

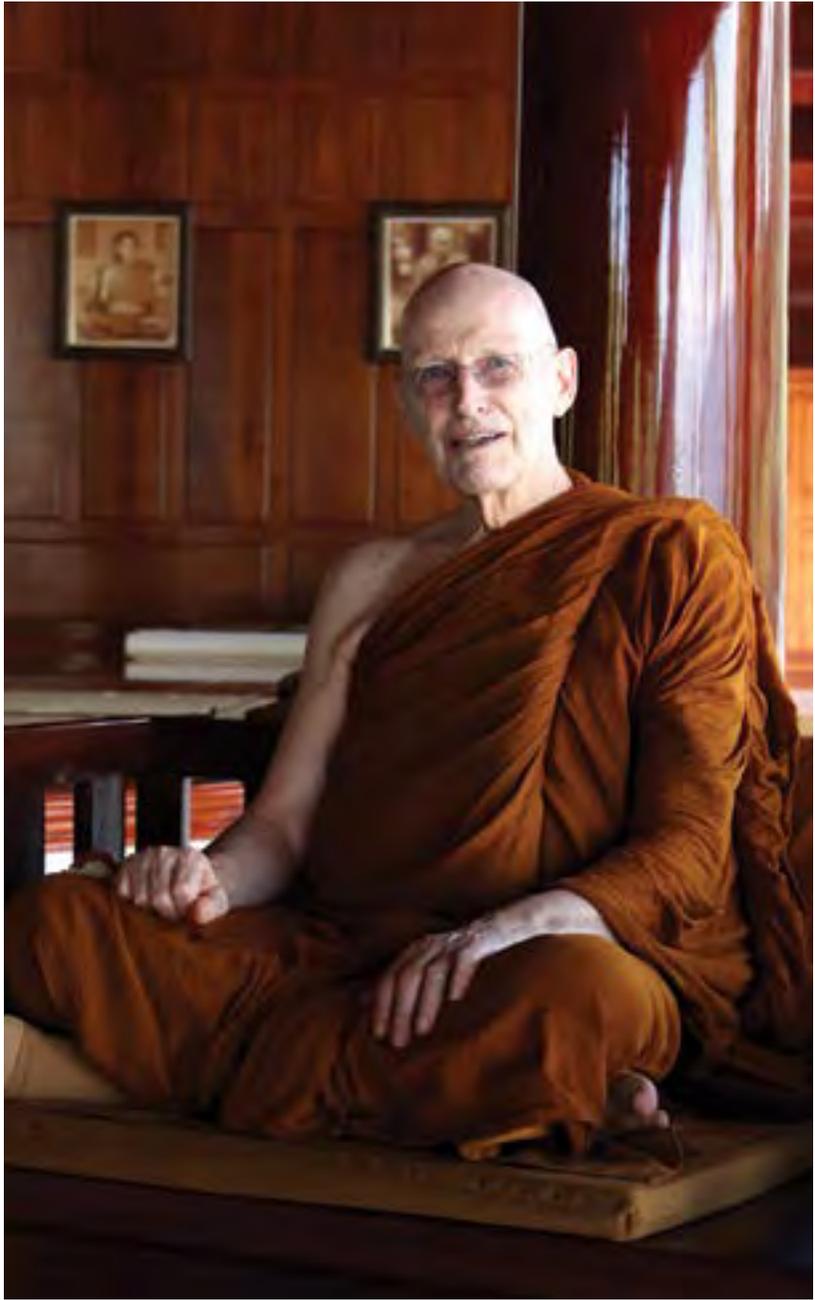


**Ajahn
Sumedho**

THE
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 1

Peace is a Simple Step



**Ajahn
Sumedho**

THE
ANTHOLOGY



AMARAVATI
PUBLICATIONS

**Ajahn
Sumedho** | THE
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 1

Peace is a Simple Step

Peace is a Simple Step
The Ajahn Sumedho Anthology

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Preface

Peace is a Simple Step brings together material that forms a foundation to Ajahn Sumedho's teachings, from talks that were given in the late 1970s and early 1980s. It is a collection made up of three books – *Cittaviveka*, *Teachings from the Forest* and *The Four Noble Truths*.

Of these, *Cittaviveka* was the first to be printed. It was put together in 1983 at the request of supporters who asked for a book about the monastery. Hence the title, and the fact that the first edition also contained narrative pieces – a brief history of the events that led to and included the arrival of Ajahn Sumedho and his sangha in West Sussex, an account of the first bhikkhu *upasampadā* (Admission to the Sangha) in Britain, and an account of the first *tudong* walk in Britain. The rest of the book comprised articles that had been published in *The Middle Way* (the journal of the Buddhist Society of London) and freshly transcribed material. This text was assembled using a typewriter, as computer word processors had not come into sangha use at that time. It was created in about three weeks, and because of this and other factors, was not very thoroughly edited and designed. A second edition was created that included Ajahn Sumedho's talk on *mettā*. Subsequently, the book was redesigned without the section on *tudong*, and with amendments to

the historical account in order to address later developments. In this edition of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings we have used only the material from his talks.

Teachings from the Forest is a collection of talks given over several years by Ajahn Sumedho at Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery) in Ubon province, North East Thailand. The conversation with Ajahn Khantipālo and the subsequent three chapters draw from Ajahn Sumedho's visit in December 1982, and have not been published before. The chapters "Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, 'Ānāpānasati'" (which was composed from several separate talks on the theme) and "Happiness, Unhappiness and Nibbāna" have appeared before in a small book called *Now is the Knowing*, which was published in 1984 from material gathered by the sangha, and in places draws from that same 1982 retreat. This collection presented Ajahn Sumedho's evocative three-line teaching: 'Yesterday is a memory; tomorrow is the unknown; now is the knowing' – a reminder that was appearing on tee shirts and wall-hangings some twenty-five years later.

The last five chapters of *Teachings from the Forest* are from talks that Ajahn Sumedho gave in a visit to Wat Pah Nanachat in May 1989. This collection was originally published at Cittaviveka, Chithurst Buddhist Monastery in 2005 to mark the completion of Ajahn Sumedho's thirty-ninth vassa (his fortieth counting a year as a samanera), and in appreciation for his teachings.

The Four Noble Truths appeared in 1992. It was a work constructed by a lay disciple that drew from some of the Dhamma presentations of the Buddha's central teaching that Ajahn Sumedho had given over the years. This teaching of the Four Noble Truths – of suffering, its cause, its ceasing and the Path to that ceasing – was the first discourse that the Buddha gave. Hence it has been a recurrent theme in Ajahn Sumedho's teaching, and forms the heart of his practice.

Ajahn Sucitto

Introduction

This book, *Peace is a Simple Step*, is the first in a series of all the written teachings (so far) of Ven. Ajahn Sumedho. The entire anthology is offered in commemoration of his eightieth birthday, July 27, 2014. The teachings included here have been gathered from books, magazines and newsletters ranging between 1981 and 2010, the majority of his teaching career in the West. Sizeable as the collection is, it only represents a fraction of his recorded output, which itself is only part of the teachings that he has given throughout his life. Nevertheless it gives ample indication of Ajahn Sumedho's approach to Buddhist practice, an approach that is rooted in his training under the meditation master, Ven. Ajahn Chah, in North East Thailand, between 1967 and 1977.

This approach, based on direct experience of living under the exacting standards of the Vinaya discipline within the austere setting of a Thai forest monastery, threw a refreshing light on the practice of Theravada Buddhism in the West. Prior to Ajahn Sumedho's arrival in Hampstead, London in 1977, the presentation of Theravada had predominantly been of a scholastic nature, interspersed with formal meditation instructions. No one had presented Theravada, let alone monastic training, as a way of life and support for the realization of

nibbāna. Not only that, but the training that Ajahn Sumedho spoke of and embodied was earthy, and gave rise to deep insights into the Western mind. It gave rise to ease, contentment and a surprising degree of flexibility and good humour. And as he and his growing number of followers demonstrated, it wasn't just theory – this way of life, drawing close to the lifestyle of the early Sangha, could be lived in the contemporary West.

Ven. Ajahn Sumedho: a brief biography

Ajahn Sumedho was born as Robert Jackman in Seattle in 1934. He served as a medic in the US Navy in the Korean War, during which visits to Japan awakened an interest in Asian studies, an interest that he pursued after leaving the Navy and enrolling at the University of California in Berkeley. This was succeeded by voluntary service in the Peace Corps in Sabah, Malaysia, 1964-66. However, still searching for inner peace, he visited monasteries in Bangkok but ended up travelling on impulse to North East Thailand where at Wat Saket in Nong Khai he became a novice monk (samanera), in 1966, and a bhikkhu in 1967.

The young Bhikkhu Sumedho was inspired to take on training under Ven. Ajahn Chah in Wat Pah Pong, a forest monastery near Ubon, about 450 kilometres/275 miles south-east of Nong Khai. He felt drawn to Ajahn Chah's more exacting standard of training, which he felt would build greater self-discipline. As he frequently recounts, it made him aware of his emotional immaturity and provided the means to take personal responsibility for the suffering that his mind created. Out of gratitude for the 'Dhamma-parenting' of Ajahn Chah, after his fifth rains season as a bhikkhu, Ven. Sumedho offered his life to serve his teacher. This led him to accept the invitation to start a monastery for Westerners (Wat Pah Nanachat) close to Wat Pah Pong in 1975. His sojourn as abbot there was relatively brief however: when Ajahn Sumedho¹ stopped in London for a few days on returning from a family visit to California in 1976, he stayed at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihara

and there met George Sharp, the chairman of the English Sangha Trust – a charity set up in 1956 to support the establishment of a Bhikkhu-Sangha in the West. Their meeting led to Mr. Sharp travelling to Thailand to visit Ajahn Chah and invite him and Ajahn Sumedho to London in 1977. With Ajahn Chah’s permission and blessing, Ajahn Sumedho stayed on at the vihara, where he was joined by Ajahn Khemadhammo, Ven. Anando and Ven. Viradhammo.

Ajahn Chah had emphasized that, even though they lived in London, the group of bhikkhus should go out on the streets on a daily alms-round: both to let people see them and to keep the bhikkhus tuned in to the principle of alms-mendicancy. What no one expected was that this would result in the sangha being offered a sizeable tract of woodland in West Sussex. But a chance encounter with a jogger crossing Hampstead Heath in 1978 resulted in just that – with the enticing possibility that the sangha could live in an environment more suited to their training. However, as the woodland had no accommodation facilities, and as the legal process of transferring the ownership to the English Sangha Trust was protracted, it wasn’t until June 1979 that, with the chance sale of the nearby Chithurst House, the move could take place.

As the house was derelict, it required the community to commit to a very full schedule of work to make it livable. But Ajahn Chah, visiting Britain in June 1979, spent a week at Chithurst and gave it his blessing. Ajahn Sumedho, realizing that, at this time, there would be no possibility for any of the community to practise solitary dwelling (*kāyaviveka*), decided that the name of the monastery, punning on ‘Chithurst,’ should be ‘Cittaviveka’: ‘the mind that has withdrawn from corruptions’. It was the first forest monastery in Britain, and in 1981, the first permanent ordination precinct (*śīmā*) in the West was established there by Ven. Ananda Maitreya Mahanāyaka Thera of Sri Lanka.

At that time, Ajahn Sumedho had just recently been given the authority to grant Admission to the Bhikkhu-Sangha (*upasampadā*), the formally established *śīmā* meant that he could begin to induct men into

the Bhikkhu-Sangha, which he first did in July 1981. He followed that up by requesting and obtaining permission to give the Going-Forth (*pabbajjā*) to women, which he began doing in 1983. This meant that the Sangha was now properly established in Britain.

Through accepting many invitations to teach, and adopting the ten-day retreat form popularized by U Ba Khin and Goenka-ji, Ajahn Sumedho soon became a very popular teacher in the West. With popularity came requests to start other monasteries where his monastic disciples could live, practise and be a support to local lay communities. The first of these branch monasteries, now called Aruna Ratanagiri, was established at Harnham, in Northumberland, in 1981. Within a couple of years, supporters in Devon also set up a residence for bhikkhus; this led to the subsequent establishment of Hartridge Buddhist Monastery. Requests for monasteries in New Zealand and Switzerland soon followed; and in the 1990s monasteries were also established in Italy and California. However before these later foundations had come to be, Ajahn Sumedho had taken a step to realize his own vision of a setting for the practice of Dhamma. Sensing the limitations of Cittaviveka, and acknowledging both the growth of the nuns' sangha and the eagerness of laypeople to hear talks, spend time in a monastery and go on retreats, Ajahn Sumedho was, by the early 1980s, on the lookout for a property in Britain that could provide suitable facilities. In 1984, a couple of close supporters found something suitable: a school that had also been a place to evacuate children to during the Second World War, north of London and near to Hemel Hempstead. It was fairly basic – a cluster of long single-story wooden buildings around a central playground with a few acres of meadow out back. However, St. Margaret's School was up for sale at a bargain price, and so – 'Amaravati' ('the Deathless Realm') was born.

From August 1984 until his retirement as abbot in November 2010, Ajahn Sumedho was based at Amaravati. It was here that he attempted something new in terms of the Forest Tradition – a monastery that was

envisioned as offering laypeople with a retreat facility, and a venue for festivals and public talks. It remains as Ajahn Sumedho's offering to society as a place for teaching, for meditation and for family occasions.

The Teachings

One thing that Ajahn Sumedho did not do was write down Dhamma instructions. So all the material here is from edited transcripts of talks and interviews that he gave. The process of recording his instructions was partial – because he would deliver instructions at any time that he felt the occasion called for it. For many of us, some of his most memorable presentations were at the morning community meetings, when over tea and porridge, the daily duties, events and reminders would be brought up. After this view of the day from the mundane perspective, Ajahn Sumedho would regularly reflect on the mood and energy of the community – busy or on retreat, uplifted or struggling – or on current affairs, such as the Gulf War in 1991. This was all impromptu and unguarded, but full of spirit; largely all of these went unrecorded. Which is good; he would sometimes be addressing 'in-house' business that needed to remain as such.

Still, there is much that has been recorded, because his output was prodigious. When I took Ajahn Sumedho as my teacher in 1978, our tiny sangha (then of three bhikkhus, three samaneras and three anagārikas) had moved from Hampstead to what was then Oaken Holt Buddhist Centre in Farmoor, a country house near Oxford. Throughout the three months of the *vassa* (Rains Retreat) he gave a talk to the community every morning; then followed that up with regular evening talks and question and answer sessions on the weekly all-night vigils. This output wasn't unusual: when we moved to Chithurst, it was much the same; and similarly when we moved again to Amaravati in 1984. In the early 1990s, the structure of the community day changed, so that there were fewer morning meetings – but 'Luang Por', as he was known at that time, would often present Dhamma during the morning

meditation period in a stream-of-consciousness reflection on the meditative process as it was happening. More formal instructions were given in the evenings, generally on the ‘Wan Phra’ (Sabbath, or ‘Observance’ days). At Amaravati there were also regular Sunday afternoon talks given throughout the summer with a more discursive and thematic approach to suit the general public. His other teaching platform was that of the formal meditation retreat of either ten days’ or (in the monastery) several months’ duration.

Talks to the monastic community also had a thematic flavour. Although the talks were generally untitled and, true to the approach of Ajahn Chah, delivered without notes or preparation, certain themes, or even Dhamma-slogans would be kept running through his talks for months on end. One of these themes would be offered as a contemplative reference point to the community repeatedly for a period of time. Although it might seem unusual to those expecting a sermon or public lecture, this informal approach is the standard of the Forest Tradition, where the Dhamma is transmitted through the teacher preparing his or her own mind and addressing the listeners with concern for their welfare. Accordingly, in the Hampstead days, Ajahn Sumedho would offer reflections on aspects of the Triple Gem, to get us grounded in Dhamma whilst in the middle of London. At that time these reflections would present for example the Buddha as ‘the knower of the world’ (*lokavidū*): this was to encourage us to also witness ‘the world’ as it arose in our minds. Dhamma as ‘directly-knowable, not delayed in time’ would also be a favoured theme, one that cast awareness on any strategies that aimed for awakening, as an experience in the future – let alone the planning that accompanies any enterprise in the West. In the early Oaken Holt days, more or less any talk he gave would centre around impermanence and uncertainty (as indeed the future of our sangha was at that time). In the early days at Cittaviveka, when we were working for seven or more hours each day, it was all ‘letting go’ – or the question: ‘What is it that Buddhas know

that unenlightened beings don't know?' To which he would provide the reply: 'All that arises passes away and is not-self.' The effect was one of establishing a simple reflective motif for us, time and time again, to help us get through the complexities of the day mindful of Dhamma.

So, as you will see, Ajahn Sumedho's teachings do not present a detailed exposition of the Buddha-Dhamma, but are offered to lay down Dhamma-foundations that can underpin daily experience so that it is contained in a way that suits contemplation. For those of us who lived with him, there were many other opportunities – exchanges over tea, or while massaging his feet, or when walking together. Of all his presentations, not least was his living example of commitment, service and vigour. When I lived at Amaravati, Luang Por's day began by rising at 2:30 a.m. to do an hour or so's vigorous exercise, followed by bathing and then meditating for another hour before going over to the meditation hall, into which the rest of us would gather around 5 a.m. to sit and listen to his instructions. He would then stay with the community through the morning meeting, give another talk, then start meeting people or check in with the monastery's management. After the midday meal, he would receive people offering the meal or members of the public in order to offer advice, then return to his dwelling around 2 p.m. for a break. In the afternoons, he'd meditate or read unless someone wished to see him, and often meet people around 5 p.m. for tea. This would be followed by the evening puja and meditation, a talk a couple of times a week, to return to his dwelling around 9:00–9:30 p.m. for final reflections before retiring for the night. This went on, interspersed with travel, on a daily basis, for a decade before he adopted a more detached role.

He stepped back from direct community involvement in the late 1990s, in order to encourage the community to grow on its own. His emphasis was that something in us already knows and is Awake; it was up to each individual to bring it forth in themselves. Also aware of his own ageing and mortality, his distancing from the day-to-day life

of the community (he continued to attend the morning and evening meditations) was to lessen the inclination to depend on him. He would often say, ironically to us who had received so much, ‘I don’t have much to teach.’ Or ‘You know what to do by now.’

His sense of completing his service as our Teacher came in 2010, when he realized that in his own terms at least, he had done enough. The topics of his talks had developed over the years, but the inclination was to an increasing simplicity in pointing to an awareness void of clinging, that he refers to as the Deathless. During the thirty-three years of teaching in the West, other people had likened his approach to Zen, to Dzogchen and to Advaita; you will notice in these books insights from psychology and from Christian mysticism, but from Ajahn Sumedho’s perspective the central theme has always been the ‘one thing’ that the Buddha taught: suffering, its origin, its ceasing and the Path to that ceasing. And his attitude had been one of carrying, out of gratitude, the transmission of Ven. Ajahn Chah’s teachings to the West. By 2010, he realized that he had completed that service. Now was the time to hand over the responsibility and step back. At the time of writing, he is based in Thailand, enjoying seclusion and the fruits of his practice.

This Collection

Most of Ajahn Sumedho’s books were created out of the enthusiastic response that his teachings elicited. The method would be that a number of recorded talks were selected, transcribed and then edited. The editorial process would often involve two or more people: a monastic who could verify the meaning, in cases of doubt, and others – monks, nuns and laypeople – to work the material into a grammatically sound written text. Much of the material has been published before, through our own free-distribution channels. However, Wisdom Publications kindly contributed the material from *The Mind and the Way* and *The Sound of Silence* as an offering to the dissemination of the Dhamma; and

we are also indebted to the Buddhist Publications Group in UK (who have published two books of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings: *Teachings of a Buddhist Monk* and *Don't Take Your Life Personally*) for a series of articles from their magazine *Buddhism Now*.

As far as this current edition goes, Ajahn Amaro and I have gathered texts from a range of sources and ordered them in terms of collections that present the development of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings from the early days on through 2010 and beyond. The material has been re-edited, by Don Carney, Nick Dwyer, Jāyasiri, Pamela Kirby, Adam Long, Ron Lumsden, Alison Moore, Nyāniko Oren Sofer, Wendy Parker and Linda Tomlinson – and others who wished to remain anonymous. The work of typesetting, design and layout has been supervised by Nicholas Halliday. We also give thanks to the many people whose painstaking efforts (some from before the advent of word processors) have contributed to this gift of Dhamma. And last but by no means least, *anumodanā* to the Kataññuta Group for initiating and sponsoring the entire project. It is a worthy way to commemorate a great teacher.

Ajahn Sucitto
Cittaviveka
2013

**Cittaviveka: Teachings from
the Silent Mind**

1 | Religious Convention and Sīla Practice

I would like to say a few words about the uses of conventional religion. Of course, I am only speaking from my own experience as a Buddhist monk, although I would say that in this respect one can recognize the values of religious convention in whatever form. Nowadays there is a tendency to think that religious convention and form are no longer necessary. There is a vague hope that if you can just be mindful and know yourself, that's all you need to do. Anyhow, that is how we would like it, isn't it? Just be mindful throughout the day, throughout the night, whatever you are doing: drinking your whisky, smoking your marijuana, picking a safe open, mugging someone you met in Soho; as long as it's done mindfully, it's all right.

There is a brilliant Buddhist philosopher in Thailand, Ajahn Buddhādāsa.² He is quite old now, but I went to stay at his monastery a few years ago. I was coming from Ajahn Chah's monastery, so I asked him about the Vinaya, the rules of the monastic order, and how important

² Ajahn Buddhādāsa (1906–1993) passed away after this book was first published. His thinking dispensed with what he saw as blind ritualism in Thai Buddhism, and was highly respected for its clarity and intellectual rigour. Despite Ajahn Chah's disagreement with this statement, a photograph of Ajahn Buddhādāsa was the only one of a bhikkhu on the shrine in Ajahn Chah's dwelling. Teachings of Ajahn Buddhādāsa were an important element in Ajahn Sumedho's personal study.

these were in the practice of meditation and for enlightenment. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘only mindfulness – that’s all you need. Just be mindful, and everything is all right, you know. Don’t worry about those other things.’ I thought, ‘That sounds great, but I wonder why Ajahn Chah emphasizes all these rules.’ I had great respect for Ajahn Chah, so when I went back I told him what Ajahn Buddhādāsa had told me. Ajahn Chah said, ‘That’s true, but it’s not right.’

We are prone to having blind attachments. For example, say you’re locked up in a foul, stinking prison cell, and the Buddha comes and says, ‘Here’s the key. All you have to do is take it and put it in the hole there underneath the door handle, turn it to the right, turn the handle, open the door, walk out and you’re free.’ But you might be so used to being locked up in prison that you don’t quite understand the directions, so you say, ‘Oh, the Lord has given me this key’, and you hang it on the wall and pray to it every day. That might make your stay in prison a little more happy, you might be able to endure all the hardships and the stench of your foul-smelling cell a little better; but you’re still in the cell because you haven’t understood that it wasn’t the key in itself that was going to save you. Due to lack of intelligence and understanding, you just grasped the key blindly. That’s what happens in all religion; we just grasp the key to worship it, pray to it, but we don’t actually learn to use it. So the next time the Buddha comes and says, ‘Here’s the key’, you might be disillusioned and say, ‘I don’t believe any of this. I’ve been praying for years to that key and not a thing has happened! That Buddha is a liar!’ And you take the key and throw it out of the window. That’s the other extreme. But you’re still in the prison cell – so that hasn’t solved the problem either. But a few years later the Buddha comes again and says, ‘Here’s the key’, and this time you’re a little wiser and recognize the possibility of using it effectively, so you listen a little more closely, do the right thing and get out.

The key is like religious convention, like Theravada Buddhism: it’s only a key, only a form; it’s not an end in itself. We have to consider, and

to contemplate how to use it. What is it for? We also have to expend the energy to get up, walk over to the door, insert the key in the lock, turn it in the right direction, turn the knob, open the door and walk out. The key is not going to do that for us; it's something we have to carry out for ourselves. The convention itself cannot do it because it's not capable of making the effort; it doesn't have the energy or anything of its own other than what you put into it, just as the key can't do anything for itself. Its usefulness depends on your efforts and wisdom.

Some modern day religious leaders tend to say: 'Don't have anything to do with any religious conventions. They're all like the walls of prison cells' and they seem to think that maybe the way is to just get rid of the key. Of course, if you're already outside the cell, you don't need the key. But if you're still inside, then it does help a bit. So I think you have to know whether you're in or out; then you'll know what to do. If you find you're still full of doubt, uncertainty, fear, confusion (doubt is the real sign); if you're unsure of where you are, what to do or how to do anything, or how to get out of the prison cell, the wisest thing to do, rather than throwing keys away or collecting them, is to take one key and figure out how to use it. That's what we mean by meditation practice. The practice of the Dhamma is learning to take a particular key and use it to open the door and walk out. Once you're out, you know. There's no more doubt.

We can start from the high-minded attitude that mindfulness is enough, but what do we mean by that? What is mindfulness really? Is it actually what we believe it to be? We see people who say, 'I'm being very mindful' when they're doing something in a very methodical, meticulous way. As they take in each bite of food they're lifting, lifting, lifting; chewing, chewing, chewing; swallowing, swallowing, swallowing.... So you think: 'He eats very mindfully', but actually he may not be mindful at all. He's just eating in a very concentrated way: he's concentrating on lifting, touching, chewing and swallowing. We confuse mindfulness with concentration. Indeed, you might think,

‘Well, if you rob a bank mindfully, it’s all right. If I’m very mindful when I rob banks there’s no kamma.’³ No doubt you have to have good powers of concentration to be a successful bank robber. You have to have mindfulness with regard to fear and conditions, to be aware of dangers and possibilities, with your mind on the alert for any kind of movement or sign of danger or threats, and then concentrate your mind on breaking the safe open, and so forth. But in the Buddhist sense, mindfulness – *sati* – is always combined with wisdom – *paññā*. *Sati-sampajañña* and *satipaññā*: they use those two words together in Thailand. They mean mindfulness and clear comprehension, and mindfulness-wisdom. So I might have an impulse to rob a bank, but *satipaññā* says: ‘No, don’t act on that impulse!’ *Paññā* recognizes the bad result if I acted on such an impulse, the kammic result; it confers the understanding that such a thing is wrong, not right to do. There’s full comprehension of that impulse, knowing it as just an impulse and not-self, so that though I might have the desire to rob a bank, I’m not going to make neurotic problems for myself out of worrying about those criminal tendencies. I recognize that there is an impulse in the mind, but I refrain from acting on it.

With this, one always has a standard of virtue, *sīla*, as a conventional foundation for living in the human form in this society, in this material world with other beings; a standard or guideline for both action and non-action. The guidelines for *sīla* are the Five Precepts: not killing; not stealing; refraining from wrong kinds of sexual activities; not lying or indulging in false speech; and not taking drink or drugs that alter consciousness. These are the guidelines for *sīla*. But *sīla* in Buddhism isn’t a rigid, inflexible standard whereby you’re condemned to hell if you infringe it in any way whatsoever, as in that hard, rigid morality we all associate with Victorian times. We all fear the prudish, puritanical morality that used to exist, so that when you say the word ‘morality’ now, people shudder and think, ‘Ugh, Victorian prude! He’s probably some terrible moralistic person

³Kamma: action which comes from conscious impulses and intentions, and which brings around a result based on the ethical quality of the action.

who's afraid of life. We have to go out and experience life. We don't want morality – we want experience!

So you see people going out and doing all kinds of things, thinking that experience in itself is all that's necessary. But it's actually better not to have some experiences, especially if they're against the ordinary interpretation of the Five Precepts. For example, you might say: 'I really want to experience murdering someone, because my education in life won't be complete until then. My freedom to act spontaneously will be inhibited until I actually experience murder.' Some people might believe that, perhaps not so much for something as serious as murder, but for other things. So they do everything they desire to do and have no standard for when to say 'No'. 'Don't ever say "no" to anything', they say. 'Just say "yes" – go out and do it and be mindful of it, learn from it. Experience everything!' It sounds good, doesn't it? 'Do everything you desire' – that's what we'd like to hear. I would. It would be nice to do everything I desire and never have to say 'No'. But then in a few years you may begin to reflect that desires have no end. You want something more now than what you previously desired, and there's no end to it. You might be temporarily gratified, like when you eat too much food and can't stand to eat another bite; then you look at the most delicious gourmet preparations and say, 'Oh, disgusting!' But it's only temporary revulsion and it doesn't take long before they start looking all right again. So if you do everything you desire, you'll find yourself jaded, worn out, confused, miserable and wretched, even at a very young age. I've seen some pathetic cases of young people who went out and 'experienced everything' and when you ask, 'How old are you? Forty?' they say, 'No, actually, I'm twenty-one.'

Buddhism in Thailand is an extremely tolerant kind of religion; moralistic attitudes have never really developed there. This is why people are sometimes upset when they go to Bangkok and hear horrendous stories of child prostitution and corruption. Bangkok is the Sin City of the world these days. You say: 'Bangkok', and either people's

eyes light up or they look upset and say, ‘How can a Buddhist country allow such terrible things to go on?’ But when you know Thailand, you recognize that although Thais may be a bit lax and loose on some levels, at least there isn’t the kind of militant cruelty there that you find in some other countries where they line all the prostitutes up and shoot them, and kill all criminals in the name of their religion. In Thailand one begins to appreciate that morality really has to come from wisdom, not from fear. So some Thai monks will teach morality on a less strict basis than others.

For example, concerning the first precept, non-killing: I know a monk who lives on the coast of the Gulf of Thailand, in an area where there are a lot of pirates and fishermen who are very rough, crude people. Murder is quite common among them, so this monk just tries to encourage them not to kill each other. When these people come to the monastery, he doesn’t go round raising non-killing to the level of ‘You shouldn’t kill anything, not even a mosquito larva’, because they couldn’t accept that. Their livelihood depends very much on fishing and the killing of animals. So I’m not presenting morality here as a rigid standard that’s too difficult to keep, but rather as something for you to reflect upon and use, so that you begin to understand it and understand how to live in a better way. If you start out by taking too strict a position, you either become very moralistic, puritanical and attached, or else you think you can’t do it so you don’t bother to try; you have no standard at all.

The second precept is refraining from stealing. On the coarsest level, that means you just refrain from robbing banks, shoplifting, and things like that. But if you refine your *sīla* more, you refrain from taking things which have not been given to you. As monks we refrain even from touching things that are not given to us. If we go into your home we’re not supposed to go around picking up and looking at things, even though we have no intention of taking them away with us. Even food has to be offered directly to us. If we stick to our rules, and you set it

down and say, ‘This is for you’, we’re still not supposed to eat it until you offer it directly to us. That’s a refinement of the precept not to take anything that’s not been given. So there’s the coarse aspect of just refraining from the grosser things, like theft or burglary, and a more refined training, a way of training yourself. I find this a very helpful monastic rule, because I was quite heedless as a layman. Somebody would invite me to their home, and I’d be looking at this, touching that. In shops I’d pick up this and that; I didn’t even know that it was wrong or might annoy anybody. It was a habit. And when somebody put food down, I’d just grab it and start eating. But when I became a monk I couldn’t do that any more. I’d feel the impulse to look at this and pick that up, but there was the precept saying I couldn’t do that. Through the monastic training you develop a much more graceful way of behaving. After a while you don’t feel the urge to pick up things or grab hold of them. You can wait, and then people can offer, which is a much more beautiful way of relating to things around you and to other people than habitually grabbing, touching and so on.

Then there’s the third precept about sexuality. The idea at the present time is that any old kind of sexuality is experience, so it’s all right to do it – just so long as you’re mindful. And not having sexual relations at all is somehow seen as some kind of terrible perversity. On the coarsest level, this precept means refraining from adultery, from being unfaithful to your spouse. But you can refine it within marriage to becoming more considerate, less exploitative, less obsessed with sexuality, so you’re no longer using sex merely for bodily pleasure. You can in fact refine it right down to celibacy, to where you are living like a Buddhist monk and no kind of sexual activity is allowed. This is the range within the precept.

A lot of people think that the celibate monastic life must be a terrible repression. But it’s not, because sexual urges are fully accepted and understood as natural urges; only they’re not acted upon. You can’t help having sexual desires. You can’t say: ‘I won’t have any more

of that kind of desire' – well, you can say it, but you still have it. If you're a monk and think you shouldn't have anything like that, you become a very frightened and repressed kind of monk. I've heard some monks say, 'I'm just not worthy of the robe. People shouldn't give me alms-food. I'll have to disrobe because I've so many bad thoughts going through my mind.' But the robe doesn't care about your thoughts, and there's no need to make a problem out of it. We all have nasty thoughts going through our minds when we're in these robes, just like everybody else. But we train ourselves not to speak or act upon them. When we've undertaken the *Pāṭimokkha*⁴ discipline we accept those things, recognize them, are fully conscious of them and let them go – and they cease. Then after a while one finds a great peacefulness in one's mind as a result of the celibate life.

Sexual life, on the other hand, is very exciting. If you're upset, frightened, bored or restless, your mind very easily goes into sexual fantasies. Violence is very exciting too, so often sex and violence are put together, as in rape and things of that nature. People like to look at those things at the cinema. Very few people would appreciate a film about a celibate monk keeping the discipline – it would be a very boring film. But if they made a film about a monk who broke all the precepts, they'd make a fortune!

The fourth precept is on speech. On the coarsest level, if you're a big liar, say, you might just keep this precept by refraining from telling big lies. That would mean that probably you would at least realize whenever you told a big lie, whereas without the precept, you might not even know that. They can become a habit. But if you refine this from the coarse position, you learn to speak and use communication in a very careful and responsible way. You don't just chatter, babble, gossip or exaggerate; you don't use speech to be terribly clever, or to hurt, insult or disparage other people intentionally. You begin to recognize how very deeply we affect one another with the things we say. We can ruin whole days for each other by saying unkind things.

⁴The *Pāṭimokkha* is a collection of 227 rules and guidelines that form the core of the Vinaya, the Monastic Rule that the Buddha laid down. In Theravada monasteries it is recited on a fortnightly basis.

Instead speech is to be developed as means of bringing wisdom and compassion into the world.

The fifth precept is refraining from alcoholic drinks and drugs that change consciousness. This can just mean refraining from drunkenness – people often like to think that’s what it means. But a more sober view is that you shouldn’t have a drink of any kind; not even a glass of wine with your dinner. This is a standard to reflect upon and use.

If you’ve committed yourself to these precepts, you know when you’ve broken them, so they’re guidelines to being a little more alert, a little more awake, and also more responsible about how we live. If we don’t have standards, we tend just to do what we feel like doing or what someone else feels like doing. My nature is naturally moral. I’ve never really liked being immoral. But when I lived in Berkeley, California, because the more clever, intelligent and experienced beings around me whom I greatly admired seemed to approve fully of immoralities, I thought, ‘Well, maybe I should do that too!’ When you look up to somebody, you want to be like them. So I got myself into a terrible mess, because people can be very convincing; they can even make murder sound like a sacred act.

So *sīla* is a guide, a way of anchoring yourself in refraining from unskilful actions with your body and speech, regarding both yourself and the other beings around you. It’s not an absolute standard. I won’t try to frighten you into not killing by telling you that if you kill a worm in your garden, you’ll be reborn in the next 10,000 lifetimes as a worm. There’s no wisdom in that. If you’re conditioned, your actions are just based on fear that you’ll go to hell. You won’t really understand; you’ve not reflected, watched and really used your wisdom to observe how things are. If you’re frightened of using action and speech, you may become neurotic; but if on the other hand you’re not frightened enough, and think you can do anything, you’ll also become confused and neurotic. In Western society there used to be a lot of denial and repression around sexuality, and that generated neurosis and split

personalities; so the assumption arose: ‘Well, if we just stop repression, we won’t have these problems any more. We’ll become free, happy, well-integrated personalities.’ But nowadays there’s no restriction, and yet people can still become miserable and neurotic. So it’s obvious that the neurosis stems from following either of the two extremes. Repression and indulgence both spring from a lack of mindfulness regarding the natural condition of sexuality.

We have to recognize both what’s exciting and what’s calming. Why is Buddhist meditation often seen as boring? Repetitions and chanting – why don’t we sing arias? (I would have liked to be an opera singer!) But on the conventional level of propriety or when I’m sitting on the teacher’s high seat doing my duty, I chant in monotone as best I can. If you really concentrate on monotone chanting, it’s tranquillizing.

One night we were sitting in our forest monastery in Thailand meditating when I heard an American pop song I had hated when I was a layman. It was being blasted out by one of those medicine sellers who go to Thai villages in big vans, with loudspeakers that play this kind of music in order to attract the villagers to come and buy their medicines. The wind was blowing in the right direction, and the sound of ‘*Tell Laura I Love Her*’ seemed to be in the meditation hall itself. I hadn’t heard American pop music for many years, so while this sentimental song was playing I actually began to cry, and I started to recognize the tremendous emotional pull of that kind of music. If you don’t really understand it, it grabs your heart and you get caught up in the excitement and emotion of it. This is the effect of music when you’re not mindful. So our chanting is in monotone because if you concentrate on it, it won’t carry you away into sentimental feelings, into tears or ecstasy. Instead you feel tranquil, peaceful, serene. *Ānāpānasati*⁵ also tranquillizes because it has a gentle rhythm, subtle, not exciting. And though the monastic life itself is boring in the sense of lacking romance, adventure and excitement, it is tranquillizing, peaceful, and calming.

⁵A widely used meditation technique, in which one composes the mind by focusing attention on the inhalation and exhalation of the breath.

So reflect upon what excites and what calms you in your life, so that you begin to understand how to use *paññā*, your wisdom faculty. As Buddhists we do this so that we know what affects us. We understand the forces of nature with which we have to coexist. We can't control everything so that nothing violent or exciting ever happens around us, but we can put forward some effort towards understanding what happens and learning from our lives as we live them.

2 | Skilful Means: Letting Go

We have been discussing the first Noble Truth – suffering – which becomes increasingly apparent as you sit here contemplating your own body and mind. Just be aware of what happens: you can see that when good thoughts or physical pleasure pass by, there's happiness, and when there's pain or negativity, there's aversion. Thus we can see that we habitually try to attain, maintain or get rid of conditions. The second Noble Truth is being aware of the arising of the three kinds of desire that we have – for sense pleasure, for becoming or for getting rid of something – and how they arise according to conditions. Penetration of the third Noble Truth means seeing how what arises, ceases. We become aware of the cessation, the letting go, and thus develop the fourth Noble Truth, the Truth of the Eightfold Path: right understanding, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration; in other words, the path of awareness.

To be aware we have to use skilful means, because at first we're mystified. We tend to develop a conception of awareness and try to become aware, thinking it is something we have to get, attain or try to develop; but this very intention, this very conceptualisation makes

us heedless. We keep trying to become mindful, rather than just being aware of the mind as it tries to become and tries to attain, following the three kinds of desire that cause us suffering.

The practice of letting go is very effective for minds obsessed by compulsive thinking. You simplify your meditation practice down to just two words – ‘letting go’ – rather than trying to develop this practice and then that practice, achieve this, go into that, and understand this; read the suttas, study the Abhidhamma, learn Pali and Sanskrit and study the Mādhyamaka and the Prajñā Pāramitā, take initiations and Go Forth in the Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana traditions, write books and become a world-renowned authority on Buddhism. Instead of becoming the world’s leading expert on Buddhism and being invited to great international Buddhist conferences – just let go, let go, let go. I did nothing but that for about two years – every time I tried to understand or figure things out, I’d say, ‘Let go, let go’ until the desire faded out. So I’m making it very simple for you, to save you from getting caught in huge amounts of suffering. You might have the desire to become the Buddha of the age, Maitreya, radiating love throughout the world, but instead I suggest just being an earthworm, letting go of any such desire. Just be an earthworm who knows only two words: ‘Let go.’

The important thing in meditation is to be constant and resolute in the practice, determined to be enlightened. This is not to be conceited or foolish, but to be resolute even when the going is rough. Remind yourself of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha and stay with the practice; let go of despair, anguish, pain, doubt, and of everything that arises and passes to which we habitually cling and with which we identify. Keep this ‘letting go’ as a constant refrain in your mind, so it pops up on its own no matter where you are. At first we may become obsessed with it, because our minds are normally used to being obsessed with all kinds of useless things: worries about this and that, doubt, anger, vindictiveness, jealousy, fear, dullness and stupidity of various kinds. We have obsessive minds, obsessed with things that cause us pain and

lead us into difficulties in life. Our society has taught us how to fill up the mind, how to jam it full of ideas, prejudices, regrets, anticipations and expectations.

Look at bookstores, filled with all the information you could possibly want to know, published in very nice bindings with pictures and illustrations. Or we can fill our minds by watching TV, going to the cinema, and reading the newspapers. These are good means of filling your mind – but look at what’s printed in the media! They appeal to people’s lower instincts and drives – they’re full of violence, wars, corruption and perversities, and gossip. All this has its effect on the mind. Because as long as our minds are obsessed with facts, symbols and conventions, if we stuff any more into them, they become jam-packed full and we go crazy. So we have to get drunk or go wild in order to let go of the pressure. It’s a cycle of madness.

When we don’t understand the nature of things, we are very suggestible. You see in our society how suggestion works on teenagers. Now it’s the punk-rock generation – everybody in that generation thinks of themselves as punks and acts like it. Fashions are all suggestion. Women are only considered beautiful if they are dressed in a certain way. Movies suggest all kinds of delights to the senses and we think maybe we should try them; maybe we are missing something if we aren’t experiencing them. Nobody knows what is beautiful or ugly any more. If somebody says that immorality is morality, and you are suggestible, you may believe that. Even if you don’t believe it at first, it begins to work on your mind, so you start thinking, ‘Maybe it is that way. Maybe immorality is morality, and morality is immorality.’

We feel obliged to know all kinds of things, to understand them and try to convince others about them. You hear my talks, you read books, and you want to tell others about Buddhism. You might even feel a bit evangelical after a retreat, but keep letting go of even the desire to tell others about it. When we feel enthusiastic we begin to impose our enthusiasms on other people, but in meditation we let go of the

desire to influence others until the right time comes. Then it happens naturally rather than as an aggressive action. So you do the things that need to be done, and you let go. When people tell you should read this book, and that book, take this course and that course, study Pali or the Abhidhamma, go into the history of Buddhism, Buddhist logic etc., tell yourself, 'Let go, let go, let go.' If you fill your mind with concepts and opinions, as an end in itself, you aren't learning the most important thing. Ideas that you aren't able to apply to practice just clog your awareness and reduce your confidence in the practice. You just have more stuff to speculate over. It's only through learning how to empty the mind out that you can fill it with things of value – and learning how to empty a mind of its clutter takes a great deal of wisdom.

Here in this meditation retreat I am giving you suggestions for skilful means. The obsession of letting go is a skilful one. As you repeat this phrase over and over, whenever a thought arises, you are aware of its arising. You keep letting go of whatever arises, but if the thought doesn't go, don't try to force it. This letting go practice is a way of clearing the mind of its obsessions and negativity; use it gently but with resolution. Meditation is a skilful letting go; deliberately emptying out the mind so we can see its purity, cleaning the mind out so we can put the right things in. You respect your mind, so you become more careful about what you put in it. If you have a nice house, you don't go out and pick up all the filth from the street and bring it in, you bring in things that will enhance it and make it a refreshing and delightful place.

If you are going to identify with anything, don't identify with mortal conditions. See what identification is – investigate your own mind to see the nature of thought and memory, sense consciousness and feeling, clearly as impermanent conditions. Bring your awareness to the slower things, to the transience of bodily sensation; investigate pain and see it as a moving energy, a changing condition. When you are in pain, emotionally it seems permanent but that is just an illusion of the emotions; let go of it all. Even if you have insight, even if you

understand everything clearly, let go of the insight. And when the mind is empty, say: 'Who is it that lets go?' Ask the question; try to find out who it is, what it is that lets go. Bring up that not-knowing state with the words 'Who - Who am I? Who lets go?' A state of uncertainty arises; bring this up, allow it to be - and then there is emptiness, voidness, the state of uncertainty when the mind just goes blank.

I keep stressing this right understanding, right attitude, right intention towards simplifying your life more, so that you aren't involved in unskilful and complex activities; so that you don't live heedlessly, exploiting others and having no respect for yourself or the people around you. Develop the precepts as a standard, develop *nekkhamma*, renunciation of what is unskilful or unnecessary, and then mentally let go of greed, let go of hatred, let go of delusion. This is not being averse to these conditions; it is letting go of them when you find you are attached. When you are suffering, ask: 'Why am I suffering? Why am I miserable?' Because you are clinging to something! Find out what you are clinging to, to get to the source. It may be, 'I'm unhappy because nobody loves me.' That may be true; maybe nobody does love you, but the unhappiness comes from wanting people to love you. Even if other people do love you, you will still have suffering if you think they are responsible for your happiness or suffering. Someone says: 'You are the greatest person in the world!' and you jump for joy. Someone says: 'You are the most horrible person I've met in my life!' and you're depressed. Let go of depression, let go of happiness. Keep the practice simple: live your life mindfully and morally, and have faith in letting go.

It's important for you to realize that we are only helpless victims of fate as long as we remain ignorant. As long as you remain ignorant, you are a helpless victim of your ignorance. All that is ignorant is born and dies. It is bound to die; it's caught in the cycle of death and rebirth. And if you die, you will be reborn - you can count on it. And the more heedlessly you lead your life, the worse the rebirth. The Buddha taught

a way to break the cycle, and that's through awareness, through seeing the cycle rather than being attached to it. When you let go of the cycle, you are no longer harmed by it. So you let go of the cycle, let go of birth and death, let go of becoming. Letting go of desire is the development of the third Noble Truth which leads to the Eightfold Path.

3 | Skilful Means: Listening to the Mind

In this form of meditation practice, listen inwardly and listen carefully. To listen inwardly, regard outside things as totally unimportant. Go beyond the concepts and thoughts; they are not you. Listen to that which is around the words themselves, the silence, the space.

When you listen, what do you hear? Listen to the changing words as if somebody else is talking, saying, 'I don't like this or that. I'm bored, fed up; I want to go home.' Or listen to 'the religious fanatic' or 'the cynic'; whatever the form or the quality of the voice, we can still be aware of its changing nature.

You can't have a permanent desire. In listening inwardly, to the point when we are listening all the time, we begin to experience emptiness. When we listen to the voices of desire we think they are us, and create terrible problems for ourselves by identifying with them. We think there is a permanent personality or being, with permanent greed. But in meditation we can see that these voices arise out of the void; they arise, and they pass away.

Following the teaching of the Buddha, the practice is to know the known. To know what? What do Buddhists know? What does the 'One Who Knows' know? The One Who Knows, knows that these changing conditions are not-self. There is not any eternal or soul-like quality, no substance in these things that one could call a permanent possession. The One Who Knows, knows that what arises passes away. You don't have to know any more to be a Buddha. Being the Buddha means knowing by observing, not by believing the scriptures or me. See for yourself. Just try to find a condition that arises and doesn't pass away. Is there anything born that doesn't die? Be that Buddha who knows by putting energy into experiencing your life here and now, not by getting lost in the delusion of the idea of being Buddha - 'I'm the Buddha; I know it all.' Sometimes desire even takes the form of a Buddha. Actually there is no one who knows, and to conceive of being Buddha is not being Buddha.

The Theravadins talk about *anattā* (not-self) and the Mahayanists talk about *shunyata* (emptiness);⁶ but they are referring to the same realization. That is, one investigates and sees that the ego, the neuroses that we have, thoughts, greed, hatred and delusion - are all *anattā*. There is no self to be found, just empty conditions that arise out of the void and pass back into it with no remainder. So we let things go, allow things to be as they are, and they change quite naturally on their own. You don't have to force them to do so. If you're experiencing something unpleasant, you don't have to annihilate it; it will go away on its own. Self-conceit says: 'I don't like this condition. I've got to get rid of it, wipe it out.' This creates a more complex situation than before - you're trying to push something away or bury your head in the ground so you can say, 'Oh, it's gone!' But that desire to get rid - *vibhava-taṇhā* - just creates the conditions for the condition to arise again, because we haven't seen that it dies quite naturally.

We're sitting now in a room full of kammic formations which we conceive to be permanent personalities. We carry them around like

a ‘conceptions bag’, because on the conceptual level of thoughts we regard each other as permanent personalities. How many things do you carry around with you, such as grudges against people, infatuations, fears and events in the past? We can become upset just by thinking of the name of someone who caused us suffering over something that happened twenty years ago – ‘How dare they do that, treat me like that!’ Some people ruin the rest of their lives by carrying grudges around. But as meditators we break through the pattern of memory. Instead of remembering people and making them real, we see that in the moment, memory and bitterness are changing conditions; we see that they are *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*.⁷ They are formed in time, just like the sand grains of the Ganges River – whether they are beautiful, ugly, black or white, sand grains is all that they are.

So listen inwardly. Listen to the mind when you’re starting to experience pain in the body; bring up the voice that says, ‘I don’t want this pain, when is the darned bell going to ring?’ Listen to the moaning, discontented voice. Or listen when you get really high, ‘Oh bliss, I feel so wonderful.’ Listen to the *devatā* (celestial beings) indulging in bliss and happiness, and take the position of a silent listener, making no preferences between *devatā* and devilish things. And remember that if it’s a condition, it ends. Recognize things and let them come and go – they are just *saṅkhārā*,⁸ kammic conditions that change, so don’t interfere. The tendency of the modern mind is to think that there’s some ogre lurking way down deep inside, just waiting for an unguarded moment to overwhelm you and drive you permanently insane. Some people actually live their whole lives with that kind of fear. But a monster is just a *saṅkhāra*, another grain of sand of the Ganges River.

⁷ *Anicca* (impermanent, transitory); *dukkha* (unsatisfactory, imperfect); and *anattā* (impersonal, not-self) are the three characteristics of all phenomena according to the Buddha. In this context, *dukkha* is not the Noble Truth of suffering – which is our response to the fragile, unreliable nature of experience – but that characteristic in all things.

⁸ The term ‘*saṅkhāra*’ (plural, *saṅkhārā*) in this instance refers to any created phenomenon, such as a thought, or an emotion. In other words, they are subjectively (though not always consciously) generated.

It's maybe an ugly sand grain, but that's all. If you're upset every time you see an ugly sand grain, you'll find life increasingly difficult. We have to accept the fact that some sand grains are ugly. Let them be ugly; don't be upset. If you saw me sitting beside the Ganges River looking at ugly sand grains, saying, 'I'm going to go crazy!' you'd think, 'Ajahn Sumedho is crazy!' Even a really ugly sand grain is just a sand grain.

So what we're doing is looking at the common factor of all these different qualities, hidden monsters, latent repressed energies and powers and archetypal forces. They are all just *saṅkhārā*, nothing much. You take the position of the Buddha: being the knowing. We see even the unknown as just another changing condition. Sometimes there's knowing, sometimes not-knowing; one conditions the other. The black hole, sunlight, night and day are all change; there's no self, nothing to become if you're being the knowing. But if you react to all the qualities of *saṃsāra*,⁹ you'll become neurotic. That would be endless, just like reacting to all the sand grains of the Ganges River. How many lifetimes would it take to react emotionally to all the sand grains of the Ganges River, being ecstatic over the beautiful ones and depressed over the ugly ones? Yet that's what people do; they dull themselves and become worn down and exhausted with this constant emotional turmoil, and finally want to annihilate themselves. They may start taking drugs or drinking to desensitize themselves.

But instead of building a shell and hiding ourselves away in fear and dullness, what we do is observe that none of this is self. So we don't have to desensitize ourselves: we can become even more sensitive, clear and bright. In that clarity and brightness there is the knowing that if it arises, it passes away – and that's what Buddhas know!

4 | The Five Hindrances

In meditation, you develop an understanding of the Five Hindrances:¹⁰ how when one of them is present you investigate it, understand it, accept its presence and learn how to deal with it. Sometimes you can just tell it to go away and it goes; sometimes you have to allow it to be there until it wears out.

We have subtle ways of being averse to that which is unpleasant, and we tend not to be very honest about our intentions. As soon as something unpleasant arises, our habit is to try to move away from it or destroy it. But so long as we do this, we don't have any *samādhi* or concentration. It is only when these Five Hindrances are absent or we are no longer attached to them that we find any peace of mind or a concentrated heart.

Only in the moment when a hindrance actually arises can you really penetrate it and have insight. You may have noticed that although you listen to teachings and gain a profound understanding of the Dhamma, you can still become angry or frightened, or feel desire for things.

¹⁰The Buddha spoke of 'Five Hindrances' on the spiritual path: (i) sense-desire (greed, lust); (ii) ill will (anger); (iii) dullness (sloth/torpor); (iv) restlessness (agitation) and worry; and (v) sceptical doubt. In characteristic style, Ajahn Sumedho simply talks about them, rather than delivering a systematic lecture. Owing to the time limit of the talk, he did not comment on (iv) restlessness/worry.

When an actual situation arises, you are not mindful; you tend to resist or resent, or just judge.

I spent my first year as a samanera¹¹ living in a monastery in North East Thailand. I was not required to do anything other than just live in a little hut. The monks brought me food every day, and as I could speak no Thai and nobody else spoke any English, I didn't have to talk to anyone. The senses were not stimulated to any great extent, so sensory deprivation set in and I found myself becoming very tranquil – so tranquil, in fact, that I attained great states of bliss and ecstasy. I'd sit on the porch of my little kuti¹² and tears of love would well up in my eyes for the mosquitoes which were biting me. I could think in abstract terms about all beings everywhere and feel great love for them, too. I even forgave my enemies and those who had caused me suffering in the past. I could entertain these high-minded feelings for all beings mainly because I was not having to live with them.

Then one day I had to go to the immigration authorities to renew my visa. I had to travel to a place called Nong Khai, which is where you cross the Mekong River to go to Laos. Because of my new sensitive state, as I walked to the town I could see things more clearly than ever before. I saw the sorrow and anguish in the faces of the people. And when I walked into the immigration office, I felt an iron curtain of hatred forming in front of me. I found out later that the leading monk of the province had ordered the officials to give me a visa. This was not quite in line with the regulations, and so it had forced the officials into a position that was really quite unfair. Because of this they had a definite aversion towards me and would not grant me a visa, which was very confusing for me because of my heightened state of awareness. The feeling of great love I had for all beings began to fade away very quickly. By the time I got back to the monastery I was in a frantic mental state. I went to my kuti and spent the next three days just calming down all the feelings that had been aroused during that hour's visit to the immigration authorities.

¹¹ A samanera is a novice monk; in Thailand, generally a boy.

¹² A kuti is a simple secluded dwelling in a monastery, often a small hut.

After a few months I became very fond of the isolated life. There's something very romantic about living that way. It's so peaceful not to be exposed to the misery of people or have your senses excited by their actions. Nature itself is very peaceful, very pleasant to be with. Even the mosquitoes, which you might think must be terribly annoying, are not really anywhere near as annoying as people are. It takes much less skill to live with mosquitoes than with another person. I became very attached to that way of life, but after a few months I had to go to Bangkok. I remember sitting in the train on the way from Nong Khai to the capital. I didn't want to talk to anyone. I just sat there with my high-minded thoughts about helping all beings, dedicating my life to their welfare, and thinking about the Dhamma and the Buddha. I was permeated by an overwhelming state of bliss. 'What a wonderful state to be in!' I thought. But the noisy, confusing and unpleasant city put paid to all that; in half an hour my mind was in terrible confusion.

From these experiences I began to see that the way to enlightenment did not lie in being shut off from everything that was unpleasant, but rather through learning to understand all that we find unpleasant or difficult. Those particular conditions have been put there for a purpose, to teach us. No matter how little we want them and would like things to be otherwise, somehow they will persist in our lives until we have understood and transcended them.

My hermit life ended soon after that. I was going to train as a bhikkhu and would live with Ajahn Chah at a monastery where I wouldn't be allowed the luxury of ascetic practice. I'd have to live in a community of monks and perform my duties, learn all the disciplinary rules that bhikkhus have to learn and live under the authority of someone else. By this time I was quite willing to accept all that; I realized that in fact it was exactly what I needed. I certainly did not need any more ecstatic blissful states which disappeared as soon as anything annoying happened.

At Wat Pah Pong¹³ I found a constant stream of annoying conditions coming at me, which gave me a chance of learning to deal with the

¹³Ajahn Chah's monastery.

Five Hindrances. At the other monasteries in Thailand where I'd lived, being a Westerner had meant that I could expect to have the best of everything. I could also get out of doing the work and other mundane things that the other monks were expected to do by saying something like: 'I'm busy meditating now. I don't have time to sweep the floor. Let someone else sweep it. I'm a serious meditator.' But when I arrived at Wat Pah Pong and people said, 'He's an American; he can't eat the kind of food we eat,' Ajahn Chah said, 'He'll have to learn.' And when I didn't like the meditation hut I was given and asked for another that I liked better, Ajahn Chah said, 'No.' I had to get up at three o'clock in the morning and attend morning chanting and meditation. There were readings from the Vinaya too. They were read in Thai, which at first I didn't understand, and even when I could understand the language they were excruciatingly boring. You'd hear about how a monk who has a rent in his robe so many inches above the hem must have it sewn up before dawn, and I kept thinking, 'This isn't what I went Forth for!' I was caught up in these meticulous rules, trying to figure out whether the hole in my robe was four inches above the hem or not and whether I should have to sew it up before dawn. Or they'd read about making a sitting cloth, and how the monks should know that the border had to be so many inches wide. And a monk would say, 'Well, I've seen a sitting cloth with a border different from that.' The monks would even argue about the border of the sitting cloth. 'Let's talk about serious things,' I'd think, 'things of importance like the Dhamma.' When it came to the pettiness of everyday life and living with people of many different temperaments, problems and characters, whose minds were not necessarily as inspired as mine seemed to be at the time, I felt great depression.

Then I was faced with the Five Hindrances as a practical reality. There was no escape. I had to learn the lesson that they were there to teach. You would be surprised at some of the forms that the first hindrance – sense-desire – takes for monks. As a layman you can spend

time trying to seek out objects that suit you, but because monks live a celibate life and have few possessions, we find our greed accumulates over things like robes or alms-bowls. We are allowed one meal a day, so a lot of greed and aversion may arise with regard to food. At Wat Pah Pong we had to accept whatever hut we were given, so sometimes you were fortunate and had a really nice one, and sometimes the one you had was not very nice. But then you could watch the aversion that arose if you were given something that you didn't like, or the pleasure if you were given something you liked.

I became obsessed with robes for the first few months; the colour of the robe, believe it or not. At the monastery where I had lived before they wore robes in a bright 'knock-your-eyes-out' kind of orange, which was not my colour. At Wat Pah Pong they wore a kind of ochre yellow or brownish-coloured robe, and I developed a great desire for this kind of robe. At first they would not give me one; I had to wear one of these 'knock-your-eyes-out' orange robes, and I became very greedy for new robes, big robes. The robes in Thailand never fitted me properly, but at Wat Pah Pong they'd make them to your size, you'd have tailor-made robes. Finally, after a month or so, Ajahn Chah suggested that a monk make me these robes, but then I became obsessed by the colour. I did not want it too brown and I did not want too much red in it. I went through a lot of sorrow and despair trying to get the right colour for the robe!

Although we could not eat anything in the afternoon, certain things are allowed in the Vinaya, and one was sugar. So I found myself having a fantastic obsession with sweets, though before I had not really cared about sweets at all. At Wat Pah Pong they'd have a sweet drink in the afternoon once every two or three days, and you began to anticipate the day when they would give you tea or coffee with sugar in it. Sometimes they'd even make cocoa! When word got round that we'd have cocoa that evening I could not think about anything else. I did not find sexual desire any problem in those days, because my obsessions were with

sugar and sweets. I'd go to bed at night and dream about bakeries. I'd be sitting at the table just about to put the stickiest pastry in my mouth, and then I'd wake up and think, 'If only I'd had just one bite!'

Before I went to Thailand I had spent a few years in Berkeley, California, where it was pretty much a case of doing your own thing. There was no sense of having to obey anybody or live under a discipline of any sort. But at Wat Pah Pong I had to live following a tradition that I did not always like or approve of, in a situation where I had no authority whatsoever. I did not mind obeying Ajahn Chah; I respected him. But sometimes I had to obey monks I did not like very much and who I thought were inferior to me. The Thai monks were very critical of me at Wat Pah Pong, whereas in other monasteries they had praised me all the time. They used to say: 'How beautiful you are.' 'And what beautiful skin you have.' They liked white skin, and though my skin is not really very beautiful, it is white. At Wat Pah Pong, however, the monks would say: 'You have ugly skin with brown spots.' I was in my thirties at the time and still sensitive to the ageing process, and they asked, 'How old are you?' I'd say, 'Thirty-three', and they'd say, 'Really? We thought you were at least sixty.' Then they would criticize the way I walked, saying, 'You don't walk right. You are not very mindful when you walk.' And I'd take my bag – they gave me a bag – and just dump it down, thinking, 'This can't be very important.' But they'd say, 'Put your bag down right. You take it like this, fold it over, and then you set it down beside you like that.' The way I ate, the way I walked, the way I talked – everything was criticized and made fun of; but something made me stay on and endure through it.

I learnt how to conform to a tradition and a discipline, which took a number of years because there was always strong resistance. But I began to understand the wisdom of the discipline of the Vinaya, which is not all that apparent on reading the Vinaya scriptures. You might develop an opinion on the traditions and the Vinaya itself, thinking, 'This rule isn't necessary.' You could spend hours of your day

rationalizing this opinion, saying, 'This is the twentieth century, these things are not necessary.' And you would watch the discontent and proliferation going on inside you and ask yourself: 'Is this suffering?' You'd keep watching your reactions to being corrected, criticized or praised. Over the years equanimity seemed to develop. You found that anger, annoyance and aversion began to fade out. And when your mind no longer inclines towards dwelling in aversion, you begin to have some joy and some peace of mind.

As I gained confidence in the practice and the teacher, and then the monastery, I developed a kind of obsessive attachment to them. I couldn't see any faults in them and I felt that everybody should be following them. When people came to the monastery I'd feel it was my duty to convert them. I can understand how missionaries must feel. When you feel very inspired, very attached to something that has helped you and given you happiness and insight, you feel compelled to tell everybody about it, whether they want to hear it or not. This was all right as long as the Westerners who came agreed with me. That was nice; I could inspire them and they would feel the same sense of dedication, and we would reinforce each other. We could get together and talk about our tradition and our teacher being the best, and how we had discovered something wonderful. But then inevitably some negative American or Englishman would come to the monastery and not accept any of this. This happened very strongly in about my fifth year there, when an American came who had been at the Zen Center in San Francisco. He proceeded to find fault with Ajahn Chah, with Wat Pah Pong, with Theravada Buddhism, with the Vinaya – with everything. He was quite an intelligent person, and he certainly had a lot of experience in going from one teacher to another, one ashram to another, from one monastery to another, and finding fault with them. He put doubt in the minds of people: 'Maybe there is a better way to do it, a quicker way. Maybe Ajahn Chah is an old-fashioned nobody.' There was said to be a teacher in India who was giving meditation courses

where people became *sotāpannas*¹⁴ almost immediately, making people think: ‘I don’t know if I am a *sotāpanna* yet or not. If I could have a teacher come and tell me, verify, it would be really nice to know where I am in my meditation.’ Ajahn Chah wouldn’t tell you this.

So I felt strong aversion arise towards this American. I felt the need to tear down every other type of Buddhism, every other teacher, every possible alternative to Wat Pah Pong and its ways. I became very critical, and every time somebody said, ‘I know a better system’, rather than listen to why it was allegedly better, I would immediately find every possible way in which it was worse. So I developed a habit of tearing down other teachers and traditions. But this brought me no joy. I began to see the suffering in always having to defend something and tear down anything that threatens the security you find in attachment. If you never really understand doubt, the nature of uncertainty in your own mind, you may be overwhelmed by it, and when someone says, ‘I know a better way, a quicker way’, you start doubting: ‘Maybe there is a better way, a quicker way.’ If this better way was described in very rational terms, you would think, ‘Well, yes, maybe that’s the way to do it.’ But when you are attached and feel loyal to your teacher, you think, ‘I can’t do that – it’s better to do it the slow way and be sure.’ So then you start to put down anybody who suggests there is a better or a quicker way. But the important thing to understand is the doubting mind. I saw that it was not up to me to decide which was the best or the quickest way to do anything, but to understand my own uncertainty. So I began to investigate the mental state that arose when doubt was put into my mind, and after a while I began to accept any kind of doubt, regarding it as a changing condition.

Once when I was in Bangkok people were comparing religions, and I was trying to be very tolerant and accept that all religions were equally good, even though I did not really think so. But I would always try to say something good, about how the goal is the same, and that we should love the Christians and try to have *mettā*, loving-kindness, for

¹⁴ *Sotāpanna*: a stream-enterer, one who has reached the first of four stages of liberation.

all Christians. But I really felt that Buddhism was better. One day this bothered me because I thought: ‘What if somebody asks you, “Which is the best religion?” What would you say? Well, I’d say “Buddhism.”’ Suddenly it became very clear that that was only an opinion, and that opinions were not permanent conditions – they were not-self and you did not need to have one or believe in one. I did not have to be the authority, the one who said this was better than that. So I no longer felt any obligation to think about this or to try to figure it out. It became clear that all I had to do was to be aware of the desire to know, and of the ability to say: ‘This is better than that.’

Another time, several years ago, I became obsessed with jealousy. As I was the senior monk I felt I had to set an example of perfect behaviour, and I began to feel jealous if other monks were praised. Somebody might say: ‘This monk is better than Sumedho’, and I’d feel a tremendous sense of jealousy arise in my mind. Jealousy’s a kind of competitiveness, a feeling that you always have to hold your own in front of everybody else. But then I found that I did not like jealousy; it was a most unpleasant condition. So I tended to repress it. I would practise sympathetic joy, *muditā*. When somebody said, ‘That monk is better than Sumedho’, I’d say to myself, ‘Isn’t that wonderful, he’s better than me’, or, ‘Oh, how glad I am for that person, he’s better off than I am.’ But I’d still feel jealous. So I realized I had to look at the emotion, and saw that the problem was that I was always trying to get rid of it. I decided to bring it up more; I started concentrating on jealousy. I’d think of every possible thing that would arouse jealousy. I kept looking at the feeling of jealousy and observing its changing nature, and after a while it began to fade out. As it disappeared I could see that it was only a natural condition of the mind and that it was not-self.

Sleepiness or mental dullness is another good teacher, which appears when you no longer feel inspired by your monastic life. When you’ve just entered the Sangha, you feel a lot of inspiration – at least I did – and you have a lot of energy. But afterwards you find yourself

becoming very dull mentally. You start falling asleep when sitting or listening to talks. You sit and concentrate on the dullness, just letting the mind go into a dull mental state without putting any effort in, or you try to resist this mental dullness. On the moon days in Thailand we used to have to sit up all night till dawn. At first, like a typical competitive American, I wanted to look good in front of others, so I'd sit there and, through sheer willpower hold myself up all night. I'd see some Thai monks sinking down, almost falling over, and contempt would arise: 'I'm better than that! I won't allow myself to give in to sleepiness or dullness.' But after a while the willpower would fade out, and I'd find myself sinking down and falling on my face on the floor. I would feel aversion to this mental state and make myself stay awake by willpower. When this happens you find yourself going into a state where you don't know what's going on and you start hallucinating. So I reflected on this hindrance and that the real problem was that it was something I didn't like. Trying to get rid of something you don't want is *dukkha*, so I thought, 'I'll just accept it; I'll investigate the feeling of sleepiness and dullness.' And though I thought I would fall asleep and disgrace myself in front of all the other monks, I found that one can concentrate on the feeling of sleepiness itself. I would contemplate the sensation around the eyes, and the feeling in the body, observing the mental condition and my habitual resistance to it. In this way, that hindrance soon ceased being a problem to me.

In life, wisdom arises within us when we understand the things we are experiencing here and now. You don't have to do anything special. You don't have to experience all kinds of extreme pain in order to transcend pain. The pain in your ordinary life is enough to urge you towards enlightenment. We can regard all these feelings of hunger or thirst, of restlessness, jealousy or fear, of lust and greed and sleepiness, as teachers. Rather than resenting them and saying, 'What did I do to deserve this?' you should say: 'Thank you very much. I'll have to learn this lesson some day; I might as well do it now, rather than put it off.'

5 | The Monastery as a Teacher: Laypeople and the Vihara

I would like to suggest that people coming here should, on occasions, bring candles, incense and flowers as an offering. This is a good tradition: to make an offering as part of our devotional practice as Buddhists, as an act of worship, of gratitude, of love towards the Teacher, the Buddha. The Buddha is the One Who Knows, the Wise One within us – but that’s also just a conceptualisation. To use our bodies within conventions, in a harmonious and graceful way, inclining towards generosity is in itself an act of giving. Is your attitude, ‘I come to the vihara to get something,’ or ‘I come to the vihara to give’ – to actually, physically, give something?

Bowing is another tradition. Learn how to bow mindfully, putting your head down, surrendering physically, giving yourself in the act of bowing, instead of just saying, ‘I’m not aggressive, I’m not proud and arrogant.’ Don’t become proud because you bow so well or start hating people who do not bow. This is an act of devotion, and devotion is an opening of the heart, of the emotions rather than the intellect. You can try to figure out how much you gain from bowing,

its advantages or disadvantages, whether it's the real Dhamma and whether it's necessary or unnecessary. But any opinion and view you have about it is just another opinion and view. Bowing is something that is done or not done – giving or not giving – but heedlessness is always rationalization, wanting to criticize, analyze or find reasons for doing or not doing something. If we live our lives in wisdom, then we do or don't do. With awareness we know what to do – the generous, the beautiful, the kind, the spontaneous. Good actions are done through clear awareness, through a seeing and understanding of time and place. Or there is awareness of wrong impulses, selfish impulses – these we do not act upon.

Chanting – what is this? Is it something valuable, or is it useless? Do you doubt whether to do it or not to do it? Do you have to find reasons and justifications, do you have to be convinced one way or the other? Or do you take a stand, saying, 'I am not going to do it', or 'I am going to do it'? Some people say: 'Chanting reminds me of Roman Catholic blind devotion and rituals, rites and ceremonies.' This is taking a stand. Can you mindfully participate in a ceremony, or are you going to reject it because you take a stand against ceremonies? Can you give yourself completely to a tradition, or do you say: 'I'll only go so far with it, and then stop?' What about the monastic life – can you give yourself fully to the monastic life, or will you have reservations: 'I'll go so far, then I don't know. In meditation I'll go so far, then maybe ... I want life on my terms, and always with the bridges there so I can run back across them if I don't like what's ahead of me.' This is, of course, *samsāra*, heedless wandering.

The practice of awareness always means the present moment, complete involvement, complete surrender, acceptance – and that is liberation. With doubt, rationalizations, justifications and reservations there is always a myriad of complexities which pull us this way and that, and confuse us.

6 | The Monastery as a Teacher: Anagārika Training

‘Anagārika’ means one who is leaving the home life for the homeless life. It implies relinquishment and renunciation, as the homeless life is the life of the religious seeker, dedicated solely to realizing the truth.

Renunciants are those who can take on the precepts that limit and contain their energies, so they don’t find themselves being pulled out this way and that and can concentrate their minds on the truth – which we call inclining to nibbāna, the Unconditioned.

The traditional opening salutation in Pali is: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa*.¹⁵ This is a way of reminding ourselves to be with that which is perfect: the purified, the truly compassionate, the enlightened. Then we take the Three Refuges, in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. First we take refuge in the Buddha: *Buddham saraṇam gacchāmi*. What does this really mean? Recollect that a refuge is a place you go to for safety, and that refuge with the Buddha means refuge in wisdom. This points to something very real; not something idealistic or far and remote, but that which is wise within us, that which is wise in the universe, awake and clear. So, taking refuge in the Buddha

¹⁵ ‘Homage to the Blessed, Noble and Perfectly Enlightened One’, i.e. to the Buddha.

is not just an empty recitation, but a way to recollect, because we forget and are caught up in our feelings and thoughts.

The second refuge is: *Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*. Dhamma is the Pali word for the Ultimate Reality, that which is ultimately true, so we take refuge in the immortal Truth, reminding ourselves to be with that which is true. Then *Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi* – taking refuge in the Sangha, the virtuous ones, those who live by a code of nobility and virtue. This can be seen as the Bhikkhu-Sangha, the order of monks, but it really means that you are taking refuge in a community, or with all human beings who are virtuous. Or you can look at it as taking refuge in that in yourself which is virtuous, compassionate and good, and in practical ways of relating and living as a human being in that spirit. Our way of relating to each other is through kindness, compassion and morality, rather than through exploitation and selfishness. Hence you remind yourself to take refuge in Sangha.

As a renunciant anagārika you take the Eight Precepts. The first one is *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* – to refrain from intentionally taking the life of any living creature. You have to learn to respect the lives of living creatures, rather than just getting rid of them for your own convenience. You must be more considerate of even the most insignificant form of life, no matter how unpleasant it might be. *Pāṇātipātā* makes us more patient, more respectful towards the rights of all creatures on this earth. We no longer look at this earth as something to be made as we want it to be, so that it's convenient for us at the expense of all other living creatures.

Adinnādānā veramaṇī is the precept of refraining from taking things that do not belong to us, so that we train ourselves to respect that which belongs to others. The third precept is *abrahmacariyā veramaṇī*, celibacy. This means total abstinence from any kind of intentional sexual behaviour. It is the way of a *brahmacārin*, in which we relinquish sexual delight for the religious quest. In other words, we take the energy given out in sexuality up into the heart, the spiritual centre.

The fourth precept is *musāvādā veramaṇī*, which means refraining from lying and being more responsible for what you say – not using language to insult others, for exaggeration or for gossip.

The fifth precept is *surāmeraya-majjapamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī*, refraining from alcoholic drink and drugs. Anagārikas refrain from intentionally altering consciousness, recognizing the way of mindfulness as one in which you open your minds to understand conditions, rather than trying to get away from them by manipulating your minds.

The sixth precept is a renunciant one of refraining from eating at inappropriate times, so we don't spend the whole day indulging in eating food. An anagārika and bhikkhu may eat between dawn and noon – here we usually eat the one meal just before noon. In the winter when it's colder we have rice gruel in the early morning, but the idea is to eat just what is necessary rather than spending our time preparing and eating food. In ordinary life one tends to munch on things all day long – at least, I did! – but here we limit our habits rather than just following them.

The seventh precept – *naccagītavādita-visūkadassanā-mālāgandhavilepana-dhāraṇa-maṇḍana-vibhūsanatṭhānā veramaṇī sikkhāpadam samādiyāmi* – means you no longer seek distraction through entertainment. You abstain if you become bored or want some fun, if you want to go to movies, to discos and so forth. However, this doesn't mean that we're against fun and entertainment, but that we simplify our lives rather than seeking distraction through the sensual world. If we feel bored or weary now, we move inward, towards the peace within. Actually, you begin to realize that true peace of mind is much more delightful than any kind of sensual pleasure, and after a while the sense pleasures begin to seem less enticing, as you start to recognize the strength within yourself.

The last precept – *uccasayanā-mahāsayanā veramaṇī* – is about sleeping. It is usually translated as not sleeping on high and luxurious

beds, but can be regarded more as not seeking escape through sleeping all the time. There's a side of us which when life becomes difficult wants to sleep all the time, eradicate ourselves through sleeping fourteen hours a day – and, of course, that's possible if you have high, luxurious beds. But in the monastic life we train ourselves to sleep on harder surfaces, which are not the kind of places where you can spend hours lost in sleep. So you begin to develop your meditation and learn to limit sleep to just what is necessary for the body, and you know how much is an indulgence or an escape. You know for yourself how to live with your body and mind in a way that is skilful.

These Eight Precepts are guidelines; they are not burdensome rules that make you feel guilt-ridden if you don't live up to their highest standard. You're not expected to be perfect all at once. This is a way of training, a way of guiding yourself towards recognizing the conditions of your mind, towards recognizing resistance, laziness, indulgence and the resentment of being restricted. You should want to see these things, so that you can release yourself from the burdens of repression and indulgence and find the Middle Way.

The initial training period lasts for one year, so I expect you to remain at least one year under the discipline and then decide whether you want to stay or not. This life is only valuable as long as you see its value. It's not a life of compulsion: it has to be voluntary, and the energy for it has to come from your own mind. You can't expect somebody else to enlighten you. This is a very mature way of living in which you're developing from your heart, developing the effort from your own mind, rather than just being conditioned into being Buddhists or monks. It's useless if you're just trying to rearrange your way of life and thinking to become something else. That's not liberation.

As an *anagārika* now, you no longer have a lot of choices and decisions to make about what to do. Life here is much more one-pointed, so you have more time to watch. We live here under these principles so that we trust each other. We're not here to compete with

each other, to see who's going to become 'anagārika of the year' – that would be working from the wrong attitude. Instead we learn to respect each other and have compassion for each other as human beings, so that we're not harsh or narrow-minded regarding individual problems, abilities, or lack of abilities. We can't all be the same, but we can respect our differences. Even though we live in a community of many people, we allow space for the mind, we forgive each other for the things we do wrong. Inevitably, living in a community with other beings means there will be misunderstandings and conflicts, but we work with them and with ourselves, rather than trying to make the community into what we would like it to be.

Learning how to forgive is a very important lesson for a human being, as many of the problems in the world arise because of a lack of forgiveness. Hundreds of years go by, but people still talk about what somebody did to their ancestors two hundred years ago. But as religious mendicants we don't have to spend our time complaining or criticizing members of the community. Instead we learn how to let go of our particular views about them and give them the space to develop. Each of us has to develop from the position of what we are, recognizing and realizing rather than becoming anything.

7 | The Monastery as a Teacher: The Samaṇa and Society

The teachings of the Buddha are teachings that help us to understand ourselves. Though it's quite possible for us to do this on our own, I really doubt whether I would be able to do it, so I'm quite grateful to have an established form and convention to use as a guide in order to understand my emotions, memories and habits.

Being committed to the convention of a *samaṇa*¹⁶ means giving myself to it voluntarily; it's something for which I feel gratitude and respect, so I stay within the limitations that it places on me. *Kataññutā*, gratitude, arises in the mind. I remember the tremendous feeling of gratitude that arose in me towards Tan Ajahn Chah and Thai society when I realized they had provided me with the occasion and the support to live like this and to understand myself. When you realize the wonder of that, you gladly live within the conventions; you want to perfect them and be worthy as a way of offering something to those who have supported you. So you integrate into society by living the Dhamma and presenting this model to others. An alms-mendicant is also one who gives occasion for others to give alms. This is different

¹⁶ *Samaṇa*: one who has entered the holy life; a recluse or wanderer.

from being a beggar going around scrounging off the neighbours. A lot of people think we're just a bunch of beggars: 'Why don't they go out and work? They probably laze around Chithurst House just waiting for someone to come along and feed them! Why don't they go out and get a job, do something important?' But an alms-mendicant gives occasion for others to give the alms that are necessary for existence, such as food, robes, shelter and medicine. We don't need very much, and we have to live quite humbly and impeccably so that we are worthy of alms. We reflect, 'Am I worthy of this, have I been living honestly and rightly within the discipline?' because people give not to us as personalities, but to the Sangha which lives following the teaching of the Buddha.

This monastery is dependent on alms. There are no fees for staying; people offer what they choose. If it was an institution based on fees we wouldn't really be *samaṇas* any more, we'd be businessmen, making a business out of teaching the Dhamma which has been freely given to us. A country like this is regarded as a good and benevolent country, but it has become too bureaucratic and too materialistic. Here in Europe people have lost that *kataññutā* – we've become very demanding, always complaining and wanting things to be better and better, even though we don't really need such high standards. As *samaṇas* we give occasion for people to offer what they can, and that has a good effect on us as well as on society. When you open up the opportunity in society for people to give to things they respect and love, this gives people a lot of happiness and joy. But a tyrannical society where we're constantly trying to squeeze out everything we can get is a miserable and depressed society.

So in Britain now, we as monks and nuns make ourselves worthy of love and respect, people make offerings and more people experience the arising of faith. More people come and listen – they want to practise the Dhamma and have the occasion to Go Forth.

8 | Patience

Patience is a virtue that is highly praised within Buddhist circles but not considered so terribly important in the materialist world, where efficiency and getting what we want instantly are far more desirable. With all the instant things that are produced now, as soon as we feel a desire, a need for something, we can get it quickly. And if we can't get it quickly we become very annoyed or upset, and complain, 'This country's going to the dogs.' We hear that all the time: complaining, because if people are going on strike or aren't efficient enough, quick enough to satisfy our desires, we have to wait and patiently endure. Notice in sitting how impatient you become, when pain arises in your body, and how you automatically try to get away from pain. If you have a fever or fall sick, notice how you resent the inconvenience, the annoyance of the body and try to get well to get away from the pain as soon as possible.

The virtue of patience is probably the most important one for us to consider at this time, because if you don't have patience, spiritual development is an impossibility. So I might think, 'I'll take the instant Zen practice; I don't want to be bothered with that Theravada because it takes too long. I want to be enlightened instantly, quickly, so I don't

have to wait around doing boring things, doing things that take time and which I may not feel like doing. Maybe I can take a course or take a pill, have some kind of machine and get enlightened quickly.' I remember that when LSD first became known, people said it was the quick way to enlightenment: 'You just swallow this tablet and you understand everything! You don't have to bother with ordination as a monk and sit around in a monastery. Just take a pill and you'll be enlightened. Go to the chemist or the dope peddler – and you don't have to commit yourself to anything.' Wouldn't that be wonderful, if that was all one had to do? But after a few trips on LSD, people began to realize that the enlightening experience seemed to disappear, and they were left in an even worse state than ever.

In a monastery the development of patience is part of our way of life. In the forest monasteries of North East Thailand you have the possibility to become very patient, because there life is much less efficient and you have to endure. You have to endure through all kinds of unpleasant physical experiences such as malarial fevers and the hot season. The hot season in North East Thailand is one of the dreariest things I've experienced in my life. You wake up in the morning and think, 'Not another day.' Everything seems so dreary. You think, 'Another hot day, an endless day of heat and mosquitoes and sweat.' A seemingly endless day, and one day after another. And then you remind yourself: 'What a wonderful opportunity for developing patience!' You hear about modern American ways to enlightenment where you can become involved in the most interesting kinds of personal relationships and in scientific experiments, doing absolutely fascinating things to each other, and be enlightened. And here you are sitting in the hot season, in an endless hot, dreary day in which one hour seems like an eternity. You think, 'What am I doing here? I could be in California, having a fascinating life, doing fascinating things, becoming enlightened quicker and more efficiently. California is much more advanced and with it than North East Thailand. What am I doing here, sweating through my

robes, being bitten by mosquitoes?’ But then you think: ‘I’m developing patience. If I just learn to be patient in this lifetime, I’ve not wasted it. Just to be a little more patient is good enough. I won’t go to California, get caught up in those fascinating encounter groups, modern therapies and scientific experiments. I’ll just sit here and learn to be patient with a mosquito biting my arm ... learn to be patient with an endless, dreary hot season that seems to go on forever.’

I also used to think: ‘My mind is too alert and bright; I’ve got so much restless movement in my mind.’ Because I had always wanted to have an interesting personality, I trained myself in that direction and acquired all sorts of useless information and silly ideas, so I could be a charming, entertaining person. But that doesn’t really count, it’s useless in a monastery in North East Thailand. When you’re alone with nobody to charm, that mental habit just goes around in your mind and nothing’s fascinating any more. Instead of becoming fascinating and charming – I could see there was no point in that – I started looking at the water buffaloes, and wondering what went on in their minds. A Thai water buffalo is one of the most stupid-looking creatures in the world. It’s a big clumsy thing and it has the dullest-looking face. I’d think: ‘That’s what I need, to sit in my kuti, sweating through my robes, trying to imagine what a water buffalo is thinking.’ So I’d sit and create in my mind an image of a water buffalo, becoming more stupid, more dull, more patient and less of a fascinating, clever and interesting personality.

Learn to be more patient with things as they are, with yourself – your hang-ups, your obsessive thoughts, your restless mind – and with the way things are externally. Like here at Chithurst – how many of you are really patient with Chithurst? I hear some of you complaining that you have to work too hard, or there’s not enough of this, or you want more time, or you want ... There are too many people, not enough privacy; the mind goes on and on. There’s always somewhere better. But patience means that you endure through the way things are right now. How many of you would be willing to sit through a hot season

in North East Thailand? Or endure patiently through a year of having some tropical disease, without wanting to go home and have mother take care of you?

We still have the hope that eventually enlightenment will make us a more interesting, with-it person than an unenlightened being: if you could just become enlightened you could surely increase the feeling of self-importance. But the Buddha-wisdom is a very humbling wisdom, and it takes a great deal of patience to be wise like Buddha. Buddha-wisdom isn't a particularly fascinating kind of wisdom – it's not like being a nuclear physicist, a psychiatrist or a philosopher. Buddha-wisdom is very humbling, because it knows that whatever arises passes away and is not-self. It knows that whatever condition of the body and mind arises, it is conditioned. And it knows the Unconditioned as the Unconditioned.

But is knowing the Unconditioned very interesting or fascinating? Try to think of knowing the Unconditioned – would that be interesting? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or the Dhamma: that would be a really fascinating thing to know, something blissful and ecstatic.' So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the Unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Is the space in this room very interesting to look at? It isn't to me: the space in this room is like the space in the other rooms. The things in this room might be interesting or uninteresting or whatever – good, bad, beautiful, ugly – but the space ... what is it? There is nothing you can really say or think about it; it has no quality except being spatial. And to be able really to be aware of space, one has to be patient. As there is nothing one can grasp, one recognizes space in the room only by not clinging to the objects in it. When you let go, when you stop your absorptions in the beings and the things in the room (along with the judgements, criticisms and evaluations of them) you begin to experience its space. But that takes a lot of patience and humility. With conceit and pride we can form all our opinions about

the room, whether we like the Buddha-image or not, or the picture at the back, or the colour of the walls; whether we think the photograph of Ajahn Mun is an inspiring one, or the photograph of Ajahn Chah. But when we just sit here in the space, the body starts becoming painful and we become restless or sleepy. Then we endure, we watch and we listen. We listen to the mind, its complaining, the fears, the doubts and the worries, not in order to come up with some interesting, fascinating conclusions about ourselves as being anything, but just as a mere recognition, a bare recognition that all that arises passes away.

Buddha-wisdom is just that much: knowing the conditioned as the conditioned, and the Unconditioned as the Unconditioned. Buddhas rest in the Unconditioned, and unless it's necessary no longer seek absorption into anything. They are no longer deluded by any conditions, and they incline to the Unconditioned, the space, the emptiness, rather than towards the changing conditions within the space.

In your meditation now, as you incline towards the emptiness of the mind, towards the space in the mind, your habitual grasping, fascination, revulsion, fears, doubts and worries about these conditions lessen. They're not-self, nothing to be excited about or depressed about, they are as they are. You begin to recognize that conditions are just things that come and go and that's why we can allow them to be just as they are; their nature is to go away, so we don't have to make them do so. We're free and patient and enduring enough to allow things to take their natural course. In this way we liberate ourselves from the struggle, strife and confusion of the ignorant mind which has to spend all its time evaluating and discriminating, trying to hold onto or get rid of something.

So reflect on what I've said, and take all the time in the world to endure the unendurable. What seems to be unendurable is endurable if you are patient. Be patient with others and with the world as it is, rather than always dwelling on what's wrong with it and how you'd like it to be if you had your way. Remember that the world happens to

be as it is, and right now that's the only way it can be. The only thing we can do is be patient with it. That doesn't mean that we approve or like it any better, but it does mean we can exist in it peacefully, rather than complaining, rebelling and causing more friction and confusion, adding to the confusion through believing in our own confusion.

9 | The Practice of Mettā

I would like to talk about the practice of *mettā*, a meditation which most people will find very useful. *Mettā* is generally translated as ‘loving-kindness’. This may be too big a word because we tend to think of ‘loving-kindness’ as grand and wonderful, and sometimes we cannot generate that kind of love for everything.

The English word ‘love’ is often misused. We say ‘I love to eat fish and chips’, when what we mean is ‘I like to eat fish and chips’. Christians talk about ‘Christian love’; this means loving your enemies, it does not mean liking them. How can you like your enemies? But we can love them, which means that we will not do anything to harm them. We will not dwell in aversion towards them. You can be kind to your enemies, kind towards people who are not very nice to you, who insult you and wish you harm. They may be unpleasant people whom you cannot like but can love. *Mettā* is not a superman’s love; it is the very ordinary ability just to be kind and not dwell in aversion towards something or someone.

If a man walked into this room right now, drunk, ugly, diseased, stinking, cursing and swearing, we could not even consider liking him, but we could be kind to him. We would not have to punch him in the

nose, curse him and force him out of the room. We could invite him in and give him a cup of tea. We can be kind; we can do something for someone who is repulsive and disgusting in some way. When we think to ourselves, ‘I can’t stand that man, get him out of here, he is disgusting’, it becomes impossible to be kind, and we create suffering around what is unpleasant to us.

There is a great lack of *mettā* in the world today because we have overdeveloped our critical faculties: we constantly analyze and criticize. We dwell on what is wrong with ourselves, with others, with the society we live in. *Mettā*, however, means not dwelling in aversion, but being kind and patient even to what is bad, evil, foul or terrible. It’s easy to be kind to nice animals like little kittens and puppies. It’s easy to be kind to people we like, such as sweet little children, especially when they are not ours. It’s easy to be kind to old ladies and men when we don’t have to live with them. It is easy to be kind to those who agree with us politically and philosophically and who do not threaten us in any way. It is much more difficult to be kind to those we don’t like, who threaten us or disgust us. That takes much more endurance.

First we have to start with ourselves, so in traditional Buddhist style we always start the practice of *mettā* by having *mettā* for ourselves. This does not mean we say: ‘I really love myself, I really like me.’ When we practise *mettā* towards ourselves, we no longer dwell in aversion to ourselves. We extend kindness to ourselves, to our conditions of body and mind. We extend kindness and patience even to faults and failings, to bad thoughts, moods, anger, greed, fears, doubts, jealousies, delusions – all that we may not like about ourselves.

When I first went to England, I asked the Buddhist people there whether they practised *mettā*. They said, ‘No, can’t stand it; it’s so false. We’re supposed to go around saying, “I like myself, I love myself, may I be happy.” It’s so soppy, wet, foolish – I don’t really feel it. It seems so false and superficial.’ On that level it sounded a bit silly to me too, until I realized that it wasn’t taught in the right way and had become

sentimental, a cosmetic covering up of things. People in England could not go along with that; they would rather sit and analyze themselves, look at their faults and exaggerate them out of all proportion. They thought they were being honest with themselves. But practising *mettā* towards ourselves means we stop trying to find all our weaknesses, faults and imperfections. Often when you have a bad mood or start to feel depressed, you think, 'Here I go again – I'm worthless.' When this happens, have *mettā* for the depression itself. Don't make a bad thing out of it, don't complicate it; be at peace with it. Coexist peacefully with depression, fears, doubts, anger, or jealousy. Don't create anything around them with aversion.

Last year, a woman came to ask me about depression. She said, 'I suffer from depression on occasions. I know it's bad, I know I shouldn't, and I want to know what to do about it. I really don't want it, I want to get rid of it. What do you suggest?' Now, what is wrong with depression? You think you should never feel depressed, because you have an idea that there's something wrong with you for being that way. But sometimes life just isn't very pleasant; it can be downright depressing. You can't expect life to be always pleasant, inspiring and wonderful. I know how depression arises when there are unhappy things and unpleasant scenes around; I saw a lot of it in my first year in England. After living in a warm, sunny country like Thailand, where the people have great respect for monks, always addressing them as 'Venerable Sir', giving them things and treating them as if they were terribly important, I found that in England some people treat monks as if they are crazy. London isn't sunny and smiling; it can be drizzling and cold, and people aren't interested in you at all. They look at you and then turn away without giving you a smile. In Thailand life was so simple and easy for a Buddhist monk. We had nice forest monasteries in natural surroundings and our own little huts among the trees. In London we were cooped up in a little house day after day, kept indoors by the drizzling rain and cold.

So all the monks began to feel depressed and negative. We would just go through the motions of being monks. We would get up at 4 a.m., go to the shrine room to do a little chanting, get that over with and then sit in meditation for a while, drink tea, go out for a walk – just going through the motions. We weren't putting energy into anything we were doing; we were becoming caught up in that which was depressing. There was also a lot of friction, with problems in the group which had invited us to England and a lot of personality clashes and misunderstandings. When I reflected on this, I began to see that I was becoming caught up in the unpleasant things that were happening around me. I was creating negative feelings around them. I was wishing I was back in Thailand, wishing the unpleasant things would go away, wishing it wouldn't be the way it was, worrying about people and wishing they were otherwise. I began to realize that I was dwelling in aversion on the unpleasant things around me. A lot of unpleasant things were happening and I was creating aversion around them all. I was complicating them all in my mind and thus suffering from them. So we decided to put effort into just being there; we stopped complaining, we stopped demanding, or even thinking and wishing about being somewhere else. We began to put energy into our practice, getting up early, doing exercises to keep warm – and we began to feel much better. Everything around us was the same, but we learnt not to create problems within ourselves over those difficulties.

When you have high expectations for yourself, thinking you have to be Superman or Wonder Woman, then of course you don't have much *mettā*, because only very seldom can we live up to such a high standard. You become doubtful of yourself: 'Maybe I'm not good enough.' By practising *mettā* towards yourself, you can stop doing that. You begin to forgive yourself for making mistakes, for giving in to weaknesses. That doesn't mean you rationalize things away, but rather that you do not go on creating problems or dwelling in aversion on the faults you have and the mistakes you have made. So by applying the practice of

mettā inwardly we can become a lot more peaceful within ourselves, with the conditions of our minds and bodies. We become more mindful and aware, more awake to the way things are. Wisdom begins to arise, and we can see how we create unnecessary problems all the time by just following the momentum of habit.

Mettā means a little more than just kindness. It is a penetrating kindness, a kind awareness. *Mettā* means we can coexist peacefully in a kindly way with sentient beings – both those voices and personae within us and with beings outside. It doesn't mean liking them. Some people go to that extreme. They say, 'I love my weaknesses because they're really me. I wouldn't be me if I didn't have my wonderful weaknesses.' That's silly. *Mettā* is being patient, being able to coexist with the pests of our minds, rather than trying to annihilate them. Our society is very much one which annihilates pests both inwardly and outwardly, wanting to create an environment where there are no pests. I've heard monks say, 'I can't meditate because there are too many mosquitoes; if only we could get rid of them.' You may never really like mosquitoes, but you can have *mettā* for them, respecting their right to exist and not getting caught up in resentment at their presence. Similarly, if I have *mettā* for the depressed mood of the moment and allow it to be there, recognizing it and not demanding that it not be there, it will go. Feelings like these arise naturally and go away. We make them stay longer because we keep wanting them to go. The struggle of trying to get rid of something we do not like seems to make it last longer than it would otherwise. The more we try to control nature, to manipulate it according to our greed and desire, the more we end up polluting the whole earth. People are becoming really worried now because we can see so much pollution from all the chemicals and pesticides we use to try to get rid of the things in nature that we don't want. When we try to annihilate the pests in our minds, we end up with pollution too – we have nervous breakdowns and then the pests come back stronger than ever.

Our modern society does not encourage much *mettā* towards the old, the sick and the dying. Our society is very much oriented towards youth and vigour, being fast and staying young for as long as possible. When you grow old you seem useless: you can't do anything very well, you're slow, you're no longer attractive, so people don't really want to know you. Many old people feel they have no place in society. They grow old and are cast aside as useless people. Our society also treats the intellectually handicapped and the mentally ill in this way. We try to keep them away so that we don't have to look at them and know they're around. But trying to ignore the facts of life such as death, infirmity and old age results in an increasing amount of mental illness, mental breakdown and alcoholism. In schools in the United States we tried to put all the intelligent students with high IQs together in one class and the slower ones in another. We did not want the intelligent students to be slowed down by the halting progress of the slow ones. I think the most important thing the intelligent can learn is to be kind and patient towards those who are not as intelligent or quick as they are.

When we are forced to compete with our own kind, life becomes hectic and frustrating. Kindness, patience and compassion are much more helpful qualities for knowing how to live in the world than getting first prize and coming first in the class. Feeling that we always have to strive and compete to survive makes us neurotic and miserable. Those who can't compete feel inferior and just drop out. We have frustration and unfulfilment among both the gifted and the not so gifted, because *mettā* has never been considered important. When we practise *mettā* we begin to be willing to learn from termites and ants, from people who are slow, from the old, sick and dying. We become willing to take time out to take care of somebody who is ill – and that takes patience. We become willing to take time out of our busy lives to help and be with somebody who is dying. We become willing to try to contemplate and understand dying. This is the direction we must take to create a really humane and good society.

But before we can start making great changes in society, we have to start with ourselves, having *mettā* for the conditions of our minds and bodies. We can have *mettā* for the disease when we are ill. That does not mean we are going to help the disease to stay for longer, or that we should not have an injection of penicillin because we are having *mettā* for the little germs infecting us. It means not dwelling in aversion to the discomfort and the weakness of our bodies when they are ill. We can learn to meditate on the fevers, fatigue, bodily pain and aches that we all experience. We don't have to like them; all we need to do is take the time to endure them and try to understand them rather than just resenting them. When we do not have *mettā*, we tend just to react to those conditions with a desire to annihilate, and the desire to annihilate always takes us to despair. We keep on recreating all the conditions for despair in our minds when we just try to annihilate all that we do not like and do not want.

Living in a Buddhist monastery is good training for learning to live with people. As a layman I had some control over my associates, keeping close to certain friends with whom I liked to be and staying away from anyone I did not like. But in the monastery I had no choice, I had to live with whoever was there, whether I liked them or not. So sometimes I had to live with people I did not like or found irritating and annoying. That was good for me, because I began to understand people I would never have taken the time to understand otherwise. If I had had a choice I would not have lived with some of those people, but as that choice was not available I learned to be more sensitive and open. I learned to have *mettā* and allow people to be as they are, rather than always trying to force them to change, forcing them to be as I would like them to be or trying to get rid of them.

Wisdom arises when we begin to accept all the different 'beings' both within ourselves and outside, rather than always trying to manipulate things so they are convenient and pleasant for us all the time, so that we do not have to be confronted with irritating

and troublesome people and situations. Let's face it, the world is an irritating place! I learnt from my own experience how frustrating life is when I have ideas of how I want it to be. So I began to look at my own suffering, rather than just trying to control everything according to my desires. Instead of making requests and demands or trying to control everything I began to flow with life, and that was much easier in the long run than all the manipulation that I used to do. We can still be fully aware of imperfections and not dismiss them or be irresponsible; the practice of *mettā* means we don't create problems round them by dwelling in aversion. We can allow ourselves to flow with life.

Our experience of life sometimes isn't very pleasant, enjoyable or beautiful; at other times it's all of these. That's the way life is. The wise person can always learn from both extremes, not attaching to either and not creating problems, but coexisting peacefully with all conditions.

10 | Kamma and Rebirth

Kamma is a subject people like to talk about, to speculate about with opinions and views concerning what we were in the past and what might become of us in the future, about how our kamma affects someone else's and so forth. I try to point out how to use this. Kamma and rebirth are words; they're only concepts that point to something we can watch. It's not a matter of believing or disbelieving in kamma, but of knowing what it really is.

Kamma actually means 'action', or the result of action¹⁷ and we can observe it by being aware of what we are conscious of in the moment. Whatever arises – thought, mood or memory, pleasant or unpleasant – it's bound up with kamma; and it's something moving from its birth to its death. You can see this directly, but it's so simple that of course we would like to speculate about it. Why do we have the kamma we do have? What happens if we aren't enlightened; will we be born in a higher realm if we practise hard, or will the kamma from previous lives overwhelm us? Or we speculate about rebirth: what is it that carries on

¹⁷ More precisely, 'kamma' refers to intended action – bodily, verbal or emotional/psychological – while *vipāka*, or 'old kamma' refers to the results of actions – such as moods, tendencies and attitudes. Ajahn Sumedho here often uses 'kamma' to refer to 'old kamma'. The point is of course that what one experiences as 'me' and 'mine' is caused and conditioned, either as an impulse and intention or as the result of action (which itself becomes the basis for further new actions).

from one life to the next if there's no soul? If everything's *anattā*, how can 'I' have been something in a previous life and have some essence that is born again?

But if you watch the way things operate independently of yourself, you begin to understand that rebirth is nothing more than desire seeking some object to absorb into, which will allow it to arise again. This is the habit of the heedless mind. When you become hungry, because of the way you've been conditioned you go out and get something to eat. That's an actual rebirth: seeking something, being absorbed into that very thing itself. Rebirth is going on throughout the day and night, because when you grow tired of being reborn you annihilate yourself in sleep. There's nothing more to it than that. It's what you can see. It's not a theory, but a way of examining and observing kamma.

'Do good and you'll receive good; do evil and you'll receive evil.' We worry, 'I've done so many bad things in the past; what kind of result will I get from all that?' Well, all you can know is that what you've done in the past is a memory now. The most awful, disgusting thing you've ever done, which you wouldn't want anyone to know about – the one which, whenever anybody talks about kamma and rebirth, makes you think, 'I'm really going to get it for having done that' – that thing is a memory, and the memory is the kammic result. The additions to it, like fear, worrying and speculating, are the kammic results of unenlightened behaviour. What you do, you remember; it's as simple as that. If you do something kind, generous or compassionate, remembering it makes you feel happy; and if you do something mean and nasty, you have to remember that. If you try to repress it, run away from it, become caught up in all sorts of frantic avoidance behaviour, that's the kammic result.

Kamma will cease through recognition. In mindfulness you allow kammic formations to cease rather than recreating them, or annihilating them and recreating them. It's important to recollect that whatever you create, you destroy, and what you annihilate, you create – one conditions the other, just as the inhalation conditions the

exhalation. One is the kammic result of the other. Death is the kammic result of birth, and all we can know about that which is born and dies is that it is a condition and not-self. No matter what the memory might be, it's not-self. If you have the memory of murdering 999 people, that's just a horrendous memory now. Maybe you think, 'That's getting off too easily; somebody who's killed 999 people should suffer for a long time and be punished and tormented!' But it's not necessary to go to any lengths to punish anyone, because their punishment is their own resultant mind-states. Who knows what wretched future births they may have to endure? But what we can know is that as long as any of us persists in being ignorant, unenlightened and selfish, we will create more kammic cycles. Our lack of forgiveness and compassion, our trying to get even with 'those evil criminals'; that's our kamma and we reap the kammic result of the miserable state of hatred.

As Buddhists, we take refuge in the Ultimate Truth, and in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as conventional forms. This means that we have confidence in the Ultimate Truth, in the Uncreated and the Unconditioned – not in what we conceive, but in recognizing conditions as conditions and allowing kammic formations to cease. We just keep recognizing conditions, instead of creating more kamma around those conditions through fear, envy, greed and hatred. This is a gentle recognition that kammic formations are what we are not. There's nothing we can say about what we are, because in Ultimate Truth there are no beings: nobody is ever born or dies.

Our path of practice is to do good, to refrain from doing evil with body and speech and to be mindful. Don't create complexities around that or seek perfection in the realm of the senses. Learn to serve and help each other. Take refuge in the Sangha by being confident of your intentions to be enlightened, to do good, to refrain from doing evil. Maybe you'll fail sometimes, but that's not your intention. And always allow others to fail. We may have ideas and opinions about each other, but give each other space to be imperfect, rather than demanding

that everyone be perfect so as not to upset you. That's very selfish, but that's what we do; we pick and choose: 'These people are the ones we want; those are the ones we don't want ... These are worthy; those are unworthy... These are the ones who are really trying; those are the ones that aren't ...'.

For peace of mind, when somebody does something wrong, recognize it as a kammic formation. Thinking, 'How dare they do that? How dare they say that? How many years have I been teaching now, giving myself up for the welfare of all sentient beings and I don't get any thanks for it' is an unpleasant mental state. It's the result of wanting everybody else never to fail me and always live up to my expectations, or at least cause me no problems – of wanting people to be other than they are. But if I don't expect you to be anything, I don't create anyone in my mind. If I think, 'That's so and so, who did this, and then he did that' I'm creating a person out of kammic conditions, and I suffer accordingly with an unpleasant memory every time I see you. And if you're ignorant and do something to me, and I do the same to you, we just reinforce each other's bad habits.

We break these habits by recognizing them, by letting go of our grudges and memories, and by not creating thoughts around the *vipāka*,¹⁸ the conditions of the moment. By being mindful we free ourselves from the burden of birth and death, the habitually recreated pattern of rebirth. We recognize the boring, habitual recreations of unsatisfactoriness, the obsessions with worry, doubt, fear, greed, hatred and delusion in all their forms. When we're mindful, there's no attachment to ideas and memories of self, and creativity is spontaneous. There's no one who loves or is loved; there's no personal being who is created. In this way we find the real expression of kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity which is always fresh, always kind, patient and ever-forgiving of oneself and others.

When giving talks on meditation, one really says the same things over and over. But it's necessary to do so because we keep forgetting over and over, and have to keep being reminded. Remember: what we remember we forget; if you have nothing to remember, you have nothing to forget. In meditation we are moving towards where there is nothing to remember and nothing to forget, which doesn't mean 'nothing', but a centring, a realization of ultimate reality, of that which is not conditioned.

Realization is not gaining. You don't 'gain' realization. You realize something which you have all the time but never notice. Meditation is not a gaining process either. We are not here to make ourselves into Buddhas, bodhisattvas, arahants or anything else, or to try to condition our minds into being Buddhist. You might think you have to have a religious brainwash, throw away all your Christian habits and simply train yourself to think like a Buddhist – wear the robe, try to look like a Buddha image, use all those Pali words and call yourselves 'Buddhists'. That's just another costume, another act, another role to play. So the purpose of our meditation is not to become 'Buddhists' either.

Realization is what? Think, the word ‘real’: realizing, recognizing, knowing, direct knowledge of ultimate truth ... What do we mean by ultimate truth? We can say, ‘Ultimate Truth’; we can use the Pali word ‘Dhamma’ or the Sanskrit word ‘Dharma’; we can say, ‘The Absolute’; we can say ‘God’. Whatever word one happens to be conditioned with is the word one prefers. ‘Ultimate Truth’ might sound a bit intellectual or not have the pull on the heartstrings that ‘God’ has, but we don’t quibble about terminology any more. We don’t care exactly what word we use. We don’t try to find the perfect word to describe something which doesn’t need any description, which cannot really be described but can only be realized. We just do the best we can with whatever language we happen to have, because the point is not to decide which terminology is the most accurate, but to go beyond the term to the actual realization of ‘Ultimate Reality’, ‘God’, ‘The Absolute’ or whatever!

On the level of religious symbolism and convention we can quibble about the ‘Buddhist view’, ‘Buddhist Dhamma’, ‘Christian God’, and be caught up in all kinds of interesting little differences and comparisons. For what? For something one hasn’t realized yet, like the blind men describing the elephant.¹⁹ It’s not the perfect word or the most accurate description that we need, but the intention to reach the reality – that one-pointed intention, that sincerity, that kind of earnestness that takes you to the realization of truth, Dhamma. So if it’s already here now, you don’t have to go around looking for it.

There are all these nice stories about religious pilgrims, religious seekers, going off to the Himalayas looking for some saint living in a cave, or some mystic, some hermit, some arahant who lives in some remote valley or mountain crag and knows the truth. We must find that person because he is our teacher and he is going to give us that truth. We have romantic visions of ourselves suddenly meeting our teacher: we climb up some remote Himalayan mountain crag, breathing hard, the air getting thinner – and he’s standing there with eyes bright, radiant

¹⁹ This refers to the Buddha’s parable of blind men trying to describe an elephant. Each man is shown a different part of the elephant – ear, trunk, leg, etc. – and therefore erroneously describes the elephant in terms of just that.

with love, saying, ‘At last you’ve come!’ On that fictional level we can create interesting visions and fairy tales about religious seeking, but the real journey is an inward one.

So how do we go inward, journey inside ourselves? We start looking for something, the ultimate reality, as something we’re going to find by looking within. So we think: ‘Meditation is the way. I don’t need to go to India. That’s foolish rubbish; I don’t need to go to the Himalayan mountains. I can just meditate and find the truth within myself.’ And that’s a very good idea – but what is the truth, and what are you looking for? Is the truth ‘something’? Does it have a quality that we should be able to recognize? The religious journey is what we call ‘inclining to nibbāna’: turning away, inclining away from the sensory world to the Unconditioned. So it’s a very subtle kind of journey. It’s not something you can do as an act of will; you can’t just say, ‘I’m going to realize the truth’ or: ‘I’m going to get rid of all my defilements and hindrances, get rid of lust, hatred, all my weaknesses!’ – and actually do it. People who practise like that usually go crazy. A man I met years ago in a mental hospital had been a bhikkhu. This man had been a ‘mahā’ – meaning he had taken all the Pali examinations. He went off to a mountaintop, went into his little hut and said: ‘I’m not coming out until I’m perfectly enlightened’; but he came out stark raving mad. If the journey is just an act of will and ego, of course, it takes you to madness. You keep bashing away, knocking about in your mind. With the ego you’re just caught in a trap. It seems a web of madness, hard to see beyond, or ever extricate yourself from. So meditation isn’t something we do to attain or achieve or get rid of anything, but to realize.

So what can we realize right now? You may think: ‘Well, I’ve been looking for the Ultimate Reality the whole time I’ve been sitting here and I can’t find it.’ What can you realize or know now whatever your state of mind is, whether you’re agitated; having bad thoughts; angry, upset, bored, frightened, doubtful, uncertain, or whatever? You can recognize that this is what is going on now. That’s a realization that

now there is this condition, of fear, doubt, worry, some kind of desire, and that it is a changing thing. If you're frightened of something, try to hold on to that fear and make it stay to become a permanent condition of your mind. See how long you can stay frightened; see if fear is the ultimate reality, is God. Is fear God, the Ultimate Truth? You can see fear. When I'm frightened, I know it. There's fear – but also, when I truly realize there's fear, its power to delude me diminishes. Fear only has power if I keep giving it power.

And how does fear have power? By deluding us, by making it seem more than what it is. Fear presents itself in a big way and we react; we run away and then it gains power over us. That's how to feed the fear demon: by reacting in the way it wants. The fear demon comes, a ferocious, nasty-looking demon; it scowls and frowns, shows its fangs, and you cry, 'Ooh! Help!' and run away. Then the demon thinks, 'This is a real sucker!' But if you recognize the demon, you realize that it is a condition, nothing more than that. No matter how ferocious or nasty it might appear, it's really nothing. Simply recognize fear, the feeling of fear, as a condition that looks fierce and nasty. Then you begin to recognize that fear is just an illusion of the mind: conditioned. Desire, any form of desire, is the same: it seems to be more than it really is. Meditation is breaking down, breaking through the illusion of the way things seem to be, by recognizing, realizing conditions as they are: as changing, as unsatisfactory and not having any personal quality, not any personal self or soul; as just things that come and go and change. You begin to stand back; you feel a space, a gap within yourself. After a while, things that once completely overwhelmed and demolished you seem more distant; you have a way of looking at them as if they were something separate, rather than what you are, 'what I am'.

Meditation is a constant realizing, a realizing of the conditions of the mind as just that, as conditions of the mind. Ignorant people do not understand this. They think the conditions of the mind are themselves, or they think they shouldn't have certain conditions but should have

other kinds of conditions. If you are a very idealistic person, you would like to be good, saintly, intelligent, noble, courageous, the finest quality of human being: 'That's what I want to be. I want to be a very noble and fine person.' Well, that's all very good, you have this ideal: 'That's what I'd like to be' ... 'the noble heart' ... 'the courageous man' ... 'the gentle, compassionate woman'. All these are wonderful ideals, but then you have to face the realities of daily life. We find ourselves being caught up in becoming angry, upset, jealous, greedy; thinking all kinds of unpleasant things about people we know; thoughts and feelings we would never think or feel if we were the perfect human beings we would like to be. So then we start thinking, 'I am so far removed from that ideal human being, that wonderful man, that perfect woman, that I'm hopeless, useless, worthless!' Why? Because the conditions of your mind don't always fit the ideal.

Sometimes we might be very courageous, very noble-hearted. At certain moments we find ourselves doing the most wonderful things, acting in a most courageous way. But at other times the opposite is the case. We wonder, 'How do such ugly thoughts come into my mind? If I were really good, I would never have such evil thoughts or feelings.' But we can realize, without trying to become anything, that these conditions are just that. Whether they are noble, brave and courageous, or weak, wishy-washy, ignoble and stupid, they are still only conditions, dependent on all kinds of factors that we can't predict or control. Begin to realize that on the conditional level of *samsāra*, everything is affecting everything. We can't say, 'I'm going to isolate myself completely from everything so that nothing affects me', because everything affects everything all the time. On the conditioned level there's nothing much we can do except recognize, realize – although we do have a choice. We can use our bodies for good rather than evil action; that's where the choice comes. If you're mindful and wise, you skilfully use your body and speech for that which is kind, compassionate, charitable and moral in relation to other beings and to the earth you live on.

What goes on in the mind could be anything, maybe even the desire to kill somebody. But that is something you don't act upon. You just recognize it. You can recognize it as only a condition and not 'self', not a personal problem. Have any of you ever had any murderous impulses, wanting to kill somebody? I have. I can understand murder. I've never murdered anybody, never come close to it, but I have certainly had murderous thoughts. Where do those thoughts come from? Is there something rotten inside me that I should start worrying about, or is it just the natural tendency of a mind to want to annihilate something which makes it feel totally repelled and averse? That's natural enough. Killing is part of nature; it goes on all the time. Animals kill each other. Just listen some nights in the forest. You hear killing going on all the time, rabbits screaming as foxes grab their throats. It's a natural inclination, it's nothing abnormal. But as moral, responsible human beings, as religious seekers, although we might have murderous impulses, we do not act on them. Instead we fully recognize those impulses as just that – as impulses, as conditions. What I mean by 'recognizing' is the realization, 'they are just that'; not creating a problem, not making complications by saying, 'We shouldn't have such impulses', or, 'I am an evil man because such impulses came through my mind', and starting to create a neurosis around them. Recognizing is just that clear realization as it really is, because that's what we can know directly, without speculation, without belief.

So that's a realization; realizing the conditioned as the conditioned. As we become more at ease with the conditioned, rather than deluded, reacting helplessly to conditions, absorbed into them, rejecting or annihilating them, we begin to be aware of the Unconditioned, the space of the mind. You think that conditions are everything, but they have to come from something. Since they are impermanent, where do they come from and what do they disappear into? As you watch, you begin to feel or experience the emptiness, or the wholeness, or the Unconditioned – whatever word you use isn't quite it. We say 'the

Unconditioned', that which is not born, does not die. That's realization too, for those of you who have realized that. That's reality. The conditioned is reality, but the quality or appearance of a condition is not ultimate reality. It's only a conventional appearance, the way things seem to be on a habitual, conventional level. Buddhist meditation is the practice of being awakened, being Buddha by recognizing, by realizing the way things really are, as you directly experience them – pain in your knees, a feeling of happiness, any sensation, thought, memory or emptiness – without grasping, without selecting, picking or choosing. We develop the equanimous heart, the mind that is balanced, full, complete and whole, seeing things as they really are, no longer deluded by anything, by no-thing or by nothing.

When I talk about realization, do you see what I mean? It's a realizing. It's not a searching for 'God', or 'Ultimate Truth' as if it were some 'thing'. Look at the word itself. You say 'God' and that makes it sound like some 'thing'. It does to me, anyway; the word 'God' sounds like something, somebody, as if it were a kind of condition. So you can only go so far on the religious path at the intellectual level, only as far as a belief. If you believe in words or ideas but never go beyond them, you're still caught in attachment to an idea about the truth, rather than knowing the truth. That's why the Buddha did not teach any kind of doctrine or belief system. I hear Buddhists say, 'Buddhists don't believe in God, and we don't believe in the soul. If you're a real Buddhist, you don't have any of that stuff, souls and gods; soulless and godless is what we are.' But that's an annihilationist teaching. That's pure annihilationism. Disbelieving in God and a soul is just the opposite of the other, of believing; it's not a realizing of truth. It's only believing a negation rather than believing an affirmation. I meet Buddhists who were Christians at one time, but have been very disillusioned and become very anti-Christian. Because of that they use Buddhism as a justification. They put down Christianity and think, 'Those Christians believe in God; they're stupid. But we don't. And those Christians

believe in an eternal soul, but we don't. We don't believe in that stuff. We believe in *anattā*, no soul!' But that is not what the Buddha was teaching. That is also a trap of the mind, limited, deluding us.

Realization is when you find out and know directly. It's not an affirmation, saying what Dhamma or the truth is: saying, 'It's male', 'The Dhamma is a man', 'The Dhamma is a patriarchal figure', 'The Dhamma is nothing', 'The Dhamma is an impersonal essence' or 'The Dhamma is the essence of everything' or 'The Dhamma is everything and all' – taking up those philosophical positions, intellectual positions that people like to take about things they haven't realized yet. We're not trying to define that which is indefinable, but to know, to realize that which is beyond definition, beyond limitation.

So our Buddhist practice is just that; we have to keep reminding ourselves because the force of habit is so strong. We so easily absorb into our thoughts and memories, into habits of looking for something or trying to get rid of something; we so easily believe all the opinions and views we have about ourselves and others, and the world we live in. We believe so easily because some of our opinions and views are so sensible, so rational, so practical, reasonable, intelligent, brilliant: 'The brilliant views and opinions that I have.' We are not trying to say you shouldn't have brilliant views and opinions either. It's all right to have brilliant views and opinions, as long as you recognize that they are impermanent conditions of mind. Don't exaggerate their importance. Also, don't feel bad if you're not very intelligent and have really stupid views and opinions; don't worry about it, because that is just the same as the other, as far as we're concerned. Realization, rather than an affirmation or a negation; this way of realizing is what we call the Middle Way. It's mindfulness, meaning that the mind is open, full, complete. You're no longer taking just a fragment and attaching, obsessing yourself with one little condition, saying, 'This little condition, this tiny little insignificant opinion that I have is the Ultimate Reality.'

What I am presenting this evening – you’ve heard it over and over – is to remind you, for you to reflect upon, to keep recognizing, realizing. Work with the little things in daily life, begin to really watch. If you’re looking for something, if you hate authority, if some monk says, ‘Do this – do the dishes’, and you feel resentment or anger at someone telling you to do something, that’s a condition of mind. A monk says, ‘Do the dishes’ and you think, ‘How dare he talk to me like that! I’ve been meditating many more years than he has. I’ve written books on Buddhism. I have a degree from the University of Wisconsin, a Ph.D. in Buddhist Studies ... and that nincompoop tells me to do the dishes!’ Keep recollecting rather than getting caught up in trying to figure out whether this system is the best one for you, whether all the monks are wise, enlightened people who have a right to tell you what to do; or feeling guilty because you become angry and you think you shouldn’t, and all the other complex mental creations around things that happen during the day.

We weave all these complexities around things. Don’t make problems out of life’s conditions, but keep recollecting. This way of recollecting, realization, is more important than trying to make everything just right; trying to straighten out all the monks and anagārikas, or trying to make Chithurst into a perfect place where you feel that everybody is exactly what they should be. That’s like trying to make everything in the world perfect; an endless, hopeless job, you cannot do it. Recognize: as long as things are adequate, use your life here for this kind of practice. Don’t waste it on unnecessary complaining or fantasizing, projecting all kinds of things onto other beings or feeling guilty because some of your reactions and feelings aren’t what you think they should be. Do you see what I mean? The important thing is not trying to think perfect thoughts or act like saints, but to realize the way things are. What can be realized now is whatever is going on in your mind, in your consciousness. It’s an immediate practice, here and now.

Our form is always moral, which means not using our physical conditions or verbal abilities for harmful, cruel, selfish, exploitive activities, but relating to each other in an active way with kindness, compassion, love; relating to each other in gentle ways. If you can't love someone, just be kind to them. If you feel a lot of anger or hatred towards me, at least refrain from hitting and killing me, that's all I ask! Practise *mettā* for those you can't stand and want to kill. It's all right to have those feelings, but just keep realizing them as feelings without acting on them. You are not expected never to have any unkind thoughts.

We do keep within that physical limitation, always within the impeccable form of *sīla*. Also, we actively help each other with *dāna*, being charitable, kindly, considerate, generous with each other, which helps us get along in a pleasant way. When we share and are kind to each other, life is much more enjoyable than when we don't. It's really much nicer when people are kind and generous than when they're not; at least, I find it so. However, if you can't be kind and generous and charitable, at least refrain from being evil, doing nasty things.

Realize that everything that arises passes away and is not-self. That's a constant refrain, a realizing. Whatever your hang-ups are, let them become fully conscious, so that you begin to realize them as conditions, rather than personal problems. Let go of the identity of yourself as having problems with this or that, and realize that the problems we do have are conditions which come and go and change. They are not 'me', not 'mine'; they are not 'what I am'. You recollect continually until you begin to break through, until as you develop in this way, the mind begins to clear because you are allowing things to cease. You're not reinforcing habits all the time; you are allowing habits that have arisen to cease, to end, and you begin to find a calm, an unshakeable peace within yourself.

12 | Attachment to Teachers

I've been asked to talk on the human problem of preference and choice. People have many problems with preferring one monk, teacher or tradition to another. They adjust or attach to a certain teacher and find that because of that they can't learn from any other teacher. This is an understandable human problem because our preferences for a teacher allow us to be open to what he or she is saying, and when others come along we don't want to open up and learn from them. We may not like them; or we might feel doubtful or uncertain about them, and so we tend to resent and not want to listen to them. Or, we may have heard rumours, opinions and views that this teacher is this way and that one is that way.

To cut through this human failing of attachment to a charismatic teacher, the structure of Buddhist convention is designed mainly to pay respect to Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha rather than to a particular personality or guru. The Sangha as represented by the Bhikkhu-Sangha is worthy of respect and worthy of alms if it lives according to the Vinaya; and that's a better standard than deciding whether we like individuals or whether their personalities agree with ours.

Sometimes we learn a lot from having to listen to and obey a particular person whom we may not like very much. It's human nature to try to adjust our lives so we are always with or following somebody with whom we feel compatible. For example, at Wat Pah Pong it was easy to follow someone like Ajahn Chah, because one felt so much respect and admiration for such a teacher that it was no problem to listen to what he said and obey his every word. Sometimes one did feel conflict or resentment, but because of the power of such a person, one could always let go of one's pride and conceit. But at times we were faced with having to be with bhikkhus senior to us whom we didn't particularly like or even respect, and in whom we could see many faults and personality traits that we found offensive. However, in training under the Vinaya we would do what was proper, what was appropriate and suitable, rather than just being petty and running away, or insulting or carrying unpleasant thoughts in our minds towards that particular person. It was a very good training. Sometimes Ajahn Chah would send us off to be with difficult people, I think deliberately to give us a chance to mellow a bit, to give in a bit and learn to do the right thing, rather than just follow the particular emotion that might be aroused at the time.

All of us have our own kind of personality. We can't help that; our personalities are just as they happen to be, and whether we find them charming or boring isn't a matter of Dhamma but of personal preference and compatibility. In the practice of the Dhamma we no longer seek to attach to friendship or to liking someone – we are no longer seeking to be only with that which we like and esteem, but instead to be able to maintain a balance under all conditions. So our training under the Vinaya is always to do what is right through action or speech, rather than to use action and speech for what is harmful, petty, cruel, selfish or egotistical. The Vinaya gives us the chance to practise in all kinds of situations and conditions.

I notice that in this country people have strong attachments to various teachers. They say: 'My teacher is this. He is my teacher,

and I can't go to any other teacher because I'm loyal and devoted to my teacher.' This is a very English sense of devotion and loyalty to someone, to the point where it may become too much. One becomes bound to an ideal, to a person, rather than to the truth. Our refuges are deliberately set up as Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, rather than as the personality of any teacher. You don't take refuge in Ajahn Chah or in any of the bhikkhus here – unless you are an unusually silly person. You could say: 'Ajahn Sumedho is my teacher; Ajahn Tiradhammo is not my teacher. I'll only learn from Venerable Sucitto and not from any other', but in that way you could create all kinds of problems. You could say: 'I'm a Theravada Buddhist; therefore I can't learn from those Tibetan Buddhists or those Zen Buddhists.' It's very easy for us to become sectarian in this way, because if something is different from what we're used to, we suspect it is not as good as or pure as the object of our devotion. But in meditation what we are aiming at is truth, full understanding and enlightenment, inclining away from the jungle of selfishness, conceit, pride and human passions. So it's not very wise to attach to a particular teacher to the point where you refuse to learn from any other.

But some teachers encourage this attitude. They say: 'Once you take me as your teacher, then don't you go to any other teacher! Don't you learn from any other tradition! If you accept me as your teacher, you can't go to any other.' There are a lot of teachers who bind you to themselves in that way, and they have very good reasons sometimes, because people just 'go shopping'. They go from one teacher to another and another, and never learn anything. But I think the problem is not so much in 'shopping' as in attaching to a teacher or tradition to the point where you have to exclude all others. That makes for a sect, a sectarian mind with which people cannot recognize wisdom or learn from anything unless it's in the exact words and conventions to which they are used. That keeps us very limited, narrow and frightened. People become afraid to listen to another teacher because that might

cause doubt to arise in their minds, or they might feel that they are not being a loyal student of their particular tradition. The Buddhist Path is to develop wisdom, and loyalty and devotion help in that. But if they are ends in themselves, then they are obstacles.

‘Wisdom’ in this sense means using wisdom in our practice of meditation. How do we do that? How do we use wisdom? By recognizing our own particular forms of pride, conceit and the attachments we have to our views and opinions, to the material world, to the tradition and the teacher, and to the friends we have. This doesn’t mean thinking we shouldn’t attach or that we should get rid of them all. That’s not wise either, because wisdom is the ability to observe attachment, understand it and let go, rather than attaching to ideas that we shouldn’t be attached to anything.

Sometimes you hear monks, nuns or laypeople here saying, ‘Don’t attach to anything.’ So we attach to the view that we shouldn’t be attached: ‘I’m not going to attach to Ajahn Sumedho; I can learn from anybody. I’m going to leave, just to prove I’m not attached to Venerable Sumedho.’ But then you’re attaching to the idea that you shouldn’t be attached to me, or that you have to go away to prove that you’re not attached, which isn’t it at all. That’s not being wise. You’re just attaching to something else. You may go to Brockwood Park and hear Krishnamurti²⁰ and then think, ‘I’m not going to attach to those religious conventions, all that bowing, Buddha images, monks and all that stuff. Krishnamurti says it’s all poppycock: “Don’t have anything to do with it, all that is useless”.’ So you attach to the view that religious conventions are all useless and you shouldn’t have anything to do with them. But that’s also an attachment – attachment to views and opinions – and whether you attach to what Krishnamurti says or to what I say, it’s still an attachment.

So we’re recognizing attachment, and it’s wisdom that recognizes attachment. This doesn’t mean that we have to attach to any other opinion, but just recognizing and knowing attachment frees us from

²⁰ Brockwood Park, less than an hour’s drive from Chithurst, is the site of a school run by followers of the late J. Krishnamurti. He was often resident there around the time this talk was given.

being deluded by the attachments we make. Recognize too that attaching does have a certain value. We have to learn to walk first of all by crawling, just by waving our arms and legs. When a baby is young the mother doesn't say: 'Don't wave your arms and legs like that! Walk!' or: 'You'll always be dependent on me, nursing at my breast, clinging to me all the time, you'll just be clinging to your mother all your life.' The baby needs to attach to the mother, but if it's the mother's intention to keep the baby attached to her all the time, that's not very wise of her. When we can allow people to attach to us in order to give them strength, so that when they have strength they can let go of us, that's compassion.

We can use conventional forms according to time and place and wisely consider and learn from them, rather than forming an opinion that we shouldn't be attached to anything, but be completely independent and self-sufficient. The existence of a Buddhist monk is a very dependent one. We are dependent on the requisites offered by laypeople: on food, on robes, on a place to live and medicines for illness. We have no money and no way of cooking food, growing food or providing for ourselves. We have to depend on the kindness of other people for the basic necessities of life. People say, 'Why don't you grow your own food, and become self-sufficient so that you don't need all these people? You could be independent.' In our society's terms, being self-sufficient, independent, not in debt to anyone, not dependent on anything, is highly valued. Yet there are these rules and conventions designed by Gotama the Buddha. They weren't designed by me. If I had my way, I would probably have designed them differently: it would be nice to be self-sufficient, have my little cabbage patch all to myself, my private funds, my little hermitage - 'I don't need you, I'm independent and free, self-sufficient.'

When I took on the bhikkhu life I didn't really know what I was getting into; I only found out later that I had made myself totally and completely dependent on other people. My family had the middle-

class white Anglo-Saxon, self-sufficient, independent, don't-depend-on-anyone type of philosophy. In America we call it the WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) syndrome. WASP Americans are not like Southern Europeans who supposedly depend on their mothers. We are completely independent from our mother and father. We're Protestant – no popes, none of that stuff, we are not subservient; being a white Anglo-Saxon Protestant means that you're at the top of the social scale – you're the best. Then I found myself in a Buddhist country, taking samanera ordination at the age of thirty-two. In Thailand little boys go forth as samaneras, so I had to sit with the little Thai boys all the time. There I was, six foot two, thirty-two years old, having to sit and eat my meals and fall in line with little boys; it was very embarrassing for me. I had to be dependent on people to give me food or whatever; I couldn't have any money. So I considered, 'What is the purpose of this? What is the value? What did the Buddha mean? Why did he do it this way? Why didn't he follow the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant values like my parents?' But I began to appreciate the need, the goodness, of being dependent in the right way, of admitting interdependence.

It takes some humility to learn to be dependent on others again. With pride and conceit one thinks, 'I don't want to be in debt or owe anything to anybody.' Here we humbly recognize our dependence on each other: dependence on the anagārikas, on the laypeople, on the junior monks. Even though I'm senior bhikkhu here, I'm still very dependent on the rest of you. This is always to be considered in our life, and not rejected or resented, because we recognize that we are always interdependent, helping each other. This is a dependence based on conventions and on the material world, and on compassionate and joyous relationships. Even if we don't have any joy in or love for each other, we can at least be kind, not vindictive or nasty to each other. We can trust each other.

Don't expect any social situation, any society, any organization or group to be perfect or an end in itself. It's only a conventional form,

and like anything else it is unsatisfactory if we're expecting to be completely satisfied by it. Any teacher or guru to whom you attach will inevitably disappoint you in some respect. Even if they are saintly gurus, they still die – or they run off away with sixteen-year-old girls ... They might do anything; the history of religious idols can be really disillusioning. When I was a young bhikkhu in Thailand, I used to consider what I would do if Ajahn Chah suddenly said, 'Buddhism is a farce! I want nothing to do with it! I'm going to disrobe and marry a rich woman.' What would I do if Ajahn Buddhādāsa, one of the famous scholar-monks of Thailand, said, 'Studying Buddhism all these years is a farce, it's a waste of time. I'm going to become a Christian'? What would I do if the Dalai Lama disrobed and married an American lady? What would I do if Venerables Sucitto and Tiradhammo suddenly said, 'I'm going to leave. I want to get out and have some fun'? Or if all the anagārikas suddenly said, 'I'm fed up with this', or all the nuns ran away with the anagārikas? What would I do? Does my being a monk depend on the support or devotion of all the other people around me, or the pronouncements of Ajahn Chah or the Dalai Lama? Does my practice of meditation depend upon support from others, encouragement and having everybody live up to my expectations? If it does, it could easily be destroyed.

When I was a junior monk I used to consider that I must have confidence in my own insight and not depend on having everyone around me support my particular position. Through the years I've had many chances to be disillusioned in this life, but I still keep reflecting, rather than depending on having everything go in a positive way for me. I have confidence in what I'm doing from my own understanding of it, not because I believe or need the support and approval of others. In your life you must ask these questions: is your becoming a *samaṇa*, a monk or a nun, dependent upon me encouraging you, upon others, upon hope, upon expectations for the future, upon rewards, and all that? Or are you determined in your own right to realize the truth?

Then stay within the particular chosen conventional form, pushing it to its ultimate just to see how far it can take you, rather than giving up when you begin to be disillusioned with it. Sometimes at Wat Pah Pong I felt fed up with things and negative towards the other monks, not because they did anything very wrong, but just because I became depressed and could only view things negatively. Then it was necessary to observe the mood rather than believe it, for when one endures through the unendurable, one finds that one can endure anything. So we're not here to find our teacher, but to be willing to learn from everything: from the rats and mosquitoes, from the inspired teachers, the depressed ones, the ones who disappoint us and the ones who never disappoint us. We're not trying to find perfection in conventional forms, or in teachers.

Last year, I went back to Thailand and saw Ajahn Chah very ill: not the same ebullient, humorous, lovable man I used to know, just like a sack of flesh sitting there – and I would think, ‘Oh, I wish Ajahn Chah weren't like that. My teacher ... Ajahn Chah is my teacher, and I don't want him to be like that. I want him to be like the Ajahn Chah I used to know, who you could sit and listen to, and then you could tell Ajahn Chah stories to all the other monks.’ You'd say, ‘Do you remember Ajahn Chah said this, this wonderfully wise thing?’ Then somebody else from another tradition would say, ‘Well, our teacher said this.’ So you'd have a competition as to who was the wisest. But when your teacher sits there like a sack of flesh, you say, ‘Oh, maybe I chose the wrong teacher.’

But the desire to have a teacher, the best teacher, the teacher who never fails you – that's suffering, isn't it? Buddhism teaches us to be able to learn from living teachers or from dead ones. When Ajahn Chah dies we can still learn from him – go look at his corpse! You might say, ‘I don't want Ajahn Chah to be a corpse. I want him to be the ebullient, humorous, lovable teacher I knew twenty years ago. I don't want him to be just a rotting corpse with worms coming out of his eyes.’ How

many of you are willing to look at your loved ones when they are dead, when you want to remember them at their best? My mother now has a picture of me when I was seventeen, graduated from high school, wearing a suit and tie, with my hair nicely combed – you know the pictures they take in professional studios so that you look much better than you ever really do. This picture of me is hanging in my mother's room. Mothers want to think of their sons as always clean-cut and handsome, young – but what if I died and started rotting away, maggots coming out of my eyes, and somebody took a picture of me and sent it to my mother? It would be monstrous to put that beside the picture of me when I was seventeen. But this is like holding onto an image of Ajahn Chah as he was five years ago, and then seeing him as he is now.

As meditators we can use this life as we experience it by reflecting on it, learning from it, rather than demanding that teachers, sons, daughters, mothers or whoever always remain in their perfect form. We make that demand when we never really look at them, never really get to know them very well, but just hold on to an ideal, an image we preserve and never question or learn from. As meditators, everything is teaching us something, if we're willing to learn to coexist with it: with the successes and failures, the living and the dead, the good memories and the disappointments. And what do we learn? – that these are only conditions of our mind. They're things that we create and attach to, and whatever we attach to is going to take us to despair and death. That's the ending of whatever begins. So we learn from that. We learn from our sorrows and grief, our disillusionment, and we can let go. We can allow life to operate following the laws of Nature and witness this, freeing ourselves from the illusion of self as being connected with the mortal condition. And so all conditions take us to the Unconditioned – even our sorrows and grief take us to emptiness, freedom and liberation, if we are humble and patient.

Sometimes life is easier when we don't have too many choices to make. It must be a bit frustrating to have too many wonderful gurus,

to have to listen to fantastic wisdom bubbling out from so many wise, charismatic people. But even the wisest sages, the finest human beings in the world today, are only conditions of our mind. The Dalai Lama, Ajahn Chah, Buddhādāsa, Tan Chao Khun Paññananda²¹, the Pope, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the world's current political leaders – they are nothing but conditions of our own mind. We have likes, dislikes and prejudices, but these are things conditioned into the mind – and all these conditions, hatred, love or whatever, take us to the Unconditioned if we are patient and enduring, and willing to use wisdom. You might find it easier to believe what I say – it's easier than finding out for yourself – but believing what I say is not going to nourish you. The wisdom that I use in my life only nourishes me. It might encourage you to use wisdom, but you actually have to eat the food yourself to be nourished, rather than believing what I say. The Buddhist Path is just that – a way for each one of us to realize the truth. It throws us back onto ourselves again, making us look and reflect on our lives, rather than being caught in the devotion and hope that take us to their opposites.

So consider what I've said this evening and reflect on it. Don't believe it, don't disbelieve it. If you have any prejudices or opinions and views, that's all right; just see them as they are, as conditions of your mind, and learn from them.

²¹ Tan Chao Khun Paññananda (1911-2007) was a friend and associate of Ajahn Buddhādāsa, and a popular and outspoken teacher in his own right. After Ajahn Chah died, he gave a lot of support to the Western monks in Thailand, acting as a spiritual 'godfather' when they were bereft of their teacher. He also visited the West on numerous occasions to offer encouragement and support.

Teachings from the Forest

A conversation between Ajahn Sumedho and Ajahn Khantipālo²²

at Wat Pah Nanachat, December 1982

Ajahn Khantipālo: I was interested in something you said the other day – that most of the trouble in this world is being caused by men, and that women are more restrained.

Ajahn Sumedho: We were talking about why the bhikkhuni (nun) discipline was more strict and detailed than that of the bhikkhus.

In our society, women already have a discipline in their lives that men lack. In any traditional society, women are expected not to be drunkards, not to be promiscuous and to have higher moral standards. Whenever society is in decline, it's when the women become degenerate. It's never when the men are. Men can be profligate, but if the women become that way – then civilization is at an end.

So when the bhikkhuni order was founded, its strict restraint was because the bhikkhunis could live at this much more disciplined level –

²² Ajahn Khantipalo was an English bhikkhu who was abbot of Wat Buddha Dhamma, which is situated in a National Park near Wiseman's Ferry in New South Wales, Australia. He disrobed in 1991.

due to their very nature. Also some rules of restraint are for protection (there is a rule preventing nuns living alone to protect them from personal attacks).

If women forget their position in nature and are unaware of the forces operating through them, they live very artificially, through ideas, not fully, not understanding the forces flowing through them. Same with men. Yet in meditation, we do learn when we begin to watch ourselves and our systems. As men, we will observe the effect of having been born with a male body. The nuns at Chithurst find that it is much easier to be refined; it is easier for them not to be coarse than it is for monks.

The male principle is a coarser one: it's taken for granted than men curse and swear, it's part of our life, the thing for men to do. And when women do it, it might prove they are equal, but it's even more unpleasant in the long run. Not because of being male chauvinist, but because it is out of character with their kammic condition. The female principle in nature is protective, passive, caring for family, the home and its protection.

If you have been in the military where you live just with men, without women around, the mentality sinks to a very low common denominator.

AK: Very true indeed.

AS: But as soon as women come on to the scene it is raised up quite a bit. The more virtuous the women, the higher the standard. It remains quite low amidst women of low character, but say, if Mother Theresa came into a room full of coarse sailors, only the most drunken one would not feel an immediate impulse to watch what he says, be a little more careful. I notice with the nuns at Chithurst that their effect on people is to automatically make them feel that to be coarse, crude or even just 'worldly' is not the appropriate way to relate to them.

AK: I have heard that the bhikkhu life is 'hiding away', not facing things, you know, escaping. People say, 'What are you all lurking in this

patch of forest for? Eh? Are you afraid of something?’ Many people in Australia look down on the *wat*²³ because we don’t earn money ... ‘Why don’t you go out and hold down an honest job of work?’ Lots of people think like that. How do you feel about that one?

AS: We are very often faced with that one ourselves. What are you running away from? Too lazy to get a job? Fact is with the unemployment rate so high, they should be putting Buddhist meditation on the National Health soon.

Then this ‘running away from the world,’ what is that? Living in London, going to the pub, watching television: this is the real world and living in the forest isn’t the real world. But actually, in the forest you are up against it, forced to face up to it. You don’t have a television set, a wife, children, a job, books to read, you can only eat once a day at the designated time. You’re just left with yourself. And then you really have to face up to things; when you look at how most people spend their days, their lives are spent in a state of constant distraction. There are all sorts of hobbies ... all kinds of things to keep you occupied.

In the monastic life, on the contrary, it is not just an aimless distraction from the present, from boredom and the fear of living. Even when you only practice Eight Precepts – including celibacy – the sense pleasures are very limited. You can’t sleep a lot, eat a lot, listen to music, go to shows or football matches, and therefore your ability to escape is restricted and curbed considerably. And a lot of sexual activity is more an aimless distraction from life in the present than a way of creating a family.

The monastic life, that is where you really come to terms with life, where you really face up to it. Because if for example I told you a lie earlier in the morning, then when I am meditating here this evening, it keeps coming up in my mind all the time. You can hardly get away with anything in this life.

AK: Yep. People come out to see us in the bush at Wiseman’s Ferry. After driving through ten miles of National Park to get to the monastery,

²³ A ‘wat’ [Thai] is a Buddhist monastery.

they think, ‘Well, this is no longer the real world, this is life on the fringe among the marginals ...’. That was the attitude of a TV crew who came to shoot some footage. What they failed to grasp is that you never can get beyond reality. The outward conditions may change, but you won’t get away from it. Wherever you go, you take it with you. People delude themselves that the monk’s life is no longer relevant, an anachronism; when in fact there is more need of this lifestyle today than at any other time.

AS: The average living standard today is what only wealthy people could enjoy 100 years ago. People today have pushed pleasure to the ultimate, via drugs – such extreme doses of pleasure. Now they see *dukkha*. Before clothes and television were all so alluring, today the ordinary man can have it all. Now, the idea of piling up more of it seems to be absurd. More and more people are wishing to return to a natural simple, spiritual life. Twenty years ago in the States, I recall there was still the faith that science could solve all our problems. In psychiatry, with the effect of new drugs on schizophrenia, they even speculated that mental illness would become extinct – wiped from the face of the earth, like smallpox. Cancer and all diseases would have their definite cures. We would all be happy and healthy, and our faith and hope in science and psychiatry would usher in the Utopian age.

Twenty years later we see the result. Science did not bring what we hoped for, the result is not what we expected. In fact, everything is worse than ever. Science has brought with it the prospect of nuclear war – the most horrifying kind of devastation that anyone could possibly experience. Rather than Utopia, science is taking us to total destruction, and people have lost their respect and faith in it.

AK: There is also the confusion caused by having too many choices. Thirty years ago you could buy Australian cheese in two or three varieties at the most. One day in Sydney I saw a shop selling nothing but cheese in about 150 varieties from all over the world. In 200 years you’ll have cheese from the moon. There is no end to it: ‘this or that, or

this'. Sense-desire spells trouble, and is an endless source of confusion, conflict and trouble.

AS: One advantage of the monastic life is that the choice is so restricted. Before I became a monk I'd never had a sweet tooth, seldom had sweets, and was not at all interested in sweet things. But as a monk, because of celibacy and the restriction placed on the '*kāma-loka*' (plane of sensual desire), I acquired this tremendous 'sugar *kilesa*' (defilement). It was so absurd, you know, because all my lust and greed centred around sugar. Previously the range of my lust had been spread over a broad area, so that the sugar one wasn't especially noticeable. But as you know, in a monastic form where the objects of greed are quite restricted, all your greed and kammic craving you have accumulated goes into that one thing.

So I thought it was very wise of the Buddha to put a seven-day allowance on sweets,²⁴ because a lot of wisdom can come from that reflection. Because it is absurd that a man aged thirty-two or thirty-three should have these vivid dreams at night ... but I'd be going into sweet shops, cake shops ... and I'd order a plate of really delicious sugary pastries and sitting down, I'd just about get one in my mouth ... and I'd wake up! And I thought if only I could just sleep to the point where I actually could eat the whole cake!

However, because you resign yourself to these restrictions – and once you begin to meditate – you experience the fulfilment that restraint brings. You begin to find that all those pleasures that were so alluring in the sensual world are in fact quite unsatisfying and unpleasant. If I hear some rock music these days, its rhythm is very unpleasant to me, whereas at one time I found it very appealing and exciting. Now, the attractive rhythm that wants to excite the mind is just noise; I now no longer find any inclination towards it. But that took many years with meditation to really see the *dukkha* of happiness.

AK: Greed only unwraps itself slowly. I recall seeing a list of Pali words used by the Buddha. The words connected with hatred and delusion

²⁴ According to the Vinaya, the Monastic Rule, sugar and its derivatives can be kept for up to seven days as a tonic, but then it must be relinquished.

numbered five or ten – quite few – whereas for greed, desire and craving there were about thirty or forty different words.

Also, regarding sweets – it is an attempt to find a substitute for love. Kids from wealthy families are always on about sweets; it is a craving due in large part to their not really being loved; their parents don't know how to love them. The heart is not there and the sweets are in attempt to compensate in some way. *Mettā* – loving-kindness is the answer. In the contemplative life we have so many opportunities; there aren't so many difficult and troublesome characters. This is what the monk's life is all about; making use of its possibilities and advantages for cultivating loving-kindness.

AS: A week after I arrived in Britain, I met people at the Hampstead Vihara and you could see there was no joy in their lives at all and I asked them about their meditation practice, 'Do you ever do any loving-kindness meditation?' 'Oh no, we can't stand that,' they said, 'it's so artificial – pretending to love everybody.' They liked to meditate in small cells out the back garden: go in the cell and stay in the cell and get insight. Many of them did experience certain insight, but they were certainly lacking in *mettā*.

After spending all those years in Thailand where there is such a lot of love and kindness, I was struck at the noticeable lack of it in that atmosphere. And the lack of warmth in the way people regard themselves and each other. The critical faculty was highly developed – complaining about the weather, criticizing the government – a lot of intelligence had developed but there was a noticeable lack of *mettā*.

When I asked them what they thought *mettā* was, most of them saw it as a sort of brainwashing technique, convincing yourself that you loved everybody. 'May I be happy, free from hatred' was too soppy, too naive and disgusting to even contemplate. So, rather than use the word 'love', which is much more misused in the English vocabulary, I began to use 'Not dwelling in aversion' as an interpretation, bringing *mettā* down to the immediate, and not as elevated as 'love' tends to be.

It was more a practice of not spending all your time examining what's wrong with yourself or the world; just becoming kinder, more patient and gentle with your own mental condition, your physical condition, the people around you and the country you are in.

Then I'd use *mettā* as a meditation subject quite a lot. Some people could not do mindfulness of breathing because they would get too nervous: trying to concentrate on a nostril or follow the breath would drive them crazy, so I'd get them to do *mettā* practice. A lot of them really began to relax. If they had anger or hatred arise in their mind, then they would spread *mettā* to that. Being kind and gentle even with the most unpleasant mood. Then I'd say: 'That's what I mean by "*Ahaṃ sukhito homi*" ("May I be happy").' It doesn't mean 'I love myself' – but simply not dwelling in aversion, not feeling guilt or hatred to what may not be a very pleasant condition in the mind or body, peacefully coexisting with, being kind to what is present now.

Following on from that, a friendly atmosphere becomes natural. If you are patient and kind towards your own mental-physical condition, then it is not difficult to have it for others. That hard idea of 'killing defilements' and 'annihilating the devil' has to be seen through.

AK: It has a background in previous religious ideas: evil is something to be stamped on, or eliminated in some violent way. Meditators who have no guidance often hold on to such destructive ideas. I say to them, 'You've got this idea that there is you and your defilements, how many people are there, is there more than one of you? No? Then you're mistreating yourself.' If I get a representative selection of Australians, then Australia sure is in deep trouble. The level of hatred, anger, and frustration there is very high indeed. People have a low opinion of themselves, look down on themselves, criticize themselves, all the time making a heap of *dukkha* (suffering) for themselves. If you don't have any good opinion of anything ... well, if you don't practise anything good, then of course you don't have a good opinion of

yourself. If you break the precepts, harm others and abuse yourself – you’ll have remorse and look down on yourself.

AS: A few months ago I was reading the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ where Jesus says, ‘Even if you look with lust at a woman, you have committed adultery.’ I thought, ‘That’s not right.’ In Buddhism, one thing is clear and helpful: the Buddha made it clear that moral conduct deals only with speech and action, not mental phenomena. Christians feel very guilty about the bad thoughts they have – all because no qualitative distinction was ever made between thought and action. Because they might feel hatred towards parents or someone they are supposed to love, they then develop this tremendous guilt complex and they have no way of seeing it merely as a general condition of the human mind – which changes. They tend to regard it as some latent evil force that is really rotten inside them, something basically wrong with them personally that they don’t really want to know about. There is that kind of dread.

Teaching in Britain I noticed how relieved people are when they begin to realize there is nothing lurking down deep inside them; and that if there is, then they begin to let it out and just recognize it. They learn a skilful way of letting go of all fear and terror of what they assume might be.

In Buddha’s teaching, the thing I appreciate about the training rules is that there is no mental offence at all. It’s only when you act or speak that you transgress the Vinaya – so a Buddhist monk is never placed in the position of feeling guilty about bad thoughts. You don’t have to confess: ‘I’ve been thinking bad thoughts about you.’ The thoughts are given the opportunity to cease by themselves.

And that gives me a perspective on my mind that I wouldn’t have if I was trying to not think evil thoughts. Whenever these thoughts used to come, I’d start feeling terribly guilty, because a bhikkhu should be loving, generous, courageous, full of *mettā* and compassion for everything ... But if one tries to live up to that ideal, one can only

stay that way for a few moments and then all the repressed hatred and resentment starts arising – along with the idea, ‘I’m not worthy of the robe, I’m a terrible person, They shouldn’t be bowing to me because I’m so bad.’

AK: When I first came to the Dhamma, I was very relieved by the wonderful fact that hatred and greed actually can be cured – it had never occurred to me before, thoughts were just thoughts, if they were there, then that must be the norm. Then I saw that by waiting for them to die, they come to an end quite naturally.

AS: ‘Getting rid of’ is always a striving, contending condition. The hindrances are important teachers and keep pestering us until we understand them. They hardly give us a moment’s peace until we come to grips with them and don’t let them off the hook. When you try and repress them out of consciousness, they will simply become subconscious. But when you allow them to cease, their kammic force is ended. You are not *making* them cease; you will never get *samādhi* by doing that.

So with the Four Noble Truths, Dependent Origination – you’ll never get wise by trying to figure these out. When you see them as guides, skilful reflections then the problem of *samādhi* is no longer a problem.

Most people think, ‘I’m not wise, I’ve got no wisdom.’ But Buddha-wisdom is something we already have, and have to learn to use. For education and worldly wisdom, you go to a university. But that’s worldly attainment. Dhamma is almost the opposite of that; there is no attainment but the realization of the way things are. All that arises, passes and is not-self – you don’t need education to do that. You may be completely illiterate and still become wise by constant reflection, until you can see, not through intellect, but direct experience.

Q: Do states of mind vary according to location?

AK: I’ve got a novice who wants to come to Thailand very much – he thinks there are arahants under every palm tree. I said, ‘When you don’t want to go to Thailand, then you can go.’ The East or the West, there is

no real difference, here or there defilements are the same, the mind still works the same. It is true that states of mind can vary with different places and people, but there is no escaping what you have to face.

When you get some equanimity in your practice, then you can handle hostility wherever you go, you can handle other people's ways of thinking, their troubles, and defilements. You develop some loving-kindness for hostile people: 'Ah, well, they are making this kind of (fruit-bearing) kamma, they'll have to pay for that!' However, in my experience you don't get much hostility. I don't know about Ajahn Sumedho.

AS: Very rare. British people are very polite; hostility is never verbal or physical, there's maybe a cold look. Also London is filled with all kinds of people wearing all kinds of clothes and people who really look freaky, so we look comparatively...

I notice however that whenever you are angry or frightened you tend to attract aggression. Even as a layman I never really hated people very much, but I notice with monks who do have aggressive tendencies – who in the past were fighters – they tend to attract more violence to them than I do. *Mettā* just doesn't attract violence. But if I do get angry with someone who says '*Hare Krishna*' or insults me, then that anger ignites the fire in the people around and then the conflicts begin. But I never mind insults because they don't mean anything to me, people are insulting something they don't understand. You realize, 'It's their problem, not mine.'

What I was referring to earlier was the way the Buddhists in Thailand worried about taking the Dhamma to England and how things would work out in that country: 'What will you do about the robes and the weather and the people? How will you be able not to carry money? How can you keep the Vinaya when it's not a Buddhist country? You will have to adapt to the English ways, you can't just go round and take Asian rituals and make English people into Asians and Thais. You've got to make it suitable for their country.' Everybody was giving advice

– but it became very clear before I left how stupid it would be for me to decide in Thailand what I should be doing in England. No use sitting here deciding what to do there. All I could do is go there and see what happens.

I'd been trained under this discipline, I felt confident enough with the training I'd had and I knew I had some skill in using the basic equipment. What happens in England I just have to watch rather than preconceive all kinds of problems or create the British people into stereotypes. So I went there with that attitude of openness, to listen and watch rather than to convert or make Buddhism appealing or make it English.

One issue came up when I arrived: a Buddhist from Newcastle said to me, 'Never make an Englishman bow. That is really offensive to the English. And that chanting and all those things. They just want the pure Buddha's teaching and not any of that Asian ritual.'

He was a lecturer at Manchester University. Well, I was not going around forcing people to bow – but I found people liked bowing. They liked Asian ritual and they missed it when we didn't do it. They liked *anumodāna*²⁵ and they were quite keen on the whole thing. I don't find a lack of support for being too far out and too exotic.

And *pindabaht* (alms-round) – this is really sweet. The Buddhist Society's summer school is a very British institution, and one year Venerable Ñānadhāro,²⁶ the Lao monk, was invited there. He said he would only come if he could go on *pindabaht*. A very nice Englishman, Roy Brabant-Smith, said he would go into the kitchen every day and have food put in Venerable's bowl. So they convinced him, and Venerable Ñānadhāro took his alms-bowl and spent two weeks at the Summer School receiving food each day and eating out on the lawn with everyone watching. Next year Ñānadhāro didn't want to go so they invited me, with Roy Brabant-Smith agreeing to the same terms.

So I followed in that line and at the end of the two weeks there was a whole line of people waiting to give food. People would go out to

²⁵ *Anumodāna*: the chanting of verses on the value of generosity.

²⁶ Venerable Ñānadhāro was the abbot of Bodhinyana Monastery near Tournon in France.

the market during the day and when I left for Oxford I'd have to carry bagfuls of food back to the monastery. People really like it; it makes them feel good.

14 | The Three Characteristics

In the tradition of Ajahn Mun²⁷, they use the term ‘*poo roo*’ – ‘the One Who Knows.’ Our practice is putting ourselves in the position of the One Who Knows. The knower is always now; we don’t know about the past or future; knowing now is the Buddha-knowing. And what we can know directly at this moment is that anything that begins must end – that sense-perception through eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind has the characteristic of impermanence (*anicca*). The characteristic of impermanence is something which ripens as insight knowledge: that every form, whether it is trivial or important, rational or irrational is tinged with the characteristic of impermanence. Knowing just this is ‘being the knowing’ – it’s not a belief in the theory of impermanence, but a continuous recognition.

Change never has any fixed point except that you can know change. And this is where we place ourselves in the meditation, in the ‘*poo roo*’, in the One Who Knows. ‘The Buddha’ means the One Who Knows; so this focus offers a direct practice, always here and now, rather than a practice in which we do something now in order to obtain something in the future.

²⁷ Ajahn Mun Bhuridatto (1870-1949) was an exemplary forest bhikkhu who trained most of the great meditation masters of the Thai Forest Tradition in the twentieth century. Ajahn Chah stayed with him only briefly, but from their meeting gained complete confidence in *kammathāna*, the Dhamma of personal experience.

Insight is founded on witnessing three characteristics. The second one is the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*). You won't find any condition which will satisfy you, it can only gratify you temporarily and then you will start looking for something else, something more. Every condition must change: If you like the condition then you will feel sorrow, despair, loss; when an unpleasant condition goes, then you feel glad. So whether it's pleasant, neutral or unpleasant, it's always unsatisfactory. The practice is simply to recognize that the idea that we can find some kind of permanent security or happiness in something that is unstable is just an attachment.

Not-self (*anattā*), is the third characteristic. It shows us that there is nothing that we can say is a soul or a real self or is really mine. When there is love, that is not a personal thing; even though it seems personal, it's a condition. Love that is present in my mind is the same kind of thing that is present in yours. There may be love there or hatred. When we have pain, we all feel the same kind of aversion to the pain. None of us want pain and that feeling of aversion is what we all share in common.

Our tendency is to become attached to a thing when it reaches its peak. For example, we talk about a perfect rose, a rose at its most beautiful – thinking that when it's reached full maturity, then we say 'This rose is perfect'. But it can't stay that way. It reaches its maturity, and then it fades, starts wilting, petals fall off and then we throw it away; we don't want to look at it anymore. So the untrained mind seeks perfection in that which is imperfect. Then, when we are attached to the idea of a rose being perfect at one point in its cycle, this is going to lead us to despair. When we become attached to success or beauty or anything that's at its zenith, its highest point, the inevitable result is sorrow.

Love of beauty and aversion to the ugly – these are natural conditions, they're not personal idiosyncrasies. Your body also is a condition in nature; it's following the laws of nature, the same as everything else. It feels hungry, tired, strong and healthy; you get a lot of pleasure out of

the human body and a lot of pain. Nowadays, people try to get as much pleasure as possible out of their bodies; they exploit the human body to squeeze as much pleasure out of it as they possibly can. This always leads to despair, because any pleasure that you get that way is always so momentary; then it's gone and then you have to look for some more pleasure for your body.

We begin to observe that attachment to beauty, sensual pleasures and love will always lead us only to depression. Instead, if you pay attention to the body, and observe it you learn from it. It's part of nature; it's not me and mine, not a self. It's as it is, what it looks like, whether it's male or female, healthy or unhealthy, beautiful or ugly, young or old, black or white, Asian or Caucasian, whatever its appearance, it's as it is, right now. Then our attitude develops into one of detachment. This doesn't mean annihilation or any desire to destroy, but simply letting go, or non-attachment. Recognize that the perfection of anything lies in its whole cycle, than any point in the cycle. The perfect rose is one that grows out of the seed, reaches maturity, wilts, and decays: that's a perfect rose.

Our bodies go through the same cycle, they reach their peak of physical beauty and then they start deteriorating into disease and death. Old age, sickness, death are part of the perfection. But you have to expand your consciousness to accept that, and be willing to allow things to take their natural course. There's nothing wrong with cycles of nature: simply recognize that what arises in the Uncreated reaches its peak and goes back to the Uncreated. This act of recognition is 'being the knowing' – and in itself, this is perfection.

We may very well think, 'It's too bad Ajahn Chah is ill, having all these troubles with health.' But that itself is nature in perfection. When we see this, we don't get caught up in attachment to our teacher: 'It's not right that Luang Por should have brain damage.' This is merely a Luang Por that we've created in our own minds. Recognize that any perception of Luang Por is something that we've created. Our

perception of Luang Por Chah in his present condition doesn't meet our perception of Luang Por when he was healthy. We were expecting something else from Ajahn Chah, we were expecting something better – and what has happened doesn't fit in with our expectation. The result is that we feel disappointment or sorrow or despair.

The *dukkha* of all phenomena means that it can never bring us satisfaction. Attachment to phenomena only brings us to despair. When we are heedless, when we don't understand nature at all, we tend to search for a permanent abiding place in conditions, and this will only bring us despair. We try to create a perfect relationship, a perfect society, a perfect security.

At Chithurst in England we know an old couple in their eighties, the Gilberts, who live in a nearby village. They used to invite us over every Saturday morning for tea and crumpets. A very idyllic old English couple, Mrs Gilbert hadn't been to London since she was eighteen years old, although they were living only fifty miles away in the beautiful village of Stedham. They were very good, moral, kind citizens. Mr Gilbert said they had never quarrelled their whole lives – never had a fight. They just had this wonderful marriage and he especially looked very bright, with shining eyes and a clear complexion. His wife was obviously in very bad health with arthritis: she could hardly move and was in a tremendous amount of pain. And so whenever she would get ill, Mr Gilbert would want us to chant; he always had this hope that somehow she would return to good health again. It was obvious that there was no way she was ever going to become healthy, and yet there was this constant hope in his mind that they would be able to live many more years together. But she died a few months afterwards – and one could see his tremendous sorrow at having lost someone he was married to for such a long time. What would seem to be a perfect marriage ends in sorrow, separation and despair. If you don't understand nature, and are unable to transcend it then you're caught in the best conditions of life.

Clinging to life – the life of our bodies takes us to death, the death of our body. But as we watch in our meditation, we can absorb expectation, hope, worry, fear, dread. Rather than react with likes and dislikes and preferences, as a meditator, you are just watching them arise and pass as they change. That’s being the knowing, knowing that whatever arises, passes away.

Meanwhile you must take care of your body, feed it, clothe it – all this is part of our way of learning and watching. The human body is something we have to take time to understand, to witness and watch – extremes, sensual indulgence (*kāmasukhallikānuyogo*) you go out to seek as much pleasure through this as you can; and self-mortification (*attakilamathānuyogo*) where you try to deny anything to the body and attempt to starve it, persecute it, cause it pain and discomfort. As bhikkhus (monks), there is a middle way between indulgence and asceticism where we can take care of the body and watch it, listen to it, understand it. We’re not in such pain and misery all the time that we are just reacting to that. We feed it, put robes on it; we contain it within the moral precepts so that it’s not being used for harmful, cruel, evil actions or speech.

It’s the same for the anagārikas: they resolve to refrain from eating in the afternoon; from dancing, singing, music and entertainment; and they give up using cosmetics, perfumes, jewellery and ornaments. They also undertake to be careful about sleeping, to be mindful of how much sleep they need, rather than just seeking escape through sleep. So, these renunciate precepts are about renouncing or relinquishing those things that we tend to indulge ourselves in and get lost in. These restraints deal with our inclination to want to get sense pleasures out of the body – pleasures that are not really necessary and which are harmful to spiritual development. We also put limitations on the annihilatorist desire to sleep. Of course there is nothing wrong with sleep or robes or clothes, food, medicine, wearing glasses and everything which is necessary, but we don’t indulge in trying to make

ourselves more attractive or alluring to somebody else, nor do we try to merely seek distraction in external pleasure through the senses. We are content to just listen to nature.

A bhikkhu who keeps the training rules is a source of blessings. Just by staying within the restrictions of the precepts, you become a field of blessings, and worthy of respect. You can make yourself that field of blessings. Not by thinking that you are that, but by being it. And if you contain yourself within the precepts, then meditation will develop naturally.

To get perfect in terms of Vinaya training is just about impossible; we do the best we can. It's really awful to see how some monks become Vinaya snobs, and become really nasty people. But then the monks who don't keep Vinaya, the ones who don't really know how to make use of it and contain themselves – there not very inspiring, they just follow their desires. Those are the two extremes, being a snob and a Vinaya fanatic, or thinking that you don't need to bother with the rules. It depends on how skilfully you use it, according to time and place – so that the rules are helping you in your meditation.

When you go to another monastery and see monks who are breaking the rules, you can become really nasty about it, 'Disgusting monks who carry money and drink milk in the evening.' I saw that tendency in myself but found that *mettā* was a far more skilful way of relating. In one's own monastery, one can teach and train according to a good standard of Vinaya, but if you stay at someone else's then you don't need to worry about it or judge it. I don't worry about my purity if they offer me a cup of coffee. I'm not going to create a problem out of it by becoming a snob or being ungrateful. Know your intentions and figure out how to use these conventions – because they are only conventions. How can Vinaya really help you? What's its real purpose? Why did the Buddha establish the rules? You can become very narrow-minded – but then you will have to suffer because of your narrow and rigid interpretations.

Then when we want to get free of our *kilesas* (defilements), we

may take that as a challenge to annihilate them – because with our conditioned perceptions of defilements we think we have to get rid of them: ‘We wouldn’t have defilements in the first place if we were good people; we should annihilate and get rid of them. Wipe out the pests! Get rid of all the pests, use a superspray, some hyperactive agent to wipe them out, sterilize, kill.’ Like these sanitary cleaning agents you put down the toilet, guaranteed to kill every germ. Makes us feel safe, doesn’t it? Once you’ve poured all that stuff down the toilet, you can use the toilet – every germ has been killed.

Ignorance makes us want to do this with our minds: to kill everything we don’t like, the pests, all that shouldn’t be there, all that isn’t nice, all that is a defilement. But the desire to kill is in itself a defilement! That desire to want to kill, annihilate, get rid of everything. And how do you get rid of wanting-to-get-rid-of? By recognizing the wanting-to-get-rid-of, just by bare attention, by mindfulness. Things go by themselves, you don’t have to get rid of them – because everything that begins, ends. There is nothing to get rid of, you just have to be patient with them and allow things to take their natural course into cessation.

Then you can hear the silence of mind, if you’re attentive and you can hear the whispers: ‘I want this, I don’t want that, I should, I shouldn’t, I like, I don’t like, I must.’ All the pressures of our life: ‘Got to do something, I’ve got to get rid of, I’ve got to get hold of that, I shouldn’t, I shouldn’t be like that. It shouldn’t be like that, they should be practising like this, they shouldn’t be practising like that!’ And you can listen to the whispers, all the buzzing sounds that constantly nag, confuse and contend. You recognize them, and allow those conditions to cease – just by bare attention, alertness to them, and patiently enduring. Be the silent watcher, the silent witness, the silent listener – and allow that witnessing to have its effects. Things can then follow their natural course. Whatever has arisen can reach cessation. Otherwise, if we don’t do that, we just recreate the pattern. Then as we get older, we get stuck in the horrible ruts of our habits. They become solidified; the ruts are

so deep, you can't see your way out of them any more; we just reinforce habits all the time, rather than allowing whatever has arisen to cease. To allow cessation means that we have to be very kind, very patient and humble – not taking sides with the good, the bad, the pleasure, the pain. Instead there's the gentle recognition that allows things to change according to their nature, without interfering. So then we learn to turn away from seeking absorption into objects of the senses. We find our peace in the emptiness of the mind, in its clarity, in its silence. We can find our rest in that silence, in that peace of mind. And we turn to that more and more, rather than to distraction through the senses.

Then, as you find this place of peace, the inclination to absorb into the objects of sense diminishes considerably, one no longer feels that compulsion to absorb into the things you see, hear, smell, taste, touch, or think. One turns and inclines to nibbāna, the peace of the mind, the Unconditioned.

15 | The Ordinary Miracle

When the body starts slumping during sitting meditation, then you can fill it with energy by turning your mind to the posture. Keep pulling the body up, as if something in front of you is keeping your body straight. Sometimes one is really fed up and just sits there in a dull state; people start nodding off. When you catch yourself doing that, then say, 'Effort, effort,' and pull the body up straight. Use your body, rather than just ignore it, or misuse it. If you energize the body, then after a while it maintains itself, effortlessly. But until then, you have to keep it straight.

Remember, so much of life is just trying to take the easy way, the path of least resistance, so that we just follow our desires, rather than go against them or resist. But the more you yield to desire, the more your mind will become confused and heedless. I remember when I was at the University of California, in the early 50's, the idea then was to follow all your desires. 'Never say no to greed.' I got myself into a terrible state – guilt-ridden and contemptuous of myself because I had become a very sloppy person.

So that was my experiment with 'following desires' – I got myself out of that as quickly as I could! And now, the subtlety of the practice is

to investigate, so that you know. You are not just following instructions with blind faith or meditating all night because you feel you have to. You recognize the feeling that you should sit up all night, the worrying about what others think if you don't, and the not wanting to do it – you can watch that kind of thing. But the best way is to resolve (*adhithhāna*), so that you don't have to think, 'Maybe I will, maybe I won't, maybe I should take a rest.' Doing that makes you suffer a lot. The best way is to make a resolution so that there is no question. Once you have made the resolution, then you can use that to listen, to watch what happens.

If you're a person without much effort in your life, then you have to make a resolution. That means to resolve in your mind to definitely do something. When we were in London, at first we didn't put much effort into our lives because of the cold. We spent the day just trying to keep warm and sank into a kind of depression and state of passivity. If there is one thing I really don't like, it's cold showers. When I wake up in the morning I don't like to get out from under the blankets, I just want to keep warm, and I don't like to get up early in the morning in a cold room. So in this cold of the English winter, I'd make a resolution when I went to bed. I'd set the alarm for 3 o'clock and then I'd resolve to get out of bed before it rang at a quarter to three, then leap out of bed as soon as I woke up. Then I'd run into the shower, turn on the cold water and leap into the cold water – which is something that I couldn't do if I thought about it. It was very invigorating. In the morning I would have a great deal of clarity and the body and mind would become sharp.

But if I just followed my *kilesas* and lay there, thinking, 'It's not necessary, I went to bed late last night, maybe I need another half hour', then I'd start the day without much effort. I would then come to chanting because I'd be worried about what people would say if I didn't. If I just followed the path of least resistance, my life would become a dreary and monotonous experience.

So resolution is very valuable for effort, because it takes a lot of effort to sit all night; you have to go against the desire to be comfortable.

There is the aversion to the feeling of sleepiness and dullness that arises and also when we get tired, we can get very bad-tempered and negative towards everything. But even that requires effort, because when you are negative, you have to think – to bring up and dwell on the details of what’s wrong with yourself and everyone else.

To stop thinking, you have to make an effort, because we are trained to think, and become habitual thinkers. So it’s easier to think than not to think. Some of our thoughts are absolutely ridiculous: I don’t know where some of mine come from! But to avoid thinking, we have to be mindful of thought – to put forth effort by watching and listening, being attentive to the flow in our minds. So rather than thinking about our minds, we watch them.

However, you’re not trying to get rid of thought, but to know it, rather than be caught in it – to just keep recognizing it. Thought is movement and an energy – it goes. It’s not a permanent mental condition – you can recognize thought for what it is, then it begins to slow down and stop. This isn’t annihilation, this is allowing things to cease; this is compassion.

You can use thought skilfully; the problem is being deluded – this is what causes the suffering. As you allow thinking to cease, then you can think skilfully at appropriate moments. It’s when the kammic resultants arise in your mind from the past, that you find yourself thinking unskilfully. So you recognize it – and in that recognition, it ceases. But if you’re thinking bad thoughts – perhaps you are angry – and you think, ‘This is terrible. I’ve got to get rid of this anger... I’m a terrible person!’ you keep reinforcing it all with guilt and repression. That’s unskilful. Instead, when obsessive thoughts come up in your mind, recognize them as impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self. This is the way of observing them rather than evaluating or analyzing. And as you become patient with your mind, the habitual obsessive thinking begins to fade and you will find great spaces in your mind that you had never imagined before.

So you're not trying to change things and people according to your desires and opinions; instead you have compassion. What we usually do is think, '*He shouldn't be like that!*' But then we're interfering, rather than realizing that our opinions about somebody are changing formations. So when someone here does something that annoys me – insults me – if I carry that perception back to my kuti – what is that? I can believe that a perception is a real person – but it's just a perception in my mind. And if I allow that perception to cease, if I just remain aware of it, then I stop creating and recreating.

Feeling that 'I should' and 'I shouldn't' – this is what creates so much misery. For example, I say: 'You shouldn't be like this' and 'You shouldn't be that way'; and: 'I think you're like this and that', 'I don't like this and that.' Then you get your perception of me, 'Ajahn Sumedho is so and so,' and then we can believe that these perceptions are truths. We could carry these around for the rest of our lives! We may never meet again until we're eighty years old, and although we've never seen each other, when the perception of me comes into your mind, you think 'He's this way.' We've carried a mental perception around for fifty years.

There's a story in the early scriptures that when the Buddha was practising for enlightenment, Māra the Tempter, who represents the ability to delude, came to test him. The Buddha just said, 'I know you Māra'. The Buddha wasn't angry; he didn't say: 'Get out of here, you so-and-so.' He said: 'I know you.' Buddhas know Māra, they're not deluded by that demon.

Unenlightened, ignorant beings are always deluded by Māra, they're either attacking or being fascinated by him. But Buddha is perfectly alert, perfectly calm, sitting under the bodhi tree with all that is fascinating or frightening, all the demons and dragons, swirling round – and he's just sitting there. He's not shutting his eyes, he's not shaking his fist; he's just sitting there, serene and calm; aware but not reacting.

When we are meditating, we do the same thing; we are ‘being the knowing.’ Taking refuge in Buddha means to be the knowing, to be wakeful. It doesn’t mean we believe we *are* Buddha – that’s delusion. But one becomes the Buddha, or the Tathāgata (‘One Gone to Thusness’) as the transcending knowing by being awake. Then Māra comes in all its different ways; all your fears, doubts, worries, greeds, etc., come swirling around your head and inside your heart – then you say, ‘I know you, Māra.’ Just be that knowing.

In meditation as you gain equanimity, you can watch things that arise in your mind. Then you can let them go, because they come out of emptiness and go back into emptiness. Some people feel that this is all a miracle. People come to meditation hoping to have miraculous experiences, but they don’t realize that experiences are already miraculous. Modern technology is miraculous; it’s more intelligent than any of us. But what most people don’t experience is what is not miraculous: the Uncreated, that which doesn’t arise and pass away. So, although our mind is conditioned to look for something, to find something, the Buddhist is looking for what is not miraculous at all.

All you have to do is watch, attentively. The object of meditation is bare attention, bare awareness. The more technique you give it, then the more remote it becomes. In whatever posture you find yourself, you’re simply awake and aware of whatever you can be aware of, now. The four postures – sitting, walking, standing, lying down – all these can be used for awareness. And what you come to know directly is what is caused and what is not caused. Sometimes your mind is perfectly empty; that is the Unconditioned. Most of the time your mind is full of things; then you have to be patient with this great activity and restlessness. Just be aware of that, watch the pain or whatever it is. Don’t ask: ‘Why am I restless?’ If you do, then you are always trying to figure out your restlessness. The idea is to endure its presence until it goes away. Notice how things change.

So you are being the silent watcher, the silent listener. You can actually hear this listening very clearly; it's the 'sound of silence.' When you understand that sound of silence in your mind, then you have a perspective on all mental states – whether trivial or important or whatever their quality might happen to be.

When you are practising like this, there's no attachment. It's not annihilation; it's clarity – stillness, not dullness. If on the other hand, we try to suppress everything, this is out of attachment to the mind as 'my self.' But emptiness is non-attachment in which you don't have to suppress anything, and you don't have to seek anything, either. All that is desire, looking for an object.

Through desire moving in your mind, you are continually being reborn into each moment. Like when you go back to your kuti, what do you usually do? You start looking for something to do. If you are not really mindful, then when you change your location then there is a desire to do something: to eat something, to drink something, to read something. That's desire, seeking rebirth, looking for a place to absorb into, looking for something to become.

If you're living without any awareness of desire, you operate in this way – you have a whole system of going from one thing to another. The result is that whenever there is the slightest bit of boredom, or unpleasantness, then you have something else to absorb into. Just think of the incredible gadgets that are available now, offering computer games and all kinds of fascinating things to do – the mystery of not being able to do something isn't there. However, you can only have so much excitement, so much romance, so much happiness and then it becomes boring. You can only be excited for a while, then you become weary; you can hope for so much and then there is despair. One conditions the other. You can't have inhalation and no exhalation, you can't have only love, hope, excitement, pleasure and interest. They are changing conditions: they begin, they reach their peak, then they fade and pass away. This principle applies to every condition.

So you get bored with constantly being reborn; and then what comes up is the desire to get rid of yourself. So people take drugs or sleep a lot, or commit suicide. And that's a desire too – seeking to be annihilated.

In fact there's a lot of stuff in the mind that we've forbidden to come up into consciousness. It's natural – in any society, there are certain things that are taboo. You're trained from childhood to allow certain things and to reject others; so, instead of allowing anger, fear, or irrational feeling to become conscious, there's a reaction to reject them. But in meditation the precepts put you in a safe moral framework; and this allows you to watch your irrational fears and let them go to cessation. Then you are free from them.

If, on the other hand you try to get rid of anger, you end up repressing it. You think it's gone because you can't see it – then it comes up again and slaps you in the face. In fact, whatever you repress is going to come back again and hit you. So the wise approach is that, although you assume that these problems are yours and that you have to get rid of them, in meditation, you can let fear, doubts, and neurotic habits come and go. They're part of the human condition, and not personal: the understanding of not-self frees you from believing that you're neurotic.

A woman came to me one time and said, 'I get this terrible depression and I'd like to know how to get rid of depression. Can meditation help me to stop my depression?' I said, 'What's wrong with being depressed? Sometimes life is depressing, let's face it.' She had the attitude that she should never be depressed. But sometimes life is just downright depressing; there's nothing you can do about it: people you love die, it gets cold and wet and rainy, you lose your job, you have no money. Don't expect to be happy all of the time. There are a lot of unpleasant, depressing things happening, but you can endure it. You can recognize it and not create a neurotic problem out of it; then it changes. But when you're attached to depression and you're attached to the idea that you are depressed, then you think, 'I'll never have a joyous moment ever

again. I'll be lonely and depressed forever.' Because that's the way it seems. And the more you believe that, the more you reinforce it. The idea of these things being self just makes one more depressed.

I knew a woman in London who was working for the BBC. She had to type, receive visitors, answer the telephone, talk to people all day – then she would go home and try to do mindfulness of breathing. She said, 'I'm so exhausted, I try to do *ānāpānasati*, but I just can't. It just doesn't work.' But when she told me about all the things she did, I said, 'Well, don't think you're going to knock out all that accumulation you've picked up during the day with mindfulness of breathing.' If you have to talk on telephones and type and receive visitors – then you have to reflect on it and not be averse to it. Recognize it. Assuming that meditation will solve the problem, we use it as a kind of club to bash the mind down. But you can only knock it down for a little while, then it comes up again. That's not the way: you need to patiently coexist with confused mental states. Be kind, be patient. If you can't get away from it, then learn to live with it – but you aren't going to be very tranquil.

Most meditation is just allowing anything that has arisen to cease. That's why I stress patience: allow things to take their natural course to cessation, rather than try to get rid of them. Try to accept even the things you don't like about yourself. Don't try to be too perfect. This is why *mettā* (patient-kindness) is so important. You always have this patient-kindness and peaceful coexistence with whatever comes. When you allow it all to fade away through peaceful coexistence, you find that your mind is very clear.

16 | Taming the Wild Horse

When we go forth as bhikkhus and nuns, we have this contemplation in the ordination procedure: *kesa, loma, nakha, danta, taco* – hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. This is because now that we're living the celibate life, the *brahmacariya*, we're no longer able to grasp and possess the objects of lust, so the approach is to observe the objects of lust with more discrimination. But we're not here to judge the quality of any condition, but to just recognize it. To be fully conscious of lust, to watch it, rather than just repressing it. To know it as it is without adding any habitual response, such as, 'A monk shouldn't be lustful.' Then we can recognize it: it's just our own creation, a conditioned response.

Lust is a natural human condition, our bodies are made for procreation. The body, male or female, is a condition in nature; bodies have all the organs necessary for procreating the human race. Sexual desire is then a natural human condition, not a personal problem. So we recognize it rather than reject it – and allow it its true place in nature. There is nothing to be frightened of – it's not a personal trait. If we are laypeople, we may incline to indulge our sexuality; if we are celibate, we may attach to celibacy, get frightened of the natural functions of the

body, and tend to repress them. After all, indulging in sexual fantasy or expression can get you into a terrible state. But sexual fantasy is always done through heedlessness, through not understanding that lust is just a condition, not a personal problem. We use celibacy as a way of seeing the natural functions of our bodies as natural conditions that are non-self, not personal. We learn to coexist with nature, so we are not obsessed by the conditions in our bodies in the present.

When you are attracted to somebody, you don't see the flaws in them, you don't even want to know about it. If you start looking at the flaws, the lust begins diminishing: So the technique of *asubha* (reflecting on the impure qualities) is a skilful method for the lustful mind. It is a discriminating practice; you start looking at the separate parts of the body; hair of the head and body, nails, teeth and skin; these are the outer surface of a person – the things that we tend to be attracted to. If we see beautiful hair, beautiful eyebrows and eyelashes, moustache, beard, hair on other parts of the body, beautiful nails, lovely white teeth and beautiful skin, what we see is that there's a beautiful person. But when we start distinguishing the hair, nails, teeth and skin – even if you find the most wonderful blonde hair in your alms-bowl, it doesn't arouse lust. Somebody's tooth, fingernail or skin – even if it's very beautiful skin – it doesn't make you lustful. But if it's all together on a human being – beautiful hair, teeth and skin – then you feel, 'I want it! I've got to have it! I've got to possess it!'

So you begin with contemplating the hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin – that's the surface – then when you go under the surface, it becomes even less attractive. When you see a beautiful person, you reflect that they have bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, tears, spittle, snot and urine. When you become skilled in this practice, then when you see a beautiful person, you don't experience any lust.

These are the skilful means which the Buddha used to observe nature and to develop insight, to learn from it. *Asubha* doesn't mean 'I don't like it' and kidding yourself that beauty is disgusting and loathsome.

The practice is not to dwell in aversion on your own body or anyone else's but rather to experience dispassion, rather than strong emotions of attachment or disgust. Dispassion comes with clear awareness, non-delusion around this existing condition. It is calm and impartial.

So monks aren't trying to convince themselves that women are disgusting and loathsome; women aren't trying to convince themselves that there is anything wrong with men. That's ridiculous; but you look beyond the appearance of beauty, to see a little more closely. It takes a little more effort – but the effect is to reduce lust in your mind.

The movie industry depends on what we can create around beauty and ugliness. Some movie stars seem to exude flower-like fragrances: you would think that nothing ever came out of their bodies. And in all those dozens of Hopalong Cassidy movies, you never notice Hopalong stop to take a pee! The same applies to boxes of tissues, with a pink or a blue flower on them – you never see a picture of one that has been used. They would have to wipe the snot off. And if the tissue in the box smelled of something foul we wouldn't want to put it up to our noses, would we?

We can be embarrassed by the conditions of the human form – its stomach ache, its pain, its secretions – because we think it's mine. In fact, it's just a condition in nature, it's not a self. So we don't have to make the body appear as if it's always like a flower – that's impossible. Instead, we reflect on the body without attachment or aversion, but with dispassion, so that we can use our body or someone else's to develop *asubha* practice.

On the other hand, if you have a lot of aversion to your own body, then you have to develop the practice of patient-kindness (*mettā*). You find people who are naturally averse personalities, they tend to like the *asubha* practice. The highly discriminating mind sees the ugliness in everything. So I can indulge in it, 'This disgusting body – loathsome, repulsive, stinking'. This is merely a gleeful indulgence in it. When people say that you should practice loving-kindness, your reaction then

is: 'That's a ridiculous, sentimental, soppy practice.' That discriminating kind of mind doesn't need to develop the sense of repulsiveness or impurity – it's already conditioned that way. So if you can't develop kindly feelings, then you should just try to not dwell in aversion.

You are not blinding yourself to the faults and flaws in everything, but you are just peacefully coexisting with them. You're aware of the unpleasantness, the pain, the loathsomeness of some things, but you are not indulging in it. You stop from indulging by kindness, patience, simplicity, peacefully coexisting and not demanding that things be otherwise. So *mettā* doesn't mean that you don't notice what's wrong with yourself and everyone else – it means that you don't develop problems around these conditions.

When you have anger and aversion, you can reflect on the religious life as a restricted one. When you are a monk or a nun, you are tied up, penned in. It's just like being a wild horse – all it can do is try to resist, try to get away; and then when it stops resisting, it can easily be trained. The horse then becomes very useful. It's the same with us: when we are first trying to do mindfulness of breathing, our mind is just like a wild horse. It doesn't want to be tied up; it wants to gallop all over the place. That's its habit, that's its nature. But when you have practised mindful breathing for a while, the wild mind begins to calm down, and it becomes malleable, supple and flexible. The supple mind can be trained. When it stops resisting and fighting everything, then it learns to accept the limitations imposed on it. Then it's very useful.

The monastic life is like being tied to a stake, or put into a corral. You can't go around doing as you like – you have to live within limits. But you still have the old habits, and as you look out over the railing of the corral, you think, 'I want to go over there.' Yet, you remain inside. You are surrendering and resigning yourself to the limits of the robe and precepts. Once you have stopped resisting, then your mind can start to be trained – to see and know – and no longer be a wild creature that just follows its desires.

When you are tied down, at first there is a lot of anger and resistance. Just after I was ordained as a samanera, I remember feeling a lot of resistance – a lot of hatred and anger towards everything and everybody. Some days I just hated everyone. It was resistance to rules, to authority; resentment at all the limitations. Finally, the resignation came. I surrendered to the monastic life: Then my practice began to develop properly. So you need to recognize what is going on. The advice is not to try acting like an ideal monk or nun; nor to try to make others believe you are a meditation master. There's no need for any masquerade. You're not putting on a costume – but you learn to use these robes as they are: their function is to restrict you. You don't have the freedom that you would have wearing trousers. You can't just leap up into the trees and swing from the branches; you can't race about here, there and everywhere, wearing these clothes.

As a monk or nun, you are a marked person. Everybody knows, so you can't get away with anything; you go out on the town, thinking, 'Now I'm away from the monastery, now I can really let my hair down and have a good time.' You're still a monk or a nun in the middle of Bangkok. You take your corral with you. Somebody asked me once, 'Do you ever take off your robes and have a holiday?' They were surprised to find out that we don't put on a Hawaiian shirt, and pop down to the beach. Our holiday is in the mind rather than outside; you have to find the real holiday resort within yourself.

A common attitude is to 'kill the *kilesas* (defilements).' But you see monks who try to kill hatred – and they're still trying although they have been monks for many years. It is sad to see them still repressing everything. Defilements are not a problem, as long as one does the investigation properly. So let your inclination be towards nibbāna: then you have the freedom to bring up the nastiness in yourself, to take a good look. Because once you know what it is, then it diminishes, and goes to cessation.

Sometimes when we're angry and hateful, we can bring it up and observe it. We don't have to act it out or try to resist it. If you want to kill me, I would prefer that you don't – but make it fully conscious so you can see it. 'I hate Venerable Sumedho and I want to kill him. I want to pull him apart, limb from limb. I want to poke his eyes out.' That's the way to make it fully conscious. You see it is only a condition in your mind and you can let it go. Usually when we feel hate or anger we get frightened of it or we feel guilty: 'I hate Venerable Sumedho ... oh I shouldn't ... Oh, a good bhikkhu should love the teacher but I *hate* him.' It goes on; and you're never really *aware* of what's going on, you just vacillate between the emotion of hatred and the guilt around it. So have the courage to really hate – fully, consciously hate, but listen to it rather than act on it.

I remember when I was at Ajahn Chah's monastery, I'd really hate him sometimes. First of all I got very frightened of that feeling; I felt guilty. And then I decided to really hate, I would sit there and think of all the hateful things that I could think about Ajahn Chah. Then I'd listen to that. There was no intention to harm Ajahn Chah; I did it to recognize the hatred. But when you really listen to hatred you see it for what it is. You can stir it up for a while and then you let it go. But when there's guilt around the hatred, we repress our hatred. Then, we're always getting caught up in feelings of remorse, self-hatred and guilt.

Reactions like this contain a lot of conceit, a lot of *atta*, 'self.' We have the idea that these emotions are *my* problem rather than seeing them as conditions. If somebody tells me I'm a no-good so-and-so, and they are angry and very aggressive to me, it is natural to feel fear or anger. If they tell me how wonderful I am, it's natural to feel happy. It's nice to hear praise and offensive to hear criticism. Praise, blame; happiness, suffering; success, failure; high status, low status – they're all natural conditions. You might think, 'I shouldn't be happy when I'm praised, I shouldn't be unhappy when I'm criticized.' But this is being very idealistic. Instead, by allowing all the mental attachments to be

fully conscious, you get to understand them. If you can endure, you'll observe that their nature is to go away, not to stay. And you become peaceful. This is the way of catharsis in meditation, in which you relieve the mind from its habitual repressions.

When you understand hatred, you're not creating more kamma (intentions which will bear fruit). In the training rules, there is no such thing as a mental offence. Hating the teacher is not an offence, it is not a breach of the monastic discipline – as long as you don't threaten or hit me. That point is very important to realize. In Christian teachings it is wrong to have bad thoughts so the priests often have tremendous guilt in their minds. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said: 'If you look at a woman with lust you have already committed adultery.' That's a really hard teaching! It makes you feel guilty about lust, but will not solve the problem. Sometimes we do feel lust, let's face it. But there's no need to feel all guilty about it.

So there's a clarity in Buddhist morality that Christian morality doesn't have. A Buddhist monk who thinks the most dreadful thoughts, but doesn't act on them has not committed any offence. So we can allow dreadful thoughts to become fully conscious. We are not committing any breach of our training rules; so in that freedom to allow things to be conscious, we let them go and they go to cessation rather than into the subconscious. Psychologically then, Buddhism works so well because it's not a guilt-conditioning religion. Christianity makes you feel guilty about being a person, even about having a body. You are born in Sin, born a Sinner and that means you're not a nice person. If you are born a Sinner but you are also a child of God, it becomes very confusing.

I was brought up in a devout Christian family, and sometimes I used to feel guilty simply about living. As a teenager, I had strong lustful obsessions, and I felt there was something terribly bad about me. I couldn't help having them but as much as I tried not to, I seemed to have them anyway. What was I supposed to do? I became very disillusioned

about Christianity. It's a bad joke, isn't it? You're a child of God who created you out of love, then you have these obsessions which you're not supposed to have and you don't know what to do about them: the more you try to get rid of them, the more obsessed you become. There is this endless cycle of guilt and repression, self-hatred. It all comes from this unfortunate and mistaken ideal.

How you deal with these things is all up to you. The guidelines are your actions and speech as suggested by the precepts. When lust or anger comes, you can investigate and know it. In Buddhist training we are not condemning nature, we are understanding it. So simply reflect: 'I know you Māra.' You don't think, 'I have to kill the *kilesas*' and start bashing away. Recognizing, that's knowing Māra. Māra is that force in the mind, in nature, which will never let you rest until you are perfectly free from *kilesas*. This devil then performs a useful function in testing you out – no matter how successful or virtuous you might be.

When people ask: ‘What do you have to do to become a Buddhist?’, we say that we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and to take refuge we recite a formula in the Pali language:

Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi: I go to the Buddha for refuge

Dhammaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi: I go to the Dhamma for refuge

Sanghaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi: I go to the Sangha for refuge.

As we practise more and more and begin to realize the profundity of the Buddhist teachings, it becomes a real joy to take these refuges, and even just reciting them inspires the mind. After many years as a monk, I still like to chant ‘*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*’ – in fact, I like it more than I did at first, because then it didn’t really mean anything to me; I just chanted it because I had to, because it was part of the tradition. Merely taking refuge verbally in the Buddha doesn’t mean you take refuge in anything: a parrot could be trained to say ‘*Buddhaṃ saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*’, and it would probably be as meaningful to a parrot as it is to many Buddhists. These words are for reflection, for looking at them and actually investigating what they mean, what ‘refuge’ means, what ‘Buddha’ means. When we say, ‘I take refuge in the Buddha’, what do we mean by that? How can we use that so it is not just a repetition of

nonsense syllables, but something that really helps to remind us, gives us direction and increases our devotion, our dedication to the path of the Buddha?

The word ‘Buddha’ is a lovely word – it means ‘the One Who Knows’ – and the first refuge is in Buddha as the personification of wisdom. Unpersonified wisdom remains too abstract for us: we can’t conceive a bodiless, soul-less wisdom, so as wisdom always seems to have a personal quality to it, using Buddha as its symbol is very useful. We can use the word ‘Buddha’ to refer to Gotama, the founder of what is now known as Buddhism, the historical sage who attained *parinibbāna* in India 2,500 years ago, the teacher of the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, teachings from which we still benefit today. But when we take refuge in the Buddha, that doesn’t mean we take refuge in some historical prophet. We take refuge in that which is wise in the universe, in our minds; that which is not separate from us, but is more real than anything we can conceive with the mind or experience through the senses. Without any Buddha-wisdom in the universe, life for any length of time would be totally impossible; it is the Buddha-wisdom that protects. We call it Buddha-wisdom; other people can call it other things if they want, these are just words. We happen to use the words of our tradition. We don’t argue about Pali words, Sanskrit words, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, English or any other words. We just use the term Buddha-wisdom as a conventional symbol to help remind us to be wise, to be alert, to be awake.

Many forest bhikkhus in Thailand use the word ‘Buddho’ as their meditation object. They first calm the mind by following the inhalations and exhalations using the syllables BUD-DHO, and then begin to contemplate: ‘What is Buddho, the “One Who Knows”? What is the knowing?’ When I used to travel around in North-East Thailand on *tudong*, I liked to go and stay at the monastery of Ajahn Fun. Ajahn Fun was a much-loved and deeply respected monk, the teacher of the Royal Family, and he was so popular that he was constantly receiving

guests. I would sit by his kuti and hear him give the most amazing Dhamma talks, all on the subject of ‘Buddho’ – as far as I could see, it was all that he taught. He could make it into a really profound meditation, whether for an illiterate farmer or an elegant Western-educated Thai aristocrat. The main part of his teaching was not just about mechanically repeating ‘Buddho’, but about reflecting and investigating, awakening the mind to really look into the ‘Buddho’, ‘the One Who Knows’, to really investigate its beginning, its end, above and below, so that one’s whole attention was stuck to it. When one did that, ‘Buddho’ became something that echoed through the mind. One would investigate it, look at it, examine it before it was said and after it was said, and eventually one would start listening to it and hear beyond the sound, until one heard the silence.

A refuge is a place of safety, and so when superstitious people came to my teacher Ajahn Chah, wanting charmed medallions or little talismans to protect them from bullets, knives, ghosts and so on, he would say, ‘Why do you want things like that? The only real protection is taking refuge in the Buddha. Taking refuge in the Buddha is enough.’ But their faith in Buddha usually wasn’t quite as strong as their faith in those silly little medallions. They wanted something made out of bronze and clay, stamped and blessed. That is what is called taking refuge in bronze and clay, taking refuge in superstition, taking refuge in that which is truly unsafe and cannot really help us. Today in modern Britain we find that generally people are more sophisticated. They don’t take refuge in magic charms, they take refuge in things like their bank – but that is still taking refuge in something that offers no safety. Taking refuge in the Buddha, in wisdom, means that we have a place of safety. When there is wisdom, when we act wisely and live wisely, we are truly safe. The conditions around us might change. We can’t guarantee what will happen to the material standard of living, or that our bank will survive the decade. The future remains unknown and mysterious. But in the present, by

taking refuge in the Buddha, we have the presence of mind now to reflect on and learn from life as we live it.

Wisdom doesn't mean having a lot of knowledge about the world; we don't have to go to university and collect information about the world in order to be wise. Wisdom means knowing the nature of conditions as we experience them, not just being caught up in, reacting to and absorbing into the conditions of our bodies and minds out of habit, fear, worry, doubt, greed and so on. It is using 'Buddho', the 'One Who Knows,' to observe that these conditions are changing. It is the knowing of that change that we call 'Buddha' and in which we take refuge. We make no claims that Buddha is 'me' or 'mine'. We don't say, 'I am Buddha', but rather, 'I take refuge in Buddha.' This is a way of humbly submitting to that wisdom, being aware, being awake.

Although in one sense taking refuge is something we do all the time, the Pali formula we use is a reminder, because we forget; we habitually take refuge in worry, doubt, fear, anger, greed and so on. The Buddha-image is also a reminder; when we bow to it we don't imagine that it is anything other than an image, a symbol. It is a reflection which makes us a little more aware of Buddha, of our refuge in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. The Buddha-image sits in great dignity and calm, not in a trance but fully alert, with a look of wakefulness and kindness, not caught in the changing conditions around it. The image is made of metal, while we have flesh-and-blood bodies which make things much more difficult for us, but still it is a reminder. Some people become very puritanical about Buddha-images, but here in the West I haven't found them to be a danger. The real idols we believe in and worship, and that constantly delude us, are our thoughts, views and opinions, our loves and hates, our self-conceit and pride.

The second Refuge is in the Dhamma, in ultimate truth or ultimate reality. Dhamma is impersonal; we don't in any way try to personify it, to make it any kind of personal deity. When we chant the verse on Dhamma in Pali, we say it is '*sanditthiko, akāliko, ehipassiko, opanayiko,*

paccattam veditabbo viññūhi. As Dhamma has no personal attributes, we can't even say it is good or bad, or anything that has a superlative or comparative quality; it is beyond the dualistic conceptions of mind. So when we describe Dhamma or give an impression of it, we do so through words such as '*sanditthiko*', which means immanent, here-and-now. That brings us back into the present; we feel a sense of immediacy, of the now. You may think that Dhamma is something 'out there', something you have to find elsewhere, but *sanditthikodhamma* means that it is immanent, here-and-now.

Akālikadhamma means that Dhamma is not bound by any time condition. The word *akāla* means 'timeless'. Our conceptual mind can't conceive of anything that is timeless, because our conceptions and perceptions are time-based conditions, but what we can say is that Dhamma is *akāla*, not bound by time.

Ehipassikadhamma means coming and seeing, turning towards or going to the Dhamma. It means looking, being aware. It is not that we pray to the Dhamma to come or wait for it to tap us on the shoulder; we have to put forth effort. It is like Christ's saying, 'Knock on the door and it shall be opened.' *Ehipassiko* means that we have to put forward that effort, to turn towards that truth.

Opanayiko means leading inwards, towards peace within the mind. Dhamma doesn't take us into fascination, excitement, romance or adventure, but leads to *nibbāna*, to calm, to silence.

Paccattam veditabbo viññūhi means that we can only know Dhamma through direct experience. It is like the taste of honey – if someone else tastes it, we still don't know its flavour. We may know the chemical formula for honey or be able to recite all the great poetry ever written about it, but only when we taste it for ourselves do we really know what it is like. It is the same with Dhamma; we have to taste it, we have to know it directly.

Taking refuge in Dhamma is taking another safe refuge. It is not taking refuge in philosophy or intellectual concepts, in theories, ideas,

doctrines or beliefs of any sort. It is not taking refuge in a belief in Dhamma, in God, or in some kind of force in outer space or something beyond or separate, something we have to find later. The descriptions of the Dhamma keep us in the present, in the here and now, unbound by time. Taking refuge is an immediate, immanent reflection in the mind; it is not just repeating '*Dhammam saranam gacchāmi*' like a parrot, thinking, 'Buddhists say this, so I have to say it.' We turn towards the Dhamma: we are aware now, take refuge in Dhamma now, as an immediate action, an immediate reflection of being the Dhamma, being that very truth.

Because our conceiving mind always tends to delude us, it takes us into becoming. We think, 'I'll practise meditation so that I'll become enlightened in the future. I will take the Three Refuges in order to become a Buddhist. I want to become wise. I want to get away from suffering and ignorance, and become something else.' This is the conceiving mind, the desire mind, the mind that always deludes us. So rather than constantly thinking in terms of becoming something in the future, we take refuge in being Dhamma in the present.

The impersonality of Dhamma bothers many people because devotional religion tends to personify everything, and people coming from such traditions don't feel right if they can't have some sort of personal relationship within a religion. I remember a French Catholic missionary who came to stay in our monastery and practise meditation. He felt at something of a loss with Buddhism because he said it was like 'cold surgery'; there was no personal relationship with God. One cannot have a personal relationship with Dhamma: one cannot say, 'Love the Dhamma!' or 'The Dhamma loves me!' – there is no need for that. We only need a personal relationship with something we are not, like our mother, father, husband or wife, something separate from us. But we don't need to take refuge in mother or father, someone to protect us and love us and say, 'I love you no matter what you do. Everything is going to be all right', and pat us on the head. The

Buddha-Dhamma is a very mature refuge; it is a religious practice that is a complete sanity or maturity, in which we no longer seek a mother or father because we don't need to become anything any more. We no longer need to be loved or protected by anyone; instead we can love and protect others, and that is all that is important. We no longer have to ask or demand things from others, whether from other people, or even some deity or force that we feel is separate from us and has to be prayed to and asked for guidance. We give up all our attempts to conceive Dhamma as being this or that, or anything at all, and let go of our desire to have a personal relationship with the truth. We have to be that truth, here and now. Being that truth, taking that refuge, calls for an immediate awakening: for being wise now, being Buddha, being Dhamma in the present.

The third Refuge is the Sangha, which means a group. 'Sangha' may be the Bhikkhu-Sangha, the order of monks, or the *Ariya-Sangha*, the group of Noble Beings, all those who live virtuously, doing good and refraining from evil by bodily action or speech. Here, taking refuge in the Sangha with '*Sangham sāraṇaṃ gacchāmi*' means we take refuge in virtue, in that which is good, virtuous, kind, compassionate and generous. We don't take refuge in those things in our minds that are mean, nasty, cruel, selfish, jealous, hateful, angry – even though admittedly that is what we often tend to do out of heedlessness; out of not reflecting, not being awake, but just reacting to conditions. On the conventional level, taking refuge in the Sangha means doing good and refraining from doing evil by bodily action or speech. All of us have both good thoughts and intentions and bad ones. *Sanḅhāras* (conditioned phenomena) are like that: some are good and some aren't, some are neutral, some are wonderful and some are nasty. Conditions in the world are changing conditions. We can't just think the best, the most refined thoughts, and feel only the best and the kindest feelings; both good and bad thoughts and feelings come and go, but we take refuge in virtue rather than in hatred. We take refuge in that in all

of us which intends to do good, which is compassionate, kind and loving towards ourselves and others. So the refuge of Sangha is a very practical refuge for day-to-day living within 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 ourselves, our own body and mind. This is being '*supatipanno*', one who practises well.

When we are aware and mindful, when we reflect and observe, we begin to see that acting on impulses that are cruel and selfish only brings harm and misery to both ourselves and others. It doesn't take great powers of observation to see that. If you've met any criminals in your life, people who have acted selfishly and wickedly, you'll find them constantly frightened, obsessed, paranoid, suspicious: having to drink a lot, take drugs, keep busy, do all kinds of things, because living with themselves is so horrible. Five minutes alone with themselves without any dope or drink or distraction would seem to them like eternal hell, because the kammic result of evil is so appalling mentally. Even if they're never caught by the police or sent to prison, don't think they're going to get away with anything. In fact, sometimes it is the kindest thing to put them in prison and punish them; it makes them feel better. I was never a criminal, but I have managed to tell a few lies and do a few mean and nasty things in my lifetime, and the results were always unpleasant. Even today when I think of those things the memory is not pleasant, it is not something that I want to go to announce to everybody, not something that I feel joy about when I think of it.

When we meditate, we realize that we have to be completely responsible for how we live. In no way can we blame anyone else for anything at all. Before I started to meditate I used to blame people and society: 'If only my parents had been completely wise, enlightened arahants, I would be all right. If only the United States of America

had a truly wise, compassionate government that never made any mistakes, supported me completely and appreciated me fully ... If only my friends were wise and encouraging and the teachers truly wise, generous and kind ... If everyone around me was perfect, if society was perfect, if the world was wise and perfect, then I wouldn't have any of these problems. But all have failed me.' Well, my parents had a few flaws and they did make a few mistakes, but now when I look back, I think they didn't make very many. When I was looking to blame others and desperately trying to think of my parents' faults, I really had to work at it. My generation was very good at blaming everything on the United States, and that is really easy because the United States makes a lot of mistakes. But when we meditate we can no longer get away with that kind of lying to ourselves. We suddenly realize that no matter what anyone else has done, or how unjust society might be, or what our parents might have been like, we can in no way spend the rest of our lives blaming anyone else – that is a complete waste of time. We have to accept complete responsibility for our life and live it. Even if we did have miserable parents and were raised in a terrible society with no opportunities, it still doesn't matter. There is no one else to blame for our suffering now but ourselves, our own ignorance, selfishness and conceit.

In the crucifixion of Jesus we can see a striking example of a man in pain, stripped naked, made fun of, completely humiliated and then publicly executed in the most horrible, excruciating way, yet without blaming anyone: 'Forgive them, Lord, they know not what they do.' This is a sign of wisdom – it means that even if people are crucifying us, nailing us to the cross, scourging us, humiliating us in every way, it is our aversion, self-pity, pettiness and selfishness that are the problem, the suffering. It is not even the physical pain that is the suffering, it is the aversion. If Jesus Christ had said, 'Curse you for treating me like this!' he would have been just another criminal and would have been forgotten a few days later.

Reflect on this, because we easily tend to blame others for our suffering, and we can justify that because maybe other people are mistreating us, or exploiting us, or don't understand us or are doing dreadful things to us. We don't deny that, but we make nothing of it any more. We forgive, we let go of those memories, because taking refuge in the Sangha means doing good here and now, and refraining from doing evil by bodily action and speech.

So may you reflect on this and really see Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha as a refuge. Look on them as opportunities for reflection and consideration. It is not a matter of believing in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – not a faith in concepts, but the using of symbols for mindfulness, for awakening the mind here and now; being here and now.

18 | Ānāpānasati (Mindfulness of Breathing)

We tend to overlook the ordinary. We are usually only aware of our breath when it's abnormal, like if we have asthma or when we've been running hard. But with *ānāpānasati* we take our ordinary breath as the meditation object. We don't try to make the breath long or short, or control it in any way, but simply to stay with the normal inhalation and exhalation. The breath is not something that we create or imagine; it is a natural process of our bodies that continues as long as life lasts, whether we concentrate on it or not. So it is an object that is always present; we can turn to it at any time. We don't have to have any qualifications to watch our breath. We do not even need to be particularly intelligent – all we have to do is to be aware of and content with one inhalation and exhalation. Wisdom does not come from studying great theories and philosophies, but from observing the ordinary.

The breath lacks any exciting quality or fascination, and so we can become very restless and averse to it. Our desire is always to 'get' something, to find something that will interest and absorb us without any effort on our part. If we hear some music, we don't need to think,

'I must concentrate on this fascinating and exciting rhythmic music' – we can't stop ourselves, because the rhythm is so compelling that it pulls us in. The rhythm of our normal breathing is not interesting or compelling; it is tranquillizing and most beings aren't used to tranquillity. Most people like the idea of peace but find the actual experience of it disappointing or frustrating. They desire stimulation, something that will draw them into itself. With *ānāpānasati* we stay with an object that is quite neutral – we don't have any strong feelings of liking or disliking for our breath – and just note the beginning of an inhalation, its middle and end, then the beginning of an exhalation, its middle and end. As the gentle rhythm of the breath is slower than the rhythm of thought, it takes us to tranquillity; we begin to stop thinking. But we don't try to get anything from the meditation, to achieve *samādhi* or *jhāna*, because when the mind is trying to achieve or attain things rather than just being humbly content with one breath, it doesn't slow down and become calm, and we become frustrated.

At first the mind wanders off. Once we are aware that we have wandered off the breath, we very gently return to it. We use the attitude of being very, very patient and always willing to begin again. Our minds are not used to being held down; they have been taught to associate one thing with another and form opinions about everything. Being accustomed to using our intelligence and ability to think in clever ways, we tend to become very tense and restless when we can't do that, and when we practise *ānāpānasati* we feel resistance, a resentment of it. We are like a wild horse when it is first harnessed, becoming angry with the things that bind it. When the mind wanders we grow upset and discouraged, negative and averse to the whole thing. If, out of frustration, we try by sheer will to force the mind to be tranquil, we can only keep that up for a short while before the mind is off somewhere else. So the right attitude to *ānāpānasati* is being very patient, having all the time in the world, letting go or discarding all worldly, personal problems. During this time there is nothing we have to do except watch our breath.

If the mind wanders on the in-breath, then put more effort into the inhalation. If the mind wanders on the exhalation, then put more effort into that. Keep bringing the mind back. Always be willing to start anew. At the start of each new day, at the beginning of each inhalation, cultivate the beginner's mind, carrying nothing from the old to the new, leaving no traces, like a big bonfire. One inhalation and the mind wanders, so we bring it back again – and that itself is a moment of mindfulness. We are training the mind like a good mother trains her child. A little child doesn't know what it is doing: it can wander off, and if the mother is angry with it and spansks it, the child becomes terrified and neurotic. A good mother will just leave the child, keeping an eye on it, and if it wanders she will bring it back. Having that kind of patience, we're not trying to bash away at ourselves, hating ourselves, hating our breath, hating everybody, getting upset because we can't become tranquil with *ānāpānasati*.

Sometimes we're too serious about everything, totally lacking in joy and happiness, with no sense of humour, just repressing everything. Gladden the mind, put a smile on your dial! Be relaxed and at ease, without the pressure of having to achieve anything special – nothing to attain, no big deal, nothing special. And what can you say you have done today to earn your board and keep? Just one mindful inhalation? Crazy! But that is more than most people can say of their day.

We're not battling the forces of evil. If you feel averse to *ānāpānasati*, note that too. Don't feel it's something you have to do, but let it be a pleasure, something you really enjoy doing. When you think 'I can't do it', recognize that as resistance, fear or frustration, and then relax. Don't make this practice into a difficult thing, a burdensome task. When I was first ordained I was dead serious, very grim and solemn about myself, like a dried-up old stick, and I used to get into terrible states, thinking, 'I've got to ... I've got to ...' At those times I learned to contemplate peace. Doubts and restlessness, discontent and aversion – soon I was able to reflect on peace, saying

the word over and over, hypnotizing myself to relax. The self-doubt would start coming – ‘I’m getting nowhere with this, it’s useless, I want to get something’ – but I was able to be peaceful with that. This is one method you can use. So when we’re tense, we relax and then resume *ānāpānasati*.

At first we feel hopelessly clumsy, like when we’re learning to play the guitar – when we first start playing, our fingers are so clumsy it seems hopeless, but when we’ve done it for some time we gain skill and it is quite easy. We learn to witness what’s going on in our mind, so we can know when we’re becoming restless and tense, or when we’re becoming dull. We recognize that: we’re not trying to convince ourselves it’s otherwise; we’re fully aware of the way things are. We sustain effort for one inhalation. If we can’t do that, then we sustain it for half an inhalation at least. In this way we don’t try to become perfect all at once. We don’t have to do everything just right according to some idea of how it should be, but we work with the problems that are there. If we have a scattered mind, it’s wisdom to recognize the mind that goes all over the place – that is insight. To think that we shouldn’t be that way, to hate ourselves or feel discouraged because that is the way we happen to be – that is ignorance.

We don’t start from where a perfect yogi is, we’re not doing complicated postures before we can bend over and touch our toes. That is the way to harm ourselves. We may look at all the postures in yoga books and see people wrapping their legs round their necks in all kinds of amazing postures, but if we try to do them ourselves they’ll cart us off to hospital. So we start from just trying to bend a little more from the waist, examining the pain and resistance to it, learning to stretch gradually. The same with *ānāpānasati*: we recognize the way it is now and start from there, we sustain our attention a little longer and we begin to understand what concentration is. Don’t make Superman resolutions when you’re not Superman. Don’t say, ‘I’m going to sit and watch my breath all night’, and become angry when you fail. Set

periods that you know you can do. Experiment, work with the mind until you know how to put forth effort and how to relax.

We have to learn to walk by falling down. Look at babies: I've never seen one who could walk straightaway. Babies learn to walk by crawling, holding onto things, falling down and then pulling themselves up again. It is the same with meditation. We learn wisdom by observing ignorance, by making a mistake, reflecting and keeping going. If we think about it too much, it seems hopeless. If babies thought a lot they'd never learn to walk; when you watch a child first trying to walk it seems hopeless. When we think about it meditation can seem completely hopeless too, but we just keep doing it. It is easy when we're full of enthusiasm, really inspired with the teacher and the teaching – but enthusiasm and inspiration are impermanent conditions, they take us to disillusionment and boredom.

We really have to put effort into the practice when we're bored; we want to turn away and be reborn into something fascinating and exciting. But for insight and wisdom we have to endure patiently through the troughs of disillusionment and depression. It is only in this way that we can stop reinforcing the cycles of habit and come to understand cessation, to know the silence and emptiness of the mind.

If we read books about not putting any effort into things, just letting everything happen in a natural, spontaneous way, we tend to start thinking that all we have to do is lounge about, and then we lapse into a dull passive state. In my own practice, when I lapsed into dull states I came to see the importance of putting effort into physical posture. I saw that there was no point in making effort in a merely passive way. I would pull the body up straight, push out the chest and put energy into the sitting posture, or else I would do headstands or shoulder stands. Even though in the early days I didn't have a tremendous amount of energy, I still managed to do something requiring effort. I would learn to sustain it for a few seconds and then I would lose it again, but that was better than doing nothing at all.

The more we take the easy way, the path of least resistance, and just follow our desires, the more the mind becomes sloppy, heedless and confused. It is easier to sit and think all the time than not to think – it is a habit we've acquired. Even the thought, 'I shouldn't think' is just another thought. To avoid thought we have to be mindful of avoiding it, to put forth effort by watching and listening, by being attentive to the flow in our minds. Rather than thinking about our mind, we watch it. Rather than just getting caught in thoughts, we keep recognizing them. Thought is movement, energy, it comes and goes, it is not a permanent condition of the mind. When we simply recognize thought as thought without evaluating or analyzing it, it slows down and stops. This isn't annihilation, this is allowing things to cease. It is compassion. As the habitual obsessive thinking begins to fade, great spaces we never knew were there begin to appear.

We are slowing everything down by absorbing into the natural breath, calming the kammic formations, and this is what we mean by *samatha* or tranquillity: coming to a point of calm. The mind becomes malleable, supple and flexible, and the breathing can become very fine. But we only carry the *samatha* practice to the point of *upacāra samādhi* (access concentration), we don't try to absorb completely into the object and enter *jhāna*. At this point we are still aware of both the object and its periphery. The extreme kinds of mental agitation have diminished considerably, but we can still operate using wisdom. With our wisdom faculty still functioning we investigate, and this is *vipassanā*²⁸ – looking into and seeing the nature of whatever we experience, its impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and impersonality. *Anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* are not concepts we believe in, but things we can observe. We investigate the beginning of an inhalation and its ending. We observe what a beginning is, not thinking about what it is but observing, aware with bare attention at the beginning of an inhalation and its end. The

²⁸ *Vipassanā* means 'insight', an aspect of meditation, which is generally coupled with *samatha*, calming. In the Theravada tradition, *vipassanā* has been encouraged through a range of systems and techniques. The Thai Forest Tradition, including Ajahn Sumedho, favours a non-systematic approach, that of wise reflection.

body breathes all on its own: the in-breath conditions the out-breath and the out-breath conditions the in-breath, we can't control anything. Breathing belongs to nature; it doesn't belong to us, it is not-self. When we see this we are doing *vipassanā*.

The sort of knowledge we gain from Buddhist meditation is humbling. Ajahn Chah called it earthworm knowledge – it doesn't make you arrogant, it doesn't puff you up, it doesn't make you feel that you are anything or have attained anything. In worldly terms, this practice doesn't seem very important or necessary. Nobody is ever going to write a newspaper headline: 'At eight o'clock this evening Venerable Sumedho had an inhalation!' To some people, thinking about how to solve all the world's problems might seem very important – how to help all the people in developing countries, how to set the world right. Compared with these things watching our breath seems insignificant, and most people think, 'Why waste time doing that?' People have confronted me about this, saying, 'What are you monks doing sitting there? What are you doing to help humanity? You're just selfish, you expect people to give you food while you just sit there and watch your breath. You're running away from the real world.' But what is the real world? Who is really running away, and from what? What is there to face? We find that what people call the real world is the world they believe in, the world they are committed to, or the world they know and with which they are familiar. But that world is a condition of mind. Meditation is actually confronting the real world, recognizing and acknowledging it as it really is, rather than believing in it, justifying it or trying mentally to annihilate it. Now, the real world operates on the same pattern of arising and passing as the breath. We don't theorize about the nature of things, taking philosophical ideas from others and trying to rationalize with them, but by watching our breath we actually observe the way nature is. When we watch our breath we're actually watching nature; through understanding the nature of the breath, we can understand

the nature of all conditioned phenomena. If we tried to understand all conditioned phenomena in their infinite variety, quality, different time span and so on, it would be too complex; our minds wouldn't be able to handle it. We have to learn from simplicity.

So with a tranquil mind we become aware of the cyclical pattern; we see that all that arises passes away. That cycle is what is called *saṃsāra*, the wheel of birth and death. We observe the *saṃsāric* cycle of the breath. We inhale and then we exhale. We can't have only inhalations or only exhalations; the one conditions the other. It would be absurd to think, 'I only want to inhale. I don't want to exhale. I'm giving up exhalation. My life will be just one constant inhalation.' If I said that to you, you'd think I was crazy; but that is what most people do. How foolish people are when they want only to attach to excitement, pleasure, youth, beauty and vigour: 'I only want beautiful things and I'm not going to have anything to do with the ugly. I want pleasure and delight and creativity, but I don't want any boredom or depression.' That is the same kind of madness as if you were to hear me saying, 'I can't stand inhalations. I'm not going to have them any more.' When we observe that attachment to beauty, sensual pleasures and love will always lead to despair, our attitude becomes one of detachment. That doesn't mean annihilation or any desire to destroy, but simply letting go, non-attachment. We don't seek perfection in any part of the cycle; we see that perfection lies in the cycle as a whole, including old age, sickness and death. What arises in the uncreated reaches its peak and then returns to the uncreated, and that is perfection.

As we start to see that all *saṅkhāras* have this pattern of arising and passing away, we begin to go inwards to the Unconditioned, the peace of the mind, its silence. We begin to experience *suññatā* or emptiness, which is not oblivion or nothingness but a clear and vibrant stillness. We can turn to the emptiness rather than to the conditions of the breath and mind. Then we have a perspective on the *saṅkhāras* and don't just react blindly to them any more.

There is the conditioned, the Unconditioned and the knowing. What is the knowing? Is it memory? Is it consciousness? Is it 'me'? I've never been able to find out, but I can be aware. In Buddhist meditation we stay with the knowing: being aware, being awake, being Buddha in the present, knowing that whatever arises passes away and is not-self. We apply this knowing to everything, both the conditioned and the Unconditioned. It is transcendent – being awake rather than trying to escape – and it is all in our ordinary activity. We have the four normal postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying down – we don't have to stand on our heads or do backflips. We use the four normal postures and ordinary breathing because we are moving towards that which is most ordinary, the Unconditioned. Conditions are extraordinary, but peace of mind, the Unconditioned, is so ordinary that nobody ever notices it. It is there all the time, but we don't ever notice it because we're attached to the mysterious and the fascinating. We get caught up in the things that arise and pass away, the things that stimulate and depress. We get caught up in the way things seem to be – and forget. But in meditation we go back to the source, to peace, to that position of knowing. Then the world is understood for what it is, and we are no longer deluded by it.

The realization of *samsāra* is the condition for nibbāna. As we recognize the cycles of habit and are no longer deluded by them or their qualities, we realize nibbāna. The Buddha-knowing is of just two things: the conditioned and the Unconditioned. It is an immediate recognition of how things are right now, without grasping or attachment. At this moment we can be aware of the conditions of the mind, of feelings in the body, of what we're seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling and thinking, and also of the emptiness of the mind. The conditioned and the Unconditioned are what we can realize. So the Buddha's teaching is a very direct teaching. Our practice is not 'to become enlightened', but to be in the knowing, now.

The goal of Buddhist meditation is nibbāna. We incline towards the peace of nibbāna and away from the complexities of the sense realm, the endless cycles of habit. Nibbāna is a goal that can be realized in this lifetime. We don't have to wait until we die to know if it's real.

The senses and the sense world are the realm of birth and death. Take sight, for instance: it's dependent on so many factors – whether it's day or night, whether or not the eyes are healthy and so on. Yet we become very attached to the colours, shapes and forms that we perceive with the eyes, and we identify with them. Then there are the ears and sound: when we hear pleasant sounds we seek to hold on to them, and when we hear unpleasant sounds we try to turn away. With smells we seek the pleasure of fragrances and pleasant odours, and try to avoid unpleasant ones. With flavours we seek delicious tastes and try to avoid bad ones. And touch: how much of our life is spent trying to escape from physical discomfort and pain and seeking the delight of physical sensation? Finally there is thought, the discriminatory consciousness; it can give us a lot of pleasure or a lot of misery.

These are the senses, the sense world. It is the compounded world of birth and death. Its very nature is *dukkha*, it is imperfect and unsatisfying. You'll never find perfect happiness, contentment or peace in the sense world; it will always bring despair and death. The sense world is unsatisfactory, and so we only suffer from it when we expect it to satisfy us. We suffer when we expect more from it than it can possibly give, things like permanent security and happiness, permanent love and safety, hoping that our life will only be one of pleasure and have no pain in it: 'If we could only get rid of sickness and disease, and conquer old age.' I remember that some years ago in the States, people hoped that modern science would be able to get rid of all illnesses. They'd say, 'All mental illnesses are due to chemical imbalances. If we can just find the right chemical combinations and inject them into the body, schizophrenia will disappear.' There would be no more headaches or backaches. We would gradually replace all our internal organs with nice plastic ones. I even read an article in an Australian medical journal about how they hoped to conquer old age! As the world's population kept increasing, we'd keep having more children and nobody would ever grow old and die. Just think what a mess that would be!

The sense world is unsatisfactory, and that's the way it's supposed to be. When we attach to it, it takes us to despair, because attachment means that we want it to be satisfactory; we want it to satisfy us, to make us content, happy and secure. But just notice the nature of happiness – how long can you stay happy? What is happiness? You may think it's how you feel when you get what you want. Someone says something you like to hear and you feel happy. Someone does something you approve of and you feel happy. The sun shines and you feel happy. Someone makes nice food and serves it to you, and you're happy. But how long can you stay happy? Do we always have to depend on the sun shining? In England the weather is very changeable: happiness about the sun shining in England is obviously very impermanent and unsatisfactory!

Unhappiness is not getting what we want: wanting it to be sunny when it's cold, wet and rainy, people doing things that we don't approve of, having food that isn't delicious and so on. Life becomes boring and tedious when we're unhappy with it. So happiness and unhappiness are very dependent on getting what we want or what we don't want. But happiness is the goal of most people's lives; the American constitution speaks of the right to 'the pursuit of happiness.' Getting what we want, what we think we deserve, becomes our goal in life. But happiness always leads to unhappiness, because it's impermanent. How long can you really be happy? Trying to arrange, control and manipulate conditions so as always to get what we want, always hear what we want to hear, always see what we want to see, and never have to experience unhappiness or despair, is a hopeless task. It's impossible. We feel happy when we're healthy, but our human bodies are subject to rapid changes and we can lose our health very quickly. Then we feel terribly unhappy at being sick, at losing the pleasure of feeling energetic and vigorous. Happiness is unsatisfactory, it's *dukkha*. It's not something to depend on or make the goal of life. Happiness will always be disappointing, because it lasts so briefly and then is succeeded by unhappiness. It is always dependent on so many other things.

Thus the goal for the Buddhist is not happiness, because we realize that happiness is unsatisfactory. The goal lies away from the sense world. It is not rejection of the sense world, but understanding it so well that we no longer seek it as an end in itself and no longer expect it to satisfy us. We no longer demand that sense consciousness should be anything other than an existing condition which we can use skilfully according to time and place. We no longer attach to it or demand that sense-contact should be always pleasant, or feel despair and sorrow when it's unpleasant. Nibbāna isn't a state of blankness, a trance where you're totally wiped out. It's not nothingness or annihilation; it's like a space. It's going into the space of your mind where you no longer attach, where you're no longer deluded by the appearance of

things. You no longer demand anything from the sense world. You just recognize it as it arises and passes away.

Being born in the human condition means that we must inevitably experience old age, sickness and death. One time a young woman came to our monastery in England with her baby, who had been badly ill for about a week with a horrible racking cough. The mother looked totally depressed and miserable. As she sat in the reception room holding the baby, it turned red in the face and started screaming and coughing horribly. The woman said, 'Oh, Venerable Sumedho, why does he have to suffer like this? He's never hurt anybody, he's never done anything wrong. Why? What did he do in some previous life to have to suffer like this?' But he was suffering because he was born! If he hadn't been born, he wouldn't have had to suffer. When we're born we have to expect these things. Having a human body means that we have to experience sickness, pain, old age and death. This is an important reflection. We can speculate that maybe in a previous life the baby liked to choke cats and dogs, or something like that, and has to pay for it in this life, but that's mere speculation and it doesn't really help. What we can know is that his suffering is the kammic result of being born. Each one of us must inevitably experience sickness and pain, hunger, thirst, the ageing process of our bodies and death; that's the law of kamma. What begins must end, what is born must die, what comes together must separate.

We're not pessimistic about the way things are, but we observe and so we don't expect life to be other than it is. Then we can cope with life, endure it when it's difficult and delight in it when it's delightful. If we understand life, we can enjoy it without being its helpless victims. How much misery there is in human existence because we expect life to be other than what it is! We have romantic ideas that we'll meet the right person, fall in love and live happily ever after, never fight, have a wonderful relationship. But what about death? You may think, 'Well, maybe we'll die at the same time', but that's just hope. And then there's

despair when your loved one dies before you do, or runs away with the dustman or the travelling salesman.

You can learn a lot from small children, because they don't disguise their feelings, they just express what they feel in the moment. When they're miserable they start crying, and when they're happy they laugh. Some time ago I went with a layman to his home. When we arrived his young daughter was very happy to see him. Then he said to her, 'I have to take Venerable Sumedho to Sussex University to give a talk.' As we walked out of the door the little girl turned red in the face and began screaming in anguish, so her father said, 'It's all right, I'll be back in an hour.' But she wasn't old enough to understand 'I'll be back in an hour.' The immediacy of separation from the loved meant immediate anguish. Notice how often in our life there is that sorrow at having to separate from something we like or someone we love, from having to leave a place where we really like to be. When you are really mindful you can see the not wanting to separate, the sorrow. As adults, we can let go of the sorrow immediately if we know we can come back again, but it's still there. For several months I travelled around the world, arriving at airports where somebody always met me with 'Hello!'; and then a few days later it was 'Goodbye!' And there was always this asking, 'Come back', and I'd say, 'Yes, I'll come back'... and so I've committed myself to do the same thing again. We can't say, 'Goodbye forever' to someone we like – we say, 'I'll see you again,' 'I'll phone you up,' 'I'll write to you', or 'Until next time we meet.' We have all these phrases to cover over the sense of sorrow and separation.

In meditation we just note, observe what sorrow really is. We don't say that we shouldn't feel sorrow when we separate from someone we love; it's natural to feel that way. But as meditators we begin to witness sorrow so that we understand it, rather than trying to suppress it, pretending it's something more than it is or just neglecting it. In England people tend to suppress sorrow when somebody dies. They try not to cry or be emotional, they don't want to make a scene, they

'keep a stiff upper lip'. Then when they start meditating, they can find themselves suddenly crying over the death of someone who died fifteen years before. They didn't cry at the time, so they end up doing it fifteen years later. When someone dies, we don't want to admit our sorrow or make a scene, because we think that if we cry we're weak, or it's embarrassing to others. So we tend to suppress and hold things back, not recognizing the nature of things as they really are, not recognizing our human predicament and learning from it. In meditation we allow the mind to open up and let the things that have been suppressed and repressed become conscious, because when things become conscious they have a way of ceasing rather than just being repressed again. We allow things to take their course to cessation, we allow things to go away rather than just pushing them away.

Often we push certain things away from us, refusing to accept or recognize them. If we feel upset or annoyed with anyone, if we're bored or unpleasant feelings arise, we look at beautiful flowers or the sky, read a book, watch TV, do something. We're never bored fully consciously, fully angry. We don't recognize our despair or disappointment because we can always run off to something else. We can always go to the refrigerator, eat cakes and sweets, listen to the stereo. It's so easy to absorb into music, away from boredom and despair into something that's exciting, interesting, calming or beautiful. Look at how dependent we are on watching TV and reading. There are so many books now that they'll have to be burnt - there are useless books everywhere, produced by writers who have nothing worth saying. Today's not-so-pleasant film stars write their autobiographies and make a lot of money. Then there are the gossip columns: people get away from the boredom of their own existence, their discontent with it, its tediousness, by reading gossip about movie stars and celebrities.

We've never really accepted boredom as a conscious state. As soon as it comes into the mind we start looking for something interesting, something pleasant. But in meditation we allow boredom to be. We

allow ourselves to be fully, consciously bored, utterly depressed, fed up, jealous, angry, disgusted. We begin to accept into consciousness all the nasty, unpleasant experiences of life that we have suppressed from consciousness and never really looked at, never really accepted – not as personality problems any more, but just out of compassion. Out of kindness and wisdom we allow them to take their natural course to cessation, rather than just keeping them going round in the same old cycles of habit. If we have no way of letting things take their natural course, we're always controlling, always caught in some dreary habit of mind. When we're jaded and depressed we're unable to appreciate the beauty of things, because we never really see them as they truly are.

I remember an experience I had in my first year of meditation in Thailand. I spent most of that year by myself in a little hut and the first few months were really terrible. All kinds of things kept coming up in my mind; obsessions, fears, terror and hatred. I'd never felt so much hatred. I'd never thought of myself as someone who hated people, but during those first few months of meditation it seemed I hated everybody. I couldn't think of anything nice about anyone, there was so much aversion coming up into consciousness. Then one afternoon I started having this strange vision – I thought I was going crazy, actually – I saw people walking off my brain. I saw my mother just walk out of my brain and into emptiness, disappear into space. Then my father and my sister followed. I actually saw these visions walking out of my head. I thought, 'I'm crazy! I've gone nuts!', but it wasn't an unpleasant experience. The next morning, when I woke from sleep and looked around, I felt that everything I saw was beautiful. Everything, even the most unbeautiful detail, was beautiful. I was in a state of awe. The hut itself was a crude structure, not beautiful by anyone's standards, but it looked to me like a palace. The scrubby-looking trees outside looked like a most beautiful forest. Sunbeams were streaming through the window onto a plastic dish, and the plastic dish looked beautiful!

That sense of beauty stayed with me for about a week and then, reflecting on it, I suddenly realized that is the way things really are when the mind is clear. Up to that time I'd been looking through a dirty window, and over the years I'd become so used to the scum and dirt on the window that I didn't realize it was dirty, I'd accepted the way it was. When we become used to looking through a dirty window, everything seems grey, grimy and ugly. Meditation is a way of cleaning the window, purifying the mind, allowing things to come up into consciousness and letting them go. Then with the wisdom faculty, the Buddha-wisdom, we observe how things really are. This is not just attaching to beauty, to purity of mind, but actually understanding. It is wisely reflecting on the way nature operates, so that we are no longer deluded into living habitually.

Birth means old age, sickness and death, but that's to do with your body, it's not you. Your human body is not really yours. No matter what your particular appearance might be, whether you are healthy or sickly, beautiful or not beautiful, black or white, or whatever, it's all non-self. This is what we mean by *anattā*. Human bodies belong to nature and follow the laws of nature; they are born, they grow up, they age and they die. We may understand that rationally, but emotionally there is a very strong attachment to the body. In meditation we begin to see this attachment. We don't take the position that we shouldn't be attached, saying, 'The problem with me is that I'm attached to my body. I shouldn't be. It's bad, isn't it? If I was a wise person I wouldn't be attached to it.' That's starting from an ideal. It's like trying to start climbing a tree from the top, saying, 'I should be at the top of the tree. I shouldn't be down here.' But much as we'd like to think we're at the top, we have to accept humbly that we aren't. To begin with we have to be at the trunk of the tree, where the roots are, looking at the most coarse and ordinary things, before we can start identifying with anything at the top of the tree.

This is the way of wise reflection. The practice is not one of purifying the mind and then attaching to purity. It's not just trying to

refine consciousness so that we can induce high states of concentration whenever we feel like it, because even the most refined states of sensory consciousness are unsatisfactory; they're dependent on so many other things. Nibbāna is not dependent on any other condition. Conditions of any quality, be they ugly, nasty, beautiful, refined or whatever, arise and pass away, but they don't interfere with nibbāna, with the peace of the mind. We don't incline away from the sense world through aversion, because if we try to annihilate the senses, that too becomes a habit we blindly acquire, trying to get rid of what we don't like. That's why we have to be very patient.

This lifetime as a human being is a lifetime of meditation. See the span of meditation as the rest of your life rather than just a ten-day retreat. You may think, 'I meditated on retreat for ten days. I thought I was enlightened, but when I got home I somehow didn't feel enlightened any more. I'd like to go back and do a longer retreat where I can feel more enlightened than I did last time. It would be nice to have a higher state of consciousness.' In fact, the more refined your experience on retreat, the more coarse your daily life must seem. You have highs, but when you go back to the mundane daily routines of life in the city, it's even worse than before. After going so high the ordinariness of life seems much more ordinary, gross and unpleasant. The way to insight wisdom is not having preferences for refinement over coarseness, but recognizing that both refined and coarse consciousness are impermanent conditions: that they're unsatisfactory, their nature will never satisfy us, and they're *anattā*, they're not what we are, not ours.

Thus the Buddha's teaching is very simple. What could be simpler than 'What is born must die'? It's not some great new philosophical discovery; even illiterate tribal people know that. You don't have to study in university to know it. When we're young we think, 'I've got so many years left of youth and happiness.' If we're beautiful we think, 'I'm going to be young and beautiful forever,' because it seems that way. When we're twenty years old, having a good time, life is wonderful, and

if somebody says, 'You're going to die some day', we may think, 'What a depressing person. Let's not invite him to our house again.' We don't want to think about death, we want to think about how wonderful life is, how much pleasure we can get out of it. But as meditators we reflect on growing old and dying. This is not being morbid, sick or depressing; it's considering the whole cycle of existence, and when we know that cycle, we are more careful about how we live. People do horrible things because they don't wisely reflect on and consider that they will die; they just follow their passions and feelings of the moment, trying to obtain pleasure and feeling angry and depressed when life doesn't give them what they want.

Reflect on your own life and death and the cycles of nature. Observe what delights and what depresses you. See how we can feel very positive or very negative. Notice how we want to attach to beauty, pleasant feelings or inspiration. It's really nice to feel inspired, isn't it? 'Buddhism is the greatest religion of them all', or 'When I discovered the Buddha I was so happy, it's a wonderful discovery!' When we become a little doubtful, a little depressed, we read an inspiring book and get high. But remember, being high is an impermanent condition. It's like becoming happy: you have to keep sustaining it, and after you keep doing something over and over again, you no longer feel happy with it. How many sweets can you eat? First they make you happy, then they make you sick.

So, depending on religious inspiration is not enough. If you attach to inspiration, when you become fed up with Buddhism you'll go off and find some new thing to inspire you. It's like attaching to romance; when it disappears from a relationship you start looking for someone else to feel romantic about. Years ago in America I met a woman who'd been married six times, and she was only about thirty-three. I said, 'You'd think you would have learned after the third or fourth time. Why do you keep getting married?' She said, 'It's the romance. I don't like the other side but I love the romance.' At least

she was honest, but not terribly wise. Romance is a condition that leads to disillusionment.

Romance, inspiration, excitement, adventure: all these things rise to a peak and then condition their opposites, just as an inhalation conditions an exhalation. Just think of inhaling all the time – it would be like having one romance after another. How long can you inhale? The inhalation conditions the exhalation, both are necessary. Birth conditions death, hope conditions despair and inspiration conditions disillusionment. So when we attach to hope we're going to feel despair. When we attach to excitement it will take us to boredom. When we attach to romance it will take us to disillusionment and divorce. When we attach to life it takes us to death. So recognize that it's the attachment that causes suffering, attaching to conditions and expecting them to be more than what they are. For so many people so much of life seems to be waiting and hoping for something to happen, expecting and anticipating some success or pleasure – or maybe worrying and fearing that some painful, unpleasant thing is just lying in wait. You may hope you will meet somebody you'll really love or have some great experience, but attaching to hope takes you to despair.

By wise reflection we begin to understand the things that create misery in our lives. We see that we are actually the creators of that misery. Through our ignorance, through not having wisely understood the sensory world and its limitations, we have identified with all that is unsatisfactory and impermanent, the things that can only take us to despair and death. No wonder life is so depressing! It's dreary because of the attachment, because we identify and seek ourselves in all that is by nature *dukkha*, unsatisfactory and imperfect. When we stop doing that, when we let go, that is enlightenment; we are enlightened beings, no longer attached, no longer identified with anything, no longer deluded by the sense world. We understand the sense world, we know how to coexist with it. We know how to use the sensory world

for compassionate action, for joyous giving. We no longer demand that it be here to satisfy us, to make us feel secure and safe or to give us anything, because as soon as we demand that it should satisfy us, it takes us to despair.

When we no longer identify with the sense world as 'me' or 'mine' and see it as *anattā*, we can enjoy the senses without seeking sense-contact or depending on it. We no longer expect conditions to be anything other than what they are, so that when they change we can patiently and peacefully bear the unpleasant side of existence. We can humbly endure sickness, pain, cold, hunger, failures and criticisms. If we're not attached to the world we can adapt to change, whatever that change may be, whether it's for the better or the worse. If we're still attached we can't adapt very well; we're always struggling, resisting, trying to control and manipulate everything, and then feeling frustrated, frightened or depressed at what a delusive, frightening place the world is. If you've never really contemplated the world, never taken the time to understand and know it, it becomes a frightening place for you. It becomes like a jungle. You don't know what's behind the next tree or bush or cliff – a wild animal, a ferocious man-eating tiger, a terrible dragon or a poisonous snake. *Nibbāna* means getting away from the jungle. When we incline towards *nibbāna* we move towards peace of mind. Although the conditions of the mind may not be peaceful at all, the mind itself is a peaceful place.

Here we make a distinction between the mind and the conditions of mind. The conditions of mind can be happy, miserable, elated, depressed, loving or hating, worrying or fear ridden, doubting or bored. They come and go in the mind, but the mind itself, like the space in this room, stays just at it is. The space in this room has no quality to elate or depress. It is just as it is. To concentrate on the space in the room we have to withdraw our attention from the things in it. If we concentrate on the things in it, we become happy or unhappy. We say: 'Look at that beautiful Buddha-image', or if we see something we find ugly we say:

'Oh, what a terrible, disgusting thing.' We can spend our time looking at the people in the room, thinking whether we like this person or dislike that person. We can form opinions about people being this way or that way, remember what they did in the past, speculate about what they will do in the future, seeing others as possible sources of pain or gratification to ourselves. However, if we withdraw our attention, that doesn't mean we have to push everyone else out of the room. If we don't concentrate on or absorb into any of the conditions we have a perspective, because the space in the room has no quality to depress or elate. It can contain us all, all conditions can come and go within it.

Moving inwards, we can apply this to the mind. The mind is like space, there's room in it for everything or nothing. It doesn't really matter whether it is filled or has nothing in it, because we always have a perspective once we know the space of the mind, its emptiness. Armies can come into the mind and leave, butterflies, rain clouds or nothing. All things can come and go through it without our being caught in blind reaction, struggling resistance, control or manipulation. So when we abide in the emptiness of our minds we move away, not getting rid of things, but no longer absorbing into conditions that exist in the present or creating any new ones. This is our practice of letting go. We let go of our identification with conditions by seeing that they are all impermanent and not-self. This is what we mean by *vipassanā* meditation. It's really looking, witnessing, listening, observing that whatever comes must go. Whether it's coarse or refined, good or bad, whatever comes and goes is not what we are. We're not good, we're not bad, we're not male or female, beautiful or ugly. These are changing conditions in nature, they are not-self. This is the Buddhist way to enlightenment: going towards nibbāna, inclining towards the spaciousness or emptiness of mind rather than being born and caught up in the conditions of mind

You may ask, 'If I'm not the conditions of mind, if I'm not a man or a woman, this or that, then what am I?' Do you want me to tell you who

you are? Would you believe me if I did? What would you think if I started asking you who I am? It's like trying to see your own eyes: you can't know yourself, because you are yourself. You can only know what is not yourself – and that solves the problem, doesn't it? If you know what is not yourself, there is no question about what you are. If I said: 'Who am I? I'm trying to find myself', and started looking under the shrine, under the carpet, under the curtain, you'd think, 'Venerable Sumedho has really flipped out, he's gone crazy, he's looking for himself.' 'I'm looking for me, where am I?' is the most stupid question in the world. The problem is not who we are, but our belief and identification with what we are not. That's where the suffering is, that's where we feel misery and depression and despair. It's our identifying with everything that is not ourselves that is *dukkha*. When you identify with that which is unsatisfactory, it's obvious that you'll be dissatisfied and discontented.

So the path of the Buddhist is a letting go rather than trying to find anything. The problem is blind attachment, blind identification with the appearance of the sensory world. You needn't get rid of the sensory world, but learn from it, watch it, no longer allow yourselves to be deluded by it. Keep penetrating it with Buddha-wisdom; keep using this Buddha-wisdom so that you become more at ease with being wise, rather than making yourself become wise. Just by listening, observing, being awake, being aware, the wisdom will become clear. You'll be using wisdom with regard to your body, thoughts, feelings, memories, emotions, all of those things. You'll see and witness them, allow them to pass by and let them go. So at this time you have nothing to do except be wise from one moment to the next.

During the last week we have had the opportunity to practise together here at the International Forest Monastery. We met together in the mornings and evenings, at teatime, on Vesakha Puja Day and for *Pāṭimokkha*, all during a brief ten days. There were times for listening, for talking and for discussing Dhamma, wonderful occasions to contemplate and reflect on our practice.

‘Mindfulness’ is an interesting word for most of us. We think it’s something that we have to try and get. Actually it’s just a very natural way of being receptive. When we drive a car we have to be mindful, unless we are drunk or in a really terrible state. We don’t think, ‘I’ve got to try to be mindful.’ If we are not a very disturbed, heedless and foolish kind of person, we just are mindful, because it is quite apparent that when driving a car we have a dangerous machine under our control. If we are not mindful we may hit somebody, kill ourselves or do some damage, so just that sense of self-preservation, respect for life and not wanting to hurt others while driving a car makes us mindful. We don’t just *practise* mindfulness while driving – we *are* mindful.

In monastic life, if we think of mindfulness as something we must practise, we form an opinion about it as something we have to develop. If we are mindful we are aware of the whole way of thinking: 'I've got to be more mindful – I must develop mindfulness in order to get out of the death-bound state and become an enlightened person.' We are aware of the forces, intentions and habits that affect us at that moment. If I am thinking, 'I've got to be mindful' while I am being mindful, I can see and be aware that I have this idea, 'I've got to be mindful'. That's mindfulness. But if I just follow the view that I must be mindful – I can be quite heedless!

One example of this is when I was at Wat Pah Pong. I would go on *pindabaht* to Bahn Gor, which is a three-kilometre walk. One day it looked like it was going to rain and we thought it advisable to take our umbrellas. So I took my umbrella and started off. But it didn't rain, so we left our umbrellas outside the village. I said to myself: 'You must be mindful, Sumedho, and when you come back from your alms-round you must remember your umbrella. Remember where it is so that you can take it back to the monastery.' So I went on *pindabaht* being very mindful of each step, got back to the monastery and realized I'd forgotten my umbrella. I had concentrated and was maybe very composed while on my alms-round, but I was not terribly mindful about other things. In other words, when one just concentrates on walking in a certain way or doing something else, one is not necessarily mindful. We need to take into our minds the way it is, what all that implies and what is involved. This does not mean just having the idea that one has to be mindful of each step while walking on an alms-round, as a kind of fixed view of mindfulness. That can be merely concentration. Mindfulness allows us really to notice the way it is, where we are, the time and the place.

Another time I was walking on *pindabaht* at Tum Saeng Pet. I was trying to be very mindful, walking barefoot, and my right leg was very sensitive; I had to be most careful of it. It was very bumpy, rocky and rooty up at Tum Saeng Pet, and I said to myself: 'You must be mindful

while walking, Sumedho!’ So I tried to be incredibly mindful, ever so careful – and I stubbed my toe. It was very painful and I said to myself: ‘You’re not being mindful, Sumedho!’ While I was saying that, I stubbed my toe again and it was absolutely excruciating. So I heard myself saying, ‘You’re not mindful at all! You’re just a hopeless case!’ – and I stubbed my toe for the third time. I was about ready to faint. And there I was, thinking, ‘You’ve got to be mindful; be mindful; try to be more mindful; I wasn’t mindful.’ I was completely caught up with my ideas about being mindful, and my poor toe was suffering along with the rest of me.

People don’t wisely consider their limits and what mindfulness and wisdom really amount to. They develop fixed ideas about following certain meditation techniques or special practices, and do not take into account the nature of the human body with its limitations, or the time and the place. For example, one time I stayed at a meditation monastery where people develop mindfulness by doing everything incredibly slowly. But there was an occasion when we were asked to attend an important meeting. Everyone was to congregate at two o’clock in the *sālā*.²⁹ I arrived on time, but then we had to wait for forty-five minutes – because some people were walking slowly and the rest of us had to wait for them. This didn’t strike me as being very wise or considerate; if one wants to walk slowly then maybe it’s best to set off well in advance. Or you can walk at a normal pace just for that occasion – in order to arrive in time. Whatever you decide, you should consider and contemplate time and place, what is appropriate, what is beautiful, what is kind. This takes wisdom rather than just mere willpower or blind grasping of conditions.

Here in Wat Pah Nanachat, contemplate this monastery as a place to practise, as a community where we share our lives together, being mindful of our Vinaya, our customs and traditions. What is the way things are done here? One doesn’t make up one’s own rules or go one’s own way in a community. In the Sangha we determine to agree to live

²⁹The *sālā* is the meeting hall in a monastery.

in a certain way. If we don't want to live in that way, we shouldn't be here. We should go where we can do what we want. The advantages of community life lie in our ability to be sensitive and caring, to be considerate and thoughtful of other human beings. A life without generosity, respect and giving to others is a joyless life. Nothing is more joyless than selfishness. If I think of myself first, what I want and what I can get out of this place, that means I might live here, but I will not have any joy living here. I might because of my seniority be able to intimidate, and because of my size be able to push my weight around and get my way, but I am not going to be joyful by doing that. Just asserting myself and getting my way is not the way to peacefulness, equanimity and serenity of the heart. As we gain seniority in the Sangha, we have to think more about other people. We need to consider how to train and look after the juniors and how to help the seniors. Nothing is more depressing than to be in a community of bhikkhus who don't really bother and just want to do what they want. They are so blind or self-centred they don't look and see, they don't ask, they don't notice – you have to tell them everything. It is very frustrating to have to live with people who are not willing to put forth the effort to try to notice and to take on responsibility.

In other words, we have to grow up. Maybe some of you came to be monks so you could get out of marrying and having children, the responsibility of having to take care of somebody else. Maybe you weren't Prince Siddhartha leaving your beautiful wife and child, those you loved most in the world, in order to realize the ultimate truth and be enlightened. Maybe you came here because you couldn't stand the idea of having to work and make money to be able to support a wife and kids. Does that ring true for any of you? It can be pretty dreary to have to go around taking care of someone. You can't go your own way if you're married. You have to think of somebody else. You have to include somebody else in your life, the one you marry, and not many people who get married do that these days. When you start having

children, you have to open up your heart even more to include them too. Babies are pretty helpless, they can't do anything, so you have to do everything for them. You have to give up your freedom and independence, your rights and privileges, in order to look after a little baby with stinking nappies, and a wife and maybe a mother-in-law ... We have to open our hearts wide to be able to look after and meet the needs of a situation like that.

For Buddhist monks here in Thailand it's easy just to go off and find a nice cave and live there. The laypeople are so generous in this country, they love to feed monks. They think monks are wonderful and will give them nice robes and build them lovely kutis. If a monk is a fairly decent and pleasant type of person, they will send him to the best doctors in Bangkok for any treatment he might need. So in Thailand a monk can be a very selfish kind of person, working on the basis of the idea: 'I must get enlightened and nobody else matters but me.' But this is a very joyless and dry way to live. Operating in this narrow-minded way becomes increasingly dreary.

I was pushed into a more responsible position by Ajahn Chah. I didn't want it. I didn't want to have to teach or be responsible for anything. I had all kinds of romantic ideas about being a monk: going off to an island, living in a cave in the Himalayan Mountains, developing magical powers, living in a state of bliss for months at a time. I had all kinds of hopes in that direction. Having to think about somebody else was not something I found very attractive. I had been married and I didn't like that, it was a drag. As a monk in Thailand I was even praised for being totally selfish: 'He's really a good monk, very strict, doesn't speak to anyone, likes to be alone, practises hard.' One gets praised for that. But life sometimes forces us to look in different directions. That's obviously what Ajahn Chah did for me. He put pressure on me, so I began to see and realize that if I just kept going the way I was, I would be a miserable, unhappy, selfish person. I began to think in terms of: 'How can I help? What can I do?' When I went to India in 1974 I had

a strong experience of what is called *kataññu katavedi*, gratitude – to Gotama the Buddha, to Ajahn Chah, to Thailand and to all the laypeople who had been supporting and helping me. This sense of gratitude was very strong. At that time I had really wonderful opportunities. After five months in India I had a lot of adventures. I had gone *tudong*, just wandered and begged for food. I met some wealthy people who wanted me to spend the *vassa* at a marvellous place in southern India. There was another invitation to go to Sri Lanka. All kinds of places in rather nice settings and idyllic environments were suddenly made available to me. But all I could think of was that I must go back to Thailand, I must find a way of serving Ajahn Chah.

So I thought: ‘What is the best way I can help and serve Ajahn Chah?’ I had left Thailand and gone to India to get away from all those Westerners who were piling up at Wat Pah Pong at that time. I was the only one who could speak Thai then, so they depended a lot on me for translating. Well, I thought the least I could do was go back and help translate for Ajahn Chah, so I left India, came back to Thailand, went to Wat Pah Pong and offered my services. I decided to be a non-complaining monk, just do what Ajahn Chah wanted me to do, and no longer ask for anything for myself. I determined that if he wanted me to stay at Wat Pah Pong, I’d stay at Wat Pah Pong, or if he wanted to send me off to the worst, most horrible branch monastery, I’d go there. Wherever I could help I would do that, without asking for any special privileges. I thought of Ajahn Chah’s worst branch monastery. At that time it was called Wat Suan Gluay. I remember going there once and I was taller than all the trees there. It is called ‘Banana Garden Monastery’, but I don’t think there’s a banana tree in the whole place. It was a hot, unattractive and difficult place with rather coarse villagers and terrible food. So, hoping to do some kind of ascetic practice, I thought, ‘I know, I’ll help Ajahn Chah by volunteering to go to Wat Suan Gluay, because nobody wants to go there. He always has difficulty keeping monks there.’ I went to Ajahn Chah and said: ‘Luang Por, I

volunteer to go to Wat Suan Gluay', and he said: 'No, you can't go.' I was quite disappointed. I was actually looking forward to it. But then a year or so later we started this monastery here. 'Wat Pah America' it was called as a joke, because most of the bhikkhus then were Americans. It was my responsibility to try and look after it.

In England one has to give up any selfish desires for one's practice. In England Buddhist monasticism somehow forces us to be selfless, while here in Thailand, as I've said before, we can feed our selfishness very much. The reason is that there aren't many options. One can go to Amaravati, Chithurst, Devon or Harnham, and that's about the only choice one has, so sometimes people start thinking of going to Thailand. But very seldom do any of the bhikkhus in England ask for anything. This is quite impressive. Hardly anyone ever asks to go to one of the branch monasteries. They will just go wherever they're needed. Even if they get tired of one place, they don't think or say, 'I'm tired of Amaravati, I want to go to Chithurst', or 'I'm tired of Chithurst, I want to go to Amaravati.' Generally the attitude is, 'How can I best help and how can I serve the Sangha?' This is the advantage of living in England as a Buddhist monk; one can't be selfish there! Selfishness stands out like a sore thumb ... It's an inappropriate attitude and way of behaving.

Here in Thailand, whether we want to be selfish or not is up to us. If we want to think of ourselves first and do our own thing, that's our privilege. We have the opportunities to do that here in this country. But we should also recognize how we can help each other. Do we really care about or take an interest in serving and trying to help in various ways, say in taking on a responsible position for which junior monks are maybe not yet ready? Perhaps it is good practice for the senior monk to do everything and not have any help, but for us it is not. So I want to encourage everyone. A community is as good as its members. One person can't make this community good by himself. The goodness of this community depends on all its members. This is for your consideration. If we want to have a really good monastery and a place

that is worth living and practising in, we all have to give something to it. We all have to give ourselves to it by opening our hearts and taking on responsibilities. Being sensitive to the needs and the type of people we are with, the time and the place, and the kind of culture we are in – all of this is part of our practice, of being mindful.

To offer one's services and be eager to help is really praiseworthy. It is something I appreciate very much. It is not always what one wants to do, but it is a very lovely gesture and very important. Many of you are new monks. Without senior monks who are willing to help out, there would be no possible way for you to be trained. In a monastery we work together, each member reflecting wisely on how to support and help the whole community in the position where he finds himself. At Amaravati, for example, I am the Abbot and the teacher, so I reflect on how to use this position for the welfare of the whole community, rather than saying, 'I am the Abbot, I am the teacher. I have many rights and privileges. I am senior to you; I can do this and you can't. You'd better obey me because I'm the powerful figure here. Let's see what I can get out of this for myself.' That's not a wise reflection, is it? A tyrant is like that, but not an abbot.

If we want to be a proper bhikkhu and we happen to be abbot, teacher or senior monk, we reflect on how to use that position for the prosperity of the Sangha. This also applies to the most junior member, the last anagārika or the guests. Whoever is living here can reflect: 'In my position, what can I do for the welfare and happiness of the community?' As a new bhikkhu, a *majjhima* bhikkhu or a *thera* bhikkhu, as a samanera, an anagārika or a visitor, we consider: 'How can I best serve this community with my talents and abilities, and the limitations I have?' Then we have a very harmonious community, because everybody is reflecting in a way that supports it. We are willing to give according to our abilities and our position within it. We are not trying to get something for ourselves anymore, or if we are, we can see that as an inferior attitude, not to be grasped or followed. We can always think

in terms of our rights: ‘Now that I have ten *vassas*, what are my rights? What are the advantages? What perks do I get for having ten *vassas*? But if we cultivate a more mature attitude in the spirit of Dhamma, we no longer demand rights and privileges, but offer our services. ‘How can I best help and serve this community?’ Ask yourselves that.

Here in Thailand, after five *vassas* one gets the inevitable five-*vassa tudong*-itch.²⁹ One thinks: ‘I’ve got my five *vassas*, now I can go *tudong*. Whoopee!’ This can become a not very nice tradition if one is encouraged to think in that way. I used to be concerned about training monks in England, because Thailand always seemed the ideal place to be a monk. I’ve had to establish monasteries one after another, always being in the process of building things and trying to set up situations for monks and nuns to train. For the past fourteen years since I left Wat Pah Nanachat, I have been put in this position of always having to start and initiate things, to set up everything. But the results of, say, twelve years in England are very good. The monks and nuns are very worthy. Their practice and understanding of Dhamma don’t seem to be harmed or in any way inferior on account of the conditions they live in. So one has more confidence in just loving Dhamma and determining to realize the truth. We learn to do the best one can with the conditions around us. Here you have long periods of time to practise meditation, *tudong* experiences and so on. There’s nothing wrong with all that, but to grasp those ideas and expect and demand it is really a hindrance to the understanding of Dhamma. It’s not that one shouldn’t go on *tudong* after five *vassas*. I’m not saying that. But to hold on to that view without seeing it for what it is can be a great obstacle to one’s practice. To be dishonest with oneself, demand rights and follow one’s own views and opinions is not the way to *nibbāna*. If we really look at these mental states of selfishness, self-concern and grasping, we see that they are painful, *dukkha*. They don’t lead to peace and clarity, to letting go, cessation, ‘desirelessness’ or *nibbāna*; and that is what we are here for, isn’t it? – to realize *nibbāna*.

²⁹ After his fifth *vassa* – which concludes the initial period of training – a monk may be allowed to go wandering on his own. As Ajahn Sumedho suggests, the idea of this can result in restlessness.

It's quite wonderful to see so many new monks here. I haven't been to Thailand for two years, and now there is an impressive line of inspired and aspiring bhikkhus. This is something for all of us to really treasure, encourage and protect. I try to do everything I can to help and support this monastery, because I want to encourage you and make offerings that will benefit you in your training and your understanding of Dhamma, in your aspiration to realize truth.

21 | Life is Quite Sad isn't It

Reflecting on this moment, we can see the inter-connectedness between meeting and separation. Everyone who comes together here must separate. This is one reflection on travelling. We are always leaving a place and moving on to meet someone else. When we are invited somewhere, we fly from airport to airport. When it's time to leave, there is always this feeling of sadness, especially when we have liked being with the people. There is always a gladness in meeting people who are Buddhists or who are pleased to have us with them, or interested in what we are doing. We can watch this in the mind when going to a Buddhist group; the happiness of people receiving us and then the sadness of separation from people who have treated us well and have been very respectful.

This is the way things are. We don't need to make anything out of it, but reflecting on Dhamma helps us to understand what it means to be human. We don't try to feel nothing so that we would be able to be totally blank, and indifferent. Not daring to feel gladness, sadness or any other emotional state, but being indifferent and insensitive is not the Middle Way at all. Sensitivity requires us to feel these things, to know what they are. We're not afraid to feel likings and we're unafraid at

feeling pain. Because we were born into this form, we are very sensitive and have emotions. That's just the way it is, the way we feel, and will feel until we die – when we're dead we won't feel anything. Being human is like this. We have these human attractions and aversions. Male and female: there it is, human attractions on the human plane with its sensory consciousness. We feel hot or cold and well or sick. We enjoy being with people who have common interests. We are angry or annoyed with people who do things we don't like. This is the way it is, but as meditators we reflect on the whole process, seeing and understanding it with wisdom and knowledge; not just trying to cut our heart out so we don't have to feel anything whatsoever. Trying to avoid forming any attachments and cutting our hearts out means having very callous ideas about Dhamma-practice.

My mother wasn't an emotional person at all. She never cried. She couldn't cry. She didn't play emotional games with anyone. She was a quite honest and very good person. Because she wasn't an emotional person, people sometimes tended to think she didn't feel things. Before she died, she told me about a scene that showed this. When my father was dying in hospital he was very emotional. He cried and felt terrible about dying and leaving her. She stood there and didn't cry. He yelled at her, 'You don't care, do you?' She said quietly, 'I feel just the same as you do, but I can't cry. I'd like to be able to cry for you, but I just can't do it.' She wasn't trying to hold back or resist her feelings; it just was her manner, her way. Later on, when she was eighty-seven, I said to her, 'Life is quite sad, isn't it?' And she said, 'Yes, very sad', not in a complaining or bitter way, but simply as a woman at the end of her life, who had lived quite well and wisely, and realized that there's a pathos and sadness to our life. That's just the way it is. There is always dying. This is the death-realm. The sense-world and the conditioned realm are a realm of death, but we are always trying to find life there. We always try to hang on to that which is dying, changing. And because of that there is always this sense of desperation, anxiety and worry. It

pursues and haunts us like a spectre walking behind us; we can't quite see it but we can feel it.

Actually, sadness is not depressing. We can become depressed by wanting things to be otherwise, thinking, 'There must be something wrong with me.' But this realm is a realm of death, sadness, separation, of having to separate from the loved. We give our hearts and have great feelings of love for each other, and then come the separation that is part of that and the sadness that comes from separation. We can see this in our own everyday experiences. We can contemplate it in our life, just noticing it in little ways. Children, before they become egos and personalities, are very immediate and spontaneous about their feelings. When a young child's father leaves to go to work, it cries, 'Don't leave, daddy!' He says, 'I'll be back in a couple of hours', but a couple of hours doesn't mean anything to a young child. It will mean something later on, but for a young child there is only that feeling of separation. Daddy's leaving and the immediate response is crying, not wanting to separate.

I used to notice that it is difficult to say goodbye to someone you are not going to see again. It's always, 'See you again', 'When will you come again?' There is the idea of meeting again in the mind, because even if there is not a lot of attachment, there's something in us that doesn't want to say goodbye forever, a very sad feeling. I had lived away from my family for many years, but there was always, 'See you again' in my mind. I took leave in August during the *vassa* in England to attend my father's funeral. My mother said, 'I'll see you again in March. I'll welcome you back in March.' She was very happy that I would be back in March, and when I went back in March she was there, but then she died. Now I can't say, 'I'll see you again.' I'll never see her again. At the funeral, when they took her coffin to the cemetery, I thought, 'I'll never see you again.' It was a very sad feeling. We can witness this as a characteristic of our humanity. If we take it personally, we might think: 'Well, if we're really mindful we won't feel anything. We won't feel any

sadness. It's just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. That's it. "Mother" is only a perception anyway. Death is the end of something that's not-self, so why make a problem about it? Just dismiss the whole thing as *anicca, dukkha, anattā*.' This is an intellectual reaction in our head, but it's not looking penetratingly into the nature of things. It's just applying a nice theory so as simply to dismiss life and not feel anything.

We needn't be frightened of or resist feeling, but can contemplate it instead – because this is the realm we have to put up with and live in for a lifetime. Emotions, feelings and intuition are an inseparable part of that realm. If they are not recognized, witnessed and understood, we become callous and insensitive rationalists. We shut sadness, gladness and other feelings down because we don't want to be bothered with them. We sometimes resist and feel quite frightened of this realm of emotional experience. For men there is a very strong resistance to it. We can see that constantly seeking a heartfelt emotional state can become an indulgence and a bit sickening and silly. But to understand the nature of sensitivity is not being morbid, foolish or indulgent. It means being really willing to allow our senses to be what they are, to learn from this realm of perception, feeling, emotion and consciousness. In a monastery we use our situation to observe these things.

Something really moving in Thailand is the *dāna* aspect. Thai people are so generous. That really touches me and means a lot to me. I didn't expect anything like that. As I'm a foreigner, why should anyone bother feeding and looking after me? And they don't really ask for very much in return. When I was a junior monk they didn't expect me to do anything. I'd just sit there like a bump on a log. In fact, they often want to give you too many things. They really love to support people living the holy life. This gave me the intention to be worthy of that kind of generosity. One way of trying to be worthy is to be as good a monk as possible, to practise and keep the Vinaya and practise the Dhamma. We can quite deliberately bring to mind the generosity of this country. It's probably one of the most generous countries we could ever live

in – the amount of giving to people living the holy life is amazing. And they expect hardly anything from us; maybe a smile now and then, or a friendly gesture. This is something that touches the heart. It touches my heart. I wouldn't say, 'Well, generosity is *anicca, dukkha, anatta*, don't get attached to it!' This is using feeling in a way that's uplifting. When I contemplate the goodness, generosity and compassion of Ajahn Chah, it has an elevating influence on my heart. It helps in our practice and in developing *samādhi*. This sense of devotion and gratitude is a powerful foundation on which to build up *samatha* and *vipassanā*.

In the community itself we can learn from each other. We also have to forgive each other, and as a reminder we perform the ceremony of asking for forgiveness. We learn from each other's ways when we don't understand them. We see each other in fixed ways and feel threatened by certain types of character. We have to work through that, so we need to allow each other that space of forgiveness for not being perfect, totally wise and without flaws all the time. Even monks like myself who have been bhikkhus much longer than others still ask forgiveness for wrongdoing, for anything said or done, intentionally or unintentionally, that may have offended or upset anyone, or caused some kind of unhappiness. This is a way of clearing and cleaning, of setting things right in ourselves and in our relationships with each other.

Fourteen years ago, when I first came here and began to teach, I wasn't very confident as an abbot at all. I had never been one before, so I was petrified. Western monks are full of ideas and all kinds of different views and opinions. And I was supposed to be the abbot, sitting there with all these monks giving me a piece of their minds and throwing opinions at me. There was always conflict, until things became really awful. I remember one morning I became really stern and laid things down, saying, 'I'm the abbot here; you follow me and shut up! I can't operate in this position if you're going to do this to me. One person wants to do it this way, another wants to do it that way. How am I supposed to function as an abbot?' Westerners believe firmly in their

own views. They follow their opinions strongly: ‘This is the way it’s got to be done! It can’t be done any other way!’ We also have our own views about Ajahn Chah: ‘Ajahn Chah said. Ajahn Chah would do it this way. Ajahn Chah would never do that.’ I had that thrown at me, always being compared to the top man. It was my first year as an abbot and everyone was already comparing me with the best. That was not fair, so I would react by saying things like, ‘Shut up’ and ‘Obey.’ I tried being heavy-handed and domineering. That actually helped in the beginning. I think everyone appreciated it, because it did somewhat clarify the situation. They were good monks, so they stopped those habits. But I didn’t want to live in that style as a way of life: ‘You shut up! Just follow and obey!’ We keep learning – everybody learns. So eventually we find a way of living that is truly beautiful and sensitive and fair.

When we rise to a senior position, we find out what happens. If we’re insecure we’ll tend to revert to certain patterns that we’ve seen before. I tried to copy Ajahn Chah or Ajahn Jun.³¹ I’d spent a *vassa* with Ajahn Jun. He was really quite fierce. If you got up during an all-night sitting, he would follow you to your *kuti*. All the time he was on your back. That’s also a way of keeping control over everything and not letting anyone get away with anything. As soon as you see a little sign of weakness, one tiny mistake, you jump on it: ‘Stop that! Shameless monk!’ But my character is not like that at all. I began to hate the idea and just tried not to look at things, developing a way of not seeing, squinting my eyes so that there was a haze. I don’t like always feeling obliged to tell people off and set them straight; that’s a really awful way to live one’s life. And that isn’t what Ajahn Jun does anyway. He’s actually a very kind monk. His behaviour wasn’t coming from a nasty place, and I found him very helpful. But in that same supervisory position I used to get pretty nasty, because I resented the role. I would be quite unpleasant, but this is how we learn. We learn from all this by reflecting on the results. More and more I realized that I was just trying to copy someone else. I could never be like Ajahn Chah. I could never

be like anyone else. I had to trust my own quality and character and develop from there.

Here at Wat Pah Nanachat there are senior monks, junior monks, novices, Eight-Precept men and women. We can all use our reflective minds more instead of creating problems. Slowly we develop a sense of supporting and helping each other, rather than forming factions or becoming very insensitive and demanding, feeling disappointed because someone doesn't live up to our expectations. We can suffer a lot by wanting the senior monk to be perfect, never do anything wrong and always understand things properly. Sometimes that isn't so, and we feel very disillusioned and disappointed, but I recommend using such situations as Dhamma. Even if we've been treated unfairly, we watch that. Actually, we can learn a lot from being treated unfairly. There is much resentment when we're accused of something we haven't done or are treated badly for no reason that we can see. We feel bitterness and anger. But we can try and use these experiences as Dhamma in our lives. When I now hear people gossip, or when I hear stories about myself that aren't true, and people blame me for things I haven't done, I can sit back and just watch my mind. If my mind starts saying, 'It's not fair!' I try to use the experience for reflection. So I am not bitter about the injustices and unfairness that I might experience.

I remember the first winter at Amaravati. It was a cold winter, very snowy, and we were having a winter retreat. The heating system wasn't very good then. We had a fireplace in the meeting hall and they put me right in front of this lovely fireplace. Being the head monk, I had the best and warmest position. Of course, everybody else at the back was freezing. We did an hour's sitting and then an hour's walking. The bell would go and it would be time to go out and walk. Sitting in front of a warm fire while it's freezing outside, I could see in my mind this strong resistance to going out into the cold. Thoughts would come up such as, 'What about my health? I'm not getting any younger' – the kind of way the mind starts operating to justify being comfortable. So

I went out to walk in the snow. It was very bleak and cold, and I just started meditating on that. After some time I realized it was all right. There was nothing bad or even uncomfortable about it. We had warm things to wear, so it wasn't painful or dangerous to our health. It's just that warmth is so attractive. There is always this aversion to cold, this wanting to get to the warmest place. I just contemplated this, the bare trees, the bleak landscape and the grey sky in the colourless winter light, and I began to quite enjoy being out in the cold. It was really nice and peaceful. I could see the desire inside of wanting the warmth again, like having a mother to protect me, something nice to hold me, feed and nurse me and keep me warm. But out in the cold we had to be aware of what we were doing. There was something strengthening and ennobling about being out there, being mindful and not complaining or running away. In this way we learn to let go of that tendency to choose. It's like growing up a little bit more. Just through that reflection I felt a sense of growing confidence.

What are the worst things that could happen to a human being? Starving, being ostracized and thrown out into the cold; humiliated and misunderstood by the community, accused of something one hasn't done, being old and sick with wild animals howling in the distance and no hope of anyone ever coming to the rescue; total deprivation of anything comfortable, reassuring or nurturing, and even being tortured and persecuted. I realized that if all that happens in life, one can cope with it, that even the worst is somehow all right. When I thought about it more, I realized how much of life we live on the level of cowardice and laziness. We're afraid to take any risks because we might suffer just a bit; or something might go wrong and we might be a little uncomfortable; or we might lose something we really think we must have. How easily we compromise just for mediocrity and comfort, and a false sense of security. We don't really bring attentiveness to our ordinary life. It's very unlikely I would be tortured or thrown out of the Sangha. I don't expect that to happen, but at the same time I don't

really care if it does. I don't mind. I can see now how to work with those kinds of situations, how to use the misfortunes of life with wisdom. They're just the way life flows. This gives us a sense of courage.

Anything I've said during this time is for reflection. It's important for us to understand Dhamma for ourselves. I'm not trying to tell anyone how they should practise or what they should do. It's for us to consider how to cultivate our own reflective mind, because in this life the effort has to come from ourselves. In the holy life we have to develop that effort from the heart. There is no way that anybody else can make us enlightened. I can push and intimidate everyone by using fear and fierceness, keeping everyone awake through making them frightened, but that just tends to condition us to be frightened creatures who are obedient and do all the right things because we're afraid of being punished and beaten up if we don't. But this life as a monk or as a nun is a matter of rising up, growing up and developing effort from there. We need to cultivate *sammā-vāyāma*, right effort, *sammā-sati*, right mindfulness, and *sammā-samādhi*, right concentration. They are part of the Noble Eightfold Path. I encourage everyone to do that and use the situation here for practice. It's a good situation, something to treasure, to respect and to use properly.

In Buddhist meditation we distinguish between *samatha* and *vipassanā*, and it is important to develop them both. *Samatha* means learning how to concentrate the mind on an object like the breath, or whatever sign we are using. It is to be developed until we contain the mind and keep it from wandering. We hold and sustain our attention on the object we have chosen. It's a mental exercise that gives the mind a kind of sharpness, but as an end in itself it cannot enlighten us. We can't be enlightened through just concentrating our mind to even a very refined level like the *arūpa-jhānas*, the formless states of absorption. Insight into the true nature of things is not possible until we start reflecting and looking into, examining and investigating the way things are. *Samatha* is actually a very simple practice. We tend to complicate it by analyzing and thinking about it – and then, of course, it becomes an impossibility. But it's merely the ability to choose an object and hold our attention on it, a way of training the mind. Most of our minds were not trained in that way before we became Buddhist monks. We're from a society that uses discursive and associative

thought. Our minds are conditioned to think in rational ways. Our critical faculties are sharpened through modern attitudes like competitiveness. We're always busy comparing: 'This is better than that. This is good. That is bad. Bad, worse, worst – good, better, best.' All this sharpens our critical faculties, but also increases our ability to doubt; the more we think about life, the more we experience doubt, uncertainty and anxiety.

Samatha is often easier for people who are illiterate, whose critical faculties aren't highly developed; their minds tend not to wander or doubt so much. People with a lot of confidence, faith and conviction find *samatha* much easier than those caught in anxiety, insecurity, worry and despair – conditions which are the result of a self created out of desires and fear. We tend to introspect and analyze ourselves. We evaluate and criticize. These kinds of mental habits make concentration increasingly difficult. Here in Thailand the Thai monks already have a tremendous amount of faith in and devotion to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha. They have a foundation of trust and confidence, of *saddhā*. This is not found so commonly among Westerners, because most of us come to Buddhism out of an intellectual interest. We can be quite impressed by the brilliance of the teaching, but still not feel very much devotion and gratitude, or any of these more heartfelt qualities which are definitely helpful and supportive in practising *samatha* meditation.

Conditions around us are also important. We can't very well do *samatha* in a place where there are lots of sensory impingements and demands. The less there is to impinge on us, the easier it is to concentrate our minds. We could go off to a sensory deprivation tank, a cave or some isolated place where we could stay without having demands and expectations placed on us, where there are no harsh, aggravating and annoying impingements. Then we could become quite naturally calm, with no sounds and nothing to look at. After the initial restlessness and resistance, we would go into a concentrated state of mind quite naturally.

In *vipassanā* we use wisdom. The surrounding conditions are not the important issue any more – we look into the nature of things without seeking ideal conditions to do so, but just observe the way things are. We use the three characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*, the Four Foundations for Mindfulness, *paṭiccasamuppāda*.³² All these different teachings are part of *vipassanā*. They are ways of contemplating, reflecting and observing the way things are. The five *khandhas* for example: how do we use that particular sequence? In themselves those five concepts of *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā*, *viññāṇa* are conventions and not to be considered from a doctrinal position. They're perceptions to use and to work with. What is being conscious, anyway? Even though we're conscious, we may not investigate consciousness. Obviously everyone here is conscious, but how many of us really know what that means? What is the difference between perception, volition and feeling? These are just ways of examining and looking at the way things are. All of us have the five *khandhas*, so they are something we can examine and investigate.

Or let's say we investigate the eye and the object. We really examine them in a practical way, looking at something with our own eyes and then examining the eye-consciousness that arises through the contact with the object. We do the same with sound, smell, taste, touch or thought and their objects. All of this we can observe and investigate. Sound is going on all the time, but we're not always conscious of it. When we look at something, we're conscious through the eye, but we're not conscious through the ear. Consciousness can move very rapidly, so it seems we can be conscious through all the senses at the same moment, but if we examine more carefully we begin to see that at the time when we look at something, we're no longer conscious of a sound. When eating food, notice the consciousness of taste. We can be thinking about something while we're eating, and not be aware of eating. How many people really taste their food? When eating they are often in a rush, talking or

³² '*Paṭiccasamuppāda*' means 'dependent arising' and refers to the Buddha's teaching on the dependent arising (or origin) of suffering and stress – and how this can cease.

busy; or they like to have snacks every now and then while reading or watching the television.

When the eye is concentrated on an object of sight, we're no longer conscious through the body. At that time hot and cold, pleasure and pain don't exist. So to deal with physical sensation, maybe to get away from physical discomfort, we can distract ourselves by looking, listening or turning to something else. That's one way of dealing with discomfort. Another way is the investigation of physical pain: going right to the actual sensation of pain, looking into the pain itself, getting to know the difference between the sensation of pain and the aversion we mentally develop around that sensation. For example, we have pain in our legs. If we concentrate our attention on the actual sensation, we stop thinking about it. We're with the sensation, but we're not creating mental aversion to its seemingly unpleasant appearance. Generally, though, we are not so refined and aware. We tend just to be averse to physical pain and discomfort, and try to suppress them or use willpower to endure them. But when we go to the sensation itself, there is body-consciousness. We're not adding aversion on to the pain: 'I can't stand it! I don't want it!' Those are emotional reactions to physical discomfort and pain of any sort. This is to be investigated and observed. When we bring attention to the sensations of the body, whether they are pleasant, painful or neutral, the body will relax more and more. When we feel tension or stress, if we concentrate on that spot with just an attitude of bare attention, without aversion, the condition for pain can diminish. What we really can't stand is the emotional reaction. Most pain we can bear; it's when we think: 'I can't stand any more of this' that we give up and try to get away from it. If we're caught in the emotional realm of, 'I can't bear it!' we may even have that thought before there is any actual pain - 'What if pain arises? I won't be able to stand it.' We can already be suffering from the possibilities of experiencing pain we don't yet have, because of our ability to remember pain we've had before and couldn't stand.

So we investigate how the mind works, the way things are. If our body is giving us pain, that's the way it is. It's not something we've created. We're not deliberately, intentionally trying to make pain arise in our body. But ignorance, desire and fear cause the reaction of aversion, wanting not to have or to get rid of. Notice how lust and sexual desire make us dull, so we lose our ability to discriminate. We can be caught in lustful fantasies, seeking sensual pleasures with mind and body, and lose our sense of perspective. We may become so eager to get what we want and experience the pleasure we anticipate that our ability to discriminate becomes inoperative. Aversion and anger tend to make us very critical. Lust does just the opposite – its push is to get what we crave, that is our sole aim and purpose. We can lose our sense of propriety and integrity, and many other virtuous qualities, when we are caught in that lustful tendency of the mind.

I remember that at Wat Pah Pong there were hardly any sweets or sweet drinks, so whenever there was the possibility of anything sweet, we would become obsessed with that idea. Once someone gave me a bag of sugar. I took it back to my kuti and tasted it. Suddenly that taste of sweetness created such greed in my mind that I consumed the whole bag of sugar in a very few minutes; I was completely out of control. That was surprising, because I wasn't into sweets very much as a layperson. Then I would have thought it was disgusting to eat a whole bag of sugar in five minutes. But the conditions for greed were supportive: the fact that I was alone, nobody was watching and no one would know. Also, sweetness is a very attractive taste, especially if we're eating one meal a day and we're celibate. For a layperson, greed is usually spread out, scattered over quite a range of things, so we don't notice it so much. Thought doesn't collect on anything as simple and ridiculous as a bag of sugar. But in the homeless life we might find ourselves lusting after a bag of sugar, something that would not have interested us at all as laypeople. Who would ever eat just sugar granules if they could get pralines, fudge and all kinds of much more pleasurable sweets to indulge

in? But one thing that this incident allowed me to see and contemplate was the sweet taste of sugar, and how it created the desire for more in the mind. If we follow that impulse and are caught in that desire, we start stuffing ourselves until we have had so much we can't handle any more. That's what lust and greed are like. But with mindfulness we can taste sweetness and just be aware of its pleasant qualities. Through investigation and understanding we no longer create lust around it. It's as it is. We don't follow it, seeking to have it again and again and again until we're absolutely satiated. Mindfulness allows us to know and be aware of time and place, appropriateness and suitability. It allows us to have integrity, to be considerate and thoughtful in our lives.

My generation of Americans never admitted to being afraid of anything. To be a man one had to put on the act of being what they call 'macho', strutting around wanting to give an impression of fearlessness. Strangely enough, often some of the most aggressive types of men are the most frightened. In meditation these masculine and aggressive types have to deal with tremendous fear and terror. A natural fear can arise, like the instinctive fear if a tiger is chasing us. That's a natural protective device. It's not personal and it's not a fault; it doesn't make us heedless. That kind of instinctive fear when we see a tiger who looks ready to attack us makes us act very swiftly in order to protect our life. Then there is also the fear of things that haven't yet occurred, of possibilities in the future; all the anxieties and worries we create in our lives about the possibility of being hurt or damaged, ostracized or humiliated and insulted, being deprived of what we want. There's the fear of the unknown. We can look into the black night and become frightened, because our eyes can't see in the darkness of the night. Or we can be afraid in a closed room with no light – anything could be there. Our sense of security, of knowing isn't present. We could imagine ghosts, monsters, or there might be scorpions, tarantulas or cobras. In this country it's quite possible to go into a room where there is a cobra we can't see.

There's a lot to be afraid of in this life as human beings. Things we know are quite possible could happen to us. We could be hit by a car or attacked by somebody. Think of the fear and anxiety women have to bear because they are an attractive force to men. They have to be careful not to put themselves in positions where they might be sexually attacked. That's a possibility of which they're very much aware. These are natural kinds of fears and anxieties coming from our human condition. Because we are born in this state, this is the way it is. But then fear may become neurotic, obsessive and unreasonable. We can be driven by fear that we've never really looked at, but are just suppressing or repressing from consciousness. We can be concerned about what people think of us. We're creatures who care about what other people think of us. We can be anxious and worried that others don't like us or don't want us. We can become quite obsessed and read being unwanted, despised or looked down on into every situation.

Anxiety, worry and doubt – all these imply dealing with unknown things. Instinctive fears deal with the known, with a definite situation. But because we think and imagine, we create a self, a personality, a person who can always be hurt, insulted or offended in some way or another. It's so fragile, isn't it? We worry about the future and we feel guilty about the past. We're anxious about a situation we're in, that something might go wrong, that something bad might happen. Note this state of mind. Uncertainty, insecurity and worry are so ordinary in our daily life experience, and yet we do not understand them and merely try to get rid of them: 'How can I get rid of my worries?' What I've found helpful is to notice and be aware of what it's like not to know, or to be uncertain about things; and then to investigate not knowing, rather than always trying to know or to dismiss uncertainty and insecurity. The desire to know and to have security is very strong. We like to feel that we're practising in the right way: 'This is really the best monastery in the whole world. This is definitely our Path. It's the right religion, the right philosophy and psychology. Yes, we're definitely

doing the right thing.’ Maybe we want somebody to affirm that what we’re doing is right. We want affirmation from teachers, other monks or people around us, to be told, ‘Yes, you’re on the right Path. Yes, this is the perfect place.’ But what happens if somebody comes here and says: ‘Oh, this monastery isn’t very good – you should go somewhere else and take so-and-so’s retreat?’ Then what does our mind do? If we’re not really investigating the way things are, we’re caught up in doubt and uncertainty about what we’re doing. Then we go to a senior monk like me and say, ‘Is this the right way?’ and I say, ‘Yes, it is. This is the right place for you.’ ‘Oh, thank goodness. Somebody said it wasn’t, so I was a bit worried that maybe I was in the wrong place.’

Look at fundamentalist Christianity, where everything is affirmed over and over again. At a born-again Christian meeting there’s a continuous affirmation of: ‘This is the only way. Jesus is our Saviour. This is right. All the others are wrong. It’s the only way.’ ‘Do the Buddhists ...?’ ‘No, no! They’re totally wrong. It’s wrong, wrong! Jesus didn’t teach Buddhism: he taught Christianity.’ ‘What about Roman Catholics?’ ‘No, No! Popery and all that.’ Endless prejudices, except about one particular form of fundamentalist Christianity which is the only way. So I might say: ‘Venerable Sir, please give me a testimonial about your experience with this particular religion, and how the Lord came and saved you.’ The Venerable Sir gets up and says: ‘I used to be a sinner and drink liquor. Then I discovered Jesus and now I am saved. My whole life has changed. I used to be an alcoholic, and gamble, and was totally immoral. Now I’ve given it all up.’ Everybody weeps and cries, and everybody exclaims, ‘Praise the Lord!’

But in Buddhism we look at doubt, rather than trying to convince ourselves that Buddhism is the right way. We want to investigate and look into the nature of things. It’s not a matter of trying to tell everyone that this is the best way: ‘Buddhism is the only way, that’s for certain!’ In *vipassanā* we look at the way things are, so when there’s doubt we investigate what it is to be wobbly, anxious and worried.

Real confidence comes with *sotāpatti*, stream-entry,³³ when we're not affirming the Eightfold Path as a belief, but actually getting through doubt by understanding its nature. To enter the stream we have to really know *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā*: personality view, attachment to practices and conventions, and doubt.³⁴ They're not to be rejected but to be investigated. Often we just want affirmation and ask, 'Am I a *sotāpanna*, a stream-enterer, Ajahn Sumedho?' People love to speculate about who's a stream-enterer or an arahant. But it's not a matter of somebody becoming a stream-enterer, but of recognizing those fetters for what they are and no longer being deluded by them; because as long as we are caught in doubt and uncertainty and keep following them, we're definitely not going to see the Path, the way out of suffering. To receive affirmation isn't the way out of suffering either, because it always needs to be reinforced. People have to agree with us: 'Yes, this is the way.' 'Yes, you have attained.' 'Yes, yes, yes.' 'All the great ajahns have agreed that I am a fully fledged stream-enterer. I have a certificate. Here, see, it has the signature of important bhikkhus on it. There's a seal and even the sangharaja³⁵ signed it.'

This is being preposterous, of course. What matters is not affirmation that we are anything, but recognizing the nature of doubt, and the attachment to self-view and to conventions. What is more preposterous than wanting to become a *sotāpanna*? If we ask, 'Am I a *sotāpanna* yet?' there's still doubt in our mind, isn't there? That's *vicikicchā*. And if we say, 'I am a *sotāpanna*', that's self-view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. So we investigate this way of thinking, 'I am, I should be, I am not, am I? Have I?' The value of teachings like *sotāpanna*, *anāgāmi*, arahant is not as attainments, but that they are to be used as reflections. Then more and more relinquishment and letting go can take place, rather than achieving or attaining something. We can't attain these things – we realize them through letting go and understanding the nature of things. On the personal level we want to attain them, but once we

³³ 'Sotāpatti', 'stream-entry', is the first stage of awakening. See Glossary for details.

³⁴ These are the three fetters cut through by stream-entry.

³⁵ The sangharaja is the head of the Thai Sangha.

appreciate these teachings as ways for reflecting on attachments, there's no need to hold on to a view of having become something or not become anything. We can equally well hold the view that we haven't attained anything, even though we may have been a monk for many years, or to be super modest: 'Oh, I couldn't possibly, little old me, dare to assume that I've entered the stream? Someone might condemn me as boasting of *uttarimanussadhamma*. That's *pārājika!*'³⁶ So we use our reflective capacity, instead of judging that there are certain things we have to get rid of in order to become a stream-enterer.

Some people take the idea of not being attached to the opposite extreme and say we shouldn't have rules and traditions: 'Ceremonies and celibacy: it's all rubbish. One just gets attached to it and one shouldn't be attached to anything.' That kind of thinking is still *sakkāya-ditṭhi*. Other people really hang on to the Vinaya and tradition, trying to protect them by all possible means in order to make sure that everything is going to be all right. We have to get rid of, kill, annihilate and burn at the stake any blasphemers or heretics who threaten the purity of our tradition: 'Got to keep my Vinaya pure, and if some woman comes along and touches me – dares to touch me – am I pure or not? How do I know I didn't set myself up? Maybe latent sexual tendencies are lurking, and I'm placing myself in a very convenient position for a woman to come along and touch me. Then I'll have an offence.' We can make the whole Vinaya structure incredibly burdensome through foolish and blind attachment to it, and strange views about purity and impurity, rather than using it for restraint and as a way of reflecting and of establishing limits we can use and standards to work from.

I talk about my own experiences so others don't have to be ashamed about having foolish thoughts and attachments – as long as we are willing to learn from them and see them clearly, rather than to suppress or believe them. I remember I spent a *vassa* at Wat Khao Chalahk. The Vinaya there is very strict and the monks are quite

³⁶ '*Uttarimanussadhamma*' means 'a state beyond that of the normal human'. To claim such an attainment, if it is untrue, is a 'defeat' offence (*pārājika*), one that would entail disrobing and never being allowed to train as a bhikkhu again in this lifetime.

obsessed about it. I thought, 'I'm from Wat Pah Pong. We have good Vinaya', and so I announced myself. They said, 'Oh yes, the Wat Pah Pong Vinaya is not so good. Ours is much better.' So I was intimidated: 'Their Vinaya is better than ours. I want to keep the best Vinaya', and I became really interested. Then I went to a small island where one of these monks was living as a kind of hermit. I stayed with him for a while and then left. Later he told the other monks that I didn't have a very good understanding of Vinaya. When I heard that I was really angry. I was ready to go right back to that island and punch him on the nose. I thought my Vinaya was really good, but he said it wasn't. That seemed like an insult to me. But it's also *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi*. Is that a skilful use of Vinaya, comparing: 'My Vinaya is better than yours. How dare you accuse me of not keeping good Vinaya'? It's not the Vinaya that is the problem – the danger lies with *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā*.

Another aspect to reflect on is the two sects of Dhammayut and Mahanikaya³⁷. If we go to a Dhammayut forest temple thinking we're very strict and pure (not touching money, practising like good *kammaṭṭhāna* forest monks), they look at us suspiciously, once they find out we're Mahanikaya. Sometimes they put us at the end of the line for food and treat us as if we're not really proper monks. In such situations we might see *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi* arising: 'How dare they!' – these kinds of self-views. To me it seems much better to watch them than to make much of them, and be carried away by indignation because we're being treated in a way we think we shouldn't be treated. When we practise Dhamma we take life as it is. We don't try to make everything fair and just, straighten out the world and make everything as it should be. We're willing to use life's unfairness and each experience for

³⁷ Dhammayut(ika) and Mahanikaya are the two branches of the Thai Sangha. The Dhammyut arose in the nineteenth century as a reform movement, to establish pure standards in the Thai Sangha. Mahanikaya is the much larger branch. Dhammayut monks will often not recognize Mahanikaya bhikkhus as valid bhikkhus at all. Ajahn Chah and his bhikkhus are forest or 'practising' (*kammaṭṭhāna*) bhikkhus within the Mahanikaya, they keep to the standards espoused by the Dhammayut.

practising Dhamma, to recognize the way things are. If we feel angry for being looked down on and regarded as something inferior, not as good, though we think we are quite as good or even better, this is an opportunity to see *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. We investigate and learn to use life's experiences wisely.

Western women who come to Thailand are easily offended by the fact that monks, the men, get all the attention. Women are always at the back, flat against the wall in the part of the room that is farthest away from the monks, and they're always supposed to lower themselves and be respectful in the presence of monks. Western women can be quite upset and indignant about this. They even write articles about how unfair and wrong it is, how women can become enlightened just like men, that there's no difference at all. I'm not justifying this monastic standard as an ideal form for women, but if we're really serious about understanding Dhamma, if we want to get beyond suffering, it's good to use the situation for watching our minds, rather than stomping away in a huff thinking it's not fair and we're being looked down on. Much more benefit comes from just observing and using such experiences through reflection, not going around asking life to be fair. In England that's the whinger's cry – 'It's not fair. It shouldn't be like this!' I'm all for fairness, actually, but so much of life is unfair anyway. In Dhamma we can use the unfairness of life with wisdom, rather than being offended and upset, and thereby missing the opportunity for enlightenment.

When we first moved to Chithurst years ago, I could observe how my mind, if I let it, would become involved with wanting the monastery to be successful, or doubting whether it was the right decision to move there. But more and more we just work with the flow of life. We see what we are doing and the things that are happening to us, how they affect the mind: the 'I am,' the self-view, the doubts that arise; having very set views about how things should be done in a monastery, and then feeling threatened when we can't force the situations into being

exactly as we think they should be. In Thailand the monasteries are an integrated part of society, but in a country like England we are on the fringes; we're oddballs. There we can't make the monasteries exactly as they are in Thailand. We observe the mental and emotional reactions. I could see things like the fear of everything falling apart and going wrong. If I had given in to that fear, everything would have degenerated and fallen apart, leading to panic and hysteria: 'You've got to hang on and hold it up! Make it and force it, and push it into being exactly what it should be.' It was a terrible mental state to have to live with.

More and more in our lives, if we develop our reflective capacities, we keep learning from life's experiences as we move into different situations. We develop all kinds of strengths and abilities to cope with exotic, strange, difficult or uncertain situations that before would have absolutely overwhelmed us. If we practise in order to observe the way things are, there's a fearlessness in the mind. We go beyond the fear of life and the possibility of humiliation, of falling apart or losing control. After being investigated, all that is no longer a problem in the mind. There's a willingness to look at life honestly and courageously, rather than being wimpy monks hiding away because we might lose our purity if we step out of our cave. If we're frightened, worried and anxious, and we don't investigate, confront and learn from these mental states, we will always be worried and anxious about things. By becoming obsessed with states of mind we make cowards of ourselves; we can't rise up to life at all, but always have to make sure everything is going to be all right, with nothing to threaten us. We settle for mediocrity and comfort, for security and safety, because going to the unknown – looking into the possibilities and potentially threatening situations that await us in the future – completely overwhelms our minds. We want to have a guarantee that we're going to be safe. But monastic life, the life of a *samaṇa*, is one of uncertainty: one meal a day, not hoarding things, not having security like money in the bank and food stored away in our kutis, always living on the edge with the possibility of having to go

without a meal, of not getting what we want. So in the situation we're in now, at this moment, we have the opportunity to use the tradition, the Vinaya, the practice of Dhamma. We use the form as a criterion and a standard to observe with; rather than as an attachment or forming opinions about it as being useless.

This monastery here, this is the way it is. Wat Pah Nanachat – it's like this. We can think, 'I want a more remote monastery without a lot of visitors coming.' We can be very offended by a coachload of tourists coming to watch *phra farang*,³⁸ and take pictures of them. We can be caught up in *sakkāya-dīṭṭhi*, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa* and *vicikicchā* over something like that. But if we turn towards Dhamma, we can use the situation for watching our minds and observing the way things are.

There was a *phra farang* years ago who was always looking for the perfect monastery. I went to visit him once but he wasn't there. It was a beautiful place with caves, absolutely ideal. A few months later I met this monk in Bangkok and said, 'You aren't at that monastery any more?' And he said, 'No, it wasn't the right place.' 'Why? It seemed like a wonderful place to me.' He said, 'Oh, I couldn't bear it. They gave me a kuti that was too close to the next one. Every time I walked to the meeting hall I had to pass right in front of this other monk's kuti. That disrupted my practice, so I left.' Then he said, 'But I found this really fantastic place in the South and I'm going there.' A few months later I met him again, so I asked how his super-duper place in the South was. He said, 'Well, I thought it was really going to be the ideal place. But you see, every time on alms-round these dogs would start chasing and biting me, so I had to leave.' He ended up disrobing. Endlessly looking for the ideal place is still being bound to the three fetters. Here at Wat Pah Nanachat, can we accept the way it is without judging it? I'm not asking anyone to approve or like the way it is, and I'm not dwelling on the things we dislike about it. I'm asking people to observe: it's like this; this is the way it is here, it's this kind of a place. Then we can be aware of our own opinions: 'I like it; I don't like it; I want to find a better and

more quiet place; I want to be alone, I don't want to be in a community with a lot of monks' – and so on and so forth.

I remember years ago visiting a monastery where the *farang* monks said, 'Oh, this is the best monastery. There are hardly any monks here. Tan Ajahn will only accept eighteen monks at the most at any time. Most of the time there are less. It's a really good place for practice.' A few years later they were complaining, 'Oh, now we have about twenty-five monks. It's not like it used to be. We can't practise any more. We've got to find another place.' Endless measuring, thinking there's a perfect place in this world to meditate; all we have to do is to find it. The perfect forest monastery with just the right number of monks, an enlightened teacher, the ideal kuti and walking path, everything just super-duper perfect. Remote, without tourist coaches coming in, no noise from the highway and no low-flying aircraft or transistor radios from the rice paddies. The food is adequate, vegetarian, wholegrain, organically grown, and the abbot is a certified arahant – it's the perfect place. I keep looking for it. Maybe it exists somewhere. But rather than spending our life trying to find it, the way of Buddha-Dhamma is to see the way things are. Nothing is preventing us from looking at the way it is. Tour coaches, noise from the highway, low-flying aircraft, any kind of food: there is nothing that isn't Dhamma about them. They may not be what we want, and so *sakkāya-ditṭhi* arises because we don't like them. In order to develop, we need to really penetrate this. We use the situation, the frustrations, the injustices, the unfairness, the mosquitoes, the hot weather, the interruptions and distractions to observe, allowing ourselves to witness greed, hatred and delusion, and the whole range of fetters that affect us if we're ignorant and heedless.

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In our practice we need to learn what right effort is, in contrast to just willpower. In Thailand the attitude is always to sleep little, speak little, eat little. This has quite a strong influence on one's mind. It sets in motion the idea of pushing and striving, but it also tends to create a kind of mental state that is very suppressive. One isn't really aware of what one is doing. Many people become so tired and exhausted that their reflective capacities no longer operate. In a group there's also a lot of pressure to conform and keep up. People don't always notice and observe the effect of these things. At Amaravati, I once gave a very strict retreat: getting up at three in the morning, dismissing everyone at eleven at night, and so forth. The results of that retreat were not very good, actually. Some of the people were very diligent at doing all that, but others just couldn't keep up with it. So then I considered, 'What are we in this for anyway? What is the purpose of what we're doing?' A lot of illness comes from that suppressive tendency just to hold everything down and drive oneself, or perhaps try to keep up with the very strong and healthy people. One might consider that a

weakness, but in England I have found it much more helpful not to emphasize trying to become a super-diligent kind of monk, or to think that strictness is the way that everything should be. The mind tends to be very much impressed by things like asceticism and the use of willpower. But I remember that in my early years when I was a samanera, I had the most insight when I had enough rest and my mind and body were relaxed. I had some powerful insights when I wasn't just pushing and striving against sleepiness or trying to keep up with others.

In the Western world, the people who commit themselves to monastic life are usually already quite determined in their own way, so one is not carrying a lot of dead weight, having to teach monks who are just following a tradition as part of a cultural pattern. This is of course a lovely thing, to have people in whom one can have confidence, so that they can begin to trust and motivate themselves. We need to learn how to motivate ourselves, rather than depend on someone else to drive and push us. I notice when we're put in teaching or leadership positions we tend to feel a sense of insecurity, so often we become almost militaristic. This is quite common. I've seen it in England with monks who are in the position of being an abbot for the first time. It's almost like sitting over people and forcing them to conform. But when contemplated, the results are not terribly impressive. The beauty of the holy life doesn't lie in driving people. Instead we encourage people to rise up to things and learn how to put effort into what they're doing. We learn from experience what seems to be most useful, helpful and of value. There is no need to make an absolute position that one has to do things a certain way. The whole purpose of contemplation and reflection is to observe the results of what we do. I think we're quite used to employing willpower alone as a compulsive and obsessive tendency of the mind. We hold things back, we force and drive ourselves. Notice that the Western mentality always has the idea we should be doing or developing something. It's very hard for us just to sit around and not feel guilty about it. There's

always this compulsion to do something, something more, get better or get rid of some flaw, weakness or bad habit.

What I'm saying is for reflection. It's not meant to do anything other than encourage us all to look at what's compelling us to do what we're doing. So as we begin to look at our motivations, what willpower is, we become aware of the compulsive tendencies of our mind.

In a community there is a lot of intimidation. There are always those who sit straighter and are always on time, those who never nod and always eat little, those we call the diligent ones. And then there is always somebody in the community who can't do any of it very well, ranging from those who try desperately to conform and live up to an image to those who just try to do the best they can. There's a tendency to look at somebody else and copy, idealize and emulate. Then there are feelings of guilt, remorse or inferiority regarding the fact that we might not be able to live up to what we think the best ones can do. All this is to be witnessed and observed. Community life can be just mass conformity, or it can be a very skilful way of understanding the nature of things. Nobody wants to live in a community for very long under a lot of pressure, feeling intimidated and put upon by others so that life becomes very dull or despairing. What appealed to me about Vinaya-discipline was that it wasn't asceticism but a reasonable way to live a life. Personally, I used to like to do ascetic practices and be very strict, but I realized that one can only do those things for periods of time, not indefinitely. I didn't really want to have to do all that as a way of life, or feel obliged always to operate on that level. I felt that the Buddha had meant monastic life to be something simple and easy, relaxed and peaceful, rather than harsh and ascetic.

In England we've had to take care of sick people. Some monks have very poor health: various back problems, knee problems and endless ailments calling for consideration as to how to work through them, not only by the monks with their particular health problems themselves, but also by the community as a whole. Do we want just a community of

healthy and tough young men, or can a community perhaps also include and open up to a wider range of ages, abilities and levels of health? I know that for a lot of young men it's very important to prove they are tough and can practise austerity. This is also to be recognized, that we might be motivated by the masculine need for rites of passage into the adult male world. Nevertheless, it is good to get to know our limits. What is it like to go without sleep or food? If we want to test ourselves, that's fair enough. It's good practice, actually. But we each have to know our limits. Some of us have to learn how to operate within the limits of poor health, having little physical reserve and a weak constitution. We need to apply mindfulness and wisdom when the body is not healthy and needs quite frequent rest or certain kinds of nourishment. One of the monks has so much tension all the time that he's been extremely constipated for most of his monastic life. These constipation problems arise because of the tension of driving and willing oneself. Learning how to practise is about finding a balance, finding out when to take it easy and when to tighten things up.

This is something each one of us has to really observe, in ourselves and in the community. We can be very idealistic, thinking what a good monk should be like: wearing rag robes, only eating what is offered, able to live in whatever place is given, surviving with just fermented urine for medicine; taking his ideal from our basic reflections, the ideal of not sleeping very much, not eating very much, not speaking very much. But if we attach to those ideals without understanding what we're doing, the result is that we lose our sense of humour and become very tense. All kinds of unpleasant results can occur. Maybe we can keep it up for a while, but then we find ourselves falling apart. When the supportive conditions for such a practice aren't there, we lose our momentum. By observing this we can begin to see how to relax, how to apply more effort and how to let go. We learn when to push ourselves and create energy, but without adopting or holding onto an idealistic position of how things should be permanently: 'Good practice is being

strict all the time!’ If we believe so firmly in our high ideals, we may quite suddenly feel despair. Many people leave because they cannot stand the idea of living in that way while always feeling a sense of failure with regard to it.

When I talk about reflection, I mean just looking at what’s driving us, what kind of ideals we have. It’s not that we shouldn’t have ideals, but what are our expectations, and what are the results of our life so far? What are we attached to and holding on to? What are the causes and results of any action? This is a means of self-knowledge, of looking into the way things are. We don’t judge that we shouldn’t be strict or push ourselves. I’m not taking a position for or against those things, but I emphasize the need to recognize what we are actually doing and its result. Practice is all about what we’re actually doing. We’re not just trying to live up to an ideal of what a good monk should be, but observing the results of what we’re doing. What would good results be? Well, if we’re still suffering and full of anxiety, doubt, stress, fear and dullness, caught in restlessness, jealousy, envy, anger, greed and all that, then we’re obviously doing something not quite right. Maybe we’re trying to purify ourselves, getting rid of our defilements, killing our *kilesas*, making ourselves into something else and trying to annihilate the bad habits. Maybe we want to prove ourselves or win approval from others, or maybe we’re trying to be what we think we should be. But anything that comes from self-view will always take us to some kind of negative result and despair. They go hand in hand. If we have a sense of self, we’ll also have disillusionment and a sense of despair.

When we read Ajahn Mun’s biography, what does that do to us? People think they would really like to be like Ajahn Mun and do all the things that he did. We seem to forget that this is an idealized biography of a great monk. What actually is the mental state when we want to become like that, wanting to become something or thinking we have to do all those things in order to become enlightened? This is a drawback

of biographies. To be honest, if I were to write my biography, there are a lot of things I just wouldn't tell you. I'd want to write about the time when I nearly died, under a tin roof with little flies going up my nose, my ears, my mouth: the terrible food, the heat, the infection and the utter despair ... but then I roused myself to sit up straight and suddenly I saw the light. That's a very inspiring story. What I would write in my biography would be things on that level, interesting, inspiring examples of practice. But there are a lot of things I think others wouldn't be interested in, they are so ordinary and boring. I wouldn't want to fill page after page with the monotony of monastic life that we experience most of the time in this form. I'd take the choice bits, the supreme challenges – and maybe the failures and successes of this life. With them I might create a very fascinating biography. Don't get me wrong: I'm not condemning the biography of Ajahn Mun either. But we can observe how we can idealize monasticism and try to live up to very high standards of asceticism and practice, not realizing what we're actually doing because there's no understanding of what's motivating us, and what we're grasping.

One problem that arises when there is any ideal set form is that some seem to fit into it more than others. Those who feel they don't quite fit into the ideal form might draw the conclusion that this isn't a suitable life for them. Maybe some of us can't chant very well, can't recite the *Pāṭimokkha*; and not everyone can be a gifted, charismatic teacher. Maybe we never learned to be really fluent in Thai, or be charming and get all the praise. Of course, it's always nice to be appreciated. But you may be the old sour-grapes type of monk who criticizes the one who chants well and never makes a mistake in the *Pāṭimokkha*, or the one who speaks perfect Thai and gets all the praise. If we're being negative, we can regard these things as superficial and not the practice. We can look down on the more popular monks – but that's another delusion, isn't it? We each have our own particular character to live with. This life isn't meant for just one particular kind of character, suitable only

for some and not for others. We always have to keep in mind that the priority of this life is to see the Dhamma here and now.

It's not our purpose to become teachers, missionaries or popular and charismatic figures, or to be able to do everything perfectly well, have a lot of disciples, have many monks and set up branch monasteries. All of this is not what we're here for – at least, that's not what I'm here for. If these things happen, it's all right. One is willing to encourage and try to create suitable situations for teaching, practising and listening to Dhamma. But the priority always has to be seeing the Dhamma in the present moment, not being deluded and pushing aside the truth of the way it is now because we are caught up in a mission or something important on the worldly plane. In my position, for example, people have all kinds of expectations of me. Sometimes I used to find that really unbearable and began to feel a lot of resentment about it. But the priority was always to observe the way things were in the present moment. If I followed this resentment, of course I'd then suffer. But through just looking at that particular thing, or any other thing, the tendency to create a problem about them dropped away. More and more, I found confidence, space and strength arising and was able to be present here and now, without making comments; neither being pulled in nor intimidated, nor wanting to please and be an impeccable monk who fulfilled other people's expectations. Thus we keep learning from life's experiences.

My reflection in daily life is always: this is the way it is, it's like this. If people leave, monks disrobe, anagārikas run away or nuns fall in love with swamis, we might feel quite disappointed. Life goes up and down: for instance, a monk for whom we had great expectations may suddenly leave. But instead of creating a problem about that, we remember the practice is about here and now, not about personalities, the expectations we have, the way we might be disappointed about somebody or the hurt feelings. They're just part of our human experience. They can always be seen here and now as

Dhamma. All that arises, ceases; that is the way things are. We don't try to make ourselves into unfeeling, indifferent people, to the point where we don't care what anybody thinks, so that if everybody left it wouldn't mean anything to us; the world could fall apart, but we'd be totally indifferent, no longer sensitive and not feeling anything at all. Sometimes we may imagine that's what an arahant is like – no matter what's happening, he's completely indifferent and unimpressed. But is that really the way it is? From my experience, the way it is, is that this is a very sensitive world. Planetary life, consciousness and the human form – the whole realm is one of great sensitivity, feeling, emotion, and even psychic phenomena. The reflection that 'all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing and is not self,' isn't a dismissal of that or an insensitivity to the way it is, to its power or quality. It's the ability to be patient, to bear with the vicissitudes of life and learn from them.

The quality of things can vary. Some can be very important and urgent, others might be totally trivial, silly and idiotic. In daily life some experiences have the quality of being very important, but a lot of daily life experiences are quite trivial and foolish. Seeing that 'all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing,' isn't dismissing the quality of anything, but giving that quality a perspective. By seeing things in the perspective of impermanence, rather than judging and paying attention only to the important ones and not bothering with the trivial ones, we begin to open to the existence of weakness, cowardice, wishy-washiness and wimpiness. They are all seen as 'what arises, ceases', instead of judging such states as being horrible, bad and something we don't want. We're willing to observe and note that these states are impermanent, and so are the big, serious, grand and urgent ones.

So what is being a human being, a *manussa*? If we reflect on this, we see we have a body and we have a mind. Just this, without a judgement: I'm not saying it's good or bad in any absolute way. Being masculine – what is the effect on the mind of being masculine? For women, what is the effect on the mind of having a female body? As a way of

reflecting, I try to encourage observing how things are affecting our minds. Women's bodies with their wombs, their nourishing equipment, menstrual periods and the whole functioning process of femininity: what effect does that have on their minds? Do the women here dismiss it or take it personally? What is the nature of masculinity? A male body doesn't have nurturing organs. It is not designed for nursing or for bearing children. That's why it's difficult for men to understand those aspects of women, because we don't have that kind of experience of life at first hand. That's the way it is. Being a man or a woman is not a failure or a fault; neither is better than the other. Any facile judgements and prejudices are not to be believed, but to be observed. This whole psychophysical process is to be observed.

Mindfulness is the way to the Deathless. The word 'mindfulness' is often used without really being understood. We can be concentrated on an object or caught in thoughts and mental patterns. But mindfulness is the reflective ability to witness, observe and let go, so that the mind is open rather than concentrated and absorbed into an object. If we take this to its logical conclusion of, say, the Buddha being mindful of the Dhamma, there is no person or personality who could be seen as an object. Male and female, all the seemingly very personal differences, emotional tendencies and psychological quirks, can be seen as *ārammanā*, mental states, rather than being judged and grasped as self. This is the meaning of not-self. Mindfulness is not a blank, vacuous or expressionless thing, but brightness, intelligence and clarity. And it's not personal. If I say, 'I am that,' 'that' becomes personal. But if there is 'that' alone, it's not anybody. When there is no attachment to the *ārammaṇā* that arise out of delusion, there is mental clarity. This is not stupidity or dullness, because we don't go towards annihilation or nihilistic views. For the whole lifespan of this form here called Sumedho, this is where there is knowing. At this level of speech and convention, I assume that when others are mindful it's the same thing for them. And out of compassion for others, we try to

encourage, direct and teach people to look at this, to know that this is the way it is.

These sensitive forms are like radios or receptors, and as long as there is *avijjā* they distort information, which becomes blocked and deformed. But when the human form is released from defilements and those blockages, these receptors and transmitters can be a real blessing to planetary life. Someone like the Buddha, who was enlightened, transmitted a wisdom teaching out of compassion. Gotama the Buddha, just one human being in history, had a tremendous effect that we can still appreciate over 2,500 years later on different parts of this planet. We can begin to realize the human potential for enlightenment, our ability to be free from the distorted attachments and defilements of the mind that we create out of ignorance. When they are relinquished, the human form is a transmitter of wisdom and compassion, of loving-kindness, joy and serenity. What does the selfish human being manifest? When I am thinking about myself, caught in selfish attitudes, I manifest greed, hatred and delusion to others. When we only think in terms of what we want, what we're trying to get rid of and what we don't like about others, the human being becomes just a nuisance and an unpleasantness to the other creatures on this planet. We can see how ignorant humanity has created so many problems on planet earth! All the pollution, corruption, destruction of the forests, diminishing numbers of whales and dolphins, fish and birds – if we keep going in this way, we're just public nuisances.

But we can also see the potential of human beings, because there always have been those like a Buddha, the arahants and the *bodhisattvas*. Through selflessness, wisdom and enlightenment they manifest the *brahmavihāras*. That should be our function on the planet, if we have one. To me that would be the most lovely thing to point to as a potential for humanity, rather than just being negative and cynical about the nature of human beings as selfish and greedy, with the pervading attitude of, 'Look out for yourself because no one else will.'

There certainly are human beings who function in that way and believe in that pattern, but we don't have to be like that. We can transcend that realm of survival of the fittest, the law of the jungle, the strong dominating the weak. We can rise above that. We can rise above our own psychic realm of 'me as a sensitive personality' to a transcendent understanding where these forms are more like transmitters, rather than being grasped as a person, or 'me', or 'mine'. We need to be able to realize that this form isn't 'mine'.

Cultivating the Noble Eightfold Path means no longer making any demands or claims on the personal plane. We trust and develop this path in daily life, so that these forms can manifest compassion, kindness, joy and equanimity towards other beings. We have the example of Gotama the Buddha and the compassion of his teaching. This form of a bhikkhu has been a brilliant form for transmitting his teaching for more than 2,500 years. It has been established in such a way that it can be carried onwards through a long period of time. That's the effect of just one human being called a Buddha. We're disciples of the Buddha and in the conventional form we use Buddhist teaching. We're his inheritors and we have the Dhamma and Vinaya. We live in the restraint of Vinaya and the spirit of the Dhamma. As long as we surrender ourselves to this form, we become its inheritors.

Enabling this particular form to be transmitted onwards benefits not only us, but also future generations. What it's ultimately about on the macrocosmic level, in our puny human predicament, all we can do is wonder. We sense a kind of marvel and mystery in being a rather vulnerable and fragile little person, a tiny body on this planet. When we look up at the sky on a clear night, we have a sense of wonder about it. We can't pin it down to the limited ability of our perceptions, thoughts or views. But what the human mind can do is open to the mystery of it all, to where the mind is really mindful. We don't try to fix and attach to ideas, to fit the totality into a narrow perception. This is why human ignorance is so strong: because we want to figure everything out with

words and perceptions, rather than open our hearts to the Dhamma, the whole and the completeness of it. If we allow enough space we can trust the mystery, the unknown, the vastness, infinity. It's a strange predicament, one that I often contemplate. Why is it this way? Why are we like this? And what can we actually know, beyond the conditioning process of our own mind? If we let the mind open up, we're able to wonder. When the mind is filled with wonder or is wonderful, there is no perception. It's not black or white, male or female, this or that. The mind stops. There is no need to grasp a perception or force anything into a viewpoint. But it is also mysterious. We can't know it through the desire to know it. We can only open the mind with mindfulness, not by trying to figure it all out with analysis, opinions and words.

In the cynical world I grew up in, the tendency was to dwell on faults and flaws, to be critical and picky, always emphasizing what was wrong with everything. The minds of critics of life, cynics, doomsday prophets are very ugly, and to be stuck in that realm is painful. When I was a young university student I really enjoyed being cynical, negative and critical. We seemed maybe to be developing those faculties at that time. It might have been an important thing to do, but to be stuck on that level is suffering. One thing we love about children is their innocence. Young children wonder about things. They don't have to have perceptions for everything. While they still have innocence, they marvel at life. They discover nature and reflect on things. But as they become more conditioned by our society, class, ancestry and all that, they lose their innocence and become conditioned into being a member of the family and society, believing and doing all the things they're expected to do in that position. But in the long run it's very painful to be caught up in duties, responsibilities or ideas of having rights and privileges and demanding them, being jealous of others and competitive. That whole realm becomes quite meaningless and distressing to us. So then there's the aspiration of Buddha-Dhamma: to become like a child again, no longer innocent but wise. Innocence is

corruptible. Wisdom is incorruptible. Wisdom also allows us to wonder again, to be open to the unknown and not frightened by it anymore, allowing this conditioned self we carry through ignorance to cease in the mind. Then the mind is a reflective mind and open to the mystery, the Dhamma and the way things are. It's not just an attachment to the view that everything that arises ceases. It's a reflection, a way of teaching us to look at a pattern of things, rather than a position we take and hold onto.

The purpose of our life as monks is to realize the ultimate truth, the truth of the way it is. The Buddha used the word ‘nibbāna’, which means ‘complete non-attachment’ – that is, not being attached through delusion and ignorance to the experiences we have from birth to death in this form as a human being. When we go forth as bhikkhus we do so to realize non-attachment (nibbāna), ‘desirelessness’ and fading away (*virāga*), and cessation (*nirodha*). These three terms, *virāga*, *nirodha* and *nibbāna*, are quite significant. To realize *virāga* we have first to understand what *rāga* or desire is. In the second Noble Truth we have the arising of desire and attachment to it. We can divide desire into three types: *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*. Desire is energy that’s always looking for something or other. If there is attachment to desire, one is never content. There’s always restlessness, trying to get something or do something, or aiming at something or other, perhaps picking up this or doing that or just saying something. When it’s not understood and seen for what it is, desire pulls us around.

Kāma-taṇhā is the desire for sense-pleasures. We distract ourselves with the sense-world. This can be done in so many ways: by eating, drinking, smoking, taking drugs, sexual activities, watching television or other types of entertainment, and so on. The possibilities for distracting ourselves are endless. In the form of a bhikkhu, the life of celibacy very much restricts our ability for *kāma-taṇhā*, but sometimes it definitely gathers round, let's say, food. We can feel tremendous desire for sweets or to listen to music, for a chance to distract ourselves with sound, sight, smell, taste or touch.

Kāma-taṇhā is still quite coarse and obvious, but *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* can be subtle. *Bhava-taṇhā* is the desire to become, and *vibhava-taṇhā* is the desire to get rid of. In this life, which can be very altruistic and based on high-minded ideas, we can have a strong desire to become an arahant or an enlightened person. It seems like a good desire, in fact. We try to become something better, or even to become the best. Or we try to get rid of the terrible things; we desire to get rid of greed, anger and delusion, jealousy weakness and fear. These seem like righteous kinds of desire. It must be good to get rid of the bad, the obstacles, the hindrances. Our minds can support and defend *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* on these levels of becoming and getting rid of. But we should remember that *taṇhā* is always connected to *avijjā*. They go hand in hand; so as long as there is *avijjā*, there'll be *taṇhā*, and the desire to become and to get rid of. This is where we really need to understand what desire is, and not just have an idea that we shouldn't have any desires, because then we form the desire not to have any desires, or the desire to get rid of the desire to get rid of desires – and it gets complicated. It's not necessary to get rid of desire, but to understand it. The second Noble Truth is the insight that supports letting go. Desires should be let go of, and to let go of something we have to know what we're holding on to. Letting go has nothing to do with annihilation. It isn't a throwing away, since no aversion accompanies it. We let desire be. It's not a matter of getting

rid of desire, but of letting it cease. We contemplate the words ‘letting go’ until we eventually realize that desire has been let go of. Then we know letting go.

So *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *vibhava-taṇhā* are to be examined and investigated. Just observe the nature of desire. How does it feel to sit here and want to get rid of something, or to move or go away, or do or say something? How much of our formal practice is based on desires to become and desires to get rid of? We should ask ourselves that question.

So our aim and intention when going forth are to realize nibbāna. But this is not a desire – there’s a difference here. We make our decision not from desire but from a deliberate choosing, the rational ability to turn towards the realization of complete understanding and freedom from delusion. Whether we think we can do it or not isn’t the issue. Whether we think we’re capable, or that anyone is capable, isn’t the point at all. We learn how to use our minds, how to use what we have skilfully. So we train as bhikkhus to realize dispassion and non-attachment to the five khandhas, taking us to the cessation of desire and ignorance. We don’t just do this when we’re ecstatic and inspired, and in a high mood: ‘I want to realize nibbāna – it’s the most wonderful thing to do!’ It’s not that, but something quite deliberate, from a very rational and clear place in our minds. We might ask, ‘Well, are there any arahants these days? Has anybody here realized nibbāna?’ This is doubt and the self-view operating. But whether anybody here has realized nibbāna or not isn’t the point. Our goal for the holy life is to be free from all delusion and free from grasping, to see and know the Dhamma and to realize the truth. What’s the point of being a monk otherwise? The whole structure and form, the surrounding conditions, support and encourage that. They help to remind us and enable us to recollect, from a deliberate, rational position of the mind – not from desire and ignorance, trying to become an enlightened person. But this is right intention if it’s grounded in wisdom and clear understanding.

Our practice and mental cultivation in this life are to observe

the way things are: suffering and the arising of suffering. We should understand and acknowledge what suffering is, not just react to it. The second Noble Truth offers the insight that reminds us to let go of desire. The third Noble Truth is the realization of cessation. Cessation doesn't mean annihilation. It's not the end of everything, total destruction, but when we let go of desire it ceases. It's natural for whatever arises to cease. That's just Dhamma, the way of things. All conditions are impermanent, so whatever comes into being falls away. The focus of the third Noble Truth is to realize the cessation of things. This is quite subtle, and if we don't set our minds on practising for that realization, we miss it all the time.

Who notices how things end or cease? We're much more interested in the arising conditions of life, like sexual activities, delicious flavours and beautiful sights. We want pleasurable experiences, an exciting lifetime with romantic relationships and adventures, so what we tend to become dazzled and fascinated with is the arising of desire. But then it reaches its peak and we can't stay fascinated, inspired and interested forever. We can only stay that way for a while: it reaches its peak and then we seek another exciting object to follow. This is what *samsāra* is about, the endless seeking after rebirth, after some kind of new, absorbing condition to become. And then we become bored, disillusioned, depressed and uncertain. That's cessation, what we don't notice and what we tend to ignore. How many of us try to find something interesting to do to distract ourselves whenever we're bored? We don't like to be bored. Nobody wants to be bored. But when we live a life of one exciting adventure after another, we become incredibly bored. We become bored with excitement. What was exciting yesterday is boring today so we have to think of something even more exciting than that. There are endless experiments with sex, drugs and rock'n'roll, to be reborn into something fascinating because yesterday's fascination is boring.

Monastic life is generally quite boring. What could be more boring

than our chanting or sitting for an hour? But it's through observing boredom that we realize the cessation of suffering, being willing to be bored and to look at our sense of despair, depression or disillusionment. It's easy to be a monk as long as we're inspired. We think, 'I want to be a Buddhist monk. That's the most wonderful thing a human being can ever do, to realize the ultimate reality – that's terribly inspiring. And to dedicate one's whole life to the Dhamma – that's really inspiring. And to give up sexual desire – oh, that's very noble. And to be an alms-mendicant, just eating whatever the faithful put into one's bowl. To wear a rag-robe, to live at the foot of a tree, sitting in the full lotus posture. To go on *tudong* and be able to put up with mosquitoes, malaria and stifling heat. And to live out in charnel grounds and graveyards.' One can make a real adventure out of Buddhist monasticism as an ideal. The reality of it is that one usually becomes a monk through some kind of inspiration. Inspiration is the arising side of our experience, but then it expires – or perspires; there's a lot of perspiration in this place! If we want to be inspired all the time we have to keep going somewhere else. We might be inspired when we come to Wat Pah Nanachat, but we won't stay that way because we get too much perspiration here – or desperation. So then we think, 'Oh, I'd like to go on *tudong*, off to the cave, the mountains, the Burmese border or the islands in the Gulf.' Once the inspiration has worn off, any place looks more inspiring than the place we're in. This is when it's important not to move, to really determine not to follow that kind of restless desire for distractions and adventures, or simply for a change, but be able to put up with the desperation, perspiration and expiration until it doesn't matter any more whether we stay or go. Ajahn Chah was always saying, 'When you want to go, don't go', because we need to stay and observe our boredom, disillusionment and restlessness. Then we might have insight into the third Noble Truth, the cessation of desire.

If we think of *nirodha* in black-and-white terms, it sounds like annihilation. This is where we need to see what grasping and letting go

are, and the cessation that follows. *Nirodha* isn't a conscious rejection of anything. It's a realization of where desire based on ignorance is let go of. We can actually see desire: then it ceases and there is the realization of the cessation of desire. When there is no more desire, what is our mind like? We really have to observe this. Mindfulness is the way to the deathless. We sit and watch, being able to observe desire, not suppressing or trying to get rid of it, not following it blindly and believing our minds are ultimately us. We turn towards that cool, calm position of 'Buddho', knowing and seeing, witnessing and recognizing the way things are.

With *ānāpānasati* it's the same pattern. I've always contemplated that: there's inspiration with the inhalation and expiration with the exhalation. When we inhale there's this sense of the spirit rising up in a way. We tend to draw and pull the air in, and the body fills out. It's like inspiration. When we're really proud and full of life, we have that sense of being inspired, full of the breath of life. But we can only inhale to a certain degree; we can't just keep inhaling, even though it's a nice thing to do. Imagine yourself only inhaling and never exhaling. What would that be like? What is an exhalation, then? The breath is leaving the body, and when we can't exhale any more we can observe that there's a real desire to inhale again. And we can't just stop and stay exhaled for very long without almost panicking with the desire to inhale, to fill ourselves up with air again.

I've noticed that it's easier for me to concentrate on my inhalation than on my exhalation. My mind wanders more easily on the exhalation. So much of life is like that. Boredom, disillusionment – that side of life is where we wander, looking for something else. It's not easy just to stay with being bored, the other side of happiness and pleasure, the other side of inspiration. To be mindful of that, to stay with that, we have to determine to do so. We determine to stay with the exhalation from its beginning to its end: just that is not terribly significant in its seeming appearance, but we can use the pattern of *ānāpānasati* as a

reflection. We try to contemplate the actual experience we all have of inhalation, exhalation, inspiration and disillusionment. When we're born we start to grow and develop. We have youth and vigour and reach a peak of physical maturity, then we grow old and feeble. Our society doesn't want to get old. We see so many older people trying to remain young, youthful and vigorous. There's so much money now in cosmetic surgery. People can have their wrinkles taken out, their double chin, their sagging jowls, the crow's feet around their eyes. They try to make the nose more attractive, the lips fuller and the teeth white and straight. A youthful complexion is really desirable.

Let's take flowers as an example. I used to contemplate roses in England, because they are so beautiful and have such a lovely fragrance. When is the rose perfect? On the day when it reaches its perfect fullness in colour, form and fragrance. From a bud it opens out and reaches the point where it's perfect. But after that peak, what happens to it? It starts to grow old and wilt. Its perfection and peak have passed and it starts getting a little worn looking. The next day it's definitely old, but still attractive enough. Finally it starts turning brown and looks pretty horrible, so we throw it away. This is one way of reflecting on life and sensual experience, always arising and passing away. We can learn from watching roses, ourselves and the people around us, the day and night and the seasons of the year. In England with its four seasons we can observe that sequence. The days are very long in summer, and they keep getting longer until the summer solstice. Then they gradually get shorter and the nights get longer. So we have this reflection on the days being very short, the nights being very long. Then they reverse, and the light-element increases until the days are very long and nights are very short. We all have this experience of living in the sensory realm, with seasons and changes, and a body that was born, grows up, gets old and will die. Everything is based on that pattern where all conditions are impermanent. Inhalation and exhalation are something we can observe right now; there are six months between observing

the winter solstice and the summer solstice. But right here and right now we can observe inhalation and exhalation and reflect on them, not just becoming mesmerised by our breath, but really contemplating it, noticing and observing the way it is.

Everything around us is Dhamma; it teaches us about the way things are. Reflecting on the Four Noble Truths is an ongoing process, working with things that we can actually observe in daily life. Watching the breath, we notice that actually it's the body that is breathing, not us. When somebody dies, the body doesn't inhale again after the last exhalation. We never see a corpse inhaling. When the body is about to die there's one last exhalation, and then – finished. That's the death of the body. As long as the body is alive it will breathe. That's its nature. Breathing is a physiological function that sustains the life of the body. Breathing is much more important than eating. We can ask ourselves, 'Who is it that breathes?' Even when we are sleeping our body is breathing. We don't have to be awake and make our body breathe. So we can observe the breath of the body because it's not-self. The breath isn't something about which we feel possessive or with which we identify. It doesn't arouse vanity in our minds – at least, not in my mind. I've never considered myself as breathing better than somebody else, or envied somebody else's breathing. Thinking that men breathe better than women, or that the King of Thailand breathes in a way vastly superior to me would be ridiculous, because breathing is just the way it is. It's a physiological function, like the heart beating and the metabolism operating. It functions quite on its own without our thinking about it or identifying with it.

With *ānāpānasati* we can tranquillize the mind by concentrating on the inhalation and exhalation at the tip of the nose. The more refined our breath becomes, the more tranquil we are. We can use *ānāpānasati* only for tranquillity, or for reflection too. We have to examine something thoroughly to really understand it, so that's why we reflect on the inhalation and exhalation – to know that pattern 'all that arises,

ceases' and realize letting go of the arising. When we let go of desire and are no longer attached to the arising, what arises ceases. That's the natural way of things. That's Dhamma. '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā*' – 'all conditions are impermanent, all conditions are not-self.' Sometimes it seems more interesting to develop *jhānas* and have magical powers, things that are more attainment-oriented, so we can feel we're getting somewhere and have attained something or can do something special. Just contemplating the exhalation doesn't seem as if we're doing anything of much significance at all. But notice this reflection on Dhamma. The way out of suffering is to understand the way things are, not to become Superman or be able to do miraculous things.

What is enlightenment? To me this term means to be able to see the way things are clearly. It is not the kind of light that blinds us. Light can be so strong that it blinds us and we can't see anything. If we try to look at the midday sun it'll burn our eyes out. Is that enlightenment? Or is it knowing things as they are? The amount of light needed to see things clearly isn't a blinding light, but what kind of light is it? The light of wisdom and reflection, being able to learn the truth from very humbling and ordinary things in daily life. We don't need to know the ultimate purpose and meaning of everything in the whole universal system, the macrocosm in its totality. We learn just from watching the breath, the way the body breathes, the ageing process of the body itself, the hope and despair in life, the happiness and the suffering, all of this. We learn from seemingly very subjective, personal and insignificant details of daily life, and from them we can arrive at the ultimate truth: being able to see and know things as they are. When we reflect like this we're not putting enlightenment on a pedestal.

This is what happens to a lot of Buddhists. Nibbāna becomes something exalted and fantastic: 'nibbāna! That's the most difficult thing. Is there anybody in Thailand who has realized nibbāna? Are there any enlightened monks? They must be supermen with radiant

auras, most fantastic and elevated, exalted above everyone else.’ The human mind tends to idealize or idolize. But if we examine how the Buddha used the term ‘nibbāna’, we see it doesn’t mean much of anything. It’s certainly not an exalted term. It means ‘cooling’, actually, like in American slang: ‘Be cool, man.’ The Buddha’s advice is to cool it. But through human ignorance the word is put up on a pedestal and worshipped as something so far beyond anyone’s reach that we have no inspiration even to try to reach it. What was meant to be a very skilful teaching and useful convention for getting beyond ignorance is made into an idol and worshipped.

This is where teachers like Ajahn Chah really bring our attention to how to use these conventions in the way that the Buddha intended, because they are for freedom and liberation; for seeing clearly and understanding things as they are. We can do them; they are not beyond our ability. This is a teaching for human beings.

The Four Noble Truths

A Handful of Leaves

The Blessed One was once living at Kosambi in a wood of simsapa trees. He picked up a few leaves in his hand, and he asked the bhikkhus, ‘How do you conceive this, bhikkhus, which is more, the few leaves that I have picked up in my hand or those on the trees in the wood?’

‘The leaves that the Blessed One has picked up in his hand are few, Lord; those in the wood are far more.’

‘So too, bhikkhus, the things that I have known by direct knowledge are more; the things that I have told you are only a few. Why have I not told them? Because they bring no benefit, no advancement in the holy life, and because they do not lead to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have not told them.

And what have I told you? This is suffering; this is the origin of suffering; this is the cessation of suffering; this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering. That is what I have told you. Why have I told it? Because it brings benefit, and advancement in the holy life, and because it leads to dispassion, to fading, to ceasing, to stilling, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna.

So bhikkhus, let your task be this: This is suffering, this is the origin of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, this is the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

(Saṃyutta Nikāya, 56.31)

25 | The Four Noble Truths: An Overview

The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta,³⁹ the Buddha's teaching on the Four Noble Truths, has been the main reference that I have used for my practice over the years. It is the teaching we used in our monastery in Thailand. The Theravada school of Buddhism regards this sutta as the quintessence of the teaching of the Buddha. This one sutta contains all that is necessary for understanding Dhamma and for enlightenment.

Though the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta is considered to be the first sermon the Buddha gave after his enlightenment, I sometimes like to think that he gave his first sermon when he met an ascetic on the way to Varanasi. After his enlightenment in Bodh Gaya, the Buddha thought, 'This is such a subtle teaching. I cannot possibly convey in words what I have discovered so I will not teach. I will just sit under the bodhi tree for the rest of my life.'

For me this is a very tempting idea: to go off and live alone and not have to deal with the problems of society. However, while the Buddha was thinking this way, Brahma Sahampati, the creator deity in Hinduism, came to the Buddha and convinced him that he should go

³⁹This sutta (discourse) was the first full teaching that the Buddha gave – to his five former spiritual companions in the Deer Park at Sarnath near Varanasi. Its name means 'the discourse that sets rolling the Wheel of Truth.'

and teach. Brahma Sahampati persuaded the Buddha that there were beings who would understand, beings who had only a little dust in their eyes. So the Buddha's teaching was aimed towards those with only a little dust in their eyes – I'm sure he did not think it would become a popular movement.

After Brahma Sahampati's visit, the Buddha was on his way from Bodh Gaya to Varanasi when he met an ascetic who was impressed by his radiant appearance. The ascetic said, 'What is it that you have discovered?' and the Buddha responded: 'I am the perfectly enlightened one, the Arahant, the Buddha.'

I like to consider this his first sermon. It was a failure because the man listening thought the Buddha had been practising too hard and was overestimating himself. If somebody said those words to us, I'm sure we would react similarly. What would you do if I said, 'I am the perfectly enlightened one'?

Actually, the Buddha's statement was a very accurate, precise teaching. It is the perfect teaching, but people cannot understand it. They tend to misunderstand and to think it comes from an ego because people are always interpreting everything from their egos. 'I am the perfectly enlightened one' may sound like an egotistical statement, but isn't it really purely transcendent? That statement: 'I am the Buddha, the perfectly enlightened one', is interesting to contemplate because it connects the use of 'I am' with superlative attainments or realizations. In any case, the result of the Buddha's first teaching was that the listener could not understand it and walked away.

Later, the Buddha met his five former companions in the Deer Park in Varanasi. All five were very sincerely dedicated to strict asceticism. They had been disillusioned with the Buddha earlier because they thought he had become insincere in his practice. This was because the Buddha, before he was enlightened, had begun to realize that strict asceticism was in no way conducive towards an enlightened state so he was no longer practising in that way. These five friends thought he

was taking it easy: maybe they saw him eating milk rice, which would perhaps be comparable to eating ice cream these days. If you are an ascetic and you see a monk eating ice cream, you might lose your faith in him because you think that monks should be eating nettle soup. If you really loved asceticism and you saw me eating a dish of ice cream, you would have no faith in Ajahn Sumedho any more. That is the way the human mind works; we tend to admire impressive feats of self-torture and denial. When they lost faith in him, these five friends or disciples left the Buddha – which gave him the chance to sit under the bodhi tree and be enlightened.

Then, when they met the Buddha again in the Deer Park in Varanasi, the five thought at first, ‘We know what he’s like. Let’s just not bother about him.’ But as he came near, they all felt that there was something special about him. They stood up to make a place for him to sit down and he delivered his sermon on the Four Noble Truths.

This time, instead of saying ‘I am the enlightened one’, he said: ‘There is suffering. There is the origin of suffering. There is the cessation of suffering. There is the path out of suffering.’ Presented in this way, as Four Noble Truths, his teaching requires no acceptance or denial. If he had said ‘I am the all-enlightened one’, we would be forced to either agree or disagree – or just be bewildered. We wouldn’t quite know how to look at that statement. However, by saying: ‘There is suffering, there is a cause, there is an end of suffering, and there is the way out of suffering’, he offered something for reflection: ‘What do you mean by this? What do you mean by suffering, its origin, cessation and the path?’

So we start contemplating it, thinking about it. With the statement: ‘I am the all-enlightened one’, we might just argue about it. ‘Is he really enlightened?’ ... ‘I don’t think so.’ We would just argue; we are not ready for a teaching that is so direct. Obviously, the Buddha’s first sermon was to somebody who still had a lot of dust in his eyes and it failed. So on the second occasion, he gave the teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

Each of the Four Noble Truths has three aspects, so altogether there are twelve insights. In the Theravada school, an arahant, a perfected one, is one who has seen clearly the Four Noble Truths with their three aspects and twelve insights. 'Arahant' means a human being who understands the truth; it is applied mainly to the teaching of the Four Noble Truths.

The first Noble Truth, 'There is suffering' is the first insight. What is that insight? We don't need to make it into anything grand; it is just the recognition: 'There is suffering.' That is a basic insight. The ignorant person says, 'I'm suffering. I don't want to suffer. I meditate and I go on retreats to get out of suffering, but I'm still suffering and I don't want to suffer ... How can I get out of suffering? What can I do to get rid of it?' But that is not the first Noble Truth; it is not: 'I am suffering and I want to end it.' The insight is, 'There is suffering.'

Now you are looking at the pain or the anguish you feel – not from the perspective of 'It's mine' but as a reflection: 'There is this suffering, this *dukkha*.' It is coming from the reflective position of 'Buddha seeing the Dhamma.' The insight is simply the acknowledgement that there is this suffering without making it personal. That acknowledgement is an important insight; just looking at mental anguish or physical pain and seeing it as *dukkha* rather than as personal misery – just seeing it as *dukkha* and not reacting to it in a habitual way.

The second insight of the first Noble Truth is: 'Suffering should be understood.' The second insight or aspect of each of the Noble Truths has the word 'should' in it: 'it should be understood.' The second insight, then, is that *dukkha* is something to understand. One should understand *dukkha*, not just try to get rid of it.

We can look at the word 'understanding' as 'standing under.' It's a common enough word but, in Pali, 'under-standing' means to really accept the suffering, stand under or embrace it rather than just react to it. With any form of suffering – physical or mental – we usually just react, but with understanding we can really look at suffering; really

accept it, really hold it and embrace it. So that is the second aspect, ‘We should understand suffering.’

The third aspect of the first Noble Truth is: ‘Suffering has been understood.’ When you have actually practised with suffering – looking at it, accepting it, knowing it and letting it be the way it is – then there is the third aspect, ‘Suffering has been understood’, or ‘*Dukkha* has been understood.’ So these are the three aspects of the first Noble Truth: ‘There is *dukkha*’; ‘it is to be understood’; and, ‘it has been understood.’

Practical Application

This is the pattern for the three aspects of each Noble Truth. There is the statement, then the prescription and then the result of having practised. One can also see it in terms of the Pali words *pariyatti*, *paṭipatti* and *paṭivedha*. *Pariyatti* is the theory or the statement, ‘There is suffering.’ *Paṭipatti* is the practice – actually practising with it; and *paṭivedha* is the result of the practice. This is what we call a reflective pattern; you are actually developing your mind in a very reflective way. A Buddha mind is a reflective mind that knows things as they are.

We use these Four Noble Truths for our development. We apply them to ordinary things in our lives, to ordinary attachments and obsessions of the mind. With these Truths, we can investigate our attachments in order to have insights into them. Through the third Noble Truth, we can realize cessation, the end of suffering, and practise the Eightfold Path until there is understanding. When the Eightfold Path has been fully developed, one is an arahant, one has made it. Even though this sounds complicated – four truths, three aspects, twelve insights – it’s quite simple. It’s a tool for us to use to help us understand suffering and non-suffering.

Within the Buddhist world, there are not many Buddhists who use the Four Noble Truths any more, even in Thailand. People say, ‘Oh yes, the Four Noble Truths – beginner’s stuff’. Then they might use all kinds of *vipassanā* techniques and become really obsessed with the

sixteen stages before they get to the Noble Truths. I find it quite mind-boggling that in the Buddhist world the really profound teaching has been dismissed as primitive Buddhism: 'That's for the little kids, the beginners. The advanced course is ...' They go into complicated theories and ideas – forgetting the most profound teaching.

The Four Noble Truths are a lifetime's reflection. It's not just a matter of realizing the Four Noble Truths, the three aspects, and twelve stages and becoming an arahant on one retreat – and *then* going onto something advanced. The Four Noble Truths are not easy like that. They require an ongoing attitude of vigilance and they provide the context for a lifetime of examination.

26 | The First Noble Truth

The first Noble Truth with its three aspects is: ‘There is suffering, *dukkha*. *Dukkha* should be understood. *Dukkha* has been understood.’

This is a very skilful teaching because it is expressed in a simple formula which is easy to remember, and it also applies to everything that you can possibly experience or do or think concerning the past, the present or the future.

Suffering, or *dukkha*, is the common bond we all share. Everybody everywhere suffers. Human beings suffered in the past, in ancient India; they suffer in modern Britain; and in the future, human beings will also suffer ... What do we have in common with Queen Elizabeth? We suffer. With a tramp in Charing Cross, what do we have in common? Suffering. It includes all levels, from the most privileged human beings to the most desperate and underprivileged ones, and all ranges in between. Everybody everywhere suffers. It is a bond we have with each other, something we all understand.

When we talk about our human suffering, it brings out our compassionate tendencies. But when we talk about our opinions, about what I think and what you think about politics and religion, then we can get into wars. I remember seeing a film in London about

ten years ago. It tried to portray Russian people as human beings by showing Russian women with babies and Russian men taking their children out for picnics. At the time, this presentation of the Russian people was unusual because most of the propaganda of the West made them out to be titanic monsters or cold-hearted, reptilian people – and so you never thought of them as human beings. If you want to kill people, you have to make them out to be that way; you cannot very well kill somebody if you realize they suffer the way you do. You have to think that they are cold-hearted, immoral, worthless and bad, and that it is better to get rid of them. You have to think that they are evil and that it is good to get rid of evil. With this attitude, you might feel justified in bombing and machine-gunning them. If you keep in mind our common bond of suffering, that makes you quite incapable of doing those things.

The first Noble Truth is not a dismal metaphysical statement that everything is suffering. Notice that there is a difference between a metaphysical doctrine in which you are making a statement about The Absolute and a Noble Truth which is a reflection. A Noble Truth is a truth to reflect upon; it is not an absolute; it is not The Absolute. This is where Western people get very confused because they interpret this Noble Truth as a kind of metaphysical truth of Buddhism – but it was never meant to be that.

You can see that the first Noble Truth is not an absolute statement because of the fourth Noble Truth, which is the way of non-suffering. You cannot have absolute suffering and then have a way out of it, can you? That doesn't make sense. Yet some people will pick up on the first Noble Truth and say that the Buddha taught that everything is suffering.

The Pali word, *dukkha*, means 'incapable of satisfying' or 'not able to bear or withstand anything': always changing, incapable of truly fulfilling us, or making us happy. The sensual world is like that, a vibration in nature. It would, in fact, be terrible if we did find

satisfaction in the sensory world because then we wouldn't search beyond it; we'd just be bound to it. However, as we awaken to this *dukkha*, we begin to find the way out so that we are no longer constantly trapped in sensory consciousness.

Suffering and Self-View

It's important to reflect upon the phrasing of the first Noble Truth. It is phrased in a very clear way: 'There is suffering', rather than, 'I suffer.' Psychologically, that reflection is a much more skilful way to put it. We tend to interpret our suffering as: 'I'm really suffering. I suffer a lot – and I don't want to suffer.' This is the way our thinking mind is conditioned.

'I am suffering' always conveys the sense of 'I am somebody who is suffering a lot. This suffering is mine; I've had a lot of suffering in my life.' Then the whole process, the association with one's self and one's memory, takes off. You remember what happened when you were a baby ... and so on.

But note, we are not saying there is someone who has suffering. It is not personal suffering anymore when we see it as 'There is suffering.' It's not: 'Oh poor me, why do I have to suffer so much? What did I do to deserve this? Why do I have to get old? Why do I have to have sorrow, pain, grief and despair? It is not fair! I don't want it. I only want happiness and security.' This kind of thinking comes from ignorance – which complicates everything and results in personality problems.

To let go of suffering, we have to admit it into consciousness. But the admission in Buddhist meditation is not from a position of: '*I am suffering*', but rather, '*There is the presence of suffering*', because we are not trying to identify with the problem but simply acknowledging that there is one. It's unskilful to think in terms of: 'I am an angry person; I get angry so easily; how do I get rid of it?' – this triggers off all the underlying assumptions of a self and it is very hard to get any perspective on that. It becomes very confused because the sense of

‘my problems’ or ‘my thoughts’ takes us very easily to suppression or to making judgements about them and criticizing ourselves. We tend to grasp and identify rather than to observe, witness and understand things as they are. When you are just admitting that there is this feeling of confusion, that there is this greed or anger, then there is an honest reflection on the way it is and you have taken out all the underlying assumptions – or at least undermined them.

So don’t grasp these things as personal faults but keep contemplating these conditions as impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self. Keep reflecting, seeing them as they are. The tendency is to view life from the sense that ‘these are *my* problems’, and that one is being very honest and forthright in admitting this. Then our life tends to reaffirm that because we keep operating from that wrong assumption. But that very viewpoint is impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self.

‘There is suffering’ is a very clear, precise acknowledgement that at this time, there is some feeling of unhappiness. It can range from anguish and despair to mild irritation; *dukkha* does not necessarily mean severe suffering. You do not have to be brutalized by life; you do not have to come from Auschwitz or Belsen to say that there is suffering. Even Queen Elizabeth could say, ‘There is suffering.’ I’m sure she has moments of great anguish and despair or, at least, moments of irritation. The sensory world is a sensitive experience. It means you are always being exposed to pleasure and pain and the dualism of *samsāra*. It is like being in something that is very vulnerable and picking up everything that happens to come in contact with these bodies and their senses. That is the way it is. That is the result of birth.

Denial of Suffering

Suffering is something we usually do not want to know – we just want to get rid of it. As soon as there is any inconvenience or annoyance, the tendency of an unawakened human being is to get rid of it or suppress it. One can see why modern society is so caught up in seeking

pleasures and delights in what is new, exciting or romantic. We tend to emphasize the beauties and pleasures of youth whilst the ugly side of life – old age, sickness, death, boredom, despair and depression – is pushed aside. When we find ourselves with something we do not like, we try to get away from it to something we do like. If we feel boredom, we go to something interesting. If we feel frightened, we try to find safety. This is a perfectly natural thing to do. We are associated with that pleasure/pain principle of being attracted and repelled. So if the mind is not full and receptive, then it is selective – it selects what it likes and tries to suppress what it does not like. Much of our experience has to be suppressed because a lot of what we are inevitably involved with is unpleasant in some way.

If anything unpleasant arises, we say, ‘Run away!’ If anyone gets in our way, we say, ‘Kill him!’ This tendency is often apparent in what our governments do ... Frightening, isn’t it, when you think of the kind of people who run our countries – because they are still very ignorant and unenlightened. But that is the way it is. The ignorant mind thinks of extermination: ‘Here’s a mosquito; kill it!’, ‘These ants are taking over the room; spray them with ant killer!’ There’s even a company in Britain called Rentokil that specializes in killing pests – however you want to interpret the word ‘pests.’

Morality and Compassion

That’s why we have to have laws such as, ‘I will refrain from intentionally killing’, because our instinctual nature is to kill: if it is in the way, kill it. You can see this in the animal kingdom. We are quite predatory creatures ourselves; we think we are civilized but we have a really bloody history – literally. It is just filled with endless slaughters and justification for all kinds of iniquities against other human beings – not to mention animals – and it is all because of this basic ignorance, this unreflecting human mind that tells us to annihilate what is in our way.

However, with reflection we are changing that; we are transcending that basic instinctual, animal pattern. We are not just being law-abiding puppets of society, afraid to kill because we are afraid of being punished. Now we are really taking on responsibility. We respect the lives of other creatures, even the lives of insects and creatures we do not like. Nobody is ever going to like mosquitoes or ants, but we can reflect on the fact that they have a right to live. That is a reflection of the mind; it is not just a reaction: 'Where's the insecticide spray?' I also don't like to see ants crawling over *my* floor; my first reaction is, 'Where's the insecticide spray?' But then the reflective mind shows me that even though these creatures are annoying me and I would rather they went away, they have a right to exist. That is a reflection of the human mind.

The same applies to unpleasant mind states. So when you are experiencing anger, rather than saying, 'Oh, here I go – angry again!' we reflect: 'There is anger.' Just like with fear – if you start seeing it as my mother's fear or my father's fear or the dog's fear or my fear, then it all becomes a sticky web of different creatures related in some ways, unrelated in others; and it becomes difficult to have any real understanding. And yet, the fear in this being and the fear in that mangy cur is the same thing. 'There is fear.' It is just that. The fear that I have experienced is no different from the fear others have. So this is where we have compassion even for mangy old dogs. We understand that fear is as horrible for mangy dogs as it is for us. When a dog is kicked with a heavy boot and you are kicked with a heavy boot, that feeling of pain is the same. Pain is just pain, cold is just cold, anger is just anger. It is not mine but rather: 'There is pain.' This is a skilful use of thinking that helps us to see things more clearly rather than reinforcing the personal view. Then as a result of recognizing the state of suffering – that there is suffering – the second insight of this first Noble Truth comes: 'It should be understood.' This suffering is to be investigated.

To Investigate Suffering

I encourage you to try to understand *dukkha*: to really look at, stand under and accept your suffering. Try to understand it when you are feeling physical pain or despair and anguish or hatred and aversion – whatever form it takes, whatever quality it has, whether it is extreme or slight. This teaching does not mean that to get enlightened you have to be utterly and totally miserable. You do not have to have everything taken away from you or be tortured on the rack; it means being able to look at suffering, even if it is just a mild feeling of discontent, and understand it.

It's easy to find a scapegoat for our problems: 'If my mother had really loved me or if everyone around me had been truly wise, and fully dedicated towards providing a perfect environment for me, then I would not have the emotional problems I have now.' This is really silly! Yet that is how some people actually look at the world, thinking that they are confused and miserable because they did not get a fair deal. But with this formula of the first Noble Truth, even if we have had a pretty miserable life, what we are looking at is not that suffering which comes from out there, but what we create in our own minds around it. This is an awakening in a person – an awakening to the truth of suffering. And it is a Noble Truth because it is no longer blaming the suffering that we are experiencing on others. Thus, the Buddhist approach is quite unique with respect to other religions because the emphasis is on the way out of suffering through wisdom, freedom from all delusion, rather than the attainment of some blissful state or union with the Ultimate.

Now I am not saying that others are never the source of our frustration and irritation, but what we are pointing at with this teaching is our own reaction to life. If somebody is being nasty to you or deliberately and malevolently trying to cause you to suffer, and you think it is that person who is making you suffer, you still have not understood this first Noble Truth. Even if he is pulling out your

fingernails or doing other terrible things to you – as long as you think that you are suffering because of that person, you have not understood this first Noble Truth. To understand suffering is to see clearly that it is our reaction to the person pulling out our fingernails, ‘I hate you’, that is suffering. The actual pulling out of one’s fingernails is painful, but the suffering involves ‘I hate you’, and ‘How can you do this to me’, and ‘I’ll never forgive you.’

However, don’t wait for somebody to pull out your fingernails in order to practise with the first Noble Truth. Try it with little things, like somebody being insensitive or rude or ignoring you. If you are suffering because that person has slighted you or offended you in some way, you can work with that. There are many times in daily life when we can be offended or upset. We can feel annoyed or irritated just by the way somebody walks or looks, at least *I* can. Sometimes you can notice yourself feeling aversion just because of the way somebody walks or because they don’t do something that they should – one can get very upset and angry about things like that. The person has not really harmed you or done anything to you, like pulling out your fingernails, but you still suffer. If you cannot look at suffering in these simple cases, you will never be able to be so heroic as to do it if ever somebody does actually pull out your fingernails!

We work with the little dissatisfactions in the ordinariness of life. We look at the way we can be hurt and offended or annoyed and irritated by the neighbours, by the people we live with, by the Government, by the way things are or by ourselves. We know that this suffering should be understood. We practise by really looking at suffering as an object and understanding: ‘This is suffering.’ So we have the insightful understanding of suffering.

Pleasure and Displeasure

We can investigate: Where has this hedonistic seeking of pleasure as an end in itself brought us? It has continued now for several decades but

is humanity any happier as a result? It seems that nowadays we have been given the right and freedom to do anything we like with drugs, sex, travel and so on – anything goes; anything is allowed. Nothing is forbidden. You have to do something *really* obscene, *really* violent, before you'll be ostracized. But has being able to follow our impulses made us any happier or more relaxed and contented? In fact, it has tended to make us very selfish; we don't think about how our actions might affect others. We tend to think only about ourselves: me and *my* happiness, *my* freedom and *my* rights. So I become a terrible nuisance, and a source of great frustration, annoyance and misery for the people around me. If I think I can do anything I want or say anything I feel like saying, even at the expense of others, then I'm a person who is nothing but a nuisance to society.

When the sense of 'what I want' and 'what I think should and should not be' arises, and we wish to delight in all the pleasures of life, we inevitably get upset because life seems so hopeless and everything seems to go wrong. We just get whirled about by life – just running around in states of fear and desire. And even when we get everything we want, we will think there is something missing, something still incomplete. So even when life is at its best, there is still this sense of suffering – something still to be done, some kind of doubt or fear haunting us.

For example, I've always liked beautiful scenery. Once during a retreat that I led in Switzerland, I was taken to some beautiful mountains and noticed that there was always a sense of anguish in my mind because there was so much beauty, a continual flow of beautiful sights. I had the feeling of wanting to hold on to everything, that I had to keep alert all the time in order to consume everything with my eyes. It was really wearing me out! Now that was *dukkha*, wasn't it?

I find that if I do things heedlessly – even something quite harmless like looking at beautiful mountains – if I'm just reaching out and trying to hold on to something, it always brings an unpleasant feeling. How

can you hold on to the Jungfrau and the Eiger? The best you can do is to take a picture of it, trying to capture everything on a piece of paper. That's *dukkha*; if you want to hold on to something that is beautiful because you don't want to be separated from it – that is suffering.

Having to be in situations you don't like is also suffering. For example, I never liked riding on the Underground in London. I'd complain about it: 'I don't want to go on the Underground with those awful posters and dingy Underground stations. I don't want to be packed into those little trains under the ground.' I found it a totally unpleasant experience. But I'd listen to this complaining, moaning voice – the suffering of not wanting to be with something unpleasant. Then, having contemplated this, I stopped making anything of it so that I could be with the unpleasant and un-beautiful without suffering about it. I realized that it's just that way and it's *all right*. We needn't make problems, either about being in a dingy Underground station or about looking at beautiful scenery. Things are as they are, so we can recognize and appreciate them in their changing forms without grasping. Grasping is wanting to hold on to something we like; wanting to get rid of something we don't like; or wanting to get something we don't have.

We can also suffer a lot because of other people. I remember that in Thailand I used to have quite negative thoughts about one of the monks. He'd do something and I'd think, 'He shouldn't do that,' or he'd say something: 'He shouldn't say that!' I'd carry this monk around in my mind and then, even if I went to some other place, I'd think of that monk. The perception of him would arise and the same reactions would come: 'Do you remember when he said this and when he did that?' and: 'He shouldn't have said that and he shouldn't have done that.'

Having found a teacher like Ajahn Chah, I remember wanting him to be perfect. I'd think, 'Oh, he's a marvellous teacher – marvellous!' But then he might do something that would upset me and I'd think, 'I don't want him to do anything that upsets me because I like to think

of him as being marvellous.’ That was like saying, ‘Ajahn Chah, be marvellous for me *all* the time. Don’t *ever* do anything that will put any kind of negative thought into my mind.’ So even when you find somebody whom you really respect and love, there’s still the suffering of attachment. Inevitably, they will do or say something that you’re not going to like or approve of, causing you some kind of doubt and you’ll suffer.

At one time, several American monks came to Wat Pah Pong, our monastery in North East Thailand. They were very critical and it seemed that they only saw what was wrong with it. They didn’t think Ajahn Chah was a very good teacher and they didn’t like the monastery. I felt a great anger and hatred arising because they were criticizing something that I loved. I felt indignant – ‘Well, if you don’t like it, get out of here. He’s the finest teacher in the world and if you can’t see that then just GO!’ That kind of attachment – being in love or being devoted – is suffering because if something or someone you love or like is criticized, you feel angry and indignant.

Insight in Situations

Sometimes insight arises at the most unexpected times. This happened to me while living at Wat Pah Pong. North East Thailand is not the most beautiful or desirable place in the world with its scrubby forests and flat plain; it also gets extremely hot during the hot season. We’d have to go out in the heat of the mid afternoon before each of the Observance Days and sweep the leaves off the paths. There were vast areas to sweep. We would spend the whole afternoon in the hot sun, sweating and sweeping the leaves into piles with crude brooms; this was one of our duties. I didn’t like doing this. I’d think, ‘I don’t want to do this. I didn’t come here to sweep the leaves off the ground; I came here to get enlightened – and instead they have me sweeping leaves off the ground. Besides, it’s hot and I have fair skin; I might get skin cancer from being out here in a hot climate.’

I was standing out there one afternoon, feeling really miserable, thinking, 'What am I doing here? Why did I come here? Why am I staying here?' There I stood with my long crude broom and absolutely no energy, feeling sorry for myself and hating everything. Then Ajahn Chah came up, smiled at me and said, 'Wat Pah Pong is a lot of suffering, isn't it?' and walked away. So I thought, 'Why did he say that?' and, 'Actually, you know, it's not all that bad.' He got me to contemplate: 'Is sweeping the leaves really that unpleasant? No, it's not. It's a kind of neutral thing; you sweep the leaves, and it's neither here nor there. Is sweating all that terrible? Is it really a miserable, humiliating experience? Is it really as bad as I'm pretending it is? ... No - sweating is all right, it's a perfectly natural thing to be doing. And I don't have skin cancer and the people at Wat Pah Pong are very nice. The teacher is a very kind, wise man. The monks have treated me well. The laypeople come and give me food to eat, and ... What am I complaining about?'

Reflecting upon the actual experience of being there, I thought, 'I'm all right. People respect me, I'm treated well. I'm being taught by pleasant people in a very pleasant country. There's nothing really wrong with anything, except *me*; I'm making a problem out of it because I don't want to sweat and I don't want to sweep leaves.' Then I had a very clear insight. I suddenly perceived something in me which was always complaining and criticizing, and which was preventing me from ever giving myself to anything or offering myself to any situation.

Another experience I learned from was the custom of washing the feet of the senior monks when they returned from the alms-round. After they walked barefoot through the villages and rice paddies, their feet would be muddy. There were footbaths outside the dining hall. When Ajahn Chah would come, all the monks - maybe twenty or thirty of them - would rush out and wash Ajahn Chah's feet. When I first saw this I thought, 'I'm not going to do that - not me!' Then the next day, thirty monks rushed out as soon as Ajahn Chah appeared and washed

his feet. I thought, ‘What a *stupid* thing to be doing – thirty monks washing one man’s feet. I’m not going to do *that*.’ The day after that, the reaction became even more violent ... thirty monks rushed out and washed Ajahn Chah’s feet and ... ‘That really *angers* me, I’m fed up with it! That is the most stupid thing I’ve *ever* seen – thirty men going out to wash one man’s feet! He probably thinks he deserves it, you know – it’s really building up his ego. He’s probably got an enormous ego, having so many people wash his feet every day. I’ll *never* do that!’

I was beginning to build up a strong reaction, an overreaction. I would sit there really feeling miserable and angry. I’d look at the monks and I’d think, ‘They all look stupid to me. I don’t know what I’m doing here.’

But then I started listening and I thought, ‘This is really an unpleasant frame of mind to be in. Is it anything to get upset about? They haven’t made *me* do it, it’s all right; there’s nothing wrong with thirty men washing one man’s feet. It’s not immoral or *bad* behaviour and maybe they enjoy it; maybe they want to do it – maybe it’s all right to do that ... Maybe I should do it!’ So the next morning, thirty-one monks ran out and washed Ajahn Chah’s feet. There was no problem after that. It felt really good – that nasty thing in me had stopped.

We can reflect upon these things that arouse indignation and anger in us: is something really wrong with them or is it something *we* create *dukkha* about? Then we begin to understand the problems we create in our own lives and in the lives of the people around us.

With mindfulness, we are willing to bear with the whole of life; with the excitement and the boredom, the hope and the despair, the pleasure and the pain, the fascination and the weariness, the beginning and the ending, the birth and the death. We are willing to accept the whole of it in the mind rather than absorb into just the pleasant and suppress the unpleasant. The process of insight is the going to *dukkha*, looking at *dukkha*, admitting *dukkha*, recognizing *dukkha* in all its forms. Then you are no longer just reacting in the habitual way of indulgence

or suppression. And because of that, you can bear with suffering more; you can be more patient with it.

These teachings are not outside our experience. They are, in fact, reflections of our actual experience – not complicated intellectual issues. So really put effort into development rather than just getting stuck in a rut. How many times do you have to feel guilty about your abortion or the mistakes you have made in the past? Do you have to spend all your time just regurgitating the things that have happened to you in your life and indulging in endless speculation and analysis? Some people make themselves into such complicated personalities. If you just indulge in your memories and views and opinions, then you will always stay stuck in the world and never transcend it in any way.

You can let go of this burden if you are willing to use the teachings skilfully. Tell yourself: 'I'm not going to get caught in this any more; I refuse to participate in this game. I'm not going to give in to this mood.' Start putting yourself in the position of knowing: 'I know this is *dukkha*; there is *dukkha*.' It's really important to make this resolution to go where the suffering is and then abide with it. It is only by examining and confronting suffering in this way that one can hope to have the tremendous insight: 'This suffering has been understood'. So these are the three aspects of the first Noble Truth. This is the formula that we must use and apply in reflection on our lives. Whenever you feel suffering, first make the recognition: 'There is suffering', then: 'It should be understood', and finally: 'It has been understood'. This understanding of *dukkha* is the insight into the first Noble Truth.

The second Noble Truth with its three aspects is: ‘There is the origin of suffering, which is the attachment to desire. Desire should be let go of. Desire has been let go of.’

The second Noble Truth states that there is an origin of suffering and that the origin of suffering is attachment to the three kinds of desire: desire for sense pleasure (*kāma-taṇhā*) desire to become (*bhava-taṇhā*) and desire to get rid of (*vibhava-taṇhā*). This is the statement of the second Noble Truth, the thesis, the *pariyatti*. This is what you contemplate; the origin of suffering is attachment to desire.

Three Kinds of Desire

Desire or *taṇhā* in Pali is an important thing to understand. What is desire? *Kāma-taṇhā* is very easy to understand. This kind of desire is wanting sense pleasures through the body or the other senses and always seeking things to excite or please your senses – that is *kāma-taṇhā*. You can really contemplate: what is it like when you have desire for pleasure? For example, when you are eating, if you are hungry and the food tastes delicious, you can be aware of wanting to take another bite. Notice that feeling when you are tasting something pleasant –

and notice how you want more of it. Don't just believe this; try it out. Don't think you know it because it has been that way in the past. Try it out when you eat. Taste something delicious and see what happens: a desire arises for more. That is *kāma-taṇhā*.

We also contemplate the feeling of wanting to become something. If there is ignorance, then when we are not seeking something delicious to eat or some beautiful music to listen to, we can be caught in a realm of ambition and attainment – the desire to *become*. We get caught in that movement of striving to become happy, seeking to become wealthy; or we might attempt to make our life feel important by endeavouring to make the world right. So note this sense of wanting to become something other than what you are right now.

Listen to the *bhava-taṇhā* of your life: 'I want to practise meditation so I can become free from my pain. I want to become enlightened. I want to become a monk or a nun. I want to become enlightened as a layperson. I want to have a wife and children and a profession. I want to enjoy the sense-world without having to give up anything and become an enlightened arahant too.'

When we get disillusioned with trying to become something, then there is the desire to *get rid* of things. So we contemplate *vibhava-taṇhā*, the desire to get rid of: 'I want to get rid of my suffering. I want to get rid of my anger. I've got this anger and I want to get rid of it. I want to get rid of jealousy, fear and anxiety.' Notice this as a reflection on *vibhava-taṇhā*. We're actually contemplating that within ourselves which wants to get rid of things; we are not trying to get rid of *vibhava-taṇhā*. We're not taking a stand against the desire to get rid of things, nor are we encouraging that desire. Instead, we're reflecting, 'It's like this; it feels like this to want to get rid of something; I've got to conquer my anger; I have to kill the Devil and get rid of my greed – then I will become...' We can see from this train of thought that becoming and getting rid of are very much associated.

Bear in mind though that these three categories of *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* are merely convenient ways of contemplating desire. They are not totally separate forms of desire but different aspects of it.

The second insight into the Second Noble Truth is: ‘Desire should be let go of.’ This is how letting go comes into our practice. You have an insight that desire should be let go of, but that insight is not a *desire* to let go of anything. If you are not very wise and are not really reflecting in your mind, you tend to follow the ‘I want to get rid of, I want to let go of all my desires’ – but this is just another desire. However, you can reflect upon it; you can see the desire to get rid of, the desire to become or the desire for sense pleasure. By understanding these three kinds of desire, you can let them go.

The second Noble Truth does not ask you to think, ‘I have a lot of sensual desires’, or, ‘I’m really ambitious. I’m really *bhava-taṇhā* plus, plus, plus!’ or, ‘I’m a real nihilist. I just want out. I’m a real *vibhava-taṇhā* fanatic. That’s me.’ The second Noble Truth is not that. It is not about identifying with desires in any way; it’s about recognizing desire.

I used to spend a lot of time watching how much of my practice was desire to become something. For example, how much of the good intention of my meditation practice as a monk was to become liked – how much of my relations with other monks or nuns or with laypeople had to do with wanting to be liked and approved of. That is *bhava-taṇhā* – desire for praise and success. As a monk, you have this *bhava-taṇhā*: wanting people to understand everything and to appreciate the Dhamma. Even these subtle, almost noble, desires are *bhava-taṇhā*.

Then there is *vibhava-taṇhā* in spiritual life, which can be very self-righteous: ‘I want to get rid of, annihilate and exterminate these defilements.’ I really listened to myself thinking, ‘I want to get rid of desire. I want to get rid of anger. I don’t want to be frightened or jealous any more. I want to be brave. I want to have joy and gladness in my heart.’

This practice of Dhamma is not one of hating oneself for having such thoughts, but really seeing that they are conditioned into the mind. They are impermanent. Desire is not what we are but it is the way we tend to react out of ignorance when we have not understood these Four Noble Truths in their three aspects. We tend to react like that to everything. These are normal reactions due to ignorance.

But we need not continue to suffer. We are not just hopeless victims of desire. We can allow desire to be the way it is and so begin to let go of it. Desire has power over us and deludes us only as long as we grasp it, believe in it and react to it.

Grasping is Suffering

Usually we equate suffering with feeling, but feeling is not suffering. It is the grasping of desire that is suffering. Desire does not cause suffering; the cause of suffering is the grasping of desire. This statement is for reflection and contemplation in terms of your individual experience.

You really have to investigate desire and know it for what it is. You have to know what is natural and necessary for survival and what is not necessary for survival. We can be very idealistic in thinking that even the need for food is some kind of desire we should not have. One can be quite ridiculous about it. But the Buddha was not an idealist and he was not a moralist. He was not trying to condemn anything. He was trying to awaken us to truth so that we could see things clearly.

Once there is that clarity and seeing in the right way, then there is no suffering. You can still feel hunger. You can still need food without it becoming a desire. Food is a natural need of the body. The body is not-self; it needs food otherwise it will get very weak and die. That is the nature of the body – there is nothing wrong with that. If we get very moralistic and high-minded and believe that we *are* our bodies, that hunger is our own problem, and that we should not even eat – that is not wisdom; it is foolishness. When you really see the origin of suffering, you realize that the problem is the grasping of desire not the

desire itself. Grasping means being deluded by it, thinking it's really 'me' and 'mine': 'These desires are me and there is something wrong with me for having them'; or, 'I don't like the way I am now. I have to become something else'; or, 'I have to get rid of something before I can become what I want to be.' All this is desire. So you listen to it with bare attention, not saying it's good or bad, but merely recognizing it for what it is.

Letting Go

If we contemplate desires and listen to them, we are actually no longer attaching to them; we are just allowing them to be the way they are. Then we come to the realization that the origin of suffering, desire, can be laid aside and let go of.

How do you let go of things? This means you leave them as they are; it does not mean you annihilate them or throw them away. It is more like setting them down and letting them be. Through the practice of letting go we realize that there is the origin of suffering, which is the attachment to desire, and we realize that we should let go of these three kinds of desire. Then we realize that we have let go of these desires; there is no longer any attachment to them.

When you find yourself attached, remember that 'letting go' is not 'getting rid of' or 'throwing away'. If I'm holding onto this clock and you say, 'Let go of it!', that doesn't mean 'throw it out'. I might think that I have to throw it away because I'm attached to it, but that would just be the desire to get rid of it. We tend to think that getting rid of the object is a way of getting rid of attachment. But if I can contemplate attachment, this grasping of the clock, I realize that there is no point in getting rid of it – it's a good clock; it keeps good time and is not heavy to carry around. The clock is not the problem. The problem is grasping the clock. So what do I do? Let it go, lay it aside – put it down gently without any kind of aversion. Then I can pick it up again, see what time it is and lay it aside when necessary.

You can apply this insight into ‘letting go’ to the desire for sense pleasures. Maybe you want to have a lot of fun. How would you lay aside that desire without any aversion? Simply recognize the desire without judging it. You can contemplate wanting to get rid of it – because you feel guilty about having such a foolish desire – but just lay it aside. Then, when you see it as it is, recognizing that it’s just desire, you are no longer attached to it.

So the way is always working with the moments of daily life. When you are feeling depressed and negative, just the moment that you refuse to indulge in that feeling is an enlightenment experience. When you see *that*, you need not sink into the sea of depression and despair and wallow in it. You can actually stop by learning not to give things a second thought.

You have to find this out through practice so that you will know for yourself how to let go of the origin of suffering. Can you let go of desire by wanting to let go of it? What is it that is really letting go in a given moment? You have to contemplate the experience of letting go and really examine and investigate until the insight comes. Keep with it until that insight comes: ‘Ah, letting go, yes, now I understand. Desire is being let go of.’ This does not mean that you are going to let go of desire forever but, at that one moment, you actually *have* let go and you have done it in full conscious awareness. There is an insight then. This is what we call insight knowledge. In Pali, we call it *ñāṇadassana* or profound understanding.

I had my first insight into letting go in my first year of meditation. I figured out intellectually that you had to let go of everything and then I thought, ‘How do you let go?’ It seemed impossible to let go of anything. I kept on contemplating: ‘How do you let go?’ Then I would say, ‘You let go by letting go.’ ‘Well then, let go!’ Then I would say: ‘But have I let go yet?’ and, ‘How do you let go?’ ‘Well just let go!’ I went on like that, getting more frustrated. But eventually it became obvious what was happening. If you try to analyze letting go in detail, you get

caught up in making it very complicated. It was not something that you could figure out in words any more, but something you actually did. So I just let go for a moment, just like that.

Now with personal problems and obsessions, to let go of them is just that much. It is not a matter of analyzing and endlessly making more of a problem about them, but of practising that state of leaving things alone, letting go of them. At first, you let go but then you pick them up again because the habit of grasping is so strong. But at least you have the idea. Even when I had that insight into letting go, I let go for a moment but then I started grasping by thinking, 'I can't do it, I have so many bad habits!' But don't trust that kind of nagging, disparaging thing in yourself. It's totally untrustworthy. It's just a matter of practising letting go. The more you begin to see how to do it, then the more you are able to sustain the state of non-attachment.

Accomplishment

It's important to know when you have let go of desire: when you no longer judge or try to get rid of it; when you recognize that it's just the way it is. When you are really calm and peaceful, then you will find that there is no attachment to anything. You are not caught up, trying to get something or trying to get rid of something. Well-being is just knowing things as they are without feeling the necessity to pass judgement upon them.

We say all the time, 'This shouldn't be like this!', 'I shouldn't be this way!' and, 'You shouldn't be like this and you shouldn't do that!', and so on. I'm sure I could tell you what you should be – and you could tell me what I should be. We should be kind, loving, generous, good-hearted, hard-working, diligent, courageous, brave and compassionate. I don't have to know you at all to tell you that! But to really know you, I would have to open up to you rather than start from an ideal about what a woman or man should be, what a Buddhist should be or what a Christian should be. It's not that we don't know what we should be.

Our suffering comes from the attachment that we have to ideals, and the complexities we create about the way things are. We are never what we should be according to our highest ideals. Life, others, the country we are in, the world we live in – things never seem to be what they should be. We become very critical of everything and of ourselves: I know I should be more patient, but I just CAN'T be patient!... Listen to all the 'shoulds' and the 'should nots' and the desires: wanting the pleasant, wanting to become or wanting to get rid of the ugly and the painful. It's like listening to somebody talking over the fence saying, 'I want this and I don't like that. It should be this way and it shouldn't be that way.' Really take time to listen to the complaining mind; bring it into consciousness.

I used to do a lot of this when I felt discontented or critical. I would close my eyes and start thinking, 'I don't like this and I don't want that', 'That person shouldn't be like this', and 'The world shouldn't be like that.' I would keep listening to this kind of critical demon that would go on and on, criticizing me, you and the world. Then I would think, 'I want happiness and comfort. I want to feel safe. I want to be loved!' I would deliberately think these things out and listen to them in order to know them simply as conditions that arise in the mind. So bring them up in your mind – arouse all the hopes, desires and criticisms. Bring them into consciousness. Then you will know desire and be able to lay it aside.

The more we contemplate and investigate grasping, the more the insight arises: 'Desire should be let go of.' Then, through the actual practice and understanding of what letting go really is, we have the third insight into the second Noble Truth, which is: 'Desire has been let go of.' We actually know letting go. It is not a theoretical letting go, but a direct insight. You know letting go has been accomplished. This is what practice is all about.

28 | The Third Noble Truth

The third Noble Truth with its three aspects is: ‘There is the cessation of suffering, of *dukkha*. The cessation of *dukkha* should be realized. The cessation of *dukkha* has been realized.’

The whole aim of the Buddhist teaching is to develop the reflective mind in order to let go of delusions. The Four Noble Truths are a teaching about letting go by investigating or looking into – contemplating: ‘Why is it like this? Why is it this way?’

It’s good to ponder over things like why monks shave their heads or why Buddha-rupas⁴⁰ look the way they do. We contemplate ... the mind is not forming an opinion about whether they are good, bad, useful or useless. The mind is actually opening and considering, ‘What does this mean? What do the monks represent? Why do they carry alms-bowls? Why can’t they have money? Why can’t they grow their own food?’ We contemplate how this way of living has sustained the tradition and allowed it to be handed down from its original founder, Gotama the Buddha, to the present time.

We reflect as we see suffering, as we see the nature of desire, and as we recognize that attachment to desire is suffering. Then we have the insight of allowing desire to go and the realization of non-suffering, the

⁴⁰ A Buddha-rupa is an image of the Buddha, generally a statue.

cessation of suffering. These insights can only come through reflection; they cannot come through belief. You cannot make yourself believe or realize an insight as an act of will; through really contemplating and pondering these truths, the insights come to you. They come only through the mind being open and receptive to the teaching – blind belief is certainly not advised or expected of anyone. Instead, the mind should be willing to be receptive, pondering and considering.

This mental state is very important – it is the way out of suffering. It is not the mind that has fixed views and prejudices and thinks it knows it all or which just takes what other people say as being the truth. It is the mind that is open to these Four Noble Truths and can reflect upon something that we can see within our own mind.

People rarely realize non-suffering because it takes a special kind of willingness to ponder and investigate and get beyond the gross and the obvious. It takes a willingness to actually look at your own reactions, to be able to see the attachments and to contemplate: ‘What does attachment feel like?’ For example, do you feel happy or liberated by being attached to desire? Is it uplifting or depressing? These questions are for you to investigate. If you find out that being attached to your desires is liberating, then do that. Attach to all your desires and see what the result is.

In my practice, I have seen that attachment to my desires is suffering. There is no doubt about that. I can see how much suffering in my life has been caused by attachments to material things, ideas, attitudes or fears. I can see all kinds of unnecessary misery that I have caused myself through attachment because I did not know any better. I was brought up in America – the land of freedom. It promises the right to be happy, but what it really offers is the right to be attached to everything. America encourages you to try to be as happy as you can by getting things. However, if you are working with the Four Noble Truths, attachment is to be understood and contemplated; then the insight into non-attachment arises. This is not an intellectual stand or

a command from your brain saying that you should not be attached; it's just a natural insight into non-attachment or non-suffering.

The Truth of Impermanence

Here at Amaravati, we chant the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta in its traditional form. When the Buddha gave this sermon on the Four Noble Truths, only one of the five disciples who listened to it really understood it; only one had the profound insight. The other four rather liked it, thinking 'Very nice teaching indeed', but only one of them, Kondañña, really had the perfect understanding of what the Buddha was saying.

The *devas* were also listening to the sermon. *Devas* (or *devatā*) are celestial, ethereal creatures, vastly superior to us. They do not have coarse bodies like ours; they have ethereal bodies and they are beautiful and lovely, intelligent. Now although they were delighted to hear the sermon, not one of them was enlightened by it.

We are told that they became very happy about the Buddha's enlightenment and that they shouted up through the heavens when they heard his teaching. First, one level of *devatā* heard it, then they shouted up to the next level, and soon all the *devas* were rejoicing – right up to the highest, the *Brahma* realm. There was resounding joy that the Wheel of Dhamma was set rolling and these *devas* and *brahmas* were rejoicing in it. However, only Kondañña, one of the five disciples, was enlightened when he heard this sermon. At the very end of the sutta, the Buddha called him 'Añña Kondañña'. 'Añña' means profound knowing, so 'Añña Kondañña', means 'Kondañña-Who-Knows.'

What did Kondañña know? What was his insight that the Buddha praised at the very end of the sermon? It was: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' Now this may not sound like any great knowledge but what it really implies is a universal pattern: whatever is subject to arising is subject to ceasing; it is impermanent and not-self ... So don't attach, don't be deluded by what arises and ceases. Don't look

for your refuges, that which you want to abide in and trust, in anything that arises – because those things will cease.

If you want to suffer and waste your life, go around seeking things that arise. They will all take you to the end, to cessation, and you will not be any the wiser for it. You will just go around repeating the same old dreary habits and when you die, you will not have learned anything important from your life.

Rather than just thinking about it, really contemplate: ‘All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.’ Apply it to life in general, to your own experience. Then you will understand. Just note: beginning ... ending. Contemplate how things are. This sensory realm is all about arising and ceasing, beginning and ending; there can be perfect understanding, *sammā-ditṭhi*, in this lifetime. I don’t know how long Kondañña lived after the Buddha’s sermon, but he was enlightened at that moment. Right then, he had perfect understanding.

I’d like to emphasize how important it is to develop this way of reflecting. Rather than just developing a method of tranquillizing your mind, which certainly is one part of the practice, really see that proper meditation is a commitment to wise investigation. It involves a courageous effort to look deeply into things, not analyzing yourself and making judgements about why you suffer on a personal level, but resolving to really follow the path until you have profound understanding. Such perfect understanding is based upon the pattern of arising and ceasing. Once this law is understood, everything is seen as fitting into that pattern.

This is not a metaphysical teaching: ‘All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.’ It is not about the ultimate reality – the deathless reality; but if you profoundly understand and know that all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing, then you will *realize* the ultimate reality, the deathless, immortal truths. This is a skilful means to that ultimate realization. Notice the difference: the statement is not a metaphysical one but one which takes us to metaphysical realization.

Mortality and Cessation

With the reflection on the Noble Truths, we bring into consciousness this very problem of human existence. We look at this sense of alienation and blind attachment to sensory consciousness, the attachment to that which is separate and stands forth in consciousness. Out of ignorance, we attach to desires for sense pleasures. When we identify with what is mortal or death-bound, and with what is unsatisfactory, that very attachment is suffering.

Sense pleasures are all mortal pleasures. Whatever we see, hear, touch, taste, think or feel is mortal; death-bound. So when we attach to the mortal senses, we attach to death. If we haven't contemplated or understood this, we just attach blindly to mortality hoping that we can stave death off for a while. We pretend that we're going to be really happy with the things we attach to – only to feel eventually disillusioned, despairing and disappointed. We might succeed in becoming what we want, but that too is mortal. We're attaching to another death-bound condition. Then, with the desire to die, we might attach to suicide or to annihilation – but death itself is yet another death-bound condition. Whatever we attach to in these three kinds of desires, we're attaching to death – which means that we're going to experience disappointment or despair.

Death of the mind is despair; depression is a kind of death experience of the mind. Just as the body dies a physical death, the mind dies. Mental states and mental conditions die; we call this despair, boredom, depression and anguish. Whenever we attach, if we're experiencing boredom, despair, anguish and sorrow, we tend to seek some other mortal condition that's arising. As an example, you feel despair and you think, 'I want a piece of chocolate cake.' Off you go! For a moment you can absorb into the sweet, delicious, chocolate flavour of that piece of cake. At that moment, there's becoming – you've actually become the sweet, delicious, chocolate flavour! But you can't hold on to that very long. You swallow and what's left? Then you have to go on to do something else. This is 'becoming.'

We are blinded, caught in this becoming process on the sensual plane. But through knowing desire without judging the beauty or ugliness of the sensual plane, we come to see desire as it is. There's knowing. Then, by laying aside these desires rather than grasping at them, we experience *nirodha*, the cessation of suffering. This is the third Noble Truth – which we must realize for ourselves. We contemplate cessation. We say, 'There is cessation', and we know when something has ceased.

Allowing Things to Arise

Before you can let things go, you have to admit them into full consciousness. In meditation, our aim is to skilfully allow the subconscious to arise into consciousness. All the despair, fears, anguish, suppression and anger are allowed to become conscious. There is a tendency in people to hold to very high-minded ideals. We can become very disappointed in ourselves because sometimes we feel we are not as good as we should be or we should not feel angry – all the shoulds and shouldn'ts. Then we create desire to get rid of the bad things – and this desire has a righteous quality. It seems right to get rid of bad thoughts, anger and jealousy because a good person 'should not be like that'. Thus, we create guilt.

In reflecting on this, we bring into consciousness the desire to become this ideal and the desire to get rid of these bad things. And by doing that, we can let go – so that rather than becoming the perfect person, you let go of that desire. What is left is the pure mind. There is no need to become the perfect person because the pure mind is where perfect people arise and cease.

Cessation is easy to understand on an intellectual level, but to *realize* it may be quite difficult because this entails abiding with what we think we cannot bear. For example, when I first started meditating, I had the idea that meditation would make me kinder and happier and I was expecting to experience blissful mind states. But during the

first two months, I never felt so much hatred and anger in my life. I thought, ‘This is terrible; meditation has made me worse.’ But then I contemplated: ‘Why was there so much hatred and aversion coming up?’ and I realized that much of my life had been an attempt to run away from all that. I used to be a compulsive reader. I would have to take books with me wherever I went. Anytime fear or aversion started creeping in, I would whip out my book and read; or I would smoke or munch on snacks. I had an image of myself as being a kind person who did not hate people, so any hint of aversion or hatred was repressed.

This is why during the first few months as a monk, I was so desperate for things to do. I was trying to seek something to distract myself with because I had started to remember in meditation all the things I deliberately tried to forget. Memories from childhood and adolescence kept coming up in my mind; then this anger and hatred became so conscious it just seemed to overwhelm me. But something in me began to recognize that I had to bear with this, so I did stick it out. All the hatred and anger that had been suppressed in thirty years of living rose to its peak at this time, and it burned itself out and ceased through meditation. It was a process of purification.

To allow this process of cessation to work, we must be willing to suffer. This is why I stress the importance of patience. We have to open our minds to suffering because it is in embracing suffering that suffering ceases. When we find that we are suffering, physically or mentally, then we go to the actual suffering that is present. We open completely to it, welcome it, concentrate on it, allowing it to be what it is. That means we must be patient and bear with the unpleasantness of a particular condition. We have to endure boredom, despair, doubt and fear in order to understand that they cease rather than running away from them.

As long as we don’t allow things to cease, we just create new kamma that just reinforces our habits. When something arises, we grasp it and proliferate around it; and this complicates everything. Then these

things will be repeated and repeated throughout our lives – we cannot go around following our desires and fears and expect to realize peace. We contemplate fear and desire so that they do not delude us anymore: we have to know what is deluding us before we can let it go. Desire and fear are to be known as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. They are seen and penetrated so that suffering can burn itself away.

It's very important here to differentiate between *cessation* and *annihilation* – that is, the desire that comes into the mind to get rid of something. Cessation is the natural ending of any condition that has arisen. So it is not desire! It is not something that we create in the mind but it is the end of that which began, the death of that which is born. Therefore, cessation is not a self – it does not come about from a sense of 'I have to get rid of things', but when we allow that which has arisen to cease. To do that, one has to abandon craving – let it go. It doesn't mean rejecting or throwing away: 'abandoning' means letting go of it.

Then, when it has ceased, you experience *nirodha* – cessation, emptiness, non-attachment. *Nirodha* is another word for *nibbāna*. When you have let something go and allowed it to cease, then what is left is peace.

You can experience that peace through your own meditation. When you've let desire end in your own mind, that which is left over is very peaceful. That is true peacefulness, the Deathless. When you really know that as it is, you realize *nirodha sacca*, the truth of cessation, in which there's no self but there's still alertness and clarity. The real meaning of bliss is that peaceful, transcendent consciousness.

If we do not allow cessation, then we tend to operate from assumptions we make about ourselves without even knowing what we are doing. Sometimes, it is not until we start meditating that we begin to realize how in our lives so much fear and lack of confidence come from childhood experiences. I remember when I was a little boy, I had a very good friend who turned on me and rejected me. I was distraught for months after that. It left an indelible impression on my mind.

Then I realized through meditation just how much a little incident like that had affected my future relationships with others – I always had a tremendous fear of rejection. I never even thought of it until that particular memory kept rising up into my consciousness during meditation. The rational mind knows that it is ridiculous to go around thinking about the tragedies of childhood. But if they keep coming up into consciousness when you are middle-aged, maybe they are trying to tell you something about assumptions that were formed when you were a child.

When you begin to feel memories or obsessive fears coming up in meditation, rather than becoming frustrated or upset by them, see them as something to be accepted into consciousness so that you can let them go. You can arrange your daily life so that you never have to look at these things; then the conditions for them to actually arise are minimal. You can dedicate yourself to a lot of important causes and keep busy; then these anxieties and nameless fears never become conscious. But what happens when you let go? The desire or obsession moves – and it moves to cessation. It ends. And then you have the insight that there is the cessation of desire. So the third aspect of the third Noble Truth is: ‘Cessation has been realized.’

Realization

Cessation is to be realized. The Buddha said emphatically: ‘This is a Truth to be realized here and now.’ We do not have to wait until we die to find out if it’s all true – this teaching is for living human beings like ourselves. Each one of us has to realize it. I may tell you about it and encourage you to do it but I can’t make you realize it!

Don’t think of it as something remote or beyond your ability. When we talk about Dhamma or Truth, we say that it is here and now, and something we can see for ourselves. We can turn to it; we can incline towards the Truth. We can pay attention to the way it is, here and now, at this time and this place. That’s mindfulness – being alert and bringing

attention to the way it is. Through mindfulness, we investigate the sense of self, this sense of me and mine: my body, my feelings, my memories, my thoughts, my views, my opinions, my house, my car and so on.

My tendency was self-disparagement. So, for example, with the thought: 'I am Sumedho', I'd think of myself in negative terms: 'I'm no good.' But listen, from where does that arise and where does it cease? Or, 'I'm really better than you, I'm more highly attained. I've been living the holy life for a long time so I must be better than any of you!' Where does THAT arise and cease?

When there is arrogance, conceit or self-disparagement – whatever it is – examine it; listen inwardly: 'I am ...' Be aware and attentive to the space before you think it; then think it and notice the space that follows. Sustain your attention on that emptiness at the end and see how long you can hold your attention on it. See if you can hear a kind of ringing sound in the mind, the sound of silence, the primordial sound. When you concentrate your attention on that, you can reflect: 'Is there any sense of self?' You see that when you're really empty – when there's just clarity, alertness and attention – there's no self. There's no sense of me and mine. So, I go to that empty state and I contemplate Dhamma: I think, 'This is just as it is. This body here is just this way.' I can give it a name or not but right now, it's just this way. It's not Sumedho!

There's no Buddhist monk in the emptiness. 'Buddhist monk' is merely a convention, appropriate to time and place. When people praise you and say, 'How wonderful', you can know it as someone giving praise without taking it personally. You know there's no Buddhist monk there; it's just Suchness. It's just this way. If I want Amaravati to be a successful place and it is a great success, I'm happy. But if it all fails, if no one is interested, we can't pay the electricity bill and everything falls apart – failure! But really, there's no Amaravati. The idea of a person who is a Buddhist monk or a place called Amaravati – these are only conventions, not ultimate realities. Right now it's just this way, just the way it's supposed to be. One doesn't carry the burden

of such a place on one's shoulders because one sees it as it really is and there's no person to be involved in it. Whether it succeeds or fails is no longer important in the same way. In emptiness, things are just what they are. When we are aware in this way, it doesn't mean that we are indifferent to success or failure and that we don't bother to do anything. We can apply ourselves. We know what we can do; we know what has to be done and we can do it in the right way. Then everything becomes Dhamma, the way it is. We do things because that is the right thing to be doing at this time and in this place rather than out of a sense of personal ambition or fear of failure.

The path to the cessation of suffering is the path of perfection. Perfection can be a rather daunting word because we feel very imperfect. As personalities, we wonder how we can dare to even entertain the possibility of being perfect. Human perfection is something no one ever talks about; it doesn't seem at all possible to think of perfection in regard to being human. But an arahant is simply a human being who has perfected life, someone who has learned everything there is to learn through the basic law: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing.' An arahant does not need to know everything about everything; it is only necessary to know and fully understand this law.

We use Buddha-wisdom to contemplate Dhamma, the way things are. We take Refuge in Sangha, in that which is doing good and refraining from doing evil. Sangha is one thing, a community. It's not a group of individual personalities or different characters. The sense of being an individual person or a man or a woman is no longer important to us. This sense of Sangha is realized as a Refuge. There is that unity so that even though the manifestations are all individual, our realization is the same. Through being awake, alert and no longer attached, we realize cessation and we abide in emptiness where we all merge. There's no person there. People may arise and cease in the emptiness, but there's no person. There's just clarity, awareness, peacefulness and purity.

The fourth Noble Truth, like the first three, has three aspects. The first aspect is: ‘There is the Eightfold Path, the *aṭṭhangika magga* – the way out of suffering.’ It is also called the *ariya magga*, the Ariyan or Noble Path. The second aspect is: ‘This path should be developed.’ The final insight into arahantship is: ‘This path has been fully developed.’

The Eightfold Path is presented in a sequence: beginning with right (or perfect) understanding, *sammā-diṭṭhi*, it goes to right (or perfect) intention or aspiration, *sammā-sankappa*; these first two elements of the path are grouped together as Wisdom (*paññā*). Moral commitment (*sīla*) flows from *paññā*; this covers right speech, right action and right livelihood – also referred to as perfect speech, perfect action and perfect livelihood, *sammā-vācā*, *sammā-kammanta* and *sammā-ājīva*.

Then we have right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, *sammā-vāyāma*, *sammā-sati* and *sammā-samādhi*, which flow naturally from *sīla*. These last three provide emotional balance. They are about the heart – the heart that is liberated from self-view and from selfishness. With right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, the heart is pure, free from taints and defilements. When the heart is pure, the mind is peaceful. Wisdom (*paññā*), or right

understanding and right aspiration, comes from a pure heart. This takes us back to where we started.

These, then, are the elements of the Eightfold Path, grouped in three sections:

1. Wisdom (*paññā*)

- Right Understanding (*sammā-ditṭhi*)
- Right Aspiration (*sammā-sankappa*)

2. Morality (*sīla*)

- Right Speech (*sammā-vācā*)
- Right Action (*sammā-kammanta*)
- Right Livelihood (*sammā-ājīva*)

3. Concentration (*samādhi*)

- Right Effort (*sammā-vāyāma*)
- Right Mindfulness (*sammā-sati*)
- Right Concentration (*sammā-samādhi*)

The fact that we list them in order does not mean that they happen in a linear way, in sequence – they arise together. We may talk about the Eightfold Path and say ‘First you have right understanding, then you have right aspiration, then ...’. But actually, presented in this way, it simply teaches us to reflect upon the importance of taking responsibility for what we say and do in our lives.

Understanding

The first element of the Eightfold Path is right understanding. This arises through insights into the first three Noble Truths. If you have those insights, then there is perfect understanding of Dhamma – the understanding that all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing. It’s as simple as that. Now, you don’t have to spend much time reading ‘All that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing’ to understand the words – but it takes quite a while for most of us to

really know what the words mean, in a profound way rather than just through the intellect.

To use modern colloquial English, insight is ‘gut knowledge’ – it’s not just from ideas. It’s no longer, ‘I *think* I know’, or ‘Oh yes, that seems a reasonable, sensible thing, I agree with that. I like that thought.’ That kind of understanding is still from the brain whereas insight knowledge is profound. It is really known and doubt is no longer a problem.

This deep understanding comes from the previous nine insights. So there is a sequence leading to right understanding of things as they are, namely, that all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing and is not-self. With right understanding, you have given up the illusion of a self that is connected to mortal conditions. There is still the body, there are still feelings and thoughts, but they simply are what they are – there is no longer the belief that you are your body or your feelings or your thoughts. The emphasis is on ‘Things are what they are.’ We are not trying to say that things are not anything at all or that they are not what they are. They are exactly what they are and nothing more. But when we are ignorant, when we have not understood these truths, we tend to think things are more than what they are. We believe all kinds of things and we create all kinds of problems around the conditions that we experience.

So much of human anguish and despair comes from the added extra that is born of ignorance in the moment. It is sad to realize how the misery and anguish and despair of humanity are based on delusion; the despair is empty and meaningless. When you see this, you begin to feel infinite compassion for all beings. How can you hate anyone or bear grudges or condemn anyone who is caught in this bond of ignorance? Everyone is influenced to do the things they do by their wrong views of things.

In Meditation

As we meditate, we experience some tranquillity, a measure of calm in which the mind has slowed down. When we look at something like

a flower with a calm mind, we are looking at it as it is. When there is no grasping – nothing to gain or get rid of – then if what we see, hear or experience through the senses is beautiful, it is truly beautiful. We are not criticizing it, comparing it, trying to possess or own it; we find delight and joy in the beauty around us because there is no need to make anything out of it. It is exactly what it is.

Beauty reminds us of purity, truth and ultimate beauty. We should not see it as a lure to delude us: ‘These flowers are here just to attract me so I’ll get deluded by them’ – that’s the attitude of the old meditating grump! When we look at a member of the opposite sex with a pure heart, we appreciate the beauty without desire for some kind of contact or possession. We can delight in the beauty of other people, both men and women, when there is no selfish interest or desire. There is honesty; things are what they are. This is what we mean by liberation or *vimutti* in Pali. We are liberated from those bonds that distort and corrupt the beauty around us, such as the bodies we have. However, our minds can get so corrupt and negative and depressed and obsessed with things, that we no longer see them as they are. If we don’t have right understanding, we see everything through increasingly thick filters and veils.

Right understanding is to be developed through reflection, using the Buddha’s teaching. The Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta itself is a very interesting teaching to contemplate and use as a reference for reflection. We can also use other suttas from the Tipitaka,⁴¹ such as those dealing with *paṭiccasamuppāda* (dependent origination). This is a fascinating teaching to reflect upon. If you can contemplate such teachings, you can see very clearly the difference between the way things are as Dhamma and the point where we tend to create delusion out of the way things are. That is why we need to establish full conscious awareness of things as they are. If there is knowledge of the Four Noble Truths, then there is Dhamma.

With right understanding, everything is seen as Dhamma. For example, we are sitting here: this is Dhamma. We don't think of this body and mind as a personality with all its views and opinions and all the conditioned thoughts and reactions that we have acquired through ignorance. We reflect upon this moment now as: 'This is the way it is. This is Dhamma.' We bring into the mind the understanding that this physical formation is simply Dhamma. It is not-self; it is not personal.

Also, we see the sensitivity of this physical formation as Dhamma rather than taking it personally: 'I'm sensitive,' or 'I'm not sensitive' or, 'You're not sensitive to me.' 'Who's the most sensitive?'... 'Why do we feel pain? Why did God create pain; why didn't he just create pleasure? Why is there so much misery and suffering in the world? It's unfair. People die and we have to separate from the people we love; the anguish is terrible.'

There's no Dhamma in that, is there? It's all self-view: 'Poor me. I don't like this, I don't want it to be this way. I want security, happiness, pleasure and all the best of everything; it's not fair that I don't have these things. It's not fair that my parents were not arahants when I came into the world. It's not fair that they never elect arahants to be Prime Minister of Britain. If everything were fair, they would elect arahants to be Prime Minister!'

I am trying to take this sense of 'It's not right, it's not fair' to an absurdity in order to point out how we expect God to create everything for us and to make us happy and secure. That is often what people think, even if they don't say so. But when we reflect, we see: 'This is the way it is. Pain is like this and this is what pleasure is like. Consciousness is this way.' We feel. We breathe. We can aspire.

When we reflect, we contemplate our own humanity as it is. We don't take it on a personal level any more or blame anyone because things are not exactly as we like or want. It is the way it is, and we are the way we are. You might ask why we can't all be exactly the same – with the same anger, the same greed and the same ignorance; without

all the variations and permutations. However, even though you can trace human experience to basic things, each one of us has our own to deal with – our own obsessions and tendencies, which are always different in quality and quantity to those of someone else.

Why can't we all be exactly equal, have exactly the same of everything and all look alike – one androgynous being? In a world like that, nothing would be unfair, no differences would be allowed, everything would be absolutely perfect and there would be no possibility of inequality. But as we recognize Dhamma, we see that, within the realm of conditions, no two things are identical. They are all quite different, infinitely variable and changing, and the more we try to make conditions conform to our ideas, the more frustrated we get. We try to create each other and a society to fit the ideas we have of how things should be, but we always end up feeling frustrated. With reflection, we realize: 'This is the way it is', this is the way things have to be – they can only be this way.

Now that's not a fatalistic or negative reflection. It's not an attitude of: 'That's the way it is and there's nothing you can do about it.' It is a very positive response of accepting the flow of life for what it is. Even if it's not what we want, we can accept it and learn from it.

Intelligent Discrimination

We are conscious, intelligent beings with retentive memories. We have language. Over the past several thousand years, we have developed reason, logic and discriminative intelligence. What we must do is figure out how to use these capacities as tools for realization of Dhamma rather than as personal acquisitions or personal problems. People who develop their discriminative intelligence often end up turning it upon themselves; they become very self-critical and even begin to hate themselves. This is because our discriminative faculties tend to focus upon what is wrong with everything. That's what discrimination is about: seeing how *this* is different from *that*. When you do that to

yourself, what do you end up with? Just a whole list of flaws and faults that make you sound absolutely hopeless.

When we are developing right understanding, we use our intelligence for reflection and contemplation of things. We also use our mindfulness, being open to the way it is. When we reflect in this way, we are using mindfulness and wisdom together. So now we are using our ability to discriminate with wisdom (*vijjā*) rather than with ignorance (*avijjā*). This teaching of the Four Noble Truths is to help you to use your intelligence – your ability to contemplate, reflect and think – in a wise way rather than in a self-destructive, greedy or hateful way.

Right Aspiration

The second element of the Eightfold Path is *sammā-sankappa*. Sometimes this is translated as right thought, thinking in the right way. However, it actually has more of a dynamic quality – like ‘intention’, ‘attitude’ or ‘aspiration.’ I like to use ‘aspiration’ because for me this is very meaningful in this Eightfold Path – we do aspire.

It’s important to see that aspiration is not desire. The Pali word ‘*taṇhā*’ means desire that comes out of ignorance, whereas ‘*sankappa*’ means aspiration not coming from ignorance. Aspiration might seem like a kind of desire to us because in English we use the word ‘desire’ for everything of that nature – either aspiring or wanting. You might think that aspiration is a kind of *taṇhā*, wanting to *become* enlightened (*bhava-taṇhā*) – but *sammā-sankappa* comes from right understanding, seeing clearly. It’s not about wanting to become anything; it is not the desire to become an enlightened person. With right understanding, that whole illusion and way of thinking no longer makes sense.

Aspiration is a feeling, intention, attitude or movement within us. Our spirit rises, it does not sink downwards – it is not desperation! When there is right understanding, we aspire to truth, beauty and goodness. *Sammā-ditṭhi* and *sammā-sankappa*, right understanding and

right aspiration, are called *paññā* or wisdom and they make up the first of the three sections in the Eightfold Path.

We can contemplate: Why is it that we still feel discontented, even when we have the best of everything? We are not completely happy even if we have a beautiful house, a car, the perfect marriage, lovely bright children and all the rest of it – and we are certainly not contented when we do not have all these things! ... If we don't have them, we can think, 'Well, if I had the best, *then* I'd be content.' But we wouldn't be. The earth is not the place for our contentment; it's not supposed to be. When we realize that, we no longer expect contentment from planet Earth; we do not make that demand.

Until we realize that this planet cannot satisfy all our wants, we keep on asking, 'Why can't you make me content, Mother Earth?' We are like little children who suckle their mother, constantly trying to get the most out of her and wanting her always to nurture and feed them and make them feel content.

If we were content, we wouldn't wonder about such things. And yet we do recognize that there is something more than just the ground under our feet; there is something above us that we cannot quite understand. We have the ability to wonder and ponder about life, to contemplate its meaning. If you want to know the meaning of your life, you cannot be content with material wealth, comfort and security alone.

So we aspire to know the truth. You might think that that is a kind of presumptuous desire or aspiration, 'Who do I think I am? Little old me trying to know the truth about everything.' But there is that aspiration. Why do we have it if it is not possible? Consider the concept of ultimate reality. An absolute or ultimate truth is a very refined concept; the idea of God, the Deathless or the Immortal, is actually a very refined thought. We aspire to know that ultimate reality. The animal side of us does not aspire; it doesn't know anything about such aspirations. But there is in each of us an intuitive intelligence that wants to know; it is always with us but we tend not to notice it; we do not understand it.

We tend to discard or mistrust it – especially modern materialists. They just think it’s fantasy and not real.

As for myself, I was really happy when I realized that the planet is not my real home. I had always suspected it. I can remember even as a small child thinking, ‘I don’t really belong here.’ I’ve never particularly felt that planet Earth is where I really belong – even before I was a monk, I never felt that I fitted into the society. For some people, that could be just a neurotic problem, but perhaps it could also be the kind of intuition children often have. When you are innocent, your mind is very intuitive. The mind of a child is more intuitively in touch with mysterious forces than most adult minds are. As we grow up, we become conditioned to think in very set ways and to have fixed ideas about what is real and what is not. As we develop our egos, society dictates what is real and what is not, what is right and what is wrong, and we begin to interpret the world through those fixed perceptions. One thing we find charming in children is that they don’t do that yet; they still see the world with the intuitive mind that is not yet conditioned.

Meditation is a way of deconditioning the mind that helps us to let go of all the hard-line views and fixed ideas we have. Ordinarily, what is real is dismissed while what is not real is given all our attention. This is what ignorance (*avijjā*) is.

The contemplation of our human aspiration connects us to something higher than just the animal kingdom or the planet Earth. To me, that connection seems more true than the idea that this is all there is; that once we die our bodies rot and there’s nothing more than that. When we ponder and wonder about this universe we are living in, we see that it’s very vast, mysterious and incomprehensible to us. Then, when we trust in our intuitive mind and let go of fixed, conditioned reactions, we can be receptive to things that we may have forgotten or have never been open to before.

We can have the fixed idea of being a personality, of being a man or a woman, being an English person or an American. These things can be

very real to us, and we can get very upset and angry about them. We're even willing to kill each other over these conditioned views that we hold and believe in and never question. Without right aspiration and right understanding, without *paññā*, we never see the true nature of these views.

Right Speech, Right Action and Right Livelihood

Sīla, the moral aspect of the Eightfold Path, consists of right speech, right action and right livelihood; that means taking responsibility for our speech and being careful about what we do with our bodies. When I'm mindful and aware, I speak in a way that is appropriate to time and place; likewise, I act or work according to time and place.

We begin to realize that we have to be careful about what we do and say; otherwise we constantly hurt ourselves. If you do or say things that are unkind or cruel there is always an immediate result. In the past, you might have been able to get away with lying by distracting yourself, going on to something else so that you didn't have to think about it. You could forget all about things for a while until eventually they'd come back upon you, but if we practise *sīla*, things seem to come back right away. Even when I exaggerate, something in me says, 'You shouldn't exaggerate, you should be more careful.' I used to have the habit of exaggerating things – it's part of our culture; it seems perfectly normal. But when you're aware, the effect of even the slightest lie or gossip is immediate because you're completely open, vulnerable and sensitive. So then you are careful about what you do; you realize that it's important to be responsible for what you do and say.

The impulse to help someone is a skilful *dhamma*.⁴² If you see someone fall over on the floor in a faint, a skilful *dhamma* goes through your mind: 'Help this person', and you go to help them recover from their fainting spell. If you do it with an empty mind – not out of any personal desire for gain, but just out of compassion and because it's the right thing to do – then it's simply a skilful *dhamma*. It's not personal ;

⁴² In this context (and spelt with a lower-case 'd') a *dhamma* is a mind-object, such as a thought or wish.

it's not yours. But if you do it out of a desire to gain merit and to impress other people or because the person is rich and you expect some reward for your action, then – even though the action is skilful – you're making a personal connection to it, and this reinforces the sense of self. When we do good works out of mindfulness and wisdom rather than out of ignorance, they're skilful *dhammas* without personal kamma.

The monastic order was established by the Buddha so that men and women could live an impeccable life which is completely blameless. As a bhikkhu, you live within a whole system of training precepts called the *Pāṭimokkha* discipline. When you live under this discipline, even if your actions or speech are heedless, at least they don't leave strong impressions. You can't have money so you're not able to just go anywhere until you're invited. You are celibate. Since you live on alms-food, you're not killing any animals. You don't even pick flowers or leaves or do any kind of action that would disturb the natural flow in any way; you're completely harmless. In fact, in Thailand we had to carry water strainers with us to filter out any kind of living things in the water such as mosquito larvae. It's totally forbidden to intentionally kill things.

I have been living under this Rule for twenty-five years now so I haven't really done any heavy kammic actions. Under this discipline, one lives in a very harmless, very responsible way. Perhaps the most difficult part is with speech; speech habits are the most difficult to break and let go of – but they can also improve. By reflection and contemplation, one begins to see the unpleasantness of saying foolish things or just babbling or chatting away for no good reason.

For laypeople, right livelihood is something that is developed as you come to know your intentions for what you do. You can try to avoid deliberately harming other creatures or earning a living in a harmful, unkind way. You can also try to avoid livelihood which may cause other people to become addicted to drugs or drink or which might endanger the ecological balance of the planet.

So these three – right action, right speech and right livelihood – follow from right understanding or perfect knowing. We begin to feel that we want to live in a way that is a blessing to this planet or, at least, that does not harm it.

Right understanding and right aspiration have a definite influence on what we do and say. So *paññā*, or wisdom, leads to *sīla*: right speech, right action and right livelihood. *Sīla* refers to our speech and actions; with *sīla* we contain the sexual drive or the violent use of the body – we don't use it for killing or stealing. In this way, *paññā* and *sīla* work together in perfect harmony.

Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration

Right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration refer to your spirit, your heart. When we think of the spirit, we point to the centre of the chest, to the heart. So we have *paññā* (the head), *sīla* (the body) and *samādhi* (the heart). You can use your own body as a kind of chart, a symbol of the Eightfold Path. These three are integrated, working together for realization and supporting each other like a tripod. One is not dominating the other and exploiting or rejecting anything.

They work together: the wisdom from right understanding and right intention; then morality, which is right speech, right action and right livelihood; and right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration – the balanced equanimous mind, emotional serenity. Serenity is where the emotions are balanced, supporting each other. They're not going up and down. There's a sense of bliss, of serenity; there is perfect harmony between the intellect, the instincts and the emotions. They're mutually supportive, helping each other. They're no longer conflicting or taking us to extremes and, because of that, we begin to feel a tremendous peacefulness in our minds. There is a sense of ease and fearlessness coming from the Eightfold Path – a sense of equanimity and emotional balance. We feel at ease rather than that sense of anxiety, that tension and emotional conflict. There is clarity;

there is peacefulness, stillness, knowing. This insight of the Eightfold Path should be developed; this is *bhāvanā*. We use the word *bhāvanā* to signify development.

Aspects of Meditation

This reflectiveness of mind or emotional balance is developed as a result of practising concentration and mindfulness meditation. For instance, you can experiment during a retreat and spend one hour doing *samatha* meditation where you are just concentrating your mind on one object, say the sensation of breathing. Keep bringing it into consciousness and sustain it so that it actually has a continuity of presence in the mind.

In this way, you are moving towards what is going on in your own body rather than being pulled out into objects of the senses. If you don't have any refuge within, then you are constantly going out, being absorbed into books, food and all sorts of distractions. But this endless movement of the mind is very exhausting. So instead, the practice becomes one of observing the breath – which means that you have to withdraw or not follow the tendency to find something outside of yourself. You have to bring your attention to the breathing of your own body and concentrate the mind on that sensation. As you let go of gross form, you actually become that feeling, that very sign itself. Whatever you absorb into, you become that for a period of time. When you really concentrate, you have become that very tranquillized condition. You have become tranquil. This is what we call becoming. *Samatha* meditation is a becoming process.

But that tranquillity, if you investigate it, is not satisfactory tranquillity. There is something missing in it because it is dependent on a technique, on being attached and holding on, on something that still begins and ends. What you become, you can only become temporarily because becoming is a changing thing. It is not a permanent condition. So whatever you become, you will unbecome. It is not ultimate reality.

No matter how high you might go in concentration, it will always be an unsatisfactory condition. *Samatha* meditation takes you to some very high and radiant experiences in your mind – but they all end.

Then, if you practise *vipassanā* meditation for another hour by just being mindful and letting go of everything and accepting the uncertainty, the silence and the cessation of conditions, the result is that you will feel peaceful rather than tranquil. And that peacefulness is a perfect peacefulness. It is complete. It is not the tranquillity from *samatha*, which has something imperfect or unsatisfactory about it even at its best. The realization of cessation, as you develop that and understand that more and more, brings you true peacefulness, non-attachment, *nibbāna*.

Thus *samatha* and *vipassanā* are the two divisions in meditation. One is developing concentrated states of mind on refined objects in which your consciousness becomes refined through that concentration. But being terribly refined, having a great intellect and a taste for great beauty, makes anything coarse unbearable because of the attachment to what is refined. People who have devoted their lives to refinement only find life terribly frustrating and frightening when they can no longer maintain such high standards.

Rationality and Emotion

If you love rational thought and are attached to ideas and perceptions, then you tend to despise the emotions. You can notice this tendency if, when you start to feel emotions, you say, ‘I’m going to shut it out. I don’t want to feel those things.’ You don’t like to be feeling anything because you can get into a kind of high from the purity of intelligence and the pleasure of rational thinking. The mind relishes the way it is logical and controllable, the way it makes sense. It is just so clean and neat and precise like mathematics – but the emotions are all over the place, aren’t they? They are not precise, they are not neat and they can easily get out of control.

So the emotional nature is often despised. We are frightened of it. For example, men often feel very frightened of emotions because we are brought up to believe that men do not cry. As a little boy, at least in my generation, we were taught that boys do not cry so we'd try to live up to the standards of what boys are supposed to be. They would say, 'You are a boy', and so we'd try to be what our parents said we should be. The ideas of the society affect our minds, and because of that, we find emotions embarrassing. Here in England, people generally find emotions very embarrassing; if you get a little too emotional, they assume that you must be Italian or some other nationality.

If you're very rational and you have figured everything out, then you don't know what to do when people get emotional. If somebody starts crying, you think, 'What am I supposed to do?' Maybe you say, 'Cheer up; it's all right, dear. It'll be all right, there's nothing to cry about.' If you are very attached to rational thought, then you just tend to dismiss it with logic, but emotions do not respond to logic. Often they *react* to logic, but they don't *respond*. Emotion is a very sensitive thing and it works in a way that we sometimes don't comprehend. If we've never really studied or tried to understand what it is to feel life, and really opened and allowed ourselves to be sensitive, then emotional things are very frightening and embarrassing to us. We don't know what they are all about because we have rejected that side of ourselves.

On my thirtieth birthday, I realized that I was an emotionally undeveloped man. It was an important birthday for me. I realized that I was a full-grown, mature man – I no longer considered myself a youth, but emotionally, I think I was about six years old some of the time. I really had not developed on that level very much. Even though I could maintain the kind of poise and presence of a mature man in society, I did not always feel that way. I still had very strong unresolved feelings and fears in my mind. It became apparent that I had to do something about that, as the thought that I might have to spend the rest of my life at the emotional age of six was quite a dreary prospect.

This is where many of us in our society get stuck. For example, American society does not allow you to develop emotionally, to mature. It does not understand that need at all, so it doesn't provide any rites of passage for men. The society does not provide that kind of introduction into a mature world; you are expected to be immature your whole life. You are supposed to *act* mature, but you are not expected to *be* mature. Therefore, very few people are. Emotions are not really understood or resolved – their childish tendencies are merely suppressed rather than developed into maturity.

What meditation does is to offer a chance to mature on the emotional plane. Perfect emotional maturity would be *sammā-vāyāma*, *sammā-sati* and *sammā-samādhi*. This is a reflection; you will not find this in any book – it is for you to contemplate. Perfect emotional maturity comprises right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration. It is present when one is not caught in fluctuations and vicissitudes; when one has balance and clarity and is able to be receptive and sensitive.

Things as They Are

With right effort, there can be a cool kind of acceptance of a situation rather than the panic that comes from thinking that it's up to me to set everybody straight, make everything right and solve everybody's problems. We do the best we can, but we also realize that it's not up to us to do everything and make everything right.

At one time when I was at Wat Pah Pong with Ajahn Chah, I could see a lot of things going wrong in the monastery. So I went up to him and I said, 'Ajahn Chah, these things are going wrong; you've got to do something about it.' He looked at me and he said, 'Oh, you suffer a lot, Sumedho. You suffer a lot. It'll change.' I thought, 'He doesn't care! This is the monastery that he's devoted his life to and he's just letting it go down the drain!' But he was right. After a while it began to change and, through just bearing with it, people began to see what they were doing. Sometimes we have to let things go down the drain in

order for people to see and to experience that. Then we can learn how not to go down the drain.

Do you see what I mean? Sometimes situations in our life are just *this* way. There's nothing one can do so we allow them to be that way; even if they get worse, we allow them to get worse. But it's not a fatalistic or negative thing we're doing; it's a kind of patience – being willing to bear with something; allowing it to change naturally rather than egotistically trying to prop everything up and cleaning it all up out of our aversion and distaste for a mess.

Then, when people push our buttons, we're not always offended, hurt or upset by the things that happen, or shattered and destroyed by the things that people say or do. One person I know tends to exaggerate everything. If something goes wrong today, she will say, 'I'm utterly and absolutely shattered!' – when all that has happened is that some little problem occurred. However, her mind exaggerates it to such an extent that a very small thing can absolutely destroy her for the day. When we see this, we should realize that there is a great imbalance because little things should not totally shatter anyone.

I realized that I could be easily offended so I took a vow not to be offended. I had noticed how easy it was for me to be offended by little things, whether intentional or unintentional. We can see how easy it is to feel hurt, wounded, offended, upset or worried – how something in us is always trying to be nice, but always feels a little offended by this or a little hurt by that.

With reflection, you can see that the world is like this; it's a sensitive place. It is not always going to soothe you and make you feel happy, secure and positive. Life is full of things that can offend, hurt, wound or shatter. This is life. It is this way. If somebody speaks in a cross tone of voice, you are going to feel it. But then the mind can go on and be offended: 'Oh, it really hurt when she said that to me; you know, that was not a very nice tone of voice. I felt quite wounded. I've never done anything to hurt her.' The proliferating mind goes on like that, doesn't

it – you have been shattered, wounded or offended! But then if you contemplate, you realize it's just sensitivity.

When you contemplate this way, it's not that you are trying not to feel. When somebody talks to you in an unkind tone of voice, it's not that you don't feel it at all. We are not trying to be insensitive. Rather, we are trying not to give it the wrong interpretation, not to take it on a personal level. Having balanced emotions means that people can say things that are offensive and you can take it. You have the balance and emotional strength not to be offended, wounded or shattered by what happens in life.

If you are someone who is always being wounded or offended by life, you always have to run off and hide or you have to find a group of obsequious sycophants to live with, people who say: 'You're wonderful, Ajahn Sumedho.' 'Am I really wonderful?' 'Yes, you are.' 'You're just saying that, aren't you?' 'No, no, I mean it from the bottom of my heart.' 'Well, that person over there doesn't think I'm wonderful.' 'Well, he's stupid!' 'That's what I thought.' It's like the story of the emperor's new clothes, isn't it? You have to seek special environments so that everything is affirmed for you – safe and not threatening in any way.

Harmony

When there are right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration, then one is fearless. There is fearlessness because there is nothing to be frightened of. One has the guts to look at things and not take them in the wrong way. One has the wisdom to contemplate and reflect upon life. One has the security and confidence of *sīla*, the strength of one's moral commitment, and the determination to do good and refrain from doing evil with body and speech. In this way, the whole thing holds together as a path for development. It is a perfect path because everything is helping and supporting; the body, the emotional nature (the sensitivity of feeling), and the intelligence. They are all in perfect harmony, supporting each other.

Without that harmony, our instinctual nature can go all over the place. If we have no moral commitment, then our instincts can take control. For example, if we just follow sexual desire without any reference to morality, then we become caught up in all kinds of things that cause self-aversion. There is adultery, promiscuity and disease, and all the disruption and confusion that come from not reining in our instinctive nature through the limitations of morality.

We can use our intelligence to cheat and lie, can't we, but when we have a moral foundation, we are guided by wisdom and by *samādhi*; these lead to emotional balance and emotional strength. But we don't use wisdom to suppress sensitivity. We don't dominate our emotions by thinking and by suppressing our emotional nature. This is what we have tended to do in the West; we've used our rational thoughts and ideals to dominate and suppress our emotions, and thus become insensitive to things, to life and to ourselves.

However, in the practice of mindfulness through *vipassanā* meditation, the mind is totally receptive and open so that it has this fullness and an all-embracing quality. And because it is open, the mind is also reflective. When you concentrate on a point, your mind is no longer reflective – it is absorbed into the quality of that object. The reflective ability of the mind comes through mindfulness, whole-mindedness. You are not filtering out or selecting. You are just noting that whatever arises ceases. You contemplate that if you are attached to anything that arises, it ceases. You have the experience that even though something might be attractive while it is arising, it changes towards cessation. Then its attractiveness diminishes and we have to find something else to absorb into.

The thing about being human is that we have to touch the Earth, we have to accept the limitations of this human form and planetary life. And just by doing that, then the way out of suffering isn't through getting out of our human experience by living in refined conscious states, but by embracing the totality of all the human and *Brahma*

realms through mindfulness. In this way, the Buddha pointed to a total realization rather than a temporary escape through refinement and beauty. This is what the Buddha means when he is pointing the way to nibbāna.

The Eightfold Path as a Reflective Teaching

In this Eightfold Path, the eight elements work like eight legs supporting you. It's not like: one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight on a linear scale; it is more a case of all factors working together. It's not that you develop *paññā* first and then when you have *paññā*, you can develop your *sīla*; and once your *sīla* is developed, then you will have *samādhi*. That is how we think, isn't it: 'You have to have one, then two and then three.' As an actual realization, developing the Eightfold Path is an experience in a moment, it's all one. All the parts are working as one strong development; it's not a linear process – we might think that way because we can only have one thought at a time.

Everything I have said about the Eightfold Path and the Four Noble Truths is only a reflection. What is really important is for you to realize what I am actually doing as I reflect rather than to grasp the things that I am saying. It is a process of bringing the Eightfold Path into your mind, using it as a reflective teaching so that you can consider what it really means. Don't think you know it because you can say, '*Sammā-ditṭhi* means "right understanding." *Sammā-sankappa* means "right thought."' This is intellectual understanding. Someone might say, 'No, I think *sammā-sankappa* means...' And you answer, 'No, in the book it says "right thought." You've got it wrong.' That's not reflection.

We can translate *sammā-sankappa* as right thought or attitude or intention; we try things out. We can use these tools for contemplation rather than thinking that they are absolutely fixed, and that we have to accept them in an orthodox style; any kind of variation from the exact interpretation is heresy. Sometimes our minds do think in that rigid way, but we are trying to transcend that way of thinking by developing

a mind that moves around, watches, investigates, considers, wonders and reflects.

I'm trying to encourage each one of you to be brave enough to consider the way things are with wisdom rather than have someone tell you whether you are ready or not for enlightenment. The Buddhist teaching is one of being enlightened now rather than doing anything to *become* enlightened. The idea that you must do something to *become* enlightened can only come from wrong understanding. Then enlightenment is merely another condition dependent upon something else – so it is not really enlightenment. It is only a perception of enlightenment.

However, I'm not talking about any kind of perception but about being alert to the way things are. The present moment is what we can actually observe: we can't observe tomorrow yet, and we can only *remember* yesterday. But Buddhist practice is very immediate to the here and now, looking at the way things are.

Now how do we do that? Well, first we have to look at our doubts and fears – because we get so attached to our views and opinions that they take us into doubt about what we are doing. People might develop a false confidence believing that they are enlightened. But believing that you are enlightened or believing that you are not enlightened are both delusions. What I am pointing to is *being* enlightened rather than believing in it. And for this, we need to open to the way things are.

We start with the way things are right now – such as the breathing of our own bodies. What has that to do with truth, with enlightenment? Does watching my breath mean that I am enlightened? But the more you try to think about it and figure out what it is, the more uncertain and insecure you'll feel. All we can do in this conventional form is to let go of delusion. That is the practice of the Four Noble Truths and the development of the Eightfold Path.

Glossary

Ajahn	(Thai, from Pali <i>Ācariya</i>) teacher, often used as the title of the senior monk or monks at a monastery; also spelt 'achaan', 'acharn' (and several other ways)
<i>ānāpānasati</i>	the meditative practice of focusing the mind on in- and out-breathing
arahant	a fully enlightened person; according to the Pali Canon, the fourth stage on the path
bhikkhu	alms-mendicant; the term for a Buddhist monk, who lives on alms and abides by training precepts which define a life of renunciation and morality
Buddha-rupa	an image of the Buddha
dependent origination	a step-by-step presentation of how suffering arises dependent on ignorance and desire, and ceases with their cessation
<i>dhamma/ā</i>	mental qualities, skilful or unskilful, that are pertinent to the process of awakening
Dhamma	the way it is, the true order of reality; often the Buddha's teachings
kamma	conscious intended action
kuti	a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or nun

Observance Day	(in Pali, <i>Uposatha</i>) a sacred day or ‘sabbath’ occurring every lunar fortnight. On this day, Buddhists reaffirm their Dhamma practice in terms of precepts and meditation. The Sangha will also recite their training rules, <i>Pāṭimokkha</i> , on this day.
samaṇa	renunciant, contemplative (term for ordained monks or nuns)
sotāpanna	literally ‘stream-enterer’, one whose realization has transcended the first three ‘fetters’ or mental structures that block awakening. These are: identification with one’s personality; attachment to customs and systems; and wavering uncertainty as to Dhamma. Having transcended these, a ‘stream-enterer’ is said to inevitably realize complete awakening within a maximum of seven lifetimes. The other three of the four stages of enlightenment are <i>sakadāgāmi</i> , <i>anāgāmi</i> , arahant (once-returner, non-returner, fully enlightened person).
Tipitaka	literally ‘three baskets’ – the collections of the Buddhist scriptures, classified according to Sutta (Discourses), Vinaya (Discipline or Training) and Abhidhamma (Metaphysics)
tudong	(Thai, from Pali <i>dhutaṅga</i>) a practice of walking for weeks or months in remote places with no guarantees of food or lodgings



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This book is the first of five volumes created to honour the life and work of Ajahn Sumedho on his 80th Birthday

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