to realize ultimate reality, *nibbāna* – is it just idealism, sentimentality? It sounds arrogant and conceited. How could I do anything like that! So we exalt the ideas of *nibbāna*, Buddhas and *bodhisattvas* and place them on pedestals so that all we can do is to admire them.

But in meditation we bring attention to the way things are rather than worshipping something high or admiring something way above us. And one aspect of the way things are is to feel awe or a sense of inferiority in regards to what is high, pure and good! Or it may be that our aspiration to realize *nibbāna* is coming from an intuition that this human realm is not really what we are; the intuition that we're not really men or women, not really instinctual creatures. Instead, we notice that being a man or a woman are conditions that we experience in our lifetime. They are the *kammic* result of being born. They are conditions that arise and cease. They are not-self.

The valid aspiration to realize *nibbāna* comes from an intuition that our real home is not as a human being on planet Earth – that this is a transition, a spiritual journey for us. But, we're not trying to deny or reject or pass judgement on the natural law of the conditioned realm. We've nothing against it but there is a determination to understand it, to avoid being caught up and reborn into *any* conditioned realm. This

we can do because as human beings we have the ability to reflect on the whole process.

Reflective thought is something we start taking an interest in when we suffer – whereas when we get too happy, our ability to reflect on anything diminishes considerably. If life is too pleasant or easy, we take it for granted and become dependent on happiness and pleasure so that if we could have a continuous flow of unmitigated happiness and pleasure we would probably settle for that. Yet we find that with all its pleasantness, convenience and comfort, life is still not satisfying and it's difficult to maintain peace and happiness for very long. We experience happy and pleasant moments but so much of our life is really quite unpleasant: for example, having to carry the body around with its less-than-pleasant functions. Then we all have to face the ageing process, the inevitable degeneration and death of our human bodies, as well as the loss of loved ones. This human state is one where we experience a lot of suffering, unhappiness, discomfort and pain.

However it is exactly at this time when we're experiencing unpleasant mental or emotional states that there is this keen interest in trying to understand the situation we're in. We value the heavenly messengers of old age, sickness and death – and the *samaṇa*, the religious seeker. These are the messengers that awaken us. When people do not respect, look at, or try to come to terms with old age, sickness and death, their lives become meaningless and materialistic – as with the present-day Western world: it's trivial. One of the values of being a *samaṇa* and having the visual appearance of a renunciant is that it acts as a sign. It's a reminder to the rest of the world that there is a way to understand our experience of life. We can get beyond it, we can realize ultimate reality, we can be freed from this suffering – there is liberation.

Why do we conform in appearance: shaven heads and wearing the same kinds of robes? Why not express one's 'unique God-given' personality, one's personal way of doing things? Because if you take

the idea of ‘me’ being separate and unique to its logical conclusion, there can only be an experience of total alienation as a personality and that is a completely unsatisfactory experience. That’s why we aim at transcending the personality rather than reinforcing it. We take refuge in Sangha rather than in our personality and nibbāna is our goal rather than happiness. Nibbāna or Deathlessness; we can’t form an image of it. Try to imagine the Unconditioned, Unborn, Uncreated, Unoriginated and you end up with a sense of annihilation, nothingness, with no feeling, no beauty, no goodness, no truth – just a total void and vacuum.

So why are we doing this? People try to think about the Unconditioned, Uncreated, Unborn, Unoriginated in this way and they end up with the view that Buddha was an annihilationist. The thing is, imagination has its limits. You can’t imagine the Unconditioned – so you give up imagining it. If you try to imagine Deathlessness or the Unconditioned, you can notice a sense of blankness where no image arises. Conscious awareness is still operating even though the object which we imagine is no-thing, or blank. Normally we regard reality as the conditioned realm – the images we have, the concepts we create or the ideals we hold to. But if forms, concepts and ideals were all there was then we would always be caught in desire and attachment. It is only through the way of letting go and of non-attachment that we are able to understand the Unconditioned and the conditioned for what they are.

Memories and mental tendencies are unique to each one of us. We each have our own kamma, our own conditions, and all are infinitely variable from one being to another. But when there is reflective thought, we can use thought to bring attention to the way it is rather than create thoughts to grasp onto. We use thought to bring attention to the feeling, to the mood, to the body, to the Dhamma, to the way things are within our own individual experience of life. We can transcend all these conditions and transcending means understanding them as Dhamma, as what they are. They are conditions – they arise and they cease.

So we reflect on the conditioned and the Unconditioned as being inevitably paired. It's not that we're against the conditioned realm and choose instead the Unconditioned. Realization of nibbāna is not a wipeout or a destruction of the conditioned realm; it's an understanding of it. Our conditioned mind tends to imagine that if we regard nibbāna as a realization of the Unconditioned, immortal, ultimate reality, then the conditioned realm is only a realm of delusion. So we reject the conditioned world. However the idea or image of the Unconditioned is not something to be attached to, held to as a view, or believed in as immortal. Allow both the conditioned and the Unconditioned to be realized. The conditioned realm is what it is. It's conditioned by the state we're in: the limitations of our human birth and consciousness. It's only through the conditioned that we can realize the Unconditioned. So don't be deluded by the conditioned and take an attitude of aversion to it, simply understand it as the conditioned realm. Then there is the realization of the Unconditioned.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, 1994)



## 38 | Self and Self-Naughting

Something that interests us all is ourselves – we are the subject of our lives. You are naturally interested because no matter what you think of yourself, you have to live with yourself for a lifetime. But even under the most fortunate circumstances if we don't see ourselves in the right way, we end up creating suffering in our minds: the self-view is something that can give us a lot of misery. The Buddha pointed out that the way to solve our problems is to develop the right understanding and right attitude towards ourselves. It isn't through trying to make everything right and pleasant on the external dimension. We may expect privileges, rights, material comforts – and these do make life more pleasant in many ways – but when our every need is provided for and life is too easy, something in us doesn't evolve. Sometimes it's the struggle through hardship that causes us to develop and mature as human beings. Where we get defeated is when we give in to resignation and apathy. Even if we could live a life of complete comfort and ease, we'd probably find it suffocating! We need to measure ourselves against something. We need to struggle and to learn how to get beyond the limitations that we think we have.

If we surrender to these limitations through wisdom then we find liberation. Life is the experience of restriction and restraint – the experience of being born in the human body and having to live with the laws of nature on planet Earth. Mentally we can soar up into the sky and into the heavens but physically we are bound to limitations that get increasingly restrictive as we grow older. This need not be seen as suffering, because it's the way things are. You can develop a different attitude and learn to accept the limitations – this is not negative resignation; it's just that you realize that what you're looking for is within you. You don't seek it outside or think that it's something far away or inaccessible. It comes through the willingness to calm down and stop resisting, and to listen and awaken to your own conscious experience. But of course the big obstruction is that we have the sense of ourselves being this, that or something else.

We become conscious of the sense of self when we are children. When we're born there's no sense of a self as being anything. But as we grow up we learn what we're supposed to be, whether we're good or bad, loveable or not, approved of or disapproved of. So we develop a sense of ourselves. We also often compare ourselves to others and have role models of what we should be when we grow up. I noticed from my own experience that the ego really started consolidating when I was sent off to school. I was thrown into classrooms with all those children and then I started noticing who was the strongest, who was the toughest and who was the one the teacher liked the best. We saw ourselves in terms of our relationships to others. This develops through a lifetime unless we deliberately choose to change and start looking more deeply. We choose not to just go on living our lives through the conditioning of the mind that we acquired when we were very young. Even when we get older we may still have adolescent attitudes or childish emotional reactions to life that we've been unable to resolve except by suppressing or ignoring them, and these can be very embarrassing or shocking to us.

Buddhists can say that there is no self as if it were a proclamation that you have to believe in: 'THERE IS NO SELF!' In that presentation something in us resists. It doesn't seem true because then what is this experience that we are feeling right now? It seems to be very much a sense of 'myself'. You're feeling, breathing, you see and hear, react to things – people can praise you or criticize you and you feel happy or depressed accordingly. So if this isn't me, then what is it? Am I supposed to go round as a Buddhist believing that I don't have a self? If I'm going to believe in something, maybe it's better to believe that I do have a self because then I can say things like: 'My true self is perfect and pure.' That at least gives some kind of inspirational encouragement to try to live your life rather than saying that there is no self, no soul, and leaving a total annihilation of any possibilities. These are just examples of the use of language; we can say: 'There is no self' as a proclamation, or 'There is no self' as a reflection. The reflective mode is to encourage us to contemplate the self. The Buddha was pointing to the fact that when we really look at these changing conditions, we can begin to see that they are not-self. What we believe in, what we hold to and cling to and assume is not what we really are. It's a position, it's a condition, and it's something that changes according to time and place. Each one of us is experiencing consciousness through the human body that we have, and it's like *this*.

Consciousness is a natural function; there is no sense of self with regard to consciousness. The only reason that we might assume a self is because consciousness operates in terms of subject and object. To be conscious we have to be a separate entity so therefore we are operating from this position of being a subjective being *here*. Then we can get obsessed with a very personal interpretation of everything: every reaction or experience, whether it's instinctive or whatever, can be interpreted in the sense of it being 'me' and 'mine'. We can interpret the natural energies of the body in a very personal way as if this is 'me' and my problem rather than seeing it all as part of the package

we get as a result of being born as human beings. Even a baby when it is first born has the instinctive drive to survive so when it's hungry, it cries. Babies are usually born as beautiful creatures so we naturally want to love and take care of them. This is just the way it is, just Nature operating, but we tend to see it in very personal ways.

We hold views about each other that we carry with us for a lifetime: 'She is like this; he is like that' – and these influence how we react and respond to each other. This can be just through the way that someone looks: pleasing, happy, welcoming, mean and unpleasant, or because somebody praises us or insults us. We can carry resentment about being insulted for a lifetime and never forgive that person. Maybe they did it when they were just having a bad time – but even after thirty years we can still make a problem about it if we want. So this self needs to be examined and contemplated in religious, 'self-naughting' terms. In some ways religion is about relinquishing the selfish tendencies of the mind. So before we can, for example, realize the Kingdom of God we have to let go of our selfish fascinations and obsessions. Or if we are going to realize the true Dhamma, we need to let go of the self-view.

We might all agree that nobody would relish the idea of becoming more and more selfish – but sometimes we don't know how not to be selfish. The strange thing is that when you become a monk or a nun, although you are thinking you are getting rid of selfishness, you sometimes find yourself getting more and more selfish. Your selfishness becomes very concentrated because you can't spread yourself over such a wide area as in lay life, so you become much more aware of your selfish tendencies. And if you condemn it then you seem to be in a hopeless situation because you begin to interpret life from that sense of, 'I'm selfish and I've got to get rid of this selfishness.' One of the biggest problems in our way of thinking is to relinquish that basic premise that 'I am this person and I have got to do something in order to become an unselfish, enlightened person in the future.'

We are conditioned to think this way in our culture: 'Do this and do

that and in the future you will become somebody worthy and acceptable in society.’ This makes sense on the worldly side of life because we start out illiterate. So we have to learn and from then on we have to study all the different subjects in a school in order to become someone who can get through the system. If we fail then we become someone who fails and failure is despised. It’s interesting teaching meditation to people who have this fear of failure – they fear that they are going to fail in meditation but there’s no way you could fail in meditation. It’s not about failure – otherwise even meditation becomes just another way for us to prove ourselves. ‘I can’t do it now. If I practise hard I will become a good meditator and I will become enlightened, hopefully ... But *who* is enlightened?’

People like to check us out to see if Ajahn Sumedho is enlightened or whether anybody else is, or whether we have reached some kind of advanced level. Or are we just blokes who haven’t quite made it? But there is a different way of looking at it. It’s the opposite of seeing ourselves in terms of being somebody who has to do something to become somebody who is better than he or she is right now: ‘I had all kinds of problems and was a very miserable, unhappy person and then practising meditation I saw the light and now I’m happy and fulfilled.’ Instead, the aim of Buddhist meditation is about changing one’s attitude by using the reflective or intuitive function of the mind.

When we go into the stillness of meditation, the sense of oneself will take over; we’ll be filled with all kinds of memories and ideas about ourselves. We sometimes wish that ‘If I go and meditate then I’ll go into stillness and I’ll get out of this ugly scenario of myself.’ Sometimes the mind will suddenly just stop and we’ll experience a kind of bliss or a peace that we have either forgotten or never really noticed before, but the sense of oneself will still operate because of the force of habit. So we develop an attitude of listening to this self not in terms of believing or disbelieving but in noticing what it really is that arises and ceases. Whether we think of ourselves as the greatest or the worst doesn’t

matter; the condition itself comes and goes. Through 'letting go' or 'self-naughting', through not trying to get rid of it but allowing it to go, we begin to experience the true nature of mind which is bliss, silence.

There are moments in our lives when the self does stop functioning and we get in touch with the pure state of conscious experience. When we have these blissful experiences, the desire to have them again immediately takes over and as long as we're attached to the view of wanting bliss we will never get it. *It doesn't work that way.* Wanting it means that we have already made it impossible! So the attitude then is one of letting go of desire, not of trying to suppress desire because that is another kind of desire – the desire to get rid of desire is still the same problem. If we're trying to suppress or annihilate desire then it doesn't work nor does just following the desire. But in this state of attentive awareness, we begin to see what is actually taking place and we can let go of the causes of our suffering. We see how it actually is and we have that intuitive wisdom to let go. In this life as a human being every moment is an opportunity for understanding in the right way. Success or failure doesn't mean anything – because even if we fail we learn from that. This doesn't mean that we don't try or put ourselves forth but that our aim is no longer to succeed; it's to understand things.

It takes a long time to get underneath this self-view because it's an all-pervasive influence on our conscious experience. With meditation we bring attention to very ordinary things like the breath and the body, learn how to bring our attention into the present moment, and learn to sustain our attention rather than be caught up in trying to become something or trying to get something out of our practice. This 'trying to get something' doesn't work because whatever we get we're going to lose. So if you feel you've 'got *samādhi*', that means you're going to lose it also. We go on a formal meditation retreat and we can get into a blissful state. But when the retreat ends we lose it. This doesn't mean we should dismiss retreats. We have to try to look at these opportunities not from the worldly, self-centred position but

from observing how things are when we remove sensory stimulation. Then when we get out of the sensory deprivation tank and walk out into the street, we can feel even worse than before because the coarse world is too unbearable. But if we contemplate this in the right way, we see the sensory deprivation or the sensory stimulation as 'the way it is'. Then it doesn't stir up or aggravate the senses and we're more or less in touch with the mind that is blissful. It's always present but when we're caught in irritation and agitation, we don't notice it.

The Buddhist approach to this – rather than going off and living in a sensory deprivation tank or becoming a hermit – is therefore to develop that awareness; because through mindfulness we begin to realize that the pure nature of the mind is always with us, even now. Even though we might be agitated or irritated, if we are mindful we'll experience a natural bliss beyond that and once we realize it for ourselves then we know how not to suffer. The end of suffering is in seeing things as they really are so that our refuge isn't in this reactive, excited condition of the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, brain and emotions. In these are the conditions that are irritating and agitated. Through mindfulness and wise contemplation of our own personal predicament, we realize that which transcends these conditions. And that is our *real* refuge.

(From a Sunday talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,  
Summer 1993)



## 37 | The Real World

Birth in the human form means there is a feeling of separateness. Consciousness works within the limitations of the body so each one of us has to see things from that particular position. Consciousness is the discriminative function of the mind. So if we attach to consciousness as our identity, there is always the sense of isolation and separation. There are romantic views of finding someone to have communion with. There's a longing in all human beings for a sense of oneness yet that is a totally impossible thing to have on the level of the discriminative mind – which is where most people seek it. If I am this body, this consciousness, then how can I ever be one with anything? Even though momentarily there may be a sense of oneness – through physical union or emotional unity – there is also separation because that which comes together must separate. This is the inexorable law. If we are attached to an idea of union, unity or communion and we feel a moment of it, that conditions the sense of isolation; there is always a sense of loss. So the more we seek communion and oneness in terms of body and consciousness, the more we feel alienated and lonely. Even when there isn't physical or emotional aloneness, we can still feel lonely because of the existential problem of ignorance – the illusion of separation which is created through identification with consciousness.

You can be sitting in a room full of people and feel totally alone. I think one of the loneliest experiences of my life was when at about age twenty-four I went to New York City to live. I was surrounded by millions of people yet I felt so lonely. Where did the loneliness come from? It was due to the longing, the attachment to the belief in 'the real world' and the feeling of not having entered 'the real world' in the same way others had. I didn't realize that everyone had the same problem. I used to think it was a personal flaw in my character, that somehow I was a misfit and that everyone else fitted in – only to find that most people also felt that they were misfits.

This sensory world doesn't fit us. It's a passage that we take in order to learn a lesson. (Hopefully we will learn it!) We don't fit into these roles – we are not really people; we are not really women; we are not really men. These forms are like costumes. They're temporary things that we have to learn to live with, learn how to accept and know. We have to learn from this suffering, this sense of alienation that comes from ignorance.

It probably starts from the moment you're born, from the time you are thrown out into the world. Babies usually cry when they are born; they don't come out laughing. I've never heard of any baby doing that! You are one with your mother and then the umbilical cord is cut. That's the end of that relationship; you are now a separate being. This must be traumatic for the baby. Many of us are longing to get back into that relationship again. We'd like a mother to nurse us and take care of us, protect us and keep us warm. We want to have some nice warm womb to crawl back into, some safe place where we'll be protected and told, 'I love you forever dear no matter what you do, and everything's going to be all right. There's going to be plenty of everything – warmth, food and comfort – forever more.'

If you practise meditation and develop insight into the Dhamma you can investigate to see the real problem. Is there any real separation or is it merely an appearance of separation brought about by attachment

(through desire) to the five khandhas? Consciousness implies desire because as a result of consciousness there's feeling. There are feelings of attraction, repulsion or neutrality and until there is enlightenment we tend to react to feeling with desire. We incline towards beautiful, pleasurable things. We try to get rid of, to run away from ugly or painful things. And the whole range of neutrality is usually unnoticed – unless you write poetry or do something to be more mindful. Usually we're caught in the more extreme reactions to the attractiveness and repulsiveness of sense experience.

There is culture, refinement and beauty in the sensory realm and we can appreciate celestial and ethereal planes of mental creativity. However it is the lower elements that tend to be the easiest things to absorb into: violence, sex, survival and the instinctual functions of the animal world. There is that level and we must learn how to touch the earth and accept instinctual nature, the four elements and planetary life as it is. So meditation isn't an escape from the instinctual world but an opening up to it. It's a way of understanding the world apart from the reactions of indulgence or suppression. We're not trying to deny the animal functions or instincts, or reject them, suppress them, or identify with them as 'me' or 'mine'. We can reflect; we can accept them for what they are rather than for what we believe them to be. Then we can also appreciate the intelligence and creativity of a human mind without becoming attached to it.

Attachment is the crux of the matter. Identification is attachment: 'I am this person, this personality ... I am this body; this is "me" ... I am this way ... I should be ... I shouldn't be ...'. And because of 'I am' and 'me', there's 'you' – because on this level of consciousness there is separation. We are separate, aren't we? I'm here and you're there.

If we understand this separation to be simply a conventional reality, there is no attachment. We are merely using it for communication and for practical reasons. But for most people that separation is the real world: 'You have to look after yourself first.' 'I only have one life, and

I've got to see that I can get everything I can out of it.' Parents say, 'Now son, you've got to be careful; you are not getting any younger. You've got to make sure that you have your pay cheque and your social security, your hospital and medical insurance.' People think, 'When I get old, I don't want to be a burden.' The elderly can be perceived as burdensome and they see themselves as burdensome because of identification with the age of the body.

By contemplating this we can observe all that we create out of these illusions: 'I don't want to be a burden ... I should; I shouldn't ... I would like to be ... You ought; you ought not to ...' and on and on in this fashion. Views, opinions, identifications, preferences and attachments of all kinds: this is what we believe in as reality. In the newspaper you'll find out about 'the real world': the financial problems and the business world, individuals' problems – who's divorcing whom, who's having an affair with whom. It's also got who's being a burden, who's not being a burden, and all kinds of advice on what you should or shouldn't be. That's 'the real world', encapsulated in a few sheets of paper with photographs.

Now that 'real' world is a poverty-stricken world. It's meaningless. If you believe in that and attach to it, then life is a very depressing experience – because the world of separation, alienation and division is a world of despair. It's *dukkha*, suffering. So what does it mean to be fully human? To be fully human is to be moral: you can't say you are fully human unless you keep at least the Five moral Precepts – otherwise you are only human some of the time. Now, moral responsibility – willingness to be responsible for your actions and speech – is not instinctual, is it? Instincts don't care about speech and actions. In instinctual nature if something is in your way, you just kick it out of the way or kill it. The animal world hasn't developed highly complicated speech patterns like humans. It's survival of the fittest in the animal kingdom because there's not the ability to think in terms of a moral commitment. To be responsible on the moral plane is a

uniquely human opportunity. In Buddhist terms it's only when we raise ourselves to that moral plane that we can say we are fully human. This is fulfilment of our humanity, not a rejection of it.

Note that so much of the violence and murder is done in the name of something noble: 'Kill the heretics! Kill the Communists!' But this is all from the position of a 'not quite' human. The first precept, to refrain from intentionally taking life, refers to all beings. It's not for us to decide who is going to live and who isn't. Other beings have as much right to be here, to live on this planet, as we do. This is the beginning of humanity because this is something we can choose – instinct doesn't choose to do this. If somebody is being a threat or a bother our instincts tell us to get rid of them as quickly as possible. But the human side says, 'Would I like to be treated like that? Is that a proper thing to be doing?'

My instincts say, 'Kill the mosquitoes! They're a nuisance; they give you malaria ... Kill those midges; get rid of them as quickly as possible!' But then the human side says that they have as much right to be here as I do. Who am I to think that I am somehow more important or have more right to breathe and to live my life than midges? From that position I'm a little kinder, I'm not so quick to destroy that which I don't like. I am much more willing to try and understand it, to respect it for what it is even though I may never like it. I can't imagine myself ever liking midges – they're just not likeable to humans. When we contemplate the amount of irritation they cause then it's not that much; we can bear it. It's just the way things are. Their lives are as important to them as my life is to me.

But we can sink down to an animal level very quickly through reacting to the pain of the sensory realm and following the instinctual tendencies of those bodies with their survival mechanisms. What we are doing in Buddhist practice is rising beyond mere existence towards the refuges of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – towards the transcendent, the Deathless, *nibbāna*. For this, the human foundation is necessary; we have to be fully human before we can expect to get beyond it. In

order to transcend our human existence we have to fully accept the instinctual plane and respect it for what it is. We no longer condemn it or identify with it. We can respect the midges, the mosquitoes and all the other beings.

So we are not judging the instinctual plane or exalting it. It is what it is – it's like this. We refrain from doing evil – from intentionally doing cruel, selfish things, or using our ability to speak with the intention to harm others. Then from that human plane we can aspire to the transcendent, Deathless Realm, Amaravati. Our bodies will die when it is the time for them to go; they die – that is their nature. The human realm is not an end in itself. We have to learn from the human experience, to know it and rise up to it, but no longer attach to or identify with it because humanity is not what we are. Paradoxically, we have to be fully human to realize that. When we're stuck in the instinctual plane we can't very well contemplate it because we're just caught in its activity and reaction. But by going to the human plane, we can be aware of the instinctual one for what it is. Then from the human plane we can contemplate the instinctual plane; and from the transcendent plane, we can understand the human one.

Much of our meditation is about seeing our own human limitations for what they really are. That's why morality is such an important part of our training. Daily reflections are also very important. We take time to consider what it is to be human and what is necessary for human survival: 'What do we really need?', rather than 'What do we really want?' As a Sangha we must consider how to be living examples for society to see the beauty of humanity, the gentleness, the kindness, the propriety of it – the wisdom of the human realm. However we are definitely not just pointing to the human realm but also beyond it.

I find it very helpful to be able to contemplate what it is to be a human being – to be conscious. What is it to be born and to age? All the things that are affecting each one of us are to be contemplated; none of it is to be dismissed or rejected. The instinctual realm, the realm of

survival and procreation, the emotional realm, the intellectual realm, the ability to feel and to love and hate and so forth – all these are natural phenomena, *dhammas*, for us to reflect on and to understand. Then as you awaken more and more you can understand why this world is the way it is.

(From a talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery during  
Winter Retreat 1988)



In the ordinary world silence is something that's thought to be not worth bothering with. It's more important to think, create, do things or to fill the silence with sound. Usually we think of listening to music or to someone talking. With silence we think there is nothing to listen to. Silence can feel uncomfortable in those times when we meet people and neither party quite knows what to say to the other; we feel embarrassed and ill at ease. In fact, these days we've managed to blast out silence and demolish space. We've created a society in which we're endlessly busy; we don't know how to rest, relax or to just be. Our lives have a driven quality in which our clever minds spend so much time developing a technology to simplify life and yet we find ourselves stressed out by it. We always need to fill up silence with sound or space with forms.

The emphasis is on being a real personality – somebody who can prove his or her worth. This is something that we feel stressed by. We can enjoy the pleasures of youth, good health, romance and adventures, but those kinds of experiences can suddenly come to an end. We may suffer a disability or lose somebody to whom we're very attached. Then the pleasures of the sense-realm, the good looks and personality, and

the praise of the world no longer provide us with happiness. We can become embittered because somehow we've not been able to achieve the level of pleasure and success that we imagine we should have. This is how we get intimidated by the demands of our personalities into always having to prove ourselves.

However personality itself is conditioned into the mind. We're not born with a personality. To become a personality we have to think, to conceive of ourselves as somebody. It can be good or bad or a mixture of all kinds of things. The personality depends on having views or assumptions about ourselves – whether we're attractive or unattractive, loveable or not, clever or stupid – and these can vary according to situations. But when we develop the contemplative mind we see through this. We begin to experience the original mind: consciousness before it's conditioned by perception. But if we try to think about this original mind, we get caught in our analytical faculties. So we have to watch and listen rather than try to figure out how to become somebody who's enlightened. To meditate in order to become somebody who's enlightened doesn't work because, as long as we're trying to do that, we create the self as a person that is unenlightened now. We tend to think of ourselves as not enlightened or someone with a lot of problems – a hopeless case. We can even assume that real honesty lies in admitting the worst possible things about ourselves: it's a kind of perversity.

Now I'm not making judgements about personality but suggesting you get to know what it is, so that you're not operating from the delusion you create and the assumptions you have of yourself as a person. In order to do that we learn to sit still and listen to the silence. Not that this is going to make you enlightened but it's going against the momentum of habit, against restless energies of the body and emotions. So you listen to the silence. You can hear the sounds of things that happen but behind all that is a high-pitched, almost electronic buzz. That's what I call 'the sound of silence.' I find that a

very helpful way of concentrating the mind because when we begin to notice that – without regarding it as any kind of attainment or achievement – it becomes a convenient method of contemplation. You can hear yourself think; it's a kind of sound, isn't it? When I listen to myself thinking it's the same as listening to somebody else talking. And so I listen to the thinking of the mind and the sound of silence. When I'm with the sound of silence then I notice that I'm not thinking. There's a stillness there, so I consciously note the stillness and that helps in recognizing the emptiness. The emptiness isn't a shutting off or a denial of anything but a letting go of the habitual tendencies of restless activity or obsessive thought.

You can stop the momentum of your habits and desires by listening. And in that, with the sound of silence, there's attentiveness. You don't have to close your eyes; you don't have to plug up your ears; you don't have to do it in a special place – it seems to work wherever you are. It can be very helpful in a communal or family situation where life gets habitual. In these situations we get used to each other and then tend to operate through assumptions and habits we don't even know about. The silence of the mind allows all these conditions to be what they are. The ability to reflect on them in terms of arising and ceasing allows us to see that all the perceptions and ideas we have about ourselves are conditions of the mind, and not what we really are. What you think you are is not what you are.

So you can ask: 'What am I then?' But do you need to know what you are? You just need to know what you're not; that's enough. The problem is that we think we're all kinds of things that we're not and we suffer. We don't suffer from not-self, *anattā*; we suffer from being somebody all the time. When we're not anybody it's not suffering, it's a relief. It's like putting down a heavy burden of self-consciousness and of the fear of what other people think. Everything that's connected to the sense of our self, we can drop; just let it go. What a relief not to be anybody, not to feel we're somebody with all kinds of problems and,

'I've got to get rid of all this and I can't do it!' That's just a thought, isn't it? It's the discriminative mind that's always saying you're not good enough or you've got to be better.

We can listen. Listening is available to us all the time. It's helpful to go to meditation retreats or situations like that where you have reminders around you and a teacher to help you to remember – because it's easy to fall right back into the old habits. They're subtle and the sound of silence doesn't seem like anything worth listening to. But even if you're just listening to music you can listen to the silence behind the music. This doesn't destroy the music; it puts it in a perspective so that you're not carried away by the music or addicted to sound. You can appreciate the sound and also the silence.

The Middle Way that the Buddha talks about isn't an extreme of annihilation. It's not saying, 'Silence, emptiness, no self – and we've got to get rid of all the conditions, all music, all forms.' Seeing the formed world always as a threat to emptiness is not it. It's not taking sides for the conditioned or the Unconditioned but rather recognizing their relationship – which is an ongoing practice. And mindfulness is the way because we have to bear with this very strong conditioning. For our whole lifetime we have to live within the limits of the human body: the problems and the difficulties, the pleasure and pain. But we can see it in the right way in order to understand things as they really are, to be able to let things be what they are rather than create delusions around things.

As a result of ignorance we create endless delusions around: the things in our life, our bodies, memories, language, perceptions, views, opinions, culture and religious conventions. So it becomes complicated, difficult and separative. The alienation that modern people feel results from self-obsession – our sense of self is of absolute importance. It's been held up to us that this is what life is all about: so we can become full of our own self-importance. Even the fact that we might think we're a hopeless case; we still give that tremendous importance. We

can spend years going to psychiatrists to discuss the reasons for our hopelessness because we are very important to ourselves. It's natural; we have to be with ourselves all the time. We can escape from other people but we are always stuck with this.

People tend to misinterpret *anattā* and think it's a denial of self, a put-down of the self as something we shouldn't have. That's not how *anattā* works. Instead, it's a suggestion to the mind; it's a tool to help us begin to reflect on what we really are. And in the long run we don't have to see ourselves in any way as being anything. If we take this reflection to its logical conclusion then the body, emotions, memories, and everything that seems so definitely and insistently ourselves can be seen in terms of, 'they arise, they cease.' And when we're aware of the cessation of things, this impermanence appears more real to us than the ephemeral conditions that we tend to grasp at or be obsessed with. It takes a while to be able to get over the hump of this self-obsession because the habitual tendencies are so strong – but it's not something we can't do.

Some psychologists and psychiatrists have commented that we need a self. This is an important thing to consider: that a self is not something that we shouldn't have but something that needs to be put in its proper place. We also need this self to be based on the goodness of our lives rather than be a self that we create as a result of dwelling on the flaws and negative tendencies of the mind. It's easy to see ourselves in a very critical way; we compare ourselves with others, with ideals. We are critical with the way we are because life is like this: it's a flow, it's feeling tired, it's having to deal with emotional problems, with anger, jealousy and fears. We don't want to admit that even to ourselves. But that's a part of the process and we have to recognize conditions and observe their nature. They are impermanent: they arise, they cease. In this way we keep learning and we find strength working through our own kammic conditioning. Maybe we didn't get a very good deal at all in life. Maybe we have health problems and emotional problems but,

seen in terms of Dhamma, these are not obstacles because it's often these flaws and difficulties that force us to awaken to life. And some part of us realizes that just trying to make everything nice is not the answer. There is something more to life than controlling it and trying to get the best of conditions.

As a way of letting go – of our own position, the sense of our self, our own conventions – there is this recognition of silence. We can be in the silence, where there is unity. The space in a room is just that, it's space. It's where forms come and go but it's also something we can notice and contemplate. As we develop awareness of space we begin to have a sense of infinity; it is indeed spacious because space has no beginning or end. We can build rooms and look at space as it exists in a room like this, but we know that actually the building is in the space. Space has no boundaries but, within the limitations of our own visual consciousness, boundaries help us see the space in a room so that we can contemplate the relationship of the forms to the space.

Then in your own thoughts as you listen, the sound of silence has the same effect. You can deliberately try to think neutral thoughts like, 'I am a human being' – it doesn't arouse any emotional feelings. Listen to yourself thinking that thought with the intention to listen to the thought as thought and the silence that it's in. This way you are contemplating and recognizing the relationship of the thinking faculty to the natural silence of the mind. You are establishing mindfulness, the ability as an individual being to be a witness, to be the listener, to be that which is awake.

It can be difficult. We can get very negative about it sometimes because we haven't resolved a lot of our desires to have things or to get rid of things. So this is where we listen to our emotional reactions. Just begin to notice when there is this silence, what happens emotionally. It may be negativity: 'I don't know what I'm doing', or 'This is a waste of time.' Doubting states will arise around this practice. But listen also to those emotions: they're just habits of the mind. By admitting

them and accepting them, they cease also. The emotional reactions fall away more and more and you feel confident in just being that which is aware.

Then you can establish your life with the intention to do good and refrain from doing evil. Paradoxically we need that self-respect. Meditation doesn't come from the idea that if we're mindful we can do anything we feel like. It involves a respect for conditions: to respect the body we have, our humanity, our intelligence and our ability to do things. It doesn't mean to be attached or identified. But meditation does allow us to recognize what we have – this is the way it is, these conditions are this way – even to respect our disabilities. Self-respect or respect for the conditions means respect for whatever state they're in. It doesn't mean liking that state but it does mean accepting it and learning to work with the limitations of it.

For the enlightened mind it's not a matter of having the best. It's not that you need to have the best health and the best conditions; because that feeds a sense of yourself as being somebody who can only operate from having the very best of everything. But when we begin to realize that the disabilities, the flaws and the strange things we have are not obstructions, then we're seeing them in the right way. We can respect them and be willing to accept and use them in order to get beyond our attachment to them. If we practise like this, we can be free from identifying with and being attached to those perceptions of ourselves as being this or being that. And the marvellous thing about this is that it allows us the whole of our lives to do it – it's an ongoing process.

(From a Sunday talk given at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery,  
Summer 1994)



When contemplating the Dhamma it's skilful to question what the personality really is. What is this sense of our individuality, the perception of us as a person that is separate from the rest? We can reflect on the nature of consciousness, an experience we all have, but what is it? We can try to find out who we really are but we don't seem to be able to get an understanding of it. It's not the self – who or what we are – that's the problem; it's our delusions around the *perceptions* of what we are, the conditioning of the mind that we acquire after birth. Think of the newborn child: it has no sense of being a person, it has no personality. The personality is something that's instilled into him or her as they grow up. Through our parents, our peers and the society we live in, we're continually fed with information about what we are and what we *should* be. So we need to realize the true nature of the mind; the mind that isn't conditioned by perception, cultural conditioning, thought or memory. And this is what meditation practice is about.

But if we try to think of meditation as being 'something' – it's this, or it's that – we're creating an image that we're trying to realize rather than just trusting in the attentiveness of the mind with no desire to find or grasp anything. As soon as we think about ourselves we become

a person – a somebody – but when we're not thinking, the mind is quite empty and there's no sense of a person. There's still consciousness or sensitivity but it's not seen in terms of being a man or a woman. It's just awareness of what's happening – what the feeling is or the mood that one is experiencing in this moment. We can call this kind of awareness 'intuitive awareness.' It's not programmed and conditioned by thought or memory or perception. The thrust of meditation then is to begin to realize the true nature of the mind that isn't conditioned by perception, cultural conditioning, thought or memory.

One of the big problems in meditation is that we can take ourselves too seriously. We can see ourselves as religious people dedicated to realizing truth and of course this seriousness has advantages. But the process can lead to arrogance and conceit: a sense of being someone who has special moral precepts or some altruistic goal, or of being exceptional in some way. It's a kind of pride that can make us lose our sense of perspective. We can become incredibly serious about our moral purity, our discipline, our dedication and so on. And to a worldly person it can seem that monks and nuns are making life unnecessarily difficult or complicated for themselves or for others. But one way of looking at the Theravada School, with its emphasis on the Vinaya, is in terms of concepts that are 'true, but not right – right, but not true.' I remember a teacher saying that we don't need the discipline or the Vinaya rules: 'All you have to do is be mindful. Mindfulness is enough.' So I went back and told Ajahn Chah and he said: 'True but not right; right but not true!' Ultimately we don't need rules, just being mindful is the Way; but since most of us don't start from the enlightened experience, we often use expedient means to contemplate and to develop mindfulness. So the meditation techniques, disciplinary rules and so on are tools for reflection and mindfulness.

The religious life is a life of renunciation. We are renouncing, abandoning and letting go of things. To the worldly mind it might sound as though we're getting rid of something or condemning the sense world, the pleasures and the beauty that we can all experience

as human beings; rejecting it because we see it as evil or wrong. But renunciation isn't a moral judgement against anything. Rather, it's a moving away from that which complicates and makes life difficult towards the ultimate simplicity of pure mindfulness in the present moment. Enlightenment is here and now, the Truth is now. There's no one who can become anything, there's no one who is born or who will die – there is only this eternal now. This awareness is what we can tune into as we let go of appearances and habitual tendencies and incline towards this simple reflection on the present.

We say this and can understand it. And it sounds quite simple but the tendency of the mind is to make it into a problem. We don't have the faith or the trust or the willingness to just totally let go in the moment. So the statement 'Enlightenment is now' can bring a feeling of uncertainty or bewilderment. Others may say that it has to be done gradually, stage by stage, lifetime by lifetime. Both are true, but not right; right, but not true. They're just different ways of contemplating and reflecting on the experience of the moment. The idea of instant enlightenment is very appealing to the modern mind: one tablet of a mind-altering substance and we're there – without having to go through a monastic training or give up anything at all – instant enlightenment!

We have to recognize the limitation of the thinking mind. These concepts – instant and gradual – are just ways of reflecting, they're not positions that we take. Take the word 'enlightenment'; maybe we see it as some kind of absolutely fantastic experience in which we are totally transformed from a selfish, deluded person into a completely wise being. We see it as something very great and grand. Most of us feel that we can't reach such a high state because our personality view is negative. We tend to emphasize what's wrong, our faults, weaknesses and bad habits. These are seen as obstructions to this experience of enlightenment but such thoughts cannot be trusted. So I often say to people: 'Whatever you think you are is not what you are!' The aim of Buddhist meditation is to let go of these conditions of the mind and

that doesn't mean denying them or getting rid of them or judging them. It means not believing, not following them. Instead we listen to them as Dhamma, as conditions of the mind that arise and cease. With an attitude of awakened, attentive awareness we learn to trust in just being the listener, the watcher, rather than being somebody trying to meditate to get some kind of result.

When we emphasize our personality we create problems because these personal qualities are different for each one of us. We have our human problems: old age, sickness and death; all men have certain things in common; all women have certain conditions in common. But then there are certain attitudes, cultural expectations and assumptions that are conditioned into the mind, instilled into us after we are born. Through mindfulness we are able to get beyond this conditioning of the mind to the pure consciousness that isn't conditioned, but which is like the background, the emptiness, or the blank sheet on which words are written. Our perceptions arise and cease on that blank sheet, that emptiness.

So contemplate this. As we begin to relax, listen and watch more rather than just trying to attain *samādhi* or other concentrated states that we read about in books, we have a much greater possibility of experiencing that emptiness. We use words like 'relinquishment' and 'abandonment' – which can sound very heavy to the worldly mind, but they don't imply acts of annihilation or destruction. Rather, they point to a willingness to let things go, to allow things to be what they are, to let them cease – to not hold on or identify with anything, but to just trust in that pure state of aware attentiveness in the present moment.

One of the big delusions that we have in regard to meditation is that it is something 'I' am doing, something 'I' have got to do. We follow the guidelines with the idea of attaining and achieving different levels of realization. It's seen in the same way as getting a university degree. It's interesting to see how some Westerners who become Theravada monks or nuns can be very intelligent and well-educated but, because of the

way their minds have been conditioned, they tend to interpret the holy life in terms of personal attainment – of becoming somebody special.

There is a rule within our monastic tradition that prohibits us from going around announcing our attainments. But in Thailand everyone said that Ajahn Chah was an arahant – though he never said so. Then people would see him smoking a cigarette and they'd think: 'Arahants wouldn't smoke cigarettes, so he couldn't be an arahant!' The conditioned mind tends to hold on to a fixed idea of an as an absolutely, totally refined, goody-good person who'd never do anything coarse but is always perfect in what they say and how they live. We want them to be perfect according to our ideal, so when we see any kind of flaw we become critical, disappointed, disillusioned and doubtful about them.

It's a function of our mind; we are creating our own arahants. And whatever we create in our own mind can easily become the opposite. What we can do is to observe this whole process of projection: of our creation of an ideal person, the ideal teacher. We begin to see how it's just an ideal. The perfect ideal is always the same, like a marble image. If a teacher does something which is totally opposite to what we think should be done, to what we imagine is perfect, we can feel quite upset or disappointed. So we may feel that somehow we have to deal with it, to justify it: 'He can behave like that because he is an enlightened being.' We are willing to overlook crude or bad manners or worse than that. We won't allow doubt to arise in our mind with regard to that person. Or at the other extreme, we think: 'That person is a bad person, they couldn't be enlightened.' We dismiss them, but if we keep to this practice of mindfulness we see that it's not really up to us to make a categorical moral judgement about other people. It's not our business to judge them as good or bad. What we can always do is to listen and be aware of our own conditioned reactions to anything that we're experiencing.

The Five Precepts provide a moral standard for the establishment of mindfulness. We can use them as standards or guidelines for actions

and speech. These precepts will help us to be mindful. Without precepts the idea of being free and doing whatever we want as long as we are mindful is just an ideal, isn't it? It's the 'right, but not true' problem: it's right, but not necessarily true all the time. If we grasp such an idea we can condone anything. For example, we might think that one can be very mindful while robbing a bank or performing the perfect murder! But without a moral standard to reflect upon, attentiveness is simply that of an animal in danger of being caught – it's the situation itself demanding mindfulness, alertness and awareness.

This is obviously the case in situations where we are right on the edge of death – like mountain climbing. We forget about ourselves and our problems; we are automatically right with the moment. There is a kind of exhilaration in that state of mind because we are far from the dreariness and greyness of daily life. Our perception becomes very concentrated and one-pointed but we can't always live life on the edge. Most of our life is not particularly exciting. It just is what it is. We do ordinary things. We eat food, we take baths, we get dressed, undressed, we have to cook, wash the dishes, vacuum the carpets, wash the car, feed the cat, go to work, and get along with our spouse, our children, our fellow workers. Then on a special day like a holiday we may do something exciting like rock climbing.

Meditation is not an extreme experience; it's not something really dangerous that forces us to be mindful. We usually meditate in places that are safe. We sit, stand, walk or lie down and we contemplate the breathing of the body. The aim is simply to observe our habitual tendencies as conditions that arise and cease. In this state the repressed fears and emotional states can rise up and reach the surface, but rather than going off and doing some distracting thing to avoid them, we begin to allow them into consciousness. We're more and more willing to allow what we do not like or want into consciousness and, through that willingness to see it, we let go of it. We abandon it and relinquish that state – not by suppressing it but by leaving it alone.

The personality, the self-consciousness, the fears and the desires of the mind are what they are; we are not trying to dismiss them or add to them or make any problems or difficulties around them. We are willing to let them be what they are. They feel this way, they have this quality; they arise and cease. In that cessation there's the realization of the peace, the bliss or the serenity of being, and there's no self in it. Everyone has that potential, that ability to realize this. We describe it as 'seeing the Dhamma, the way it is' – it's not a matter of becoming anything at all.

Sometimes in meditation we experience one or more moments of complete calm and peacefulness in the mind and we think: 'I want this' but of course it goes away. Then the next day when we go to meditate, we try to get it back – but we can't because we're trying to get something we remember rather than trusting and letting things fall away according to their true nature. It's not that we've got to do something or become anything. So then without that pressure or compulsiveness of the mind, we can learn from life itself. Truth is revealed to us.

(From *Forest Sangha Newsletter*, No. 38, October 1996)



## 41 | Awakened Consciousness

Somebody asked me one time, ‘Could you describe Buddhism in one sentence?’ And I said, ‘I can do it in one word: Wake-up!’ The very word ‘Buddha’ means ‘awakened’. Buddhism is a ‘wake-up’ teaching – an invitation to pay attention, to be open, receptive, here and now – in which the importance of your thinking process and cultural assumptions recedes. Not that it’s about getting rid of desire or getting rid of your self, but rather of not limiting yourself to language, thoughts, memories and identity.

Taking refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha is a way of expressing this waking up. The English word ‘refuge’ means a place where we feel safe. We are seeking a place of safety or that which is safe from the danger. We’re looking for refuge and this refuge will never fail you. As long as there is this sense of awakened attention and seeing Dhamma rather than judging everything according to cultural conditioning, personal preferences, the ego, and ideals, it’s always safe no matter where you are.

We’re very attached to thinking; we come from a culture that has developed the thinking process. We can think in rational terms, with logic. We have science and psychology and ways of thinking

and perceiving through concepts that allow us to manipulate the conditioned world. And then we see ourselves through this same conditioned habit of thinking.

Thinking is not something to be despised or rejected but attachment to thinking always leads to division. The thinking process is a critical function and its purpose is to compare, analyze and criticize: ‘This is bigger than that; this is blue; that is green.’ We discriminate and then we decide what we like and what we don’t like, what should be and what shouldn’t be, right and wrong, good and bad. Then we apply this to meditation with the assumption, ‘I’m an unenlightened person who still has to get *samādhi*, get insight, get all kinds of other things, in order to become enlightened.’ This is all based on *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* – the ego, the self-view or personality-view – and the grasping of Buddhism. This is not Dhamma; this is from the self which is based on time. When I think of myself then I think, ‘I am Ajahn Sumedho’, and then I can recite my biography. That’s *sakkāya-diṭṭhi* or conventional reality. This is not to dismiss it, but I need to be able to see that this is the thinking process. There is this assumption, ‘I am an unenlightened person, who’s here to practise in order to become ...’. If I never challenge that perception I may spend the rest of my life blind to awakened consciousness. The other one is, ‘I am enlightened, I’m pure already, I don’t need to practise.’ It’s the same problem: attachment to the sense of, ‘I am somebody who is already enlightened’, or ‘I am somebody who is not yet enlightened.’

You’re probably thinking, ‘Well, it leaves you with really nothing.’ But you can start from that position – that’s how we all start: ‘I’m a confused person, I’m unhappy, I want to find some kind of relief from the suffering.’ Going to Thailand, practising meditation and becoming a monk are all about becoming: ‘I need to do this in order to become something.’ It doesn’t work. You have to really look at yourself thinking like this. To see yourself thinking you have to think intentionally: ‘I am this unenlightened person practising in order to become ...’. It’s as simple as that. There’s an awareness of this assumption and this

awareness is not a thought. Keep pursuing this and you begin to see clearly that consciousness with awareness is not thinking – yet it doesn't exclude thinking. Conscious awareness includes thinking but is not attached to it.

The Buddha pointed out that the real problem lies in ignorance and attachment to conditions. It's not the conditioned phenomena that are the problem, it's not desire, it's not the body and it's not the senses. It's the ignorance of this simple reality and the attachments we have. It's that blind way we commit ourselves to our sense of self, to the unquestioned attitudes we have about cultural ideals or cultural assumptions, and then the attachment to the thinking process: trying to figure everything out, trying to figure out Buddhism. There are so many opinions and views circulating around Mahayana, Vajrayana, Zen, Nichiren, or modern variations, American Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and on and on like this. We form views according to whatever group or convention we are inclined towards or happen to encounter first. There was certainly a time when I attached to Theravada, the Thai Forest Tradition, but at the same time Ajahn Chah was saying, 'Wake up and see the attachment to this sense of "I am this."' So the aim is not to become a Theravada Buddhist or a forest bhikkhu but rather to use these conventions for awakening. Just to become a Buddhist, to condition yourself with Buddhist ideas and Buddhist prejudices and attitudes – that's not liberating. There's still the suffering. Nothing will awaken you until you dare to question, to observe. Not to question in order to figure it out but to take that step from attachment to non-attachment – which is what awareness really amounts to.

With this awakened consciousness we recognize the conditions in terms of Dhamma; we discern all conditions are impermanent. It's not attaching to a view that 'all conditions are impermanent.' We actually know this. And we also discern the Unconditioned. We recognize nibbāna, *anattā*, *suññatā*, *nirodha*. These are the words for the Unborn, Uncreated, Unformed, Unconditioned. This is in the teaching

of the Four Noble Truths. These apply to your ordinary life and the changes that occur internally and externally. The Noble Truths naturally pertain to Buddhist monks too because they have successes and failures just like anyone else. Monastic life is not an easy ride but if used properly it is a form that encourages awareness. It's not for attachment but for awakening.

How can we use this convention for awakening rather than for attachment? We become a Theravada Buddhist, a bhikkhu or a bhikkhuni – or we can awaken to Dhamma. This is through mindfulness. Mindfulness, or right mindfulness (*sammā-sati*), is an awareness that comes from the very centre, an awareness that includes the totality: our feelings, the physical body and the objects that we experience through the senses. It's an all-inclusive awareness. It's not aimed particularly at one thing, just being aware of some external thing, or identifying with awareness as some kind of personal quality. Or maybe we think we're not aware enough. People say, 'I'm not terribly mindful but I'm trying to become mindful.' These are the words that we use for *sati*. But the point is not to try to become somebody who's aware; rather, to be awareness itself in the present – awakened consciousness here and now. It's immediate. Mindfulness includes everything; it embraces the totality. In this way it's non-critical, it's non-divisive. It includes what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, think and feel, emotional feelings, personal views, opinions, memories and attitudes ... They are like *this*.

The critical mind on the other hand will pick and choose; it wants happiness, it doesn't want suffering. It wants to be praised and respected and doesn't want to be blamed and despised; it wants to be successful, not a failure. In this way the worldly *dhammas* are formed out of thinking. That was one of the great challenges that I found because even though I understood that as an idea, at first I couldn't figure it out because I was thinking about it. How do you let go of thinking? 'I know I should let go of thinking, and yet, how do you do it?' You confuse the issue by trying to figure out how to stop thinking.

The function of thinking is divisive: happiness, suffering, heaven, hell, right and wrong. When we try to figure things out with the thinking process, we just get attached to it; we get only so far and then it doesn't work. You can't get enlightened through attachment to thinking no matter how developed your intellect might be. The thinking process is conditioned. Language is something I learned after I was born. I wasn't born with language but I was born conscious. And consciousness is not a thought – consciousness is reality. It's not personal; it's not 'my consciousness.' Thinking of it as 'my life' and 'my reality' and 'what I think' creates separation. On an ideal level we might think, 'We're all one in the Dhamma', and that's a beautiful ideal but it's not what we're really experiencing – we're thinking about it. When we think about it we feel this separateness, loneliness and isolation. Maybe we're in conflict with somebody else who doesn't agree with us, or we're in conflict with ourselves because we can be very clever on the thinking level, yet emotionally immature. We can have very high-minded, altruistic goals and beautiful ideals and at the same time feel emotionally like a victim.

Emotions have this sense of really being me: 'My love, my hate, my rights, my beliefs, my greed, my sexual desire, my jealousy and my fear.' When you're really feeling some strong emotion, it's more real and more 'me' than anything else – but there's also this awakenedness to it. Whatever the emotion is no matter how strong or how subtle it might be, there's an awareness of it. This is what the Buddha was pointing to: waking up to conditioned phenomena in whatever form of the myriad forms that might be appearing in your consciousness.

The thinking process is limited to a linear way of looking at everything and that's why it's dualistic. You can only have one thought at a time. You can't think two thoughts at the same moment. One thought connects to another; they associate. The thinking process is about conditioning yourself with grammar to communicate messages to other people. Our thinking habits are based on the grammatical

structure of a language, and one thought associates with another. Memories become very strong; they arouse emotions: somebody makes a harsh criticism and I feel it emotionally. Or you can remember times when you've been mistreated or abused and even though those conditions aren't present now, when you start grasping at memory you can get just as angry.

I used to experiment in Thailand with this. I noticed how I could really wind myself up while sitting in a kuti in the forest. You're getting bored and dull, and you think of some indignity you suffered. I could be sitting in that kuti with none of the conditions present and, without really intending to, get excited and indignant over something just by attaching to a memory of being mistreated in the past.

With awareness of this present moment here and now, that which is aware is not indignant or angry; it's simply aware of the emotion. Righteous indignation is like this, feeling really wired up to seek revenge is like this. In this way you're opening yourself to observing the way it is. But when there's attachment to this emotion and I keep thinking, believing and feeling this memory, then I feel I'm angry and have good reason to be angry, I want to seek justice and revenge. That's why there's so much war and persecution: because human beings are not awake, they are operating from their conditioning. It's all coming from ignorance, not understanding Dhamma.

But with mindfulness we're getting outside of our own thinking process. Mindfulness (*sati*) and wisdom (*paññā*) lead to discernment. Discernment means to see Dhamma rather than seeing from a conditioned attitude. With *sati* and *sampajañña* – mindfulness and apperception – there can be an opening to the totality of this moment; something that is not a thought or a perception, but is recognizable: it's like *this*. That is consciousness. Suddenly we're recognizing consciousness itself rather than merely using consciousness and projecting into it our own sense of self, conditioned attitudes, emotional habits and identities.

So this awakened mindfulness, *sati-sampajañña* – seeing, knowing, investigating, realizing, and taking refuge in Dhamma – it’s the Buddha that knows the Dhamma or the truth of the way it is. It’s not me, Ajahn Sumedho, knowing the Dhamma. It’s not ‘my Dhamma’; it’s this knowing. In the Thai Forest Tradition they use this word ‘Buddho’, which is a kind of mantra form of Buddha and means ‘awakened consciousness.’ Buddha then is a word that has great meaning to me because I’ve used it for so long. It’s not just sentimental or an attachment to the founder of what we know as Buddhism today. It’s a sense of awakened consciousness, realizing ‘this is real’ and relating to the conditions, to my kammic tendencies, to my sense of myself as a separate person with all his emotional habits. There’s this awareness that includes the whole range of conditioned phenomena, discerning: ‘All conditions are impermanent, *sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*.’

That which knows conditions are impermanent is not a condition. One condition can’t know another condition. If I don’t absorb into a condition but just receive it, then both have equal value in consciousness. This consciousness receives and it discerns. It isn’t a thought process; it’s discernment, a wise recognition of the way it is – conditioned phenomena are impermanent, not-self. I might use the linguistic convention – ‘this is *my* body’ – but actually it is what it is. I don’t have to call it ‘mine’ to be fully aware.

As you develop this practice, more and more you begin to recognize that the Dhamma is reality, and that which knows the Dhamma isn’t a person. That’s why you can’t claim it personally: ‘I know the Dhamma.’ Instead, the Unconditioned is reality. The Unconditioned is what happens when you let go of conditioned phenomena, when you’re no longer trying to get hold of or get rid of, or trying to control or figure everything out. So you begin to relax and open – but not in order to make yourself at ease; it’s not for personal needs. It’s an attitude of receptivity and allowing conditioned phenomena to be the way they are rather than liking this and not liking that.

Just think of how much we suffer from our idealism. For example the United States is a very idealistic society. It is founded on ideals of freedom, equality and rights. But the reality is we're disappointed and critical because the United States isn't living up to its principles. We can feel cynical and embittered by the fact that it should be a country where everything is perfect – and it's not. But the Buddha wasn't idealizing. Instead he was pointing to the way things are: all conditions are impermanent. That's not an ideal; the Buddha is not idealizing impermanence. Impermanence is a word, a suggestion, a way of looking; it's not a belief and it's not for grasping.

Impermanence is an awakening suggestion to the mind to see how, when you really observe them, thoughts, emotions, sensory experiences and physical experiences are always changing. There's no permanent substance or essence in any of them. The Buddha wasn't an annihilationist. He wasn't saying that because everything is impermanent, all conditions are bad and we should just get rid of them, or that there's anything wrong with conditions. He wasn't saying that we've got to sort it all out and promote all the good conditions and annihilate all the bad conditions. 'We've got to annihilate "the axis of evil", kill the enemy, and then we'll have only the good left': that's not how things really are. In the very act of killing we are doing something unwholesome. We want a utopian society where everything is good but we try to create it by annihilating the pests and things that we don't like. That's certainly not going to lead towards this utopian ideal we cherish. People have tried it with genocide and attempts to annihilate the enemy in various ways and it only leads to more anger, hatred and misery for everybody concerned.

Mindfulness and wisdom are within the potential of human individuals. This is not a teaching for specially refined types of human beings. It's based on the most common experience of any human being: suffering, *dukkha*, the first Noble Truth. There's nothing esoteric or subtle about it. It's an experience that every human being can

recognize. Suffering is common to all of us, from people in the most fortunate, wealthy positions to the most miserable beggars. This is why awakening to suffering is not about grasping hold of suffering as a kind of depressing resignation to misery. It's awakening to an understanding of suffering. We have to recognize it, be aware of suffering. People will say, 'I don't suffer; I'm happy all the time.' But they're not. They haven't understood yet: happiness depends on having the conditions to support it – so it's impossible to be happy all the time.

This is a society based on discontent; it wants you to be discontented with what you have. The economy would collapse if everyone were content. Being envious, jealous and discontented is what keeps the economy going. Society is based on the tendency to create self-importance with 'what I think, and my rights, my attitudes ... my life.' This is very much part of our cultural conditioning. As a result there is stress, fear, self-consciousness and insecurity in so many personal ways. If you've never challenged or looked any deeper than that, it gets worse as you get older: 'I'm old, and I can see nobody loves you when you're old and grey. I might as well die: I'm no longer productive in this society, I'm a drain on the economy.'

You can think things like that but, in terms of Dhamma, old age is not suffering. No matter how pleasant or painful it might be: disease, suffering, terminal illness, loss; all these are part of a human lifetime. This is not suffering but rather the nature of the conditioned realm. The sense realm is like this, being a human being is like this. We feel; we're sensitive, intelligent creatures but we're ignorant until we awaken. We create more suffering for ourselves than other creatures because we can worry about the future in a way that animals can't. Even when we have lots of money in the bank and guaranteed security to the grave, we can still be totally miserable. This suffering is caused by ignorance, by attachment to conditions, by not wanting things to be the way they are, and by wanting something we don't have. So the Buddha encouraged us to really look at this wanting, this desire.

Not that we're trying to annihilate desire – we are recognizing desire without attaching to it. Once you recognize desire then you're not just blindly attaching to every desire that enters your consciousness. That which is aware of desire is not desire.

Sometimes, of course, life is miserable, unjust and painful. We can have the most fortunate life yet it's subject to change in ways that we most dread and fear. When you're my age, you're seeing inexorable change in ways that I never expected when I was young, both in my own life and in the society around me. But what doesn't change? That which isn't changeable – consciousness – remains the same all the time. It's not something you can find; you recognize it. That's what awareness is, you suddenly recognize: this is it. This is *vipassanā* practice: investigating, looking into suffering, its causes and its cessation. Then you *realize* the way of non-suffering. Whereas if one just *thinks* of ending suffering ... 'Maybe I should kill myself because I'm getting old; the body isn't like it was. Indigestion, arthritis, stiffness, old age.' But do I have to suffer from it? This is the way the body goes: it's born, grows up, gets old and dies. That's the way it's supposed to go. It's not like the end of suffering means you don't feel anything anymore, that you're so evolved and you don't feel arthritis or painful feet. It's just that you don't create suffering around the way it is.

Not to create suffering around the body is to receive the body in all its aspects, the way it is, in its illnesses, good health, vigour, fatigue, youth and old age. It's not the suffering of the person, it's just the way conditioned phenomena are; they're *dukkha*; they're all changing. The body has no ability to sustain itself at the peak age and stay that way forever. Now at my age, seventy-four, you don't want to live forever in a seventy-four-year-old body. In fact I'm quite looking forward to death, getting rid of this body.

But there's no need to create suffering around the body. Mindfulness allows us to receive the conditioned realities of the present with non-attachment: they are like this. The suffering, then, is caused by

not wanting them to be like this, not wanting to get old, not wanting physical discomfort, wanting to be young again, wanting to be healthy. That's the suffering we create, that's the unbearable misery of human ignorance: always wanting something you don't have, not wanting what you have or wanting things not to be the way they are.

(From a talk given at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery on the Lunar Observance Night, 18 June 2008)



**Wes Nisker:** I thought we would start with a little bit of reminiscing. Maybe you could recollect the time thirty or forty years ago when you first met Ajahn Chah. Did you have any inkling at the time that you would eventually become a teacher, and do you think Ajahn Chah had any idea – after you had stayed many years, of course – that he was looking for people like you; that he had a plan for the future? You [Ajahn Sumedho] were there first, right?

**Ajahn Sumedho:** Yes.

**WN:** How many years?

**AS:** I was there about three years before Jack came. I met Jack after my first Vassa with Luang Por Chah, after which I wanted to go off into the wilds and practice. So I was living up on Phu Phek Mountain – in Thai terms it's called 'a mountain' but actually it is just a very high hill near the town of Sakon Nakorn – and I'd been there for six months when Jack came to visit. So I was living up there and that's where I met Jack. He came to visit.

**Jack Kornfield:** I had gone to Thailand with the Peace Corps because I wanted to visit a Buddhist monastery. I was working with the rural health medical team when one day somebody came in and said they'd heard there was a Western monk living on a mountaintop near to an old ruined Cambodian temple. I got very excited: 'We have to go.' So we got a jeep and drove out there. It was a long way up: a 2,000 foot climb that Ajahn Sumedho walked up and down every day just to get his alms-food. I think he was living there with one Cambodian monk.

**AS:** He was a Thai monk.

**JK:** One Thai monk. I've told this story before: he [Ajahn Sumedho] was sitting on the porch of this little wooden cottage and he had bees on him. I said: 'What's with the bees?' and he replied: 'Well, I moved into this little hut and there was a beehive. At first I really wanted to get rid of them because you're afraid they'll sting you or something, and then I realized they were here before me and it was also their hut – they only use the upper half – and I'm a Buddhist monk. So I've just made my peace with them.' And I thought: 'Now, this is a very unusual person.' I was immediately taken – OK, this is somebody who's really practising. And then I was quite inspired when you said that you had just come from the forest monastery of this teacher, Ajahn Chah, that he didn't treat you special – which was the way many Westerners were treated – but that it was both very good training and that he was great.

**AS:** And I think you came several times while I was there. I'd forgotten all about that bee incident until I read your introduction to that book, *Teachings of a Buddhist Monk*. Then I remembered I was learning to live with the bees. They liked the sweat and the salt on your skin, so they'd swarm over your body.

**WN:** Did you have any sense that you might someday teach this practice?

**AS:** No. In those days I didn't think any Westerner would ever be interested in this! I'd tried to find people who shared my interests when I was in graduate school in Berkeley and later again in the Peace Corps but nobody seemed the slightest bit interested in Buddhism.

**WN:** Where were you in the Peace Corps?

**AS:** In Sabah, in northern Borneo, for two years.

**WN:** Not a lot of Buddhism in Borneo.

**AS:** No. That's why when I went to Thailand, it really impressed me because up to then my interest was in Zen Buddhism, Alan Watts and D.T. Suzuki – people like that. And Aldous Huxley – but in, I think, *The Perennial Philosophy*, he kind of dismisses Theravada. He says it hasn't produced any enlightened people since the time of the Buddha and it's all about rules. So I had dismissed Theravada. And then just because I was in South East Asia at the end of 1964, I went on holiday to Thailand and Cambodia. I found Thailand just fascinating. It was a Buddhist country and everywhere there were monks, temples, stupas – the whole culture was immersed in Buddhism. I loved that, I loved that atmosphere. So I thought, well, after the Peace Corps I might go back and see what Theravada Buddhism has to offer.

Then the last year that I was in the Peace Corps, I lived in a coastal town. It was a smuggling port into the Philippines and steamships would dock there. It's a very, very small port but extremely wealthy because of the smuggling. They'd unload all these American cigarettes on the pier, and the Philippine pirates would come over and pile all the cigarettes into their boats and smuggle them into the Philippines. So one day the immigration officials said they had this young German who happened to be on one of the smugglers' boats and had entered Sabah through this town – which was illegal. They didn't know what to do with him so I said he could stay with me, in my house. He had just been in Bangkok studying at Wat Mahathat and before he left he gave me the address of Ajahn Khantipalo who'd been to England and was famous for teaching meditation in Bangkok. So then I had an address. After the Peace Corps I went straight to Bangkok and started meditating at Wat Mahathat.

**Ronna Kabatznick:** I'm curious to know how you got to Ajahn Chah's monastery and what your first impression was.

**AS:** Well I lived in Bangkok for about six months and taught English at Thammasat University. Wat Mahathat is right across the street from Thammasat University so in the morning I'd be teaching and in the afternoon I'd be meditating. And I had good results. They taught the Mahasi Sayadaw tradition there.

I always kind of had this feeling I'd be a monk. I was brought up in Seattle in what they call a high Anglo-Catholic Church. It was Episcopalian like the Church of England but very high church and ceremonial like Roman Catholicism. And there was only one of these churches in Seattle. My parents were very important members of this parish so they had visiting Anglican monks from England, or from Santa Barbara where there was a monastery, to stay at our house. I was very impressed by these people and when I was young I was very religious. Then in my adolescence I started questioning and thinking about Christianity and it didn't make sense to me. So even though I wanted to be a monk, I couldn't really see how I could because my only experience was of Christianity. Then I became interested in Buddhism and this led to Thailand and the possibility of becoming a monk.

I was looking for a place to get ordained so I asked around the expatriate community in Bangkok and they were all talking about Ajahn Maha Bua. A lot of the Westerners said that he was the only teacher worth going to, that all the rest were a waste of time. There was Ajahn Buddhādāsa in the south who had very strong views but he was a great Zen master and not really Theravada. This is how Western people talk. So I met Ajahn Maha Bua and I met Ajahn Buddhādāsa. I really liked Ajahn Buddhādāsa a lot but he had some of the most opinionated monks staying at his monastery you know, Western monks. So I reckoned on getting ordained at Wat Bovorn and going to Ajahn Maha Bua - but then some coincidences happened.

My visa expired and, as I had to leave Thailand to re-enter, I decided I'd go to Laos on a holiday and then re-enter Thailand from Laos.

But in Laos I met a Canadian monk who started telling me about the conflict that was going on in the Thai Sangha between the two sects, Mahanikaya and Dhammayut. And he said: 'Whatever you do, don't get into the Dhammayut because they're the ones who framed and imprisoned a senior monk in the Mahanikaya in order to promote one of their monks.' All this was political stuff that really wouldn't affect me anyway but he said: 'Whatever you do, don't become a monk in the Dhammayut.' So I asked him where I could get ordained and he said, 'My teacher is living across the river in Nong Khai (which is a border town in Thailand). He's an arahant and you can go forth with him.' So on this naive impulse, I did. I went and got ordained with this monk, who was the head monk of the province. I was a samanera for one year and did a lot of meditation at Wat Sri Saket, which was a meditation monastery just outside the town.

Wat That Phanom used a Burmese style of meditation where you stay in your hut and they bring food to you. I was there for about a year and since nobody spoke English I didn't have anyone to talk to. I went through incredible experiences, both horrendous and then kind of heavenly, and I had a lot of insights. I realized then that I wanted to take bhikkhu ordination but I didn't know where, so I asked the universe: 'Where should I ordain?' A short time later, one of Ajahn Chah's monks who could speak English came wandering by on *tudong* and came to stay at our monastery. So suddenly there I was talking to this monk who was the first English-speaking Buddhist monk I'd met. And of course I hadn't spoken English for a year so it was like a dam breaking. He was very impressive, very strict with the rules, and I thought, 'This is a really good monk, this is how I should be', and he said: 'Well, you've got to come and stay with Ajahn Chah, my teacher, in Ubon province.' I asked my preceptor and, though he had never met Ajahn Chah he'd heard very good things, so he agreed that once I took bhikkhu precepts I could go and spend *vassa*, the Rains Retreat, with Ajahn Chah and this monk would take me there.

After my ordination in Nong Khai in May 1967 I travelled with Phra Sommai to Ubon and that is when I first met Ajahn Chah. When I met him I'd been travelling, was very tired and had diarrhoea. So at that first meeting all I could think to say was, 'Where is the toilet?' The English-speaking monk translated and Ajahn Chah let me use the toilet in his kuti. That was my embarrassing meeting with him. But I did have a favourable impression and so decided to stay there.

As I lived the life there I noticed that Ajahn Chah really took an interest. He didn't specify any method of practice but I'd already developed competence in the way I was practising. He would ask about what I was doing and he had no objections; he just encouraged me. Wat Pah Pong was quite a beautiful forest place so it fulfilled my ideals of what I wanted out of a Buddhist monastery. But the days were full: going out on alms-round or working in the afternoons, as well as attending morning and evening pujas, and Ajahn Chah gave long talks in the evening, lasting hours. I decided that I wanted to go back to the more eremitic style I'd had before, living all by myself in a little hut with no duties. So I convinced Ajahn Chah to release me and he let me go after the *vassa*. I'd met a monk who knew of this place on a mountain – near to where Jack was living at the time – and he invited me there. Ajahn Chah really didn't want me to go – I was just a newly ordained monk – but he finally gave in because he saw I was determined. And so on the evening I left, he took me himself to the train station with a truckload of other monks. My last memory of this time was of them all saying goodbye to me, and Ajahn Chah saying, 'Well, come back for the next Rains Retreat.' and me replying, 'I don't know, but we'll see.'

Anyway, I went up to this place expecting to have another insightful, splendid experience like in the first year, but the six months I was there were absolutely the worst, the most miserable time I'd ever experienced. I got sick and all my attempts at meditation failed. Then I developed an obsessive aversion to a Thai monk, not that he did anything to deserve it; but it was a kind of madness I was in. I then

became very sick and everything, the whole thing was a total failure. So, just before the next *vassa* I went back to Ajahn Chah. My robes were in shreds and I was emaciated.

**JK:** I went back to visit you. It was the hot season and like a hundred degrees or more. You were wretchedly sick and couldn't make the long walk up and down the mountain for food, so they had put you in this little thatched-roof rice field farmer's hut at the bottom of the mountain. You were just lying there in the sweltering heat, wretchedly sick for day after day and the villagers would come and bring food because you couldn't even move.

**AS:** I thought it was the end, you know. The villagers were really good but it was a primitive situation. There was no medicine, so they brought in a doctor on a horse who gave me some kind of injection. The hut was just a tin-roofed shed; so with the hot sun it was like baking in an oven. Most of the time I just lay there feeling sorry for myself, listening to the planes flying over and thinking about my friend, Robert, who was working as a teacher in Bangkok and making lots of money. 'I could be making lots of money. I'm lying here in the jungle, and for what?' I thought, wallowing in self-pity. Then suddenly I saw – I had this insight – that I was creating the suffering, and so to stop this self-pity I thought, 'Just do *ānāpānasati*.' I sat up and concentrated on my breath and all that self-pity disappeared. Then my health improved. It was a real insight, you know, realizing just how powerful it was. There I had been wallowing in misery then I just used *ānāpānasati* and magically everything started getting better.

**RK:** What was your experience, Jack, when you first met Ajahn Chah? Did you think you would end up teaching?

**JK:** I felt really naive when I went to the monastery. I had all these ideals. All the Westerners did, and I had read things about Zen and I thought, 'I'm gonna find a Zen master'. One of my first impressions upon entering Wat Pah Pong was of how beautiful a place it was. The paths were swept, the forest was thick, and there was this kind

of dignity and decorum about the way the monastery was run. It had a coolness to it – that’s the only thing I can say – especially in the hot season. You went in and you felt you’d found a place where things were really chilled out, in the best way. So that was the first impression. I was really lucky because I’d had good language training in the Peace Corps and I’d studied Chinese some time before that, so Thai came pretty easily to me. So by the time I went to see Ajahn Chah, I was speaking Thai reasonably well although I didn’t know Dharma Thai. And he was so immediate and interested. He was one of the most interested human beings, he and the Dalai Lama. When you’re with the Dalai Lama, you feel like somebody’s really paying attention to you and is really interested. That was the quality of Ajahn Chah. And there was this sparkle about him even though he looked quite severe. He had this great big mouth that, when he was relaxed, kind of turned down like a frog or something like that. And he could look really severe. But there was a twinkle in him. He was a wise person because he would watch and observe. He loved to watch people. And then he’d just ask a question right at the centre of something; ‘Afraid of suffering?’ You know, two words, and then all of a sudden you realized, oh, he’s really looking at what’s going to happen to you. So I was quite taken with him but it was still all my fantasies and all my ideals, and I had no idea. I thought, ‘Well, I’ll stay for some years.’ but I’d always planned to come back. I didn’t think I was going to be a monk for life because of my attachments to the world. I wanted to come back and have a relationship and get married; all of those things.

**WN:** Did he know that?

**JK:** I don’t know if he knew it or not. When we took the ordination, it wasn’t that we expected to do this for life. It was come and see if you can stand it, basically. So my intention was to stay for a couple or a few years or whatever, to see what I could learn, and then I thought I would be coming back. I thought, ‘Well, maybe I’ll do something else. Maybe I’ll become a psychologist.’ That was the thought I had, more

than being a teacher. ‘And at least I’ll know something from this that will be helpful.’

**WN:** I hope it was more helpful than becoming a psychologist. There’s a story that you [Ajahn Sumedho] have told before about the monk who first told you about Ajahn Chah. Apparently he disrobed, became an alcoholic and a good-for-nothing; and Ajahn Chah gave you some instructions regarding him. Would you mind repeating that story?

**AS:** He was about my age and he’d been in the Thai Navy and I’d been in the American Navy during the Korean War, so we had a lot in common. But he was obsessed with the monastic rules and was such a Vinaya fanatic that, even before he took me to Wat Pah Pong, I was beginning to wonder whether I wanted to go with him. I thought, ‘Do I really want to go stay with Ajahn Chah if Ajahn Chah is like that?’ But my preceptor insisted that I go just to have a look, so I went. The monk Sommai had a cousin who was also a monk and together they helped translate between Ajahn Chah and me; but after a while the cousin disrobed and was followed soon after by Sommai. However, he was going to live near the monastery so he moved out into a hut just outside the gate. But then he started coming into the monastery drunk – and that was very distressing to me because I realized why he needed the rules so much. It was like he needed a structure otherwise he’d just fall apart. When he didn’t have the structure, he had nothing inside himself to rely on. ‘This is why he was such a fanatic about the rules’ I thought, and it was a good insight because it enabled me to see why people need structures. Some people don’t have any centre and if they don’t have something to hold onto outside, they fall apart. And I realized I’d never had that problem, that I’ve always had a centre to operate from. Anyway, finally one afternoon when I was with Ajahn Chah, Sommai came over and said, ‘I’d like to become a bhikkhu again.’ and Ajahn Chah answered, ‘I will never ordain you in this lifetime and in the next lifetime if I ever hear that you were Sommai in this lifetime, I won’t ordain you then either.’ He was kind of laughing.

I was quite critical of Sommai too; everybody was, because he was behaving very badly. Finally he moved back into Ubon and I would see him now and then or hear reports that he'd been involved in all kinds of theft. There were terrible reports – even of him killing and going into Laos. I don't know whether they were true or not, but even his relatives wouldn't accept him anymore. Finally, one of the monks in the town felt sorry for him and gave him a place to stay in his monastery. Then Ajahn Chah told me, 'You know, he did one thing that was very, very good. He brought you here and you should always express your gratitude for that, and you should always call him *Ajahn Sommai*' – which means teacher, you know. This impressed me because here I was following my own critical mind – and justifiably, as he was acting in a despicable way – but there was something so compassionate about what Ajahn Chah said. By this time Sommai had lost all self-respect; he'd go out drunk, bother people and beg on the streets. I used to go and see him and I'd address him as '*Ajahn Sommai*', and something in him would respond, you know. He would be like a better Sommai – he really responded, and I thought, 'Ajahn Chah wants this way of reminding him, because he must live with so many horrible memories that at least I can remind him of something good.' And I do feel grateful to him. I really feel a lot of gratitude to him. And then I heard a couple of years ago that whilst drunk he was hit by a truck and died drunk.

**WN:** You and Jack were both trained in Asia and now you've established these huge centres: one monastic and one lay. But when you teach do you find yourself drawing on what you learned from your teachers in Asia or do you find that you have to alter it for Western minds? Is there some way in which your teaching is fundamentally different from how you learned?

**AS:** While I was with Ajahn Chah I also had to adapt then because of the cultural differences, the emphasis, and even the Thai speech patterns: if you took them literally, in English, they were too hard and they'd make you very compulsive.

**WN:** For example?

**AS:** Well, in Thailand they talk about ‘killing the *kilesas*’ which is a reference to getting rid of your defilements. Before I ever meditated I’d been trying to do that and found it just led to repression, but Ajahn Chah’s teaching encouraged us to develop *upāyas* – skilful means – that worked for us. He really liked us to work out our own skilful means according to our own particular characters, never insisting we do it *this* way. When I told him that ‘killing defilements’ didn’t help me very much he agreed, because it’s really just about being mindful and letting them be. Ajahn Chah had to slow the Westerners down because we were ‘sock-it-to-’em!’ in the beginning. But over the years, out of necessity, I adapted to the situations I found myself in yet I have always felt very much in the spirit of Ajahn Chah.

**WN:** What are the adaptations, or are there any major shifts that you made in the way you train monks or do ceremonies or anything?

**AS:** Well, the training and the discipline are pretty much the same but we have to adapt to climate.

**WN:** The techniques that you teach are ...?

**AS:** Very much the same, like the Four Noble Truths and the way of reflection. All this is very much the same. I found that whole approach so true and helpful. And then as my understanding deepened and the sense of self got less and less, I would suddenly realize the profundity of things Ajahn Chah had said many years ago that I didn’t quite get at the time.

**JK:** I’ve had exactly that experience. There’s like this treasure chest of teachings and even memories of the way he would work with people. And when I was there I was just trying to survive, basically. I was trying to keep my robe from falling down; I was trying to sit on the stone floor and not have my butt ache too much. I was trying to work with a mind that was really pretty wild, and so forth. And he’d be giving these wonderful and deep teachings and I was just like hanging on with a life-preserver. So he’s really given a lifetime of teachings, and

the essence of them is the essence of the Dhamma. It's the Four Noble Truths, the foundations of mindfulness and the *brahmavihāras* that you could make an entire life and all of Buddhism out of. It's wonderful. I don't feel like the fundamental teachings have changed that much. If Ajahn Chah or Mahasi Sayadaw were to come to a retreat here and see people practise, notice what they're doing and hear the instructions, they would mostly be familiar to them, and they'd nod and say, 'Yes, this is what we were teaching.' However, the cultural changes around them have been really important. One, as Ajahn Sumedho found, was the shift from striving and effort – with which most people use to judge themselves and tie themselves into knots – to a much deeper emphasis on relaxation and discovery. A whole lot more teaching of the flavour of *mettā* and compassion, because again people carry a lot of struggle and a great deal of suffering and trauma. Without having that element of compassion and *mettā*, it's very difficult for them to settle down and see with any clarity.

**WN:** You mean Westerners have more psychological stuff that they're carrying than Asians, in general?

**AS:** I'd say that most Westerners are extremely self-disparaging and self-critical whereas Asians aren't or don't tend to be that way. And the guilt: everybody I know that I've been teaching suffers a lot from guilt. When you talk to Thais, talk to the Dalai Lama, this is not a problem with any of them. In fact they don't see why it's a problem with us.

**JK:** And then a quality of spaciousness. In the early years of training and practise, the forms are so important. Like Ajahn Sommai, I think all of us in some way were using the forms because we were somewhat like boats without a rudder. But after a while, I began to realize ...

**WN:** The forms like watching your breath?

**JK:** How to follow your breath, how to walk, how to sit, how to practise in whatever form, even outside of retreat. You know, how one follow the precepts, how rigidly to do it. And then it becomes apparent again that the forms are *upāya*, skilful means. And what Ajahn Sumedho's

been teaching so much in retreat about wise or right attitude, to see that freedom is possible in a spacious way, and then use whatever forms there are to help discover that, or embody it. It's a shift of emphasis from the technique and the striving for something, to discovering what Ajahn Chah called '*jit derm*', original mind, or '*poo roo*', the one who knows innate wisdom. But all of us as Westerners were really looking for technique to start with, because that was going to get us 'enlightened.'

**WN:** And maybe you do have to start with it.

**JK:** It's good to start with technique. But as you mature you realize that the techniques are simply tools to help you come back to what he was teaching from the beginning, which is: trusting your original nature and the openness of consciousness itself.

**RK:** I noticed on the retreat last week that you [Ajahn Sumedho] actually hardly ever mentioned the word *mettā* to us as a group, although we chanted the *Mettā Sutta*. In contrast, there's usually a specific emphasis here on periods of guided *mettā* meditation with elaborate instructions and suggestions of beginning and ending the meditation with *mettā*. But I notice that you focus more on the wisdom teachings as a way of accessing loving-kindness. Do you mind talking a little bit more about that, given what you just said about the nature of our critical minds and using wisdom as a path rather than focusing on *mettā* first?

**AS:** Well, in my own practice I think *mettā* and wisdom kind of come together. Even though I teach *mettā*, my main interest is in realizing, getting people to develop a competence in recognizing and awareness. And so this is what I emphasize. But of course *mettā* is also a skilful way to do that because to relax and to trust is the result of *mettā* practice towards yourself. The sense of abiding in well-being, non-striving, self-respect and things like this, come from the essence of *mettā*. Even though I didn't mention it as such, for me to really relax and trust, that's *mettā*.

**RK:** And that was outstandingly obvious and heartfelt. I think that

what I experienced was *mettā* without sentimentality which was quite beautiful. And I think that shift was an important one. So I thought that was interesting. And I'm just curious what Jack would say having us going in on more of a *mettā* level, because of what you just said about the self-criticism, the trauma, the harshness, etc.

**JK:** I would say that we're really talking about the same thing: that which creates the space that we share, that people feel in an embodied way, and has kindness, relaxation and willingness to see. And the skilful means, such as reciting *mettā* phrases, are not just in order to do a particular practice but to open the mind and open the heart. And when that happens, understanding comes. So it's really trying to make that inviting space I found from walking into Wat Pah Pong in the beginning. There was something about the way the forest and the monastery was taken care of that held all of us and gave a kind of ground of well-being and freedom that you could sense. And so I see it in the same way.

**WN:** Was it an accident that Ajahn Chah and that monastery spawned so much of the Theravada Western Dhamma? Or what was it?

**JK:** Well, I've met a lot of teachers over the years and fantastic teachers like the Dalai Lama, Dipa Ma, Thich Nhat Hahn, Nisargadatta, and so forth – many I respect deeply – but for me Ajahn Chah was the most straightforward, wisest person of all. There was something very special about him. And the simple thing to say is that when I got there in 1967 for my first visit, he was relatively unknown. It wasn't a big monastery with maybe forty-five men living there and some nuns on the other side, but when he died a million people came to his funeral. He didn't travel around Thailand very much. But people would get cassette tapes of his teachings, or someone would transcribe a little, and they would hear him. He spoke in a very simple way directly to the heart. This is not something that his books convey because they tend to contain his formal talks which were actually a little flatter and more serious. There was such a presence about him that when you heard him, it was like:

‘Oh, this is wisdom speaking!’ And it made you happy.

**WN:** And he spoke to the common folk, the ordinary Thais, as well?

**JK:** And to the Westerners. He also spoke to the intellectuals in Bangkok and later on to the ministers, generals and politicians who would come, even to the King and Queen of Thailand. There was some way in which his language of Dhamma was so immediate and universal that whoever heard it would just start shaking their head and saying, ‘Yes!’

**WN:** Do you [Ajahn Sumedho] have that same feeling about Ajahn Chah?

**AS:** Yes, definitely. He wasn’t even known by Thais other than those in the local area. And when I first went there in 1967 there were only about twenty-two monks and it was a very basic monastery. He wouldn’t allow the water system to be connected to the reservoir or pump wells so you had to draw water from wells. He wanted to keep everything in such a way that we all had to help each other. Even to draw a bucket of water you needed at least one other monk to help you pull it up on a rope.

**WN:** And that was deliberate on his part?

**AS:** Deliberate, yes, and the paths in the monastery. He’d make sure there were always trees in the way so you couldn’t just think of a path as just something to walk down. You had to be aware, you had to walk around the trees. He did things deliberately to create this awareness, even making gates like stiles so you had to squeeze round something to get in. And he also had a great sense of humour. One of his very effective ways of teaching me was to get me to laugh at myself. In monastic life you can take yourself very seriously. You’re dealing with morality and all these heavy things and you really can get yourself in quite a state. When you got like this he could get you to laugh at your absurdity. I appreciated that because then suddenly it wasn’t a heavy number he was laying on us. He was obviously a very happy person in his own right and a very loving kind of presence.

During my first year there somebody started recording his talks and gave Ajahn Chah a tape recorder. He loved this machine. He’d tape

everything he was saying and then he'd play the tapes for us at his kuti in the evening. This really annoyed me because I wanted to listen to him; I didn't want to listen to a tape. But he was actually starting this taping style and a lot of his tapes have been re-recorded over the years and are now on CDs and other media. When you listen you can get a feeling for the way he talked, even though they are in Thai and often in a dialect. The Thai culture is quite an earthy, practical culture. He was very good at using the Thai language, which is very rich in puns and the ability to play on words, to bring the Dhamma into people's lives in a way that a lot of other monks never conceived of as possible. For example, teaching illiterate rice farmers to practise. The rice farmers said that before they met Ajahn Chah they just thought that they couldn't practise; that the monks practised but they were just illiterate peasants and all they could do was make merit. They said he was the one who taught them how to practise, how to meditate.

**JK:** They'd come on the full moon and quarter moon Wan Phra, which were the days when we would sit up all night. At first it would be some hundreds but then this big hall was built and there would be five hundred people, even more. People would dress in white, most of them villagers from nearby, and there would be Dhamma teachings, and they would sit. And some of them were very good practitioners, especially the women. The devotion, steadiness and wisdom of a lot of the lay practitioners were really quite fantastic and very inspiring. I would be sitting there and wanting to move and my mind would be wandering, then I'd look out and there were these people who fed me and bowed to me as if I was really something very special, and they'd be sitting there like the Buddha.

**WN:** Do you want to say anything more about Ajahn Chah?

**AS:** It surprised me how famous he became because he was in a rather remote and least attractive part of Thailand, but it was just the way he taught and his effect on both the Thais and the Westerners. It was because of the Westerners, and the difficulties created by them not

speaking Thai in a monastery where there were Thai monks, that gave Ajahn Chah the idea to establish Wat Pah Nanachat as a special place to train Westerners. Since I was the most senior of the monks, I would be head monk. At first I wasn't keen on this but, because I had decided to help I determined to do it, and it worked. Wat Pah Nanachat is now highly regarded in Thailand and Western people from all over the world go there to train. But that was his vision of things.

Ajahn Chah taught the purpose and meaning of monastic life. It was through him that I saw the whole monastic package come together: the life of awareness and contentment, the emphasis on community, Sangha, and helping each other. This was very much a part of the practice, such as not having a water pump but having to rely on somebody else to help when we needed to draw water from the well. And I found this quite revealing because I was brought up the opposite way – to be independent and not have to bother somebody else just to get some water. That was how I thought, culturally. I liked the convenience of ‘when I need water I can go get it and I’m not bothering anybody’, but his attitude was to be very interdependent. This brought up a lot of mental states in me because it was going against my very strong American conditioning of, ‘I don’t need you, I can do it all by myself, and do it my way.’

**JK:** It’s also partly your ‘fault’, Ajahn Sumedho, that Wat Pah Nanachat happened. Even if it was Ajahn Chah’s idea, many people went there because you were there. And they could hear from you and see from the way that you talked about it, as I did, the kind of inspiration you were gaining both from the monastery and from Ajahn Chah. That was really appealing to us. And I think a lot of the people who went to Wat Pah Nanachat were drawn to you and to what you were discovering there before they knew Ajahn Chah. It was as if they got to Ajahn Chah through hearing about him and seeing his manifestation in Ajahn Sumedho.

**RK:** What advice from Ajahn Chah has served you most over the years?

**JK:** Oh, there is so much but here are a couple of examples. After a lot of

training in various other monasteries in southern Thailand and Burma, I went back to see Ajahn Chah and told him about all my different experiences. He listened until I had finished, then smiled and said: ‘Ah, something else to let go of.’ And that was really helpful because it was so obvious I couldn’t hold onto them anyway, and the point wasn’t to collect experiences. So that was a really good one.

Early on, I was very frustrated with the monastery, him, and the way people were because it wasn’t the way that I thought it should be. Even in the best monastery, after you’re there for a little while you see through the cracks and see people aren’t really enlightened, the way they look – and I would watch Ajahn Chah and think: ‘What does an enlightened person do?’ He would be scratching his leg and I’d be thinking: ‘Is he *mindfully* scratching or is that just unconscious?’ I really wanted this ideal person. And finally, because I was ready to leave, I complained about the way people were behaving. I said: ‘Even you, you don’t seem like you’re enlightened sometimes’ – which only a Westerner would have the nerve to say – and he just laughed! He thought that was the greatest thing. And I explained, saying: ‘You’re doing this and that, and sometimes you say something and you’re contradicting something you said before’, and he just laughed and said: ‘It’s really a good thing.’ and I said: ‘Yeah? Why?’ because I was really upset. And he said: ‘Because if I fit your image of the Buddha, of enlightenment, you’d still think that you could find it out here, and it’s not out here.’ And in that moment it became clear to me that I’d not be happy or free by virtue of what anybody else does. It’s only going to be in here or it never will be.

**WN:** Do you have any advice from Ajahn Chah, or a story?

**AS:** Well one thing that comes to mind is that after a couple of years with Ajahn Chah, I started to develop more of a critical eye towards the monastery. I could see a lot of things weren’t as good as they used to be and I felt Ajahn Chah needed to be informed of this. There was this one monk who really upset me. He had a loud voice, was very influential,

and he would say a lot of things that were quite insulting of Western monks. So one time, when Ajahn Chah was away, after our fortnightly recitation of the rules had taken place and we were in a meeting, I brought up the subject of this monk who was sitting there. In American style, I kind of told him what I thought of him and it was obvious that he was very humiliated. I'd humiliated him in public – which you don't do in Thailand. I felt quite bad because he eventually left. Ajahn Chah called me aside one day and said: 'You know that monk?' and I said: 'Yes, he created a lot of trouble here.' Ajahn Chah said: 'Yeah, he has a bad mouth and a good heart,' and suddenly I realized it was true. He had a good heart, just an unfortunate way of speaking. So I've never forgotten that: not to be caught in my own self-righteousness and my sense that 'I've got to set this monk straight.' Suddenly I could see that righteous anger wasn't what I should follow.

When I became the head monk at Wat Pah Nanachat, I found it very difficult the first year – sometimes it was such a burden to me. One afternoon I went up to see Ajahn Chah and I was obviously quite down. He was sitting under his kuti and before I even spoke he said: 'Oh, Sumedho, you thought being head monk was an easy job. You'd get one of those triangular pillows and just have people wait on you, didn't you? Ha, ha, ha. Now you know what it's like.' And I suddenly realized that one always sees the teacher as being in a privileged position. Suddenly I had more empathy for him – because I realized he'd been doing this for years amid the problems of Sangha life and the blame, scandals and difficulties – and yet he had this kind of buoyancy and joy in being. It encouraged me to keep going and to not take myself so seriously or be so hard on myself because I would make mistakes and upset everybody but I would see that it is part of how you learn. The learning process isn't always doing the right thing or making the best decision.

Then, when I went to England, he sent me a note through another monk. I don't know how but I guess he pretty well knew or kind of figured out where I was at. He gave me the perfect teaching for that

moment. It was: ‘Sumedho, if you can’t go forward and you can’t go backward, when you can’t go up, when you can’t go down, then what do you do?’

**WN:** That was out of the blue?

**AS:** Out of the blue. It wasn’t like I was talking to him on the telephone. I hadn’t seen him for a year or so. I still have the note in my kuti at Amaravati because it’s a good teaching, all the time.

**RK:** Is there anything about the mind that still surprises you?

**AS:** Well, now I’m no longer surprised at anything that comes up in the mind. Because of the practice there’s a confidence in the practice where I’m not surprised at anything that comes up. But you do see how strange things come up in your mind and you really see that it’s non-self because some of it you can’t even relate to on a personal level. The things that arise that are quite unexpected.

Yet the confidence deepens because you just keep practising to the point where you really know. It’s something that you have confidence in and then you apply it to your daily life. I’ve found so much insight through difficult situations with other people, problems in the sangha, people criticizing me, people disillusioned with me, and things like this. I’ve learnt from situations that bring up a strong sense of self and self-worth; so now I know how to deal with that.

**WN:** I have one more, quick question. Ajahn Chah taught spaciousness and pure awareness, right? So is that what you’re passing on?

**AS:** Yes. In Thai they refer to it as ‘*poo roo*’ – the knowing – ‘the one who knows.’ This is used a great deal. And, like Jack used the term ‘*jit derm*’, also ‘the original mind.’ These terms are used a lot in the Thai Forest Tradition. To be the knowing rather than the object – that was Ajahn Chah’s koan all the time: ‘Don’t be the owner of the object, be the knower of the object.’ I heard this over and over again, ‘Don’t be the owner, be the knower.’ The object was always the mood of the mind, the thoughts, or the mood that I was in; these became objective to me through reflecting on them. And then the knowing, the *poo roo*, is not

the object anymore. You're not identified. So, say anger would arise, I'd question the awareness, 'Is it anger?' No, awareness is not anger but it's aware of anger. So then I'd establish more and more: be the awareness, not the anger. How do you be the knower and not the anger? That's by trusting in this awareness. It's not that you find it; it's not an object but it's something you recognize. This is it. This is where there's the realization of the third Noble Truth.

(An unpublished *Inquiring Mind* interview with Ajahn Sumedho, Jack Kornfield, Wes Nisker and Ronna Kabatznick. Interview recorded in late 2005, probably at Spirit Rock Meditation Center)



## Glossary

|                            |   |
|----------------------------|---|
| <b><i>anattā</i></b>       | literally, 'not-self' i.e., impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person nor belonging to a person; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena |
| <b><i>arahant</i></b>      | a fully enlightened person; according to the Pali Canon, the fourth stage on the path   |
| <b><i>avijjā</i></b>       | ignorance   |
| <b><i>bhava-taṇhā</i></b>  | desire to become, achieve or obtain something   |
| <b><i>Buddha-rupa</i></b>  | an image of the Buddha  |
| <b><i>brahmacariya</i></b> | holy/spiritual life (specifically monastic)   |
| <b><i>brahmavihāra</i></b> | sublime states: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity   |
| <b><i>citta</i></b>        | mind, heart, psyche   |
| <b><i>desanā</i></b>       | a talk on the teachings of the Buddha   |
| <b><i>Dhamma</i></b>       | the way it is, the true order of reality, the Buddha's teachings  |
| <b><i>dhutaṅga</i></b>     | (Thai ' <i>tudong</i> ') special renunciant observances, austere practices  |

|                              |  |
|------------------------------|--|
| <b><i>dukkha</i></b>         | suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena   |
| <b><i>farang</i></b>         | (Thai) foreigner   |
| <b><i>jhāna</i></b>          | state of absorption  |
| <b><i>kāma-taṇhā</i></b>     | sense desire, desire for sensual pleasure  |
| <b><i>karuṇā</i></b>         | compassion   |
| <b><i>kilesa</i></b>         | defilement, unwholesome qualities that cloud the mind  |
| <b><i>kor wat</i></b>        | (Thai) The list of duties to be observed with reference to the dwellings, requisites and one's fellow <i>samaṇas</i> . Used with great care, it is one of the principle means of training in Ajahn Chah's monasteries. |
| <b><i>kuti</i></b>           | a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or nun   |
| <b><i>mettā</i></b>          | loving kindness, goodwill  |
| <b><i>muditā</i></b>         | sympathetic joy  |
| <b><i>nibbāna</i></b>        | (equivalent to Sanskrit nirvana) literally 'extinguishing of a fire'; freedom from attachments, quenching, coolness  |
| <b><i>paññā</i></b>          | discernment, wisdom  |
| <b><i>pariyatti</i></b>      | theory, getting an intellectual grasp of a teaching; the academic aspects of Dhamma  |
| <b><i>paṭipatti</i></b>      | putting understanding into practice  |
| <b><i>pativedha</i></b>      | realizing the meaning of the teachings in oneself  |
| <b><i>phra farang</i></b>    | (Thai) foreign monk  |
| <b><i>poo roo</i></b>        | (Thai) being the one who knows   |
| <b><i>saddhā</i></b>         | confidence, faith  |
| <b><i>sakkāya-diṭṭhi</i></b> | personality-view, the first fetter that has to be broken for the realization of nibbāna, i.e. enlightenment  |
| <b><i>samādhi</i></b>        | meditative concentration, unification of mind, collectedness   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>samaṇa</b>  | contemplative, renunciant, religious seeker, monk or nun   |
| <b>samanera</b>  | novice monk  |
| <b>samatha</b>   | calm, tranquillity, steadying  |
| <b>sampajañña</b>  | clear comprehension, full awareness  |
| <b>sati</b>  | mindfulness  |
| <b>sīla</b>  | morality, virtue, precept  |
| <b>sotāpanna,<br/>sakadagami,<br/>anagami,<br/>arahant</b> | the four stages of enlightenment (stream-enterer, once-<br>returner, non-returner, fully enlightened person)   |
| <b>sotāpanna</b>   | literally 'stream-enterer', one whose realization has<br>transcended the first three 'fetters' or mental structures<br>that block awakening, i.e. identification with one's<br>personality; attachment to customs and systems; and<br>wavering uncertainty as to Dhamma. Having transcended<br>these, a 'stream-enterer' is said to inevitably realize<br>complete awakening within a maximum of seven lifetimes |
| <b>tudong</b>  | (Thai, from Pali <i>dhutaṅga</i> ) the practice of walking for weeks<br>or months in remote places with no guarantees of food or<br>lodgings   |
| <b>upādāna</b>   | attachment, clinging, grasping   |
| <b>upasampadā</b>  | admission to the Bhikkhu-Sangha  |
| <b>upekkhā</b>   | equanimity   |
| <b>vibhava-taṇhā</b>                                       | desire to get rid of, desire for oblivion or annihilation  |
| <b>vicikicchā</b>  | sceptical doubt  |
| <b>viññāṇa</b>   | consciousness  |
| <b>vipāka-kamma</b>  | results of previous intentional action   |







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