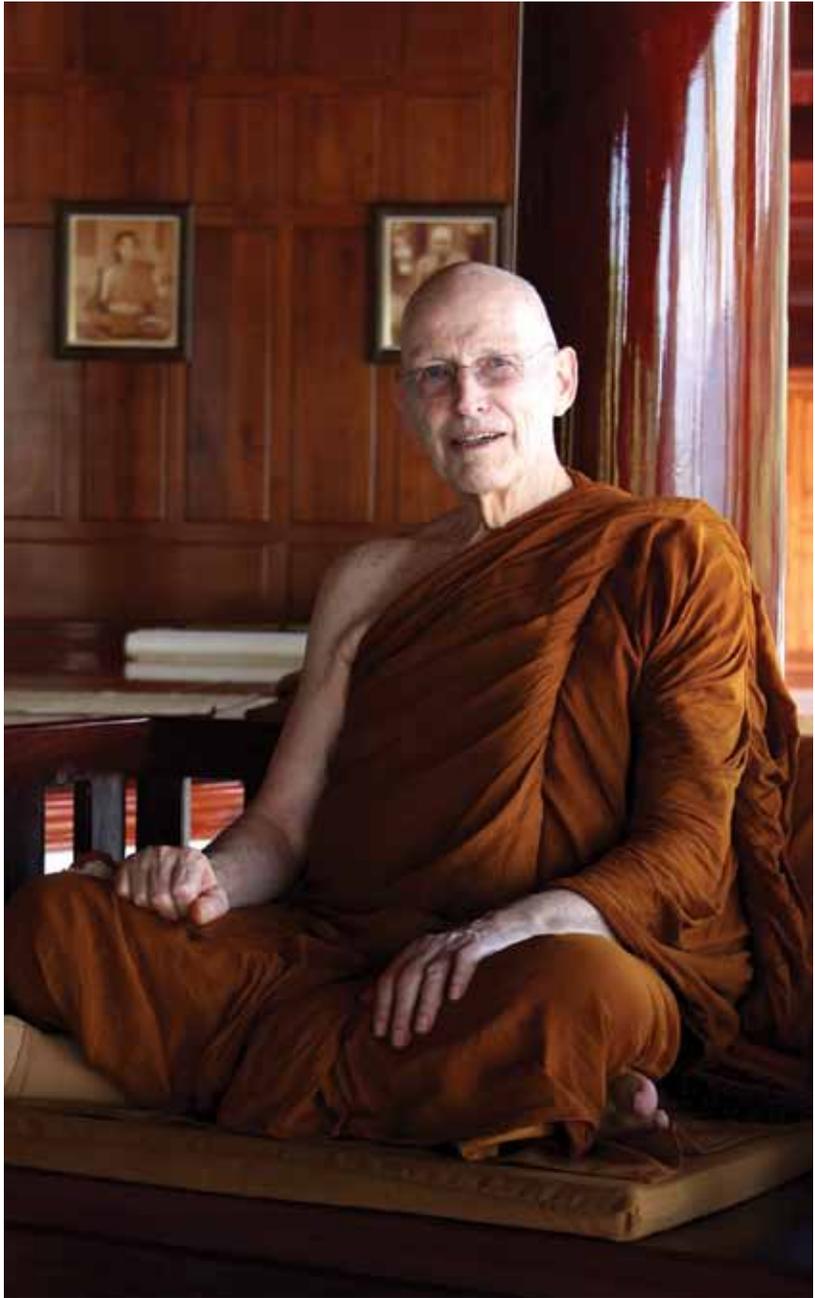


**Ajahn  
Sumedho**

THE  
ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 3

# Direct Realization





**Ajahn  
Sumedho**

THE  
ANTHOLOGY



AMARAVATI  
PUBLICATIONS



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ANTHOLOGY

VOLUME 3

# Direct Realization

*Direct Realization*  
*The Ajahn Sumedho Anthology*

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## Preface

This volume contains material gathered from talks given by Ajahn Sumedho in the late 1980s and 1990s. It is made up of two collections – *The Way It Is* and *Buddhism Now!* – and an interview with John Baxter, conducted at Amaravati in 1986.

The original version of *The Way It Is* was published in 1991. The current version differs through the inclusion of another talk, now entitled ‘Returning to the Way Things Are’ which originally appeared in the collection *Seeing the Way* where it was called ‘The Way It Is.’ This talk was in fact the opening talk of the 1988 Winter Retreat at Amaravati from which many of the other chapters in the book derive, but had not been included because of its appearance in *Seeing the Way*. It now feels appropriate to place it within the context in which it was first presented. The title has been changed because the book already had a chapter titled ‘The Way It Is’ which has now been retitled ‘This is the Way It Is’ to avoid confusion(!). Some of the talks were part of a series that Ajahn Sumedho gave to the monastic community on the theme of dependent origination; as this can be a complex teaching, we have included Ajahn Sucitto’s introductory note on the theme as a guide.

*Buddhism Now!* is a collection of articles from a magazine of that name produced by the Buddhist Publications Group, currently based in Totnes, England. These articles were edited talks given

by Ajahn Sumedho at the BPG's week-long Summer Schools in Leicester (which he attended for eighteen consecutive years) and from retreats at Amaravati that BPG's editors attended. We wish to express gratitude for the offering of this material from the BPG archive.

Ajahn Sucitto





**The Way It Is**



## A note before you begin

This book contains a collection of teachings that Ajahn Sumedho gave in the 1980s (with the exception of ‘Investigating the Mind’, which was given in 1979). As you will deduce from the people who are referred to, some talks were addressed to the monastic community at Amaravati during their Winter Retreat of 1988.

In the monastic retreats Ajahn Sumedho would often develop a theme from the Buddha’s teaching over a couple of months, linking it to other aspects of the Dhamma, embellishing it with accounts of his personal experiences, demonstrating its relevance to the society in general, or using it as an exhortation to the Sangha to live up to their aspiration of awakening. Although it is not possible to render the tonal depth and variety of these talks in a printed work, the mixture of short exhortations and pointers, longer contemplative reflections mingled with the chants that the monks and nuns would recite daily may suggest the atmosphere of the monastery, as well as the contemplative background against which the teachings were offered.

During this monastic retreat Ajahn Sumedho offered reflections based on the dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) teaching of the Buddha. The dependent origination traces the process whereby

suffering (*dukkha*) is compounded out of ignorance (*avijjā*) and conversely suffering is eliminated (or rather not created) with the cessation of ignorance. Ajahn Sumedho suggests that in terms of direct experience, ignorance is the illusion of selfhood, the conceit ‘this is what I am, this I am not’ that is a prime condition for the arising of suffering.

This sense of identity can be detected in a latent state as self-consciousness, or as habitual mood of the mind such as conceit or self-criticism, or it can manifest as selfish bodily or verbal activity. The profundity of the dependent origination is that it describes how even at its most passive, this ‘self-view’ initiates habitual actions (*kamma*) and attitudes through which even a silent and well-intentioned meditator experiences suffering. These habitual actions range from sustained thoughts, inclinations and attitudes on the ‘internal’, psychological plane to the ‘outer’ realm of verbal and bodily action. All such intentional activity is termed *saṅkhāra*. Even moral action based on self-view can lead to anxiety, doubt, ‘sorrow, grief, pain, lamentation and despair.’ Such is the meaning of the first ‘link’ of dependent origination ‘*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*’, or ‘dependent on ignorance are kammic formations.’

In its most complete formulation, dependent origination is expressed as:

*‘avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanam saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmaṇaṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā sambhavanti, evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhāsa samudayo hoti.’*

This deals with the arising of *dukkha*. The cessation of *dukkha* is then mapped out:

*‘avijjāyatveva asesavirāganirodhā saṅkhāranirodho, saṅkhāranirodhā viññāṇanirodho, viññāṇanirodhā nāmarūpanirodho, nāmarūpanirodhā*

*saḷāyatananirodho, saḷāyatananirodhā phassanirodho, phassanirodhā vedanānirodho, vedanānirodhā taṇhānirodho, taṇhānirodhā upādānanirodho, upādānanirodhā bhavanirodho, bhavanirodhā jātinirodho, jātinirodhā jarāmaṇaṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā nirujjhanti, evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhāsa nirodho hoti'*

In English this can be translated as: Dependent on ignorance are habitual formations; dependent on habitual (*kamma*) formations is consciousness; dependent on consciousness are name-and-form (mentality-corporeality); dependent on name-and-form are the six sense-bases; dependent on the six sense-bases is contact; dependent on contact is feeling; dependent on feeling is desire; dependent on desire is grasping; dependent on grasping is becoming; dependent on becoming is birth; dependent on birth is old age, sickness and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair. Through the entire ceasing of this ignorance habitual formations cease; through the ceasing of habitual formations consciousness ceases; through the ceasing of consciousness name-and-form cease; through the ceasing of name-and-form the six sense-bases cease; through the ceasing of the six sense-bases contact ceases; through the ceasing of contact feeling ceases; through the ceasing of feeling desire ceases; through the ceasing of desire grasping ceases; through the ceasing of grasping becoming ceases; through the ceasing of becoming birth ceases; through the ceasing of birth old age, sickness and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to cease. Thus is the ceasing of this whole mass of suffering.'

There are many forms of dependence that are concerned in this analysis. It is helpful to remember that *paccaya* can mean 'dependent on', 'supports' or 'conditions'. It does not necessarily mean 'creates'. For example one could say 'walking is dependent on legs' or 'ice is dependent on water' or 'catching the train is dependent on getting to the station at the right time' or even 'the view is dependent on the non-appearance of intervening objects.' Understanding this, the contemplative begins to realize that just as 'arising dependence' need

not mean ‘creation’, the ‘cessation’ so valued by the Buddha need not mean ‘annihilation’, but may also be understood as ‘comes to rest’ or ‘doesn’t create anything.’ So in this lifetime, when nibbāna is to be realized, mentality-corporeality can ‘cease’ – i.e. the identification with physical and mental kamma-formations can cease so that life is no longer lived from the pleasure/pain principle dictated by the senses (*nāma-rūpa-saḷāyatana-phassa-vedanā-tañhā*). In this spirit one could interpret the sequence in a more fluid way, for example:

To the extent to which (*paccaya*) the mind has not comprehended (*avijjā*) Truth, habitual drives (*saṅkhāra*) manifest and condition (*paccaya*) awareness into a discriminative mode (*viññāṇa*) that operates in terms of (*paccaya*) subject and object (*nāmarūpa*) held (*paccaya*) to exist on either side of the six sense-doors (*saḷāyatana*). These sense-doors open dependent (*paccaya*) on contact (*phassa*) that can arouse (*paccaya*) varying degrees of feeling (*vedanā*). Feeling stimulates (*paccaya*) desire (*tañhā*) and, according to (*paccaya*) the power of desire, attention lingers (*upādāna*) and so personal aims and obsessions develop (*bhava*) to give (*paccaya*) rise to self-consciousness (*jāti*). That self-consciousness, mental or physical, once arisen must follow (*paccaya*) the cycle of maturing and passing away (*jarā-maraṇa*) with the resultant sense of sadness (*soka*) varying from sorrow (*parideva*) to depression (*domanassa*), to anguish (*dukkha*) and emotional breakdown (*upāyāsa*).

When the mind looks into the sense of loss and comprehends Truth (*avijjā-nirodha*), habitual drives cease (*saṅkhāra-nirodha*) and the awareness is no longer bound by discrimination (*viññāṇa-nirodha*); so that the separation of the subject and object is no longer held (*nāmarūpa-nirodha*) and one does not feel trapped behind or pulled out through the six sense-doors (*saḷāyatana-nirodha*). The sense-doors open for reflection, rather than being dependent on contact (*phassa-nirodha*) and impingement does not impress itself into the mind (*vedanā-nirodha*). So there is freedom from desire (*tañhā-nirodha*) and

attention does not get stuck (*upādāna-nirodha*) and grow into selfish motivations (*bhava-nirodha*) that centre around and reinforce the ego (*jāti-nirodha*). When no personal image is created, it can never bloat up, nor can it be destroyed (*jarā-maraṇa-nirodha*). So there is nothing to lose, a sense of gladness, uplift, joy and serenity (*soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsa-nirodha*).

With the cessation of such a death-bound frame of reference there is the living of the True life, the holy life, of which Ajahn Sumedho so evocatively speaks.



# 1 | Happiness Forever

We have been meditating, watching our breath, contemplating the inhalation and the exhalation. We're using bare attention, mindfulness of the body while walking, standing, sitting and lying down. Rather than becoming fascinated, we're opening the mind to conditions as they are at the present time.

Notice how even in a beautiful place like this we can really make ourselves miserable. When we are here we might want to be somewhere else; when we are walking we might want to be sitting; when we are sitting we might want to be walking. When we are meditating, we are thinking what we'll do after the retreat. Then after the retreat we wish we were back here ... Hopeless, isn't it?

Before you came to this retreat, you may have been having problems at home and thinking, 'I can hardly wait until I go on retreat.' And then here you wish, 'I can hardly wait for the retreat to end.' Maybe you become very tranquil sitting there and thinking, 'I want to be like this all the time', or you try to attain that blissful state you had yesterday but instead become more and more upset. When you achieve these nice blissful states you grasp them, but then you have to get something to eat or do something, so you feel bad at losing the blissful state. Or

maybe you haven't been having any blissful states at all, just a lot of miserable memories, anger and frustration arising. But everyone else is blissful, so you feel upset because everybody else seems to be getting something from this retreat except you

This is how we begin to observe that everything changes. Then we have the possibility to observe how we create problems, attach to the good or create all kinds of complexities around the conditions of the moment; wanting something we don't have, wanting to keep something we have, or wanting to get rid of it. This is the human problem of desire; we're always looking for something else.

I remember as a child wanting a certain toy. I told my mother that if she got me that toy I'd never want anything ever again. It would completely satisfy me. And I believed it, I wasn't telling her a lie; the only thing that was stopping me from being really happy then was that I didn't have the toy I wanted. So my mother bought the toy and gave it to me. I managed to get some happiness out of it for maybe five minutes ... and then I had to start wanting something else. So in getting what I wanted I felt some gratification and happiness, but then desire for something else arose. I remember this so vividly because at that young age I really believed that if got that toy I wanted, I would be happy forever ... only to realize that 'happiness forever' was an impossibility.

## 2 | Returning to the Way Things Are

Today is the full moon of January and the beginning of our Winter Retreat. We can have an all-night meditation sitting tonight to commemorate the auspiciousness of the occasion. It's very fortunate to have an opportunity such as this to devote ourselves for two months to one-pointed reflection on Dhamma.

The teaching of the Buddha is the understanding of The Way Things Are – being able to look, to be awake. It means developing attentiveness, brightness, and wisdom – developing the Eightfold Path, which we call *bhāvanā*.

Now when we're reflecting on things as they are, we're 'seeing', rather than interpreting through a veil of self-view. The big obstacle all of us have to face is this insidious belief in the 'I am' – attachment to self-view. It's so ingrained in us that we're like fish in the water: water is so much a part of the fish's life that it doesn't notice it. The sensory world we've been swimming in since our birth is like that for us. If we don't take time to observe it for what it really is then we'll die without getting any the wiser.

But this opportunity as a human being has the great advantage for us of our being able to reflect – we can reflect on the water we’re swimming in. We can observe the sensory realm for what it is. We’re not trying to get rid of it. We’re not complicating it by trying to add to it – we’re just being aware of it as it is. We’re no longer deluding ourselves by appearances, by fears, desires and all the things we create in our mind about it.

This is what we mean when we use such terms like: ‘It is as it is.’ If you ask someone who is swimming in water, ‘What is water like?’, then they simply bring attention to it and say, ‘Well, it feels like this. It’s this way.’ Then you ask, ‘How is it exactly? Is it wet or cold or warm or hot ...?’ All of these words can describe it. Water can be cold, warm, hot, pleasant, unpleasant ... But it’s just like this. The sensory realm we’re swimming in for a lifetime is this way! It feels like this! You feel it! Sometimes it’s pleasant. Sometimes it’s unpleasant. Most of the time it’s neither pleasant nor unpleasant. But always it’s just this way. Things come and go and change, and there’s nothing that you can depend on as being totally stable. The sensory realm is all energy and change and movement; all flux and flow. Sensory consciousness is this way.

Now we’re not judging it; we’re not saying it’s good or it’s bad, or you should like it, or you shouldn’t; we’re just bringing attention to it – like the water. The sensory realm is a realm of feeling. We are born into it and we feel it. From the time the umbilical cord is severed we’re physically independent beings; we’re no longer physically tied to anybody else. We feel hunger; we feel pleasure; we feel pain, heat, and cold. As we grow, we feel all kinds of things. We feel with the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body; and with the mind itself. There is the ability to think and remember, to perceive and conceive. All this is feeling. It can be lots of fun and wonderful, but it can also be depressing, mean and miserable; or it can be neutral – neither pleasant nor painful. So all sensory impingement is ‘the way it is’. Pleasure is this way; pain is this way. The feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is this way.

To be able to truly reflect on these things, you have to be alert and attentive. Some people think that it is up to me to tell them how it is: 'Ajahn Sumedho, how should I be feeling right now?' But we're not telling anybody how it is; we're being open and receptive to how it is. There's no need to tell someone how it is when they can find out for themselves. So this two months of finding out how it is, is a valuable opportunity. Many human beings, it seems, are not even aware that such a development of wisdom is possible.

What do we mean when we use this word wisdom? From birth to death, this is the way it is. There's always going to be a certain amount of pain, and discomfort, unpleasantness and ugliness. And if we're not aware of it as it really is – see it as Dhamma – then we tend to create a problem out of it. The span between birth and death becomes all very personal; it becomes fraught with all kinds of fears and desires and complications.

We suffer a lot in our society from loneliness. So much of our life is an attempt to not be lonely: 'Let's talk to each other; let's do things together so we won't be lonely.' And yet, inevitably, we are really alone in these human forms. We can pretend; we can entertain each other; but that's about the best we can do. When it comes to the actual experience of life, we're very much alone; and to expect anyone else to take away our loneliness is asking too much.

When there's physical birth, notice how it makes us seem separate. We're not physically joined to each other, are we? With attachment to this body we feel separate and vulnerable; we dread being left alone and we create a world of our own that we can live in. We have all kinds of interesting companions: imaginary friends, physical friends, enemies, but the whole lot of it comes and goes, begins and ends. Everything is born and dies in our own minds. So we reflect that birth conditions death. Birth and death; beginning and ending.

During this retreat, this kind of reflection is highly encouraged: contemplate what birth is. Right now we can say: 'This is the result

of being born; this body. It's like this: it's conscious and it feels, there's intelligence, there's memory, there's emotion.' All these can be contemplated because they are mind objects; they are *dhammas*. If we attach to the body as a subject, or to opinions and views and feelings as 'me' and 'mine', then we feel loneliness and despair; there's always going to be the threat of separation and ending. Attachment to mortality brings fear and desire into our lives. We can feel anxious and worried even when life is quite all right. So long as there's ignorance – *avijjā* – regarding the true nature of things, fear is always going to dominate consciousness.

But anxiety is not ultimately true. It's something we create. Worry is just that much. Love and joy and all the best in life, if we are attached to them, are going to bring the opposite along also. That's why in meditation we practise accepting the feeling of these things. When we accept things for what they are, we're no longer attached to them. They just are what they are; they arise and cease, they're not a self.

Now from the perspective of our cultural background, how does it appear? Our society tends to reinforce the view that everything is 'me' and 'mine'. 'This body is me; I look like this; I am a man; I am an American; I am 54 years old; I am an abbot.' But these are just conventions, aren't they? We're not saying I'm not these things; rather we're observing how we tend to complicate them by believing in the 'I am'. If we attach to them, life becomes so much more than it actually is; it becomes like a sticky web. It gets so complicated; whatever we touch sticks to us. And the longer we live the more complicated we make it. So much fear and desire comes from that commitment to 'I am' – to being somebody. Eventually they take us to anxiety and despair; life seems much more difficult and painful than it really is.

But when we just observe life for what it is, then it's all right: the delights, the beauty, the pleasures, are just that. The pain, the discomfort, the sickness, are what they are. We can always cope with the way life moves and changes. The mind of an enlightened human

being is flexible and adaptable. The mind of the ignorant person is conditioned and fixed.

Whatever we fix on is going to be miserable. Being a man, or being a woman, as a permanent belief, is always going to make life difficult. Any class we identify with – middle class, working class, American, British, Buddhist, Theravada Buddhist – grasping to any of these will produce some kind of complication, frustration and despair.

Yet conventionally, one can be all these things – a man, an American, a Buddhist, a Theravadin; these are merely perceptions of mind. They are adequate for communication; but they're nothing more than that. They're what is called *sammuttidhamma* – 'conventional reality'. When I say: 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho,' that's not a self, not a person; it's a convention. Being a Buddhist monk is not a person – it's a convention; being a man is not a person, it's a convention. Conventions are as they are. When we attach to them out of ignorance, we become bound and limited. That's the sticky web! We're blinded; being deluded by the convention.

When we let go of the conventions, we don't throw them away. I don't have to kill myself or disrobe; the conventions are all right. There's no suffering involved in any of these if there is the awakened mind seeing them for what they are; they just are as they are. They're merely a convenience; expedient to time and place.

With the realization of 'ultimate reality' (*paramatthadhamma*), there is the freedom of nibbāna. We are free from the delusions of desire and fear; this freedom from conventions is the Deathless. But to realize this we have to really look at what attachment is. What is it all about? What is suffering, and attachment to the 'I am' process? What is it? We're not asking anybody to deny themselves; attachment to the view of being nobody is still somebody. It's not a matter of affirmation or negation but of realization; of seeing. To do this we use mindfulness.

With mindfulness we can open to the totality. In the beginning of this retreat, we open to the whole two months. On the first day, we've

already accepted in full awareness all possibilities: sickness and health, success and failure, happiness and suffering, enlightenment or total despair. We're not thinking: 'I'm only going to get ..., I only want to have ..., I want to have only the nice things happen to me. And I've got to protect myself so that I'll have an idyllic retreat; be perfectly safe and tranquilized for two months.' That in itself is a miserable state, isn't it? Instead, we take all the possibilities, from the best to the worst. And we're doing this consciously. That means: everything that happens during these two months is part of the retreat – it's a part of our practice. The Way Things Are is Dhamma for us: happiness and suffering, enlightenment or total despair – everything!

If we practise this way, then despair and anguish take us to calm and peace. When I was in Thailand I had a lot of these negative states – loneliness, boredom, anxiety, doubt, worry and despair. But accepted as they are, they cease. And what's left when there's no more despair?

The Dhamma that we're looking at now is subtle. Not subtle in the sense that it's high up – it's so ordinary, so very much here and now that we don't notice it. Just like the water for the fish. Water is so much a part of its life the fish doesn't notice it; even though it's swimming in it. Sensory consciousness is here, now. It's this way. It's not distant. It's not really difficult. It's just a matter of paying attention to it. The way out of suffering is the way of mindfulness: mindful-awareness or wisdom.

So we keep bringing our attention to the way things are. If you have nasty thoughts, or feel resentful, bitter or irritated, then notice what it feels like in your heart. If we're frustrated and angry during this time, it's all right because we've already allowed for that to happen. It's a part of the practice; it's the way things are. Remember, we're not trying to become angels and saints – we're not trying to get rid of all our impurities and coarseness and just be happy. The human realm is like this! It can be very coarse and it can be pure. Pure and impure are a pair. To know purity and impurity is mindfulness-wisdom. To

know that impurity is impermanent and not-self is wisdom. But the minute we make it personal – ‘Oh, I shouldn’t have impure thoughts!’ – we’re stuck again in the realm of despair. The more we try to have only pure thoughts, the more the impure thoughts keep coming. That way we make sure we’re going to be miserable for the whole two months; guarantee it. Out of ignorance we create a realm for ourselves that can only be miserable.

So in mindfulness, or full-mindedness, all misery and all happiness are of equal value: no preferences. Happiness is this way. Misery is this way. They arise and they cease. Happiness is still happiness; it’s not misery. And misery is still misery; it’s not happiness. But it is what it is. And it’s nobody’s and it’s only that much. And we don’t suffer from it. We accept it, we know it and we understand it. All that arises ceases. All *dhammas* are not-self.



### 3 | Investigating the Mind

The root of suffering is what we call *avijjā* – not knowing or ignorance of the way things really are. This is the basic ignorance of not understanding our true nature. We suffer because of views and opinions, habits and conditions which we do not understand. We live our lives in a state of ignorance, not understanding the way things are.

If you listen to yourself very much, you can sometimes hear such statements as, ‘I should do this but I shouldn’t do that’, ‘I should be this way, I shouldn’t be that way’; or that the world should be other than it is, or our parents should be this way or that way, and shouldn’t be the way they are. We have this word ‘should’ ringing through our minds because we have an idea of what shouldn’t be or should be. In meditation, listen to that opinion within yourself of what should be and what shouldn’t be; just listen to it.

We have a tendency to try to become something, and so we set a goal, create an ideal of what we would like to become. Maybe we think society should be other than it is. People should be kind, generous, understanding, loving; there should be brotherhood and people shouldn’t be selfish. The government should have wise leaders, the world should be at peace and so forth. But the world is as it is at this

moment in time, and things are as they are. When we don't understand this we will struggle. So listen inwardly to yourselves, to the constant crying, 'I am this way, I am not this way,' and penetrate this 'I am, I am not' with awareness.

We tend just to react and take it for granted that 'I am' and 'I am not' are the truth. We create ourselves as a personality and attach to our memories. We remember the things we learnt, we remember what we've done – generally the more extreme things, we tend to forget more ordinary things. So if we do unkind, cruel, foolish things, we have unpleasant memories in our lives and feel ashamed or guilty. If we do good things, charitable things, kind things, we have good memories in our lives. When you start reflecting on this you will be more careful about what you do and you say, because if you have lived your life foolishly, acting on impulse out of desire for immediate gratification or an intention to hurt or cause disharmony or exploit others, you are going to be faced with a mind filled with very unpleasant memories. People who have led very selfish lives often have to drink a lot, take drugs or keep themselves constantly occupied, so they don't have to look at the memories that come up in the mind.

In the awakening process of meditation we are bringing awareness to the conditions of the mind here and now, just by being aware of this sense of 'I am, I am not.' Contemplate the feelings of pain or pleasure, the memories, thoughts and opinions, as impermanent, *anicca*. The characteristic of transience is common to all conditions. How many of you have really investigated this in every possible way while sitting, standing or lying down? Investigate what you see with your eye, hear with your ear, taste with your tongue, smell with your nose, feel and experience with your body, think with your mind.

The thought 'I am' is an impermanent condition. The thought 'I am not' is an impermanent condition. Thoughts, memories, consciousness of thinking, the body itself, our emotions – all conditions change. In the practice of meditation you must be quite serious, brave and

courageous. You must really investigate, dare to look at even the most unpleasant conditions in life, rather than try to escape, to seek tranquillity or forget about everything. In *vipassanā* the practice is one of looking into suffering; it's a confrontation with ourselves, with what we think of ourselves, with our memories, and our emotions, pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent. In other words, when these things arise and we are aware of suffering, we take the opportunity to examine it rather than rejecting, repressing or ignoring it. So suffering is our teacher. It's teaching us, so we have to learn the lesson by studying suffering itself.

It always amazes me that some people think they never suffer. They think, 'I don't suffer. I don't know why Buddhists talk about suffering all the time. I feel wonderful, full of beauty and joy. I'm so happy all the time. I find life a fantastic experience, interesting, fascinating and never-ending delight.' These people tend just to accept that side of life and reject the other side, because inevitably what delights us disappears and then we are sorry. Our desire to be in a constant state of delight leads us into all kinds of problems and difficulties. Suffering is not just caused by massive things like having terminal cancer or losing someone you love; it can occur around what is very ordinary, like the four postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying down. There is nothing extreme in them. We contemplate the normal breath and ordinary consciousness. We contemplate ordinary feelings, memories and thoughts, rather than grasping hold of fantastic ideas and thoughts to understand the extremes of existence. So we don't become involved in speculation about the ultimate purpose of life, God, the devil, heaven and hell, what happens when we die or reincarnation. In Buddhist meditation we just observe the here and now. The birth and death that are going on here and now are the beginning and ending of the most ordinary things.

Contemplate beginning. When you think of birth you think, 'I was born', but that is the great birth of the body which we can't remember. We experience the ordinary birth of 'me' in daily life as, 'I want, I don't

want, I like, I don't like.' That's a birth through seeking happiness. We contemplate the ordinary hell of our own anger that arises: the heat of the body, the aversion, the hatred we feel in the mind. We contemplate the ordinary heaven we experience: the happy states, the bliss, the lightness, the beauty in the here and now. Or we contemplate just the dull state of mind, that kind of limbo, neither happy nor unhappy, but dull, bored and indifferent. In Buddhist meditation we watch these within ourselves. We contemplate our desire for power and control, to be in control of someone else, to become famous or someone on top. How many of you, when you find out someone is more gifted than you are, want to put them down? This is jealousy. What we have to do in our meditation practice is see the ordinary jealousies, the hatred we might feel for someone who might take advantage of us or annoys us, or the greed or lust we might feel for someone who attracts us. Our mind is like a mirror which reflects the universe and we watch the reflection. We used to take these reflections for reality, so that we became entranced, repelled or indifferent to them. But in *vipassanā* we observe that they are all just changing conditions. We begin to see them as objects rather than as a self, whereas when we're ignorant, we tend to seek identity with them.

So in practice we are looking at the universe as it is being reflected in our minds. It does not matter what anyone else happens to experience. One meditator will sit and experience all sorts of brilliant lights, colours, fascinating images, Buddhas, celestial beings, even smell wonderful odours and hear divine sounds, and think, 'What a wonderful meditation, such brilliance came, a divine being like a radiant angel came and touched me and I felt this ecstasy. The most wonderful ecstatic experience of my whole life – I've waited my whole life for this experience.' Meanwhile someone else is thinking, 'Why doesn't something like that ever happen to me? I sat for a whole hour in pain with an aching back, depressed, wanting to run away, wondering why on earth I'd come to this retreat anyway.' Another person might say,

'I can't stand all those people who have those silly ideas and fantasies. They disgust me, they develop this terrible hatred and aversion in me. I hate the Buddha-image sitting in the window, I want to smash it. I hate Buddhism and meditation!'

Which of these three people is the good meditator? The one who sees *devas* dancing in heaven, the one who is bored, indifferent and dull, or the one full of hatred and aversion? *Devas* and angels dancing in the celestial realms are *anicca*, are impermanent. Boredom is *anicca*, impermanent. Hatred and aversion are *anicca*, impermanent. So the good meditator, the one who is practising in the right way, is the one looking at the impermanent nature of these conditions. When you talk to someone who sees *devas* and experiences bright lights, you start doubting your own practice and think, 'But maybe I'm not capable of enlightenment. Maybe I'm not meditating right.' Doubt itself is impermanent. Whatever arises passes away. So the good meditator is the one who sees the impermanent nature of bliss and ecstasy, or experiences dullness, anger, hatred and aversion, and reflects on the impermanent nature of those qualities when sitting, walking or lying down.

What is your tendency? Are you very positive about everything – 'I like everybody here. I believe in the teachings of the Buddha, I believe in the Dhamma'? That's a faith kind of mind. It believes, and that kind of mind can create and experience blissful things very quickly. Some of the farmers in Thailand, people who have hardly any worldly knowledge, who can hardly read and write, can sometimes experience blissful states, experience lights and see *devas*, and believe in them. When you believe in *devas*, you see them. If you believe in lights and celestial realms, you'll see them. If you believe the Buddha is going to save you, he will come and save you. What you believe in happens to you. If you believe in ghosts, fairies, elves, if you don't doubt those things, you'll find them appearing to you. But they are still *anicca*, impermanent and not-self. But most people don't believe in fairies and

*devas* and think such things are silly. This is the negative kind of mind, the one that's suspicious and doubtful, does not believe in anything: 'I don't believe in fairies and *devas*. I don't believe in any of that kind of thing. Ridiculous! Show me a fairy.' The very suspicious and sceptical mind never sees such things.

There is faith, there is doubt. In Buddhist practice we examine the belief and doubt we experience in our mind, and we see that they are conditions changing. I have contemplated doubt itself as a sign. I'd ask myself a question like, 'Who am I?' and then I'd listen for the answer – something like 'Sumedho Bhikkhu.' Then I'd think, 'That's not the answer, who are you really?' I'd see the struggle, the habitual reaction of trying to find an answer to the question. But I would not accept any conceptual answer: 'Who is sitting here? What is this? What's this here? Who is thinking anyway? What is it that thinks?' When a state of uncertainty or doubt arose, I would just look at that state as a sign, because that is where the mind stops and goes blank, and then emptiness arises.

I found asking myself unanswerable questions which would cause doubt to arise, a useful way of emptying the mind. Doubt is an impermanent condition. Form, the known, is impermanent; not knowing is impermanent. Some days I would go out and look at Nature, observe myself just standing there, looking at the ground. I'd ask myself, 'Is the ground separate from myself? What is that, who is that who sees the ground? Is that ground with those leaves, are those leaves in my mind or outside my mind? What is it that sees, is it the eyeball? If I took my eyeball out, would it be separated from myself, taken out of the socket, would I still see those leaves? Or is that ground there when I'm not looking at it? Who is the one who's conscious of this anyway?' And sound – I did some experiments with sound because the objects of sight have a certain solidity – they seem fairly permanent, for today at least. But sound is truly *anicca* – try to get hold of it and hold it. I'd investigate my senses in this way – can my eyes hear sound? If I cut off

my ears and burst my eardrums, will there be any sound? Can I see and hear in exactly the same moment?

All sense organs and their objects are impermanent, changing conditions. Think right now, 'Where is your mother?' Where is my mother right now? If I think of her in her flat in California, it's a concept in the mind. Even if I think, 'California is over there', that's still the mind thinking, 'over there.' 'Mother' is a concept: so where is the mother right now? She is in the mind: when the word 'mother' comes up, you hear the word as a sound and it brings up a mental image, a memory or a feeling of like or dislike or indifference. All concepts in the mind which we take for reality are to be investigated, so know what concepts do to the mind. Notice the pleasure you get from thinking about certain concepts and the displeasure that other concepts bring. You have prejudices, biases, about race, nationality – these are all concepts or conceptual proliferations. Men have certain attitudes and biases about women, and women have certain attitudes and biases about men; this is just inherent in those identities. But in meditation 'female' and 'male' are concepts, feelings, perceptions in the mind. In this practice of *vipassanā* you penetrate with insight into the nature of all conditions, coarse or refined. Insight breaks down the illusions that these concepts give us, the illusions that they are real.

When we talk like this, people might question, 'How do you live in this society, if it's all unreal?' The Buddha made a very clear distinction between conventional reality and ultimate reality. On the conventional level of existence you use conventions that bring harmony to yourself and the society you live in. What kind of conventions bring harmony? Things like being good, being mindful, not doing things that cause disharmony such as stealing, cheating others, exploiting others. Having respect for other beings, having compassion, being observant, trying to help: all these conventions bring harmony. In the Buddhist teaching on the conventional level, we live in a way that means doing good and refraining from doing evil with the body or speech. So it's

not as if we are rejecting the conventional world: 'I want nothing to do with it because it's an illusion.' But that thought's just another illusion!

In our practice then, we see that thought is thought. 'The world is an illusion' is a thought; 'The world is not an illusion' is a thought. But here and now, be aware that all we are conscious of is changing. Live mindfully, put effort and concentration into what you do, whether you're sitting, walking, lying down or working. Whether you're a man or a woman, a secretary, a housewife or a labourer or an executive or whatever – apply effort and concentration. Do good and refrain from doing evil. This is how a Buddhist lives within the conventional forms of society. But they are no longer deluded by the body or the society, or by the things that go on in the society, because a Buddhist is one who investigates the universe by investigating their own body and mind.

## 4 | Precepts

Tonight is the new moon,<sup>1</sup> and so today we reaffirmed our commitment to *śīla*: the *Pāṭimokkha* for the bhikkhus, the Ten Precepts for the nuns, the Eight Precepts for the anagārikas. In this reaffirming of our commitment we can take these Eight Precepts to a refined level of interpretation. So with the first precept: *pāṇātipātā veramaṇī* – to refrain from killing other creatures – even though none of us may be prone to murder or physical violence, it is important to make it clear in our mind that our intention in this life is not even to harm others deliberately.

The second precept – *adinnādānā veramaṇī* – is not just to refrain from stealing, but to respect the property of others; not to disturb or misuse that which belongs to others. It is a way of making that very definite in our consciousness.

*Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī*, the third precept, is the vow of celibacy. At this time there's much concern about AIDS and venereal diseases. A total misuse of sexuality has developed over the past few decades, whereby people have been completely irresponsible and sought pleasure from sexual activities without regard for the consequences. The result is

<sup>1</sup> In Buddhist cultures, the phases of the moon are celebrated as the lunar 'Observance Days.' These are days when Buddhists come to the monastery, commit to moral precepts, listen to Dhamma talks and practise meditation. On these days, the bhikkhus participate in the fortnightly recitation of the *Pāṭimokkha* – the core of the Monastic Rule.

that now we have moral dilemmas about abortion, and about the various diseases and problems which arise and how to solve them. What should we do? Try to promote the use of condoms and all kinds of prophylactic measures, so that people can do everything they want without having to restrain themselves? Or promote pills and devices to prevent pregnancy, so that no one will have to choose between having an abortion or having a baby? What is never even mentioned in all this is any kind of moral position. It seems to be something you just don't mention. Celibacy is never even considered as a possible way of life.

But when we really consider our life as human beings, there's a more skilful way to live. We can take on responsibility for our existence and refrain from involving others, or even exploiting our own bodies for the pursuit of that kind of pleasure. To undertake celibacy is a rather ennobling precept. It lifts us up: to be celibate is a potential, a possibility for developing meditation through the restraint necessary for the realization of truth. Celibacy is something one has to take on for oneself. It's not something which can be forced; that would not be chastity anymore, it would be tyranny. It has to be something we choose, something we rise up to as individual beings, not an imposition on us. We don't want to go back to a puritanical position of 'Thou shalt not', and threaten people with 84,000 aeons in fiery hells, burning in absolute pain, for any kind of sexual enjoyment. We are not trying to bring fear into the mind or to intimidate, but rather to encourage what is noble and beautiful in our humanity.

I assume that you are capable of motivating yourselves, and so I present this opportunity for practice. Sometimes people can have very low opinions of themselves which are not really true. Maybe they've never had an opportunity to motivate themselves, or never felt that anyone trusted them enough to do so. We are trying to bring that kind of value, that kind of beauty into our monastic life, so that monasticism is something that is 'beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful in the end', and not a kind of imposed tyranny or a forced march.

We need to take on that responsibility for ourselves, rather than turning it over to somebody else, expecting someone else to come along and enlighten us or love us, drive us or scold us. The spiritual potential of each being here is to be recognized. We have that marvellous ability to rise up to things, rather than to sink down. Rising up isn't a wilful force, it's the ability to go beyond the inertia or the habit tendencies of one's life towards something higher; learning how just to pay attention to the breath, or to be more patient, more forgiving, more kindly to oneself and others. All of this is the effort of rising up and meeting the occasion. This doesn't mean always having to succeed or prove oneself, it means rising up to meet a situation in a skilful way with mindfulness and wisdom. And this is a possibility for us: we don't have to be caught in the force of habit and lost in the realm of delusion.

With speech, *musāvādā veramaṇī*, the precept is to refrain from incorrect speech: how easy it is to get caught in self-view if we use 'I am', 'poor me' speech habits. Notice the way the Buddha used language: 'There is suffering', 'there is' anger, greed or delusion. This is an example of refraining from wrong speech. If we start reflecting in that way, it affects how we see things. In this community we have a willingness to learn how to communicate, and try to have a way of speaking which is clear and honest, but not demanding or deluding in any way. By contrast, in society one tries to be clever in one's speech, witty, droll – and, with an intelligent mind, one's speech habits can be quite cruel and unskilful. But we give that up and try to use speech as something beautiful and clear, without giving forth wrong views to others.

*Musāvādā veramaṇī* is not just refraining from lies, but involves the intention to take on responsibility for speech. That whole function of our humanity is quite a miracle when you contemplate it, and yet we just take it for granted. We can use our speech for telling dirty jokes, cursing and swearing, gossiping, insulting and all kinds of mean, horrible and dishonest things. Or we can respect this rather marvellous

gift we have and learn how to use it in a way that is beautiful, accurate and kindly.

Then *surāmerayamajja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī*, refraining from intoxicants: think how fortunate we are that we don't have to drink, take drugs and shoot up heroin. That problem affects all levels of society. Men, women and children, all races, all classes, are being caught in the grip of these addictive drugs. There are also cigarettes and alcohol, all harmful and deluding to the human mind. When we become clouded with drugs and drink, we can't be responsible for what we say? I remember that when I used to drink, it was so that I didn't have to be responsible for what I said. When intoxicated, you lose your sense of timidity and shame with regard to sexual conduct. You have a few drinks, and suddenly a lot of inhibitions just drop away. I wasn't into murdering people, but I certainly had no hesitation about getting rid of annoying insects and other things that I didn't like. One could see how easily one's sense of moral propriety and commitment could disappear under drugs and drink. Nowadays you find young people prostituting themselves to get money to buy drink and drugs – even people twelve or thirteen years old, those we used to call children.

Then there are the renunciant precepts, those which simplify our lives. To refrain from eating after noon, and from entertainment and self-adornment. For human beings there is a whole realm of fun and entertainment available through eating, dancing, singing, games, movies, TV and shows. Then there's sleep. There's the temptation to spend a great deal of time seeking comfort and sleep. These aren't immoral. I'm not saying that eating a dinner is an immoral activity – or dancing and singing, come to that – but we are trying to restrain ourselves and refrain from opportunities to distract ourselves through sensory pleasures, so that we can observe and reflect.

These are standards and precepts for reflection, and not rules from God. They are not to be viewed from the 'Thou shalt not' position. Each one of the precepts is a resolution, something we are taking on and

not something God is imposing on us. So you rise up to these precepts and make a resolution, in order to have it in your minds when you are tempted to act on the impulses you might be experiencing. After all, most of us come from backgrounds which were quite indulgent, and where we were never really encouraged to restrain ourselves. *Sīla* is an honourable and lovely opportunity we have as human beings. We choose to be moral. We're not being moral because we're afraid of being immoral. We choose to do this and rise up to that which is noble, good, kind and generous.

Admittedly, worldly attractions remain strong, and it isn't part of my teaching to condemn them. I'm not against the worldly life, nor am I trying to raise monasticism up as something everyone should be doing. One can live a very good, wholesome worldly life too – wholesomeness is not just the prerogative of monks and nuns. Sometimes laypeople think I'm a 'monk fanatic' because I emphasize the value of this way of living. But the attitude is one of reflection rather than having an axe to grind or a position to take on anything. We aim to develop that reflective ability of the mind, and the particular conventions we find ourselves in are developed around that. This is what the Buddha's teaching is about. All the conventions of the *Vinaya* (monastic discipline) and Dhamma teachings are designed to help in that way. Some people say you can follow the teachings fully as a layperson, and this is not to be denied; but if monastics can't use the lifestyle which is deliberately established for Dhamma-Vinaya, what makes them think they'll ever do it in any other form? This is what I want to get you to look at. Look at yourselves as wanting something you don't have, or wanting to get away from what you have. Just watch that in yourself, that restlessness, discontent and movement of your mind.

Sometimes, of course, one doesn't want to give up the world yet, one still wants rebirth and happiness and worldly things. Fair enough. But I don't want you to go round lying to yourselves. If you want to have your own way, have rebirths and worldly happiness, that's your

decision – but don't delude yourselves by thinking that you are doing something else, because if you really understand the teaching of the Buddha, there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. This is the way it is. We are living a life that is for that kind of reflection. Then you can observe that desire to be somewhere else as a movement of your mind, to see that and recognize it for what it is. Whether you follow that desire or not is still up to you.

Allow yourself to die to the moment. Investigate and observe how things are. Everything that arises ceases. In all, everything fits into that pattern. In this way we can reflect on the mundane day-to-day ordinariness of our lives. Since we monastics can't dance and sing, go to shows, pubs, football games or restaurants and follow the pleasures and distractions of the world, the ordinariness of our lives takes on more significance. If you're used to a high level of excitement, ordinary things are boring and one is always aiming at some new thrill or experience. Monasticism is a boring lifestyle, just a routine. We're not aiming at having exciting things to do or distractions, because in meditation we are being aware of how things ordinarily are in consciousness. So we no longer try to find and follow the extraordinary. It is only through calming down and through restraint, not following restlessness and not being caught up in emotions, that we have a chance to realize the Unconditioned. It's only when we can let go, calm down and reflect that there is a realization of the ending of the conditioned realm – in which everything that arises ceases – and a realization of nibbāna. There is no way of realizing nibbāna by striving and trying to attain, achieve and be caught up in the arising side. You have to let go of that.

The realization of letting go of what arises in the mind leads to witnessing the cessation of that which has arisen. Then there is the true peace of allowing things to be as they are. No longer are we somebody who has to get somewhere, do something, get rid of something or change something. When we're caught in distracting ourselves with pleasures, we're somebody, and somebody who has to find happiness,

have success or become something. No matter how many excitements and pleasures I might experience, I have to have more than that. We are never content with the excitement and adventures of life. They just cause us to be caught up in that movement of having to have more and more – until we get burnt out. Then we go to the opposite extreme, where because we are tired and worn out from all the excitement and stimulation, we break down, fall asleep or get drugged or drunk. We want not to exist. We can only have so much excitement and then we can't bear it any more.

To be excited continuously is a hell realm. In my sister's home in California they have all these television stations and cable relays. You can have seventy or so channels at your disposal all the time. People get into the habit of just switching channels if anything becomes the slightest bit boring, or slightly uninteresting or unpleasant. They just switch to the next one – there's always a gun fight or a chorus line to zap you. It's a kind of hell realm – it's unpleasant to have a mind that has to be stimulated one moment after another.

So you see the loveliness of a life that is based on composure, moral restraint, nobility, generosity, kindness, and reflection on Dhamma. It is wonderful to be able to have the opportunity and the encouragement to contemplate your own existence, and train in a way that enables you to respect yourself. You can move towards being a contented and joyful being rather than a hungry, obsessed one.



## 5 | Everything That Arises Passes Away

The Buddha said the origin of all suffering was ignorance, so it's important to consider what he really meant by 'ignorance'. Most human beings in the world live very much as if their habits, thoughts, feelings and memories are what they really are. They do not take the time to look at their lives, or don't really have the opportunity to watch and consider how these conditions operate.

What is a condition? The body that we have, emotions and feelings, the perceptions of the mind, conceptions and consciousness through the senses – these are conditions. A condition is something that is added, compounded, something that arises and passes away; it's not the Uncreated, Unborn, Unoriginated ultimate reality. Religion is what human beings use to try to get back to that ultimate realization of reality beyond the cycles of birth and death, the supramundane wisdom or *lokuttara paññā*, and nirvana or nibbāna is the experience of this transcendent reality. This is when we suddenly know the truth; not by studying the Pali scriptures or a Zen book, but through direct experience.

We generally conceive the truth as being a thing, nibbāna as being some peaceful state of mind or some kind of ecstatic experience. All of us have experienced some kind of happiness, so we like to conceive the Unborn, Uncreated, Unoriginated as a happy experience. But the Buddha was very careful never to describe the Ultimate Reality or nibbāna – he never said very much about it. People want to know what it is, write books on it, speculate about its nature, but this is exactly what the Buddha didn't do. Instead he pointed to direct knowing of conditions that change, what we can know through our own experience at this moment. This is not a matter of believing anyone else. It's a matter of knowing at this present moment that whatever arises passes away. So we put forth that kind of attention in our lives – we are attentive and notice that whatever arises passes away. Every condition of your mind or body, whether it is a sensation of pleasure or pain, feeling or memory, sight, sound, smell, taste or touch, inside or outside, is just a condition.

It's important to reflect on what 'ignorance' really means, in the sense in which the Buddha used it when he called it the origin of all suffering. Being ignorant means that we identify with these conditions by regarding them as 'me' or 'mine', or as something that we don't want to be 'me' or 'mine'. We have the idea that we must find some permanent pleasant condition, we have to achieve something, get something we don't have. But you can notice that desire in your mind is a moving thing, looking for something, so it's a changing condition that arises and passes away – it's not-self. The expression 'not-self' (*anattā*) is not some kind of mantra you keep repeating to get rid of things, but an actual penetration of the very nature of all desires.

As you look carefully, very patiently and humbly, you begin to see that the created arises out of the Uncreated and goes back to the Uncreated; it disappears and there is nothing left. If it were really you and really yours, it would stay, wouldn't it? If it were really you, where would it go, to some kind of storehouse of personality? But that concept,

like whatever you conceive, is a condition that arises and passes away. Whenever you try to conceive yourself or any concept or memory of yourself as this or that, it is only a condition of your mind. It's not what you are – you're not a condition of your mind. So sorrow, despair, love and happiness are all conditions of mind and they are all not-self.

Notice when you suffer, feel discontent in your life – why? It's because of some attachment, some idea of yourself or someone else. Someone you love dies and you feel sorry for yourself, or you think of and dwell on the good times you've had with them, creating more conditions of mind. Maybe you feel guilty because you weren't giving or loving all of the time – that's a condition of mind also. You have a memory, you conceive of them as being alive – but that very idea of a person is a perception of mind, it's not a person. Remembering someone who is alive, someone you wish you could be with right now, is a condition of mind. And remembering someone who's died, so that you'll never see them again, is also a condition of mind. Buddhist meditation is a way of looking at the conditions of mind, investigating and seeing what they are rather than believing in them. People want to believe – when someone close to you has died, somebody may tell you, 'Oh, they went up to heaven with God the Father', or, 'They're living in the delights of the Tusita Heaven.' They say this so that you'll have a pleasant perception of mind: 'Well, now I know that my grandmother is happy up there in the heavenly realms, dancing with the angels.' Then somebody else says, 'Well, you know, she did some pretty dreadful things, she's probably down in Hell, burning in the eternal fires!' So you start worrying that maybe you'll end up there too – but that's a perception of mind. Heaven and hell are conditioned phenomena.

If you reflect back to ten years ago, that's a condition of mind that arises and passes away, and it arises because I've just suggested it to you. So that condition is dependent upon another condition; memory is what we have experienced, and the future is the unknown. But who is it who knows the conditions of the moment? I can't find that 'who':

there's only the knowing, and knowing can know anything that is present now – pleasant or unpleasant, speculations about the future or reminiscences of the past, creations of yourself as this or that. You create yourself or the world you live in, so you can't really blame anyone else. If you do, it's because you're still ignorant: We call the One Who Knows 'Buddha', but that doesn't mean 'Buddha' is a condition. This is not saying that a *Buddha-rūpa* knows anything, but rather that 'Buddha' is the knowing. So Buddhist meditation is really being aware, rather than becoming Buddha. The idea of becoming Buddha is based on conditions – you think you're someone who isn't Buddha right now, and in order to become Buddha you have to read books to find out how to become one. Of course, this means that you have to work really hard to get rid of those qualities which are not Buddha-like. You are far from perfect, you can be angry, greedy, doubtful and frightened, and of course, Buddhas aren't like that because Buddha is that which knows, so they know better. In order to become Buddha, you have to get rid of these un-Buddha-like qualities and try to develop Buddha-like qualities such as compassion. But all these are creations of the mind. We create 'Buddhas' because we believe in the creations of the mind. But they aren't real Buddhas. They're only false Buddhas. They're not wisdom Buddhas, they're just conditions of our mind.

As long as you conceive yourself as being somebody who has to do something in order to become something else, you are still caught in a trap, a condition of mind, as being a self, and you never quite understand anything properly. No matter how many years you meditate, you will never really understand the teaching; you will always be just off the mark. The direct way of seeing things now – that whatever arises passes away – doesn't mean that you are throwing anything away. It means that you're looking as you've never bothered to look before. You're looking from a perspective of what's here now, rather than looking for something that's not here. If you come into the meditation hall thinking, 'I've got to spend this hour looking for the Buddha, trying

to become something, trying to get rid of these bad thoughts; I must sit and practise hard, try to become what I should become – so I'll sit here and try getting rid of things, try to get things, try to hold onto things' – with that attitude, meditation is a really strenuous effort and always a failure. But if you are just aware of the conditions of mind – if you see in perspective the desire to become, to get rid of, to do something, or the feeling that you can't do it, or that you're an expert or whatever – you begin to see that whatever you're experiencing is a changing condition and not 'self'. You're seeing a perspective of being Buddha, rather than doing something in order to become Buddha. When we talk about *sati*, mindfulness, this is what we mean.

I am really shocked and amazed by many religious people – Christians, Buddhists or whatever – who seem to be ignorant regarding the practice of their religion. Few people seem to have any perspective on religious doctrine and belief and disbelief. They don't bother to find out. They are still trying to describe the indescribable, limit the unlimited, know the unknowable, and not many look at the way they are. They believe what somebody else has told them. In Theravada Buddhism monks will tell you that you can't get enlightened these days; there's no way you can even attain stream-entry, the first stage of sainthood, those days are past. They believe enlightenment is such a remote possibility that they don't even put forth much effort to see that all that arises passes away. So monks can spend lifetimes reading books and translating suttas, but believing that they're unenlightened and it's impossible to become enlightened. But then what's the point of religion anyway? Why bother if the ultimate truth is so remote, such an unlikely possibility? In that case we become like anthropologists, sociologists or philosophers, just discussing comparative religion.

Gotama the Buddha was one whose wisdom came from observing Nature, the conditions of mind and body. That's not impossible for any of us to do. We have minds and bodies; all we have to do is to watch them. It's not as if we have to have special powers to do that, or that

somehow this time is a different time from that of Gotama the Buddha. Time is an illusion caused by ignorance. People in the time of Gotama the Buddha were no different from people now – they had greed, hatred and delusion, egos, conceits and fears, just like people nowadays. If you start thinking about Buddhist doctrines, different levels of attainment, you'll just get into a state of doubting. You don't have to check yourself with a list in a book, but just know for yourself until no condition of body or mind deludes you.

People say to me, 'I can't do all that, I'm just an ordinary person, a layman; when I think of doing all that, I realize I can't do it, it's too much for me.' I say, 'If you think about it, you can't do it, that's all. Don't think about it, just do it.' Thought only takes you to doubt. People who just think about life can't do anything. If it's worth doing, do it. When you become depressed, learn from depression; when you fall sick, learn from sickness; when you're happy, learn from happiness – these are all opportunities to learn in the world. Keep silently listening and watching as a way of life – then you begin to understand conditions. There's nothing to fear. You don't have to get anything that you don't have already, there's nothing to get rid of.

## 6 | The Five Khandhas

As long as these human bodies are alive and their senses are operating, we have to be constantly on our guard, alert and mindful, because the force of habit of grasping the sensual world as a self is so strong. This is very strong conditioning in all of us. So the way the Buddha taught is the way of mindfulness and wise reflection. Rather than making metaphysical statements about True Nature or Ultimate Reality, the Buddha's teaching points to the condition of grasping. That's the only thing that keeps us from enlightenment. Buddha-wisdom is an understanding of the way things are through observing oneself, rather than observing how the stars and planets operate. We don't go out looking at the trees and contemplating nature as if they were an object of our vision, but we actually observe nature as it operates through our personal form.

What we take ourselves to be can be classified as five aggregates or khandhas: *rūpa*, form; *vedanā*, feelings; *saññā*, perception; *saṅkhārā*, mental formations or thought processes; *viññāṇa*, sense consciousness. They provide a skilful means of seeing all sensual phenomena in groups. The easiest to meditate on is the *rūpa* khandha, the form of your own body, because it is stuck to the ground, heavy, gross. It's

a slower moving thing than the mental phenomena, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhārā* or *viññāṇa*. You can reflect on your own body for long periods of time, meditate on the breath rather than on consciousness, because it is within our ability to concentrate on breathing. Ordinary people can contemplate their own breath.

You can contemplate the feeling of your own eyes. They have sensations. Contemplate the tongue, the wetness of the mouth or your tongue touching the palate in your mouth. You can contemplate the body as a sense organ giving you the sensations of pleasure and pain, heat and cold. Just observe what the feeling of cold or heat in the body is like; you can contemplate that because it is not what you are. It's an object you can see, can easily observe as if it were something separate from yourself. If you don't do that, you just tend to react. When you're too hot you try to get cooler and take off your jumper, and then you grow cold and put it back on again. You can just react to those sensations of pleasure and pain in the body. Pleasure – 'Oh, isn't that wonderful', and you try to hold on to it, to have more pleasure. And pain – 'Oh – get rid of that', and you run away from anything uncomfortable or painful. But in meditation we can see these sensations, and the body itself is a sensual condition that has pleasure, pain, heat and cold.

You can reflect on the forms that you see. Just look at something beautiful, like flowers. Flowers are probably the most beautiful things on the earth and so we like flowers. So note when you look at a flower, how you're drawn to it and want to keep looking at it, being attracted to what is pleasing to the eye. Or look at something that is unpleasant to the eye, say excrement. When you see excrement, cow dung on the path, you politely ignore it. Look at your own excrement. We produce it ourselves and yet it's something that we don't really want to go round showing other people. It's something we'd rather nobody ever saw us producing. You don't really feel drawn to go looking at it like you would a flower, do you? But we're quite willing to wear flowers, carry flowers around, have flowers on our shrine. It's not that you should

find excrement attractive. I'm just pointing out that you can meditate on this force of the sensory world. It's a natural force. It's not bad or wrong, but you can meditate on it to see how you tend to react to sensory experiences.

When you experience beautiful sounds or horrible ones, pleasant odours or stinking ones, pleasant tastes or unpleasant ones, pleasurable physical sensations or painful ones, heat and cold – meditate on these things. Look and see these things as they are: all *rūpa* is impermanent. Beautiful flowers are only beautiful for a while, then they become repulsive. So we observe this natural transformation from what is fresh and beautiful to what is old, ugly. I was a lot prettier when I was twenty! Now I'm old and ugly. An old human body is not very beautiful, but it's the body following what it's supposed to do. I'm glad mine is not getting prettier. It would be embarrassing if it was.

The mental khandhas also operate on that same principle. *Vedanā* is a mental state, the feeling you have of attraction and aversion to the physical things that you hear, see, smell, taste, touch. The sensation of pain is just as it is, but then there's the reaction of liking or disliking, or not even that, but just a moving towards or away from it. You can be aware of feelings, moods. Note the heat that comes from anger, the dullness that comes from doubt and sloth and torpor. Note the feeling when you're jealous. You can witness that feeling. Watch instead of just trying to annihilate jealousy. When jealousy conditions your mind, begin to reflect on it rather than reacting to it or trying to get rid of it because you don't like it. When you're cold, what is coldness? Do you like it? This coldness, feeling cold, is that something terribly unpleasant or do you just make a lot out of it? Hunger, what is hunger like? When you're feeling hungry, meditate on that physical feeling to which you tend to react by trying to get something to eat.

Or meditate on the feeling of being alone or separate, the feeling that people look down on you. If you feel I don't like you, meditate on that feeling. (Or if you feel you don't like me, meditate on that!)

Bring this into consciousness now, but not analytically, trying to figure out whether I really do like you; or whether your relationship to me is a dependent, childlike relationship that you shouldn't have; or getting caught up in Freudian psychology, or whatever. Just observe the doubting, uncertain state of mind in your relationships to others, not to analyze, but just to observe the feelings of confidence or lack of confidence, aversion or attraction. That is *vedanā*. This is a natural thing. We're all sensitive beings, so attraction and repulsion are operating all the time. They are conditions in nature, not a personal problem unless we make it so.

*Saññā* khandha is the perception khandha. To grasp a perception means to believe in the way things appear in the present as if they have a kind of permanent quality. That's how we tend to operate in our lives. So I might think, for example, that a particular monk is this way. It's a perception I have whether I'm sitting next to him or I'm alone, whether he's helping me or he's angry with me. I have this fixed view. A fixed perception is not all that conscious, but I tend to operate from that particular fixed position if I believe in my perception. And when I think of him in that way, it's as if his personality is fixed and constant rather than being the way it is at this time. My perception of him is just a perception of the moment; it's not a soul that carries through time, not a fixed personality. So *saññā* is to be meditated on.

Khandhas are mental formations. There are perceptions of the mind (*saññā*), and on the basis of them are our mental activities (*saṅkhārā*). So the assumptions you have about yourself, from childhood, parents, teachers, friends, relatives, and whether you perceive yourself as good and positive or in a negative way or a confused way – all that is the *saññā/saṅkhārā* khandhas. Memories come up, or fears about what you might be lacking. You can worry that there might be a serious flaw in your character, or that some horrible repressed desires might be lurking way down deep in your mind, which might come up in meditation and drive you crazy. That is another mental condition, not

knowing what we are, so that sometimes we imagine the worst possible things. But what we can know is that whatever we believe ourselves to be is a condition of the mind; it arises, it passes away, it's impermanent.

If we come from certain fixed perceptions of ourselves, we conceive all kinds of things. If you operate from the position 'I am a man' you assume that perception of yourself is what you are. So you never investigate that perception; you just believe that you're a man and then conceive manhood as being a certain way, what a man should be. Then you compare yourself to what the ideal for manhood is, and if you don't live up to those high standards of manhood, you worry. Something is wrong! You start feeling upset or guilty, or hating yourself, because of your basic assumption that you're a man. On a conventional level this might be true: men are this way and women are that way. We're not denying the conventional reality, but we're no longer attaching to it as a personal quality, a fixed position to take at all times in all places. This is a way of freeing ourselves from that quality of being bound to unsatisfactory conditions. If you believe in being a man or a woman as your true identity and your soul, that belief will always take you to a depressing state of mind. All these are perceptions we have. We create so much misery over perceiving ourselves to be black or white, or members of a certain nationality or class. In England people suffer because of their perception of belonging to a certain class; in America we suffer from not having any perceptions of class, from the perception that we're all the same, we're all equal. It's the attachment to any of these, even to the highest, most egalitarian perception, that takes us to despair.

By investigating these five 'heaps',<sup>2</sup> aggregates or groups, you begin to see them. You can know them as objects because they're *anattā*, not-self. If they were what you are, you wouldn't be able to see them. You'd only be able to be them. You'd have no way of witnessing them or detaching from them, you'd just be caught into them all the time, without any ability to detach and observe them. But being men, women,

<sup>2</sup>The literal meaning of *khandha*

monks, nuns, Italian, Danish, Swiss, English, American, Canadian or whatever is only a relative truth, relative to certain situations.

Yet we can operate our lives from fixed positions, of being ‘I’m American’ and ‘We’re this way’. Throughout the world we have those national prejudices and racial prejudices. These are just perception and conception (*saññā/saṅkhārā* khandhas) that we can observe. When you have a fixed view about somebody (‘One thing I can’t stand is Hondurans’), you can observe that in your mind. Even if you have strong prejudices and feelings but you try to get rid of them, that comes from assuming that you shouldn’t have any prejudices at all; that you shouldn’t have any bad feelings towards anybody, and you should be able to accept criticism with an equanimous mind and not feel angry or upset. That’s another very idealistic assumption. See that as a condition of mind and keep observing. Rather than hating ourselves or hating others for being prejudiced, we observe the very limitations of any prejudices or perceptions and conceptions of the mind. We meditate on the impermanent nature of perception. In other words, we don’t try to justify, explain, get rid of or change anything. We just try to observe that all things change – all that begins ends.

Then we meditate on the *viññāṇa* khandha: consciousness, the sensory consciousness of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind, and how one thing goes to another, aware of the movements of consciousness of the senses. Looking at something, hearing something – this changes very rapidly. All these five khandhas are *anicca*, impermanent. When we chant: ‘*Rūpaṃ aniccaṃ, vedanā aniccā, saññā aniccā, saṅkhārā aniccā, viññāṇaṃ aniccaṃ*’, this is very profound. Then we chant ‘*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*. ‘*Saṅkhārā*’ here means all conditioned phenomena, all sensory experience – the sense organs, the objects of the sense organs, the consciousness that arises on contact – all this is *saṅkhārā* and is *anicca*. All is conditioned. So ‘*saṅkhārā*’ here includes the other four khandhas: *rūpa, vedanā, saññā, viññāṇa*. With this you have a perspective from which the conditioned world is infinitely variable and complex. But where do

you separate *saññā* from *sañkhārā* or *sañkhārā* from *viññāna*? It's best not to try to make precise divisions between these five aggregates; they're just convenient means for looking at things, helping you to meditate on mental states, the physical world and the sensory world. We're not trying to fix anything as permanently *sañkhārā* or definitely *saññā*, but just using these labels to observe that the sensory world, from the physical to the mental, from coarse to refined, is conditioned, and all conditioned phenomena are impermanent. Then you have a way of seeing the totality of the conditioned world as impermanent, rather than getting involved in it all. In this practice of insight meditation we're not trying to analyze the conditioned world, but to detach from it, to see it in a perspective. This is when you really begin to comprehend *anicca*; you insightfully know that '*sabbe sañkhārā aniccā*.'

So any thoughts and beliefs you have are just conditions. But I'm not saying that you shouldn't believe in anything, I'm just pointing out a way to see things in perspective, so you're not deluded by them. We won't grasp the experience of emptiness or the Unconditioned, the Deathless, as a personal attainment. Some of you have been grasping that one as a kind of personal attainment, haven't you? – 'I know emptiness. I've realized emptiness' – and patting yourselves on the back. That's not '*sabbe dhammā anattā*', that's grasping the Unconditioned, making it into a condition, 'me' and 'mine.' When you start thinking of yourself as having realized emptiness, you can see that also as a condition of the mind. '*sabbe dhammā anattā*', all things are not-self, not a person, not a permanent soul, not a self of any sort. That's very important to contemplate also, because '*sabbe dhammā*' includes all things, both the conditioned phenomena of the sensory world and the unconditioned, the Deathless.

Notice that Buddhists make no claim for Deathlessness as being a self either – 'I have an immortal soul', or 'God is my true nature.' The Buddha avoided all statements of that nature. Any possible conceiving of oneself as anything at all is an obstacle to enlightenment, because

you attach to an idea again, to a concept of self as being part of something. Maybe you think there's a piece of you, a little soul, that joins the bigger one at death. That is a conception of the mind that you can know. We're not saying it's untrue or false, but we're just being the knowing, knowing what can be known. We don't feel compelled to grasp that as a belief; we see it as only something that comes out of the mind, a condition of the mind, so we let even that go.

Keep that formula: 'All conditions are impermanent, all things are not-self' for reflection. And then whatever happens in your life as you live it, you can see: '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā.*' It keeps you from being deluded if miraculous phenomena happen to you, and it is a way of understanding other religious conventions. Christians come along and say: 'Only through Jesus Christ can you be saved. You can't be saved through Buddhism. Buddha was only a man, but Jesus Christ was the son of God.' So you think: 'Oh, I wonder, maybe they're right.' After all, when you go to one of these born-again meetings everybody's radiating happiness; their eyes are bright and they say, 'Praise the Lord!' When you go to a Buddhist monastery and just sit there for hours on end watching your breath, you don't get high like that, so you might start doubting and think: 'Maybe that's right, maybe Jesus is the way.' But what you can know is that there's a doubt. Look at that doubt, or the feeling of being intimidated by other religions when they come on strong, or feeling averse to them, or having prejudices against religions. What you can know is that these are perceptions of the mind; they come and go and change.

Keep a constant cool reflection on these things, rather than trying to figure them out or feel that you have to justify being a Buddhist. Christians may say: 'You don't do anything for the Third World', and you say: 'We ... we ... we ... chant! We share merit and we radiate loving-kindness.' That sounds pretty weak in a situation where you're talking about malnutrition and starvation in Africa. But now, at this time, there's this opportunity to understand the limits of what you can do.

All of us would definitely do something about starvation in Africa if we could, if we felt that there was something one individual could do here and now at this time. Reflect on this – what is the real problem at this time? Is it the problem of starvation in Africa, or is it human selfishness and ignorance? Isn't starvation in Africa the result of human greed, selfishness, and stupidity?

Therefore we open our minds to the Dhamma. We wisely reflect on it and then realize it. Truth is to be realized and known within the context of personal experience. But the practice is a continuous one – I still practise all the time. Things change: people praise and blame, the world goes on. One just keeps reflecting on it through: '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā.*' When you recognize the conditioned and the unconditioned, you have what is called the ability to develop the Path, and there's no more confusion about that. The goal now is to realize nibbāna, or the Deathless, or non-attachment – to realize what it's like not to be attached to the five khandhas. Realize that when you're sitting here and you're really at peace. There's no attachment to the five khandhas then, but you might make a perception out of that peacefulness and attach to that, and always try to meditate in order to become peaceful again according to a perception. That's why the practice is continuously letting go rather than an attainment.

Sometimes when you become calm on retreat, you can have a very peaceful mind and you attach to it, so you meditate in order to attain that blissful state again. But insight meditation means looking into the nature of things, of the five khandhas: seeing them as *anicca* – impermanent; as *dukkha* – unsatisfactory. None of these khandhas have the ability to give you any kind of permanent satisfaction. Their very nature is unsatisfactory and *anattā*.

Start to investigate and wisely consider '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā*', rather than thinking you've attained something or that you've got to hold on to that attainment, and starting to resent anybody who gets in your way. Note what is attachment. When your

mind is really concentrated, let go of it. Rather than just indulging in that peaceful feeling, attach to something. Worry about something. Do it deliberately, so that you begin to see how you go out and grasp things or worry about losing them.

In your practice, as you begin to understand and experience letting go, you begin to realize what Buddhas know: *‘Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā.’* It’s not just a string of words – even a parrot can say the words, but it’s not an enlightened parrot. Insight is different from conceptual knowledge. But now you’re penetrating, going deep into this, breaking through the illusion of self as being anything at all – or nothing; if you believe that you don’t have a self, that’s another belief. ‘I believe I don’t have a self. We believe in no self.’ You see that the Buddha pointed to the way between those two extremes of believing you have a self and believing that you don’t have a self. You cannot find anything in the five khandhas which is a permanent self or soul: things arise out of the unconditioned, they go back to the unconditioned. It is therefore through letting go, not through adopting any other attitude, that we seek to no longer attach to mortal conditions.

## 7 | ... All the Time in the World

As we sit here during this retreat, we have to pay attention to things that are not at all interesting. They may even be unpleasant and painful. To endure things patiently rather than run off to find something interesting is a good discipline – to be able just to endure the boredom, the pain, the anger, the greed; all these things, instead of always running away from them. Patience is such an important virtue. If we have no patience, there is absolutely no possibility of becoming enlightened. Be extremely patient.

I liked the kind of meditation where I could sit and grow very calm, and when pain would arise in the body I'd want to get rid of it so that I could stay in that state of calm. Then I began to see that wanting to get rid of pain was a miserable state of mind. Sometimes we sit for several hours, sometimes all night long. You can run away from physical pain, but after a while you begin to come to terms with it. I've used practices like having all the time in the world to be with pain, rather than trying my best to get rid of it in order to come back to my 'real' meditation. I take time to be with the pains in my body if they come up in consciousness, rather than thinking, 'How can I get rid of them to get some bliss?' Somehow, saying, 'I have all the time in the world, the rest

of my life to be with this pain' would stop the tendency to want to get rid of it. My mind would slow down for long periods of time, without following or creating a desire. Some of you have this idea of conquering pain, getting over the 'pain threshold', but that's a disaster ...

## 8 | This is the Way It Is

‘This is the way it is’ is a skilful reflection. Venerable Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, the renowned Thai sage, said: ‘If there was to be a useful inscription to put on a medallion around your neck, it would be: “This is the way it is.”’ This reflection helps us to contemplate, wherever we happen to be, in whatever time and place, good or bad, ‘This is the way it is.’ It is a way of bringing an acceptance into our minds, a noting rather than a reaction.

The practice of meditation is reflecting on ‘the way it is’ in order to see the fears and desires which we create. This is quite a simple practice, but the practice of Dhamma should be very, very simple rather than complicated. Many methods of meditation are very, very complicated, with many stages and techniques, so one becomes addicted to complicated things. Sometimes we don’t really know how things are because of our attachment to views. However, the more simple we become, the more clear, profound and meaningful everything is to us.

For example, consider the people here, the monks and nuns we live with. Maybe we feel attracted to some, we feel averse to some, we sympathize with some, we understand some, some we don’t understand; but whatever view we have, we can see it as just a ‘view’

of a person rather than a real person. We can hear ourselves saying, 'I don't want him to be like that ... I want him to be otherwise. He should be this other way, shouldn't be like this.' 'I want it to be otherwise' is the wail of the age. Why can't life be otherwise? Why do people have to die? Why do we have to grow old? Why this sickness? Why do we have to be separated from our loved ones? Why do innocent children who wouldn't hurt anyone in their lives, old people who wouldn't hurt anyone, have to suffer from starvation or brutality?

There is always some horrible new thing happening. The other day someone wrote to me about the Bangladesh Muslims trying to get rid of Buddhist hill tribes in the Chittagong Hill Tracts through genocide. Then we hear about Iranians trying to eradicate the Bahais ... it goes on endlessly. There are always clashes between groups, one trying to take over another's land or power. This has been going on since who knows when. Someone has always been trying to exterminate someone else since Cain murdered Abel – and that was a long time ago! But each time we hear of these atrocities we say, 'How terrible ... it shouldn't be ...'

We hear about American drug companies selling poisonous and horrible drugs to the Third World countries. 'That shouldn't be! Dreadful.' The pollution of the planet, the despoiling of the environment, the killing of dolphins and whales ... where does it end? What can you do about it? It seems to be an endless problem of human ignorance. At a time when people should know better, they are doing the most horrendous things to each other. It is a time of gloomy predictions: earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and diseases – it shouldn't be like this.

Saying, 'This is the way it is' is not approval or a refusal to do anything, but a way of establishing oneself in the knowledge that Nature is 'like this.' In the animal kingdom it's very much a question of survival of the fittest, a natural self-selecting law where the weaker strains are destroyed, so in that way even Nature is quite brutal. We think of Nature as being everything it 'should' be – sweet, with flowers, and sunshine – but Nature is also very brutal. What is our position

in Nature? We can live on the level of the animal kingdom, with its emphasis on the survival of the fittest, the strong over the weak, and living by fear and power. We can live like that because we share that animal mentality. We have an animal body and it has to survive like any other animal body on this planet. So the law of the jungle is something human beings can subscribe to – and many of them do. But this is only a lower level. If we live on just that level, we must expect the world to be as it is, in a state of fear, and anxiety. But as human beings we can get beyond this animal level; we can decide to have some kind of moral standard to abide by, so that we don't have to live our lives in a state of anxiety.

But even higher than that is our ability to realize the Truth – to contemplate existence, to cultivate the reflective mind through which we can transcend personality. At the level of moral behaviour we still have very strong personality view, and in our civilization we've developed a sense of 'me' and 'mine' to absurdity. So strong is this sense of 'me' and 'mine' that it seems to dominate everything and taint everything we do, and there's always a sense of anguish and suffering connected with it. Contemplate that whenever there is a sense of 'me' and 'mine' in anything, it always seems to give rise to discontentment, uncertainty or doubt, guilt, fear or anxiety. There is this view of 'me' as an individual being, that 'this' is mine, that 'I' should or should not, coming from a belief in oneself as the body or mental conditions. However, this view is based on an illusion; it comes from conditioning, not from insight. So as long as we identify with the limitations of the body and the mind, then of course we are going to experience doubt, despair, anguish, sorrow, grief and lamentation – these mental forms of suffering. How could it be otherwise? We're certainly not going to get enlightenment from distorted misunderstanding and wrong view.

We have this opportunity now to establish right view and right understanding, which free us from the personality illusion: identification with what are called the five khandhas – body, feeling,

perception, mental formations and consciousness. So we contemplate consciousness through the senses – the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. We can contemplate mental formations, the yesterdays of our own creation and the thoughts and views that we create. We can see them as impermanent.

We have this ability to contemplate the nature of things, the ability to say, ‘This is the way it is.’ We can notice ‘the way it is’ without adopting a personality viewpoint. So with the breath of the body, its weight, its posture, we are just witnessing and noting, observing how it is now, in this moment. The mood of the mind, whether we feel bright or dull, happy or unhappy, is something we can know, we can witness. And the empty mind, empty of the proliferations about oneself and others, is clarity. It’s intelligent and compassionate. The more we really look into the habits we have developed, the clearer things become for us. So we must be willing to suffer, to be bored, and to be miserable and anguished; this is an opportunity to bear with these unpleasant mental states rather than suppress them. Having been born, this is the way it is, at this time, in this place.

## 9 | The Raft

The Buddha pointed to the way of seeing things as they are; this is what we mean by enlightenment. Seeing the way it actually is, we aren't doomed to live in a realm from which there's no way out. There's a clear way out of this realm of misery; a very precise way.

The Buddha said: 'I teach only two things: suffering and the end of suffering.' So Buddhism is a baffling religion to Westerners, because it has no doctrinal position. It doesn't make doctrinal statements about ultimate reality or anything else: there's just suffering and the end of suffering. That is to be realized, and to realize the end of suffering, you have to admit and really know what suffering is, because the problem isn't with suffering, but with delusion and grasping. And we really have to understand suffering – according to the sermon of the Four Noble Truths, suffering is to be understood. There is suffering. It should be understood.

In our daily life here at Amaravati we notice when we are suffering. We can blame it on the weather, the people or whatever, but that's not the point, because even if someone is treating us badly, that's just the way the world is. Sometimes people treat us well, sometimes they treat us badly, because of this worldly concern for conditions; but the suffering is something we create. In a monastery we're trying

to act in responsible ways, so that we're not intentionally causing anyone to suffer. We're here to encourage each other towards moral responsibility, towards cooperation, kindness, compassion. That's our intention.

Sometimes we get lost – we blow up at each other, or we do things that aren't very nice – but that's not our intention; these are the heedless moments. I conduct myself in a moral way not only for my own benefit, for my own practice, but out of respect for you and towards the Sangha, and towards the community around us: to be someone who lives within the restraints of the moral precepts. Then my intention is towards my relationship with you, towards *mettā*, kindness and compassion, joy, calm, serenity. Every one of us at least intends to do good and refrain from doing evil. That helps us to look at the suffering we create in a community with those aims – because a lot of you really suffer here. And this is to be understood. It's the first Noble Truth, *dukkha*: the suffering of not getting what we want; the suffering of things not being the way we want them, of separation from what we like; the suffering of having to do that which we don't want to do, of having to be restrained when we want to be unrestrained.

I think of how easy it is to create you in my mind: 'The nuns are like this: the anagārikas are like that, bhikkhus are like this,' and so forth. One can have these biases: 'Women are this way; men are that way, Americans are like this and the English are like that.' We can believe that, but these are perceptions of the mind, views that arise and cease. And yet we can create a lot of suffering about them: 'This one doesn't come to the morning chanting', or 'That one isn't doing their share of the work and this one thinks they're too important', or whatever. But the important point is the suffering, the *dukkha*, because when we have that, we create despair in our minds. We become annoyed, indignant and that takes us to a sense of despair. If we don't understand *dukkha* here, we won't understand it no matter where we are: in London, Bangkok or Washington DC; on a mountaintop or in a valley; with good

people or bad people. So it's really important to observe suffering, to know *dukkha*.

There are three insights into the first Noble Truth: there is *dukkha*; it should be understood; it has been understood. That's how insight works: recognition that there's something to understand and beginning to know when we understand it. So those are the three insights into the first Noble Truth.

The second Noble Truth is the origin of *dukkha*: there is an origin, it's due to the grasping of desire. The second insight of the second Noble Truth is that this attachment to desire – this identification with desire being 'me' and 'mine', this following of desire – should be let go of, leaving it as it is. Then the third insight of the second Noble Truth is: desire has been let go of – through practice, *dukkha* has been let go of.

There is the first insight into each of the Truths, *pariyatti* – an observing that there is suffering, its origin and so forth. Then there's *paṭipatti* or insight into practice: what we do, how we practise. And the third insight is *paññavedha* or wisdom. It has been understood; it has been let go of.

When there is the insight, 'The origin of suffering has been let go of', there is knowledge of that result – actually letting go. You know what it's like not to be attached to something. Holding a clock is like this, and when I put it down I'm aware of what not holding it is like. If I'm holding things and I'm heedless, I don't even notice when I'm no longer holding them, when there's no grasping. I'm not aware of it. Really ignorant and heedless people are so caught up with grasping that even though they're not grasping something all the time, the habit is such that they only notice when they are grasping at something. Many of you may only feel fully alive when you're filled with greed or anger in some form or other. So letting go can be quite frightening to people; when they let go of things, they may feel they're no longer alive.

There's a lot of investment in being a person. Even the view that 'I have a bad temper; I have a lot of anger' can be a kind of conceit. If

I'm angry, I feel very much alive. Sexual desire makes the 'I' feel alive – that's why there's so much obsession with sex in modern European lives. And when there's no sexual desire, no anger, I want to fall asleep. I'm nothing. When there's no mindfulness at all, one just has to seek more sensual pleasure – to eat something, drink something, take drugs or watch something on TV, read something or do something dangerous. You can break the law just because it's exciting to do so. But imagine trying to get people to spend a weekend just holding a clock and noticing what that is like! What a waste of time! I could be out terrorizing the police, I could be at a disco with strobe lights, music blaring in my ears, pot, LSD and Scotch! Being attentive to the way things are, no longer just distracting the mind, sounds really painful by comparison.

This evening we're going to sit in meditation until midnight. It's a chance to observe more fully what it's like to be sitting; what it's like when the mind is filled with thoughts and when there are no thoughts; when there is suffering and when there isn't suffering. If you have a view that sitting until midnight is going to be suffering, you have already committed yourself to suffering until midnight. But if you start examining that very view, fear or doubt in your mind for what it is, you can observe when it's present and when it's not present. If you're not suffering, you're not thinking there's any suffering. Then this feeling of suffering comes and you attach to the view, 'I'm suffering, and I have to sit up and I'm tired.' This is the first Noble Truth: 'There's suffering, suffering is to be understood' through an admission, a recognition and an understanding.

The insight of the second Noble Truth is to let go, to leave alone, not to make anything out of an all-night sitting. These are perceptions. They're nothing, really: if you're using the situation for reflection and contemplation of when there is suffering, then there isn't suffering. I'm aware of holding this thought, grasping this thought or not grasping this thought. One can pick things up or put them down, knowing how to

use them rather than having a blind obsession to grasp or reject them. I can put down the clock but I don't have to throw it away. But it's not that holding the clock is wrong, unless there is ignorance about it. One is aware of grasping and the non-grasping, holding and not holding.

The third Noble Truth is the cessation of suffering. When you let go of something and you realize letting go, your habits become your teachers. When you let go of suffering, suffering ceases. 'There is cessation and it should be realized' – this is the second insight into the third Noble Truth. And this is our practice: to realize cessation, to notice when suffering ceases. It's not that everything's going to disappear, but the feeling of suffering and 'I am' ceases. This is not to be believed but to be realized, and then there is the third insight – that cessation has been realized.

This leads to the insight into the fourth Noble Truth concerning the Eightfold Path, the way out of suffering. These insights connect to one another. It's not that first you do one and then you do another; they support each other. As we have the insight into letting go, as we realize cessation, there is right understanding and the rest follows from that – the development of wisdom or *paññā*.

Don't see this as something that deals just with very deep and important issues, because it's about the here and now, the way things are. We're not thinking about extreme situations to work with, but just sitting, standing, walking, lying down, breathing, feeling as normal beings, living in a moral environment with the way it is. We don't have to go into hell to really see suffering, we're not seeking it. We can create hell at Amaravati, not because Amaravati is hell, but because we create it with all kinds of miserable things from our mind, and this is the suffering we can work with. It's just the suffering in this normal human realm, where our intentions are to refrain from doing evil, to do good, to develop virtue, and to be kind. But there's still enough suffering here to contemplate these Four Noble Truths with their twelve aspects. You can memorize them: then wherever you are you've

got something to contemplate. Eventually you let go of all these things, because they aren't ends in themselves either, but like tools to be used. You learn to use these tools, and when you've finished you don't need to hang on to them. To signify this the Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft that you can make out of the things around you. You don't have to have a special motorboat, submarine or luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around, just to get across to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle, we're able to use what's around us for enlightenment.

The raft is to carry us across the sea of ignorance, and when we get to the other shore, we can let it go – which doesn't mean we have to throw it away. This 'other shore' can also be a delusion, because the other shore and this one are really the same shore. It's merely an allegory. We have never really left the other shore; we've always been on the other shore anyway, and the raft is something we use to remind us that we don't really need a raft. So there's absolutely nothing to do but to be mindful, to be able to sit, stand, walk, lie down, eat food, breathe – and all the opportunities as humans to do good. In the human realm we have this lovely opportunity to be good, to be kind, to be generous, to love others, to serve others, to help others. These are some of the most lovely qualities of being human. We can decide not to do evil. We don't have to kill, lie, steal, go around distracting ourselves and drugging ourselves, getting lost in moods and feelings. We can be free from all that. The human form is a wonderful opportunity to refrain from evil and do good, not in order to store up merit for the next life, but because this is the beauty of our humanity. Being a human can be a joyful experience rather than an onerous task. So when we contemplate this, we really begin to appreciate this birth in a human form. We feel grateful to have this opportunity to live with our teacher, the Buddha and our practice, the Dhamma, and to live in the Sangha.

The Sangha represents the human community as unified in virtuousness and moral restraint; it is the soul force of the human

realm. That which is truly benevolent in humanity has its effect on the moral aspects that abide in the human realm, so all sentient beings are benefited by it. What would the world be like if humanity were just selfish, with every man for himself, endlessly making demands, not caring about others at all? It would be a terrible place to live. So we don't do that; we abide in the Sangha, an abiding where we live together within a convention that encourages morality and respect for each other. This is for reflection, for contemplation; you have to know it for yourself, nobody can realize it for you. You have to arouse yourself and not depend on something external to push you or hold you up.

We even have to let go of our need to be inspired. We have to develop strength until we no longer need any kind of inspiration or encouragement from anyone else, because inspiration isn't wisdom. You get high – 'Ajahn Sumedho's wonderful' – and then after a while you don't get high on me any more and think: 'Ajahn Sumedho's disappointing, he's let me down.' Inspiration is like eating chocolate: it tastes good and it's very attractive, but it's not going to nourish you; it only energizes momentarily and that's all it can do. So it's not wise to depend on whether people live in the way that you want them to live, or that they will never disappoint you.

It's so important to develop insight through practice, because inspiration wears out, and if you are attached to and blinded by it, you are in for terrible disillusionment and bitterness. There's a lot of this with different charismatic guru figures who teach around the world. It's not balanced. You may become intoxicated by somebody else's charisma, but you can't maintain it, so you inevitably fall down into some lower state. The way of mindfulness, however, is always appropriate to the time and the place, to the way things are in their good and bad aspects. Then suffering isn't dependent on the world being good or bad, but on how willing we are to use wisdom in this present moment. The way out of suffering is now, through being able to see things as they are.



## 10 | Patience

Peacefulness and tranquillity can be incredibly boring, and a lot of restlessness and doubt can come up as a result. Restlessness is a common problem because the sensory realm is a restless realm; bodies are restless, minds are restless. Conditions are changing all the time, so if you are caught up in reacting to change, you're restless.

Restlessness needs to be thoroughly understood for what it is; the practice is not one of just using the will to bind yourself to the meditation mat. It's not a test of your becoming a strong person who has to conquer restlessness – that attitude just reinforces another egotistical view. It is a matter of really investigating restlessness, noticing it and knowing it for what it is. For this we have to develop patience; it's something we have to learn and really work with.

When I first went to Wat Pah Pong I couldn't understand Lao. In those days Ajahn Chah was at his peak and giving three-hour *desanās* every evening. He could go on and on and on, and everybody loved him – he was a very good speaker, very humorous and everybody enjoyed his talks. But if you couldn't understand Lao ...! I'd be sitting there thinking, 'When is he going to stop, I'm wasting my time.' I'd be really angry, thinking, 'I've had enough, I'm leaving.' But I couldn't get

up enough nerve to leave, so I would just sit there thinking, ‘I’ll go to another monastery. I’ve had enough of this, I’m not going to put up with this.’ And then he would look at me – he had the most radiant smile – and he’d say: ‘Are you all right?’ And suddenly all the anger that had been accumulating for those three hours would completely drop away. That’s interesting, isn’t it? After sitting there fuming for three hours, it would just go.

So I vowed that my practice would be patience, and that during this time I would develop patience. I’d come to all the talks and sit through all of them as long as I could physically stand it. I determined not to miss them or try to get out of them, and just practise patience. And by doing that, I began to find that the opportunity to be patient was something that helped me very much. Patience is a very firm foundation for my insight and understanding of the Dhamma; without it I would just have wandered about, drifting as you see so many people doing. Many Westerners came to Wat Pah Pong and drifted away from it because they weren’t patient. They didn’t want to sit through three-hour *desanās* and be patient. They wanted to go to the places where you could get instant enlightenment quickly in the way you wanted.

Because we can be driven by selfish desires and ambitions even on the spiritual path, we can’t always really appreciate the way things are. When I actually contemplated and reflected on my life at Wat Pah Pong, I realized that it was a very good situation: there was a good teacher, there was enough to eat, the monks were good monks, the laypeople were very generous and kind, and there was encouragement towards the practice of Dhamma. This is as good as you can get; it was a wonderful opportunity, and yet so many Westerners couldn’t see that because they tended to think, ‘I don’t like this, I don’t want that’, and ‘It should be otherwise’ and ‘What I think and what I feel, I don’t want to be bothered with this and that.’

I remember going up to Tam Saeng Phet monastery, which was a very quiet secluded place in those years, and I lived in a cave. A villager

built me a platform, because in the depths of this cave was a big python. One evening I was sitting on this platform by candlelight; it was really eerie and the light cast shadows on all the rocks. It was weird. I was sitting there and I started to get really frightened, and then suddenly I was startled. I looked up and there was a huge owl right above, looking at me. It looked immense – I don't know if it was really that big, but it looked enormous in the candlelight, and it was looking straight at me. I thought, 'Well what is there to be really frightened of here?' and I tried to imagine skeletons and ghosts, or Mother Kali with fangs and blood dripping out of her mouth, or enormous monsters with green skin; and I began to laugh because it became so amusing. I realized I wasn't really frightened at all.

In those days I was just a very junior monk, and one night Ajahn Chah took us to a village fête. I think Satimanto Bhikkhu was there at the time. We were all very serious practitioners and we didn't want any kind of frivolity or foolishness; and of course going to a village fête was the last thing we wanted to do, because in these villages they love loudspeakers. But Ajahn Chah took Satimanto and me to this fête, and we had to sit up all night with the raucous sounds of the loudspeakers going and monks giving talks all night long. I kept thinking, 'Oh, I want to get back to my cave – green-skinned monsters and ghosts are much better than this.' I noticed that Satimanto, who was incredibly serious, was looking really angry and critical, and very unhappy, and we just sat there looking miserable. I thought: 'Why does Ajahn Chah bring us to these things?' Then I began to see for myself. I remember sitting there thinking, 'Here I am getting all upset over this. Is it that bad? What's really bad is what I'm making out of it, what's really miserable is my mind. Loudspeakers and noise, and distraction and sleepiness, one can put up with them, but it's that awful thing in my mind that hates them, resents them and wants to leave – that's the real misery!'

That evening I could see what misery I could create in my mind over things that one can bear. I remember that as a very clear insight

of what I thought was miserable, and what really is miserable. At first I was blaming the people, the loudspeakers, the disruption, the noise and the discomfort – I thought that was the problem. Then I realized that it wasn't, it was my mind that was miserable.

If we reflect on and contemplate Dhamma, we learn from the very situations which we like the least – if we have the will to do so.

How many of you have been practising today trying to become something – ‘I have got to do this, or become that, or get rid of something, or got to do something’? That compulsiveness takes over, even in our practice of Dhamma. ‘This is the way it is’ isn’t a fatalistic attitude of not caring or being indifferent, but a real openness to the way things have to be at this moment. For example, right now at this moment this is the way it is, and it can’t be any other way at this moment. It’s so obvious, isn’t it? Right now, no matter whether you are feeling high or low or indifferent, happy or depressed, enlightened or totally deluded, half-enlightened, half-deluded, three-quarters deluded, one-quarter enlightened, hopeful or despairing – this is the way it is. And it can’t be any other way at this moment. This doesn’t mean we can’t try to make things better, but we do so from understanding and wisdom, rather than from an ignorant desire.

How does your body feel? Just notice that the body is this way. It’s heavy, it’s earthbound, it’s coarse; it gets hungry, it feels heat and cold, it gets sick; sometimes it feels very nice, sometimes it feels horrible.

This is the way it is. Human bodies are like this, so this tendency to want them to be otherwise falls away. The world is this way. Things happen: it snows and the sun comes out, people come and go, people have misunderstandings, people's feelings get hurt. People grow lazy or inspired, depressed and disillusioned; people gossip and disappoint each other. There's adultery, theft, drunkenness and drug addiction; and there are wars, and there always have been.

Here in a community like Amaravati we can see the way things are. Now it's the weekend, when more people come to offer alms-food and it's more crowded and noisy. There are people pounding vegetables and chopping things, with everything going all over the place, and sometimes there are children running up and down screaming. You can observe 'This is the way it is' rather than think 'These people are impinging on my silence.' 'I don't want it to be like that, I want it to be otherwise', might be the reaction if you like the quiet orderliness of the meal when there's none of that activity, and there are no loud noises or harsh sounds. But life is like this, this is the way life is, this is human existence. So in our minds we embrace the whole of it, and 'This is the way it is' allows us to accept the changes and movements from the silent to the noisy, from the controlled and ordered to the confused and muddled.

One can be a very selfish Buddhist, wanting life to be very quiet and to be able to 'practise', with plenty of time for sitting, plenty of time for studying the Dhamma and thinking, 'I don't want to have to receive guests and talk to people about silly things, I don't want to ... blah blah blah.' You can be a very, very selfish person as a Buddhist monk. You can want the world to align itself with your dreams and ideals, and when it doesn't you don't want it anymore. But rather than make things the way you want them, the Buddha's way is to notice the way things are. And it's a great relief when you accept the way it is, even if it's not very nice; because the only real misery is not wanting it to be like that.

Whether things are going well or not so well, if we don't accept the way things are, the mind tends to create some form of misery. So if you are attached to things going nicely, you'll start worrying if they go less well, even when they are actually still going well. I have noticed that with little things, such as when it's a sunny day and one jumps for joy – then the next thought will be, 'But in England the sun can disappear in the next moment.' As soon as I've grasped one perception and I'm jumping for joy at the sunshine, the unpleasant thought arises that it may not last. Whatever you're attached to will bring on its opposite. And when things aren't going very well, the mind tends to think: 'I want them to get better than this.' So suffering arises whenever there is the grasping of desire.

The sensory world is pleasurable and painful, it's beautiful and ugly, it's neutral; there are all gradations, all possibilities in it. This is just what sensory experience is about. But when ignorance and the self-view are operating, I only want pleasure and I don't want pain. I want only beauty and I don't want ugliness: 'Please, God, please make me healthy, give me a good complexion, physical attractiveness, and let me stay young for a long time, get lots of money, wealth and power, no sickness, no cancer, lots of beautiful things around me; surround me with beauty and the pleasures of the senses at their best, please.' Then the fear will come that maybe I'll get the worst. I could get leprosy, AIDS, Parkinson's disease or cancer. And I might be rejected and despised and humiliated, left alone out in the cold, hungry, sick and in danger, with wolves howling and the wind blowing.

From the viewpoint of the self, there's a tremendous fear of rejection, ostracism or being despised in our society. There's a fear of being left alone and unwanted; there's a fear of being old, and left to die alone, there's natural fear of physical danger, of being in situations where our bodies are in danger; and there's the fear of the unknown, the mysterious, ghosts and unseen spirits. So we gravitate to security – cosy little places with electricity, central heating, insurance and

guarantees on everything – taxes paid and legal contracts. All of these give us a sense of safety. Or we seek emotional security: ‘Say you’ll always love me, dear. Say you’ll love me even if you don’t mean it. Make everything safe and secure.’ And in that demand there’s always going to be anxiety because of the grasping at desire.

So monastics are developing a light around the uplifting of the human spirit rather than around material guarantees. As alms-mendicants you take the risk that you might not get anything to eat. You might not have a shelter, you might not have any really good medicine, you might not have anything nice to wear. People are very generous, but as mendicants we don’t take that for granted, assuming that we deserve it. We are grateful for whatever is offered, and cultivate the attitude of few wants, few needs. We need to make ourselves ready to be able to leave and relinquish everything at any moment, to have the kind of mind that doesn’t think, ‘This is my home, I want it to be guaranteed to me for the rest of my life.’ No matter how it goes, we adapt, our needs are few. And so we make adaptations to life, to time and place, rather than making demands. Whatever way it goes is the way it is. Whatever diseases we may catch, or whatever tragedies, catastrophes or successes we experience, from the best to the worst, one can say this is the way it is. And in that there is acceptance and non-anger, non-greed and the ability to cope with life as it’s happening.

We are not here to become anything, get rid of anything, change anything, make anything for ourselves or demand anything, but to awaken more and more, to reflect, observe and know the Dhamma. Don’t worry that things might change for the worse. However they change, we have the wisdom to adapt to them. And I can see that this is the real fearlessness of the alms-mendicant life. We can adapt, we can learn wisely from all conditions, because this lifetime is not our real home. This lifetime is a transition we’re involved in, a journey through the sensory realm, and there are no nests, no homes, no abiding in this sensory realm. It’s all very impermanent, subject to disruption and

change at any moment. That is its nature. That's the way it is. There is nothing depressing about that if you no longer make the demand for security in it.

The reality of existence is that there isn't any home here. So the homeless life, going forth into mendicancy, is what is called a heavenly messenger, because the religious spirit no longer shares the delusions of the worldly mind, which is very determined to have a material home and security. Instead you have the trust in Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, and the teaching and the opportunities as mendicants and meditators to develop the insight and understanding to free the mind from the anxieties that come from attachment to the sensory realm as a home.

The idea of owning, and hanging on to things is the illusion of the worldly life. The view of the self sends forth all these delusions, from which we have to protect ourselves all the time. We're always endangered, there's always something to be worried about, something to be frightened of. But when that illusion is punctured with wisdom there is fearlessness; we see this is a journey, a transition through the sensory realm, and we are willing to learn the lessons it teaches us no matter what those lessons might be.



Sometimes we approach meditation from a way of thinking that is based on trying to get rid of unwanted mental states and control the mind. It's better to see meditation as an opportunity to be mindful, to be at peace with yourself and with whatever mood you happen to be in at this moment, rather than trying to achieve some kind of desired state. Learn to be one who's at peace with the way things are. When I started meditation in Thailand, the way I had lived my life before I became a monk affected my meditation practice. I began to let go of things and to accept all my ambitious and aggressive tendencies, and to be attentive to the way things are. The more you trust in this, the more quickly you will understand it's the way out of suffering. Notice how things affect your mind. If you're starting a meditation period having just come from your work, notice what that does to your mind. If the mind isn't tranquil and pure and serene, don't criticize it, notice the busyness of it all: you've been travelling in the rush hour, working at the keyboard, talking on the telephone, and maybe having to work with people you don't like in difficult, aggravating situations. Just notice all

of it; these things do have an effect on us. This is the experience of consciousness and sensitivity.

It is what being born as a human being amounts to. You're born, you have to live a lifetime as a conscious being in a very sensitive form, and what impinges on you, what comes to you from the objective world is going to affect you. There's nothing wrong with that, it's just the way it is. The problem is we tend to make everything very personal. We feel like it's wrong: 'I shouldn't be affected by these things that impinge on me; I shouldn't feel anger, or aversion, or greed, or irritation and frustration, envy, jealousy, fear, anxiety – I shouldn't be feeling these things. If I were a normal, healthy person I wouldn't have any of these problems; I wouldn't be sensitive at all, like a rhinoceros with a tough hide that nothing could ever get through – so maybe I'm not normal!' But it's just the way it is. Life is like this. Because we are human, we have these extremely sensitive forms and there's nothing really wrong with that. There are many irritating things about aspects of our lives, but being sensitive is like that, isn't it? Sensitivity means that whatever it is, pleasant or unpleasant, pleasurable, painful, beautiful, ugly, we're going to feel it.

So the way out of suffering is through mindfulness and not-self. There is only the awareness of our true nature: blissful and serene and pure. If we find this peace and serenity depends upon conditions being a certain way, and we need to control these conditions in order to abide in the blissful serenity of the purity of the mind, then it's all coming from desire: 'wrong view.' Mindfulness and understanding allows you to adapt and accept life – the total life experience – without having to control it. You don't have to hold on to the bits and pieces you like, and feel threatened by the possibility of being separated from them. Right meditation really allows you to be brave and adaptable, to be flexible and all that implies.

Things happen. Mother Nature has a way of letting us know that she's not just going to go along with our desires. If we try to control everything, and make it so that we are not being affected by any of it

– or only affected in the ways we like, then even if we get a measure of control over things, we just increase the suffering because conditions are changing all the time. We have to live with this body for a lifetime, and bodies are conscious and sensitive forms. This is what being born means: getting old, sickness and then death. By knowing the way it is, you find you are capable of accepting life, not bewildered by the way life happens to be. If you understand it and see it in the right way, you're not going to have wrong view; you're not going to add to it with fears, desires, bitterness, resentments and blame. We have the ability to accept the way life is. Understanding Dhamma allows us also to have a fearless attitude. We begin to realize that we can accept whatever happens. There's really nothing to be afraid of. Then you can let go of life; you can follow it because you're not expecting anything out of it, and you're not trying to control it. You have the wisdom, the mindfulness, the ability to go with the flow, rather than be drowned in the tidal wave of life.

Take time to be silent, listen to yourself: the breathing, just the natural rhythm of the body, the way your body feels now. The body is a condition in nature – it's not really you. It's not 'my' breathing any more; it's not personal. You breathe even if you're sick – and if you're asleep you're still breathing. It's the body that breathes. From birth to death it will be breathing. So that's why we use it as an object to focus on, to turn to if we're thinking too much. When thoughts get convoluted and complicated, we bring attention to the ordinary breathing of the body at this moment and we aren't lost in thought anymore; we are being attentive to a natural rhythm. But as soon as you start thinking, you can't concentrate on the breath; it becomes a 'me' again, and 'I' am trying to be mindful of my breath. But when you're just with the breath, there's no self. Your self will arise when you start thinking and when you're not thinking, there's no self. When you're mindful, thought isn't coming from wrong view, the view that 'I am a self.'

Thought can be a way of reflection, a way of focusing attention on Dhamma, rather than of creating problems of self-criticism or anxiety

about yourself and humanity. When you get angry and you're thinking, 'He said that to me, how dare he! That dirty so and so!' – if you stop thinking and just use the breath, eventually the feeling of the body that comes with anger will fade away, and then there is no anger. So if you feel angry, just reflect on what it feels like as a physical feeling. It's the same with any mood: contemplate, reflect on the mood that you're in; just work with it – not to analyze it or criticize it – just reflect on it, how it is. Some people say, 'I get very confused when I meditate – how can I get rid of confusion?' Wanting to get rid of confusion is the problem. Being confused and not wanting it to be like that just creates more confusion. So what does it *feel* like? Confusion may not feel like the more stimulating passions we can have that are quite obvious. We tend to not pay any attention to the more subtle states like hesitation, or doubt, and slight anxiety. Of course, one side of us just wants to get rid of all that, just stomp it out – but with the right understanding, we see that the very 'desire to get rid of' is suffering. In fact, we can bear with the feeling of insecurity if we know what it is, and that it's impermanent. With this understanding you begin to feel more and more confident in just being aware and mindful.

The mind is sensitive to suggestions and assumptions. This is why we're not trying to develop the practice in order to *become* an enlightened person. Such an assumption fixes you into the belief that right now you're not enlightened – that you've got a lot of problems, you've got to change your life, you've got to make yourself different and so on – that you're not good enough the way you are right now, so you have to meditate, and hopefully some time in the future you'll become something that you'd like to become. Well, if you never see the delusion of *that* way of thinking, then it just carries on! You'll never really become what you should be, no matter how much effort you put into your meditation. After years of trying to become enlightened, you'll always feel like a failure. And this is because you've still got the wrong attitude about it all.

## 13 | The Sound of Silence

When you grow calm you can experience the sound of silence in the mind. You hear it as a kind of high frequency sound, a ringing sound that's always there but is normally never noticed. When you now begin to hear that sound of silence, it's a sign of emptiness, of the silence of the mind. It's something you can always turn to. As you concentrate on it and turn to it, it can make you quite peaceful, blissful. Meditating on that, you have a way of letting the conditions of the mind cease, without suppressing them with another condition. Otherwise, you just end up putting one condition over another.

This process is what is meant by making 'kamma.' For example, if you're feeling angry and you start thinking of something else to get away from the anger, this is just putting one condition on top of another. You don't like what is going on over here, so you look over there, you just run away. But if you have a way of turning from conditioned phenomena to the unconditioned, no kind of kamma is being made, and the conditioned habits can fade away and cease. It's like a safety hatch in the mind, the way out, so your kammic formations, (*sankhārā*), have an exit, a way of flowing away instead of recreating themselves.

One problem with meditation is that many people find it boring. People become bored with emptiness. They want to fill up emptiness with something. So recognize that even when the mind is quite empty, the desires and habits are still there, and they will come and want to do something interesting. You have to be patient, willing to turn away from boredom and from the desire to do something interesting, and be content with the emptiness of the sound of silence. And you have to be quite determined in turning towards it. But when you begin to listen and understand the mind better, the emptiness of the sound of silence is a very realizable possibility for all of us. After many years of practice, gross kammic formations fade away and the more subtle ones also start to fade. The mind becomes increasingly emptier and clearer. But it takes a lot of patience, endurance and willingness to keep practising under all conditions and to let go even of one's most treasured little habits.

One can believe that the sound of silence is 'something' or that it is an attainment, but it is not a matter of having attained anything, but of wisely reflecting on what you experience. The way to reflect is that anything that comes goes; and the practice is one of knowing things as they are. No kind of identity is involved – there is nothing to attach to. Some people who hear that sound want to know: 'Is that stream-entry?' or: 'Do we have a soul?' We are so attached to concepts. All we can know is that we want to know something, we want to have a label for our 'self'. If there is a doubt about something, doubt arises and then there is desire for something. But the practice is one of letting go. We keep with what is, recognizing conditions as conditions and the unconditioned as the unconditioned. It's as simple as that. Even religious aspiration is seen as a condition. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't aspire, but just that you should recognize aspiration in itself as being limited. And emptiness is not-self either – attachment to the idea of emptiness is also attachment. Let go of that! The practice then becomes one of turning away from conditioned phenomena, not

creating anything more around existing conditions. So whatever arises in your consciousness – anger, greed or whatever – you recognize it is there but you make nothing out of it. You can turn to the emptiness of the mind, to the sound of silence. This gives conditions like anger a way out to cessation, you let them go away.

We have memories of what we have done in the past. They come up in consciousness when the conditions are there for them to come. That is the resultant kamma of having done something in the past, having acted out of ignorance, and done things out of greed, hatred and delusion, and so forth. When that kamma ripens in the present, the impulses of greed, hatred and delusion still come up in the mind, the resultant kamma. Whenever we act on them ignorantly, when we aren't mindful, we create more kamma. We can create kamma in two ways: by following it or trying to get rid of it. When we stop doing this, the cycles of kamma have an opportunity to cease. The resultant kamma that has arisen has a way out, an escape hatch to cessation.



## 14 | Only One Breath

Ven. Subbato told me that he had never developed *ānāpānasati*, mindfulness of the breath. So I said: ‘Can you be mindful of one inhalation?’ and he said: ‘Oh yes.’ ‘And of one exhalation?’ and he said: ‘Yes.’ And I said: ‘Got it!’ There’s nothing more to it than that. However, one tends to expect to develop some special kind of ability to go into some special state, and because we don’t do that, we think we can’t do *ānāpānasati*. But the way of the spiritual life is through renunciation, relinquishment, letting go, not through attaining or acquiring. Even the *jhānas*<sup>3</sup> are relinquishments rather than attainments. If we relinquish more and more, letting go more and more, then the *jhānic* states are natural.

The attitude is most important. To practise *ānāpānasati*, one brings the attention onto one inhalation, being mindful from the beginning to the end. One inhalation, that’s it; and then the same goes for the exhalation. That’s the perfect attainment of *ānāpānasati*. The awareness of just that much is the result of concentration of the mind through sustained attention to the breath, from the beginning to the end of the inhalation, from the beginning to the end of the exhalation. The attitude is always one of letting go, not attaching to any ideas or feelings

<sup>4</sup> *Jhānas*: Refined states of mind-consciousness experienced through meditative absorption.

that arise, so that you're always fresh with the next inhalation, the next exhalation, completely as it is. You're not carrying over anything. So it's a way of relinquishment, of letting go, rather than of attaining and achieving. The danger in meditation practice is the habit of grasping at things, grasping at states, so the concept that's most useful is the concept of letting go, rather than of attaining and achieving. Maybe yesterday you had a really super meditation, absolutely fantastic, just what you've always dreamed of; and then today you try to get the same wonderful experience as yesterday, but you get more restless and more agitated than ever before. Why is that? Why can't we get what we want? It's because we're trying to attain something that we remember, rather than really working with the way things happen to be now. So the correct way is one of mindfulness, of looking at the way it is now, rather than remembering yesterday and trying to get to that state again.

The first year I meditated, I didn't have a teacher. I was in this little kuti in Nong Khai for about ten months, and I had all kinds of blazing insights. Being alone for ten months, not having to talk, not having to go anywhere, everything calmed down after several months, and then I thought I was a fully enlightened person, an arahant. I was sure of it. I found out later that I wasn't. I remember we went through a famine in Nong Khai that year, and we didn't get very much to eat. I had malnutrition, so I thought: 'Maybe malnutrition's the answer. If I just starve myself ...' I remember being so weak with malnutrition at Nong Khai that my earlobes started cracking open. When I'd fall asleep I'd have to pry my eyelids open; they'd be stuck shut with the stuff that comes out of your eyelids when you're not feeling very well. Then one day a Canadian monk brought me three cans of tinned milk. In Asia there is tinned sweetened milk and it's delicious. He also brought me some instant coffee and a flask of hot water. So I made a cup of this, put in a bit of coffee, poured in some of this milk, poured hot water and started drinking it. And I went crazy. It was so utterly delicious,

the first time I'd had anything sweet in weeks, or anything stimulating. And being malnourished and in a very dull, tired, apathetic state, this was like high-octane petrol – whoomph! I gulped it down immediately, I couldn't stop myself – and I managed to consume all three tins of milk and a good portion of that coffee. And my mind actually went flying into outer space, or it seemed like it, and I thought, 'Maybe that's the secret – if I can just get somebody to buy me tinned milk ...'

When I went to Wat Pah Pong the following year, I kept thinking, 'Oh, I had all those wonderful experiences in Nong Khai. I had all those wonderful kinds of beautiful visions, and all those fantastic floating experiences and blazing insights, and it seemed I understood everything. And I even thought I was an arahant.' That first year at Wat Pah Pong I didn't have much of anything. I just kept trying to do all the things I'd done in Nong Khai to get those results. But after a while even strong cups of coffee didn't work any more. I didn't seem to get those exhilarations, those fantastic highs and blazing insights that I had in the first year. So after the first Rains Retreat<sup>4</sup> at Wat Pah Pong, I thought: 'This place is not for me. I think I'll go and try to repeat what happened in Nong Khai.' And I left Ajahn Chah and went to live on Phu Phek Mountain in Sakorn Nakorn Province. There at last I was in an idyllic spot. However, for the alms-round you had to leave before dawn and go down the mountain, which was quite a climb, and wait for the villagers to come. They'd bring you food, and then you had to climb all the way back up and eat this food before twelve noon. That was quite a problem. I was with one other monk, a Thai monk, and I thought: 'He's really very good', and I was quite impressed with him. But when we were on this mountain, he wanted me to teach him English – so I was really angry with him and wanted to murder him. It was an area of North East Thailand where there were a lot of terrorists and communists. Sometimes helicopters flew overhead, checking us out. Once they came and took me down to the provincial town, wondering whether I was a communist spy.

<sup>4</sup>The traditional three-month Rains Retreat is undertaken each year in Buddhist monasteries. It is generally a time of heightened attention to matters of training and spiritual instruction.

Then I became violently ill, so ill that they had to carry me down the mountain. I was stuck in a wretched place by a reservoir under a tin roof in the hot season, with insects buzzing in and out of my ears and orifices and horrible food. I nearly died, come to think of it. I almost didn't make it. But it was during that time in that tin-roof lean-to that a real change took place. I was really despairing, sick and weak and totally depressed, and my mind would fall into hellish realms. With the terrible heat and discomfort, I felt I was being cooked; it was like torture. Then a change came. Suddenly I just stopped my mind; I refused to get caught in that negativity and I started to practise *ānāpānasati*. I used the breath to concentrate my mind and things changed very quickly. After that I recovered my health and it was time to enter the next Rains Retreat, so I went back – I'd promised Ajahn Chah I'd go back to Wat Pah Pong for the Rains Retreat – and my robes were all tattered and torn and patched. I looked terrible. When Ajahn Chah saw me, he just burst out laughing. And I was so glad to get back after all that!

I had been trying to practise, and what I had wanted were the memories of those insights. I'd forgotten what the insights really were. I was so attached to the idea of working in some kind of ascetic way, like I did the first year when asceticism really worked. At that time being malnourished and being alone had seemed to provide me with insight, so that for the next few years I kept trying to create the conditions where I would be able to have those fantastic insights. But the following two or three years seemed to be years of just getting by. Nothing much seemed to happen. I was six months on that mountain before I returned to Wat Pah Pong, deciding just to stay on and follow the insights I had had. One of the insights the first year was that I should find a teacher, and that I should learn how to live under a discipline imposed on me by that teacher. So I did that. I realized Ajahn Chah was a good teacher and had a good standard of monastic discipline, so I stayed with him. Those insights that I had were right, but I'd become attached to the memory of them.

People get very attached to all these special things like meditation retreats, and courses where everything is under control, everything is organized and there is total silence. Even though you do have insight then, reflection is not always there, because one assumes that to have those insights you need those conditions. Actually, insight is more and more a matter of living insightfully. It's not just that you have insight sometimes, but that more and more, as you reflect on Dhamma, everything is insightful. You see insightfully into life as it's happening to you. As soon as you think you have to have special conditions for insight, but are not aware of that thought, you'll create all sorts of complexities about your practice. So I developed letting go, not concerning myself with attaining or achieving anything. I decided to make little achievements possible by learning to be a little more patient, a little more humble and a little more generous. I decided to develop in this way, rather than going out of my way to control and manipulate the environment with the intention of setting myself up in the hope of getting high. It became apparent through reflection that attachment to the insights was the problem. The insights were valid insights, but the problem was attachment to the memory of them. Then the insight came to let go of all insights; not to attach to them, just to keep letting go of all the insights one may have, because otherwise they become memories. And memories are conditions of the mind, and if you attach to them they can only take you to despair.

In each moment, it is as it is. With just one inhalation, at this moment, it's this way. It's not like yesterday's inhalation. You're not thinking of yesterday's inhalation and exhalation while you inhale and exhale now. You're with it completely as it is, so you establish that. The reflective ability is based on establishing your awareness in the way it is now, rather than having some idea of what you'd like to get and then trying to get it in the here and now. Trying to get yesterday's blissful feeling in the here and now means you're not aware of the way it is now. You're not with it. Even if you're doing *ānāpānasati* with the

hope of getting the result that you had yesterday, that will make it impossible for that result to happen.

Once Venerable Vipassi was meditating in the shrine room and someone else was making quite distracting noises. Talking to him about it, I was quite impressed, because he said he first felt annoyed, but then decided the noises would be part of his practice. So he opened his mind to the meditation hall with everything in it – the noises, the silence, the whole thing. That’s wisdom. If the noise is something you can stop, like a door banging in the wind, then stop it, close the door. If it’s something you have control over, you can do that. But you have no control over much of life. You have no right to ask everything to be silent for ‘my’ meditation. When there is reflection, instead of having a little mind that has to have total silence and special conditions, you have a big mind that can contain the whole of it: the noises, the disruptions, the silence, the bliss, the restlessness, the pain. The mind is all-embracing, rather than specializing in a certain refinement of consciousness. Then you develop flexibility, because you can concentrate your mind. This is where wisdom is needed for real development. It’s through wisdom that we develop, not through willpower, or controlling or manipulating environmental conditions, getting rid of the things we don’t want and trying to set ourselves up so that we can follow this desire to achieve and attain.

Desire is insidious. When we are aware that our intention is to attain some state, that’s a desire, so we let it go. If we are sitting here with even a desire to attain the first *jhāna*, we recognize that this desire will be the very thing that will prevent its fulfilment. So we let go of the desire, which doesn’t mean not doing *ānāpānasati*, but changing our attitude to it.

So what can we do now? Develop mindfulness of one inhalation. Most of us can do that; most human beings have enough concentration to be concentrated from the beginning of an inhalation to the end of it. But if your concentration span is so weak that you can’t even make it to

the end, that's all right. At least you can get to the middle, maybe. That's better than if you gave up totally or never tried at all, because at least you're composing the mind for one second and that's the beginning: to learn to compose and collect the mind around one thing, like the breath, and sustain it just for the length of one inhalation; or if not, then half an inhalation, or a quarter, or whatever. At least you have started, and you must try to develop a mind that's glad at just being able to do that much, rather than being critical because you haven't attained the first *jhāna*, or the fourth.

If meditation becomes another thing you have to do and you feel guilty if you don't live up to your resolutions, you start pushing yourself without an awareness of what you're doing. Then life becomes quite dreary and depressing. But if you are putting a skilful kind of attention into your daily life, you'll find much of daily life pleasant. That may not be so if you are caught in your compulsions and obsessions. Acting with compulsiveness becomes a burden, a grind, and we drag ourselves around doing what we have to do in a heedless and negative way. However, we have this time for a retreat – we can sit and walk; we don't have a lot to do. The morning and evening chanting can be extremely pleasant for us when we're open to them. People are offering the food. The meal is quite a lovely thing. People are eating mindfully and quietly. When we're doing things out of habit and compulsion, they become a drag; a lot of things which are quite pleasant in themselves are no longer pleasant. We can't enjoy them when we're coming from compulsiveness, heedlessness and ambition. Those are the kinds of driving forces that destroy the joy and the wonder of our lives.

Sustaining your attention on the breathing really develops awareness, but when you get lost in thought or restlessness, that's all right too. Don't drive yourself. Don't be a slave driver or beat yourself with a whip and drive yourself in a nasty way. Lead, guide and train yourself; leading onwards, guide yourself rather than driving and forcing yourself. *Nibbāna* is a subtle realization of non-grasping. You

can't drive yourself to nibbāna; that's the sure way of never realizing it. It's here and now, so if you're driving yourself to nibbāna, you're always going far away from it, driving right over it.

It's pretty heavy sometimes to burn up attachments in our mind. The holy life is a holocaust, a total burning, a burning up of self, of ignorance. A diamond is a symbol of the purity that comes from the holocaust, something that went through such fires that what was left was purity. And so that's why, in our life here, there has to be this willingness to burn away the self-views, the opinions, the desires, the restlessness, the greed – all of it, the whole of it, so that nothing but purity remains. Then when there is purity, there is nobody, no thing; there's just 'that', 'suchness'. And let go of that. More and more the path is just simply being here and now, being with the way things are. There's nowhere to go, nothing to do, nothing to become, nothing to get rid of. Because of the holocaust, there is no ignorance remaining, but only purity, clarity and intelligence.

## 15 | Stillness and Response

When we began our Winter Retreat, I asked you to accept the whole of what happens during the next two months. Make it your intention not just to have the kind of retreat that you would like, but to open yourself to the possibility of whatever arises. Psychologically, this prepares us for the way life moves and changes. When we set our mind on trying to make life into what we want, we always feel frustrated when it does not go quite the way we would like. So try changing your attitude to one of acceptance, and willingness to look at and understand experiences, rather than just trying to get rid of them.

You're developing this practice of stillness, the stillness which is everywhere, whether you are in a group or alone. In order to be with the silence, we have to realize the stillness, the silence. In other words, be that way – be still and silent. If one just follows the restless sensations of the body and the proliferations of the mind, then of course silence is impossible. It can even be a threatening experience, because one is so identified with the agitation and restlessness of the sensory realm and endlessly seeking to be born into it. The emphasis now is to recognize that restlessness for what it is, no longer to follow it, but to train oneself towards calm. This means not just suppressing or persecuting

the bodily formation, but training it, because these bodies need to be trained with kindness. If you brutalize animals, they are not very nice. They are just frightened, untrustworthy, miserable creatures. To train an animal does not mean you just pamper it, but that you guide it. It is the same with your own body. Your body needs to be respected and guided into not following its restless energy and habits. But this does not mean you should deny it everything, either. As a trainer you need to be both kind and firm, not stubborn or brutal. Not kind in the sense of giving in to everything, because that is not really being kind, but caring, being concerned, having the right amount of interest, the proper attitude towards your own body and mind.

How to calm the body? One way is through 'sweeping meditation', in which you 'sweep' your attention through the body, concentrating on the sensations in the body as you do so. The body needs to be noticed and accepted for what it is, so we bring into consciousness even the tensions, unpleasant sensations and sensation-less parts of the body. When we do that, going from the top of the head to the soles of the feet and back up again, the body will feel relaxed. It's a very healthy meditation, and it will help to train the mind not to be caught up in conceptual proliferation and endless wandering.

Then as these forms start to calm down, we begin to feel much more aware of the silence of mind. We can abide more and more in that emptiness, where there is no self, just the present moment as it is. The stillness and silence are ever-present wherever we are, no matter what condition we happen to be in. You can abide in emptiness by just standing among the barren trees of winter and looking at them, without creating anything from them. You can feel a sense of perfect calm and contentment with just being still and silent like the trees. Our ego might say, 'Well I do not want to become like a tree. I want to express my true inner creativity, my unique personality.' We listen to the inner voices that complain and grumble, the wanting to become something, that which stands out or exists. But we are not feeding

these creatures, we are letting them go and moving towards the stillness, the silence.

This word ‘existence’ means ‘standing forth.’ Something that doesn’t exist doesn’t stand forth. So when we say ‘non-existing’, we are not talking about killing ourselves and no longer being alive, but about no longer following the desire to stand out to become something, to be separate. That sounds like a really nihilistic view: ‘Ajahn Sumedho does not want to exist! Oh, poor man, needs to go to a psychiatrist.’ But non-existence does not mean we do not want to have any personalities, that we just want to become dreary, boring people. That is not it. It is the ability to abide in the subtlety of just being aware, open and sensitive, without being caught in the delusions of trying to become something else or stand out in some way. It is just realizing the peace of non-existence – because non-existence is peaceful. And when there are non-existence and emptiness, there is the knowing: brightness, wisdom, awareness, clarity, enlightenment. Things are as they are, suchness, as-is-ness.

In Western values the emphasis is on being special, a unique individual, a child of God. This attitude is very much supported by culture and religion. There are the ‘chosen people of God’, the sects which feel that they have been called by Jesus (and all the rest haven’t), and they are the ones who are going to make it and live in an eternal paradise. But what happens to you if you have all these views of being special, of being an individual, all those self-views? From my own experience, the result of all of this was suffering. There seemed to be a tremendous investment in having a unique and sizzling personality. Sometimes I used to think, ‘Wait a minute, maybe I don’t have a very nice personality. Maybe I don’t have *any* personality.’ There was so much anxiety, frustration, jealousy and fear. You didn’t want to be a failure, didn’t want to be a mediocrity, to be the ‘ordinary guy.’ It was very painful to be always caught in that desire to become somebody. And as long as you have that desire,

you're always going to fear you'll become something that's not very good, because fear and desire go together.

At first our Path may seem a bit hopeless. Sometimes a lifetime's tendencies and habits towards becoming and emphasizing yourself as an individual personality are so strong that you feel you should not be that way – you should try to be nobody. But trying to be nobody is still being somebody. What I am suggesting is not to become nobody, but to realize the truth of mind. Then you can abide in Truth, where you feel most at ease and peaceful, rather than in this endless round of existence in which you're always seeking to be reborn again. You'll never find contentment in any level of existence. They never satisfy, not even the best of them. The most blissful conditioned states, the *jhānas*, are still unsatisfactory for us. The Buddha made it very clear that all forms of human happiness and worldly success are really terribly disappointing, because they can only gratify us temporarily. As soon as that gratification is gone, we are caught in the same process of again seeking to be reborn, to become something else, to find another moment of happiness. Life becomes so wearisome.

To live in a body with the right attitude, begin to accept it as it is, with all that might be right and wrong in it, whether it is young or old, male or female, strong or weak. This is the path to true peacefulness. Do not seek to identify with your body or try to make it into something else. When we know Truth, we can pick up our identity as is appropriate to time and place, without this becoming an attachment. We feel we can manifest and disappear according to what is needed. I am not saying that we should just stand among the trees for the rest of one's life. We can be something that is useful and helpful to others, but no longer as a permanent role we are trying to hold onto and defend. So we begin to feel a sense of freedom and ease.

When I was young I was very self-conscious – to say something in public was absolutely terrifying for me. Even when I was in the Navy, just having to raise my voice to say 'Aye aye, sir!' in public in a roll-

call would have me shaking from self-consciousness. Then I became a schoolteacher. Teaching eight- to nine-year-old Chinese kids in North Borneo for a couple of years wasn't such a threat. But then becoming a monk in Thailand and eventually having to give talks to Thai people in Thai ...! All this self-consciousness became apparent. I'd get highs when I felt I'd given a good talk and everybody said: 'You're really good, Sumedho, you can give good Dhamma.' Then sometimes I would give a really stupid talk and think: 'I don't want to give another talk ever again. I didn't become a monk to give talks.' But the idea was to keep watching this. Luang Por Chah<sup>4</sup> would always encourage me to remain aware of the pride, the conceit, the embarrassment and self-consciousness that I would feel. And fortunately, in Thailand the people are such that they're just grateful for a monk giving a talk. Even if it's not a very good talk, that doesn't seem to upset them very much. They still seem quite grateful for it. So that made it quite easy.

One time at a Kaṭhina<sup>5</sup> ceremony where we had to sit up all night, Ajahn Chah said: 'Sumedho, you have to give a talk for three hours tonight.' Up until then I'd only talked for half an hour. That was a strain, three hours! And he knew it. But with Ajahn Chah, I always felt that if he said something, I'd do it. So I sat up on the high seat and talked for three hours. And I had to sit there and watch people get up and leave; and I had to sit there and watch people just lie down on the floor and sleep in front of me. And at the end of the three hours, there were still a few polite old ladies sitting there! That wasn't Ajahn Chah saying, 'OK Sumedho, go in there and bowl them over with some scintillating stuff. Entertain them, really sock it to them.' I began to realize that what he wanted me to do was to be able to look at this self-consciousness, the posing, the pride, the conceit, the grumbling, the lazy, the 'not wanting to be bothered' attitude, the wanting to please, to entertain, to win approval. All these have come up during these talks of the past fifteen years. But in meditation one feels more and more a real

<sup>4</sup> Luang Por: the Thai term translates as 'Venerable Father', although the English does not convey the mixture of affection and respect that it signifies. It is used in addressing an elderly monk.

<sup>5</sup> Kaṭhina: a ceremony held at the end of a Rains Retreat when laypeople make offerings to the monastery.

understanding of the suffering of a self-view. And then through that insight one realizes the abiding in emptiness.

Whenever Ajahn Chah used to give a talk, he'd sit and close his eyes, and then he'd start talking – and what would come out would be appropriate to the time and place. He said never to prepare a talk; he didn't care if they were interesting or not, but just to let them come. And when there's non-existence, no self anymore, and we give a talk, there are none of the problems we build out of: 'What do people think of me? What do people say about me?' Or defiance: 'They can think what they want, I don't care!' (But you do really, otherwise you wouldn't have to say that, would you?).

Sometimes personalities manifest at the appropriate times. As you talk, you manifest your personality. Maybe in your own mind you are still caught up in being a person. But this is merely conditions that arise and cease, and come out of fear and desire. When there is emptiness, personality still operates – it does not mean that we are exactly the same, like bees in a hive. There are still the myriad differences of character and personality that can manifest as charming or whatever. But there is no delusion about them – there is no suffering.

For example, when Ajahn Chah first visited England, he was invited to a certain woman's home for a vegetarian meal. She obviously had put a lot of effort into creating the most delicious kinds of food. She was bustling about, offering this food and looking very enthusiastic. Ajahn Chah was sitting there assessing the situation, and then suddenly he said, 'This is the most delicious and wonderful meal I have ever had!' That comment was really something, because in Thailand monks are not supposed to comment on the food. And yet Luang Por suddenly manifested this charming character, complimenting a woman who needed to be complimented because that made her feel happy. He had a feeling for the time and place, for the person he was with, for what would be kind. So he could step out of the designated role of what is supposed to be according to a tradition, and manifest in ways that

were appropriate. That shows wisdom and the ability to respond to a situation; not to be just rigidly bound within a convention that blinds you. That was a manifestation, and also a disappearance, because I have never heard of his doing that again.

The empty mind is an abiding in ease, where there is no self, no fear or desire to be deluded with. And yet there is the ability to respond out of compassion and kindness to the present situation in a suitable way. It is strange, isn't it? Compare the goal of nibbāna, of non-existence, with that of becoming the best person in the whole world, the strongest or the most beautiful. Worldly values are about having power, beauty, wealth – but they all have their opposites. Success is always attached to failure, happiness is always attached to unhappiness, praise is always attached to blame, good fortune to bad fortune. So if you choose the worldly values of wealth, power, success and praise, you are going to get their opposites along with them, because they are like two sides of the same coin. You can't separate the one from the other. Worldly values are never really going to allow you to feel at ease.

The world is an unsafe place, it's not peaceful. And it's not where we really belong. You only begin to understand and realize peace through emptiness, non-existence, not-self. And this is not annihilation, but enlightenment, freedom, true peace, true knowledge.



## 16 | Reflections on Sharing Blessings

Now let us chant the verses of sharing and aspiration.

*Through the goodness that arises from my practice,  
May my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue,  
My mother, my father and my relatives,  
The sun and the moon,  
And all virtuous leaders of the world -  
May the highest gods and evil forces;  
Celestial beings, guardian spirits of the Earth,  
And the Lord of Death;  
May those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile;  
May all beings receive the blessings of my life.  
May they soon attain the threefold bliss  
And realize the Deathless.*

*Through the goodness that arises from my practice,  
And through this act of sharing,  
May all desires and attachments quickly cease  
And all harmful states of mind.  
Until I realize nibbāna,  
In every kind of birth,  
May I have an upright mind  
With mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigour.  
May the forces of delusion not take hold  
Nor weaken my resolve.*

*The Buddha is my excellent refuge,  
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma,  
The Solitary Buddha is my noble Lord,  
The Sangha is my supreme support.  
Through the supreme power of all these,  
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.*

## 17 | Turning Towards Emptiness

By reflecting, you bring into consciousness the state of conditions as they happen to be now. Having been born, we're now this age, feeling this way, at this time and in this place. That's the way it is. That cannot be changed by us. It's just the inevitability of birth that this is the way it is now. And when you realize this, you have a perspective on the way it is – rather than a reaction to the way it is. If you don't reflect, you just react to the way it is.

If you're feeling happy, you get high, 'I want to be a monk for the rest of my life and devote myself to the Dhamma. Dhamma is the way for me, the only way, the true way'; and you go out and bore people with a harangue on the importance of Buddhism in the world because you're high and you feel positive and confident. Even that feeling of being inspired and confident and full of faith and devotion and all those kinds of things – that's the way it is. One can feel a lot of faith, confidence in what one is doing. Or one can feel the opposite: one loses faith, one feels that this is a waste of time: 'I've wasted my life. It's of no value, I haven't got anywhere. It hasn't done anything for me. I don't believe in it anymore, I'm fed up with it.' Or one can feel indifference: 'It's all right, don't know what else to do. Better than working in a factory.'

Whichever way you're feeling now, either extreme or just indifference, that's the way it is.

So just notice when you're feeling positive and tremendously energetic, or when there's a lack of energy and you're too critical. When you're depressed, tired or not feeling very well, it's hard to arouse the inspired feeling. In those circumstances you tend to pick up what's wrong with things very quickly. The way somebody walks across a room can really irritate you. Somebody blows their nose too hard, and oh, that's disgusting! But when you are feeling full of inspiration and devotion, you don't care about the faults of this or that, you're caught up in this feeling of devotion and faith. These perceptions are to be reflected on as the way it is now. It has to be this way because it can't be any other way at this moment. We feel like this, we feel tired or invigorated or whatever – this is the way it is. These are the results of having been born and living our lives, and being subject to changing conditions of sensuality.

Then note, really note what you add to the existing conditions. In all-night sittings you may feel sleepy or tired; note what you add to that feeling. Note the feeling itself but maintain a posture, rather than just react to feeling tired from an attempt to annihilate the feeling by following it and sinking into lethargy. When you're convinced that you're so tired there's really nothing you can do about it, and even pulling your body straight is something that seems totally impossible, hold it up straight for a length of time. Observe, and learn how much energy it takes to hold a body up.

How much energy does it take to stop the thinking process? Have you ever noticed that? 'Just can't stop thinking' – the mind goes on and on. 'Can't stop, what can I do? I don't know how to stop thinking – it keeps going. I can't stop it ...' I know about this because I've always had a problem with a mind that just seemed to be endlessly thinking about something. And the desire to stop thinking and the effort to get rid of it create the conditions for more thinking. It takes effort to do this, not just

thinking about doing it. I remember an Australian Abhidhamma fanatic once came to Wat Pah Pong. This man had a mission – when Westerners get into Abhidhamma they become like born-again Christians – but he didn't know how to meditate; he didn't believe that meditation worked, and he figured it all out with his Abhidhamma concepts. He felt that you couldn't stop thinking. He said: 'You're always thinking and you can't stop thinking.' I said: 'But you can stop thinking', and he said: 'No, you can't'; and I said, 'I've just stopped thinking', and he said: 'No, you haven't!' It was pointless to go on talking to someone like that. You have to be alert to know when you are not thinking, so you take an actual thought like 'I can't stop thinking', and you deliberately think that. This is what I did, because I was a habitual, obsessive thinker.

So if you are averse to thinking, instead of trying to stop, go to the other extreme and deliberately think something; and watch yourself deliberately thinking, so that it's not just a wandering thought process in which your mind goes round and round in circles. Use your wisdom faculty: deliberately think something, some thought that is completely neutral and uninteresting, like 'I am a human being.' Deliberately think it, but observe the space before you're thinking, and then deliberately say: 'I am a human being.' Then note the end of the thought, the moment when you stop thinking. Pay attention to the moments before and after the thought, rather than to the thought itself; just hold attention on where there is no thought. Investigate the space around the thought, the space where the thought comes and goes, rather than thinking. Then you'll be aware of an empty mind, where there's just awareness but no thought. That may last for just a second, because you start grasping, so you just have to keep being more aware by thinking something again. With practice you can use even very unpleasant thoughts. For example, you might have strong emotional feelings of, 'I'm no good, I'm worthless', and they can be an obsession. In some people's minds they can become a background to their lives. So you try thinking: 'I shouldn't think that. Venerable

Sumedho says 'I'm good. But I know I'm no good.' However, if you take that obsession and use it as a conscious thought: 'I am no good', you start seeing the space around it, and it no longer sounds so absolute. When it becomes obsessive it sounds absolute, infallible; the honest truth, the real truth: 'This is what I really am, I'm no good.' But when you take it out of the context of obsession and think it deliberately, intentionally, you see it objectively.

That sense of 'me' and 'mine' is just a habit of the mind; it's not the truth. If you really take the 'I/I am' and look at it objectively, the feeling created by that 'I am' and 'I am this way' or 'I should be/should not be' is very different from when you're just reacting.

In contemplating the Four Noble Truths you have the truth of suffering, its arising, its cessation and then the Path. You can't know the Path and the way out of suffering until you are aware of where everything ceases – in the mind itself. The mind is still vital and alert even when there is no thought in it; but if you don't notice that, you believe you are always thinking. That's the way it seems. You only conceive of yourself when you're thinking, because you're identified with memory and the sense of 'I am' or 'I am not.' That 'yourself' is very much a conditioned, programmed perception in the mind. As long as you believe in that perception and never question it, you will always believe that you are an obsessive thinker, and you shouldn't be this way or shouldn't feel that way and you shouldn't worry – but you do, and you're a hopeless case; and so it goes on from one thing to another.

So 'I am' is just a perception, really – it arises in the mind and it ceases in the mind. When it ceases, note that cessation of thought. Make that cessation, that empty mind, a 'sign' rather than just creating more things in the emptiness. You can get refined states of consciousness by fixing on refined objects, as in *samatha* meditation practices that emphasize calming the mind – but with the contemplation of the Noble Truths you're using the wisdom faculty to note where everything ceases. And yet when the mind is empty, the senses are still all right.

It's not like being in a trance, totally oblivious to everything; your mind is open, empty – or you might call it whole, complete, bright. Then you can take anything, like a fearful thought – you can take it, deliberately think it and see it as just another condition of the mind rather than a psychological problem. It arises, it ceases; there's nothing in it, nothing in any thought. It's just a movement in the mind and therefore it's not a person. You make it personal by attaching to it, believing it: 'And I'm such a hopeless case. I know I can never be enlightened after all the things I've done; the stupid things. And I'm so selfish and I've made so many mistakes. I know there's no hope for me.' All that arises and ceases in the mind!

Believing is grasping, isn't it? – 'I know what I am and I know I'm no good.' You believe that, and that's what grasping is. You create that belief, so the mind goes on in that way. And you can find all kinds of proof that you're no good – you can even start getting paranoid: 'Everybody knows that I'm no good, too. Yesterday Ven. Sucitto walked by and I just knew that he knows I'm no good. Then this morning I came into the hall and Sister Rocana looked at me a little bit strangely – she knows!' Through belief you can see and interpret everything that people do in a personal way, as if they've all been condemning and judging you. That's paranoia.

Even the most beautiful thoughts and aspirations, as well as the most evil and nasty ones, arise and cease in the mind. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not saying good and evil thoughts are the same. They have the same characteristic of arising and ceasing, that's all. In other respects they're different. Good thoughts are good thoughts, evil thoughts are evil thoughts. So I'm not saying it's all right to think evil thoughts, but I am pointing beyond the quality of the thought: love and hate arise and cease in the mind. In this perspective you're going to the reflective mind, where most people are totally unaware. People are generally only aware of themselves as a personality, an emotion or a thought – in other words, as a condition.

For practice, don't worry about the qualities that go through the mind, how wonderful, interesting, beautiful, ugly, nasty or neutral they might be. We're not investigating qualities or denying the quality of any thought, but just noting the way it is. Then you leave it alone so that it ceases. You create a thought, deliberately put it into the mind and let it go. To let go doesn't mean you push it away: you leave the thought alone, though you're aware of it during the whole time: the moment before the thought, the interstices and the ending.

We don't notice the space around thought very much. It is just like the space in this room, I have to call your attention to it. What does it take to be aware of the space in this room? You have to be alert. With the objects in the room you don't have to be alert, you can just be attracted or repelled: 'I don't like that, I like this.' You can just react to the quality of beauty and ugliness, whether it pleases or displeases you. That's our habit – our life tends to be reaction to pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness. We see beauty and we say, 'Oh, look at that! Isn't it absolutely fantastic?' or we think 'Oh, disgusting!' But the beautiful objects and the ugly ones are all in space, and to notice space you withdraw your attention from the beautiful and ugly objects. Of course they're still there; you needn't throw them out, you don't have to tear down the building so that we can have a space here. But if you don't concentrate on what's in that room with love or hate, if you don't make anything out of it, your attention withdraws from the objects and you notice the space. So we have a perspective on space in a room like this. You can reflect on that. Anyone can come and go in this space. The most beautiful, the most ugly, saint and sinner, can come and go in this space, and the space is never harmed, ruined or destroyed by the objects that come and go in it. The mind works on the same principle. But if you're not used to seeing the spaciousness of your mind, you are not aware of the space that the mind really is. So you're unaware of the emptiness of the mind, because you're always attached to an idea or an opinion or mood.

With insight meditation you're reflecting on the five khandhas – on the body, *rūpa*; feelings, *vedanā*; perception, *saññā*; mental formations, *saṅkhārā*; and sense-consciousness, *viññāṇa*. We may want to get rid of them, but that is another condition, another *saṅkhāra* that we create. So we investigate them until they no longer delude us, and allow them to cease in the empty mind. When you think, 'My body's still here – how does it cease? It's still here, isn't it?' Consider that the body will live its lifespan; it has been born, and it will disappear when its kammic force ends. What happened to Napoleon? What happened to the Queen of Sheba? And Confucius and Lao Tzu, and Marie Antoinette, Beethoven and Bach? They're memories in our minds; they're just perceptions in people's minds now. But that's all they ever were anyway, even when their bodies were alive. 'Venerable Sumedho' is a perception in the mind – in my mind it's a perception, in your mind it's a perception. Right now the perception of it is: 'Venerable Sumedho is alive and kicking.' When the body dies, the perception changes to: 'Venerable Sumedho is dead.' That's all. The perception of death is there along with the name 'Sumedho', where now it is alive and kicking.

So as you experience it, the body is a perception that arises and ceases in the empty mind. With this realization of the empty mind, you can develop the Eightfold Path very skilfully. The Eightfold Path is based on right understanding, and that is the understanding of cessation.



## 18 | Beyond Belief

From the appearance of the five khandhas – *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *sankhārā* and *viññāṇa* – and the unquestioned belief that they are oneself – it always seems that the mind is in the body. If you say, ‘Where’s your mind?’, most people will point to their head or their hearts. But if you investigate the way things are, following the teachings of the Buddha, you begin to realize that the body is in the mind. Mind is really what comes first – the body is just the receptor. It’s a sensitive receptor like a radio or radar, or something similar. It’s not a person, it’s not anything other than merely an instrument.

When that view of being within the five khandhas is seen through and let go of, there’s a realization of what we can call ‘deathlessness’, immortality. These words imply ‘beyond the conditioned’, and the ability to conceive the deathless is impossible. You can point at a word like ‘deathless’, immortal or unconditioned, but beyond that there’s no more you can say about it, because words themselves are conditioned, and mortal. Words, concepts, perceptions, conceptions are only appropriate to the conditioned world. As long as you’re attached to thoughts and concepts, to views and opinions, no matter how intelligent and altruistic those views might be, that very attachment will bind

you to the conditioned realm – you will keep being reborn into it. You will keep searching for the unconditioned in the conditioned, looking for God in the mortal condition, in the changing nature of sensory consciousness, only to feel totally frustrated and disappointed. Then you have to support that ‘soul view’ by a kind of stubborn belief.

Beliefs don’t change. When you are fifty, you can believe in exactly the same things you believed in when you were five. That belief is the grasping of a perception. Some beliefs are very nice and pretty and sentimental. The romantic and sentimental view of life presents a pretty picture that we can still believe in even when we’re eighty. When my Gran died at seventy-five, she still had a sixteen-year-old girl’s emotional development. When she died she had a boyfriend called Hercules Cavalier who was her gigolo. She still had the same kind of romantic longings as when she was a sixteen-year-old girl. Even though at seventy-five she was a physical wreck, her mind was still attached to those pretty pictures of youth.

We assume and believe, and never question the prejudice and fixed views we’re grasping, that we never change. They don’t change; we keep reaffirming the same old things over and over again. That’s why so many political problems arise: it’s because so many people hold on to political views, rather than trying to be aware of the needs of a particular time and place. How much violence, meanness and nastiness are done in the name of property alone! And boundaries: ‘This is my land, get off my land.’ You see it all the time in countries’ endless border problems. And the meanness of heart, not wanting to let people in or let them out, because of the unquestioned belief, ‘This is my house/my family/my wife/my husband/my children, my, my, my ...’

Over the course of many years of meditation, I can see that a lot of attachments, obsessions and tendencies have fallen away because of allowing things to cease. The process has been one of letting things go, rather than believing, grasping, and becoming reborn in endless thought patterns and desires. When we view life as just a passage, we are

not going to hang on to it. We're not going to become mean and selfish, because we realize that nothing is worth holding on to – not material wealth, property, status, worldly values, or anything else. Nothing is worth bothering with that much, because it is not really ours anyway. Of course, we can believe that it's ours. But in actual investigation, in looking into the way the mind actually is, we see that nothing really belongs to us anyway, and there's nobody to own anything. With the reflection that the body is in the mind, this grasping changes. You have to start contemplating, 'What is mind, then?' – because your body's certainly not in your brain. Nor is your blood-pumping heart. They're in your body.

This evening I was standing outside and looking at the dusk, and the trees, the barren trees on the borders of Amaravati; just contemplating that the trees are in the mind and that trees are conscious. There's a certain level of consciousness in all life, in the fact that there is receptivity to the environment, and trees are very receptive to the environment they are in. This leads to beginning to change the perception of mind to that of a consciousness that pervades everything. Then it's not just a human mind, there's something more to it. But in Buddhism it is never named, you never try to form a concept about it. Instead you contemplate the totality, the whole of sensitivity, the sensory realm and what it is really about. And we have to contemplate this from our own ability to be conscious and to feel, but not see it in terms of 'me' and 'mine' – 'I feel these things, but nobody else does'; or 'Only human beings do, and animals don't'; or 'Only mammals do, and reptiles don't'; or 'Only the animal and insect kingdoms do but not plants.' Consciousness does not imply thought, but it does imply receptivity to what is impinging, to what comes to it. We begin to see that consciousness is a vital, changing universal system. It's like a plenum, it's full with all possibilities, all potentials of form, of what can be created. We can see whatever we can think of in terms of the human ability to imagine, through which we can create all kinds of fantasies

that come into material form. But the greatest, most profound and meaningful human potential is overlooked by most people. This is the ability to understand the truth of the way it is, to see the Dhamma, to be free from all delusions.

When you are contemplating reality, begin to reflect on where there is no self. Whenever there is the cessation of self, there are just clarity, knowing, and contentment – you feel at ease and balanced. It takes a while to be able to give up all the striving tendencies and the restless tendencies of the body and mind. But for some moments they will cease, and then there's a real clarity, contented peacefulness. And also there is no self, no 'me' and 'my' in that. You can contemplate that.

We must recognize that we have to learn through being totally humbled, by never succeeding at anything we are doing in this meditation, never being successful, never getting what we want – and if we do get what we want, we lose it right away. We have to be totally humbled, to the point where any form of self-view is relinquished willingly, graciously, humbly. That's why the more that meditation comes from willpower based on a self-view, and on 'me' achieving and attaining, the more you can expect only failure and despair, because this is not a worldly pursuit. In worldly situations, if you are clever and strong, gifted and have opportunities, and if the conditions are there, you can barge your way through and become a great success. The survival of the fittest means you can manage to get on top and destroy the competition – you can be a winner. But on the worldly plane even a winner is still going to be a failure, because if you win something you are going to lose something too. Winning and losing go together. So winning is never as wonderful as it might look, it is the anticipation of winning. If you've actually won something – so what? You have a moment of elation, maybe – 'I'm a winner!' – but then it's, 'Now what do I do? What do I have to win next?' Winning, worldly goals and worldly values are not really going to satisfy us, so if we apply that same attitude towards the religious life it's clearly not going to work.

We will just feel a sense of total despair, helplessness. And we need that, we need to lose everything, to let go of everything: all hope, all expectations, all demands, to be able just to be with the way things are, and not expect or demand them to be otherwise.

The practice of the Buddha is to accept life as it is. This is the way it is. Our reflection as mendicants is that we have enough to eat, robes to wear, a roof over our heads and medicine for illness. The Dhamma and Vinaya are taught. That is good enough, so we begin to say, 'It's all right, I'm content', and not make problems or dwell on the irritations and frustrations that we find here. I find myself much more at ease now with letting life be as it is here in Amaravati, and with the way things are – with the weather, the people, the country. Not comparing, not judging, but being grateful for the opportunity and accepting of whatever is. And it isn't all that easy, believe me, because I can be quite critical too, and fussy. There's also a strong sense of responsibility in wanting to make things right, and work properly – not just wanting nice things for myself, but wanting to make everything right and good for everyone else. I can be really caught up with responsibility. Being an Ajahn and an Abbot and all that, you try to set a good example. You become obsessed with it. I always felt I had to be a kind of cardboard monk, a plastic Sumedho Bhikkhu. If you saw anything other than my perfect smile and stereotyped presence, you'd lose all faith in the Dhamma!

But we begin to let go of that, even the altruistic tendencies of feeling responsible. That doesn't mean one is irresponsible, but one is letting go of those ideas, those views that can so blind us. They might be very good views, but if you grasp them you can't get beyond them. In living the holy life you train yourself to be open and willing to learn from the ups and downs and the way things happen to be – the irritations and problems of community life, and the way things are – rather than resisting, avoiding and rejecting life. You give up controlling and manipulating, and trying to change the world and make it into what

you want it to be. One has to give up, let go of that kind of inclination, and abide in the knowing, in mindfulness.

In practice, just notice if you're trying too hard. If you have the view that you must stay awake, that can make you compulsive, the 'I have to stay awake' compulsion. Notice if you attach to either extreme, like 'I have to stay awake', or 'It doesn't matter.' You can use one to counterbalance the other. If you tend to think: 'It doesn't matter', you need to practise 'I must stay awake', but if you're caught in the 'I must stay awake' compulsion, you can say: 'It doesn't matter, let go.' Neither one is a fixed position, they're just skilful means to find the middle, the place of balance. You don't come in here and say: 'It doesn't matter, let go, that's my practice' and then fall over asleep, because it doesn't matter – 'It's all Dhamma, sleeping Buddha, awake Buddha.' Or there's the compulsive, 'I don't want to fall asleep, it matters so much to stay awake! Ajahn Sumedho says: "You come here to be awake, not to fall asleep"; so then one can become caught in the compulsion to be awake.

The knowing here is the knowing of what's driving us, what we're attached to, where that attachment is; and it does take patience to see it and to acknowledge it.

One of the supports for enlightenment is devotion, a kind of emotional sweetness and joyfulness. We tend to want everything on the level of intellectual concepts, but we also need to humble ourselves to the joy and sweetness of loving the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, especially if we find our practice is getting a bit dried up. This is to advise you not to be frightened of loving and joy, and open-hearted generosity. Human life without this is a dreary desert, just like living in some antiquarian museum. It's all nice and clean with marble corridors, but cold, ordered, catalogued. In museums everything is dusted and put in order, but it's cold. Religion also gives us this opportunity for warmth, joy, love, devotion, offering, giving. They are very much a foundation and a necessity for religious life. See our life here in the community as an opportunity to manifest generosity, love and joy,

not just as an obsession with looking at our *citta* to see what is moving through it at this moment, seeing that it's *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. We do that in order to reflect on the way things are, to be free from illusions or attachments to love and generosity – because if you attach to concepts of love and generosity, that will also bring you to despair.

For this retreat the laypeople have come to give, to help our sangha-community. This is their act of love and generosity, and our appreciation for that act of generosity is our determination to practise, to realize the Dhamma, so that our lives will bless the lay community in a skilful and wholesome relationship. We can reflect on it in this way, not to take the situation for granted in any way whatsoever, but to allow space for the joy and the gratitude we feel. These qualities help provide the foundation for our own understanding of freedom from delusion.



## 19 | Being Nobody

Try to note the cessation or the ending of things in little ways by paying special attention to the ending of the out-breath. This way, in your daily life, you'll notice the ordinary endings to which no one ever pays attention. I've found this practice very useful because it's a way of noticing the changing nature of the conditioned realm as one is living one's daily life. As I understand it, it was to these ordinary states of mind that the Buddha was pointing, not the special highly developed concentrated states.

The first year that I practised I was on my own, and I could get into highly developed concentrated states of mind, which I really enjoyed. Then I went to Wat Pah Pong, where the emphasis was on the way of life in accordance with Vinaya discipline and routine. There one always had to go out on alms-round every morning, and do the morning and evening chanting. If you were young and healthy, you were expected to go on these very long alms-rounds – they had shorter ones that the old, feeble monks could go on. In those days I was very vigorous, so I was always going on these long, long alms-rounds and I'd come back tired; then there would be the meal, and then in the afternoon we all had chores to do. It was not possible

under those conditions to stay in a concentrated state. Most of the day was taken up by daily life routine.

I got fed up with all this, and went to see Luang Por Chah and said: 'I can't meditate here'; and he started laughing at me and telling everyone, 'Sumedho can't meditate here!' I was seeing meditation as this very special experience that I'd had and quite enjoyed, but Luang Por Chah was obviously pointing to the ordinariness of daily life: getting up, the alms-rounds, the routine work, the chores; the whole thing was for mindfulness. And he didn't seem at all eager to support me in my desire to have strong sensory deprivation experiences by not having to do all these little daily tasks. He didn't seem to go along with that, so I ended up having to conform and learn to meditate in the ordinariness of daily life. And in the long run that has been most helpful. It has not always been what I wanted, because one wants the special. One would love to have blazing light and marvellous insights in technicolour, and incredible bliss and ecstasy and rapture – not just be happy and calm, but over the moon! But if you reflect on life in this human form, it is just like this. It's being able to sit peacefully, get up peacefully and be content with what you have; it's that which makes our life as a daily experience something that is joyful and not suffering. And this is how most of our life can be lived – you can't live in ecstatic states of rapture and bliss and do the dishes. I used to read about the lives of saints who were so caught up in ecstasies they couldn't do anything on any practical level. The blood would flow from their palms and they could do feats that the faithful would rush to look at, but when it came to anything practical or realistic they were quite incapable.

And yet when you contemplate the Vinaya discipline itself, it is a training in being mindful. It's about mindfulness with regard to making robes, collecting alms-food, eating food, taking care of your kuti, what to do in this situation or that situation. It's all very practical advice about the daily life of a bhikkhu. An ordinary day in the life of Bhikkhu Sumedho isn't about exploding into rapture, but about getting up and

going to the toilet, bathing and putting on a robe, and doing this or that; it's just about being mindful while one is living in this form and learning to awaken to the way things are, to the Dhamma. That's why, whenever we contemplate cessation, we're not looking for the end of the universe but just the exhalation of the breath, or the end of the day, or the end of the thought, or the end of the feeling. To notice them means that we have to pay attention to the flow of life – we have to really notice the way it is, rather than wait for some kind of fantastic experience of marvellous light descending on us, zapping us, or whatever.

Just contemplate the ordinary breathing of your body. You may notice that if you're inhaling, it's easy to concentrate. When you're filling your lungs, you feel a sense of growth, development and strength. When you say somebody's 'puffed up', they're probably inhaling. It's hard to feel puffed up while you're exhaling. Expand your chest and you have a sense of being somebody big and powerful. However, when I first started paying attention to exhaling my mind would wander. Exhaling didn't seem as important as inhaling – I was just doing it so that I could get on to the next inhalation.

Now reflect: one can observe breathing, so what is it that can observe? What is it that observes and knows the inhalation and the exhalation? It's not the breathing, is it? You can also observe the panic that comes if you want to catch a breath and you can't; but the observer, that which knows, is not an emotion, not panic-stricken, is not an exhalation or an inhalation. So our refuge in Buddha is being that knowing; being the witness rather than the emotion, the breath or the body.

With the sound of silence, some people hear fluctuations of sound or a continuous background of sound. So you can contemplate it, you notice that. Can you notice it if you put your fingers in your ears? Can you hear it in a place where they are using the chainsaw, or when you're doing exercises, or when you're in a fraught emotional state? You're using this sound of silence as something to remember to turn to

and notice, because it's always present here and now. And there's that which notices it. There is the desire of the mind to call it something, to have a name for it, have it listed as some kind of attainment or project something on to it. Notice that, the tendency to want to make it into something. It has been said that it's probably just the sound of your blood circulating in your ears. Somebody else called it the cosmic sound, the bridge to the Divine – that sounds nicer than 'the blood in your ears.' It might be the sound of the cosmos, or you might have an ear disease. But it doesn't have to be anything; it's what it is, it's 'as that.' Whatever it is, it can be used as reflection, because when you're with it there is no sense of self; there is mindfulness, there is the ability to reflect. So it is more like a straight edge that you can go to, to keep you from wobbling. It is something you can use to compose yourself in daily life, when you're getting dressed, brushing your teeth, closing a door, coming into the meditation hall, sitting down. So much of daily life is just habitual, because we focus on what we consider to be the important things of life – like meditation. So walking from where you live to the meditation hall can be a totally heedless experience, just a habit – *clump, clump, clump!* Then *slam!* goes the door! After which you sit here for an hour trying to be mindful!

But you can begin to see a way of being mindful, of bringing mindfulness to the ordinary routines and experiences of life. I have a nice little picture in my room of which I'm very fond, of an old man with a coffee mug in his hand, looking out of the window into an English garden with the rain coming down. The title of the picture is 'Waiting.' That's how I think of myself: an old man sitting at the window with my coffee mug, waiting, waiting, watching the rain or the sun, or whatever. I don't find that a depressing image, but rather a peaceful one. This life is just about waiting – we're waiting all the time, so we notice that. We can be just waiting, not waiting for anything but just waiting. And then we respond to the things of life: to the time of day, the duties, the way things move and change, the society we are in. That response isn't

from the force of habits of greed, hatred and delusion but a response of wisdom and mindfulness.

How many of you feel you have a mission in life to perform, something you've got to do, some kind of important task that's been assigned to you by God, or fate, or something? People frequently get caught up in that view of being somebody who has a mission. Who can be just with the way things are, so that it is just the body that grows up, breathes and is conscious, gets old and dies? We can practise, live within the moral precepts, do good, respond to the needs and experiences of life with mindfulness and wisdom – but there's nobody who has to do anything. There's nobody with a mission, nobody special; we're not making a person or a saint, an avatar or a *tulku*, a messiah or Maitreya. You may think, 'I'm just a nobody', but even being a nobody is being somebody in this life. You can be just as proud of being nobody as of being somebody, and just as deludedly attached to being nobody. But whatever you happen to believe, whether that you're a nobody or a somebody, that you have a mission or are a nuisance and a burden to the world – however you might view yourself, the knowing is there to see the cessation of such a view.

Views arise and cease. The view: 'I'm somebody, an important person who has a mission in life' arises and ceases in the mind. Notice the ending of the view of being somebody important, or being nobody, or whatever – it all ceases. Everything that arises ceases, so there's a non-grasping of the view of being somebody with a mission or of being nobody. There's the end of that whole mass of suffering – of having to develop something, become somebody, change something, set everything right, get rid of all your defilements or save the world. Even the best ideals, the best thoughts can be seen as *dhammas* that arise and cease in the mind.

You might think that this is a barren philosophy of life, because there seems to be a lot more heart and feeling in being somebody who's going to save all sentient beings. People with self-sacrifice who

have missions, help others and have something important to do are an inspiration. But when you notice that as *dhamma*, you are looking at the limitations of inspirations and their cessation. Then there is the *dhamma* of those aspirations and actions, rather than somebody who has to become something or do something. The whole illusion is relinquished, and what remains is purity of mind. Then the response to experience comes from wisdom and purity rather than from a personal conviction of a mission, with its sense of self and other and all the complications that come from that whole pattern of delusion. Can you trust that? Can you trust in just letting everything go and cease, not being anybody and not having any mission, not having to become anything? Can you really trust in that, or do you find it frightening, barren or depressing? Maybe you really want inspiration: 'Tell me everything is all right; tell me you really love me; what I'm doing is right and Buddhism is not just a selfish religion where you get enlightened for your own sake; tell me that Buddhism is here to save all sentient beings. Is that what you're going to do, Ven. Sumedho? Are you really Mahayana or Hinayana?'

What I'm pointing to is what inspiration is as an experience – idealism: not trying to dismiss it or judge it in any way, but to reflect on it, to know what it is in the mind, and how easily we can be deluded by our own ideas and high-minded views. And to see how insensitive, cruel and unkind we can be through the attachment we have to views about being kind and sensitive. This is a real investigation into Dhamma.

I remember that in my own experience, I always had the view that I was somebody special in some way. I used to think, 'Well I *must* be a special person.' Way back when I was a child I was fascinated by Asia, and as soon as I could I studied Chinese at university, so surely I must have been a reincarnation of somebody who was connected to the Orient. But consider this as a reflection: no matter how many signs of being special, or previous lives you can remember, or voices from God, or messages from the cosmos, whatever – I'm not denying those things or saying that they aren't real, but they're impermanent. They're *anicca*,

*dukkha, anattā*. We're reflecting on them as they really are. What arises ceases: a message from God is something that comes and ceases in your mind. God isn't always talking to you continuously – unless you want to consider the sound of silence the voice of God, but then it doesn't really say anything. We can call it anything – we can call it the voice of God or the divine, or the ringing of the cosmos, or blood in our eardrums. But whatever it is, it can be used for mindfulness and reflection – that's what I'm pointing to, how to use these things without making them into something.

Then the missions we have are responses, but not to experiences that we have in our lives. They're not personal anymore. It's no longer me, Sumedho Bhikkhu, with a mission, as if I'm specially chosen from above, more so than any of you. It's not that any more. That whole manner of thinking and perceiving is relinquished. And whether or not I do save the world and thousands of beings, or help the poor in the slums of Calcutta, or help to cure all lepers and do all kinds of good works, that would be done not from the delusion of being a person, but as a natural response from wisdom.

This I trust: this is what *saddhā* is – it is faith in the Buddha's word. *Saddhā* is a real trust and confidence in Dhamma: in just waiting, being nobody and not becoming anything, but being able just to wait and respond. And if there's nothing much to respond to, it's just waiting – coffee cup in hand, watching the rain, the sunset, getting old, witnessing the ageing process, the comings and goings in the monastery – the ordinations and the disrobings, the inspirations and the depressions, the highs and the lows, inside the mind, outside in the world. And there is the response – because when we have vigour, intelligence and talent, life always comes to ask us to respond to it in some skilful and compassionate way, which we are very willing and able to do. We like to help people. I wouldn't mind going to a Buddhist leper colony – I'd be glad to – or working in the shanty towns of Calcutta, or wherever, I'd have no objections; those kinds of things are rather appealing to

my sense of nobility. But it's not a mission, it's not me having to do anything; it's trusting in the Dhamma. Then the response to life is clear and of benefit, because it's not coming from me as a person and the delusions of ignorance conditioning mental formations. We observe the restlessness, the compulsiveness, the obsessiveness of the mind, and let it cease. We let it go and it ceases.

## 20 | Non-Dualism

A significant offering of the Buddhist teaching lies in what we call non-dualism. It's the 'neither-nor' approach to philosophical questions. Monistic religion tends to talk about the One, the One God; the Whole, the Buddha-Nature or the One Mind, and that's very inspiring. We turn to monistic doctrines for inspiration. But inspiration is only one level of religious experience, and you have to outgrow it. You have to let go of the desire for inspiration, the belief in God, the Oneness, the One Mind or all-embracing benevolence or universal fairness.

I'm not asking you to disbelieve in those things either. But the non-dualistic practice is a way of letting go of all that, of seeing the attachment to views, opinions and perceptions, because the perception of one's mind is a perception. The perception of a universal benevolence is a perception to which we can attach. The Buddha-Nature is a perception. Buddha is a perception. The One God and everything as one universal system, a global village where all is one and one is all, everything is fair and everything is kind, and God loves us: these are perceptions which might be very nice, but they are still perceptions which arise and cease. Perceptions of monistic doctrines arise and cease.

What happens as a practical experience when you let things go

and they cease? What's left, what's the remainder? This is what the Buddha is pointing to in teaching about the arising and cessation of conditions. When the perception of self ceases and all the doctrines, all the inspired teaching, all the wise sayings cease, there is still the knower of the cessation. More views. And that leaves us with a blank mind. What is there to grasp? So the desire to know, to have something to grasp, comes up. We can sometimes see a kind of panic in our minds: 'We've got to believe in something! Tell me about the universal benevolence!' But that's fear and desire operating again – 'I want to believe in something! I need something to believe in! I want to know that everything is all right. I want to attach to and believe in the perceptions of oneness and wholeness.' That desire, which you may not notice and may still be attached to, is still operating. That's why the religious experience is often one of despair.

In the story of the crucifixion, the most impressive statement Christ made was: 'My God, my God why hast thou forsaken me?' What happened to the God who was protecting Jesus? Even God left him. That's an anguished cry. The one perception 'I' could count on suddenly dissolved in his mind. And after that of course came the acceptance and then the Resurrection, the being born anew to be free from all that illusion, from all that attachment to God, attachment to the doctrine, attachment to even the highest ideas and the finest values.

All these things are still very good and praiseworthy. But it's through attachment that we suffer, because if we attach to any perception, we are not realizing the truth. We are just attaching to symbol, and grasping the symbol as being the reality. If I said: 'You see the Buddha sitting up there on the shrine? That's the real Buddha. That is Buddha', you'd think: 'Ajahn Sumedho has really gone crazy.' Yet we can still attach to a perception of Buddha as Buddha. We are not at the stage where we are going to believe that the vast statue is Buddha, but we can be very attached to a view about Buddha. And it might be a very nice view, just as that Buddha-rupa is a very nice Buddha-rupa. I like that

Buddha; it is very beautiful, and we don't have to get rid of it because Buddha-rupas do not delude. What is dangerous is our attachment to a perception – of self, of others, of Buddha, of God, of Oneness, of wholeness.

When you can truly free your mind from attachment, all these particular angles are valid. We are not condemning monism as wrong. But attachment to monistic doctrine is limiting and blinding, just like attachment to non-dualism. The purpose of non-dualism is really a tremendous pointing at attachment. But if you are just a philosophical non-dualist, you can be attached to a kind of annihilation attitude.

I'm not asking you to attach to a position of non-dualism, but I have asked you not to try to inspire your mind or read about inspired monistic teaching and various other religions during this retreat, because in order to really learn how to use this particular tool, you have to follow the instructions and observe the results. And it can seem pretty barren, but we have to let go of that need for inspiration, right up to that point of despair. We have to learn to accept that emptiness, that silence, the cessation, the loneliness, the lack of warmth; and not ask for benevolence and kindness. We have to open to the silence and contemplate it, learning from it rather than running away from it and looking for a nice warm mother or a nice safe father. Then one way you can describe this holy life is the growing up of an individual being to that maturity where we no longer linger in the warmth of adolescence or childhood, or in the pleasures of the world.



Bhikkhus, there are ten dhammas which should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

*What are these ten?*

*I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values.*

*This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*My very life is sustained through the gifts of others.*

*This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*I should strive to abandon my former habits.*

*This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*Does regret over my conduct arise in my mind?*

*This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*Could my spiritual companions find fault with my conduct?  
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise,  
will become separated from me.  
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related  
to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma; whatever kamma  
I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.  
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*The days and nights are relentlessly passing,  
how well am I spending my time.  
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*Do I delight in solitude or not?  
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*Has my practice borne fruit with freedom or insight,  
so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed  
when questioned by my spiritual companions?  
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*Bhikkhus, these are the ten dhammas to be reflected upon again  
and again by one who has gone forth.*

## Dependent Origination 1: Ignorance is Self-View

The uniqueness of the Buddhist approach is *anattā* – the realization of not-self. The particular style of reflection in structures like the Four Noble Truths and *paṭiccasamuppāda* changes the way of thinking from the self-view of the soul and ‘me’ as an absolute to *anattā*, not-self.

The problem lies in the fact that ‘not-self’ seems like annihilation, and what frightens people about Buddhism is that ‘not-self’ and ‘no soul’ sound like an absolute position that one has to take as a Buddhist. People who hate God and resent Christianity may become Buddhists because they’ve got a grudge against God, the soul, sin and guilt. They really want Buddhism to be a kind of atheistic philosophy and a total rejection of the whole Christian experience. But that’s not what it is. Buddhism is not atheistic or nihilistic. The Buddha was very careful to avoid such extreme positions. Instead his teaching is a very skilfully and carefully constructed psychology. Its aim is to help us see through and let go of all the habitual attachments – attitudes born out of ignorance, fear and desire – that create this illusory sense of a self. So for over 2,500 years now Buddhism has managed to survive and keep its purity.

And that is because its approach is very clear. There is a Sangha living under the Vinaya-discipline, and there's the teaching of the Dhamma.

If we practise with this in the right way, we can really begin to see the suffering and misery we create over the illusions about ourselves. We're not trying to create an illusion that there isn't any self. The point is not to go from the illusion of self to the illusion of 'there is no self', but rather to investigate, contemplate and have insight until the ineffable truth is realized by each one of us for ourselves. Each one of us has our unique experience – we don't all experience exactly the same things. We have different memories, experiences, tendencies and habits. And yet we always relate these infinite varieties to Dhamma teachings, so we are not just making totally subjective interpretations. We apply the Dhamma teaching to our experience, in order to be able to communicate and understand it in a context that is wider than that of personal subjectivity.

Often people deviate in their practice because religious experiences are interpreted too subjectively. They're not put across in a form that can be communicated. They become unique personal experiences, rather than universal realizations. But the Buddha established a whole way of thinking and expressing the teachings that is exactly the same today. We're not here to change it and bend it all to fit our personal experience. We measure our experience with the teaching, because the teachings are so skilfully made that they cover everything.

In the contemplation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* we're coming to agreements on how its terms relate to contemplative experience. When you first read *paṭiccasamuppāda*, you don't understand it at all. 'Ignorance conditions kammic formations; kammic formations condition consciousness, etc.' So what? What does that mean? You imagine it must be very profound and probably takes a lifetime of studying Pali to understand, so you tend to brush it aside.

In Buddhist circles the Four Noble Truths can be glossed over. 'Oh yes – basic Buddhism. Yes ... now, let's get on to the real advanced

Mādhyamika<sup>6</sup> Buddhism!’ Or: ‘What did Dogen say?’ Or: ‘Milarepa is absolutely fascinating, isn’t he?’<sup>7</sup> And you think: “Suffering, Origin, Cessation and Path”, yes, we know that, now let’s get on to the real nitty-gritty.’ So the Four Noble Truths tend to be perfunctory beliefs. People don’t investigate or use them, because the teachings in themselves are not interesting. ‘Suffering, Origin, Cessation and Path’ is not an inspiring teaching, because it is a teaching for practice, not a teaching intended as inspirational. And this is why we use it: because that particular way of thinking and contemplating is psychologically valid. With it we can begin to understand that which we’ve never seen or understood before. In following this way of practice, you’re actually developing your mind and intelligence in a way that is very seldom done. Even in the most advanced educational systems, people don’t really train their minds in this particular way of reflection and contemplation. To think rationally is highly regarded, but to understand what rationality is as a function of mind, you have to reflect on the nature of the mind. What is actually happening? What is it all about? And of course, these are the questions of existence, the existential questions: ‘Why was I born?’ ‘Is there a meaning to life?’ ‘What happens when I die?’ ‘What is it all about?’ ‘Is it meaningless – just a cosmic accident?’ ‘Does it relate to anything beyond itself, or is this merely something that happens and then that’s it – that’s the end?’

We have great problems with relating the meaning of life to anything real beyond the material world. So materialism becomes the reality for us. When we explore space, it’s always on the material plane. We want to go up in rocket ships and take our bodies up to the moon, because according to the materialist view that’s what’s real. Western materialism lacks subtlety and refinement: it brings us down to a very coarse level of consciousness, where reality is this gross material object, and the emotions are dismissed as not being real because they’re

<sup>6</sup> Mādhyamika is a philosophical analysis of the principle of interdependency (as in Dependent Origination) propounded by Nāgārjuna in the latter half of the second century BCE; Dogen (1200–1253 CE) was the founder of Soto Zen in Japan and Milarepa (c. 1052–1135 CE) was a renowned Buddhist hermit-monk in Tibet from whom the Kagyu lineage traces its descent.

subjective. You can't go round measuring emotions with electronic instruments. But of course the emotions are very real to us individually – what we're feeling is really more important to us than a digital watch. Our fears, desires, loves, hates and aspirations are what really make our lives happy or miserable. And yet these can be dismissed in modern materialism for a world based on just sensual pleasure, material wealth and rational thinking, so that the spiritual life seems to many people to be just an illusion, because you can't measure it with a computer or examine it with electronic instruments.

Yet in pre-scientific European civilization, the spiritual world was the real world. How do you think they built the cathedrals? And art – all this came from a real sense of spiritual aspiration, of the human being connected to something beyond the material world. Spiritual truth is something each one must realize individually. Truth is self-realization, the ultimate subjectivity. And the Buddha takes subjectivity to the very centre of the universe, the silent still point, where the subject is not a personal subject. That still point is not anybody's or anything.

In meditation you're moving towards that. You're letting go of all these attachments to the changing conditions of the material world, the emotional plane, the intellectual plane, the symbolic plane, the astral plane. All that is let go of in order to realize the still point, the silence. This letting go is not an annihilation or a rejection, but it gives you the perspective to understand the whole. You cannot understand the whole from being out on the circumference, where you just get whirled around. Being whirled around on the circumference means that you're lost in attachment to all the things that are whirling around. It's called *saṃsāra*, where you're just going around in circles and you can't get any perspective in *saṃsāra*. You have no ability to stop and watch or observe because you're just caught in this circular movement.

In this way of the Four Noble Truths and *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the aim of meditation is to stop the mind's whirling. You abide in stillness, not as an attack against the conditioned world, but in order to see it in

perspective. You're not annihilating it or criticizing it, or trying to get out of it in any way through aversion or fear of it. You're getting to the centre, to the still point where you can see it for what it is, and know it, and not be frightened or deluded by it anymore. And we do this within the limitation of our personal experience. So we can say, 'Each one for themselves', because that's how it looks when we're sitting here. And yet that still point is not in the mind, it's not in the body. This is where it's ineffable. The full mind or the still point isn't a point within the brain. Yet you're realizing that universal silence, stillness, oneness, where all the rest is a reflection and seen in perspective. And the personality, the kamma, the differences, the varieties and all these things are no longer deluding us, because we're no longer grasping at them.

As we examine the mind more and more, as we reflect and contemplate on it and learn from it, we all begin to realize the stillness of mind, which is always present, but which with most people is not even noticed, because the life of *samsāra* is so busy, so frantic that one is whirled around. Even though the still point is always here, it's never seen until you have an opportunity to abide in the stillness rather than go around on the circumference.

Not that stillness is something to attach to either. We're not trying to become people who are still, just sitting here in stillness, not feeling anything. I know that some of you come in here and create a personal world that you can inhabit through the hour of meditation. But that's not the way out of suffering; that subjective and personal world is very dependent on things being a certain way. It is so fragile and so ephemeral that it is destroyed by the slightest disruption. The refined world of tranquillity is so lovely, so peaceful – then somebody moves their robes, somebody's stomach growls, somebody snores. It's disgusting to be disturbed from these fine tranquil states by coarse bodily functions. But stillness isn't tranquillity. It's not necessary that we should be tranquil, but there's stillness when we can trust in abiding in the silence, rather than following our compulsive tendencies. We all

tend to think we've got to be doing something; we're so conditioned to do things that even meditation becomes some kind of compulsive activity that we're involved in. 'Develop this ... develop that ... I have to develop my *samādhi*, and I have to develop the *jhānas*.' You don't just come in here and sit, you come in here and develop! That's how we think. We feel guilty if we are not doing anything, not progressing, developing, getting anywhere. And yet to be able to come in here and sit in stillness is not a very easy thing to do. It's much easier to make great meditation development projects, five-year plans and so forth. Yet you always end up at the still point, things as they are.

With understanding more and more, there can be a letting go of the desire to develop and become anything. And as one's mind is freed from all that desire to become and get something, to attain something, Truth starts revealing itself. It's ever present, here and now. It's a matter of just being able to be open and sensitive so that Truth is revealed. It's not something that is revealed from outside. The Truth is always present, but we don't see it if we're caught up in the idea of attainments, of 'me' having to do something, having to get something. So the Buddha made a direct attack on 'me and mine.' That's the only thing that's blocking you. The obstacle is the attachment to a self-view, that's what is the problem. If you just see through that self-view, let go of that, you'll understand the rest. You don't need to know all the other kinds of elaborate esoteric formulas. You don't have to go endlessly into the complexity if you just let go of the ignorant view of 'I am.' See that, and know and understand the way of letting go, of non-attachment. Then the Truth reveals itself wherever you are, all the time. But until you do that, you'll always be caught in creating problems and complications.

*'Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ, viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpapaccayā saḷāyatanaṃ, saḷāyatanaṃpaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmaranaṃ maraṇaṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā sambhavanti.'*<sup>7</sup>

All this means that if you keep insisting on being attached to the illusions of a self, to greed, hatred and delusion, all you're going to ever get at the end are old age, sickness, and death, grief, sorrow, despair and anguish. That's all you'll get for the rest of your life – a pretty boring prospect. But you can be free from that here and now through right understanding, seeing things in the right way. There can be the knowing of Truth, in which we are no longer deluded by appearances or habits, or by the conditions around us.



## Dependent Origination 2: Momentary Arising

In Ajahn Buddhādāsa's book on dependent origination, he emphasizes that his approach has been on *paṭiccasamuppāda* as working in the moment, rather than in terms of past, present and future lives. When you contemplate, when you practise, you realize that that is the only way it could ever be. This is because we are working with the mind itself. Even when we are considering the birth of a human body, we are not commenting on the birth of our own bodies, but recognizing mentally that these bodies were born. Then we note in reflection that mental consciousness arises and ceases. So that whole sequence of Dependent Origination arises and ceases in a moment. The arising and the cessation from *avijjā* are momentary, it is not a kind of permanent *avijjā*. It would be a mistaken view to assume that everything began with *avijjā* and will all cease some time in the future.

In this sense *avijjā* means not understanding the Four Noble Truths. When there is understanding of suffering, origin, cessation and path, things are no longer affected by *avijjā*. We see the perceptions with *vijjā* perceptions are conventional reality, no longer 'me' and 'mine'. For

example, when there is *vijjā* I can say ‘I am Ajahn Sumedho’ – that is a conventional reality, still a perception but it is no longer viewed from *avijjā*, it’s merely a convention we use. There’s nothing more to it than that. It is as it is.

When we reach the cessation of ignorance, at that moment all the rest of the sequence ceases. It is not that one ceases and then another ceases. When there is *vijjā*, suffering ceases. In any moment when there is true mindfulness and wisdom, there is no suffering. Suffering has ceased. When you contemplate the cessation of desire, the cessation of grasping (*upādāna*), there is the cessation of becoming, the cessation of rebirth and suffering. When things cease, when everything ceases, there is peace. There is knowing, serenity, emptiness, not-self. These are the words, the concepts describing cessation.

When I practise in this way, I find it is very difficult to find any suffering. I realize there isn’t any suffering except in a heedless moment when one gets carried away with something. So because of heedlessness, lack of attention and forgetting, we get caught in habitual (kammic) mind stuff. But when we realize we have been heedless we can let it cease, we can let go. There is the letting go, the abiding in emptiness. No longer are there the strong impulses to grasp; the fascination and glamour of the sensory world have been penetrated. No longer is there anything to grasp. One can still experience and see the way things are without grasping them. There’s nobody grasping anything. There can still be feeling, seeing and hearing, taste and touch, but they are no longer created into a person, ‘me and mine.’

For me the important insight is just how momentary consciousness is. The tendency is to perceive consciousness as a long-term thing, being awake and conscious as a permanent state of being rather than a moment. And yet *viññāṇa* is always described as a moment, a flashing moment, an instant. So rather than assume that *avijjā* is a continuous process from the birth out of our bodies, we can see that at any moment there can be *vijjā* and the whole thing just ceases. The

cessation of that whole mass of suffering can be realized. It's gone! Where is it?

To practise this way is to keep examining things so that everything is seen exactly for what it is. Everything is only what it is in the moment. When we see that beauty is just beauty in the moment, ugliness is just that in the moment, there is no attempt to solidify it or prolong it in any way, because things are just what they are. One is increasingly aware of the formless or nebulous as just what it is, rather than something that is overlooked, dismissed or misinterpreted.

The problem of perception is that it tends to limit us just to being conscious of certain points. We tend to be conscious at certain designated points and the natural change and flux and flow are not really noticed. One is only conscious at A, B, C, D, E, F, G – the points between A and B are never really noticed because one is only really conscious at the designated points of perception. That is why, when the mind is opened with *vijjā* and is receptive, Dhamma reveals itself; there is a kind of revelation. The empty mind in the state of wonder allows truth to be revealed, but no longer through perception. This is where it is ineffable truth; words fail us and it is impossible to put it into perceptions or concepts.

Maybe now you are beginning to appreciate the emphasis the Buddha made: 'I teach only two things ... there is suffering and there is the end of suffering.' If you have just that insight into understanding suffering and then realize the end of suffering, you are liberated from ignorance. If you attempt to speculate on what that is like, you could call it *nibbāna*, the highest happiness, but 'highest happiness' is not quite it either. To expect the highest happiness sounds like expecting to get high, floating in the air, reaching *nibbāna* and floating up to the ceiling. But the Way is one of realization; mindfulness and realization. The Eightfold Path is development, *bhāvanā*: to develop that path to right understanding. More and more we realize the emptiness, the not-self, the freedom from not being attached to anything, which affects

what we say, what we do and how we live in the society we are in by increasing the sense of serenity and calm.

That word ‘nibbāna’ is generally defined as ‘non-attachment to the five khandhas’, which means no longer experiencing a sense of a self with regard to the body and mind – *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā*, *viññāṇa*. We no longer contemplate the five khandhas with *avijjā*, but with *vijjā*. We see that they are all impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. Nibbāna is the realization of non-attachment wherein the self-view ceases. The body is still breathing, so it doesn’t dissolve into thin air, but the mistaken identity that ‘I am the body’ dissolves. The mistaken identification with *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā*, *viññāṇa* – all that ceases. The self dissolves, you can’t find anybody. You can’t find yourself because you are yourself.

In the traditional view of Dependent Origination occurring over the span of three lives, the five khandhas are seen as a kind of permanent form from birth. The body, feelings, perceptions, mind formations and consciousness are considered as being continuous from birth. But that’s an assumption we make, and the reflection of momentary arising points to the mind itself. The body isn’t a person anyway: it’s not ‘me’ and ‘mine’, never was, never will be. There’s only the perception of it as ‘me’ and ‘mine’, the belief that I was born. I’ve a birth certificate to prove that this body was born. We carry birth certificates in our mind – we carry around the whole history, the memories and so forth of our lives, giving us this sense of a continuity of a person from birth to the present moment. But examination of perception alone shows that perception arises and ceases. This perception of me as a permanent personality is just a moment. It arises and ceases. Consciousness too is just momentary and conveys the attractive, repulsive and neutral qualities of the conditioned realm. When one sees that clearly, there is no longer any interest in that attachment and in seeking for happiness, trying to be reborn into happiness or beauty, pleasure, safety or security. Rebirth is a grasping of the conditioned realm, so we let that

go. The five khandhas are still the five khandhas, but they are seen for what they are, as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.

So this reflection on the truth of the way it is, is very direct, very clear. From the confused, amorphous, nebulous, insecure, unstable, uncertain to the certain – whatever it is, we are no longer choosing which we prefer, we are just noting that whatever arises ceases. As you realize this through your practice, a lot of the vagueness, and fuzziness of your mind are seen for exactly what they are. Confusion is confusion, just that, it's a *dhamma*. Confusion is just confusion in the moment, it's not permanent or the self. So what before was a problem or something deluding us is transformed into a *dhamma*. The transformation is not through changing the condition, but through changing the attitude from ignorance to clarity.

People say: 'All this is very well, but what about love and compassion?' The block for all that is desire. Love is no problem once there is no delusion; once there is no self, there's nothing to hinder, block off or prevent love. But as long as there is self-illusion, love is just an idea that we long for but always feel disappointed with because the self is getting in the way. The self-view is always blinding us, making us forget and deluding us that there isn't any love. We feel alienated, lonely and lost because there doesn't seem to be any love, so we blame somebody else. Or maybe we blame ourselves for not being lovable, or we become cynics. But the Buddha pointed to this and asked what the real problem was. It's the illusion of a self. It's attachment to that perception. That affects consciousness and everything else, so we are always creating separations and dissatisfaction, and identifying with that which is not ourselves. Once we are free from that illusion, love is ever present. It's just that we can't see it or enjoy it when we are blinded by our desires and fears. As you understand this more and more, your faith increases and there is a willingness to give up everything. There is a real zest, a joy in being with the way things are.



## Dependent Origination 3: The Formation of Self

*Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*: this means ‘Ignorance conditions the kammic formations’, i.e. body and mind as defined by the five khandhas. That is when we operate from a position of ignorance, not understanding the truth, and everything that we experience and do and say and feel is conditioned from that ignorance, absolutely everything. This is where the self-view is such a blind spot. When we think of the kammic formation as ‘self’ rather than as ‘not-self’ everything that happens, everything that is experienced is referred to that sense of a person, as a physical body, ‘me’ as a perception. This is *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*.

If you have the insight that all conditions are impermanent, all *dhamma* is not-self, then there’s knowing or *vijjā*, and truth or Dhamma rather than ignorance (*avijjā*) and habitual kamma (*saṅkhārā*). There’s knowing the Dhamma, the truth of the way it is. Then all the rest follows suit, everything is seen as it is. There’s no distortion: consciousness, the five aggregates and the sense world are seen as Dhamma rather than as self.

What is your suffering in life, anyway? Why do you suffer? If you investigate you can always trace it back to *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*.

There's natural suffering, going hungry, getting old and getting sick, but that's all bearable. That's nothing that we can't bear. Sickness, old age and death are things we can always bear with. They're not real suffering. Suffering is the greed, hatred and delusion we produce through the self-view, through taking it all personally. The creations and attachments to wrong views, prejudices, biases and all the horrors that we are responsible for can all be traced back to *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*.

We can't really expect very much improvement if we still insist on being ignorant, caught in the self-view. Even though we might be able to improve conditions slightly by trying to be a good person, as long as there is attachment to self-view there is delusion, so even the goodness we do comes from delusion. It doesn't lead anyone out of suffering. If we don't have wisdom, often we try to do good but end up harming and causing all kinds of problems, while thinking we can tell others what is good for them.

What is the way it is at this moment? Your body is sitting. You can feel things – pleasure, pain, heat, cold or whatever. This is the way things are. There's no self in that, we are not creating the self. When we bring our attention to the way things are, we can see what we do when we add 'me' and 'mine' to the moment: what I think, what I feel, what I want, what I don't want, what I like, what I don't like. Or we can be aware of the selves we create in others, my opinions about you. I have suffered a lot from creating people in my mind, not because anybody was really cruel to me, but because of all the things I used to create about myself and about other people. The fear of what others thought, jealousies, envy, greed, possessiveness. I would have my prejudices and views about people, what I thought they were really up to and my suspicions about what they really wanted. So suffering comes out of the creations we make about ourselves and others, about our parents, and the people closest to us.

What is suffering? Really ask yourself, what is the suffering of your life? Yesterday the cold winds were blowing through me as I was walking

out there in the field. Is that suffering? I could make it suffering. I hate this cold wind. But actually it was all right – I mean it was something I could completely bear. If I didn't make anything about it in my mind, it was just cold wind, that's all. Yet we can spend time in Amaravati creating attitudes about monks, nuns, laypeople. You can really make senior nuns into big ogres! We can have strong views about seniority. If we are in a senior position we can be very attached to it – 'I am senior to you. You are just a new monk. Do that. I'm boss.' So we can create ourselves as being senior monks. But we are not here to create kamma based on ignorance. The conventions we have are merely expedient means. They are simplifications, moral agreements and community agreements to make life simple and uncomplicated, and also to allow us to reflect on the way we relate to people above; senior people, equal people, junior people.

The Buddha said: 'The view that everybody is equal is a delusion.' 'I am superior to everyone' is a delusion. 'I am inferior is a delusion. 'I am' is a delusion if that identity is based on ignorance. But when there's *vijjā*, 'I am' is merely conventional reality. It's just the way we talk: 'I am hungry' or 'I am Sumedho Bhikkhu', but it's not a person.

When there's *avijjā* it conditions the *saṅkhārā*, which condition consciousness or *viññāṇa*. Consciousness conditions mentality and corporeality (*nāma-rūpa*), which conditions the sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), which condition contact (*phassa*), which conditions feeling (*vedanā*). When ignorance is the primary condition, the rest are all affected by it. The sensory world, body and mind are related to in terms of 'me' and 'mine'. This is the self-view. In contrast to Brahmanism, where the Hindu talks about the Atman, or the higher self, the One, when the Buddha talks of self, it is related to attachment to the five khandhas, to body, feeling, perceptions, volitions and consciousness. Attachment to that, ignorance, conditions kammic formations. All this creates a sense of a self. This self-view starts to become strong when you are aged six to seven. You go to school and you compete and compare, and this strong

sense of a self starts being conditioned into your mind. I remember the first five or six years of my life being magical, and then after six or seven it started getting increasingly worse. Before that there wasn't very much a sense of self.

In a country like the States – which is a very nice country, actually – there is an emphasis on self-view. There is not a tremendous amount of wisdom in that country, and the personality view is very much the dominant theme: 'I am an individual, I have my rights. I can do what I want. You can't tell me what to do. Who do you think you are? I'm as good as you are. Get off my back.' The egalitarian Americans have strong individualistic attachment to being an individual with a fascinating personality, a real character, a 'good guy'. This is the American emphasis on the personal level. Being a 'good guy' is all right; there's nothing wrong with it, but as *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā* it can only bring suffering. When there are ignorance and the self-view, the 'good guy' is always going to suffer.

*Avijjā* conditions the *saṅkhārā*, which condition consciousness, which conditions mentality-corporeality, which conditions the six senses, which conditions contact and then feeling, and then feeling conditions desire – the *vedanā-taṇhā* connection. You can notice that if you are caught in attachment to personality view or self, desire, grasping (*upādāna*) and becoming (*bhava*) will be operating. You will be lost in that pattern, because when there is ignorance in the moment it affects everything – consciousness, the senses and sense-objects, feeling – and then desire comes into it: 'I want something.' 'I want to be happy.' 'I want to become.' 'I want to get rid of.' 'I want.'

Examine desire during this retreat; really get to know what desire is. From my own reflection on it, I see it is always energy aiming at something, whether it's restless and scattered or aimed at something definite. There is a strong desire to get rid of things we don't like as quickly as possible. We want to get what we want instantly and get rid of what we don't like instantly; we don't value patience any more in our

society. We want efficiency. Everything looks nice, and then something comes in and makes a mess, and we have to clean it up immediately because we don't want obstacles or hindrances, or anything unpleasant. We want to get rid of it quickly, so we are very impatient and we can get very upset and annoyed at things because of this desire to get rid of, this *vibhava-taṇhā*.

The desire to become, ambition, *bhava-taṇhā*, is often a motivation within the religious life – we want to become an enlightened personality. So *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* are to be studied and examined. You can reflect on them; you can listen to these desires: 'I want to get enlightened.' 'I want to get *samādhi*. I want to make the best I can out of this retreat so I can have some kind of achievement or attainment from it all.' Or to get rid of things: 'I hope I get rid of all my lust and anger during this retreat. I hope to get rid of the jealousy, so I never have to be jealous again. During this retreat I am working on jealousy. I'm working on doubt or fear – if I can get rid of my fear by the end of this retreat I will have no more fear left, because I'm going to get right in there and annihilate fear.' That's *vibhava-taṇhā* – 'There is something wrong with me and I have got to make it right. I have got to become something else by getting rid of these bad things, these wrong things about me.' It's all 'I am' and 'me-and-mine'.

*Kāma-taṇhā* is quite obvious – it is the desire for pleasurable sense experiences. These forms of desire are to be known and understood. The trap is that we tend to think the Buddha teaches us to get rid of our desires. That is how some people interpret Buddhism. But that's wrong: the Buddha taught us how to look at and understand desire so that we do not grasp it. That's not telling us to get rid of desire, but to really understand it so that it can no longer delude us. The desire to get rid of desire is still desire, it is not looking at desire. With that desire you are just grasping a perception that you shouldn't have desires and you have to get rid of them. But through understanding Dependent Origination we see *taṇhā* as Dhamma rather than as self -- you are looking at *taṇhā*,

desire, as that which arises and ceases. That's Dhamma. In twenty-two years of careful looking and close observation, I have not found one desire that arises and keeps arising. If any of you do find one, please tell me.

*Kāma-taṇhā* is fairly coarse and fairly obvious: 'I want something to eat', or sexual desires. But *vibhava-taṇhā* can be very subtle, righteous and important, and one can be deluded by that righteous quality. The desire to get rid of evil can seem so right. We can dedicate our lives to getting rid of the evils in this world and become fanatical. This is what you can see in modern social problems. There are the degenerate tendencies of this society, leading to sexual aberrations and drugs, and then there are the very righteous forms of fundamentalism which condemn the degenerate, loose-living, immoral behaviour of one element of society. But we are looking at desire itself, from the gross forms of want and lust to the righteous passion of 'wanting to kill and annihilate these degenerates.' Contemplate that as something within your mind. I have seen both tendencies in myself. I can become attracted to sensual pleasures, and I can also be really hard and self-righteous, and critical of others or myself. *Bhava-taṇhā* can be very sweet too, when it is intended for the welfare of others. It's not just that I want to attain something so I can say I have attained something. There is also the *bhava-taṇhā* of wanting because you feel you would like to help everyone else. There is still the 'I am' - 'I want to get enlightened, and then I am going to really help everyone else, and I want to become someone who is not selfish but works totally for the welfare of all sentient beings.' That's very altruistic - it's beautiful and inspiring, but it can also be *bhava-taṇhā* if it is coming from *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*.

When we see clearly with *vijjā* and see Dhamma, there is nobody to become anything, or to achieve or attain. Things are as they are. Good is done and bad is refrained from in action and speech. There is doing good. What is there left to do in life but to be virtuous? Isn't that the beauty of our humanity? What is truly joyful and lovely about being

human is our ability to be virtuous. I can't think of anything else to do. The human experience is for virtue and goodness, and refraining from doing evil harmful things to ourselves and others. I can't think of anything else worth doing.



## 25 | Dependent Origination 4: Feeling Conditions Desire

At the beginning of the practice, *paṭiccasamuppāda* is *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*: ignorance conditions the kammic formations. *Avijjā* is the ignorance of not knowing the Four Noble Truths. There is ignorance in any being who does not understand that there is suffering, the arising of suffering, the cessation of suffering and the Path leading to its cessation. Conversely, the word for knowledge in this sense is *vijjā*. *Vijjā* is the knowing of the Four Noble Truths: insight into suffering, its origin, cessation and the Path.

When we haven't had insight into Truth, *avijjā*, not knowing, conditions the *saṅkhārā*. We create an 'I am.' The *saṅkhāra* 'I am' is created and conditioned from that *avijjā*. Notice that the first Noble Truth does not say 'I suffer'; it says, 'There is suffering; there is *dukkha*.' It's not saying that anybody suffers. However, we think we suffer. We think, 'I suffer a lot in this life ... He's a real sufferer ... She suffers all the time ... I've suffered a lot in my life. I wasn't born with the best kammic formations available on this planet, and I've really had to suffer. Poor me!' But the suffering is what we create, out of ignorance.

The important point the Buddha made was that we should live in accordance with knowledge rather than ignorance.

This Buddhist practice is a way of knowledge, of knowing; it's all about knowing the truth. That's why I don't particularly feel sorry for anybody when they think they suffer a lot. I could say, 'Poor thing, I really feel sorry for you that you've had to suffer.' But thinking that one is suffering is not the position of knowing. Things have happened in the past, perhaps unfortunate occurrences, and then we think and indulge, which carries them on in the present with all kinds of additional suffering. But when there's knowledge, insight, *vijjā*, we realize there's nobody to suffer. We see things as they are. Every human being has the ability to see the way things are clearly and not create suffering about it.

Admittedly we've all experienced unfortunate things or done foolish things. This is just ordinary human experience. Once we're born, anything can happen to us. The whole range of life's experiences is possible for us, from the most fortunate to the most unfortunate ones. That's the result of birth. There's nothing wrong with that; it's just the way it is. Birth in the human realm is risky – we can't be sure what we're getting into. It could be a real mess, or it could be a delight; or it could be sometimes messy and sometimes delightful, or one-quarter messy, three-fourths mediocre and no delightful things at all. Being born in this human world, into sensory consciousness, is like this: it's unstable, uncertain, it changes, and we cannot find any security within it. This is what we all have in common. From the most fortunate to the least fortunate human beings, we are all vulnerable, being in a shape and form that can be damaged, hurt and diseased. When we look at this side of our human existence, we don't feel prejudices and strong views concerning race, class, sex, nationality and so forth. We're all brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death.

Having been born, there's *viññāṇa*, consciousness, there's body, *nāma-rūpa*. There are the sense organs – *saḷāyatana* – the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. There is *phassa* or contact with the sense objects;

and there's *vedanā*, feeling. This *vedanā* is the result of birth and consciousness, and in this sense is applied to sensory experience, to the attractive, neutral and unattractive qualities. The experience of *vedanā* through the eyes doesn't mean your eyes ache or hurt; it means that when you see beautiful flowers as attractive, the *vedanā* of attraction is pleasant. There is also unpleasant or neutral feeling. That whole process will then stimulate desire, grasping and becoming (*taṇhā-upādāna-bhava*). We become what we desire. Now apply that to all the senses and their objects – to sound, smell, taste, touch and thought. Some of our thoughts are very pleasant, some are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and some are unpleasant. This is the sensitivity of these bodies; they're totally sensitive conditions, they're conscious and they feel. This is just the way it is. Some of you only want to be partially sensitive. You're frightened of being totally sensitive. You'd like to become sensitive only to nice things, and you'd like to pray to God and say: 'Oh God, please give me everything nice, only pleasant feelings, and please make everything beautiful for me. And never let me suffer, and let me always have success and happiness and beautiful people around me until I die.' That's the whinging human mind wanting only partial sensitivity.

*Vijjā* or insight knowledge is knowing the pleasant and neutral and unpleasant as they are. We're not asking for partial sensitivity any more, or for the best of the sensory experiences, but opening towards total sensitivity, which includes all possibilities for pain, ugliness, unpleasantness. *Avijjā* says: 'I don't want to lose my looks; I don't want to have any unpleasant experiences; I want to be happy.' That's *avijjā*. *Vijjā* says: 'There is suffering; there is its origin and its cessation, and there is the way out of suffering.'

So contemplate this 'I am' that cries and weeps and fears and desires. Why are we frightened? What are we frightened of and anxious about? It is the possibility of pain, isn't it? – of being physically harmed, diseased or emotionally exploited, or hurt in some way; of

being rejected, unloved, looked down on, getting cancer or Parkinson's disease. 'I don't want that, I want perfect health. I'm afraid I might have some terrible disease. What if I have one of those heart attacks where for the next thirty to forty years I'm a kind of cabbage and the monks have to do everything, put me on the potty? I don't want that, I couldn't bear to be a nuisance or a burden to anyone.' 'I don't want to be a burden' is an English obsession.

So 'I am' is something to contemplate and observe because it is something that we're convinced is a reality. Because of ignorance, 'I am' is truth for most human beings. And it's very natural to want happiness and want to run away from pain. You see something beautiful, you grasp it, you want it. You see something ugly, you want to get rid of it. Those are the natural reactions on the sensory plane. If that's all there is to it, you just have to try to get all the best you can and run away from all the bad, and there's no way out. It's each one for themselves – survival. The clever and the strong survive, and the stupid and the weak will be at the bottom, in the pits. But the human being is equipped with a reflective mind; we can reflect and contemplate *vedanā*. We can observe and contemplate what attraction is and what beauty is. We're not just dumb animals: we can actually watch ourselves wanting to grab and possess the beautiful. We can observe and reflect on our aversion to anything ugly and unpleasant; and we can also contemplate what is neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

Our normal breathing is neither pleasant nor unpleasant; it's neither attractive nor unattractive. That's why you have to pay attention to it, because if the breath were attractive it would attract you, and I wouldn't have to say, 'Watch your breath' – you'd be watching it anyway because it was so attractive. Breathing is the most important physiological function, and the body does it whether we're aware of it or not, whether we're crazy or sane, young or old, male or female, rich or poor, or whatever. Breathing is this way. It's neither exciting or interesting, nor is it disgusting or revolting. But as we concentrate, bring our attention

to breathing of the body – what happens? Well, when I concentrate on my breath the mind goes tranquil, I feel tranquillized by being able to concentrate on the breathing of this body.

*Ānāpānasati* is boring to most people at first; just inhalation-exhalation, the same old thing. The breathing of the body is neutral *vedanā*. When we do the meditation of sweeping through the feeling of the body, the pressure of the body sitting on the seats and the clothes touching the skin, that's neutral feeling. Then we can observe the *vedanā* through the ear, the nose, the tongue, the eye, the body, the mind. And we start to see that this is just the sensory realm, not a person, just the way it is. There's nothing wrong with that, nothing bad about it at all. *Vedanā* is all right. There's just the pleasant and the painful and the neutral; they're just what they are. However, to be aware of pleasure, pain and neutral *vedanā* means that we have to bear it, really accept it rather than just reacting to it. We reflect on it, contemplate it so that we really understand it. If we don't contemplate and have insight into *vedanā*, we just continue this process of *paṭiccasamuppāda* – so we have desires, because *vedanā* conditions *taṇhā*, desire. But with insight we can break the habit. We can contemplate *vedanā*. Then we begin to understand how desire arises: wanting the pleasure, not wanting the pain, and just ignoring the neutral.

A person who lives a very fast life has a life based on going from one exciting, thrilling thing to the next. When we think of really exciting lifestyles, what is usually involved? Usually they are full of frantic attempts to have fantastic sensual experience, always running about, because yesterday's fantastic sensual experience is boring. There's a need to have new sensual experiences, new romances and adventures, because anything becomes boring when it's repeated. So *samsāra* is the cycle, the endless running about looking for the next interesting thing, the next excitement, the next romance, the next adventure – the next, the next, the next. Notice how insidious that is in our lives. Even in the monastic life, even in a meditation retreat, we can still be caught up in

trying to get onto the next thing, sitting here thinking about what we'll do after the retreat, or trying to find something to make our lives more interesting here at Amaravati.

What is interest? Things that are interesting are things that are attractive and hold our attention. We want to be attracted by something. We want attractive things, pleasurable experiences, beautiful objects, beautiful music and sounds. They are interesting, they hold our attention, they please and fascinate us. If an experience is unpleasant, we dread it. For most people the idea of having to be in some place where there's nothing beautiful – dreary, boring people; gross, coarse and bad odours; men and women who have no culture; disgusting, foul, stinking evil brutes; pain, sickness – can be a hell-realm. We dread that this is what we might end up with. It might happen that we get stuck in some miserable place. So we want to avoid and get rid of all of that, and then try to get hold of as many pleasant experiences as possible.

And yet most of our lives are neither pleasant nor painful *vedanā*. When you contemplate most of your life, I'm sure that for most of you about 98 percent has been neither pleasant nor painful. When I think of my life, about 2 percent has been highly pleasant or highly painful, and about 98 percent has been neither pleasant nor painful, but just what it is. And yet that 98 percent of one's life can go by totally unnoticed, because we are so attached to the extremes of waiting for the next thing, longing and expecting and hoping, and then dreading and fearing the possibility of not having any more pleasure, not having a good time. Well, just think of our day here at Amaravati or anywhere in the world. How much of it is really pleasurable or painful?

The Buddha advised us to bring our attention to the neither-pleasant-nor-painful things in life, because to accept and notice neither-pleasure-nor-pain means we have to be attentive and alert. If something is not attractive or repulsive, it doesn't make us react. It doesn't stimulate our minds at all. So we have to bring our attention to it, be awake to it. That's why in meditation we sit, we stand, we walk, we lie down; four

basic postures, normal breathing, things that are so ordinary, but are not pleasurable nor painful. The practice of mindfulness is to bring our attention to *vedanā*. But we're not attaching to neutrality either: we're not trying to attach to either pleasure or pain. So to study *vedanā* we're not trying to live a neutral existence, but bringing attention to it means that we have to put effort into just sitting, standing, walking, lying down; being awake, being here and now. We have to pay attention, we have to learn to concentrate the mind.

*Vedanā* conditions *taṇhā*. So what is *taṇhā*? This word is translated as desire. It's when you're not aware and alert to the way things are – then you want, or do not want. Starting from *vedanā*, if it's pleasurable you want it, if it's painful you don't want it. Then there's sensual desire – *kāma-taṇhā*, wanting sensory pleasures, just going around eating and drinking, listening to music and living a very distracted life of sensual delight. We all know that, don't we? We've all also experienced *bhava-taṇhā*, desire to become, ambition: 'I want to become something. I want to become a success; I want to become enlightened; I want to become good. I want to become admired and respected.' Or, *vibhava-taṇhā*, desiring to get rid of – that's a strong one, too: 'Let's get rid of all the unpleasant things, the bad thoughts, the bad feelings, the pain, the imperfections.'

We can observe these three kinds of desires: we can observe and reflect on them because they're objects of the mind; they're mind objects, they're not the subject. Desire is not you, in other words. But out of heedlessness, out of *avijjā*, it becomes a subject, it becomes you. You grasp desire and you become the desired: 'I want this and I don't want that. I want to become a success, I don't want to become a failure. I've got to get rid of these faults.' So there's the grasping of desire, and then you become somebody who wants things or doesn't want things. And that's endless. When we become a person who wants things and doesn't want things, it just goes on and on and on. There's always something we want, something we don't want. If we don't watch and observe this

process, our whole life is just this endless cycle of *saṃsāra* going around and around, just wanting; becoming somebody who wants something, becoming somebody who doesn't want something. And that, of course, conditions rebirth, *jāti*. It conditions old age, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair – depression, misery; '*jarāmaraṇaṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā.*'

To be somebody who always has to be getting something or getting rid of something is such a painful way to live. Just contemplate: what is the real suffering in your life? When you think you've suffered, what is it that you suffered from? It was from being somebody who wants things or doesn't want things. We talk about the first Noble Truth, *dukkha*. We all have this suffering. When there's *avijjā* we suffer, our life is going to be a realm of suffering. This is becoming very obvious in affluent Western Europe, in places like America and Australia; affluent societies where people get very much what they want, and where suffering isn't the suffering of starvation, deprivation and brutality. But in affluent countries there's so much misery and suffering – from what? Wanting and not wanting, because even when we get everything we want we want more, and there are things that we don't want. Just trying to satisfy all our desires and get everything we want is not the answer. That's not the way out of suffering, because that process doesn't end until you see it, until you use *vijjā* rather than *avijjā*. So contemplate that, this wanting and not wanting, desire and the grasping of desire.

When you contemplate *vedanā*, then you see it's just natural: attraction, repulsion and neither attraction nor repulsion. It's just being sensitive. For example, these flowers in front of me are attractive to me right now. That's just the natural way of things. There's no desire in that. If I contemplate at this moment: 'I don't want those flowers', there's no desire. I don't want to get rid of them either. There's no wanting or not wanting, but they're still pleasing; their attractiveness is this way. That's *vedanā*. Or something ugly like these curtains. I find them ugly. Whenever I come into this room my mind says, 'Those

curtains are ugly’, so I don’t really want to look at them. But I can be aware of the displeasure when my eyes contact those curtains without desiring to get rid of them; it’s just awareness of their unattractiveness. Or the wall, which is neither attractive nor unattractive, just a neutral wall. Reflecting in this way, you see that’s just the natural way of things: attraction and aversion, neither attractive nor averse, just *vedanā*. Desire is what we add, like for those flowers: ‘Oh, I really want those flowers, I want to have those flowers in my room, I’ve got to have those flowers!’ Or the curtains: ‘I wish they could get rid of those curtains, they really upset me.’ One dwells on wanting to get rid of the curtains, wanting to grab the flowers. Of course, one doesn’t even notice the wall unless something attractive or unattractive appears on it. And what about the space in the room? Space is neither attractive nor unattractive, is it?

So contemplate in this way. What is desire? When you’re feeling pain in your body, if you reflect on the actual physical sensation of pain, you become aware of adding the desire to get rid of it to that physical sensation. Notice the actual sensation that you have in the body and the aversion to it, the desire to get rid of the pain. Notice that the breath doesn’t arouse desire. Maybe you have a desire to concentrate your mind, to become one who has *samādhi* or something like that: ‘I want to become a person who can attain *jhāna*.’ But the actual breathing is neither attractive, interesting nor unattractive. For most people, the idea of attaining *jhāna*, becoming somebody who can realize *jhāna* is attractive. So we can go about doing *ānāpānasati* with that desire. Or maybe you have a distracted mind – the mind wanders, it doesn’t do what you want. You want it concentrated on the breath, but every time you start it wanders off. So you want to get rid of the distracted mind, you want to become someone who has a composed and concentrated mind, not someone who has a wandering, distracted mind. That’s *vibhava-taṇhā*, the desire to get rid of the wandering, distracted mind by becoming somebody who has a concentrated mind and can attain *jhānas*.

This is a way of reflecting on desire – desire for sense pleasure, desire to become, desire to get rid of. If we really contemplate and know *vedanā* exactly through *vijjā*, through mindfulness and wisdom, then we don't create desire. There's still the pleasure, the pain, the neither-pleasant-nor-painful, but things are as they are. This is the suchness, the way things are; it's the Dhamma, the Truth. There's no suffering when things are as they are. Suffering is a result of desire-grasping-becoming (*taṇhā-upādāna-bhava*). From there the sequence of *paṭiccasamuppāda* goes on to birth, ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (*jāti jarāmaraṇaṃ soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā*). The whole sequence of misery follows from *taṇhā-upādāna-bhava*.

So contemplate this theme of *paṭiccasamuppāda* during this retreat. The desire to get rid of desire is still a trap of the mind. Contemplation is not getting rid of, but understanding. This is the way of knowing, of *vijjā* rather than *avijjā*.

## Dependent Origination 5: Letting Go of Desire

The arising of *dukkha* is due to the grasping of desires. And the insight is that there is this origin or arising, and that desire should be let go of. This is the second Noble Truth; it is the insight knowledge of letting go.

Some people think that all I teach is: ‘Whatever happens, let go.’ But the teaching involves a real investigation of suffering; insight into letting go occurs through that understanding. So letting go does not come from a desire to get rid of suffering – that is not letting go. *Vibhava-taṇhā*, or the desire to get rid of is quite subtle, but wanting to get rid of our defilements is another kind of desire. Letting go is not a getting rid of or putting down with any aversion. Letting go means being able to be with what is displeasing without dwelling in aversion, because aversion is an attachment. If you have a lot of aversion, you will still be attached. Fear, aversion – all this is grasping and clinging. Dispassion is acceptance and awareness of things as they are; not creating anything, letting go of the aversion to what is ugly or unpleasant. So ‘letting go’ is not a trick phrase coined as a way of dismissing things, but a deep insight into the nature of things. Letting go is therefore being able to

bear with something unpleasant and not be caught up in anger and aversion. Dispassion is not depression.

How many of you dismiss and refuse to acknowledge the unpleasantness of the functions of your own bodies? There are certain functions of the human body that aren't beautiful, that we do not mention in polite society. We use all kinds of euphemisms and ways of politely excusing ourselves at the appropriate moment, because we do not want the perception of ourselves to be connected to those functions. We want our presence or image to be connected with something pleasing, interesting or attractive. We want our photograph taken with flowers in an attractive setting, not on the toilet. We want to disguise the natural processes of life, cover up the wrinkles, dye the hair, do everything to make ourselves look younger, because ageing is not attractive. As we grow older, we lose what is beautiful and attractive. Our reflection is to be really aware of sickness and death, that which is attractive and unattractive; the way things are in this realm of sensory consciousness. Being an entity with sense organs which contact objects – they may be anything from the most beautiful and pleasing to the most hideous and ugly – we experience feelings. Feeling, *vedanā*, entails the alternatives of the pleasant, the painful and the neutral; this applies to all the senses: taste, touch, sight, hearing, smell and thought.

So *vedanā*, I use that particular word, that *khandha*, as the concept for all that attraction/repulsion. We are experiencing *vedanā*, we are aware of the pleasant, painful, beautiful, ugly, neutral; through the body or through what we hear, smell, taste, touch or think. Even memories can be attractive. We can have memories that are pleasing, unpleasant or neutral. And if we are heedless and operate from *avijjā*, self-view, the unquestioned assumption that 'I am', the attractive, unattractive and neutral are interpreted with desire. I want the beautiful, I want the pleasant, I want to be happy and successful. I want to be praised, I want to be appreciated, I want to be loved. I don't

want to be persecuted, unhappy, sick, looked down on or criticized. I don't want ugly things around me. I don't want to look at the ugly, to be around the unpleasant.

Consider the functions of our body. We all know that these functions are just part of nature but we don't want to think of them as being ours. I have to urinate, but I would not want to be known in history as Sumedho the Urinator. Sumedho the Abbot of Amaravati, that's all right. When I write my autobiography, it will be filled with things like the fact that I was a disciple of Ajahn Chah, about how sensitive I was as a little child, innocent and pure – maybe a little mischievous now and then, because I don't want to be seen as a kewpie doll. But in most biographies the unpleasant functions of the body are just dismissed. We are not to go round thinking we should identify with these functions, but just to begin to notice the tendency not to want to be bothered with them, or pay attention to them, and observe a lot of what is part of our life, the way things are. In mindfulness we open our minds to this, to the whole of life, which includes the beautiful, the ugly, the pleasing, the painful and the neutral. So in our reflection on the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, we see it is connected to the second Noble Truth.

This is where the sequence *taṇhā-upādāna-bhava* is most helpful as a means of investigating grasping. Grasping in this sense can mean grasping because of attraction or because of aversion, trying to get rid of. Grasping with aversion is pushing away; running away is *upādāna*, as is trying to get hold of the beautiful, and possess it and keep it – seeking after the desirable, trying to get rid of the undesirable.

The more we contemplate and investigate *upādāna*, the more the insight arises: desire should be let go of. In the second Noble Truth it is explained that when suffering arises, it should be let go of. And then, through the practice of letting go and the understanding of what letting go really is, we have the third insight into the Noble Truth. Desire has been let go of: we actually know letting go. It is not a theoretical letting go, it is not a rejection of anything; it is the actual insight.

In discussing the second Noble Truth there are the statements: ‘There is the origin of suffering’, ‘It should be let go of’ and the third insight: ‘It has been let go of.’ And that is what practice is all about – fulfilling those three. That applies to each of the Noble Truths: there is the statement, what to do about it and then the result of that. The first Noble Truth: there is suffering; it should be understood; it has been understood. These are the three aspects of insight into the first Noble Truth. The second Noble Truth: there is the origin of suffering, *samudaya*, which is the grasping of desire; it should be let go of; it has been let go of. The third Noble Truth: there is cessation, *nirodha*; it should be realized; and the third insight: it has been realized. The fourth Noble Truth: there is the Eightfold Path, the way out of suffering; it should be developed; it has been developed. This is insight knowledge. When you think, ‘What does an arahant know?’ it is this: he knows there is suffering; he knows suffering should be understood; he knows when suffering has been understood; he knows the origin of suffering, he knows it should be let go of, knows that it has been let go of, etc.

These are the twelve insights. This is what we call arahantship, the knowledge of one who has those insights.

*Paṭiccasamuppāda* is a really close investigation of the whole process. It is grasping of the five khandhas that is the problem. The five khandhas are *dhammas* – they are to be studied and investigated. They are just the way things are. They are not a self, they are impermanent. And to know this is the way it is to know the Dhamma.

And so the grasping of the conditioned world as a self is based on delusion or ignorance (*avijjā*), the illusion of a self as being the five khandhas. And because of that we live our lives based on ignorance. The volitional activities (*saṅkhārā*) from that ignorance interpret everything from ‘I am’ and from the grasping of desires: the result is *jarāmaraṇa*, ageing and death. If I grasp the body as self, ‘I’ get old. My body is ageing; it’s sagging and wrinkly. And the belief that ‘I am getting old’ because the body is getting old is a kind of suffering. If there is

no sense of self, there is no suffering. There is an appreciation of the body's ageing. There is no feeling that there is anything wrong with the body getting old; that is what it is supposed to do. That is its nature. It is not me. It is not mine, and it is doing what it is supposed to do. Perfect, isn't it? I would be upset if it started getting younger – eventually I'd be back in nappies and I'd have to go through everything again.

The thought 'I am getting old' isn't sorrowful. It is a conventional way of talking about the body. But if this is what I think I am: 'I am the body, this is my body', then ignorance conditions *sañkhārā* and gives rise to many other problems: 'I'm getting old, I want to be young, I want to live a long life, don't you call me an old man, you young whippersnapper!' Why? Because of identifying with the body. And then I am going to die. 'That's a morbid thing, let's not even talk about death. Of course we are all going to die, but that's far away.' When you are young you think of death as so far away – 'Let's enjoy life.' But when anyone we know dies or we nearly die, death can be very frightening. And all that is from attachment to the identity 'I am this body'.

Then, of course, there are all the views, feelings, memories and biases we have (*vedanā, saññā, sañkhārā*). We suffer not only from identification with the body, but also when we attach to the beautiful and to feelings: 'I want only the beautiful, I want only the pleasant, I do not want to see the ugly; I want to have beautiful music and no ugly sounds, only fragrant smells ...' We attach to what the world should be like; opinions about Britain, France, the USA. Attachments to these views, opinions and perceptions make up the *vedanā-saññā-sañkhārā* sequence of the five khandhas, and we can attach to all that in terms of self: 'It's my view, what I think, and what I want and don't want, what should be and what should not be.' And from that illusion of self come grief, anguish, despair, depression, sorrow, lamentation.

The insight into the second Noble Truth is that there is an origin to this suffering. It is not permanent. It is not absolutely always that something arises. The rising of *dukkha* is due to the grasping of desire.

You can see desire because it is a *dhamma*, it arises and ceases. You can see the desire that arises to seek the beautiful and pleasant on the sensual plane, through eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind. *Kāma-taṇhā* is sensual desire. Sensual desire always wants some kind of pleasurable or at least exciting experience. *Kāma-taṇhā*: you can see it in our movement of going towards and then grasping the sensory pleasures.

*Bhava-taṇhā* is the desire to become, it is to do with wanting to become something. As we do not ultimately know who we are, our desire is to attain and achieve, and become something. In this Holy Life the *bhava-taṇhā* can be very strong. You feel you are here to attain and achieve enlightenment. It all sounds very good. But even the desire to become enlightened can come from this *avijjā*, from this self-view: ‘I’m going to get enlightened, I’m going to become the first American arahant. I’m fed up with this world, I want to get enlightened so that I will not have to be reborn again. I don’t want to go through childhood again. I don’t want any of that. I want to become someone who doesn’t have to be born any more.’ That can be *bhava-taṇhā/vibhava-taṇhā* – they go hand in hand. In order to become something, you have to get rid of the things you don’t like and don’t want: ‘I’m going to get rid of my defilements, and I want to get rid of my bad habits and get rid of my desires. All this sounds very righteous too; the defilements are bad – get rid of them.

So in the Holy Life there is a lot of *vibhava-taṇhā*. We can live this life solely to get rid of things, and to become something by getting rid of something. Notice then that the second Noble Truth is the realization that desire should be let go of, should be laid down. It is not a rejection of desire, but an understanding; you let it go, because otherwise it is *vibhava-taṇhā*, the desire to get rid of desire. Know it, see it, but don’t make anything out of it. If you are coming from ignorance, your desire says, ‘I want to become an enlightened being and I shouldn’t think like that, I shouldn’t have the desire to become a Buddha; I shouldn’t

want to become anything.’ All that can be from ignorance conditioning mental formations (*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*). The insight knowledge then is: ‘Desire should be let go of.’

To say: ‘We shouldn’t be attached to anything’ all sounds very right, but that too can be coming from *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*. ‘I shouldn’t be attached to anything’ is very much an affirmation of myself as somebody who is attached to something and shouldn’t be that way, who should be otherwise. So that’s just a trap of the mind, not a real insight into *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *vibhava-taṇhā*. Reflect on what attachment is. If in fact you are just throwing things away, that is not the way to solve this problem. You are not really examining *kāma-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā*, *vibhava-taṇhā*, so you won’t have an insight into letting go. You will merely take a position against attachment, which is another kind of attachment. So examine, look into attachment. This is working in a much more subtle and realistic way than just forming an opinion that you shouldn’t be attached to anything.

I remember a psychiatrist who lived in Bangkok, who used to take somebody’s wristwatch. The person would get upset and he would say, ‘You are attached to your wristwatch.’ Then he would take his own watch and throw it away to prove he was not attached. He was bragging about this to me. I said, ‘You have missed the point. You are attached to the view that you are not attached to your wristwatch.’ Throwing the watch away like a smart aleck and saying, ‘You are attached, I’m not, I threw mine away’ wasn’t letting go. There was a lot of self in it: ‘Look at me – I’m not attached to these wretched material things.’ You can be quite proud of being non-attached. With reflection we see attachment and we don’t have to get rid of things, but we can be not attached to them; we can let go of them, not by throwing them out, but by understanding the suffering from being attached.

As you understand the peace of non-attachment, of letting go, the second Noble Truth leads to the third. When you let go of something, you are aware there is no attachment to the five khandhas. There is

awareness that desire has been let go of. Then the insight into the third Noble Truth of cessation arises. There is cessation. Cessation should be realized. As we realize cessation more and more, we begin to notice non-attachment. Not many of you are aware of non-attachment. You are usually conscious through being attached to things. A totally deluded human being only feels alive through attachment and desire. Contemplate that when you are not caught up in attachment to the five khandhas, you do not feel alive, you are nobody. Having neurotic problems makes people feel interesting and alive: 'I have fascinating neuroses from all kinds of traumas in early childhood.' So it's not Sumedho the Urinator, it's Sumedho the Interesting Neurotic, the Mystic, or Sumedho the Abbot – these are conditions to which we can be attached. But realizing cessation allows you to let the self cease. There is letting go. The realization of letting go is cessation, that whatever arises ceases. And cessation is noted. Cessation should be realized.

So our practice is one of realizing cessation. That is when we talk about emptiness: we realize the empty mind where there is no self. There is no sense of the mind being anybody. As soon as you think of it as 'my' mind, if you grasp that thought you are deluded again. But even if you have 'my mind' and see it as that which arises and ceases, with non-grasping of it, then it is just a condition. There is no suffering from that, it is peaceful.

When there is no self, there is peace. When there are 'me' and 'mine' there is no peace. Worry, anxiety, what are they? They all come from 'me' and 'mine'. When you let go there is cessation of 'me' and 'mine'. There is peace, calm, clarity, dispassion, emptiness.

I observe that when there is no self, no attachment, the way of relating to others is through the *brahmavihāras*, the Divine Abodes: *mettā*, kindness; *karuṇā*, compassion; *muditā*, sympathetic joy; and *upekkhā*, serenity. These are not from a self or *avijjā*. It is not that there's an idea that, 'I must have more *mettā* for everyone, because I have a lot of aversion and I shouldn't – I should have loving-kindness

for all beings. I should feel compassion. Sometimes I just want to kill everybody. I should feel a lot of *mettā*, *muditā*, be kind and joyful and sympathetic with people. I should be serene, too.’ From a selfish person’s point of view, the *brahmavihāras* as are not the real practice. The desire to become someone who has lots of *mettā* and *kāruṇa* and all that kind of thing is still *bhava-taṇhā*. But as the illusions of self fall away, this is the natural way to relate. You do not become a vacuous zombie through understanding Dhamma. You still relate to each other, but through kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and serenity, rather than through greed, hatred and delusion.

What do unselfish human beings generally manifest in society? You could explain *mettā*, *muditā*, *karuṇā* and *upekkhā* as energies that manifest through unselfish human beings. Then apply that to our own practice now. When there is *vijjā*, knowing and seeing clearly, that gives full opportunity for the practice of kindness, compassion and the rest. But it is not me, not mine, not Sumedho the *mettā*-filled Ajahn, Sumedho the Good Guy rather than Sumedho the Urinator. As soon as Sumedho-delusions step aside and cease, kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and serenity can manifest. This is why the human state is a great blessing: when the self-view is relinquished, what remains is a great blessing. But it’s not me. ‘I’ am not a great blessing. All I can do in this conventional self is let go of delusion, be mindful and not get attached to things, see clearly – that is what I can do. That is the practice of the Four Noble Truths and development of the Eightfold Path. It amounts to being vigilant, mindful, seeing things clearly. Then what happens is up to other things. There is no need to go around trying to become Sumedho the Good Guy any more. Goodness can manifest through this form if there is no delusion; and that is not a personal achievement or attainment at all, merely the way things are, the way it happens to be. It is Dhamma.



## 27 | The Shining Through of the Divine

What is divinity? We may have a vision of a human being as instinctive, because we have an animal body with the same instinctive nature as an animal. Survival and procreation are just as strong instincts in us as they are in cats, dogs and rabbits. But there is also the divine. This is something that we rise up to or turn to; because it's not instinctive, it won't be something we'll find unless we deliberately seek it.

For reflection on divinity we have the four *brahmavihāras*, the beautiful, selfless qualities that can manifest through the human form when there's no self. When you're not caught in instinctive behaviour or emotional reactions based on ignorance; when there's dispassion and the whole process of self-view ceases, divinity becomes obvious. Then kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and serenity of mind are not qualities we have to get, but qualities that manifest through these human forms.

In our lives as separate, individual beings we relate to things; we have to meet and contact and react or respond to objects all the time throughout our lives. On the physical level we have to respond to each

other's presence in some way, by ignoring, embracing, paying respects or cursing. In relationships, when there's no self, there is a divinity that manifests. Thus you can see that the human form is a form for the divine.

On the other hand, we can think we live just for ourselves: 'It's my life and I can do what I want, I have the right to happiness' and all that kind of selfishness. If we don't rise above the animal mentality, we can live very much by following our instincts or emotions. Or we can live in a world of ideas, of attachment to ideas of how things should be, which is very much a problem in the Western world. But as you penetrate that and see the suffering that comes from grasping anything at all, as that insight brings about letting go and non-attachment, there's a response to the way things are which can be divided into these four categories of the *brahmavihāras*.

*Mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā* provide a reflection: they form a sequence of how to relate to the human realm, to the animal kingdom and to nature. *Mettā* is very much how we should relate to ourselves, too. It's how to relate to ourselves with kindness and acceptance, rather than with aversion and judgement. *Mettā* implies accepting something that may not be very nice, such as physical pain, or things that aren't very nice about your body or your character. Maybe you have a lot of fears or bad temper, or something similar. If you have *mettā*, that means you can accept those things for what they are. You're not judging them or condemning them from an ignorant, self-conscious position. You're aware of them as painful, unpleasant, or ugly, but *mettā* practice is the ability to accept patiently the flaws, pain, irritations and frustrations within our minds and bodies, and the unpleasant and annoying things that impinge on them from outside. This is because with *mettā* such things are no longer seen as personal; there's no me and you, no 'You've done this to me' or 'I've done this to you.' *Mettā* is having perspective and not creating a problem even about unfairnesses, injustices, inadequacies and so forth in ourselves, others or society. This doesn't mean that we don't notice or can't see

them, but it means we don't make problems about them. We don't carry them around in our minds with bitterness, resentment, anger and destructive tendencies. With *mettā* there's always the ability to forgive and start anew, to recognize the way things are and not expect everything to fit our ideals regarding how things should be. This doesn't mean that we fatalistically resign ourselves to mediocrity, tyranny or stupidity, but that we aren't caught in the pattern of ignorance conditioning mind formations. Thus we can bear with the vicissitudes of life with kindness and acceptance.

Then there's *karuṇā*, compassion. When we see the suffering of others and the injustices and unfairness that exist, we respond with compassion, but not like a wealthy person feeling sorry for the poor. That's not it. It's not looking down on the poor, not patronizing or feeling sorry for people, but understanding the predicament of our human condition and all that goes with it. It's from understanding the nature of suffering, how it arises and ceases, that you can have true *karuṇā* for other beings. The British have a lot of *karuṇā* for animals. Britain is quite an impressive country, when you think how much wildlife there is in this densely populated area of southern England. That's a good quality, *karuṇā*. Britain is a kind country, where people generally have developed compassion – concern for the unfortunate and the underprivileged.

When we moved to Chithurst, there were people who didn't want us there; but most of the local people tried to be fair. In other words, they had a certain measure of compassion for us. They would not have harmed us or tried to get rid of us, even though they may have preferred a nice Christian monastery or a nice, proper upper-class family to buy Chithurst House, a family who would keep horses and play polo. That would have been more in line with the general mood of West Sussex because people like what they're used to. But because *mettā*/*karuṇā* were already developed, only a few people were directly hostile or wanted to take action against us. So one can regard this as *mettā*/*karuṇā*.

Sometimes in Theravada Buddhism one gets the impression that one shouldn't enjoy beauty. If you see a beautiful flower you should contemplate its decay, or if you see a beautiful woman, you should contemplate her as a rotting corpse. This has a certain value on one level, but it's not a fixed position to take. It's not that we should feel compelled to reject beauty, and dwell on its impermanence and on how it changes to being not so beautiful, and then downright repulsive. That's a good reflection on *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, but it can leave the impression that beauty is only to be reflected on in terms of these three characteristics, rather than in terms of the experience of beauty. This is the joy of *muditā* – being able to appreciate the beauty in the things around us.

Flowers are a lot prettier than we are. We admit they're prettier, we expect them to be; we don't envy them their beauty. But we might really hate somebody else for being beautiful, because then it's a threat. Somebody else's beauty makes me look not so beautiful. This is to be observed, not to try to force a kind of false happiness onto the situation, but to let these things cease in your mind. To be clearly aware of this particular problem is to stay with it and not make a problem about it from the self-view. Recognize it as *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā*; let it cease; let go of it. Then, in that letting go, we find a rejoicing in the talents, the goodness and the beauty of other beings. When you look at flowers you experience a joyful feeling, and that's *muditā* – you're rejoicing in or glad at the beauty of something. Maybe you've never reflected like that. We see beautiful things in nature, and because they're no threat to us or anything else, we can rejoice in the sunset or the beauty of trees and mountains and rivers. So that's *muditā*: a rejoicing in beauty, goodness and truth. And we rejoice in the goodness of others. When somebody does something good or you hear about some noble action, heroic effort or self-sacrifice, a sense of *muditā* arises. That's joy, sympathetic joy.

But we tend to fall short of this when it becomes a matter of 'you' and 'me'. We can be very jealous of somebody's health and beauty if

we are caught in the self-view. We might feel joy at the flowers in the garden, but then go to a neighbour's house where the flowers are more beautiful than ours. We might feel envy because from a self-position it's, 'Her flowers look better than mine, and she is more beautiful than I am'; or, 'He is better looking than I am', or 'He is more intelligent', or 'He has a better personality.' So we suffer from envy and jealousy. It's a very common problem; in fact, many human beings are really stuck in envy and jealousy.

If one were to go to a rich person's house, with beautiful grounds, a swimming pool, beautiful oriental carpets and lovely furnishings, a selfless person might rejoice at being in a beautiful place. Or, one might think, 'Hum, wealthy people, probably got rich from cheating the poor and ripping off the underprivileged ... grumble, grumble, grumble.' I remember once going into a beautiful church in London with somebody. I said, 'Oh, what a lovely church.' He said, 'Yeah, it was probably at the expense of all those colonies the British exploited.' But I wasn't commenting on history, but experiencing the gladness of being in a beautiful place. And yet we can think that maybe that church was built out of the slave trade or the opium trade. Perhaps slave traders and drug traffickers centuries ago felt guilty, so they built a magnificent church in London. But that doesn't mean that it's not beautiful. We're not judging it on the moral plane, but reflecting on the joy, on the experience of beauty, goodness, and truth: these are what bring joy into our lives. People who can't see the beauty of the good or the true are really bitter and mean at heart; they live in an ugly realm where there's no rejoicing in beauty, goodness and truth.

To rejoice in these things doesn't mean that we get carried away with them; the experience of joy no longer occurs if we indulge in beauty and try to grasp it, or if we hold on to the experience of joy to try to have it all the time. But *muditā* is certainly a part of our human experience. *Muditā* is our ability to be joyful with the beauty and loveliness of life's experiences. It is the sense of joy and appreciation

and gratitude for the beauties and the lovely things of life, the lovely things in other people. So when there's no self, then there's joy; we find joy in the goodness, the beauty of the people around us, or in society or natural conditions. Once you have insight, you find you enjoy, delight, in the beauty and the goodness of things. Truth, beauty and goodness delight us: in them we find joy. That is *muditā*.

But if you see beauty as something to grasp, it arouses desire. You see beautiful human beings, a beautiful woman or man, and you think, 'I want.' That's desire. It's not rejoicing in the beauty of someone; it is the desire to possess, control, and get something for yourself out of it. At the level of instinct, that's the way it is. It's natural enough. If we didn't find each other attractive, no one would want to perpetuate the species. If sexual activities were painful and miserable, nobody would want to do them, and if we found each other totally repulsive and ugly, we wouldn't want to get close to each other, not to mention anything as intimate as sex. Desire is the natural way on that level of the sensory realm. There's nothing wrong with it, but there is the possibility for a human being to transcend it. If desire was all we were and all we could do, we should always follow it. But because we can transcend it, we have this connection to the divine; we can rise above the coarse instinctive nature of our own bodies and the animal realm.

And that's what I'm pointing to; I'm not condemning the animal realm. Animals can bring us a lot of joy. Down at Chithurst recently I spent the day with Doris, our cat, and I have always felt she brought me a lot of joy. She's a very pleasant animal. If I got attached to her, however, I'd say, 'I've got to have Doris. I've got to bring Doris here to Amaravati. I can't live without her.' Then I'd drag her up here and she would have to fight with the cats who live here. And it would all be just for me, just so I could get what I wanted. That wouldn't be a joyful experience any more. It would cause a lot of problems.

We can reflect on how things affect us. Always to want *muditā* – the beautiful flowers, the waterfalls and the beautiful birds singing means

that you can't rejoice in them any more, because you're trying to hold on. You're trapped in all kinds of views and opinions about them, so that even if you're in the midst of them you're not really enjoying them, rejoicing in them any more, because you've been separated from them through your desire for them.

In our life as *samaṇas*,<sup>8</sup> contemplating nature, contemplating the Dhamma, we don't have to think that all beauty is just there to corrupt us and give us another rebirth. That's another self-view. But be aware of how beauty affects you. When you see a beautiful woman or a handsome man, how does that affect your mind? There may be an initial attraction, and then you can easily start to feel threatened and reject the person because we have a life of celibacy. Or you might give a second glance and dally with the sexual thoughts that might arise from that eye contact. But the more you are mindful, the less you tend to follow things as desire, the less you tend to create or add to the feelings with desire and attachment. When you're mindful, you don't do that.

Enlightenment doesn't mean a kind of bland indifference. Sometimes enlightenment is made to sound as if it means becoming emotionless zombies, people who don't feel anything any more. Well, as long as there's self, what we would call joy tends to be tinged with selfishness; it becomes stained with our selves. We become jealous if we have something beautiful and somebody else has something more beautiful, because selfishness always turns beauty into possessiveness. If the beauties of life, the joy of truth and beauty and goodness, are coming from self, they're always corrupted with jealousy, envy and begrudging people. So if there's selfishness, even being the most beautiful of all is not really a joyful experience, because you are always worried that someone else might claim that crown. If you adopt a self-view, there's always that possibility. But when there's no self, beauty doesn't belong to anyone. It's not mine or yours; we realize there's no possibility of possessing it anyway, so there's no desire to possess.

<sup>8</sup> *Samaṇa*: a renunciant contemplative, a monk or nun.

So there can be the joy of the experience of beauty, without it being corrupted by selfishness.

Then *upekkhā*: equanimity, serenity. To be able to abide in serenity of the mind, we're not going around looking for beautiful things to find delight in, because there's no self. You respond to beauty with joy, but it's not something that you look for or seek as a person any more. So the ordinariness of life is *upekkhā*, is serenity. It's about having peacefulness with the pains and aches of the ageing process and separation from the loved. All this is the realization of *upekkhā*, of serenity.

*Upekkhā* doesn't mean indifference. Sometimes it's translated as 'indifference' but it actually means serenity when things are ugly, unpleasant or ordinary. If you follow the *asubha* practices, noticing, paying attention to the unbeautiful, the not-beautiful, you begin to create *upekkhā*, equanimity or serenity. There was a hospital in Bangkok which received all the murder victims and violent deaths, corpses found in the canals and things like that. If you went in on a Monday they would have a collection from the weekend, a variety of gruesome, macabre objects that would first give you a strong feeling of revulsion. You'd go in and say, 'Yuk! Let me out of here!' because we don't generally like to look at human bodies that have been butchered and mangled, and are in a state of decay. Such things are what civilized society always keeps away from. We have institutions to take care of them, so they never have to meet our attention. But if one meditates on these things, the result is actually equanimity or serenity. If you get over the initial aversion, horror and negativity towards a rotting human corpse or a human corpse that's been cut up in an autopsy, the result is equanimity – a tremendous peacefulness and serenity. Not depression. Not aversion. When there's no self, one can abide in a state of serenity. If there's self, then we say, 'I hate it, I don't like it, take it away, I can't stand it. I can't bear this. It's foul, it's disgusting.' But when there is equanimity, actually, there is no self, so one is not making problems about the process of living, and the way things move and change and go from beauty to decay. With *muditā*

you find joy in the beauty, and when the beauty fades there's equanimity rather than sorrow.

*Upekkhā* is actually is the ability not to follow aversion or be carried away when you see beautiful things. So we're not just running around trying to rejoice in beauty, or trying to feel *karuṇā* for every unfortunate creature. We can let ourselves wait when there's nothing much happening. With *upekkhā* one does not have to seek something to become happy about or some cause to fight for, or engage in the compulsive activity that's another great problem for modern humanity – we try to use up our need for restless activity in good causes, instead of being always involved in activities because there's no *upekkhā*.

Traditionally, the *brahmavihāras* are considered as *lokiya dhamma*, mundane Dhamma, not the transcendent or *lokuttara dhamma*. Because of the way the mind tends to think, the view arises that they're not worth bothering with: '*Lokuttara dhammā* are the important ones. You don't pay much attention to *lokiya dhammas*.' But with mindfulness you're with the relationship of the *lokiya* to the *lokuttara dhamma*. We relate on the *lokiya dhamma* level through the *brahmavihāras* – *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*. When there's no self, when there's no ignorance conditioning the mental formations, then there is the way of things, the *lokiya dhammas*. But we're not asking *muditā* to be a permanent experience. We are not expecting to have a continuous, absolute, eternal experience of rejoicing and joy in our lives, because we are not attached to that as a viewpoint.

So the *brahmavihāras* represent a spontaneous response to the experience of birth and consciousness when there's no self. They're a spontaneous response from selflessness, from *anattā*, rather than an impulsive reaction from desire. There's a difference between a spontaneous response to wisdom and mindfulness and an impulsive reaction to desire. The difference lies in that view of a self. In the self-view one is still grasping, just reacting impulsively with desire to life's impingements and experiences. When there's no more ignorance,

there's spontaneity. That's what spontaneity is. There's no self in it. It's just a more and more natural way to respond to beauty, truth and virtue; or to pain and misery; or to winter, spring, summer and autumn; to the fortunate beings or the unfortunate ones; and even to the waiting, holding your cup of tea, looking out of the window at the rain.

This is just a contemplation of what divinity is. If you reflect on the instinctive nature, the earthbound body, its sexual desires, its reproductive abilities, survival, eating, drinking, sleeping, all these basic instinctive necessities, there's nothing bad about them; they're just the way a form like this survives. It has to reproduce itself. In fact, human beings are becoming too good at reproducing themselves. It's rather frightening. How many billions is the world population? Six billion and rising on this planet? And if they were all just like animals, just operating out of instinct, they would be several billion selfish, undeveloped, neurotic, screwed-up human beings. It's terribly frightening. Or take it to the opposite extreme – several billion enlightened human beings – now, that might not be so bad! Several billion enlightened human beings rather than several billion ignorant, selfish human beings; several billion human beings who can manifest the divine in their daily lives, through *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*. That doesn't sound so bad – it sounds rather nice. But several billion human beings manifesting greed, hatred and delusion is a pretty grim picture. Yet we don't have the right to comment on them: this one here, this is what we have, this is what we can work on. Don't worry about the others. This is what you can develop through reflection and through meditation.

With the emphasis Buddhists place on reflection, mindfulness and wisdom, the Holy Life might sometimes seem to be an almost unfeeling attempt to look at everything in very objective ways. Rather than feel things, we're supposed to see everything as *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. That's how it might seem. But remember that the heartfelt experience of life is a loving one, so love and devotion are not to be dismissed. If we're looking at the experience of love as just *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, that might seem cold-hearted. Objectivity, however, is merely a way of having things in perspective, so that love is not something that blinds us. If we're attached to the idea of love, we can be quite blind to its reality. We can become very inspired by talking about it or meditating on it – seeking it in others, demanding it or feeling somehow left out. But what is love in terms of our lives as we live them? On an emotional plane you might want to have feelings of tremendous oneness, or maybe aim the feelings at some particular person, wanting to have a special, loving relationship with another person. Or love can be abstract – love of all human beings, love of all beings, love of God, love of something or some concept.

Devotion is from the heart; it's not a rational thing. You can't make yourself feel love or devotion just because you like the idea of it. It's

when you're not attached, when your heart is open, receptive and free, that you begin to experience what pure love is. Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity – the realm of the Divine Abodes, the *brahmavihāras* – these come from an empty mind; not from a sterile position of just annihilating feeling, but from a heart that is not deluded, not blinded by ideas of self or others, or by passions of some kind or another. You may think the Holy Life is cold and heartless, because in a community of *samaṇas* such as this, living according to a way of restraint and discipline, we're not demonstrative in our expressions of love and joy. This community does not bubble with feelings of devotion. It is quite formal and restrained in its form and expression. But this does not necessarily deny love. With mindfulness, with the way we relate – to our own bodies, to the Sangha, to the laypeople, to the tradition and to society – there is openness, kindness, and receptivity. There is caring, a joyfulness and compassion that we can feel. It is still *anicca* and *anattā*, and it is *dukkha* in the sense that it's not in itself the end of anything; it's not satisfying as an identity or an attachment. But when the heart is free from illusions of self, a loving quality arises in the pure joy of being. It's not expected to be anything or anybody, nor is it expected to last or be permanent. It is not to be made into anything. It's just the natural way of things. So when you contemplate in that way, that is the way of faith and trust and devotion.

Faith, confidence and trust are nothing you can really grasp. Faith is not anything that you can create. You can say the words, but really to have faith and confidence in Dhamma is to be willing to let go of any demand or affirmation or any attachment whatsoever. And that experience of faith comes to us as we examine and understand the Dhamma, or the true way of things. If we really contemplate Dhamma, see Dhamma, then there is faith, this strong sense of total trust, confidence in truth.

If you're practising *vipassanā* meditation and becoming more frightened, anxious or tense, or feeling emotionally sterilized, you're

not doing it the right way. Perhaps you are using a technique as a way of suppressing your feelings or denying things, so you end up feeling more tense, sceptical, uncertain. There is an attachment to some view about it. The more we really see and completely understand the way things are, the more we have this quality of faith. Faith increases, it's total trust. When one talks about surrender, giving up or letting go, it's through total trust. It is not just taking a chance or a risk, it is through the experience of faith.

The path is something we cultivate. We have to know where we are and not try to become something that we think we would like to be; we have to practise with the way it is now, without making a judgement about it. If you're feeling tense, nervous, disillusioned, disappointed about yourself, the tradition, the teacher, the monks or nuns, or whatever, try to recognize that what is in the moment is enough. Be willing just to admit, to acknowledge the way it is, rather than indulging in believing that what you're feeling is an accurate description of reality, or thinking that what you are feeling is wrong and you shouldn't be feeling like that. Those are two extremes, but the cultivation of the Way is to recognize that whatever is subject to arising is subject to ceasing. And this isn't a put-down or a cold-hearted way of cultivating the path, even though it might sound like it.

You might think you just have to let go of all your feelings and see that the love in your heart is just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. You feel love for the Buddha and you think: 'Oh, that's just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. That's all it is!' You feel love for the teacher and you think: 'That's just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. Don't get attached to the teacher!' You feel love for the tradition: '*anicca, dukkha, anattā*, don't get attached to traditions or techniques.' Not getting attached to anything can be merely a way of suppressing everything. It's not necessarily letting go or non-attachment, it can be merely a position you take, and if you take that position and operate from it, all you're going to feel is negativity, stress. 'You shouldn't be attached to anything, you shouldn't love anything,

you shouldn't feel anything – feeling anything is just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*.' That means you're just taking the words and using them on your mind like a bludgeon, a big club. You're not reflecting, watching, observing, opening, trusting.

*Mettā* practice, loving-kindness is one of the beautiful devotional practices that are highly recommended in Buddha-Dhamma. As human beings we're warm-blooded creatures. We do feel love, that is part of our humanity. We like each other, we like to be with other people, we like to be kind; we find enjoyment in cooking food and giving it to other people. We enjoy helping. You can see that with the custom of *dāna*, generosity in the Asian communities. When Sri Lankan people come here with their curries, they light up with the joy of giving. That's a very good quality. It's beautiful to see somebody who maybe has been up all night preparing delicious food to offer to somebody else – they're not cooking it for themselves. Well, what is that as a human experience? Is it defilement, or is it being attached to feeling delight or happiness at doing things for others? This is the beauty of humanity – just being able to love, to give, to share, to be generous.

Try contemplating what the great delight of being the richest person in the world would be. What would be the truly delightful thing about it? To get what I want? No, it would be the opportunity to give it away. That would be the true delight of being rich and wealthy – so that you could give it away as *dāna*. Whereas to be rich and not be able to give it away would be a real burden. What a burden that would be, to be the richest man in the world, and be selfish and hold onto all my wealth and keep it all to myself. The joy of wealth is in one's ability to share it and give it, without any kind of corrupt intentions or selfish demands.

So this is what is lovely about our humanity: we can experience this joy of giving. And it's something we all experience when we really give something, when we help somebody without any selfish request or demand for something in return. Then we experience joy. It is certainly a lovely human experience – but we don't expect it to make us

joyful for the rest of our lives. The joy of generosity and kindness isn't permanent, doesn't make us permanently happy, but we don't expect it to. If we did it wouldn't be *dāna* any longer, it would be a deal we were making. It wouldn't be an act of generosity, it would be buying something. Real joy comes from giving and not caring whether anyone even knows or acknowledges it. As soon as the self comes in – for example, 'I'm giving this *dāna* to you and it is very important that you know who's giving it. ME, I'm giving it!' – the amount of joy that comes from giving is probably very minimal. If I'm so concerned about being recognized and appreciated, that you should appreciate my generosity and my goodness, that becomes a joyless state of mind. One cannot feel happy or have real joyfulness in living if there is attachment to the idea that one's actions should be recognized. There's nothing wrong with people appreciating somebody else's goodness and generosity, but when we don't demand it, there is joy.

Romantic love is usually based on the illusion of a self and a demand for something back. Spiritual love is altruistic love or universal love and is represented by the *brahmavihāras* – *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*. Such love is a unitive experience. It brings together, it unites. It is a communion. Hatred is the experience of separation. When we hate there's no union, communion, or oneness. Hatred is separative, divisive, and discriminatory. Love is unitive, and we want unity because living in a world of hate, discrimination and separation is a miserable hell-realm.

The community is a communion, a Sangha, a whole. If we're divorced from the sangha, if we hate the sangha: 'Hate this nun, hate that monk – and I don't like that, don't like this', then this is not a community, it's a dis-unity. The feeling is one of alienation, separation, emphasizing me and you and your faults and my feelings, and my anger at your faults. Or it can be my emphasizing the things that are wrong with you – things that are wrong with the monks, with the nuns, with the anagārikas; things that are wrong, full stop. And attaching to those perceptions will make me feel alienated, separated, angry, discontented, unhappy, depressed.

Sometimes the mind will go into a very negative state where all you feel is annoyance. Nothing people do seems quite good enough. When you're in that mood everything seems wrong – the cats, the sun, the moon – the mind goes into division, separation and negativity. You feel separate from everything you see, and no communion or union is possible as long as you are identified with and attached to that attitude of mind. When you are in a loving mood, it doesn't really matter if somebody isn't feeling very good or is not doing exactly what they should. There are always little things, little bits and pieces that aren't quite what they should be. But when you're in a loving mood these things aren't so important. The loving experience comes because you're willing to overlook the personality differences and the discrimination that exist in the conditioned realm for the feeling of communion, of union, of oneness. We unite as brothers and sisters in a common experience of old age, sickness and death, rather than pointing out the differences or who's better than whom.

When we take refuge in Sangha, we're taking refuge in *supaṭipanno*<sup>9</sup> (those who have practised well), *ujupaṭipanno* (those who have practised directly), *ñāyapaṭipanno* (those who have practised insightfully), *sāmīcipaṭipanno* (those who practise with integrity). Rather than taking refuge in Americans, British, Australians, or in men or women or nuns or monks, we take refuge in those who practise the Dhamma – in the good, the direct, and the sincere.

We have tendencies towards both union and separation, and we can be mindfully aware of this. The way things are has to be recognized as Dhamma. There is uniting and there is separating, and with clear awareness one does not identify with either extreme. There's a time for union, communion, a time for non-discrimination, for devotion, for gratitude, for generosity, for joy. But there's also time for separation and discrimination, for examining what's wrong. There is a need to look at the flaws; to look at anger, jealousy and fear, and to accept and understand those emotional experiences, rather than judging them

and taking them as self and as something we shouldn't have. This is what being human is all about: we're born into a separate form and yet we can unite. We can realize unity, community, oneness, but we can also discriminate.

So refuge in the Buddha is the ability of a human being to recognize both sides and respond appropriately. We can look at the flaws and the problems of life as part of our human experience, rather than in a personal way. Then we are no longer proliferating; nor are we magnifying or exalting, obsessed with what's wrong, because we have this perspective of unity and separation. This is the way things are, the Dhamma.

Is being a Buddhist monk or a Buddhist nun a denial of love? Is the Vinaya discipline merely a means of suppressing feelings? It can be just that. We can use Vinaya discipline and monastic tradition as merely a way of avoiding things. Maybe the monks are just frightened of women. Maybe the nuns are petrified of men, so they become nuns and don't have to face their fears and anxieties with regard to relationships with men. Of course, many worldly people think like that. They think we're all here because of an inability to cope with the real world. But is that really how it is? If it is, if that's why you're a monk or nun, then you're in this way for the wrong reasons. It is not an instrument for avoiding reality and life, but for reflecting on them, because in restraint and the dignity of restraint, the way of monasticism is an expression of love for all beings, men, women, both inside and outside. We no longer choose one person on whom to focus our attention and devotion, but devote ourselves to all beings.

I realize that if I were a family man, I would have to give my whole attention to my wife, children and immediate family. That's the result of family life and what marriage is about. They have priority. You have to relate to your marriage partner and those for whom you are responsible. Or one can be an alms-mendicant and live on faith alone, on trust in the goodness and benevolence of other beings, because one

feels love and respect for all beings. That love and respect are what generate the alms that sustain us in this life as alms-mendicants. And the funny thing is that the power of the Buddhist Sangha is so strong that even if you personally hate all other beings, the alms still come in. The power of the robe seems to be so strong that even if you as an individual monk or nun hate everybody, you will still be fed by kind-hearted beings. This is because of the *pāramī* of the Buddha. That doesn't mean you should develop hatred or justify it in yourself in any way. Rather, it's a reflection on the power of a very skilful convention that was established by the Lord Buddha. When you appreciate that you really feel love and trust.

Why do these monasteries here in England work? Why should they work in a non-Buddhist country? Why should anybody want to mail a cheque, bring a sack of potatoes or prepare a meal? Why should they bother? This is because of the *pāramī* of the Buddha. The goodness of the lifestyle he established generates generosity. The loving-kindness, the compassion and joy of the Holy Life reach out and open other people to that same experience. It is a mystery. From a practical, worldly attitude of justifying our existence in the eyes of society, we don't seem to do all that much for anyone. Many people think we just sit here and try to become enlightened for ourselves, have nice, pleasant mental states, because we can't stand the real world. But the more you contemplate this life and understand it, the more you realize the power of the goodness, the faith, the *pāramī* of the Buddha, which allow communion to take place in an interconnection of goodness. It needn't be demonstrated, talked about and emphasized a lot. It speaks for itself. We don't have to go out telling people: 'You should give us alms because we are practising the Dhamma and we are disciples of the Buddha.' Our requisites are offered because people appreciate and respect the Holy Life. It brings joy and happiness into people's lives, because we rejoice in the beauty of others and in the goodness and benevolence of this experience of living.

So the Holy Life is actually a strange way to live. In terms of what we regard as reality according to our cultural conditioning, quite how it works is a mystery. But as Dhamma, as Truth, as the way things are, it actually works. And this increases our faith, and our trust in the Refuges and in the beauty and goodness of our lives as *samaṇas*.



*May I abide in well-being,  
in freedom from affliction,  
in freedom from hostility,  
in freedom from ill will,  
in freedom from anxiety,  
and may I maintain well-being in myself.*

*May everyone abide in well-being,  
in freedom from hostility,  
in freedom from ill will  
in freedom from anxiety,  
and may they maintain well-being in themselves,*

*May all beings be released from all suffering  
and may they not be parted from  
the good fortune they have attained.*

*When they act upon intention,  
all beings are the owners of their action  
and inherit its results.*

*Their future is born from such action,  
companion to such action,  
and its results will be their home.*

*All actions with intention,  
be they skilful or harmful;  
of such acts they will be the heirs.*

**Ajahn Sumedho Interviewed  
by John Baxter**



### The Sangha in Thailand and Britain

*John Baxter:* After your years as a bhikkhu in Thailand and leading a monastery for Westerners there, what differences do you see in the life of this community?

*Ajahn Sumedho:* Here there is more of an urgency to practise. Often in the Thai monasteries things are kind of put off. Maybe it is the climate. Here one is not in a Buddhist country and you can't take that much for granted. Also people here who shave their heads and put on robes place themselves on the fringe of society, whereas in Thailand by being a monk you are very much the ultimate focus and a highly respected member of society. There is not the prestige here! Also I must say that the quality of the people entering the Sangha here is very high.

They sacrifice a lot to do it and often go against the wishes of their families, making themselves look slightly ridiculous in terms of British values. That takes a lot of determination. Other than that it is very

much the same. The Teaching and the Vinaya doesn't change.

**JB:** How are Western members regarded by the Thai Sangha? You have all been involved with the Forest Tradition rather than the Scholastic Tradition. Do they see you as properly 'kosher?'

**AS:** Thailand is very hospitable to Westerners. It has never been a colony so one does not come up against feelings of anxiety or fear towards white people. They are also ready to admire Europeans and if you are interested in anything Thai then the door is open wide. It is a very easy country to meet people and they are very friendly and hospitable.

If you are a monk you are appealing to the very best in people there, always meeting the very best side of Thai culture, for their love and respect for the Sangha is deeply ingrained. This means that any Westerner who attempts to join it and live in the right way is also highly respected. However there is always the Westerner who doesn't, who acts badly – and that is greatly resented.

The one thing that will really offend Thais is to demean their religion. One time a Western consul's wife went to a costume ball wearing a monk's robe. That caused great offence and he was asked to leave the country. It is not like America where you might go to a masquerade ball as a pregnant nun and it would be thought very funny. In Thailand you do not make fun of things which are worthy of respect. In England too there are all the vicar jokes with the vicar portrayed as some sort of effete nitwit. That would be considered very bad taste for the Thais and they would never do that to their monks. They have a sense for the sacred.

Of course they can be very critical of bad or foolish monks. They do not follow them blindly. I respect that. Coming as I do from America, where nothing is sacred and everything is pulled down and profaned, you realize there is something missing in your life, that which rises up. If you don't have that sense of devotion and respect it is easy to sink into depression, criticism and negative states. Then it becomes easy to denigrate the most beautiful, profound and sacred things.

## Theism, Atheism and Buddhism

**JB:** In your life you have moved from initially being an Anglican Christian to a state of disbelief and then towards the Buddha's Way. Having experienced these conditions from the inside what do you see as the difference between your assumptions about the world and those of a Secular Humanist or Atheist?

**AS:** Well, the atheist still holds to a position of disbelief. To me that is just a denial rather than an affirmation, whereas the Buddhist position is neither denying nor affirming, but simply noting the way things actually are. The Buddhist way is to open the mind and observe how things actually are, how you are experiencing existence. You are not starting from a theistic view that there is a God or the atheistic view that there isn't. You are starting from where you are right now, from your own existence and feelings of being.

This means that we start by investigating suffering. This is something we naturally tend to avoid, so this is what is emphasized. It is something we repeatedly turn our attention to and open ourselves to. Mindfulness is opening to life as it is actually happening to us as opposed to just reacting to life according to the ever-changing conditions that present themselves.

In contrast, if we believe in God that tends towards interpreting everything from a theistic point of view; or *vice versa* with atheism. So born-again Christians see everything that happens as God's will. Atheists wouldn't. For them there is no God, just nature and the laws of physics. They would see it from a very materialistic plane maybe.

The Buddhist approach though is not to start from either position, but just to note that in this human form sensory experience is change. Being born in a human body means you have to live in a sensitive state for a lifetime, one that is always involving change and suffering. There is the ageing process, sickness, death and separation from the loved. Then there is the cold and the unbeautiful and all that. And as much as one would like to experience only the good side, inevitably so much of

our life is really involved with pain, suffering and anguish, with despair and fear. The Buddhist practice is to open the mind to this rather than deny or suppress it.

**JB:** Would you then see the big difference between most atheists and humanists and those who have done a lot of Buddhist meditation being that the humanist is inclined to try to suppress a full awareness of the painful part of life and to identify only with the happy part?

**AS:** Yes, and they do not get to any real depth of understanding because they are just working with ideas in a rather superficial way. Consequently they are not really aware of how life actually is. They are just viewing it from an atheistic theory or a materialistic view, assuming that this human form is all there is. Many of them have this idea of perfecting the human world. They have the idea of it being possible to create a Utopian society where Paradise is this planet, where every human being has everything they need and want and everyone is happy. But that can never be! If you understand what life on this planet is about you know that is not possible. Everything is caught up in a process of ceaseless change and movement, and that inevitably entails suffering. So Utopian Idealism with its vision of Humanity as an end in itself is another form of ignorance. It won't work.

You are never going to find complete contentment by just being an unreflective human being. This human form is temporary, a transition from birth to death. You have to live within its limits and through the pain and experiences you meet. If we open ourselves to this then this sense of the divine and the wholeness and the truth comes. We begin to have inklings of that – but in Buddhist teaching it is never put into metaphysical statements. These are not metaphysical truths. Metaphysical statements aren't necessarily wrong, but because of our human state we can't really know because we are too much involved in survival and instinct, life and pain. So you start from there rather than from God and a hierarchy of statements about some universal system.

The way of enlightenment is to penetrate existence as you are actually experiencing it. What you are really doing in meditation is going to the ultimate subject, the subject that you can never get beyond.

This particular life form with its sensory consciousness is always putting us in the subject-object relationship and we believe this is a reality. Materialism and humanism see the objective world as real and they don't know the subject. They only think they know the subject by identifying it with material things, or with race or culture or class. They may identify the subject with the body, saying, 'This is me.' But if you get to true subjectivity you see that the body is not you, it's an object, it's not the subject. Thus secular humanism is very superficial, trying to make you enjoy life on the sensory plane with idealism but without wisdom.

## Going Forth and Household Life

**JB:** Do you see the *samaṇa* life as a higher life closer to the teaching of the Buddha than the lay or householder life?

**AS:** I see the monastic life as being very supportive for spiritual development, especially at this time when most of our society does not support spiritual development at all. Ours is a materialistic, hedonistic society that tends to draw us out and arouse our greed and envy. In monastic life one learns to live within very defined limits. It is a much more simple, supportive, one-pointed way of living. In that way it is much more helpful, much more conducive towards spiritual realization. That doesn't mean it is the only way. It just means that for lay people they have much more pressure on them and many more conflicting messages to cope with.

**JB:** I have noticed that some of the men and women in the Sangha have been married. Clearly marriage entails responsibilities and duties so who is free to regard themselves as being in a position to join the Sangha?

**AS:** Well, in some cases the partner consents and the Vinaya rule is that one should not go forth without the consent of the other person. Admission into Sangha is not supposed to break up families. This is the

case with one of the nuns and one of the women novices. They both received the consent of their husbands. Also the wife of one of the men novices gave consent.

**JB:** One could feel that the wife or husband must have had very little option but to give consent. One might also feel that to leave a husband or wife when there are children or financial responsibilities is a hard thing to justify.

**AS:** Well, you just couldn't live this life if you had left irresponsibly, because you have to look at your mind and that would weigh very heavily. However society here in Britain is one such that people can manage and some have waited until children have grown up. In one case the man's wife saw that it would be good for him. There was agreement between the two.

**JB:** Yes. I have spoken to him and he speaks very highly of her and thinks she has been extremely good about it all.

**AS:** Yes, she is a very impressive and unusual wife! The nun I mentioned waited until all her children had grown up. Her husband also was willing to let her and she didn't force the issue. Things more or less came together for her, and worked out. Of course these are only a small number in the Order. Most have joined us as single people, though some have been divorced.

**JB:** Is this desire to join the Sangha shown by some married people peculiarly Western?

**AS:** Oh no, this happens in Thailand also. It's usually the case that a woman lets her husband become a monk, and that's considered a very good thing. In Thailand the social position of a woman whose husband becomes a monk is often more fortunate than here because they have these extended families. They are not left in a flat in London on their own.

**JB:** I think it is quite a stumbling block for Westerners to hear in the story of his life that the Buddha left his young wife and child to go off and become a celibate homeless wanderer. It sounds just about the worst thing one could do.

**AS:** What the story is saying is that he didn't leave them out of irresponsibility, but out of wanting to really help them in an ultimate way. After his enlightenment he went back and helped them towards their enlightenment. He actually did more for them than any husband could be expected to do. Yes, if he just left because he didn't like her or didn't want the responsibility, that would have been blameworthy, but he left loving his wife and that was a very difficult thing to do. He sacrificed status and comfort and everything and went off into the unknown and lived as an ascetic for six years. He left her in a palace and she was properly provided for. The story portrays him as leaving her while still loving her, but feeling that that was not enough. He saw that human relationships and family life are not an end, not complete, not fulfilling to us. We have to come to terms with ourselves eventually rather than just enjoy the comforts and pleasures of family life.

## **Death and Rebirth**

**JB:** At the risk of repeating things you have often been asked to explain before, could you please explain your attitude towards rebirth and how you see death.

**AS:** I am only interested in rebirth as something that you can witness with the mind. You can talk about a previous life or the next life, but then you are just dealing with speculation. The emphasis in the teaching though is always on the here and now rather than speculating about the past or imagining the future.

When you understand what the Buddha was really teaching, then rebirth in those terms is really the process of becoming which is a mental process. You are becoming something all the time.

In heedlessness, when you are not being mindful, but just following habit and its process of becoming something, you mentally slip into role after role. For example becoming a father and a teacher, and something else and then something else, according to what you are attaching to and absorbing into on the sensual plane.

And this also applies to death of course. Seeing the death of the body is something I clearly haven't experienced yet, so that is what I don't know. It is the unknown, rather than something I speculate about. In this practice we are being extremely direct and honest. We are not making guesses or theories about things. We are working with the actual experience of existence while we are alive, rather than speculating about something we haven't experienced yet.

We aren't trying to figure things out on a metaphysical plane. What we are doing is pointing to the experience of being a human being at this time and at this place. The Buddha's teachings are pointing to that. They are not metaphysical but existential. They allow you to free yourself from identifying mortality with the dissolution of the body, with the death-bound conditions.

You can have the insight to let go of this by no longer holding on to the perceptions of your mind or emotions, or to your perceptions of the material world. When you penetrate with wisdom you see it is not yours, not-self. That is the release from birth and death. So while you know that the body will die, you recognize that it is just the natural movement of those physical and mental conditions – which are not essentially yours.

**JB:** What you are saying then, if I understand you, is that because one can reflect and see, 'That is my body, those are my feelings and perceptions, those my mental formations, that is my consciousness' – because one can do that for all aspects of our observed being – one can say, 'The awareness is none of those things.' But is not 'the awareness' our consciousness of them? How do you reconcile that with the teaching as stated in the Daily Chanting that we are not to identify our being, our self with any form of consciousness?

**AS:** Because we are conscious and we are involved in birth, in having been born, we have this ability to observe and reflect on existence as we are experiencing that through our senses. So the Buddhist teaching is to encourage us to investigate the nature of existence, what comes up in consciousness.

Now what is it we can know? Because sensory consciousness arises through contact with the eye, ears, nose, tongue, body and brain, there is the awareness of sound, sight, taste, touch and mental activity. So because of this comparative objectivity, this ability to contemplate and reflect on sensory experience, we can fully comprehend its significance and free ourselves from attachment to it.

To me this is probably the reason for being born; I can't think of any other reason. All religion points to our being involved in a great mystery: life and existence is really quite mysterious to us. Our perceptions are limited to what is possible for us as human beings. We can't really know anything other than what the eye sees and the ear hears. We can create images in the mind, abstractions and descriptions of our world, but they are always subjective approximations.

Our cultural and family background influences us to see the world in the particular subjective way we do. It is a strongly conditioned perception. If you were born into an aboriginal family you would perceive the world from that cultural perspective.

So culture is conditioned into the mind. But the basic awareness would be the same no matter what the perceptions are! The awareness of an aborigine and of an English person are the same. Of course the perceptions and qualities would be different, and of course this is true of individuals. The way you perceive is going to be slightly different from the way I perceive.

**JB:** Because of subjective selection and interpretation?

**AS:** Yes. And the ultimate Buddhist experience is to get beyond that conditioned experience and have just an awareness of the way it is, as it actually is, the here and now truth. And that doesn't need a name. You are just with it and are completely awake and alert without having to concentrate on any particular thing, or think about it or interpret it in any way.

And the more we abide in that clarity and attentiveness, the more we understand why the world is the way it is. We can see why we suffer:

suffering always comes from what we project onto the modes of life. Right now this is the way it is. If I suffer now it is because I am wanting it to be something else; I am being critical or taking things in a personal way. But actually, right now, as the eye is conscious and the ear, nose, tongue, body and mind is conscious, there is just a suchness to the moment. It's just this way without having to call it anything or judge it.

As we establish our attention in this way, just knowing it is the way it is, we are able to recognize more clearly that which we create or project onto it. Because we are born as human beings we are inevitably going to be experiencing through the senses. Suffering is then added on to that.

Liking, disliking, prejudices and desires are just projected onto that fundamental awareness. If we want to stop suffering we must just stop doing that.

## **Pain and Suffering**

**JB:** Would you then draw a distinction between suffering and pain, so that pain is something, a sensation, which arises in the body and is inevitable, while suffering is our attachments and reactions to that pain and is not so inevitable?

**AS:** In Buddhism there is the *sabhāva dukkha*, the suffering that comes with birth, sickness, old age and death. That is just nature. Then there is the suffering we create out of ignorance, of not knowing the truth, taking it all as if it were our true nature. So we make it personal, we want it to be otherwise, we want to hold on to something that is changing and make it permanent. We want to get rid of what we see as the ugliness of life and not have any pain. We just want to have pleasure. We don't want to get old or have sickness or face death. This is the suffering that we create out of ignorance. When there is enlightenment and you recognize the way things really are, then you don't create that; but there is still old age, sickness, death and physical pain.

However if you examine your experience of physical pain carefully you note that there is a difference between the actual sensation and your emotional reaction to it. The more you can be aware of your sensation of pain, without reacting to it, the more bearable it becomes. One can concentrate on pain and be quite peaceful with it.

What we think we can't stand is our aversion to that feeling, our impatience, and panic. These emotional reactions are horrible for us. I have seen myself going into a state of panic and fear when just remembering pain when there isn't any real pain there. There isn't any pain at that moment, but my reaction is in anticipation of the pain, or maybe it is the memory of a moment before, when there was pain. If you really notice pain you see that it is something that arises and ceases. It is not continuous. But if you are perceiving it as a permanent sensation, even when it is not very much, then you keep on imagining that it is terrible, so you keep on reacting with aversion and panic to it.

**JB:** Have you ever known a monk who has been tortured? Being involved with Amnesty one is aware of how many people are suffering the most appalling torture. Would meditation training make any difference to the way a person would be able to handle that?

**AS:** Yes. I think so. Think of that Vietnamese monk who immolated himself. He could be aware of the pain and not go into aversion to it. I can't speak about people who have been tortured because I don't know any, but I do know many people who have chronic pain. Even though the pain still exists they can bear it and be peaceful with it. Sister X (one of the nuns) has a lot of chronic pain, but you'd never know it.

### **Literalism, Metaphor and Mystery**

**JB:** How would you respond to being called a Buddhist modernist who has simply dropped those parts of the Buddhist tradition that aren't in accord with contemporary secular and largely Western assumptions? Recently I was talking to a Buddhist who was keen to say that the teaching of the Buddha with regard to the various worlds and rebirth is

true both in the form and spirit. I was trying to say that it is the spirit that is important, the form is often metaphor. Such an approach I have read being described as that of a Buddhist modernist.

**AS:** Everything I teach is in accord with the scriptures and the Four Noble Truths. That is our reference point and the teaching we use for meditation. I would not call myself a modernist, but maybe because of practice I can relate it to people's experience in a modern time. Often when you read the suttas, many people would find those very difficult to relate to, because often the translations don't mean much to them, or it makes it sound as if it has happened to the Buddha and to no one else, and it doesn't reach your heart, doesn't inspire you to realize that it is talking about your own existence. This was the Buddha's whole purpose in teaching. It was to bring to our attention what existence really is.

**JB:** When I read the scriptures with their references to the gods, they are always treated in a less than reverential way. There is that lovely passage where the Buddha is speaking to the Brahma God who says: 'I was here from the beginning, I was the Creator.' The Buddha turns around and says something like, 'But you don't know that.' It made me burst out laughing when I read that. It does seem then the metaphorical way of handling references to supernatural beings is original to the texts themselves and not imposed on them, and is to be expected, bearing in mind the way the Buddha criticizes people for claiming certainty over views or opinions which are not certain.

**AS:** Well of course that was the way people thought at that time. Christian cathedrals are full of angels, devils and hells. At that time people's minds were conditioned to perceive the world through myths, symbols and metaphors. Our time on the other hand is one in which we perceive the world through theories, logic and rational thought, scientific views and psychology.

The cosmology of Buddhism however, from the highest heaven to the lowest hell, is simply a metaphor for the whole realm of human

experience, from the most refined state of consciousness, which is neither perception nor non-perception, to the lowest form of misery, unmitigated pain and anguish which is the deepest hell.

Though we may experience these extremes, most of our lives are lived in between that. So the animal, human and first levels of the *deva* realms are in that middle position. So you find that we relate to the animal kingdom a lot because we share an animal-type body, and then the Four Maharajas, the Protectors of the World, can be seen as 'guardian angels' or the powers of shame and moral dread which guide you from doing terrible things. So simple people take things quite literally, and the more sophisticated take them more metaphorically, but whichever way you take them, they are still quite helpful!

Seriously though, to believe in *deva* worlds literally doesn't seem necessary and the Buddha didn't make that his teaching. The Four Noble Truths is what he taught – and he said that this is all you have to know. These other things are like trying to count all the leaves in the forest.

Of course the possibilities are infinite because the universe is mysterious isn't it? As human beings living in this vast universe, we can only know so much. It is beyond our ability to comprehend it fully. We can only open to it as to a mystery. If you do try to comprehend the whole universe, what happens is that you start to mould it into a set of beliefs, or into some sort of metaphysical symbol, but you still don't know and comprehend the universe – however poetic or sophisticated your language might be.

Religion is that which takes us to the point of opening up to that mystery. Buddhism, like Christianity, operates in a way that does that. Its whole purpose is to open the mind to the mystery, rather than to solve the mystery with some silly beliefs and perceptions that we are grasping at. We have to accept that this is all we can do in our position as human beings.

## Pacifism and Harmlessness

**JB:** Buddhist monks and nuns are necessarily pacifist. How far is this to apply to Buddhist laypeople?

**AS:** Let's say we are harmless, not passive – which makes it sound as if we don't do anything. We focus on not harming anything, but our practice is mindfulness rather than harmlessness. Mindfulness allows us to act appropriately for time and place rather than just from an ideal. This is a refined point that I don't think people appreciate much.

We in the West tend to regard moral positions as fixed. People go into a panic if you say, 'Morality is not an absolute.' People want absolute moral positions. They want to say, 'Is this absolutely right or is it wrong?' or 'Is killing absolutely wrong at all times?' This is because people are afraid to act on their own responsibility. They either try to ignore the questions, or they deny that morality is absolute and draw the false conclusion that morality is a waste of time.

The precepts, either those that apply to the *samaṇas* or those that apply to a layperson, are guides for conduct and speech which help us to live in a way which is harmless and there is trust, in a way in which there is goodwill generated. We avoid actions which lead to conflict in society and which generate guilt and remorse. Still, morality is not an absolute. It can't be. It is not the ultimate truth. Moral precepts are conventions aren't they? With mindfulness, morality is put into its proper perspective. Morality as an end in itself takes us to the puritanical, judgemental, hard-line, 'moral majority' bigotry that sadly we in the West so often associate with the word 'morality'.

The Buddhist layperson has the Five Precepts of which the first is harmlessness, refraining from cruelty to other creatures. Now in society this encourages us to refrain from doing things which cause division, suspicion, paranoia, self-hatred, fear. They are very important for living in a decent way with other human beings, quite apart from people having any spiritual aspirations.

**JB:** But what about the use of force by the State in stopping the Communists from invading Thailand or whatever?

**AS:** The Buddha, when he talked about this kind of thing referred to the already existing moral position. He didn't develop anything new on that issue. He didn't stop the defence of a kingdom. He did point out one time when some group was going to conquer another, that they would not be able to do it. They asked him why and he replied that the kingdom that they wanted to conquer was doing things well, and when a kingdom does things in the right way they are invincible. He pointed out that they were moral, that they had meetings to discuss things, that they worked together and were not divided. He told them that they would never be able to conquer such people so they should not try. The best defence is moral integrity.

Still there was a warrior caste and the duties of a king, and that was to defend the country. Offensive policies were always regarded as immoral, to attack and take over is, of course, theft. Defence was considered – I remember Brezhnev saying that defence is moral and offence is immoral; that, basically, is the Buddhist position! Others though seem almost to regard the opposite view as right, that offence is moral.

In the social conditions in India at that time as is the case now in our time, there was always the possibility of bandits and terrorists. It is acknowledged that people needed defence from them. The Buddhist position is not an idealistic foolish position. It is always workable with life as it has to be experienced. It is not a case of taking a high ideal and applying it *ad absurdum* to situations.

**JB:** If you are then saying that defence is moral and to arm yourself for defence is moral, and to fight to defend your territory or to defend your life is moral, and can be a perfectly mindful thing to do, would you then think that the ownership of nuclear weapons is different because you are saying, 'If you attack me I will kill everyone regardless of whether or not they played any part in the attack.'

**AS:** This is just insane! That is just horrible to me! I'm not saying that defensive war is necessarily moral, but that it may be the responsibility, the duty of a government to look after its boundaries and protect its people. That was the duty of a king in that ancient world, and it still is for modern rulers. I don't see how that nuclear thing is protecting the citizens! It seems that now that makes one a target. Of course it is such a totally different time from the time of the Buddha. Now weapons have reached such a state that it is monstrous, and it is evil even to make those things and has been from the beginning. It is morally unacceptable to think in terms of even contemplating using those bombs on anyone. They are evil weapons.

That is where science has failed for it does not usually take into consideration the moral aspects of what the scientists are doing. Scientists, or such is my impression, think they can do anything in the name of science, and they just go ahead and do it. That is why the planet is getting polluted and everything is going wrong. Modern science, modern capitalism and modern socialism are so irresponsible. They all share blame for the mess we are in.

## **Birth Control and Sexuality**

**JB:** What is your attitude towards birth control?

**AS:** Well, my attitude, being celibate, is a simple one. The best form of birth control is restraint!

I don't particularly like these birth control methods that lead to people having intercourse without having any thought about the consequences. The results have not been all that admirable. Sexuality needs to be considered in a wiser way than it generally is, and not just used as something for pleasure, distraction and indulgence, without any responsibility. That's not good kamma; you are harming your own body and harming other people's and developing obsessions of a sexual kind, and all that will cause self-hatred. Celibacy, if the attitude is right, is a good form of restraint and birth control.

In the Third World countries where they have terrible problems with population, whatever they do it is going to bring some unpleasant result. As in China where they have abortions and only one child, the result will be an enormously unbalanced population of old people with few young ones. The more you try and tamper with life, the more unpleasant the result will be.

This is where our understanding of Dhamma helps us to recognize our proper relationship to the planet we live on and the other beings we live with.

**JB:** Of course the Communist authorities are well aware of this and see that as being preferable to having all their economic and cultural gains lost in a sea of growing population.

**AS:** In what I say about sex, don't get me wrong. I am not puritanical about it. We would not throw people out of the monastery no matter what they had done in the past, or whatever their sexual orientation or problem might be. It is not that we are passing judgement on people. What we are trying to do is to guide people into wholesome living and doing skilful things.

For instance as a monk I would not take part in an anti-abortion campaign or take a hard line over that, but I would try and encourage people to be more responsible and mindful. We need to bear with the results of the mess we have made so far in a way that will resolve itself in a wholesome way in the future, so that we are not just keeping the whole miserable process aggravated through our own ignorance and stupidity.

### **Bad Kamma in Society**

**AS:** We are going to have to bear the result of pollution, nuclear weapons, sexual licence and all that. You can see the results now. But we have to bear with that and do the best we can and work through that. Well, more people are beginning to see that it is wise to be responsible and to live in a way that lets you respect yourself; to see to it that you are serving the society and helping in the world. So many people here

just seem to try and get everything for themselves. We don't have a beautiful society any more because people only think of their rights and privileges and what they want and can get. Not many are thinking of living in a restrained way for the welfare of society.

**JB:** I see it as a mixture. Working in a school I would still say that when I look at the school I work in I see that even in a year of industrial action, most teachers see fulfilment comes in serving the pupils and doing something useful, and that one would feel bad inside if you don't.

**AS:** Yes, but that's usually not acknowledged, is it? At one time the teacher and doctor were very highly respected. They were seen as living for the benefit of others. The point I am making is that the tendency of our society is to be very materialistic. Really, human beings when they are asked to sacrifice, rise up and shine in beautiful ways, but our society does not give us much incentive to rise up to things, even though there is much opportunity for it. The tendency is to condition us towards being competitive, making more money and buying things, and emphasizing our rights and privileges rather than our duties and responsibilities.

Children now often have no knowledge of their duties and responsibilities. They think they are free persons who can do all they want and live on the dole. Young people think it their right to be provided with work! They think they have a right to have money. I don't hear much from young people talking about responsibilities to their families, to their friends, to the nation. It is not that they don't have it, it's just that they don't state it.

When I talk like this I usually get a good response from most English people. English people are quite high-minded and love their country, but it is not something that is openly regarded as important any more. What is regarded as important is to be successful, to win the prize, get the job, or to get on the dole and get what you can.

What we are doing is to try and encourage what is skilful, and this is where education is so important. It should not all be about

competitiveness. There can only be a few winners. Cooperation is where joy comes from, where we help each other, where we are not raising up the winners as the best in the society, and in which we can all feel ourselves to be important members of society not as winners but as ordinary members of it. I think a lot of people think they are failures at a young age and that they have nothing to offer to anyone. The emphasis is too competitive, on competitive examinations; of course the capitalist system always arouses envy. You are always being encouraged to look at what your neighbour has.

**JB:** The dynamics of capitalism seem to be to play upon greed, hatred and delusion, particularly greed.

**AS:** Yes. It just makes you greedy and jealous.

**JB:** And socialism on the other hand, what does that do?

**AS:** Socialism without Dhamma is just idealism. It doesn't work. You have to have the ethics, morality as the foundation, and then socialism would be the natural form that would evolve from that because it is a cooperative system. Socialism as we know it has been imposed upon people by a government. It is a very idealistic system – there's nothing wrong with its ideals, it is just the means that end up so tyrannical. If I point a gun at you and say, 'You will be democratic' then it is nonsense and tyranny. That seems to be what happens with socialism.

## **Idealism, Wisdom and Self-Contempt**

**AS:** When you contemplate your mind then you see that idealism is very much a problem. You can see it here in Britain where people are very idealistic and have very high standards. Then this idealism makes them judge life from these standards and then being critical and negative towards the way they are actually living and how life has to be. This is because they are attached to an image that's perfect – like this Buddha-image is here. But we can't be perfect, we just have to adapt to the way things actually are. This is where wisdom is necessary rather than idealism.

One of the biggest problems you discover when interviewing people on meditation retreats is self-contempt and self-disparagement. Often people haven't done that much wrong! It's just that they are comparing themselves to the highest ideal, then they see themselves as being weak or foolish or stupid or inferior.

**JB:** Is this self-contempt more than in Europeans or Americans?

**AS:** I think it is quite common in Western society, but think that English people tend to be more self-disparaging than Americans because the attitude here is so much more critical and understated. It seems to me that the English cultural attitude is quite introverted and critical of oneself. That conditioning then tends towards people understating their own value.

This is also a quality that can be changed into something skilful. English people can be quite reflective because of it. If you get people to have the right attitude then you can get people to use this conditioning in the right way rather than just for hammering away at themselves! Instead of just letting the critical faculty turn inward on oneself, it can be used more as a way of aiding one's reflective nature to understand the way things are; as an aid to letting things go rather than taking it all personally. That is why I think Dhamma has so much interest for people in this country. It's because people have evolved quite far in some ways and they just need a few suggestions to be able to see more in a skilful way. Then they can carry on quite easily.

**JB:** So you would see the culture of this country as having reached a point where there are quite a lot of connections with the Dhamma and a Buddhist approach?

**AS:** If one puts it in terms of English ways of thinking then they take to it immediately. They love nature here, it is a naturally beautiful country, they love gardens and animals, they are very tolerant and they like to be fair. They do not like to take things to excess, they are not extremists, they are not great sensualists. The French by comparison love the senses – and I am not talking primarily about sex, but food and

wine, fashion and style – but the English don't really find all that so interesting or attractive.

**JB:** Also English philosophy has the tradition of being very critical of the big system. Small pieces of analysis are preferred. This also seems to be more in line with the Buddhist tradition, which is inclined to say that any philosophical position that becomes inflexible and is taken as unchanging truth is almost certain to be wrong. My philosophy teachers were always pointing out that conclusions in philosophy are relative and approximate, never final. That seems to be very much the Buddhist approach to views and opinions. By contrast German philosophers and theologians have attempted to build definitive and comprehensive systems. Thomistic Catholicism attempted to do this, encapsulating the whole of reality in one great system of thought.

**AS:** That is what the Buddha always avoided. The brahmin philosophers came to him and tried to pin him down. 'Are you an eternalist or an annihilationist?' (One who teaches that the world has no beginning or one who teaches that on death the person completely ceases to be.) They tried to pin him down to a metaphysical position. He however would not take any position. He reiterated that he taught the meaning of suffering and the way out of it. This wasn't because he didn't know. It was because he realized that that is not the way to do it and that you get yourself into trouble immediately you form, for example, theistic doctrines.

### **Christianity, Buddhism and the Religious Goal**

**AS:** This is the great problem for Christians now, particularly Roman Catholicism with all the doctrines that they have absolutized. For example the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, or the Virgin Birth, or trying to make out that the Resurrection of Jesus is some sort of scientific, historical fact. This is absurd, and yet they try and justify it; and as a Christian you are not supposed to question such doctrines. But when you are looking at suffering, everybody suffers, and everybody's

suffering arises and ceases – so you are pointing to truths rather than to beliefs.

**JB:** Fernando and Swidler assert in *Buddhism, An Introduction for Christians and Jews*, that there is a deep inner affinity between Christianity and Buddhism and that ‘You can be fully a Christian and fully a Buddhist.’ What is your reaction to that?

**AS:** Buddhism doesn’t cancel out anything. To become a Buddhist doesn’t mean that you stop being a Christian, you just use Buddhist conventions. Learning to play the piano doesn’t cancel out being a guitarist. The Buddhist approach I think is complementary to Christianity. From my perspective the problems that Christianity has now are due to the attachment there is to doctrine.

As presented by the Churches this whole issue has not evolved very far even though with individual Christians it has. As institutions the Churches cling to doctrinal images which increasingly seem rather childish. I think particularly of the way the Fatherhood of God is talked about and the great emphasis there is on having what is described as ‘a personal relationship with God.’ I think it seems almost neurotic that they need some outer force to love and protect them, and they don’t question this and they are afraid to let go of it.

In Buddhism the starting point is almost the exact opposite, a way of negation rather than of affirmation. That I think is the way many people are now. Rather than just affirming belief, people often negate (their beliefs) but not out of aversion (because they find them too challenging) but out of mindfulness. They see that this is not God, this is not the ultimate, this is not true, this is not the way things are.

This is also how to free your mind from all your views, opinions and beliefs, not rejecting them, but seeing them for what they are. Then the mind is open and you can have a perspective which allows truth to be revealed. That is why the Four Noble Truths are taught, because that allows you to let go of everything so that your mind is empty. I have heard of Christian monks talking of God as Void or No-Thing; these

are very Buddhist attitudes and I can see that these are monks who have been practising meditation in some form and know their minds. Look at the diagram from St. John of the Cross: it depicts the direct road to Mount Carmel, the path of the Perfect Spirit. On it is written: 'Nothing, nothing, nothing, and even on the mountain, nothing.'! So this 'no-thing' does exist in Christianity, but I think that is not what is ordinarily taught.

However, I really don't know enough about this. I was turned off the Christian spiritual tradition because of the insistence always that you start off by regarding yourself as being in the presence of God. For me that was a big problem, for I found God increasingly problematic, and so to sit there and 'imagine the presence of God' left me with this terrible sense that there was nobody there and that I was projecting onto existence a personification of being which did not correspond to reality. That made me feel bad.

In contrast the Buddhist approach asks for no presuppositions. One starts with feeling the body, watching the breath, noting what is happening in the mind. It starts from where you are. Of course those who can take the Christian presuppositions may come to similar ends.

The person of Jesus does inspire me. He seems to have been an enlightened being and his teachings can echo and amplify those of the Buddha. I feel there is a lot of mileage to be made in investigating that.

What's more if Buddhism comes to this country, as has been the case when it has come to other countries, it has never supplanted the local religion, but has worked alongside it, accommodated itself to it and also transformed it.

**JB:** Do you think this will happen here?

**AS:** My intention is not to influence Christianity or to convert people to Buddhism, but to try and present skilful ways in which people can realize truth, whatever they want to call it. I think Buddhism has a lot to offer that way for it is a very skilful teaching. Still, I really doubt that Britain will ever become a Buddhist Country *per se*, but it may be that

hopefully in the future more people will be enlightened, that religious truth may be reaffirmed and proclaimed in a way that may be more universal than we find in these very acculturated religions.

What I am thinking about is not just the convention of the Buddha Way, but that there may be a potential for a more universal statement that is appropriate for an evolving planetary culture. I think that all religions will contribute to it and it will come much more from the realization of individuals than from one prophet proclaiming the truth to everybody.

We don't need another prophet but a movement of individual human beings towards enlightenment, for it has all been proclaimed already by all the teachers and prophets, and everything is printed in translations. There is not a scarcity of spiritual wisdom. It is now up to us to do something about it as individual beings.

Some forms of Christianity, those that are waiting for the Second Coming, for Armageddon or whatever, are all waiting for something to happen out there, like those who are waiting for the Maitreya Buddha. I find that very immature. It is like a little child waiting for someone to come and make everything right for me: like me making a mess and hoping my parents will come along and save the day! When you grow up you see you must clean up the mess yourself.

I also see the ultimate religious goal as becoming a really mature human being! We should aim to become wise and mature rather than believe God will come and save us.

## **The Sangha in the West**

**JB:** What do you see the Sangha as achieving? What is it here to do?

**AS:** What I can do and we are doing is taking what I know and presenting it and giving people the opportunity to train and make a commitment to this type of life, or to live in a monastery temporarily. We are always open to interfaith meetings and working with other religious people. I think that the lifestyle of Buddhist monks and nuns is a very lovely

form; I look at it as a kind of gift to Britain, an act of making an offering of something very valuable and useful. Our intention is to serve the society rather than to convert it, or exploit it, or make demands of it. Our presence as monks and nuns is to be a blessing and that means we have to work on ourselves to do that and be worthy of alms.

We use this form of Buddhist monasticism because this is what we know. How it will change over the years is something that no one knows. It must change according to its own nature and not according to somebody's ideas, and it will adapt itself. How it grows is up to itself and not to some individual who says, 'This is not what we want.'

Of course it is not going to be exactly like it was in Thailand but we need to respect what it has come from. We are not trying to make it into an English form of Buddhism, but neither are we preventing it from becoming one. We want to plant it and let it grow, though if it doesn't grow that is all right too. Still it's growing and it will adapt itself to the needs and environment it lives in.

**JB:** Finally, Tan Ajahn, do you think that the proximity of monks and nuns in the same community as at Amaravati makes monastic life more or less difficult?

**AS:** Let's say that in Thailand there isn't this proximity. The monks and nuns are very separate and in some ways that is easier. But one of the advantages of this set-up is that we are beginning to see things in our minds with regard to women more clearly. It may not be as easy for us, but here we really have to come to terms with our attitudes.

When men live too isolated and separate from women they often revert to a kind of chauvinistic approach in which they lump women together and say: 'That's just typical of women,' and dismiss them. Or they exaggerate and idealize women too much, long for them and make too much of them. Here we are aware of these tendencies in ourselves and have the opportunity to face up to them.

I am also coming to understand something of the problems women have which I had never really understood before. For example, there are

the differences between the ways men and women react to situations. Sometimes a man will think that a woman is just being unreasonable because he thinks she should be responding like a man does when she is actually responding in a way that is natural to her.

Right now it is all working very well and many of the monks have been able to observe and awaken to a lot of suppressed feelings, such as anxieties, with regard to the opposite sex.

Also I must say that the nuns are impeccable. Their intention is not to attract the monks and they are working on themselves as much as the monks are and so they are also learning about their feelings towards men and understanding how men work. Here at Amaravati there is an increasing amount of respect between monks and nuns and it does not go into forming attachments or unskilful relationships. And that is good.

I don't particularly want an easy life in which everything is secure and safe. Living in this way one sees more that the Buddha's teaching is something which prepares us to learn from the whole of life; and part of the human experience is the relationship between the sexes. You can't dismiss half the human population. If you do there is something lacking in yourself.

I have seen that happen in monks who always felt threatened and insecure around women. If you get used to dismissing women and not having to relate to them in any way, then you just feel burdened and unsure and annoyed by them. These are unwholesome mental states that need to be worked through. So living in this communal way can be a real help to living the holy life.

**Buddhism Now!**



## 31 | The Still Silence

The first Noble Truth is the understanding of suffering, and the second is the insight into letting go. The suffering that we are talking about comes from attachment out of ignorance, out of habit, greed, hatred and delusion. We tend to react to sensory impingement: either wanting the pleasant, or not wanting the unpleasant. So the tendency is to react and grasp; and grasping also implies trying to get rid of something.

Then the third Noble Truth is the realization of cessation, *nirodha*. Cessation does not mean the ultimate cessation of everything, where we go into a kind of blank vacuum; it is the mind empty of 'I am', where there is no grasping, no hatred, and no delusion, where there's simply the realization of what we might call 'the empty mind', or 'the silence'.

Silence, then, is to be realized; it is not to be believed in or created. We cannot make silence; and we cannot realize it by going into a pitch-black cave where there is no sound. It will be silent in a cave like that, of course, but if there has been no insight into suffering and the origin of suffering, the moment the cave is left noises and the things that come into sight will upset us.

Of course, it's pleasant not to have things impinging on the senses but if, out of ignorance or greed we attach to that stillness and silence,

that sensory deprivation, we can easily feel very angry when it is disrupted; we may even feel like murdering someone! So, that can't be the kind of still silence the Buddha was talking about! He couldn't have been talking about a silence that is dependent upon conditions which, in this case, would be a lack of sensory movement. If I have to go away from you now to some place where nothing harsh, exciting, or agitating will come to me and find 'stillness in myself', there has been no insight. The stillness and silence experienced through sensory deprivation will just be interpreted from the 'I am' position. Then, as soon as the silence is broken or disturbed, it will be upsetting and anger will arise. The silence of the cessation of suffering, is now; it is here and now, in the mind. We don't have to go anywhere to get it.

If there is a realization of cessation (the third Noble Truth), then the way things happen to be in the moment on the sensory plane, whether harsh sensory impingement, painful sensory impingement, pleasant feelings or beautiful sights, they are not really the issue any more. One can bear with conditions when the silence is not from denying or rejecting but from understanding, from letting go, from realizing that all is subject to arising and ceasing. Then even in movement there's stillness and a peacefulness that all of us can experience and know directly for ourselves.

The Four Noble Truths offer a very accurate teaching because they are something we can apply to our lives wherever we happen to be. There is a growing interest in Buddhism in Britain. Why is this? Why do people here want to practise Buddhist meditation? Because it provides something that each of us longs for. We are living at a stressful time with all the successes of Western civilisation: Western education and technology, and the miracles that the West has performed. There seems to be no end to it – yet people have not become more peaceful and contented. In fact they seem even more stressed by it all. So the problems of modern society in the West are not coming from a lack of anything, from tyrannical governments or from anything terribly

wrong, but just from the level of stress in the mind: the speed, the nervousness, the tension, the tendency to get caught up in things and having no way of letting go, no understanding of the nature of things. So people end up taking drugs, drinking a lot, seeking sensory deprivation, trying to bury their heads in the sand. They go off to remote islands in the Pacific or do something they think will help them find inner peace.

In Thailand, where we lived in forest monasteries, I remember how common it was for monks to be attached to particular situations, and also to be very opinionated! I remember visiting an absolutely beautiful place in the North East. The people there had made a kind of meeting hall in a big cave on a cliff, that gave a panoramic view of the forest below, and there were lovely little kutis built into rock grottos. It was a dream come true. I thought it would be nice to live there, so I spoke to a Western monk in Bangkok who had been there. I said, 'Were you at that beautiful monastery?'

'Oh yes!'

'It must have been wonderful – so peaceful and beautiful.'

'I couldn't stand it!'

'Why? What was wrong?'

'Well, I was given this little place to live in, this little hut, but every morning I had to walk by someone else's hut – and it upset my mind.'

'So what did you do?'

'I had to leave. It wasn't a proper place for me. I had to find something better.'

'Well, did you find something better?'

'No, the place I went to wasn't very good either. Every time I went out on alms-round, dogs would come up and bite me.'

I thought: 'Hmmm, this is interesting. You're missing all these opportunities; you're looking for the perfect place; and you think that once you have found it, once you have found a place where nothing will offend or disturb you, you will really be able to practise.'

This is common among monks. They get attached to the idea of

‘Don’t disturb me! Don’t bother me! We’ve got to have it like this! Can’t have it like that!’

I was tending in that direction myself when I first met Ajahn Chah, and he obviously observed this because he would never let me get away with it. I would start programmes for ‘real practice’ – it was kind of arrogant. I would think: ‘I’m here for *real* practice. These other monks – they’re not as serious as I am; I’m more serious.’ And so I would set myself a very strict practice routine. Then, suddenly, Ajahn Chah would ask me to go somewhere with him, but I would say: ‘It’ll upset my practice!’ And he would ask: ‘How will it upset your practice?’ – then he would take me somewhere!

At one time we went to a place where a new branch monastery was being established on the Cambodian border. It was a fetid kind of environment – really hot and dusty, with huge mosquitoes all over the place. The village people had built a crude shelter and we sat up all night in this shelter while Ajahn Chah talked with the villagers. I couldn’t understand Thai very well so I just had to sit there (you are expected to stay with the teacher until he says you can go). So I stayed and he kept talking and talking, and they chewed these betel nuts, spitting out the red juice. I was feeling more and more averse. And these huge mosquitoes kept landing on me. ‘What a horrible place!’ I thought, and I became absolutely furious with Ajahn Chah.

He kept ‘interfering with my practice’ over the years until, finally, I got the point! So, when I came to England in 1977, I was prepared. I didn’t have views about ‘my practice’ having to be any whichway. It did become apparent to me during those first two years in London that I didn’t want to live in a big city, that London was not where I really wanted to be, but was it interfering with my practice? Was living in London, in a completely new country, as a foreigner, as a Buddhist monk, having to adjust to a new climate and everything – was that disrupting my practice? In no way was it doing that, because the practice was something to be with all the time and did not depend upon

external conditions. Occasionally there was the feeling that I would like to have more time alone – go to some quiet place – but this was all seen as conditions of the mind, conditions to let go of.

Strangely enough, however, it was in the streets of London that the silence and stillness of my mind became strong and real, rather than in the cave in Thailand – and it was wonderful to see that. It isn't that London is a holy, sacred, city, is it? None of us would make that assumption. Yet it was here the realization came that it didn't matter what impinged on the mind itself, as long as there was mindfulness and reflection on the way things are.

It was very clear right from the beginning that one would not be able to reproduce Thailand in England, or set things up as they were in the Thai monastery. Instead, one trusted in the ability to respond and adapt to life as it happened. There was no question of trying to create something new, of trying to impose ideas onto this society, or trying to convert people to Buddhism. It was not a case of running away from this culture or the people of this society by forming a little cult that shuts its doors and says: 'We want our way, and don't bother us!' – none of that.

The trust and confidence in the practice of being with the true silence of the mind is what we call 'here and now Dhamma'. Truth is always apparent here and now; it is timeless. This is the challenge we now have as human beings living in a stress-filled society with its increasing problems and difficulties. It gets very complicated at times for everyone, and yet we can let go and realize silence and peacefulness now. We call it 'inner peace', which is just a way of saying that you can't go out and find it; you don't have to go and look for it in India, or think that it is in some other place – the Himalayas or anywhere else.

The statements of the Buddha are negative ones: 'It's not this; it's not that; it's not-self; there is no self; the created, conditioned realm is not-self; the Unconditioned is not-self.' At Amaravati (which means 'the Deathless Realm') we say: 'There is Amaravati.' Of course, you

might think I mean the piece of land you see around you, but if you also apply that statement to something more profound – as a realization in your own heart – then *there* is the Deathless. I am talking very much in this vein now because I feel that human beings need to really consider this again. We don't have much in our society that encourages this, or that really talks about deathlessness.

When they decided to publish a book of my talks in 1985, I wanted to call it *Path to the Deathless*, but someone said that the word 'deathless' is not a good one for the English, that if it has 'death' in the title, no one will want it. Then they kind of neutralized it and called it *Mindfulness: The Path to the Deathless*. So even the word 'deathless' can be frightening to people, can't it? I don't know whether English people find that offensive or not, but to me the word 'deathless' is the same as 'immortal'. The word itself is an important one to contemplate, to bring into our minds – just that word – because we identify very much with it. We are frightened by death, by the prospect of dying and of suffering; of sickness, pollution, nuclear holocaust, and so on. We are faced now with so many horrible, death-bound experiences. Of course we shall all die anyway – and premature deaths, terrible painful deaths, mass deaths, genocide are all possibilities that we are aware of – yet hardly anyone talks about deathlessness, or the immortal, or transcendent truth. I am impressed, however, by those modern theologians and Christian meditators who realize this. The actual mystical experience, or the insight into truth is, of course really something that cannot be qualified in words; it can only be pointed to. And so this talk is an attempt to point to that possibility for those who have not had the experience, or for those who have grave doubts about it or wonder what mystical experience is. Often this is described as feeling at one with the universe, but even the concept of 'oneness' is relinquished when there is a more continuous awareness of true silence and the vast emptiness of Dhamma.

One thing I have seen as an obstacle in most meditators is a compulsive tendency. Just the idea of sitting triggers off the attitude that there is something to be done. The conditioned mind is programmed to be this way.

In my early monastic life I was haunted by the idea that there was something I had to do, to realize, to get or to rid myself of. When we look at ourselves from the conditioned mind, from our thoughts and memories, we tend to see ourselves in critical ways: we are not good enough, too lazy, have too much anger. We think we have to conquer our anger in order to get enlightened, or we have to conquer our lust or learn to deal with it so it won't be an obstacle to our practice. I had a lot of jealousy, actually, and felt that I had to get rid of it. I even asked a teacher how to practise sympathetic joy instead – that didn't work!

The basic assumption was that I was 'somebody' and that there was something wrong with 'me'. I had to become somebody who did not have anything wrong with him. If I meditated in the right way, therefore, and did all the right things, I would get rid of the bad qualities

and become somebody who could become enlightened in the future – if that was possible.

You can see what a woolly attitude that is – to live your life coming from that position, and letting that influence your meditative experiences. Even just sitting began to be a compulsion: ‘I’ve got to sit!’ And as soon as I sat down, crossed my legs and put my back straight, I would go into the gear of ‘the meditator’ – not really seeing that it was a compulsiveness that I was encouraging, rather than mindfulness.

In the past twenty years, the practice of *vipassanā* has become increasingly well known in the West, and a lot has been made of it. Some people have made cults around *vipassanā*. They have the idea that it was a teaching kept secret for centuries, to be revealed by certain teachers at this time. There are all kinds of weird, corrupted attitudes around something that really isn’t a secret at all, but something that has always been available in the main Buddhist traditions. Also, it is in a context. That means it isn’t just a technique to solve all the problems of this time. Whatever views you have about *vipassanā*, it is better to observe them as views rather than actually believing them, because ‘*vipassanā*’ really means ‘insight’: looking into the way things are, seeing clearly. This is investigation, examination, reflection.

One of the conditions that blinds Westerners most is compulsiveness. Our society is a very compulsive one. How many of you can feel at ease doing nothing? When there is nothing to do, do you feel you should *find* something? And if you can only find useless and counterproductive things to do, do you feel that at least you are doing *something* – because if you do nothing, you get the feeling that you are somehow degenerating or going off?

The modern Western materialistic attitude is that you are only worthy if you do things, so if you don’t do anything you are somehow a nuisance, a waste, a parasite. Bhikkhus sometimes get accused of being parasites: ‘You don’t *do* anything!’ They think we just sit under bodhi trees, get enlightened, and then live in a state of permanent bliss.

Whilst everyone else is out there in the marketplace, working hard and trying to pay off the mortgage, Buddhist monks just sit in nibbāna. They don't suffer, and they aren't miserable like the rest of mankind; they are just parasites on society! One woman accused me of this once. I said: 'Well, if I had a high salary you would probably think I was really doing something. The only reason you think I don't do anything is because I don't get paid anything.'

When I sit in meditation I like to observe feelings of: 'There is something I've got to do.' The general attitude towards meditation may be: 'You've got to practise mindfulness of breathing! You've got to develop your mantra!' – or whatever. Try to be aware of that feeling of having to do something. I am not saying you should convince yourself you don't have to do anything, because that would be another compulsion, wouldn't it? You should instead meditate by not meditating, by observing the feeling in the body or the mental framework – that which wants to do something, say, or feels it has to get something – the sense of 'should be' or 'shouldn't be'. Try to notice any sense of compulsion about having something to do, or something to get rid of, or something you have to become.

The reflective capacity of the mind is just bare attention and witnessing. It is intelligence, not vacuous blankness. In Western civilization the human mind is conditioned to proliferate. Here, in a country like Britain, being reasonable is what is exalted and praised. So the conditioned mind here is always trying to put everything into terms that are reasonable and fair. I am not condemning this, or saying it's wrong, I am just pointing it out as a conditioning process that we become identified with. And when we are identified with ideas of being reasonable and fair, we can be easily offended, upset, or confused when life is not that way, or when we are not that way. How many of us dread our own emotional states because they are totally unreasonable? And when life is not fair, when things are not the way they *should* be, we feel offended or threatened by what is happening around us, to us, or inside us.

Then there is imagination (we can create images), and we have retentive memories. Both of these are functions of the mind that we tend to be identified with. They are, however, our own creations, our memories, our conditioning – just logical, reasonable frameworks of conditioning. Now, what underlies all of that is the reflective ability – that which is purely aware, consciously aware – the intuitive mind. And that is not highly developed in the Western world. We tend to treat intuition as something untrustworthy. Usually women are intuitive, aren't they? But, you know, we don't always trust women! We trust reasonableness. And intuition isn't reasonable; it is the total receptivity and sensitivity of the mind that isn't conditioned by anything; it isn't programmed by culture or religion, by gender or class, by race or nationality; it isn't programmed by any of these things. These are identities with the sex of the body, or with the class, or with the race or ethnic background. These are all conditions that were instilled in the mind after we were born. That mind of the newborn child is not conditioned by anything; it has no ideas about itself. The baby's body has its effect on the mind, but that is a mind that is intuitive rather than conditioned; and we lose that intuitiveness as we become more identified with our names.

How many of us were really aware of being boys and girls up to a certain age? It didn't matter, did it? Then suddenly we are told: 'You're a boy! She's a girl!' 'Boys are like *this*; girls are like *that*.' 'You are a good boy!... a bad boy!' Or, 'You are English! ... middle class ... working class.' I remember being told in school that I was not mathematically inclined. So for years after that I assumed I couldn't do mathematics – because I wasn't inclined that way. Those were the words that, to me, meant I couldn't do mathematics.

When I was at university, however, I had to take some mathematics, some algebra, and I put it off till the last moment – because I thought I couldn't do it. And then, when I took the course, I found I really liked it and did extremely well! I am not mathematically inclined, but still ...

So these are conditions, self-views, aren't they? How many of you were told you were a certain type when you were an innocent child, so that this has influenced your whole outlook on life? As you get older you can question the wisdom of the adults around you, but when you are an innocent child you don't question them; you believe what they say.

My mother was God really, for the first few years of my life. She had complete power and was the one I depended on totally. Her moods would affect me. She could make me happy or unhappy, and reward or punish me, much more than my father. The mother is the dominant influence at first, and then later the father. So the adult world is absolute to the child's mind. We get conditioned by what our parents say, or our peers, and by the place we grow up in, religious attitudes, fashions and trends; all these are conditions of the mind. With the intuitive ability and reflective mind, however, we turn to that original pure mind that wasn't conditioned by anything, that is consciously aware, where there is intelligence. This isn't a blank void, but it isn't conditioned knowledge either. Sometimes we think intelligence is conditioned knowledge, as though getting a PhD makes us intelligent. But, really, intelligence is just the nature of things. When we take away the delusion – the limitations of the conditioned world – then intelligence can operate at its most powerful and in its most true and beautiful way.

Mindfulness, then, is the path to the Deathless, or the way to the Deathless. We can use the word 'intuitive' or 'receptive' or 'awareness' – any of them will help us begin to bring our attention to the ability we have of just being with this moment, with the way it is, where we can observe the conditioning. You can observe the body; you can contemplate your own body. You can contemplate the little toe on your right foot, or you can contemplate the whole body. The intuitive mind and reflective abilities of the human mind are able to go to detail or totality; they are malleable, flexible, capabilities.



## 33 | Awakening to Ordinariness

If you reflect on your mood right now, what is it? Do you feel happy, unhappy, or neither? Do you feel hot or cold? Do you feel inspired or depressed? Do you feel confused or clear, unsure or sure? Whenever I feel confused, I just try to accept that feeling. What is that like as a feeling? By asking myself that question I begin to notice and accept the feeling of confusion, rather than just resisting it. Generally, we don't like to be confused; we want to be unconfused. So we resist it and struggle with it, which makes us even more confused! Instead of trying to get rid of it, however, we can reflect on that as an object, as something to witness and learn from, rather than simply regarding it as an obstacle preventing us from becoming enlightened. This is a change of attitude, isn't it? 'I am too confused! How can I get enlightened if I am confused like this?' But we can actually use confusion as a way of understanding what it is. When you start thinking you are confused, then you have made a connection with it: 'I am someone who is confused and I don't want to be. I want to be someone who is not confused.' Then you are definitely someone who is going to be confused!

So you can simply be aware of whether the body feels relaxed or tense. You may feel tension in various parts of the body – in the neck,

the shoulders, or the solar plexus, for example – and you can actually just witness that, just go to it and accept the tension or the feeling of discomfort, rather than trying to get rid of it. You can see this ‘trying to get rid of’ as a subtle and clever form of desire, because your ideal is to be a relaxed person at ease with life, isn’t it? In which case, any tensions you might feel should be got rid of in order for you to become this ideal person – that is your conditioned mind. Your conditioned mind will go on and on like that, telling you how you should be and how you should not be. But don’t give so much importance to the conditioned mind. Trust more in your ability to reflect and contemplate and accept the way it is ‘right now’.

Conditions arise and cease, so it is not a matter of getting rid of them; they simply go! You don’t have to make them go, because their nature is to do so. In that way, you can take it easy. If you just accept conditions as they are and bear them in whatever form they take in the moment, then they pass – and you recognize they are no longer present.

In reflecting on Dhamma, you are aware of greed when it is present, and you are aware of non-greed. So, if you are feeling particularly greedy or lustful you are aware of that – not judging it, not making a problem out of it – you are just observing the physical feeling: the heat or cold, the wanting something, or to get rid of something. You accept the feeling; you recognize its presence. And when it ceases, you note the absence of it: ‘There is no greed now.’ Or, in the case of anger, you know when it is present and when there isn’t any, and you can reflect: ‘As a reflection on anger, I am reflecting non-anger right now; the absence of it is like *this*.’ Through consciousness you are actually aware of non-anger and non-greed. You are not just aware of greed and anger, but also of the mind where there is no anger, no greed, no delusion.

The ego is always connected to the condition, isn’t it? You don’t build an ego around non-anger or non-greed. Usually your ego is involved with: ‘I’m too greedy!’ or ‘I have too much anger!’ The identity

is always with some condition of the mind. If we think we have a problem with anger we assume that the problem is always there, that it is latent, lurking in the depths of our souls ready to pop up at some embarrassing moment. There is the tendency to see enemies behind the bushes or under the bed – this sense of danger and something horrible waiting to take us over. The self-view is all right, in fact, if we know that it is a view, if we recognize it for what it is. But when we give our self-view a reality and power that it doesn't deserve, then it takes us over and we become frightened, worried, anxious, obsessed with the conditions we experience. Even when I haven't been angry for a long time, I sometimes think, 'No anger! It is so peaceful just sitting here and enjoying not being angry.'

The conditioned and the Unconditioned relate to each other, and this relationship is to be witnessed and accepted. The conditioned realm is what is really our identity and what deludes, and we bring attention to that realm first, because if we don't we tend to create ideas about the unconditioned, like God and metaphysical doctrines: the unborn, the immortal realm. We form doctrines and views about it, so God in Christianity, say, inevitably ends up as an absurd old man, white beard, up in the sky. If you ask Christians what God is and push them to really contemplate that, they usually end up seeing God more in terms of unconditioned reality, immortal. But because it has been given so many personal attributes, it is these attributes that have a lot of power in our minds. Fathers have a lot of power.

Some people don't like father figures. The feminist movement in America once said that God is a woman, and its members made this crucifix of a woman nailed to a cross which they put in Saint John the Divine Cathedral in New York. This was shocking to orthodox Christians – especially as she had a rather nice figure! But why not if you are giving God attributes?

Buddhism is enigmatic and strange to the Western mind, because the Buddha didn't proclaim metaphysical doctrines as a belief system,

even though the metaphysical pattern is proclaimed very clearly in the unconditioned. It is a perfect metaphysical teaching. It is the relationship of the conditioned to the unconditioned without attributes or personal qualities. In fact, it is rather cold, isn't it? The words 'conditioned' and 'unconditioned' don't arouse any kind of emotion. Give it more powerful emotive qualities and it will set something off; emotions will be aroused. But this particular way of phrasing keeps it in a place where we can reflect on it rather than letting it inspire us. We can use rationality and reasonableness, and learn how to use it, because to be reasonable and rational is a great gift; it isn't a curse! I am not condemning it. In fact, I appreciate it very much. I value it. It's like a miracle to me that I can actually think rationally and reasonably. But as an identity, as an end in itself, it is unsatisfactory. As an end in itself, it is meaningless; it is merely a function of the mind that we learn to use with wisdom. Then we find it is one of the tools we use for the path, for the Eightfold Path, for right understanding.

The Buddha taught a way of understanding and realization rather than trying to convert people to a particular system of ideas, thoughts and doctrines. That is why the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, even the Five Precepts, are not absolute ties; they are not commandments. The Five Precepts do not command us not to kill; it is not an imperative from above. One simply takes the first precept to refrain from intentionally killing other beings. This is something one chooses to do out of one's own wisdom. One determines to try in this lifetime not to be responsible for intentionally taking the life of any other creature. But notice that this is phrased as a way of personally determining a precept, rather than of me, say, commanding you to keep it. If I should make it a commandment, I would be forcing you into a reaction. You would say, 'Oh, yes, Ajahn Sumedho said we have to keep the Five Precepts, and if we don't, we shall go to the lower realms when we die!' And then some of you are going to think, 'Bah, humbug! How many times have I heard that before? Those old priests and monks

always come at me with those ‘Thou shalt not!’ commandments. Well, I’m going out right now and I’m going to kill an ant!’

The commanding form, the imperatives of life, force a strong reaction of disobedience, rebellion, or just dismissal. The Dhamma, on the other hand, is an invitation, an encouragement; it is for us to contemplate and reflect upon so that we can figure it out for ourselves.

You have the intelligence, the wisdom, to learn the importance of keeping the first precept as a result of your own reflections, rather than through being threatened with the fires of hell if you break it. That is fear-conditioning, isn’t it? It is reward and punishment. Most of us are already conditioned that way through our society; we are given rewards for being good and punished for being bad. That is what the conditioned mind expects. But now we are rising above that conditioning, in order to reflect upon it, so that instead of precepts being commandments, they are standards upon which to reflect, to contemplate, to consider.

Our minds are opening wide, becoming receptive. There is intelligence there; there is great beauty there; it is universal. It is not narrow conditioning from our life experiences. We are opening wide to total sensitivity, meditating in a way which allows us to be totally sensitive, rather than just trying to shut ourselves off from feeling anything. That sometimes is what we want to do, isn’t it? When I first started meditating, I simply wanted to shut down: ‘Don’t want to feel anything! Want to get into one of those *jhānas* that you read about in the *Visuddhimagga*,<sup>10</sup> where you get into this state of bliss. If I could get into one of those states for a long time, oh ...! Life at the moment is too painful, too fraught, too dangerous! I just want to be in some state of perfect happiness, for eternity.’ But life in this human realm is the way it is; it is filled with pain, frustration and irritation, but that is all right. When we have the right attitude towards it, that is what really pushes us into being enlightened, into seeing, into witnessing, into understanding.

<sup>10</sup> *Visuddhimagga: The Path of Purification*: treatise on Theravada Buddhist doctrine written by Buddhaghosa in approximately 430 CE in Sri Lanka.

If we could all be in the *jhānas*, and if they were easily accessible, we would stay there most of the time. We would live in a state of unmitigated bliss without having to feel anything in the body or deal with any problems in society. It would be like an addiction. I am sure that crack cocaine is incredibly exhilarating, that blissful states must come from it, because people want it so badly. If you become addicted to ecstatic feelings, then ordinary life must be really painful and dreary. The Buddha-Dhamma is all about the ordinariness of life – the breathing, the posture – just nothing extreme. We are not trying to attain miraculous powers or live up in the *deva* realms, but merely learning to understand and work with the flow of life in an undrugged, untainted way. Just sitting for half an hour or so watching the breath – what is that? To most people that is the ultimate boredom. It is, however, through the patient awakening to just ordinariness – like the breathing of the body, the posture, the feelings – that you transcend boredom. Boredom then no longer has the power to influence you; you transcend these conditions, these emotional reactions. It isn't that you deny or suppress them, but you witness them and know them for what they are, so they no longer have the power to obsess your mind.

## 34 | The Three Refuges

I think it is very important to reflect on the significance of the Refuges, or the Three Jewels: Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Sometimes in the Western world these Refuges are seen as merely traditional, and relegated to a ceremony which only traditional Buddhists perform, not fully appreciating that they are pointers to the reality of the moment. In Pali we chant: *Buddham sāraṇaṃ gacchāmi; Dhammaṃ sāraṇaṃ gacchāmi; Saṅghaṃ sāraṇaṃ gacchāmi*. As a Refuge to take in order to see and realize the truth, you can regard Buddha as ‘that which is mindful’, pure intelligent awareness. Taking refuge in the Buddha is not a sentiment of the mind but a recollection and remembrance that right now, that which is aware and knows the truth, is Buddha. It is not something that is mine, but when I am mindful – when I allow my life to be increasingly more mindful – that is refuge in Buddha. And that is a conscious experience within a form, a human form, such as we all have. Rather than identifying with the conditioning of the mind or the body, you get beyond the body itself – not a man or a woman, no nationality, no quality. You don’t even identify with Buddha; you take refuge in that pure awareness that is possible for all human beings.

Recognize that the result of birth is consciousness. So consciousness is the experience that we are all having right now. Each one of us is a conscious being. You have been conscious from the time you were born. From the time you left your mother's womb you started your life as a separate conscious entity, which means that you are the subject, you experience everything that impinges on you, that contacts you, that you meet, that you experience throughout your whole lifetime – whether it is good or bad, right or wrong, pleasant or painful. Success, failure, praise and blame – you are going to feel it all in some way; it is all going to leave some kind of imprint. This means that when you interpret life's experiences on the personal level, you are frightened by them. When you see the experiences you have from the position of refuge in Buddha, however, then every experience, everything that happens to you, is enlightening you; everything is Dhamma.

Seeing the Dhamma, you take refuge in Dhamma, in truth, in the way things are. Even if it is painful or humiliating, good or bad, right or wrong, you see it as it is; you see it in terms of Dhamma. So then experiences are no longer something to resent or be frightened of, because you recognize that life is like that: being born, being conscious, the human kamma that you have, the state you are in from the time of birth to the time of the death of this body. Anything can happen! Instead of being frightened by it all, you can have a sense of being willing to see, willing to learn from the experiences of life. And a lot of the learning comes from pain, doesn't it?

Often we get profound strength and wisdom through the pain of our experiences, rather than through pleasure. Pleasurable experiences tend to make us dozy and dull. But I think that for most of us life has never been too easy or too pleasant. We might not be in the middle of a war right now, but we can still have a battlefield raging in our minds about somebody's insulting comment, or somebody's lack of sensitivity or consideration. We can feel really hurt and offended by all kinds of things.

In the middle-class societies of the Western world where people have a fair amount of comfort, where their lives are not based on just survival, on just getting enough to eat, on looking for a crust of bread in order to survive the day, they can take a lot for granted. In affluent Western countries like this one, there is a lot of security, but people are not mindful in this security; they do not reflect, and do not understand in terms of Dhamma, so even within this security neurotic hang-ups arise. When people are just surviving, they don't have time to be neurotic. Only when they have a lot of time do they have time to worry, to feel offended, to worry about whether the world is going to end within their lifetimes, if the sky is going to fall in, if they will be able to last the decade. These are not the concerns of those who spend their days just trying to survive.

Our lives, then, have presented us with this advantage in the sense that we do have time, we do have security. We live in a country that is benevolent and stable – no matter what the newspapers scream and yell about. It is good enough! You can make problems out of anything. I was in New Zealand a few years ago; a place which doesn't have any terrible problems, only three million people, a very pleasant kind of land. And they are desperate to find headlines for their newspapers. Somebody bought me a Wellington newspaper and it read: 'Drunk man hits policeman!' That would never make the headlines here.

Buddha, Dhamma – that is the paradigm of the universe, isn't it? The conscious experience that we all have from birth is 'the subject that experiences the object'. In this refuge, instead of the subject being 'me' and the objects being the things that 'I' like and 'I' don't like, the objects are *dhammas*, whatever they are. The *dhammas*: all that is subject to arising is subject to ceasing. Conditions are the *dhammas* that we experience; they are seen in terms of Dhamma rather than in terms of whether I like them or not, or whether they are pleasing or not. So there is a shift from interpreting our lives from 'me, my experiences and my problems', to 'the Buddha (that which is pure awareness, intelligence)

reflecting on the Dhamma', which is what we experience through our bodies, through our senses, through our minds: the arising and ceasing of conditioned phenomena. We are aware of conditions arising, and we are aware of the cessation of conditions. So, this awareness is not something we cling to, it is something we 'be'; it is a way of being. We don't become aware, we 'be' aware. We don't become people who are mindful, we 'be' mindful. Some people say, 'I try to be mindful.' But we are not trying to be mindful, we 'be' mindful. When we try to be mindful, we think mindfulness *is* something; we think, 'I should be mindful!' Then the whole thing goes into some kind of distorted problem: 'I'm somebody who is not mindful and I should be. I try to be mindful, but I'm not.' And it goes around and around in the interpretation of our conditioning of 'me' as a person, 'me' as a personality that should be some other way: 'I've got to develop something, get something I don't yet have, and get rid of the things that I shouldn't have.' This whole sense of being a person creates the sense of having to become something: 'I'm not good enough the way I am; I'll have to change; I'll have to become enlightened in the future; I must kill my defilements.' This kind of thinking is the thinking of the conditioned mind.

When we put it in terms of Dhamma, we see all this as thoughts, attitudes, the language that we are conditioned with from our culture. This sense of 'me and mine' is something that is instilled in us. There is subjective knowing, but we don't identify with that. There is knowing things as they are, and it is universal, it is not personal any more, is it? When we see things in terms of the Buddha realizing the Dhamma, we get beyond our own individuality and our own personality, our own unique characters. That which is aware and knowing is universal; it is not just 'me', something 'I' do as a person, or something 'you' can do as an individual. There is awareness and recognition of *dhammas*: the arising, the ceasing, all conditions are impermanent.

Those conditions can be very personal: how you feel, the way you think, your character, your inclinations or tendencies. Your experiences

of life have a highly personal quality about them; they are unique. And no two people have exactly the same feelings or experiences. Yet putting these conditions into the perspective of Dhamma transcends the personal quality. That is why we take refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

The Sangha, then, is the actual practice of this; it is you and me; it is individual human beings – men and women – who practise the Dhamma, who do good and refrain from doing bad, who have made some determination to take refuge in Buddha and Dhamma in order to see things clearly – and this also is not personal.

We can see Sangha as the description for bhikkhus – that is one symbol of Sangha – but I prefer to see it in the sense of ‘those who practise the Dhamma’, whether I know those people or not, whether they are in Britain, Thailand or Korea, or whether they are called Buddhists, Christians, or anything else. The issue is not to try to say who the Sangha is. The point is, the Sangha is a refuge in that dynamic action of being mindful and seeing things in the right way. We can see it in terms of our own individual experiences of life moving more towards that refuge of practising in the right way, doing it properly, sincerely, earnestly. So then the refuge in the Sangha is not in *this* teacher or *that* school of Buddhism. They are just conventions; they are not refuges. You don’t take refuge in Theravada Buddhism. If you do, you shouldn’t! You don’t take refuge in individual teachers. If you do, you know what happens! When you take refuge in a person that you happen to admire or respect, that also is not refuge in Sangha; it is you attaching yourself to somebody. So this other refuge in Sangha is a transcendent refuge – it is human beings, it is men and women, it is people who are actually practising good; it is not an airy-fairy abstraction, some kind of ethereal school of beings; it is all possibilities of human beings living at this moment who are practising in the right way. So it is our humanity that we realize in this refuge in Sangha. The Sangha is a community; it is

like the Church or the Community of those who practise; the seen or unseen beings who practise in the right way.

So when we reflect on these Three Refuges in this way, we realize more and more that it helps us to get beyond just the personal interpretations and the highly emotional feelings that we have. All the prejudices, biases, obstructions, hindrances, defilements, and all that we can interpret as personal faults or flaws, we begin to see in this perspective of Dhamma. The bad, the evil, is that which arises and ceases, too. We see every condition in terms of 'right perspective', or pure knowing, pure awareness. Our active life is a life of mindfulness, doing good, refraining from doing bad, purifying the mind.

## 35 | Direct Knowing

We identify with what we look like, with our faces. We also identify with the conditioning of our minds: the ways in which we've been trained to think and feel, with values, habits acquired, and so on. Beyond the conditioned realm, however, is the unconditioned: the unborn, the uncreated, something without form, quality or quantity. This is where everything ceases, and where our abilities to imagine and perceive, end. But by speaking in this way, we still create images of the conditioned and unconditioned!

For most people the conditioned is all they ever really relate to; the unconditioned remains a kind of metaphysical belief, or some abstraction they might accept. And some people don't even consider it. Even in metaphysical doctrine the unconditioned is given conditions. So we give God attributes; we give Him all kinds of qualities that are, of course, conditioned. An attribute, a quality, a quantity, is 'born', 'created'.

We are all very involved with the realm of mortality, and what is conditioned is mortal, subject to death or cessation. At the end of our lives we shall all inevitably experience death, when the body stops functioning, when the heat element dies out, and the body disintegrates.

A reflection on life is that it *is*. We can describe life, write poetry about it, try to define it, but what is it? It is like *this!* Being able to breathe, being conscious, conscious breathing, feeling, is life. Being involved in breathing, consciousness and feeling until the body dies, is a lifetime, a human lifespan.

The tendency of Western materialism is to emphasize the importance of the death-bound condition, even though we wouldn't put it like that, would we? We would say we were emphasizing life – life is important; we want to live! How we live is also considered to be important; we feel we should be free to do what we want, to develop and have all kinds of rights, privileges and experiences. Life is the important issue. But life itself means death, because we can't have life in this realm without death. So we begin to question whether there is life after life, or a transcended form of life. Right now, however, what we are involved in is life on the feeling, sensory plane. This is what hits us during this lifespan, isn't it? What we are constantly being confronted with is impingement from the conditioned realm. That is what eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, brain and nervous system are all about.

And yet, from the primitive to the present sophisticated forms of humanity, there has always been a sense outside the senses, or an intuition that there is something beyond, something transcendent. And this is often speculated about, or believed in. We form metaphysical doctrines about, say, a realm after death, or transcendent truth, or the immortal, the eternal, the infinite. Immortality is something that each one of us can realize but can never prove. We have no way of holding it up, of capturing it, preserving it, or proving it to anyone else. In other words, each human being is quite capable of realizing ultimate reality, immortal truth, and yet not one of us is capable of proving it to anyone else.

If human beings are not encouraged to realize this truth for themselves, they either go to some authority or expert on the subject and accept what they say, or they simply dismiss the whole thing as being totally irrelevant to their lives. So we might just dismiss the

subject – and this is probably what most of us do. Then we get involved in other important social, economic and political issues that we devote our lives to.

Now the Buddha was a sage who tried to convey a particular teaching that would encourage the realization of ultimate reality. And the teaching of the Buddha sometimes baffles modern humanity because it does seem somewhat strange to our way of thinking. We are used to regarding religion from the point of view of being told something. A sage, or philosopher, or some prophet tells us something, and we either agree with it or not; or maybe we are like the agnostic – not quite sure! Not too many people are absolutely sure, on the negative or on the positive side.

This symbol of the Buddha, then – the knower, the ability of a human being to know the truth – is most significant for us at this time. This particular way of knowing, or Gnosticism, was all destroyed, it seems, at one time in Western civilization. An attempt was made to destroy every bit of Gnostic literature, yet it kind of continues to creep in, doesn't it? They keep finding things like the Gnostic gospels, in old clay pots in caves that have been overlooked all these years! Now, the word 'gnosis' is related to the Pali word '*ñāṇa*', which means 'insight knowledge', 'direct knowledge'. It is not abstract knowledge, it is not knowledge *about* something, it's direct knowing. Direct knowing of the human mind is the whole purpose of the Buddha's teaching.

When people ask me why I became a Buddhist, I tell them it was because of this opportunity. I felt that if there were a God, or an ultimate transcendent reality, or an immortal, it could be known directly. If there is an ultimate truth, then we have to realize it.

Now, admittedly, gnostic forms can be quite dangerous because in some ways anybody can believe almost anything – we can believe in the silliest ideas – so we need to have a way of pointing to this direct knowing, a way of talking about it, that isn't just subjective. Maybe there is no agreed way of talking about it, or maybe the ability to use

perception is never the same; after all, it is something that each one must realize. So when one does realize it, one tends to describe it with the particular perceptions one has, whether one is Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or whatever. One uses what one has to describe ultimate reality. Therefore we hear some very strange expressions of it.

In the Buddhist convention, we take our own direct experiences and weigh them against the teachings of the Buddha. We measure experience through the conventions we have, so there is an agreed way of talking about it. And this the Buddha was very careful about. Bhikkhus and bhikkhunis are totally forbidden to talk about their insights from a subjective place. There is no way we can let a monk say, 'I am an enlightened person,' or 'I have realized ultimate truth.' Such statements are forbidden. If we claim this and it is not true, it is a disrobing offence. If we are mad and say it, it is not an offence! And if we make such a claim to the lay community, even if it is true, it is still an offence. 'I have realized! I am enlightened! I am a stream-enterer! I am this! I am that!' – these are considered inappropriate ways of speaking. The Buddhist way is never from this position of 'I have realized', or 'I have experienced this insight'. We use the formula 'there is! The Buddhist teachings are: 'There is suffering; there is the end of suffering; there is the conditioned; there is the Unconditioned.' We never say: 'I am the Unconditioned!' or 'I am an immortal being!' because it is inappropriate in the Buddhist convention.

Now, this is sometimes baffling, because many people feel that Buddhists are not enlightened any more since they never say so. Back in the seventies Westerners used to go round Thailand looking for enlightened masters. Finally, they would say, 'There aren't any!' That was because people didn't proclaim themselves to be such. If a Buddhist monk claims he is enlightened, everyone becomes wary of him because he is not a proper monk! But does that mean there aren't any enlightened beings? We are thrown back on ourselves, and this is the Buddhist way. It is the way of looking at ourselves, of developing

mindfulness, rather than of going around trying to find out whether someone else is enlightened or not.

When the Buddha was sitting under the bodhi tree and realized truth, he knew he was enlightened. After a while he thought: 'This is too subtle. There's no one I can possibly think of who is going to understand what I've realized. It will be better if I don't even try to find anyone. I'll just sit here under this tree ... maybe go off to a cave or something.' But then, according to the scriptures, Brahma Sahampati – a radiant being who obviously had great compassion for us – interrupted the Buddha when he started thinking this way and said something like, 'Now listen! There are those with only a little doubt. There are human beings who will understand if you but seek them out and make yourself available to them.' So the Buddha said, 'Well, yes, you're right. I'll do that!' Then he asked himself: 'Who do I know who will understand?' and he thought of his previous teachers. But, by the power of his own intuition, he immediately knew that they had both died. Then he thought that maybe the five disciples who had deserted him before his enlightenment might understand.

So he left Bodh Gaya where the bodhi tree is, and made his way to the Deer Park near Benares. On his way he happened to meet another ascetic who recognized his aura of purity. The ascetic said: 'What have you realized, venerable sir?' The Buddha replied: 'I am the all-enlightened Buddha.' The ascetic was a bit bewildered by this remark and said: 'Oh, well, good for you! Goodbye!' Now, what the Buddha said was a direct and true statement. He wasn't lying or bragging, or making false claims; he was just saying what was true in the most direct way. The 'I am' that he spoke of, wasn't an egotistical 'I am'; it was not 'I am the body', or 'I am feeling', or anything like that; it was 'I am the transcendent I-am'; it was from wisdom; it was the universal 'I am'.

Most human beings have not realized the universal 'I am'; they are just the 'I am's' of 'I am a man,' or 'I am a woman,' 'I am an Englishman,' 'I am good,' 'I am bad,' 'I am this,' 'I should be ...' 'I shouldn't be ...' So

when the Buddha taught his first sermon in Benares, he said: 'There is suffering; there is the origin; there is the cessation; there is the path out of suffering.' These are the Four Noble Truths. The statements were made in the way of 'there is', rather than 'I have realized and understood': this is direct knowing, knowing without identification.

## 36 | Turning to the Silence

In meditation we can focus on turning away from thinking or from concentrating on things, and from getting a perspective on emotional feelings and reactions, and return to the source, to the emptiness. This is a helpful way of meditating. We can find emptiness – the empty mind – and that can be the place to refer to or start from, instead of starting from an idea or position about meditation and practice.

If you only know thoughts and feelings – if that is all you ever witness – then you are stuck in the mire of emotional habits, thoughts, views, opinions and conceptual proliferations. The Pali word '*papañca*' means 'conceptual proliferation'; and it is the ongoing perpetual proliferating obloquy of the mind which – once started – just goes on and on and on ... It is the habit of the mind. And this is not reflective thought. Reflective thought would be more like: 'There is suffering. What is it?' That is contemplative; that is taking the Dhamma teachings and applying them to reality, to experience. But *papañca* is when you feel a certain way and your thoughts just go on and on without direction, simply rattling on – one thought connecting with another.

But there is a way out of the chattering mind – the endless din of thinking and emotion – and that is to turn to the silence, to reflect on

the silence of the mind. To practise *ānāpānasati* is another way of doing it: going to the breath or contemplating the body (one's own physical body), its feelings, its posture, its breathing. But the sound of silence has the ability to contain everything; it's like a background. And one can eventually begin to feel the body in the silence, or the breath in the silence, which has more of an all-embracing quality than, say, the body itself, or *ānāpānasati* – at least that is how I experience it.

Now, when turning away from things, it is very important to do it in the right way. It isn't a question of rejecting anything. If there is a desire to get rid of something, it doesn't work; it ends up as another form of suppression. That is why the right understanding of things is so important; the knowledge of things as they are. It isn't just grasping the idea that the sound of silence is a way of escaping problems. That won't work! You need the ability to reflect, to investigate, to see the cause and conditions of things, and to realize that there is no point in just being stuck in the mire of conceptual proliferation. It isn't that you suppress things; it is more that when you see in the right way, you need not give your attention to them any more.

The sense of oneself arises in thought and emotion: the sense of 'me' as a person, and then 'you'. So, I create you in my mind through thought, through memory, through conceptual proliferation, through loving and hating. That is ignorance (*avijjā*) of the mind. And suffering (*dukkha*) is a result of that. If there is ignorance, there is unsatisfactoriness. Insight meditation (*vipassanā*) is looking into the way things are: seeing the causes of suffering, and realizing non-self (*anattā*). In silence there is no sense of self. If you learn to sustain attention on the silence for a while and contemplate that, it is what it is; you don't feel that you are anybody. To become somebody you have to start thinking again – not reflective thought, but habitual thought, identifying with 'I' and 'me'. That is when you see the birth of yourself and the death of yourself, mentally. How many births and deaths in a day? How many times do you get born and die within an

hour? That is a good question to ask yourself: ‘How many times do I arise and cease?’

The cessation of the sense of self is peace. All conditions are impermanent: they arise and they pass away, and their passing is peace. So, in the death of the ‘self’ – when you let go of this sense of self, of the assumption of it, of views, feelings and grasping of self – is clarity and peacefulness of mind. And so peace is a natural state of mind – peaceful, clear, empty, infinite, non-personal, pure, holy. You begin to realize what is blessed, what is holy, what is pure. You really know it. It is something you are realizing. It is not personal, not mine: ‘I am holy and I am pure!’ That just doesn’t make sense any more. To think you are holy and pure in terms of ‘me’ as a person is nonsense. It is just that *there is*: there is purity, there is holiness, there is blessedness, there is liberation from suffering, there is non-suffering, there is non-self, there is non-grasping. To think, ‘I am not grasping anything,’ or ‘I am beyond self,’ is an absurdity. That is why the Buddha referred to himself as the Tathāgata (that which is present here and now). It isn’t like somebody with a birth certificate, a passport, or a *curriculum vitae*; it isn’t that Prince Siddhartha became the ascetic Gotama and then became the Buddha. The Tathāgata is ‘that which is present now – alert and conscious now, suchness’.

‘*Tathatā*’ means ‘suchness’ or ‘as-is-ness of the moment’. When I first came across this word ‘suchness’ in Zen literature I thought, ‘What the heck is suchness? Suchness! – that’s nonsense – can’t figure that one out!’ If we hold perceptions to be reality, then we have to perceive it *as* something in order for our world to be real; it can’t be just what it is. We have to interpret it, or give it a name, or describe it in some way. We perceive the world *through* words, *through* ideas. This obsession with cameras and photography now is just wanting to capture things, capture moments on film, petrify them in time, and make them fixed, because everything is moving and changing. But suchness or *tathatā*, the Tathāgata, is *right now*. This is the way it is. But sometimes, when

I say, 'This is the way it is,' people will say, 'You mean this is the way it is forever?' No! This is the way it is RIGHT NOW! The only way it *can be* is the way it is right now. It is changing, but at this moment the suchness of this moment is just this way. The thinking mind has to stop, otherwise you will want to ask, 'Where is it? What is he saying?' You just have to stop your mind and listen, or watch. Then you will be relating to suchness, the suchness of the moment, the as-is-ness.

When something unpleasant happens, or something bad, if we say, 'Well, you know, that's the way it is ...!' that isn't suchness; that is just a cynical statement: 'Life is pretty horrible and that's the way it is. Just put up with it!' But that is just resignation to misery; it isn't suchness – unless, of course, you see the suchness of that particular attitude.

Or, when we regard the past as something that is very real, we may think, 'Ten years I've been a monk! – twenty-eight, twenty-nine years I've been a monk!' That is conventional reality, but it is also thinking of ourselves as having been something for twenty-eight years. And that is just a memory; it is perception in the present. When you really look at it, there is not a person any more; there is just a memory in the present.

We are establishing this awareness in the present with the Dhamma, with the way things are, rather than letting all our memories of the past corrupt, disturb and influence the present moment. People who carry things in their minds are always distorting the reality of the present with attachments and views. The problems of the world come from that – from resentment, from disappointment, from suffering – from the experiences of the past. When we don't see the present, we merely project or proliferate into the present all kinds of things from the past. Once we begin to realize that, we can turn to the silence, finding a resting place in emptiness and awareness, in the suchness of the moment. The emotions tend not to want to do that. Emotions have a power that is very convincing; they can convince us that they are real and important.

Years ago, back in the fifties, there was a movie about a woman who was to be executed. It was supposed to be a true story of an American

woman who was to be sent to the electric chair. Susan Hayward, who played the part, was very popular at the time, and well known for giving melodramatic performances. 'I want to live!' was the name of the movie. Of course, Susan Hayward could say that line – 'I want to live!' – in a most emotional way. I remember it now, right back from the fifties, her screaming: 'I WANT TO LIVE!' and it made an indelible impression on my mind.

When I was in a branch monastery in Thailand before I came to England, I went through a period of feeling I was dying. The inspiration of the monastic life was no longer there, and I found it incredibly boring. The rocks there absorbed the heat making it very hot, and the food was really dreary. There was nothing at all to look forward to. Day after day brought the same dreary routine. I received letters telling me about all the things they were doing in America. Jack Kornfield wrote describing the fascinating life he was leading, and all the wonderful things that were happening in the sixties – all the things I was missing out on! The sixties must have been fantastic in America – the sixties and seventies – and here I was in this hot place! I felt as though I was dying. This inner voice would say – just like Susan Hayward – 'I want to live!' Susan Hayward kept saying to me, 'I want to live! I'm wasting my life!'

Emotions can be very convincing, very powerful, like a melodrama. They can seem real and true while they are going on, but for me at that time there was also that which was aware of them – an awareness of those emotions as mental objects was established already – and I trusted in that. It was hard going, but I did establish my refuge in the awareness of that screaming, crying, pathetic thing in me. That was the thing I trusted rather than the messages I was getting through my emotions which were in themselves empty. They were empty and soulless things, even though they sounded very much like Susan Hayward who was a very powerful actress. But, still, she was an actress.

Getting that perspective is very important, and very wonderful in itself. It will change your direction: you won't be helplessly caught

up in your own emotions and the emotions of others; you won't be helplessly caught up in worldly problems, urgent messages, hysteria, intimidation, or any of it. The world is like that. It is chock-a-block full of intimidation, urgent messages, very important, shattering, destroying, destructive things, terrible prophecies – all kinds of things from the past and all kinds of dreadful things that might happen in the future. When we think about those things, we get caught in becoming anxious, frightened and insecure; we become threatened by things we produce in our own minds. So we can get a perspective on that. Not by suppressing anything, not by pushing anything down and rejecting it, but by seeing things as they are. We can always start anew.

We are really moving to deathlessness, to timelessness. This is what we are connecting to again. We have been thrown out, like Adam and Eve, into the world, thrown out of this paradise, the Garden of Eden, into *samsāra*, this miserable place where people are murdering each other, and so forth. And we think, 'How can we get back to the Garden of Eden? I want to get back there. I don't like it out here. It's cold and terrifying out here.' The Garden of Eden, here, is the symbol of that which is timeless and deathless.

*Sandiṭṭhiko akāliko ehipassiko opanāyiko paccattaṃ vedītabbo viññūhīti*: 'apparent here and now, timeless, encouraging investigation. *'Ehipassiko*': 'come and see! Come and have a look right now!' *'Ehipassiko*' can be translated as 'encouraging investigation', but that is a paraphrase because it is much more immediate. It isn't so much 'I encourage you to investigate the Dhamma', as 'Come and see RIGHT NOW! Don't dilly-dally. Don't waste your time putting it off until the next retreat.' *'Ehipassiko dhamma opanayiko*': 'leading inwards, leading to nibbāna, to non-attachment.

And then *'paccattaṃ vedītabbo viññūhīti*': to be experienced individually by the wise. If you don't think you are wise, the point has been missed here. 'To be experienced individually', takes the wisdom for granted. As you are developing, you are using wisdom. Wisdom is

there. It isn't a question of thinking: 'I'm wise!' but wisdom is with you all the time. It isn't something you lack; it is just something you don't use for much of the time. Also, seeing that thought is *anicca, dukkha, anattā* – seeing it for what it is, is a development of wisdom; it is using wisdom in the present. Wisdom is not something that you accumulate and get lots of in the future. You are developing the *ability* to use wisdom. The teachings themselves are wisdom teachings. You don't become wise through memorizing the teachings and holding onto them, but the teachings are there to develop wisdom, to remind us to use wisdom in the present.

Also, don't be afraid of being selfish: *be selfish* and listen to it. Get to know what it is, and then turn away from it so that you realize non-self. Don't take a stand that you 'shouldn't be selfish' and then always criticize yourself because you *are* being selfish and you shouldn't be! That is just conceptual proliferation; you will just go round and round with that one: 'I know I shouldn't be selfish; I try my hardest not to be, but then, you know, I find I'm obsessed with my self and with what I should be!' Then you go on into a scenario of guilt and remorse about selfishness. But that which is aware of that scenario, *that* is your refuge. You can turn to the silence, let go, and contemplate just the state of attention, sustained attention and awareness. That kind of attention is sustainable. It isn't like concentrating on an object that you can't sustain for very long. You can sustain attention, receptive attention, listening, being mindful. That is the balance point. As you learn to trust and rest there, you will find that that is like being balanced.

Balance is effortlessness, isn't it? It seems effortless to be balanced. Yet until you learn how to do it, it takes a lot of effort. You go from this side to that, like children when they are learning to walk. They don't have the balance, so they are always standing up and falling down, standing up and falling down, holding on to things and letting go, then falling down again. They have to go through an extreme process of falling down and standing up until, suddenly, they connect with the balance.

When learning, you may have to fall down a lot! But that strengthens you. Little children learning how to walk are strengthening their bodies as they stand up, fall down, and stand up again. It is like exercising, developing their bodies. That is part of the process. It is not that there is anything wrong with it, that children should be made so that they balance right off and don't have to go through all that. Animals are different. As soon as horses or cows are out of the womb they are standing up on all fours; they are a lot cleverer than we are. It takes ages for us to stand up. So the ups and downs and the struggles of life can be recognized as also developing strength. It's not a waste. There isn't something wrong with you because you can't find the balance immediately, though we would all like to. We need to learn from the trials and errors we make.

## 37 | It's Boring to be a Person

Reflecting, meditating, contemplating – as a way of using Dhamma – is developing intuitive awareness. Contemplation is not a rational process of logic; it is not a question of being logical about anything, but of being aware, being the watcher and the witness, the observer, the knower. The Buddha is ‘the knowing’. ‘Buddha’ also implies a person. That is why there are Buddha-images. We can make Buddha into a human form, because the Buddha-awareness is something that is natural to us in our human state. And that is why Buddhas can be born in the human realm. The word itself means the knowing, the ability to know things as they are. So contemplate this – this ability to know.

Each one of us is living a lifetime in a separate form where we have to experience all different kinds of unpredictable things that can happen – the natural process of the ageing of the body, and the contingencies that we experience through a lifetime as a separate entity. And we know when something is impinging on us. It isn't just knowing about something abstractly. This kind of knowing is direct awareness; it's intuitive; it's immediate to the present moment. Many of us don't use this very much; we tend to live in a world of abstract projections. We create ourselves. We create other people. We create

a society. So we experience life through a lot of filters, through a lot of perceptual conditioning that is often very bad. We can see things in very distorted ways; interpret life from the various forms of greed, hatred and delusion, if we don't awaken to the way things are.

We talk about 'empty mind' (*suññatā*) and 'non-self' (*anattā*). These words are very significant in Buddhism, as are nirvana or nibbāna, cessation (*nirodha*) and desirelessness (*virāga*). They are pointing to the absence of things. We are not usually conscious of absence; we are conscious more of the presence of things, so we give a lot of significance to what we are conditioned into perceiving. If we don't have a perception of something – if we don't know what it is – we tend to ignore it. Very unsophisticated people with a narrow vision of things see in rigid ways. They have to ignore a lot of their own experiences because they have no way of perceiving them or accepting them in conscious experience. They might label something or someone as 'the devil', as I was once when I was accused of being a Satanist. And Venerable Sobhano was accused of being a devil-worshipper when he was starting a *dhutāṅga* walk from Mount Athos in Greece. The monks there are very conservative. They think the Roman Catholics are even worse! At least they let him into the place. If one's perceptual range is very fixed, anything that doesn't fit into that range is seen as being alien, so it's bad: Foreign? – bad! Different? – bad! That is a kind of simplistic logic, isn't it? Anything that doesn't fit neatly into one's perception of what is acceptable and right and good, is bad. And one has no way of dealing with it, other than putting it all into one category. Fundamentalism does that in religion. Everything that is not understood is lumped together and said to be heretical or bad.

With Buddha-Dhamma we are not trying to perceive right and wrong in fixed ways, but rather with intuitive awareness, with mindfulness. Then we develop the wisdom faculty. We begin to be intuitively aware of goodness in the present moment – no matter what it looks like. It doesn't have to look like Buddha or Jesus. Our intuition picks up on it

in the immediacy of the moment, rather than projecting prejudices, biases and preferences onto it, which is what we tend to do when we are not being mindful. If you get into conservative communities, the word 'foreigner' is often used pejoratively: 'He's a foreigner!' meaning 'He's not one of us!' Everybody that doesn't fit into your national identity is lumped together as 'foreigners'. And it has this sense of 'We don't know what they might do! They might pick their noses or do something disgusting; they might embarrass us.' In reflection we can observe this.

Observe these things in your own mind. Don't try to pretend that you are super-tolerant of everything, that you are a Buddhist who just completely accepts everything. These are ideals that we might have: of being very tolerant, accepting, understanding, compassionate for all sentient beings, for the suffering of all others – not having class prejudices, ethnic prejudices, racial prejudices, gender prejudices, religious prejudices – of being completely free of all that. We try to pretend, but then we notice that there are moments when certain things do arise. Here in Britain, people sometimes feel themselves going into a state of tension over the way some accents sound. It doesn't affect an American very much. But these are forms of conditioning. They are there whether we want them or not, and they affect our conscious experience. With intuitive awareness we can notice these things. We can begin to pick up where we tend to cringe, where we feel offended, where we feel averse, frightened or threatened by the way somebody moves, or the way somebody looks, or because of their accent, their colour, or whatever. So we are not trying to pretend that we don't have any kind of reaction; we are simply observing the reactions that we do have.

This ability to observe is your refuge. This which is the witness, the observer, the knower, is what you need to trust. Whatever your reaction is, it is that. You cannot make yourself react according to your tolerant idealism, but you can be aware of those reactions: of being intolerant, of being narrow-minded, bigoted, or cruel. You can at least

notice all these different emotional states in terms of Dhamma: ‘That which is subject to arising is subject to ceasing’. And when we begin to accept what we are feeling and what we are experiencing, that doesn’t mean we like it or approve of it; we are not trying to justify what we are feeling; we are just learning to notice what we are feeling; It is like *this*.

Sometimes ‘feeling’ is very hard to describe. How many people can really describe it. I say, ‘How do you feel right now?’ And you say, ‘Well, er ... well ...’ We have words to point to feeling, but actually it is just like *this*. It isn’t intellectual; it isn’t a symbol of anything; it is an immediate experience. This is a sense realm. This is a feeling realm that we are living in. Feeling is like *this*.

When we talk about transcendence in religion, or the realization of nibbāna or enlightenment, we shouldn’t see this as something remote. Buddhists in this country and Buddhists in general have elevated enlightenment to such a high state that nobody thinks they could ever reach it. Is that what the Four Noble Truths is about? Was the Buddha placing enlightenment in such a high place that only a very special kind of human being could ever realize it? Someone was telling me the other day that Buddha was enlightened because he had all these previous lives as a Bodhisattva where he developed all these virtues, and so he could get enlightened. That was 2,538 years ago. If only one person can get enlightened in that time, what are we doing here? It’s a waste of time!

Also, Buddha left us his teachings so we don’t have to discover the Four Noble Truths for ourselves. The Buddha provided us with all the clues and conventions and guidelines. It is a matter of just using the teaching, of just making it work.

One of the big problems that we all face – especially in the Western world – is that we have very strong social and cultural conditioning which gives a lot of importance to being individuals. We have exaggerated egos and make a lot of ourselves. I noticed when I was living in a monastery in Thailand that the ego of the Thais is more

connected to a community, to a culture, to a family and a nation. Their identities are more connected in terms of responsibilities and being part of a wider group. But I am from an American background, and we were conditioned to emphasize our separateness, our individuality. I was brought up to be a unique individual – not a member of a community – so we are full of ourselves. And this sense of the importance of our views, our opinions, our presence, our personality, our soul, our self, is a very strong perception that affects what we do in Buddhist meditation.

When we meditate, we could be coming from a very self-centred position that we are not aware of because it is so ingrained in us. We might not know how to get any perspective on that sense of ourselves as a person, as a personality. So how do we get behind our personality, our cultural conditioning, or the conditioning we acquired before we learned to read and write? In those first six or seven years of our lives we develop a sense of ourselves. A lot is just implied through the attitudes of relatives, teachers, ethnic identity and so on, the way everyone thinks and assumes is just normal and right. And we acquire all that during those first seven years. Nobody is trying to make us acquire it; it is just natural. We receive whatever is coming at us, good or bad. When a baby is born its mind is like a *tabula rasa*, an empty white space with nothing on it. And then we start writing things on it: 'I am ...' and so on. But how do we get back to the *tabula rasa*, the empty mind? When we try to do it as an ego – 'I'm going to empty my mind!' – we find we cannot. Try to do it that way – just as an act of will: 'I'm going to empty my mind now!' And see how far you get with that one. You might think: 'Well, of course, I have these problems now, but if I sit on a zafu for many hours a day, for many days a week, for many weeks a year, then something will happen!' Haemorrhoids, maybe ...!

Mindfulness is about being able to stay open to the way things are. We start with basic things, like the breath and the body, the posture, things that aren't connected with social conditioning and the ego. We use the posture by beginning to notice just the way the

body is – sitting, standing, walking, or lying down – by beginning to acknowledge right now what the body is doing: ‘At this moment I am sitting!’ Very simple and very obvious; nothing complicated about it; no mystical significance to it. It is just the way it is, isn’t it? Right now my body is sitting here; it is like *this*. What does it feel like when it is sitting? There is the ability to observe, but I can’t think how to describe it. How do I describe my body sitting? I feel a little pressure here and there; I can notice certain physical sensations. But to contemplate the sitting posture is to open up the mind, to learn how to bring the body into consciousness as something that *is now*. The posture, the sitting posture right now, is like *this*; and we begin to be aware of different sensations, feelings, pressures and neutral things of the body. Usually, we aren’t aware very much of our bodies unless they start giving us a lot of pleasure or a lot of pain. If the body feels really good, we notice it; and if it starts aching or hurting, we notice it. But when it is neither, we don’t notice it. We don’t know how to. We just ignore the body until it goes into more extreme states. So, with meditation, we begin to turn our attention to the body by becoming aware of the posture and the breath: ‘inhaling, exhaling, is like *this*.’

Formal meditation practices are for learning how to sustain attention on the things that we don’t pay attention to. Our education is not towards learning how to sustain attention on one thing. Most of us are taught to think in logical, rational ways. So it’s easy for us to think and go from one thought to another in a logical sequence. We like that; we feel comfortable with that; it sounds intelligent; and it feels right to be able to rationalize. But in some meditation practices – like calming (*samatha*) – we learn to focus on an object, to sustain attention on one thing, and that is a different way of training the mind. It is quite difficult for most of us to do that, because we are so conditioned into thinking about things.

In *ānāpānasati* we are sustaining our attention on just the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, using just what is happening with the

breathing as a focus, learning how to bring attention to the breath and sustaining awakened awareness on the natural breathing of the body. The attitude is one of learning to just be with, rather than trying to *make* oneself concentrate on the breath. Even the words are deluding; we say: 'Concentrate on the breath!' And then we get this idea that we have to do something, we have to wilfully pay attention to the breath. But that doesn't work – which is why we get so frustrated with *ānāpānasati*. To say, 'Concentrate on the breath!' to me sounds as if you are supposed to find the breath and then concentrate on it. The way that it works, however, is to relax with the breath. I think that is a more useful suggestion. So, learn to notice the breath by simply bringing the breathing of the body into consciousness; and then feel at ease with it. Just be with, relax into, the breathing of the body.

I find this way of talking more conducive to concentration than the *idea* of having to concentrate on the breath. That becomes too theoretical. We get an idea and then try to do what we think we should do, rather than just being with what *is*, with the breath as it is. The body is forever changing; it is a condition that was born and will die. The breath is in its usual inhaling/exhaling habit, but that which is aware of the body and the breath, what is it? This is an enquiry. What is the constant thing in this process of breathing? It is sustained attention, that which is aware of the breath, that which knows that the breath is like *this*, that the body is like *this*. It isn't a thought, is it? It isn't a condition of the mind; it's the natural state of the mind. The purity of the mind is in this awareness.

The attitude, then, is more like a listening-attention, like listening to the traffic outside. We can project onto that traffic, can't we? We can say, 'I don't like traffic!' But we create that. When we are attentive without creating any thoughts, then it's all right; then we don't suffer from the noise of the traffic, or from the yew hedge being trimmed. We can sit here and just concentrate on the sound of the hedge cutter. And as we get the spirit of practice more, we won't create aversion onto

sound; we won't think, 'Oh, that sound is ruining my meditation.' If we come from a position of 'I like/I want' – from ideas and our own personal preferences – we tend to be critical and averse to what is happening, either inside or outside us. We are critical of ourselves, of each other, of society and the world. In this state of attentive awareness, however, we find a refuge. That refuge is in resting in this awareness, just trusting it. It is very simple! It isn't beyond our ability – something that we can't do – it is just something we don't notice, or have ever appreciated.

That which is aware – that which can listen, can notice, can know things as they are before we start thinking about them or loving or hating them – in that state of attention, when I am just in that state, there is no sense of self, of me as a person. I can get beyond my own social conditioning, my own personality, just by listening, just by being aware; in that there is no Ajahn Sumedho. In order for Ajahn Sumedho to come into being, I have to start thinking. In the attention of witnessing, however, there is consciousness; it is not a trance. We are not absorbed into anything; we are not absorbed into some refined state of conscious experience. We are right here, looking with eyes wide open, ears open, totally receptive, but empty. There is no self. There is no attachment to anything. There is just this resting in the ability to be receptive and aware in the present, to the body, to the breath.

We also begin to notice just the mood, or just the emotion. In the Four Foundations of Mindfulness (the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta),<sup>11</sup> the four foundations are the objects of the mind: the body, the feeling, the mental conditioning (*citta*), and the way it is (Dhamma). When we talk about the four foundations of mindfulness, therefore, remember that they are objects we are observing. Notice the relationship is subject to object, mental objects, objects in the mind. Consciousness is a function. We are conscious when we are born out of the mother's womb; we start life as a separate conscious entity. So consciousness is not culturally conditioned; it is a function, a natural function; and we begin to recognize this conscious awareness, awareness through consciousness.

<sup>11</sup> Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta: This sutta can be found in the Middle Length Sayings and also the Long Discourses of the Buddha.

Consciousness, then, is like *this*; it is like waiting, like listening. We use the body and the breath as something to focus on at first, in order to learn how to establish awareness, how to pay attention to that which we usually don't pay attention to. I also use the 'sound of silence': a kind of high-pitched background sound behind the sound of the traffic, or whatever. If you just listen now to the traffic, notice also this kind of high-pitched buzzing sound.

Now, when we begin to develop that sustained listening to something that we don't generally notice – like the sound of silence – that gives us perspective. We don't usually notice it. We are so involved with ourselves, with what we are thinking and our reactions, that we are not aware – except maybe when our egos drop away for a moment. Suddenly we might hear it! Or maybe we just think something is wrong with our ears! We might think we have an ear problem. But it isn't a problem; it is just the way things are. Don't make anything out of it: 'I am now one with the universal sound!' kind of thing. People do sometimes think like that; they feel they have attained something in this life. But the spiritual life doesn't work if you come from that position. You have to let go of everything. It is a total loss. If someone asks me: 'What have you gained, Sumedho, from thirty years in the monastic life?' 'Nothing!' 'So, you've wasted your life?' 'No! Everything I've gained, I've lost.'

The point is, if we gain something, we lose it! That is just the way things are. So, it isn't a matter of gain – that is a worldly attitude – it is about letting go, letting go of the desire to gain. And we let go to the point of there being nothing left except this purity, this natural state of purity that is with us all the time. It is with us all the time, but we are unaware of it; we don't see it. It's like water to a fish. Recognize that purity is the natural state that never leaves, that never gets stained, and that never gets lost. So there is no need to try to find it because it's already here, and it is only in letting go of everything that you begin to realize this true purity.

As to our personalities, what do we think we are? We might think, 'Oh, you know, I get angry, jealous, frightened, resentful of things; I can be mean-hearted and all kinds of things.' And, of course, we exaggerate our faults, don't we? As people, we are conditioned to think of ourselves as basically impure: 'Adam and Eve did it; it's their fault; it's the woman's fault! She got Adam to eat the apple – her fault!' So, basically, we tend to see ourselves in terms of being sinners, of being impure. Now, whether you agree with it or not, those are the underlying assumptions of our culture in the Western world, aren't they? Judaism, Christianity, Islam, the Near Eastern religions – that whole way of thinking – tends to be based on the idea that we are sinners. Now, that doesn't mean that we don't sin! What I am saying is: recognize that we are not claiming purity as 'mine' on the personal level of 'I am pure as a person,' but that purity is our natural state of being, and we can be open to it at any moment – just by being mindful.

This state of intuitive awareness seems like nothing, yet emotionally we are expecting something great – like a mystical experience. We want to feel this sense of oneness with the whole universe, or see some kind of light, or experience some kind of dazzling ecstasy. We read about the mystics or yogis, and people who have mystical experiences, and it can be phrased in terms that sound so dramatic, so fantastic, that we are primed, maybe, to think that it is some kind of high; that we are aiming for some high peak of ecstasy. But the Middle Way of the Buddha is the subtle awareness through the investigation of Dhamma, through letting go of the things we are habituated to, of relinquishing our grasping, of renouncing, relaxing, freeing ourselves from holding on to habits, ideas, thoughts, emotions, and things.

So, when you are in this state of 'just attention', I encourage you to trust in it. You really need to trust, because it doesn't seem like anything; it seems like nothing, actually, and emotionally we can resist it. We think, 'Oh, I'll go and read the newspaper.' Because, at least emotionally, we can relate to someone being murdered: 'Isn't

that disgusting!' we say; 'Isn't that shocking?' And we get emotionally caught up in that. But the sound of silence and no-thing – emotionally we feel frustrated by that. That is why we need to learn to be patient with our emotions. We are not trying to suppress them (whatever emotional reactions we have, we need to accept them) but they can often be very negative towards meditation; they can make us very restless, or bring a sense of doubt or aversion. But when we are in this position of the knowing, when we allow the conditions that arise to cease, then we don't try to get rid of them; we just give them the space, the opportunity, to cease. The more we trust in that, the more we find a sense of real peacefulness, a sense of just attention and peace, a calm and clarity, a mental clarity.

Now, the foundation for this kind of practice is, of course, based on moral responsibility. We learn to be responsible, to do what is good and refrain from doing what is not good. It isn't just being passive, just watching everything arise and cease in a passive way – that would mean that we were somehow not participating in life – what we are talking about instead, is participating in life in a way that is skilful. We can learn from our experiences. Ajahn Chah's style was to develop awareness around the monastic life. We never had periods of meditation retreats as such, but developed mindfulness around the discipline, the restraint and the quality of life of a monk in a forest monastery. So we had this restraint in action and speech as regards the Vinaya, and the practice was to observe. My mind, when I first became a monk, was very resistant to the restraint of monastic life. I am emotionally programmed to follow impulses. I am an American from California! 'Do what you want! Express yourself! Be creative and do your own thing!' This was the philosophy that I previously held before becoming a monk. Then suddenly – can't do this, can't do that – restraint – mindfulness! You think, 'Oh no!' I had this resistance to restraint. But, then, that was the point. The whole purpose was to observe that resistance. Ajahn Chah was very good at getting you to look at what was happening in

your mind. Even though in that first year we didn't have a common language with which to communicate, he certainly got across what he wanted you to do. He wanted us to look at what we were actually doing and thinking within the monastic lifestyle there.

In the Buddhist world there are many views and opinions about how to practise, and the arguments never seem to cease. There is the Tibetan system and the Theravada, the Zen and the Pure Land, and then there is Vipassana, Samatha, and all the rest. And in the Theravada alone there are the endless arguments and opinions about how to meditate – even in Ajahn Chah's monasteries, in our monasteries – because people tend to interpret the scriptures and get ideas according to their own ways of thinking. They do not get behind their own conditioning, their own reasonableness, their own intellectual gifts. Some of the most intelligent Buddhists have the greatest blindness in this respect. They are so intelligent that they impress themselves: they are so utterly reasonable! But we need to get beyond being reasonable to the *tabula rasa*: the empty mind, and then we will see that all these different ways – the Theravada, the Mahayana, and all these things – are just conditions that arise and cease in the mind. We don't hold our identity in being anything, which means that we can still remain within a tradition. There is no need to throw it out, and yet we are no longer holding onto it. Then it works for us as something that is a good friend and guide, rather than a fixed position.

Monks can become very idealistic about monasticism, and even after many years, still try to be good monks according to the idealism that they have. In the suttas there are these inspired passages about proper bhikkhus who are full of compassion, selflessness, and are diligent in putting forth the right effort. We think, 'I'm going to do that!' and at first try to live up to these ideals. But you can only do that for so long before it falls apart. You try to act like a good monk, look like a good monk, sound like a good monk, but then, after a while, you begin to hate it; it all seems so phoney. That is because of attachment to the form and to the ideas you have.

I encourage you to develop an awareness of moving through this spaciousness of the mind – like with the sound of silence – when, if you notice, your mind is wide open. If you are focused on something, your mind is fixed on one thing, on an object, and you have to remove everything else. You are so focused, you reject all other impingement. But the sound of silence is like radar where everything is broad and embracing, and that helps you to reflect. You can contemplate from that kind of receptive openness, that intuitive awareness; you can see what suffering is and what non-suffering is; you begin to really notice what *dukkha* is and what non-*dukkha* is, what self is and what non-self is – as you are experiencing it.

Most of us know what grasping is and what non-grasping is, what desire is and what desirelessness is. These are very clear states. It isn't just a matter of having ideas about nibbāna and desirelessness; it is actually knowing desirelessness, actually knowing *anattā*, knowing nibbāna, recognizing them. When I feel upset or threatened by something, I make a special effort to use whatever it is as a mental object, and to accept what I am feeling – in the body as well. It isn't analytical; it is observing what it feels like when I am feeling threatened by something, feeling upset, or offended by what somebody has said. Somebody says something that offends me – what does that feel like? What is the mood like in the mind? What is the body like? I begin to notice and go to that sense of being offended or threatened by something or somebody, accepting it for what it is. And then it ceases. Then I note the absence of it.

You can notice the presence and the absence of things. What do you have to do to be a person? Listen to yourself! Listen to your own personality: 'I'm like *this*, and I should be like *that*; and I shouldn't be like this. And you're like *that*. I wish I wasn't like *this*; I wish I was like *that*. And I shouldn't feel this way, but I do! I don't want to be like this, but I am!' The personality – it's boring, isn't it? The same old stuff ... It's boring to be a person! You bore yourself to death! But that which is aware – that which listens to the personality – what is that? You can

hear yourself, can't you? You can hear yourself being somebody: 'He said *that* to me. How dare he talk to me like that!' I can hear myself thinking in that way. What is it that is aware of that? I am asking this question, not to get an answer, but just to notice and to trust in that which is aware and listens ... That is purity of the mind. You can't get behind it; you can't see it; you can only *be* it. Then you begin to trust in just the purity of being aware, in which the various forms of mental conditioning and emotional habits can be seen and accepted and relinquished, and be liberated from.

The experience of liberation from those habits is peace. When we feel angry, for example, we accept that feeling – we are not analyzing, making moral judgements or any value judgements about it whatsoever – we just notice that it feels like *this*; it is *this* way. And when it ceases (because it has arisen, it ceases), the cessation of anger feels very peaceful. Notice that! We don't tend to notice the absence of anger. We are aware of when we are angry: 'I'm angry now!' But when we are not angry, we don't contemplate the mind without that anger in it. We tend to think of ourselves in terms of 'I'm an angry person! I have a lot of problems with anger, and I am an angry person.' And the assumption is that I am an angry person all the time. I have defined myself as such, and I am this way. Even when I'm asleep, I am an angry person. Even when I am not angry, I'm an angry person.

We have prejudiced ourselves to see ourselves only from a bias, from a perception that we create. Awareness, however, allows us to recognize non-anger, non-greed, non-delusion, non-grasping, non-self. It is not like being somebody or being something or attaining anything; it is recognizing the way things are. So then we have the Buddha knowing the Dhamma. The Buddha sees, knows, the truth of the way it is. That is our refuge.

This way of awareness also helps us to resolve emotional habits that we all have – immature and emotional habits that we might not want, but can't help. We don't know how to resolve them. We just try to

suppress them, maybe, or spend years going through therapies, trying to understand: 'Why do I feel lonely?' or whatever. But in meditation, as we begin to trust in this awareness, in this purity, and reflect, we also begin to accept our emotions, no matter how immature, childish or silly they might be. We are not judging them in terms of ourselves any more, we are just recognizing their presence and their absence – and that resolves them. You are no longer identifying with them, or making judgements about them.

If you say, 'I have these immature emotional habits,' like anger, you think you are that way all the time – even when you are asleep! We tend to see ourselves in very fixed ways, as if anger or immaturity were a constant factor in our lives, so that even when it is not there, 'I'm still that way!' We create ourselves into a person who is *that way*, and we assume we are that all the time. When you actually observe the way it is, however, you realize that those things come and go, that they are not what you are, that they are not yours. As you realize this more, you liberate yourself from these wrong views about yourself, these assumptions that you are a permanent something or other!



Many people, when they first come to meditation, concentrate on suffering, but then they continue to do that for years and years, and are not aware of non-suffering. If the teaching comes across as 'everything is suffering and you have to look at suffering, confront suffering', but still with this idea that 'I am somebody who suffers', then after years you *are* still suffering and not noticing when there is no suffering.

When we emphasize suffering, the mind tends to project suffering onto everything. If we are coming from this assumption that everything is suffering, we look at those flowers there and think, 'That's *dukkha*, that's suffering!' What are we doing when we do that? We are projecting from our minds; we are taking the word 'suffering' and putting it onto those flowers. That is what is happening, isn't it? The reasoning behind that is that we know they are pretty now, but tomorrow they won't look so good, and then they are going to wilt, they are going to rot and stink, so: 'Don't get attached to them! Don't even look at them. You will only be disappointed and suffer.' What we are doing is *creating* suffering, we are projecting the idea of suffering onto everything.

Was the Buddha teaching that? No, he didn't say that everything is suffering; he said that there is suffering. He pointed to suffering as a goad, as something that jabs us and awakens us; the pain of life that jabs us so that we suddenly feel, 'What's going on here?' It isn't a matter of coming from the position that everything is suffering, but of using the experience of suffering to realize non-suffering, to use the sense of ourselves, our personalities, to take us to non-self, to that realization of not-self.

Notice what attachment is. Don't just think you shouldn't be attached to something. How many of you think that, as Buddhists, you shouldn't be attached to anything? That is coming from an ideal of: 'If I were really practising, I wouldn't be attached to anything. Buddhists shouldn't be attached!' But that isn't it. It is by *observing* attachment, that you realize non-attachment. It isn't until you accept, understand, and recognize attachment, that you realize non-attachment. Non-attachment is not realized through trying to hold to a view that you shouldn't be attached to anything. That doesn't work.

The same with desire and desirelessness. If I think, 'I shouldn't have any desires; desire is bad, but I'm full of desire! I can't practise properly because I'm full of desires and I shouldn't be!' that is the self holding to a view. The view is that 'I am somebody who has a lot of desires, and even when I'm asleep I am just a hotbed of desire.' Instead of just hating myself for having desires, however, I can ask myself what desire is; I can study it, investigate it, notice it, contemplate it.

In order to contemplate and to recognize things, however, you have to first embrace them. It is the openness, the intuitive awareness, that allows you to accept even the worst possible things into your conscious experience. Pain and misery, and all the rest, can be accepted into consciousness and then, with the use of wisdom and understanding of Dhamma, can be let go of. Then non-grasping is realized, desirelessness is realized – not through trying to get rid of desire, but through understanding it. Non-suffering (*non-dukkha*) is

not the result of getting rid of suffering, but of recognizing it and no longer grasping it, no longer creating suffering out of ignorance. This is very important. Don't see nibbāna as something so high that you, as a person, are incapable of it, nor think that you, as a person, are going to realize nibbāna – that could be another ego trip: 'I'm going to get there. I'm going to be the first American to realize nibbāna. Another winner; another first. Somebody else has realized it first ...? Oh, this is the end ...!' But this practice isn't a matter of attaining; nibbāna isn't an attainment but a realization.

This practice also integrates well into activity. I have had many responsibilities over the years – first in Thailand, and now here in England – but this has not been an obstruction to the practice. People think it is. But it isn't. If you think it is, then of course it will be. When I came to England in 1977, I had all kinds of ideas about things, and had to work through a lot of resentment when things got difficult or didn't go so well. I would think, 'I shouldn't have come here. I want to go to the Himalayas and live in a cave. I want to be a Milarepa. I don't want to be head of a monastery.' This cave in the Himalayas was usually my image when I wanted to get out of anything. Something would go wrong, somebody would complain, and I would think, 'Oh, I want to go off to the Himalayas!' Then I began to see the resentment I had about having to be always in the position I was in.

The question is, then, how do you take resentment itself to realize non-resentment? The point is to see these as ways to make things work for you. Take what you have, what you are feeling, and notice it. For a long time I didn't even notice I had resentment. Then I began to notice it and realize that it could take me to non-resentment. Notice non-resentment, non-self, non-anger, non-greed, non-grasping, desirelessness. Then you can realize the path, the way to develop, and it will become very clear how to practise in life with the way you are. We learn from the way we are with all our virtues and vices, and from the way life is for us, and from the people we are living with, and the

conditions around us. They may not be what we want, but none of them are obstructions to enlightenment.

During this week here at the Leicester Summer School try to develop an awareness around the silence. It may be frustrating at first, but don't make it into a big thing or force it. Begin to just recognize it and relax with it – a sense of just attention, a gentle attentiveness that you can sustain. If you are too wilful, you cannot sustain it. You have to be wilful with certain things like lifting a log onto a lorry or something like that, but you cannot sustain that kind of strength or will. Sustained awareness is a gentle awakened awareness that is subtle. It is not difficult in that you have to train yourself for years in order to realize it; it is a matter of recognizing it and using it, and developing attitudes that help to sustain it. Patience is helpful; being patient with yourself and with the world. And being honest; being willing to look at things and look at what you don't like or don't want. Try to accept discomfort or embarrassment or negative feelings; try to just endure them until they go rather than ignoring them. We all have problems with families, for example, and in monasteries too. Sustain your attention on these difficulties; accept what is happening. Even if you don't like what is happening, you can be with it – and that is very humbling in a way, very helpful and strengthening. It is often through the very difficult times that you gain strength in your practice. If you are willing to, endure and bear with *dukkha* until you realize non-*dukkha*. Don't think of the Buddha's teachings as 'everything is *dukkha*', though. If you start from there, everything *will* be *dukkha*! You will have made it so!

## 39 | Universal Original Purity

The Buddha approached the spiritual path through the Noble Truths. These are based on the existential reality of suffering, and this is where many people in the West misunderstand Buddhism. They compare it to other religions and come out with statements about it being a negative approach, and that Buddhists don't believe in God. There is this idea that it is some kind of atheist religious form. But if you contemplate the Buddha's teaching, the important thing to realize is that it is a teaching of awakening rather than of grasping any kind of metaphysical position.

The first Noble Truth – suffering (*dukkha*) – brings us back to a banal and ordinary human experience; the suffering of not getting what one wants is common to all of us. We all experience suffering from being separated from what we like and love, and having to be with what we don't like. So we can all relate to that, rich or poor. We all have to experience old age, sickness and death, grief and sorrow, lamentation, despair, doubt: these too are common to every human experience. So there is nothing particularly unusual about this kind of suffering; it is ordinary. The point is, however, it is to be understood. And in order to understand it, you have to accept it.

If you are always trying to get rid of suffering, you can't really understand it. Instead, you are caught up in reacting to it – that is what we tend to do when we feel discontented or unhappy. Whatever form of suffering we are experiencing, the tendency is to try to get rid of it by seeking happiness, by maybe distracting ourselves with something which might give us a few moments of pleasure; we try to get away from what we don't like.

The first of the Four Noble Truths is the truth of suffering; and with that comes the insight: 'Suffering should be understood.' This is where the reflective mind is awakened to it. And this is where we really examine it, really investigate the experience of suffering in the present, whether it is physical or emotional. We have to be willing to experience suffering, rather than just trying to find ways of getting rid of it. So this is going against the natural reactions we have, that all sentient beings have, and we actually turn to it, actually examine it, actually embrace it, actually look at it and feel it. And this we can only do through reflection. When we try to examine suffering analytically, what happens? We end up blaming somebody. And therefore we end up increasing the amount of suffering and confusion we have by endlessly trying to rationalize it, by analyzing it. Having the reflective mind, on the other hand, is having the willingness to feel and experience, savour and taste, suffering.

What is the suffering of anguish and despair? There is a difference between wallowing in anguish and despair, and resisting those things by understanding. Understanding means we are willing to notice them, to turn to them, and to use them as a Noble Truth, rather than taking them to be some kind of personal problem. It is a question of changing one's attitude. We can change from, 'I'm suffering and I don't want to,' to 'There is suffering and it's like *this*.' What is it like as an experience to be separated from the loved? We can notice that feeling of anguish, of suffering, as a result of being separated from what we love and like. And then there is the frustration, the exasperation of having to put

up with something we don't like – and that feels like *this*. When I feel frustrated, exasperated or fed up, I use that opportunity for insight into the Noble Truth of suffering: to feel exasperated and fed up is like *this*. So what am I doing? I am detecting that kind of mood. I am not judging or analyzing it, but just noticing that this feeling is like *this*. The mind embraces the feeling and is willing to feel exasperated. There is then the awareness of it as an object, and you begin to see it as 'there is suffering'.

The cause of suffering (the second Noble Truth) is attachment to desire. Maybe we have the view that we have to get rid of desire, that desire is something we should not have, rather than understanding it, knowing it, investigating the result of clinging to it, of being attached to wanting something – wanting something we don't have, or not wanting what we do have – wanting to become something that we are not, wanting to get rid of bad habits, wanting to get rid of anger and desire.

What does desire feel like as experience? It aims at something, and has an energy to it. So when we attach to desire, we are always trying to get something – like the compulsive shoppers of this age. People go into shopping centres now and just buy things from a desire to get what they don't have. Not only do wealthy people do it, but also people with credit cards – who then get themselves into terrible debt. There are many things in these shopping malls that just make you want them. That desire comes of wanting something you don't have, some beautiful object, and reflective awareness is when one becomes aware of that feeling of wanting something. What is it like, that feeling of wanting? We can observe it as an experience in the present: wanting is like *this*. We can observe it just on the sensory level – the desire for sense pleasure, for sensory experience.

Desire itself isn't a problem; it is the grasping of desire that brings suffering. It is not in getting rid of desire, but in letting go of desire we begin to realize the way of non-suffering. Letting go of the causes of suffering is letting go of the grasping of desire.

This realm that we live in is a desire realm. Desire is natural to this realm. It is what keeps things moving. This realm of sensory experience – of pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness – is just the way it is. So desire is not really the problem. Ignorance is the problem – not understanding things as they really are. We begin to recognize that grasping these desires causes suffering. We actually recognize, then, that suffering has a cause. It is not the body, the sense world, the conditions themselves that are the cause of suffering; it is the grasping of conditions that is the cause.

It is very important to reflect on this. We easily blame conditions for our suffering: ‘You! You said something to me that really made me suffer. It’s because I can’t get what I want that I’m suffering. I want something and I can’t get it, so I’m really suffering.’ Or, perhaps I am very attached to an idea of what I should become and I can’t stand myself the way I am. Then I want to become this perfect ideal!

Wanting to become something, wanting to get rid of something, wanting sensory gratification – these three kinds of desire and the grasping of these three kinds of desire, are what we can reflect upon. That which is aware of desire – mindfulness – is not desire, is it? Desire is a mental object that you can observe; you can be a silent witness to desire. If you *are* desire, there is no way you can possibly have perspective on it. But because you are not desire, it is something that you can observe and learn from.

First we can observe desire, then the grasping, and then comes the insight of letting go. Letting go of desire isn’t getting rid of it. We are not resisting desire, getting rid of it; we are just letting it be what it is. Desire is desire! Let it be that way. If we understand it, we know it; we know the feeling of it; we know when it is present; we know when it is absent. This is *knowing*, direct *knowing*. Even in Buddhist countries they say: ‘We’ve got to practise in order to get rid of our desires and get rid of our defilements. Kill the *kilesas*!’ People go on and on like that. It isn’t just Westerners who interpret Buddhism in this way.

I encourage people to observe desire as experience. What does it feel like? Really get to know it. Wanting sense pleasure, wanting to get rid of something, wanting to get away from something, wanting to become something, feels like *this*. Practising meditation in order to become enlightened — what does *that* feel like? ‘If I practise hard enough I’m going to become enlightened!’ That is the worldly mind, isn’t it? At university we have to study hard so that we will pass examinations. ‘Work hard! You’ll get rewarded!’ This is the work ethic of our society. We may apply this ethic to meditation. ‘Meditate hard! Really get in there and meditate! Grit your teeth! Kill your defilements! Really smash through! Make yourself become something. Become an enlightened person!’ The desire to *become* enlightened, to *become* pure, to *become* a better person, sounds very good, doesn’t it? The desire to become a good person is a very good desire; the desire to be good isn’t bad. The important thing is to recognize that the grasping of desire is the problem; that is the cause of suffering.

Grasping: what is that like as an experience? There is desire, and then you really hang on to it, cling to it, identify with it. I remember contemplating purity. Bhikkhus have the Vinaya (the rules of the Order), and there is often the attempt to attain purity through keeping this Vinaya. But after years I never felt really pure just by keeping the Vinaya. You can become kind of pure in Vinaya, but as strict as you become, you do not naturally feel pure. I kept thinking, ‘Well, what is purity, then? Is it that you become pure through keeping rules, by refraining from doing nasty things and refraining from thinking bad thoughts? Do you eventually become pure by that means? Is purity a state that you achieve through doing something? Can you *become* pure in some way?’ But then there is contemplating what purity is right now. This is different from assuming that I am impure to begin with and operating from that position; that is the self-view: basically I’m impure and I’ve got to become pure. Bringing purity into the reflective awareness in the present, is the inquiry into what is really pure at this

moment in terms of what I can actually directly know at this moment. The only thing I can really find as pure is in awareness, the pure state of awareness, this attention in the present – that is pure!

When I really contemplated and realized that, then I had the insight that I've never been impure. It's never been absent from me. It's always been here and now. It is close, near, absolutely present all the time, but I forget it and get carried away with my desires. I grasp desire: wanting what I don't have, not wanting what I do have, wanting to become something, wanting to get rid of something, wanting to become pure. 'I want to become pure!' I do things to get to that purity: go on fasts, torture myself, try to get rid of my bad thoughts, struggle and strive, bed of nails, hair shirt, self-flagellation ... But what happens when we do that kind of thing? We end up exhausted and not pure yet!

At certain moments you might think that you *are* pure, but because you think you are then you can also think you are not. So, even if you achieve purity through all those ascetic means, you cannot sustain it. The point is, if it is something you attain, it is not really pure.

Contemplate purity here and now. What could it be right now for any of us? Purity is not in a thought, or the body, or emotion, is it? Purity is in awareness. Awareness is the gate to the Deathless. Awareness is the transcendent reality. We begin to have the sense that our true nature is pure and, no matter what we do or think or say, we can never lose that purity. Even the most horrible criminals are still pure – serial killers, rapists, paedophiles – the whole lot. But they don't know it; they don't know and so they do all kinds of things out of ignorance, out of grasping desire, out of not understanding things as they really are. And we forget. We believe we are this: '*I am this or that.*' How many of your identities are you really attached to? Do you like to think of yourself as being a certain type of person, having a certain kind of racial identity or sexual identity or class identity or personal identity? These things are very strong; and everyone is very much attached to his or her identity. Being a woman is an identity, or being a man, being

a blind person, being a disabled person, or whatever. We often depend on these identities for a sense of our self worth.

In the state of purity, however, these identities are no longer necessary. It isn't that they are dismissed in conventional language, but they are not what we really are. We are not anything – only purity. But don't believe me. This is something you have to find out for yourself. It is realizable, rather than some kind of theory or high-minded idea that has come to me. It is the realization of truth, through investigation, through awakened awareness.

To recognize this purity and to value it deeply is a great relief, because it is with me all the time. I just have to keep remembering. I do forget it! I get carried away with the habits of the mind and body. But then I also remember. Meditation is actually the process of learning to remember this purity, the here and now, this centring oneself with the body, with the breath, with the sound of silence, and just noticing the conditioned states, the changing-ness of conditioned phenomena, of moods, emotions, thoughts, feelings, views and opinions, good and bad, high and low.

Those of us who are from Jewish or Christian backgrounds sometimes see ourselves in terms of being sinners. I was brought up with the idea that we are basically born within a state of sin. There was a feeling of having lost purity and having to find it, of trying to become pure, or achieving it maybe when I die by doing something. This is from my own experience, my own cultural background. In Buddhism, however, we do not think of our true nature as some kind of fallen being who has sinned, but just as being forgetful. That, I can relate to. I have to admit that I forget. Forgetting is one thing and remembering is another. If we forget, we can remember. Remembering is like mindfulness, awareness, clear understanding, clear comprehension, real understanding, and the use of wisdom. Just noticing this; knowing that one is very clear when there is purity. And when there is not, really know what it is like; know the suffering that one creates when one is caught up in grasping

desires. Feel it. Know just the general ambience of that, just that kind of irritating, acrimonious feeling of wanting or not wanting. Just be aware of that grasping and making oneself suffer through it. Or remember the purity of the moment.

The purity of the moment is in this pure state of awareness. So you can always refer to it, remember it, just by the simple act of attention; this wide, embracing attention, intuitive awareness in the present. That is the gate to the Deathless, to the transcendent reality, the Unconditioned. It is not an achievement. You don't achieve it. You just remember it. When you try to achieve it you are operating from ideas, grasping ideas, and going along with the assumption that you are the identity of yourself; you are this person who is impure and you have got to become pure. That is then your basis, the premise that you are operating from, your *modus operandi*. From this position you never feel pure; you always feel as though there is something wrong. There is a sense of despair and disappointment because you are starting from a position that is basically deluded rather than from the purity of the present.

When we talk about the Buddhist teaching as direct, it is *that* direct. You cannot be more direct than the awakened attention in the present. You are not starting from a position about yourself or the world, and making value judgements about it; it is just the simple imminent act, the internal act of listening, the open, receptive listening where you can hear that sound of silence, that kind of scintillating sound in the background — that is purity. Of course, you don't go around saying, 'I'm pure now!' You don't need to decorate purity; it is perfect in itself. If there is any claim to it, you are off again. When people go around claiming they are pure, I never believe them. It isn't something you proclaim; it is something you realize, because it isn't personal. It isn't 'mine': 'my purity'! It isn't yours either. It is universal. It is where we are the same.

If you want to know where we are all equal, we are all equal in this purity. This purity is complete. There is not more or less of it in

anybody. Purity has no nationality, isn't male or female, isn't even Buddhist. The realization of this is the beginning of awakening to the way things are.

Now, emotionally, we are not usually prepared for the awakened state. Even though I had an insight into this years ago, I resisted it, because emotionally I was prepared for *becoming* something. I would get bored with it, or I would doubt it, and I would want things. There were a lot of worldly things that I was still very fond of at that time. It wasn't that I was unwilling to let go of a lot of worldly things, but other things I wasn't quite so eager to let go of. I was perfectly happy to let go of the anger, jealousy and fear, for example. But I wanted to keep the good stuff for a while. The world was still rather tempting and fascinating; it promised all kinds of things. So, emotionally, there was still a longing for worldly things: for pleasure, comfort, fulfilment, adventure. Something in the worldly plane was still very attractive to me and even good in itself. These emotions, then, would become resistant to this simple practice of mindfulness. But more and more you begin to see the suffering of attachment even to the good things of the world. And it is attachment, not the world, not the good things, but the attachment that brings the suffering.

I have been here at Amaravati for fifteen years now. We have a nice temple with cloisters, and somebody donated funds for a very nice kuti, the nicest kuti I have ever had. So one may become attached to Amaravati, or to ideas about Amaravati, to the Sangha, to monasticism or Buddhism, to being a good Buddhist monk, to the Theravada tradition, to the Thai Forest Tradition, to establishing Buddhism in the West, or whatever. All these things are very good and one gets praised for them. People sometimes say, 'Isn't it wonderful what you've done! You've established monasticism in the West.' I get these kinds of messages. But one has to be careful not to start attaching to them, and suffering when one doesn't get such compliments, or when the monks and nuns start disrobing and people start finding fault with you. Responding to

praise and blame, success and failure, are signs of attachment. This is where I made a strong determination. In my practice the priority is always towards purity, never towards worldly things: not towards the monastic life, Buddhism, individual monks or nuns, orders of monks and nuns, Buddhism in the West, Buddhism in the East, Buddhism in the North or South. Even if I am successful at these things – even if I do establish Buddhism permanently for the next thousand years in Europe – the priority can only be to realize nibbāna, to cross over the sea of suffering. We have made this temple at Amaravati so sturdy, it will last a thousand years! Buddhism may not survive, but the temple will. The architect said twenty elephants could dance on the roof of that temple and it would not cave in! But to realize nibbāna is the whole purpose of becoming a monk or nun. This has always meant a lot to me. I could see that it might be sometimes easier to build temples than to practise, and to keep that practice going until you really know, so that it isn't theoretical. Each one of us has this opportunity to know this for oneself. That is the only way we can be liberated – through knowing it for oneself rather than through anyone else's understanding.

I now see the emotional habits that I have as the results of kamma. If I accept whatever emotions come up, if I let them become conscious, and then let them out, they will be liberated from their prison. I find this a skilful way of looking at it. Even after years of moral conduct and strict practice, it is surprising what emotions still come into consciousness. But in terms of practice, whatever comes – don't make a problem out of it, just recognize the opportunity to liberate that wretched creature, or that emotion, from its prison. The attitude is in terms of *vipāka-kamma*, resultant kamma: when the conditions ripen, the result of actions becomes conscious. So, just let them be conscious and liberate them by letting them go. Let them be what they are, and they will naturally move away. With awareness you open the doors to the Deathless, you liberate those wretched conditions from their misery. That is mindfulness. We talk about the doors to the Deathless, that 'the doors to the Deathless are

open!' – but they aren't something out there, something remote or hidden. The Buddha pointed to mindfulness – this is the path to the Deathless.

You can see that at every moment of your life you have it. This is your heritage, your opportunity, and even if you forget about it, or don't want to do it right now, there will be a point in your life when you *will* want to do it. Even if you are not ready for the unconditioned experience, for realization, you *will* be at some time. You will simply get fed up with the suffering that you create through ignorance and attachment.

This seems to be a time when this kind of teaching is becoming increasingly appreciated. It isn't just through the Buddhist convention, but in many other ways as well. It is as if this kind of practice is being made more available to people. Or maybe it is the time of awakening because of the seemingly unsolvable problems and the mess that we have created through our greed, hatred and delusion. The population pressures of this age, the pollution, all the wars and weaponry, and the materialism – all this has been done as a result of what? As a result of desire and attachment to desire. So much of our intelligence has been used for creating horrible weapons, smart bombs that aren't so smart, and the problems of human beings and all planetary creatures at this time on this earth; and yet there is this potential for enlightenment, for realization.

If we contemplate in terms of just being one human individual at this time, we see that what we learn through awareness is something very ordinary and unimpressive. It isn't as if we light up and have extravagant experiences; it is very subtle. So nothing shows. No one would ever know, because there is nothing spectacular about paying attention – this expansive intuitive listening, attentive listening, intuitive awareness – nothing fantastic, nothing to write home about. That is why it is overlooked, why people don't notice. Generally, people look for something spectacular, some mystical experience, where they kind of merge with the ultimate in a union of bliss! It is what we would like, isn't it? Sometimes you have moments like that where you

feel as though you are in union with the ultimate, with nature and everything. But that kind of feeling quickly becomes a memory and then you want it again. You get attached to a memory and constantly look for something – through a memory – rather than trusting in the very simple ability you have right now of just paying attention. This is a humbling experience. It isn't an achievement that we can exhibit for the world to see, so worldly people think it isn't worth anything.

The ways of trying to get you to meditate sometimes come with promises about looking younger, acquiring money, improving your relationships, being successful, being happy, curing diseases. These things sell meditation. Now, it is not that those things never happen, or that the reverse takes place and you become poorer and sicker through meditation, but I am referring to the ultimate purpose of meditation, which is the realization of truth. To many people, if meditation doesn't promise a lot of the good worldly things, then it isn't worth anything. Realizing the way of non-suffering, however, and a fearlessness that comes through that, is said to be the highest happiness. To be fearless and to understand the truth is its own reward. You don't need anything more than that; you don't need to have lots of money or good health or anything else.

The mind is not just some kind of thing in the skull, so awareness brings a sense of expansion, of being connected, of being unlimited, infinite, immeasurable. Awareness – which is not fixed on just one object – is open and receptive, wide, never attached to just one little thing. That is what we call intuitive awareness. Whatever pleasant, unpleasant, miserable emotions or boring thoughts come, just welcome them. Open the doors of the prison to liberate these stupid thoughts and feelings, rather than just thinking you don't want to have them.

## 40 | The Point of Intersection Between the Timeless and Time

People often believe that contemplation is the same as thinking about something. But when I use the word it means rather ‘contemplating an existing condition’. If you feel angry or resentful, contemplate that feeling. This isn’t to say you should try to figure out why or where the feeling has come from, but look at the way it is, let it be, and notice what it feels like as an experience in the present.

The three characteristics of impermanence: (*anicca*), unsatisfactoriness (*dukkha*), and non-self (*anattā*), are the guiding suggestions – not in the sense of going around thinking that anger is just impermanent, unsatisfactory and non-self, or in projecting those ideas on to experience – but in looking at impermanence and contemplating it. I remember noticing the passage of time, of how the sun rises and sets, and using impermanence as a subject to contemplate for the day, or for several days. We can notice visual change and sound; when an aeroplane flies overhead, for example, or when somebody speaks. We can be aware of how sound is very definitely impermanent – fleeting, ephemeral. The same with taste and touch. Are these things permanent? No!

Contemplate also, contentment and gratitude. Now, this isn't an imperative to be content and grateful! I am not saying you *have* to feel these emotions; it is more a question of encouraging this way of living, a way in which these kinds of feelings come to you, and you cultivate them. In monastic life we deliberately cultivate contentment. It doesn't come that naturally. A lot of the time we are discontented with everything, but through contemplating discontentment and the suffering that comes from always complaining or wanting things to be better, we see the suffering of negative mental states.

As alms-mendicants we can contemplate the fact that our lives depend on the kindness of others. That is one of the monastic contemplations, and it is somehow a beautiful thing for a monk or nun to remember every day in their lives. We can also contemplate all the good actions in the world; all the tiny little things people do; unselfish actions on a great or small scale. Think of all the good things that conscious beings have done today. This is another contemplation that helps us to think in a positive way about the goodness of humanity.

A year ago I had a retreat at a tea garden in Darjeeling. A lovely guesthouse had just been built there and I was the first guest. I had it all to myself. There was a television in the lounge and the manager had turned it on so that the only thing you could really get was BBC international news. This was about the time Pol Pot died in Cambodia. So the day they cremated his corpse I saw it on the television. I had been to Cambodia in 1997 for a month as an invited guest of the Sangharaja. I led some retreats in Phnom Penh and met all kinds of people. They gave me the VIP treatment. I was taken to Angkor Wat and to a resort town on the coast. They also took me to museums where skulls from the killing fields were held, and a school where they tortured people. There were photographs on the walls that brought ominous and depressing images into the mind: scenes of brutality, of people delighting in torture and prolonging death in horrible, agonizing ways. They didn't just shoot somebody in the head. The Khmer Rouge loved to make people suffer in a long drawn-out process.

So these images are in my mind of the horror of the killing fields in Cambodia. And of course Pol Pot is the symbol for all that. He is a kind of demon that people regard as one of the great monsters of this century: Hitler, Stalin and Pol Pot! At the time, I was doing the practice of 'rejoicing in the inconceivably vast oceans of good actions performed by conscious beings since beginningless time'. This is what I was contemplating on this retreat in Darjeeling. What I saw on the television, however, was Pol Pot's corpse being burned like rubbish. Here was this old man that everybody hated. The Khmer Rouge had turned against him, and his wife and daughter weren't at the funeral; in fact only a couple of armed guards were present. They built a fire with rubber tyres and threw his body on top. They also threw on the old mattress on which he had died, and a bamboo chair he had sat on. And this pile of rubbish just burned. One couldn't help but feel more like 'rejoicing at the dismal end of a terrible monster' rather than 'in the inconceivably vast oceans of good actions by conscious beings since beginningless time'. I noticed the tendency to feel that he deserved it – revenge! Even that was too good for him. He should have been made to die in a horrible way, just to get even. I wasn't actually feeling like that, but I could understand those vengeful, vindictive tendencies of the human mind. It occurred to me that probably everybody was thinking: 'Good riddance to that old monster!' and that nobody regarded Pol Pot in any positive way. So I deliberately tried to think differently. Surely Pol Pot had moments of kindness! He had a dog. He had a wife and a daughter. He had been a temple boy when he was young. So I tried to rejoice in the good actions of Pol Pot – just as an exercise for contemplation.

The perception of Pol Pot is that he was a monster; and yet no one is totally evil – no one! Good actions would have been performed by Hitler and Stalin as well. Just because someone does terrible things doesn't mean they are totally evil and never do *anything* good. Contemplating like this, I began rejoicing in the good actions, and 'the inconceivably

vast oceans of good actions performed by conscious beings since beginningless time'. I thought, 'Maybe I'm the only person on this planet rejoicing in the good actions of Pol Pot at this time!' Some people would be angry with me for crediting him with even one act of kindness at any moment in his life – like petting his dog or buying his wife a new dress, or something – but it is possible!

Contemplating these little things – even though they might seem trivial – is an exercise in consciously informing yourself of rejoicing in the goodness of humanity. This exercise, I found, counterbalanced my tendency to give so much importance to the bad actions of humanity (myself included). I have noticed that I am very good at making a big deal of the mistakes and foolish things I've done, and my faults and weaknesses. I can really get off on that! And I tend to dismiss any goodness in my life, you know: 'So what!' I don't know why I do that, but that is what happens.

I also notice this in the sangha here in England. There is so much interest in what is wrong with the sangha that sometimes the goodness of it is dismissed. The attitude that there is something wrong, or that there is a real problem we have to solve, is quite common among monastics. This isn't to deny that there might be something wrong, or to imply that everything is just perfect, but it does tend to create an atmosphere of anxiety so that there is a constant, underlying feeling of 'something wrong', and that we need more meetings, more discussions, to find out what it is. We have done that and it seems to make matters worse! Maybe the real problem is in assuming that there is something wrong, and giving that too much importance and attention.

In this 'I rejoice in the inconceivably vast oceans of good actions performed by conscious beings since beginningless time', I could rejoice in the inconceivably vast oceans of good actions performed by the sangha here in England since it began. Is that better? This is a contemplation not based on idealistic thinking or fantasy, but knowing the goodness in our hearts, knowing that we want to be good.

Most humans I know really do want to be good even if they aren't, but they sometimes get caught in resentments, attitudes and habits that drive them into doing harmful or corrupt things. The aspiration to be good is very common. I don't think I have ever met anyone who I could say is totally evil or who hasn't had some sort of aspiration for good action. Remembering this and bringing it back into one's own mind does not inflate the ego; it is just being honest about the way things are.

One practice that we have in the monastery is to share the blessings of our life. The attitude in Buddhism in general is not to do things for selfish ends. So, even though we might be sitting here thinking, 'I'm going to get enlightened! I don't know what you're doing, but I'm going to do it,' (which sounds very selfish), we then share the blessings of our practice with others. There is also this beautiful chant we do at the end of the day that is about sharing the blessings, the goodness and practice of our life, with all sentient beings. In Buddhist terms, all sentient beings include demons, angels, monsters and saints, forces seen, forces unseen, the born, the not-yet born, and so forth. It is so all-inclusive you couldn't possibly leave anyone out. We even share the blessings of our life with the Lord of Death. Whoever would think of doing that? This helps us to recognize that our lives are interdependent; we are not just isolated entities operating in a way that has no effect on anyone else.

I was brought up to be an independent, free individual – these were the ideals – and this gave me the impression that my life is *my* business, not *yours*, and that whatever I do with my life is *my* business: 'None of *your* business! If I want to ruin *my* life, well, that's *my* business. Don't you worry about it. You just mind *your* business; take care of *your* life.' That seems fair enough: 'Keep your nose out of *my* business.' But the effect of this was, that by the time I reached thirty I was suffering from chronic loneliness. It wasn't that I didn't have any friends, but I was still lonely. The loneliness wasn't due to not relating, I was simply reaping the result of this individual, independent free spirit that said: 'My life is *my* business and not *your* business. Mind your own business!'

Through meditation, however, I gradually became aware of how I had cut myself off emotionally from the rest of the world with my ideals of independence and individualism. In one way, it is fun when you are young and enjoying the freedom of asserting yourself, of not being concerned about what others think; of thinking, 'It doesn't matter what I do because it isn't going to hurt anyone else! If it hurts me, well then, I'll accept that!' But now I wouldn't think in that way because I can see how we affect each other – whether intended, or not.

This realm we are in is very sensitive; it is all about sense experience, about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching; it is all about how things affect us. Just the tone of someone's voice or the words they use will have its effect. Somebody was telling me recently about an angry telephone call they received. The anger that came across, he said, went through every cell of his body. He was talking to somebody who didn't greatly matter to him, but he felt the power of that angry voice. That is sensitivity, isn't it? You could rationalize it and say, 'Well, it's that person's suffering ...' and try to dismiss it without feeling anything. But being sensitive is rather frightening, isn't it? To be sensitive means we are subject to so many things happening to us, so we have to develop ways of protecting ourselves.

Another attitude from my generation was to regard men as not being sensitive. 'Women are sensitive, but men aren't! We don't feel things; we're tough! Men don't cry like women do.' We got this kind of messages as children: 'Men don't cry! It's a sign of weakness. Feeling is a sign of weakness.' I remember in the military developing a macho suit of armour: 'Nothing bothers me! I'm not afraid of anything!' There you would be, shaking and quivering with terror, while saying, 'I'm not afraid of *anything!*' This is the mask you put on in public. It is a way of protecting yourself.

In meditation, however, you open the doors to being fully sensitive. So, how is sensitivity to be interpreted? The Buddha pointed to seeing it in terms of Dhamma rather than in terms of self. Being sensitive as a

personality, as if ‘I am this body’, is to think in terms of, ‘This is me and my emotions, my feelings, my thoughts, my memories, my eyes, ears, nose, tongue and so forth. All this is mine!’ And then I become quite frightened by this sensitive state. It seems overwhelming when you contemplate life, to think that this interdependence and this sensitivity are so all-pervasive. It makes you want to find a place in which to protect yourself: a fortress, a little cave with a ‘Do not disturb!’ sign hanging on the front of it and ‘Strangers stay away!’ It makes you want to limit the sensory impingement. You could start getting paranoid about the ‘alien influences out there’. You could start speculating about spirits, ghosts, creatures from other planets – all kinds of things ‘out there’ that could harm you in some way. It is quite possible to create untold dangers in our minds about what is ‘out there’ in the universe, in the dark, and become paranoid and frightened.

If our lives are interpreted on the ‘self’ level, there is a lot to worry about. The body can easily be damaged. Our feelings can easily be hurt: somebody insults us, or makes fun of us, or humiliates us. These are common human experiences we all dread and don’t want in life. So how do we interpret sensitivity with wisdom? The Buddha’s message is to do it in terms of Dhamma – in terms of the way it is: sensitivity is like *this*. We can contemplate pleasure, pain and neutral feelings. We can reflect on what happiness and suffering are, what equanimity is, what silence is, what noise is, what aggravation is, and so forth. We can open to these things rather than try to protect ourselves from them. We can actually turn towards them with the intention of understanding sensitivity, and cease creating suffering around sensitive states. We become liberated, therefore, by being totally open and sensitive. That is where we do not create suffering! We don’t create suffering out of ignorance, fear, or desire. And this sense of embracing, opening, welcoming, is in terms of Dhamma rather than in terms of ‘me’, ‘mine’ and ‘self’.

Culturally, we are conditioned to interpret experience through the self-view, the personality-view, the personal experience: my

life, my feelings, my body. And now we contemplate it in terms of Dhamma: there is this feeling; there is pleasure; there is pain; there is suffering; there is happiness; there is peace; there is war, and so forth. In this case, experience is understood through embracing rather than through resisting (which is the result of fear and ignorance). And our human kamma is such that we are in a place where we can do this. The human mind is a reflective mind, a Buddha-mind. In terms of the way it is, each one of us is on this point where there is both the conditioned and the unconditioned. T.S. Eliot wrote: 'To apprehend the point of intersection of the timeless with time is an occupation for the saint.'<sup>13</sup> To apprehend, to know that point of intersection of the timeless with time – this is the here and now for each one of us. Don't believe me! Contemplate it! We can actually see the time and the timeless where we are in this moment, and that is because we are a conscious entity in the universe. There is a kind of independent conscious entity. We are not merged in the unconditioned in terms of having a physical, conscious body. This particular thing is a conscious entity in the universe, not in a personal way of 'I am a conscious entity in the universe', but because this is the way it is, isn't it?

We can just give all our attention to the time-bound thing, the conditioned realm. This is what materialism does. It is always sorting out, rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic, trying to create perfect societies out of ideas: perfect socialist systems, communist systems, democratic societies, common markets, economic markets. We can create ideal societies with our minds based on the highest principles, the highest morality, and the very best of the best. But, in terms of experience life is never like that; it's like *this* – changing. You can get something new, for example, but what does it do? It just gets old! This temple here. We have built it now, and on 4th July it will reach its peak. So there it will be, finished, at its peak, a new temple, complete! What is it going to do? It is just going to get old, isn't it?

I remember when we found Chithurst House. It had 1862 written on the front entrance; the year it was probably built: 1862! For an English person that isn't very old, but for an American it certainly is. 1862! That is when the Civil War was going on in the United States, Abraham Lincoln was President, and some well-off person decided to build this rather nice house using good materials in England. It was very well made. By the time we got it, however, it was derelict and parts of it had to be demolished. But it had been built in stone, and stone has this sense of lasting a long time. I am from Seattle in the North West where all the houses are built in wood. You seldom see stone or even brick houses in Seattle. When I came to England I just admired the infinite variety of bricks you have here. Everything is brick! When we took Ajahn Chah to Edinburgh, he looked around and said, 'It's a stone city!'

Stone and brick seem a little more permanent than wood. Yet, after a 120 years Chithurst House was ready to collapse of dry rot. Going in there made me think of Miss Havisham's house in *Great Expectations*; everything was decaying. It was built to last, of course, but even a stone house gets old. The point is, you build it, decorate it, make it look wonderful, invite all your friends for a house-warming party, everyone says, 'Oh, isn't it beautiful?' And then what does it do? It starts ageing! So you have to constantly repair and repaint it. But no matter how hard you try, still its nature is to degenerate. This is just the way it is.

So much energy in this century has gone towards trying to create permanent, ideal conditions; it has been full of ideas about socialism, unionism and communism. And now democracy is the big thing; this working towards creating fair systems – which is fine; I'm not against it! – but, when all our attention goes towards making everything just right on the conditioned level, that is all we see. We don't know the way things are. In many ways, therefore, we are disappointed with life, because no matter how hard we try to give our lives to these good causes, in the end it doesn't seem to matter that much, not at the end of the day.

Observing the nature of suffering is the first Noble Truth; the second Noble Truth is the cause of suffering; and the third is realizing the cessation of suffering – and that is the realization of the unconditioned reality that we can turn to. We can notice and awaken to the deathless reality, the unlimited, timeless, immeasurable, desireless reality. The Buddha taught that one should not reject the conditioned realm; that one should not say, ‘I’ll have nothing more to do with that! I’m only going to pay attention to the Unconditioned.’ The point is, we can’t actually do that. Conditions – the body and the kamma we have – are so strong. How do we relate the conditioned with the unconditioned? We reflect on the way it is by paying attention to it: it’s like *this*.

The conditioned realm is impermanent (*anicca*), unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and not-self (*anattā*). The Unconditioned is when the mind stops; it is not impermanent, unsatisfactory, not-self, neither is it annihilated, or dead in the sense of a blank void of nothingness. It is the pure and intelligent background – that which contains the conditions that arise and cease. And the particular perspective we have as human individual entities is the possibility of realizing this for ourselves, knowing this. This is something we can prove, know directly, through intuitive awareness. In Buddhist terms we work on that level of grasping conditions and letting them go. We realize non-grasping, non-self, and desirelessness. We learn about desirelessness through desire, non-self through self, and the peace of non-grasping through grasping. This reflective, contemplative, intuitive way of examining the sensitive experience that we are in, is through is called ‘realization’. When there is no grasping, no desire, no self, what is left? It is like *this*. The breath is like *this*. The body is like *this*. The sound of silence is like *this*. And you learn to just relax with it. You don’t grasp it; you don’t identify with it; you accept it: it’s like *this*. You are in the present and no longer trying to get something or get rid of something; you are simply learning to relax and trust in pure attention, pure awareness.

Your relationship to the conditioned realm is then one of loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), altruistic or sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*): the four sublime states (*brahmavihāras*). The response to the suffering of others is compassion from the purity of mind; it isn't 'me' feeling sorry for people who are suffering; it isn't personal. It is a natural response out of wisdom and purity. You understand suffering, and your compassion is empathetic rather than patronising. And altruistic or sympathetic joy is rejoicing in the inconceivably vast oceans of good actions performed by conscious beings since beginningless time. That comes from the purity of the mind; it is no longer a personal emotion. So you find that in the emptiness of the mind there is a lot of joy in life. Through this, there's a lot of joy in my life that was never there before. And this joy is not some created state that I make up; it is there when there is awareness and trust. Sometimes just the beauty of life as experience feels such a joy. And then there is equanimity, the sense of balance and serenity that is quite natural to this point of intersection between the timeless with time.

I offer this as a reflection and an encouragement to practise trusting yourself, your intuitive awareness, so that you realize truth. This is not just sentiment or idealism; I am pointing to the realization of reality, the way it is; and it has to be experienced individually. I can't do it for you. You have to do it. You have to realize it.



## 41 | Pointers to the Ultimate

In any religion there is the exoteric side – the tradition and forms, scriptures, ceremonies and disciplines – and the esoteric, which is the essential nature of it. So, in much of what we call ‘religion’, the emphasis is on the external form. And of course this can be variable; there is no one external form that is totally right, making all the others inferior to it. The aim of a religion is to point to the truth, or the deathless reality, immortality, or in Christianity to God.

But what is God? If God is a being, then that is a condition. And if God is something that comes and goes, arises and ceases, then God is not an ultimate reality. So God must also mean ‘ultimate’: that which religion points to; that which is immortal and ultimately real. ‘God’ in Christianity is personified in the Trinitarian structure in which there is God the Father (the patriarchal form), and the Logos or the Word of God, where God’s Word was expressed through Jesus Christ. These are the traditional beliefs and the exoteric form of, say, Christianity.

Buddhism, on the other hand, was established around the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha: the teachings and the Vinaya (the discipline for monks and nuns). And in Islam, I believe the emphasis is on the Koran, the Holy Book.

So each religion has its unique emphasis. But these are merely the exoteric forms which point to ultimate reality. You can have many pointers to the same thing, can't you? We can all point to this bell. It isn't a matter of saying that my pointing to the bell is more right than yours; that doesn't make sense. Yet we can become attached to the idea that you have to sit here and point in the way I do in order to see the bell. We can get very attached to the form or, in other words, to the conditioned realm.

But we do need a form. If we are coming from idealism alone, it doesn't work. There are people now in England who talk about Dhamma but have thrown out Buddha and Sangha. They are trying to start from the top, where the Dhamma is, talking about it almost as though it were God. They don't see that a traditional form has a power and logic behind it, simply taking what they like out of it – maybe from idealism – and disregarding the rest. This is like trying to start your journey from the top of the ladder. But you have to start from the bottom!

God without a scripture or the presence, say, of a saviour, remains too remote, too high, too far away from us. It's like being at the top of the ladder where there are no rungs, so that all you can do is just look up in admiration with no possibility of climbing. The forms make it possible to learn how to put forth the effort to actually climb up onto the first rung, and then the second, and so forth until you get to the top, eventually. This is just an analogy, of course, but it can be useful for contemplating how to use a religious tradition.

Now is a time when religions are tending to say 'we're right; our form is the best'. One has more confidence within one's own tradition because that is what one has used. I teach Buddha-Dhamma because this is the way I have done it. I cannot very well teach Christianity or Islam or Hinduism. If you have learned to play the violin, you cannot really teach somebody how to play the piano – not because you think pianos are somehow lesser or you despise them, but you just have not learnt how to play them. The point is, if you learn to play one instrument well,

you can play in harmony with the others. A good pianist and a good violinist would have no problem making beautiful music together. But if you have got a lousy violinist and a terrible pianist – cacophony! So, if there are people of different religions who don't know how to play their instruments, then it comes out all horrible and confused, and you just want to run away. You might think, 'If that's religion, I want nothing to do with it.' But, then, if you hear people who have developed skill in their religion, it is like a beautiful orchestra: it is lovely to listen to; you want to draw near; you are inspired; you are pleased; it uplifts you.

In modern times, when we have to learn how to live with other religions, other ways of doing things, it is really important to try to understand our own and to practise it – which doesn't mean we are in any way making critical comments about anyone else's. If we feel we like ours best, that is all right. After all, if we liked some other religion better we would be practising that. It is just that faith has been awakened in us through this way. And where we have faith, where we have confidence, that is something to trust.

What I see about Buddhism – especially in the teaching of the Four Noble Truths in the Pali scriptures – is that it is very much like a perennial philosophy. It points to the way things are, the ultimate, the metaphysical pattern, the relationship of the conditioned to the unconditioned. All the metaphors, similes, and parables, and all the ethnic and cultural additions and qualities of a religion, are taken away. What you end up with is the conditioned and the unconditioned. The path is always to realize, and to let go of anything that blinds you to that ultimate perfection: to be able to see the path clearly and to practise.

Now, even though modern atheists, materialists and scientists sometimes condemn religious people for believing in doctrines that cannot be proven, these very same people believe in their own scientific doctrines or philosophical opinions, like the atheist who says: 'There is no God!' That is a very conceited thing to say, isn't it? Who am I to go around announcing that there isn't a God? How can anyone possibly

know that? One believes, perhaps, that very coarse, material things are the only reality, or that one's experience is the only reality, but just because one can't verify God as a material object, or whatever, it doesn't mean there is no such thing. One is still believing – in this case in one's own views! In this case, the heart is not open to investigating truth; one merely takes a position *against* rather than *for*.

So, whether you believe in God or believe there is no God, it is still believing, isn't it? It is a human mind that believes. Believing is a condition of the mind that you can observe; it is something you can see within yourself. You can believe in anything – witches and demons and all kinds of things – because belief is unlimited; it is a function of the mind. So, the Buddha pointed to belief as something that arises and ceases. He didn't say you should believe in something, or that you should not believe in something. That is why he remained silent about the question of whether there is a God or not. The point is, it's a realization; it is something you have to realize for yourself. If I say there is a God, are you going to believe me? Some people might say, 'I believe anything Ajahn Sumedho says. If he says there's God, there's God!' And others might say, 'I think he's got it all wrong; there is no God; Buddha never taught anything about God; there is no God in Buddhism; Buddhists don't believe in God; we are not God-believers!' I've upset people by talking about God. Some Buddhists are what you might call hardliners.

Belief itself is to be witnessed. It is not a question of saying that you shouldn't believe in anything. We have to believe in things in order to get them done. We can use belief, but we need to know what it is, rather than blindly believing just because we are told to, or because the majority of people do. Or, similarly, disbelieving, because we cannot see God and haven't experienced anything that we can say is God. This is where we find that upon being asked what we believe in, the question doesn't make sense to us any more. As Buddhist meditators, we don't know how to answer that question.

It isn't where we are. We are not in a place of believing. It is not a position of belief that we are in.

When religious-study teachers come here, it is clear that they find religions other than Buddhism much easier to cope with. After all, the Muslims believe in Allah and the Koran; the Christians believe in God and the Bible; the Hindus have Brahma, Krishna and Shiva, the Vedas and Upanishads; and the Zoroastrians have Zarathustra and Ahura Mazda. But what do the Buddhists believe in? 'Do you believe Buddha is God?' This is the type of question that is difficult to answer, because it isn't the way we approach any issue. There is the doctrinal position: 'There is God!' But a doctrinal position starts with a metaphysical statement: 'I believe in God.' In Buddhism, however, the starting point is: 'There is suffering.' This is an existential truth, not a metaphysical one. That is why it's important to consider the different approaches. This is a different way of looking at it.

The way of the Buddhist, then, is through the understanding of suffering. There is then the realization of ultimate reality – or of God if you want to use that word – but it's a realization. It isn't believing; it is a knowing. When the psychologist Carl Jung was dying, somebody asked him: 'After all your studies and so forth, what do you say about God? Do you believe in God?' And he said, 'No! I *know* God.' I don't know whether he did know God or not, but he said he did, and that is more the way of knowing than believing. This is what this path is, which is why I talk about knowing truth rather than believing doctrines about the truth. It is a very direct way: immediate, here and now, outside of time. If you contemplate time – the perception of it, and how much we interpret and believe in time as an ultimate reality – when you analyze it, it isn't real, is it? The reality of past and future falls away.

The Buddha pointed to an existential truth. Suffering (*dukkha*) is about our human existence. The actual meaning of 'exist' is 'to stand forth'. Now, what stands forth for us in our lives is suffering, isn't it? We suffer a lot. We have a lot of existential suffering on this journey that

we are involved in from birth to death; and this suffering is common to every human being. It isn't just certain ones that have it – it isn't just the poor, or just men, or just women, or just Europeans, Africans or Asians – it is everyone from the beginning of the human race – and will be to the end of it. As long as there is ignorance, there is going to be suffering. So, this is a common experience we all share. When we talk about suffering, we don't say that we believe in it, or that we don't believe in it; we *know* it because we suffer. We only have to believe in things that we don't quite know yet.

So we start directly from using our knowledge faculties rather than the believing ones. We are looking at suffering. And what is the insight? That suffering should be understood. The direct path of the Buddha is that there is suffering, and it should be understood. This is the way of knowledge. We are using knowledge directly, all the time, if we are practising in the right way.

This realm that we are born into as human beings is a conscious realm. And consciousness is the ability to know things; it is the experience of knowing. The reflective mind that we human beings have, that allows us to contemplate our own existence, our own suffering, is what we call 'the Buddha'. This is the ability to know and see things as they are, to use wisdom, to see according to wisdom rather than according to belief or bias or prejudice. So it is like a Gnostic path. The Greek word '*gnostic*' is related to the Pali word '*ñāṇa*' which means 'insight', 'knowledge', 'direct knowledge'. The Western world has not developed direct knowledge. The Gnostic forms of religion were persecuted and destroyed by the Catholic Church.

In mindfulness you begin to observe cultural conditioning as the impermanence of your own language, your own thoughts, your own attitudes; your views of yourself, views of the world, opinions, emotions. All of these are witnessed as *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* (impermanence, suffering, non-self). That is pure objective seeing, pure knowing – through mindfulness and wisdom – which are not conditioned, not

cultural. You can't even say they are Buddhist, or anything. They are beyond any of those kinds of concepts.

By looking at suffering and understanding it, we develop this way of knowing the truth. Then there is the realization of cessation and the development of the Path. This is a way of realizing God, or realizing truth. The teachings are excellent teachings. They are not dogmas or beliefs, but are given in such a way as to encourage us to reflect on them rather than just to grasp them. People still grasp Buddhist teachings, of course, and become 'Buddhists' rather than liberated enlightened beings. People 'become Buddhists' by believing in Buddhism, but the actual practice the Buddha gave is a direct path of liberation here and now. That is why, as you practise more and more, you find there is no suffering. The suffering the Buddha pointed to is through ignorance. If the Buddha had started with the teaching that there is no suffering, however, none of us would have believed it. *There certainly is suffering! He got that wrong!* So he started with: 'There is suffering.' This is a teaching we can identify with. It isn't difficult. It is the common bond between us all, isn't it?

In Thailand a monk will address a whole group as 'brothers and sisters in suffering, old age, sickness and death'. And that brings a bond. Suddenly we are looking at each other as brothers and sisters who are sharing this common experience. We aren't thinking in terms of who is better than who, or of class, race, nationality, or any of these things. That seems irrelevant to the common bond we have as human beings – as brothers and sisters in suffering – whether we are Iraqis, Kuwaitis, Saudis, Americans, British or French. When we think of ourselves as brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death, we stop that foolishness. If, on the other hand, we want to build up an army to fight, we can't say we are brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death. We have to say, 'Those people over there are demons. The more you kill the better. They don't have any feelings. They like to bayonet babies and butcher old women. They have no respect for anything.'

And then you think, 'Oh, I'm going to kill them.' Propaganda is like that; it's a way of making you think the best thing you can do is kill them. In reflective knowledge, however, we see the common bond, from the most despicable human being, to the most saintly. That is a reflective teaching. We think, 'Yes, yes, that is the truth. When you think about that – brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death – you realize we're all getting old and ...'

In the moment of mindfulness, there is no suffering. I cannot find any suffering in mindfulness; there is absolutely none. When there is heedlessness, however, there is a lot of suffering in my mind. If I give in to grasping things, to wanting things, to following doubts and worries, and being caught up in things like that, then there is suffering. It all begins from my grasping. But when there is mindfulness and right understanding, then I can't find any suffering at all in this moment, now. It is all about this moment here and now. It is not about whether suffering exists as a kind of metaphysical abstraction, or theory of suffering; we are not talking about suffering as a theory or an idea, but as an actual experience here and now. There might be physical pain, but if we are mindful, we can reflect on this: *There is pain. It's like this.* But then we don't create aversion around it, so there is no suffering. If we have a fever or cancer or anything that people think is suffering, and then we are mindful, there is no suffering in that moment. When there is heedlessness, we might worry or be caught in despair and negative states towards it. But at any moment of mindfulness and understanding, there is no suffering.

This is why it is a direct teaching. It is always 'apparent here and now, timeless, encouraging investigation, leading to liberation, to be experienced individually by the wise'. Now, this is to be your realization. It is for you to investigate what suffering really is, when it is, and when it is not. In a mind where there is no delusion, no heedlessness, no ignorance, there is no suffering. When there is no suffering, there is no birth and death: there is nobody to be born or to die. Conditions are

changing, but they are not personal any more. The body dies, but there is no longer the assumption that 'I am dying', or 'I am the body that is dying'. When it is time for the body to die, then its true nature is to die. Having been born, its time comes and it dies. That is its nature; that's natural, perfect. There is nothing wrong or frightening about it; it is just the way it is, a natural phenomenon. As soon as we are heedless, however – 'Oh, I'm dying! Oh, dear me! What will happen when I die?' – then we suffer. Suffering comes from doubt, worry, fear of the process, fear of the unknown. There is a whole range of suffering we create through all the wrong assumptions we make about ourselves and the universe we live in.

Now, I am not very well equipped to comment on the theistic approach, or the belief in God, but that is a part of surrender, isn't it? The Christian message of the cross; for example, of Jesus Christ surrendering to the cross; is a very powerful symbol of surrender and forgiveness. He is forgiving the people who are persecuting him, and surrendering to the restriction, the humiliation. That is a symbol of humiliation and pain in the most obvious form – stripped naked, totally humiliated, jeered at, plus the physical pain of hanging on a cross. But then there is actual forgiveness and surrender.

So, in a theistic or doctrinal approach, the ideal is to surrender selfish desires and attitudes – surrender to the form of the religion, to the style of it. In the Buddhist path that is also very much what we are doing. In Christianity, the surrender is with faith rather than with wisdom, but in Buddhism the more wisely one reflects, the more one surrenders. As you understand things, you stop the resistance; the resistance tends to diminish, and then you naturally surrender. When you have completely surrendered to the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – that is bliss. But as long as you are trying to get something for yourself, you are not going to have that happiness, that blissfulness, because the self – wanting something for yourself – always creates suffering. That is why the Refuge: the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha, is so important.

They are a reflection. It isn't a question of believing in them in an exoteric style, but of using them as teachings to help find or realize an esoteric way, inside ourselves: the Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha which we surrender to. That is purity, ultimate purity, wisdom and compassion.

As to religious symbols, there is both static and dynamic symbolism. When we talk about the absolute, for example, there is no dynamic quality there – that is a rigid word. It is the ultimate, the absolute. And if one worships or believes in the absolute, one's mind tends to become very rigid. Dynamic symbols, therefore, are always in relation to the absolute – like the infinite. Infinity is dynamic rather than absolute. Absolute and infinite are really the same thing looked at in slightly different ways. One is the more static, fixed position, and the other a dynamic position.

The static absolute tends to be personified as a male, while the dynamic is personified as a female. The female deities are the symbols for compassion in the more dynamic religious forms; and the absolute symbols are the male, static kind of thinking of justice. This is God the Father, who has a very fixed view and punishes – the male type of thing, which tends to command and proclaim. The compassionate religious forms, on the other hand, are forgiving. Avalokiteshvara and Kuan Yin in Buddhism are often given female forms, because that is how religious symbolism works psychologically. But they are two aspects of the same thing. They are just ways of reflecting and contemplating, rather than taking up a position *for* the absolute *against* the infinite – preferring Mother Mercy to God the Father, for example, or Kuan Yin to the Buddha, or whatever. But we are not making preferences; we are recognizing that the mind has these different aspects. Even in our language, in our symbols, we have ways of expressing what would be called a static form and a dynamic one.

Now, if there were no dynamic form, religion would become very fixed and judgemental, righteous. Purity is a fixed view, isn't it? Purity! That word itself implies something static; it isn't dynamic. Love is

a dynamic force, and also joy – these are dynamic qualities. But the dynamic relates to the static. It is like the perfect marriage of yin and yang, male and female, father and mother. Rather than conflicting, they are complementary. They depend on each other. One is not superior or inferior to the other.

When you are developing reflection on truth, you work with the mind and begin to see what religious symbolism means. We are not told in our education to try to understand how to use symbols. The empirical, scientific attitude, tends to believe in facts and figures, statistics, as being reality. Symbolism might be regarded as quaint, but not as real. Intuitively, however, we relate to symbols more than to statistics, don't we? Our discriminative mind – rational thought, logic and so on – is the rigidity of the mind; it is more like the ABC, the 1, 2, 3, the computerized version of everything. Both have their value, however, and depend on each other. It is not a question of preferring one over the other, but of using both, in order to have a reference point.

If we listen to the sound of silence or concentrate on the breath, that is where the mind is pure, isn't it? It is not outgoing, not dynamic. One is in a kind of stasis of mindfulness. But in our daily lives we have to go out into the world. We have to relate to forms, changing conditions, people and society in general. So then there is loving-kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), and equanimity (*upekkhā*) – qualities which are necessary for relating and responding to other creatures and other beings in the society we live in. If you go home and sit there in front of your wife or husband, say, just watching your breath, refusing to relate to her or him, it would be an attachment to purity, wouldn't it?

We can become attached to the idea of purity, and just want to identify with the unconditioned as something we should be – condemning all conditions, even, as being unworthy or dangerous, or forms of Māra, the Evil One. But that is not how we can live. We can't just sit and watch the breath all the time, because of the nature of our

bodies. We have to work. We have to survive as creatures. We can't just sit in an ethereal realm and not notice anything. Part of our lives, at least, is learning how to live with other human beings.

The dynamic form of religious experience is the right speech, right action, right livelihood of the Eightfold Path which points to relating to the world around us in the right way, in the moral way: non-harming, not lying or stealing, not exploiting anything or any other person or creature, doing things that are for the welfare and benefit of the planet Earth and the beings upon it, rather than being engaged in destructive ways which cause harm or pollution, and so on. Right livelihood, right action, right speech – these things might be dismissed somehow. But it is in doing these things that we spend our lives, really, in the societies we live in. So, this is the dynamic, religious life: doing what is right, what is beautiful, what is true, what is good; refraining from doing or speaking in ways that are harmful or dishonest, disruptive, cruel.

Here the guide is not idealism but right understanding. We are not coming from an ideal of harmlessness, but from an understanding based on investigating suffering and realizing non-suffering. And the influence from right understanding then flows into working and living for the welfare of others with that compassionate, kind, loving energy.

In Buddha-Dhamma – especially in the Theravada school – wisdom is emphasized very much. In the Mahayana, compassion is emphasized. It is a matter of emphasis. Emphasis is another thing we do. We can emphasize one thing over another, but that doesn't mean one is ultimately better or the other lesser; it is just what we emphasize. You might put love first and wisdom second, or wisdom first and love second. You have to put one thing first. You can't say love and wisdom in the same moment – just because of the limitation we are under. However, that doesn't mean that love and wisdom don't exist in the same moment. Wisdom and love can be here and now in this moment, but when we talk about them, we have to put one first and the other second. That is just the way it is. So, when we are talking, when

we want to emphasize compassion, we put compassion first. When we want to emphasize wisdom, we put wisdom first. This is a way of emphasis but not of preference or looking down on one and exalting the other. When I talk about the mind, for example, I talk about it in a cool way that doesn't convey the emotional nature of it. When I want to emphasize the mind's feeling nature, I talk about the heart. That is just a matter of emphasizing, of using particular words that convey a particular meaning. And when we are skilful in the use of language, we try to use appropriate terminology, try to communicate as accurately as we can. It isn't a question of saying the heart is better than mind, or that mind is better than heart; that would be ridiculous. It is just a way of emphasis, a way of making a point.

As you practise, you begin to see that it is all your path. Leaving the retreat, going home, is still the Eightfold Path; it is still practice. It isn't that you have to give up your practice when you go through the gate of Amaravati. If that were the case, it is not a transcendent path that I have been teaching. If it simply depends on having everything under control in the shrine room, then it might be a sort of therapy, but it wouldn't allow you to be liberated from delusion. It is only when we apply these teachings to daily life that the realization comes that wherever we are is the place of enlightenment, here and now – not the Retreat Centre at Amaravati, or the bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya – but wherever we are. This is the place. This is the *axis mundi*. This is the centre. This is where there is truth, Dhamma: here and now. Where your body is – whether it is here or at home, in Thailand, America, or wherever – is not the important issue any more. You cease to believe there is a specific place on this planet where you go to sit in order to become enlightened!



## Brothers and Sisters in Old Age, Sickness and Death

If you never awaken the mind, but merely live a perfunctory life based on the momentum of your habits acquired when young, as you get older those habits become less vital but more entrenched. The force of habit is like a cage; it's something that imprisons you. People talk a lot about freedom in the sense of being physically able to do what they want; and yet that kind of freedom can lead to slavery – we become addicted, habituated to various unskilful actions, attitudes, and tendencies that we never see through or get beyond.

That is why, sitting here on a zafu for a week or so on retreat, is like an incarceration. You are told to keep silent. You are not to go out and play games, dance and sing, or run around the fields, play football, cards, dress up and make yourself alluring, or listen to music. The most exciting thing that happens in this situation is the arrival of chocolate sometimes in the afternoons!

So, when you are on retreat, restrictions are placed on your physical actions and speech, but there are also mental restraints and limitations. You are not to simply let your mind go wild, or indulge in fantasies. The

point is to learn to bring the mind into the present. If it goes off into a tirade, or into its habits, fantasies and obsessions, you gently bring it back to the here and now, to the body, to the breath, to the silence. This is a way of centring and bringing attention to the present; and it is the ultimate kind of restriction. You sit here in the present, in the here and now, and sometimes that seems like tying yourself down.

On the other hand, this is freedom. You are not just a helpless victim of habits, thoughts, desires or fears. This is a way to contemplate, to develop, to cultivate, and to understand this experience of human consciousness, human existence. *This* is what we've got; we contemplate the existential reality of *this moment*.

Now, on the conventional level we are all here in this room sitting together. In terms of 'the way it is', however, you are actually in my mind. I don't really mean 'my mind', but this is the limitation of speech. So, the room is in my mind. My eyes and the light in the room allow me to see; and that is a conscious experience, eye-consciousness. You, then, are in the conscious experience. You can see me, but I can't see me as an object. I can see bits of my knees and so on, but the full view of me, I cannot see. For each one of us, this is the *axis mundi*; it is the centre point of the universe. Each one of us is the centre of the universe in terms of direct experience in the present. This is a reflection on the way it is. It is not an ego trip. One doesn't say, 'I am the centre of the universe,' as a person. That would not be a reflection, but a perception that one might foolishly grasp. As far as your own experience goes, however, you have always been the centre of everything in terms of conscious experience – from the time you were born until the time your body dies. It's the way it is. The rest of us come and go. You all come in and out of my consciousness. And when you are all gone, I'm still here, wherever that may be. And even if I go, I'm still wherever I am.

Noticing this centre point is very important. One is conditioned into perceiving oneself as a personality – as being another person in the room – and one's consciousness as being in the brain, maybe, or in

the head. If we never question, never investigate all the views we have about ourselves – our bodies, our personalities – we just operate from an attitude of ignorance. Having not awakened to and examined the way things really are, we operate in the realm of conventional agreements.

We can all agree to certain conventions; and each particular culture has its own unique quality. Why, for example, are the English not exactly the same as the French? Why is it that all the French are not exactly the same? And why are the Americans different from the English, not to mention the Chinese, Russians, Thais, and Sri Lankans? The assumptions that we acquire when we're growing up, say, come from the prejudices of our particular ethnic, social conditioning. So, if you were born in Yugoslavia, you would think of yourself as Yugoslavian – although that term is *passé* now, isn't it? They are back to smaller ethnic identities now. Whatever, angst and prejudice is derived from attaching to an identity, because that is *not* the centre of the universe. Being a 'Croat' or a 'Serb', an 'American' or anything else, is to operate from a biased view.

One wonders how people can commit genocide. How can one group slaughter another group of people? When we get into cultural habits and ethnic biases, these things can easily take over the mind. If we are not reflective and have no understanding of the way things are, we can be easily pulled into the prejudices of our particular ethnic background. In my childhood, identifying as an American and growing up during the Second World War, I was influenced by propaganda against the Germans and Japanese; they were the enemy! The Russians were allies until 1945, so they were the good guys. But propaganda is instilled into the mind so that you hate the enemy. After all, if you are going to kill somebody, you first have to hate them. You can't think of them as nice people; they are monsters and demons. We used to have lurid posters in Seattle of barbed wire and swastikas, and Nazi-like figures dragging women down dark alleyways. I remember looking at those posters as a child and thinking that, if they came to America, they

were going to do that to my mother. There was a sense of horror, fear, and dread of the enemy. Propaganda demonizes; it is a conditioning process. Propaganda is not the way things are; it is an encouragement for people to attach to certain views.

One of the ways monks address groups of people in Thailand is by saying, 'Brothers and sisters in old age, sickness, and death.' It is interesting to think we are all brothers and sisters simply because we all share the same old age, sickness, and death. Suffering, loss of the loved, being irritated by being with the unloved, and wanting what we don't have – everybody shares these things whether African, South American, Australian or anything else. Now, that is a reflection. You are not being asked to grasp a grand view of humankind as some great fellowship; that could be an inspiring perception, admittedly, but it is not a reflection on the way it is. 'Brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death' is a realization that we all suffer from the same things. My suffering and your suffering are really the same. Queen Elizabeth's suffering is the same as my suffering. It is different in quality or particular circumstances, but old age, sickness, death, loss of the loved, having to be with the unloved, wanting something one doesn't have – we all experience these things. It is the same with the homeless, or whatever social position one is in, or whatever race or religion. The bond is in the common human experience. We are all in the same boat!

Dhamma allows us to respect all life itself. We recognize that animals have the same pain that we have. Some people think that a dog's experience of pain – of being kicked, for example – is different from their own. Contemplate that! I don't really know, not being a dog, but how *could* it be different? The dog is a conscious and sensitive being. It feels not only pain but also the nastiness of the state of mind that just sees a dog as something to abuse. A dog will pick that up along with the physical pain. I'm reflecting now, just contemplating pain and suffering. When you contemplate like this, then you feel empathy for the suffering of creatures – not just for human beings, not just for the

nice people that you get along with – but even for the horrible ones.

We develop *mettā*, learn to respect the lives of all creatures, and abandon any intention of causing them harm. Inevitably, we are going to do things whereby other creatures will suffer – simply from breathing the air, for example. That is the way it is. But we don't deliberately harm or abuse any other creature.

This reflective mind, then, is the still point in the centre. That is why each one of us is important in our own right. You might feel that you are not a very important person, that you are just one of the 5.5 billion on this planet. I have sometimes thought that if I should die right now, a few people might feel some sadness and miss me for a while, but it would soon pass. Most people would never notice. After all, this is just another body on the planet, like an ant. You can see ants crawling around and you might think that if you were to kill one it wouldn't matter, because one ant doesn't have much value. In fact, some people might think it's good to kill ants, as many as possible. But I am sure that the life of that ant is important to itself. Surely it wants to live, just like I want to live. To each one of us, our life is important. Whether it is important in the ultimate sense is mere speculation, but in terms of experience, your life, your experience of consciousness, is very important. *This* is what you have; *this* is what you are feeling; *this* is the way it is; *this* is how you can learn, how you can develop through understanding.

In relationships in the past, I have thought in terms of 'me' and 'you', of relating to the other with the idea of being spiritual friends, of supporting and helping each other towards spiritual goals and so forth. Then things happen and one feels let down or betrayed or misunderstood by some other monk, and you think you must work it out. The more you try to do that, however, the more problems arise, and the more misunderstandings. In the end it becomes an endless going at each other, trying to figure out who is wrong and who is right, or what is wrong with this and what is wrong with that, who is to blame and who is not. All this can go on and on and on to the point

where you don't want to see that other person any more; it all just gets too complicated. You are trying to solve every problem – work out everything in your mind – on the level of conventional reality. But it is just endless proliferation which gets increasingly more complicated.

Reflecting on the way it is, on being the centre of the universe at this point here, brings one to letting go of problems rather than creating them. I can't make you let go of problems, but I can let go of them myself; that is something I *can* do. I can resolve the problem in here; I can resolve it in the mind itself. This is not dismissing or denying anything, but recognizing the nature of the mind and breaking through the illusions we have about ourselves and other people.

There are various ways of trying to help others, but one way you can really help is by not creating a problem, by trusting in the pure presence of awareness. This we can do. This will help everything and everybody. Letting go, I am sure, is for the benefit of all of us. By being aware, by being in the awakened state, we are not adding to, not complicating, not creating, not proliferating, not taking sides. Then, at any point in time, this conscious entity in the universe is not contributing to the ignorance and confusion of the rest. That doesn't seem like much in terms of what one can do to help others, but I put my faith and trust in this pure awareness because, at worst, it is totally harmless and, at best, it is enormously beneficial.

How do we know that all the goodness of humanity is not helping us all the time? Human beings do many good things in their daily lives that never make the news and may never be noticed by anybody. The news is all about how bad we are. You could make a good movie about a Buddhist monk who breaks all the Vinaya rules. That would probably be very successful and make lots of money: 'Buddhist monk seduces woman, cheats and steals, kills and murders.' Or, you could make a film about a monk who sits perfectly still in meditation and in his mind lets go of the world. I don't think that would be a popular film. Think of all the goodness of your own life. This is a practice I

encourage because we tend to dwell on the mistakes we have made. We exaggerate and make mountains out of molehills, dismiss the goodness, the kindnesses, the thoughtfulness, the generosity. You see it a lot with mothers. Motherhood demands that you give up your own pleasures and interests for the sake of somebody else. The goodness of that kind of thing can be completely dismissed or taken for granted. But when you contemplate it, you realize that an enormous amount of goodness is generated every day on this planet, just by ordinary human beings.

Imagine if we weren't good at all, if we were totally selfish, lived only for our own benefit, enjoyed persecuting and hurting others – that would be a hell realm. But we can feel the sadness of others. When we hear about genocide, or about people who just happen to be in the wrong place and get killed by bombs, there is a sense of real sadness in that. We can understand the loss that others feel because we have experienced loss ourselves. We have this ability to empathize with the suffering of people that we don't know at all.

What brings us on a meditation retreat? In a situation like this you can begin to recognize the spiritual aspiration of your life. Something very good, something very beautiful inside brings you to a place where you will have to suffer, go through the physical torments of sitting still and facing the mental obsessions and fears that arise. And there is a willingness to do that. Why? Because, basically, human beings are spiritually oriented. When we contemplate humanity in this way, we begin to see everyone has the same potential. It is possible then to look at each other in terms of being spiritual rather than as being English, French, German, Japanese, or whatever.

In 1955 when I was in the Navy, I went to Japan. It was ten years after the war and I was twenty-one. We were on a supply ship going from San Francisco to Hawaii, and then on to American bases in Japan. I didn't believe the propaganda much because I wasn't that stupid, but it still had its effect on the mind. One thing I saw in Japan, however, was that they were incredibly honest. Some American GIs were willing

to exploit the Japanese, but I didn't detect that so much amongst the Japanese. Even though Japan was a very poor country then, and people were trying to get things the Americans were discarding, they had a tremendous sense of integrity and didn't steal. In terms of the good qualities of humanity, it is not a matter of race; it's a matter of morality and personal integrity.

Buddhism is not a brainwashing or conditioning type of teaching. One is not being asked to adopt Buddhist ideas, say all the right Buddhist things or wear Buddhist clothes (even though I do). It is not a reconditioning process; it is mindfulness, awareness, letting go of conditioning. For me, Buddhism is reminding myself of the great gift I have every moment of this pure presence, the ability to be fully present.

The Buddhist monk's robe, because one is wearing it, is for mindfulness. I could see it in terms of attachment. In fact, I have been attached to robes and things like this. The point of these things, however, is to remind oneself of what one is doing. When I look at my robe of saffron or orange – a colour that people would seldom wear – it impinges on my consciousness and reminds me of Buddhist monks, which in turn reminds me of Sangha, which is also a reminder of wakefulness. Could the Amaravati temple be used in the same way? We could look at it aesthetically, in worldly, practical, utilitarian terms, or we could use it as a symbol. There are Buddha-relics enshrined in the pinnacle of the spire; I enshrined them myself. So you could look up at the pinnacle. Or you could look beyond the pinnacle into the sky, into the spaciousness. Our consciousness can be attuned to infinity and space, and not bound by the five khandhas and the conditioned realm. So symbols, forms and conventions of these kinds can be used for awareness rather than for developing worldly attitudes or attachments to becoming some kind of a Buddhist. They can be used as forms which say: *Wake up! Pay attention! Be mindful!*

When you see a Buddhist monk or nun, you might say, 'Oh, that's Sister Thanasanti,' or 'That's Venerable Thanuttaro.' And because of

personalities you say, ‘Sister Thanasanti is like *this*, and Venerable Thanuttaro is like *that*.’ Or you might say, ‘I really like this person; he’s got a great personality. But I don’t really care much for him; he doesn’t do much for me.’ That is seeing it in terms of personality. On the other hand, the forms can be seen in terms of awakening – the shaven head, the robe – they can be reminders of awareness.

As Buddhism moves into the Western world, the question is asked, ‘Is monasticism necessary? Do we really need monks and nuns? Maybe that old stuff worked in Asia, but is it profitable now?’ There is a lot of this, especially in the States, about it no longer meeting the needs of modern people. But that is an opinion, a view, which can be argued and rationalized on both sides. You can see it as totally useless, or you can make a case for its absolute necessity. The point is not to take sides, but to use the forms of Buddhism when they are around, for mindfulness rather than for taking positions.

When I first saw a real, live, flesh and blood bhikkhu, something in me felt very excited. I was in the Peace Corps in Singapore at the time, and remember sitting eating Chinese noodles one evening when an orange-robed monk walked by. He just walked by in the distance. I didn’t talk to him or anything, but that visual presence had a profound effect on me. Something in me resonated with it. I don’t know what it was, but it was a positive feeling. I later travelled in Thailand and Cambodia as a tourist and saw many Buddhist monks, but on each occasion I could not help but feel tremendously inspired by their presence.

At that time, I thought that all Buddhist monks were arahants. I was very naive! But it doesn’t really matter whether they are arahants or not; it’s how to use the presence, the form, that counts. It can be used for awareness rather than for following views and opinions. So, how do we use the things around us so that they awaken us or remind us? This, I find, is a very important matter. I live in a monastery and there are Buddha-rupas and so forth all around me, and they help to remind me in a conventional way. But some people live in places where there are

no such reminders. Other things can be used in a similar way, however, like churches, the sky, flowers. Anything can serve to awaken the mind, or remind us, rather than things just being seen through the worldly mind in the habitual way.

Contemplate your own goodness. In England, sometimes we don't dare do that, because it sounds like boasting. Or we may be afraid of inflating our egos. In fact, we tend to dwell on our faults. If I say to someone, 'Okay now, be honest, what are you really like?' They probably tell me about their faults, because most people identify strongly with their faults. But sometimes there has to be a determination to dwell on the goodness of one's life. My life here at Amaravati is very good. And people who come here try to be as good as they can. I have witnessed much human goodness by being at this place. And the intention of my life is to cultivate the good and to refrain from doing bad. The selfishness of humanity gets all the news, and yet my experience is mainly of something very good.

I have been living in the UK for twenty-three years now, and my experience of living here has been very good. I haven't really experienced the dark side of this place. It vaguely impinges at times, but not that much. I trust in the power of the Dhamma and the goodness of intentions, and have received the benefits of living such a life, which is something I am very grateful for. Having had the opportunity of being a monk and living in monasteries, and of living here in England as a Buddhist monk, is something I never expected in my life; in my wildest fantasies that was not one of them. I remember having fantasies about a monastic life in Asia. I saw myself sometimes living in a cave as a hermit in a state of joy and bliss, or like in those Chinese paintings – the little monk sitting under a willow tree listening to the water falling – magic images like that. But not once did I see myself in Hertfordshire!

What I am talking about is rejoicing at the goodness of sentient beings. This doesn't mean that one is not aware of the badness, or refuses to admit to the meanness and nastiness of humanity; it's not that. We

are, anyway, very aware of that; we don't need to cultivate it. But rejoicing in the goodness of conscious beings from beginningless time – that kind of reflection is a very positive way of looking at humanity. One can begin to recognize the goodness in oneself and in all human beings, whether they are homeless, street people, or whatever. One may have an arrogant attitude, thinking that somehow one has more right to be here than some other person: 'My life is more important than somebody of another race, or a street person, or a tramp. I'm more useful to society than they are. My life is more important than theirs.' What does that feel like? Contemplate it. It doesn't ring true to me that my life is more important than any other being.

One can recognize the potential we all share, that the value of life is through this awakened awareness, rather than through imposing one's will upon others through ignorance, fear and desire. In our own way we can begin to see the potential we have as human beings, as conscious entities in the universe, recognizing the power that we have, that each individual has, once they purify the mind and see things as they are. Tremendous power for goodness and compassion comes through the human form as we free ourselves from the darkness, the blindness that we attach to through being bound to dull, meaningless, conditioning. Contemplate how meaningless life is as just a conditioned, human being – how depressing it becomes if you see yourself only in terms of very rigid and narrow perceptions – rather than appreciating the gift you have, which you may have forgotten or just not recognized.

In awakening to the Dhamma, the human individual is like a channel for blessing. I look at Luang Por Chah, for example, and see him as one human being who was like a channel. All the blessings, the goodness, came through him to all of us. That was just through the power of one human being's mind – through his letting go of ignorance – not to mention all the others that we may not even know about who have done the same.



## 43 | Making Friends with the Cement Mixer

So the retreat continues and today wasn't so noisy – we didn't have such a good opportunity to meditate and make friends with the cement mixer and the pneumatic drill! But that is rather facetious, isn't it? In a way, however, it offers an opportunity to adopt a realistic attitude towards meditation, rather than to create hostility towards the way it is. 'There is noise, and unpleasant things happen, but if we become averse to them, we create hostility. When we are mindful and accept the way it is, then we don't create hostility. So the real suffering is not the sound of the pneumatic drill and the cement mixer, but the stuff you create in your own mind. That is what *dukkha* is.

We might want a monastery that is perfectly silent, like a dream place. Spirit Rock in California is a beautiful place in Marin County across from San Francisco where they have lovely buildings and a meditation hall. It is modest and convenient, and has been well thought out. But there are these wild turkeys which go 'gobble, gobble, gobble, gobble ...' just outside the meditation hall. One of these birds in particular likes people, he is very friendly. But now they have a

quandary because some people think they should be got rid of. Well, I always think friction and having annoying things around is absolutely essential for good meditation, otherwise you become incredibly selfish, incredibly controlling, and easily get upset.

If the standards are too high and everything is just perfect, then any little thing that disturbs you can get you into a rage. This is an important reflection. Luang Por Chah was very good at getting me to see that suffering wasn't really anything there in the monastery – the food, the climate, the insects – it was what I created in my own mind. And that is also where wisdom is. You begin to realize that the world is going to be this way, that there is always going to be something you don't like, that there is always going to be something irritating or undesirable.

How do we respond to undesirable situations? One way is to react, and try to get rid of the wild turkeys, the cement mixer, the pneumatic drill, the lawnmower, and any other annoying thing. Sometimes we get somebody who is into ringing bells, and they just hammer away on that bell out there. That can be really annoying. This isn't to say we should not try to set up quiet and suitable places in which to meditate, but what we are really aiming at is liberation from conditions rather than trying to control them. When we get into environmental control and try to make everything the way we want it – even if we get what we want – we become somebody who has to have our own way in order to meditate. Then we are very dependent.

Peace of this kind is through controlling and getting rid of every kind of disturbance. You can become very refined and sensitive by doing that, but then life becomes increasingly more miserable – because the world is not particularly refined. This is not a refined realm, not a *deva loka*, a paradise. We and Planet Earth are not made of ether or subtle substances. We therefore need to recognize that the human realm, planetary life, sensory existence, and so forth, is like *this*. It is wide-ranging in the quality of the conditions and experiences: coarse *and* refined. The wisdom is in embracing the totality of it, rather than just

trying to refine it so as to get what you want. You will break if you do that. If you get too refined, you just cannot exist any more, you crack.

A healthy state of mind is not refined; it is that which takes life and responds and adapts to changing conditions. In our lives, we have to bear with the ageing of the body, sickness, pain, death, loss of loved ones, ongoing irritations and frustrations. The arahant, then, is a being that embraces all without being refined or precious. The arahant is not somebody who has to have life only at its very best, at its peak moments.

When we examine Buddhist monasticism, it is not about having refined requisites or high standards; it is about having four requisites of a low standard. Some of the monastics at the time of the Buddha didn't even wear robes; they were naked ascetics. The Jain monks didn't have alms bowls; they had to go to the door and beg for food with their hands and could only take what filled them. They weren't allowed to have money, gold or silver, and had to pull out their beards because they couldn't even use razors. But the Buddha thought that was a bit too much when he established Buddhist monasticism 2,542 years ago and modified it so that monks were allowed to make robes from the rags that people had thrown away. We have three robes to cover the body and to keep warm, and these are based on what people had thrown out, on what the villagers didn't want, or what they wrapped corpses in. One could go to a charnel ground, take this cloth, wash it, and make a nice robe for oneself. We were also allowed to carry a bowl for alms food; medicine was fermented urine; and, shelter for the night was at the foot of a tree.

Now, these are very low standards, aren't they? However, the monastic form isn't an ascetic form and, if better things are offered, we can accept them. Some people offer nice textiles for robes. I didn't ask for this robe, for example, but some people in a part of Thailand where I used to live make silk and they wanted to make me a robe, so they made this one for me in silk. But it isn't what I require as my standard. Also, the food we get here is of a very high quality. We can't say we want

high quality food; we're not even supposed to hint. So if someone asks: 'What do you want, Ajahn Sumedho? What do you prefer?' – you are not supposed to say anything. You just take what you get in your alms bowl. The training is to be content with basic things, training the mind to learn how to be content, and I think that is very important for us all.

Even though we may not live at a low standard we reflect from that standard, so that what is given is appreciated – like the food we get, the robes we are given, and the shelter for the night. Gratitude and contentment, I find, are qualities of the holy life that make it a joyful experience. It is a lifestyle that brings me a lot of joy. I have contemplated the things that have been given to me so that I can live in this way and devote my life to the Dhamma. But I have not always been content with what I have had.

In the early days in Thailand when I was a young monk, the first kuti I was given by Ajahn Chah was a fairly new one, but was not very high (I was the tallest monk they had ever seen in Ubon)! So they gave me this kuti to use – and I kept bumping my head on the beams and door frame. It did make you mindful, but I complained. I felt I would like a better kuti. Ajahn Chah, however, got me to look at that complaining. You know, it was a shelter for the night, and it had a new corrugated tin roof which was very nice in the rainy season in Thailand; a roof that did not leak when the monsoons came. Contemplated in that way one felt content, gratitude for what one had, rather than thinking, 'It's too low! Why can't they get me something better? Do they expect me to live in this place?' But then, even though those kind of thoughts continued to come, I began to see that I was creating suffering around these things.

Food is a very sensitive issue as well, isn't it? People can get really touchy about that. In some of the poorer areas in North East Thailand, you just take what is given. I have sometimes had just rice and salt for my meal, and that would be the one meal of the day. I did occasionally suffer from malnutrition as a result, but that was not as much suffering as the incessant obsession we create in our minds. We do have high

standards. We want the best, are fussy and demanding, and think we cannot possibly survive on less. There are these things that we absolutely need!

The alms-mendicant is content with the four requisites, and because I deliberately cultivate that kind of thing, I do feel a lot of gratitude for the things given to me. The temple that has been built here at Amaravati came about from donations. People offered this temple. It wasn't something I demanded, and seemed to happen in a miraculous way without anyone being pushy and obsessed with fundraising. So things do happen in that way, you know. Also, the *kuti* they built for me is a very nice one and I am very grateful for such a nice place, but it was not something I demanded; it was not something I had to have. People make these things available and that is fine. It is important, however, to train the mind to be content with a roof over one's head for the night, the food one gets, the clothes one wears, and the medicine that is available.

After my sixth *vassa* – my sixth year as a monk – I had a heartfelt sense of recognizing all the goodness that had been sent to me throughout my monastic life. It seemed that when I became a monk, suddenly everything opened up for me: I found a good teacher, people were eager to help me stay in Thailand, the Immigration Department gave me a resident's visa (which is almost impossible to get except for wealthy American businessmen), and over the years there has been the generosity of food offerings and requisites. And everyone was so willing, so eager, to support me for my spiritual development. Because of that I have felt a kind of joyousness.

I look at this body and think, 'I've been a monk for thirty-three years and this body is now an alms-food body.' The body is supposed to change every seven years, isn't it? So this is a body that is made out of alms food. It is quite healthy for its age, and I feel a lot of joy, a lot of peace and clarity of mind through meditation. It is a rare opportunity for the likes of someone like myself to live the holy life in such a full and complete way.

Discontentment: always feeling that things aren't good enough, wanting something better, wanting more, not being content with where one is, always thinking one would be happier somewhere else, always looking for the next thing, always trying to raise one's standards. These kind of mental states are very much a part of one's cultural background, you know: 'the grass on the other side of the fence is always greener.' That's how I've been conditioned through my social and cultural background,

The training in contentment for me was through the monastic life. And this gives the mental quality that is very pleasant to experience. The complaining mind, the critical mind, the always wanting something one doesn't have, or not being content with what one does have, is *dukkha*. You create that *dukkha*, that suffering. The monastic life is a form that you surrender to. If you are not willing to surrender to it, then after a while you don't want to do it any more; you get tired of it. It doesn't work for you if you continue to think in terms of attaining, gaining, and becoming. One can survive the monastic life on inspiration and endurance for a while, but after that it reaches a point where you've had enough and you just have to leave.

In the long run surrendering means letting go of everything. But there are a lot of things you don't want to let go of, so you feel a sense of terror sometimes, or just resistance and rebelliousness towards the monastic life. Through reflection, however, and through watching mindfully the reactions one has to the restraints, the conventions, you begin to see that the suffering isn't really in those conventions, but in the reactions themselves – like hating the cement mixer. That is where the suffering lies.

In this retreat I have tried to emphasize a sense of *saddhā*, faith, trust and enthusiasm for meditation. We are willing to take a risk. We are not asking for guarantees of enlightenment and security, but are willing to put ourselves on the line and risk failure, starvation and everything else, and just trust in the Dhamma. That's a very good

reflection for people who live in a welfare state where they are used to having all the guarantees from cradle to grave. It does sometimes sound like foolishness or irresponsibility – but basically I see that the Buddha established the monastic order as a vehicle that would last through generations. It has survived 2,542 years in this way – not by being propped up with a lot of money, guarantees, and promises – but through establishing the Dhamma-Vinaya where the needs of the Sangha are based on trust and faith, rather than on demands.

Human beings are generally good-hearted. We want to be good. We feel a lot of joy when opportunities for generosity or selfless action are made available to us. You can see that the love of the good, of the true, and the beautiful, is very much part of our humanity. But if we just see human beings as mere consumers, greedy for things, selfish and vain, then we get this very jaundiced view, this nasty picture of ourselves, and miss out on the potential for our good side, of what we truly long for. Just from living here in Britain for twenty-three years, I have experienced generosity, kindness, respect and appreciation – all the good things my life has been involved with by being a Buddhist monk living in a non-Buddhist European country.

Ask yourself what you really love: the good, the truth, what is beautiful? We long for those things, don't we? Even though evil can look glamorous and fascinating sometimes, even though it may appear tantalizing, tempting and exciting, generally speaking, when we really contemplate those kinds of feelings, we recognize that they are rather childish, and what we really want is the good, the true, and the beautiful. We want to know the truth. We love the good. Remind yourself of this. The habits around vanity, selfishness, miserliness, fear, worry, and anxiety, are conditions we create out of ignorance, not out of right understanding.

We can easily delude ourselves. We can think that what is ugly is beautiful and what is bad is good. We can delude ourselves into thinking that an atrocious act is a saintly one. We can rationalize almost anything

we want to, make a reasonable case for committing murder, for robbing a bank, for destroying an ethnic group, for bombing. We can give very rational arguments based on rational, thought-out ideas, and can delude ourselves very easily. We have clever minds. But when we get down to basics, that longing for the good, the true and the beautiful, is like a spiritual aspiration. There is something in us; it isn't a desire that comes out of ignorance but a natural aspiration of the human mind, a longing for liberation, for freedom, for the good, the true and beautiful. This is something to respect in yourself, and to keep remembering as what you really long for, what you really aspire to – and not to let all the mundane and banal, worldly, materialistic influences take you over and blind you to what you really are, to what your true nature is.

Now, this opportunity of going into retreat is something to greatly value and treasure because it is an ideal situation for reflection. Notice how, over the past week, you have not had to make many decisions about what you are going to eat, what you are going to wear, where you are going to go, who you are going to speak to, and what you are going to do next; it has all been nicely arranged for you. The food has been laid on, you are not here to change your clothes all the while, and there is noble silence so that you don't have to socialize, entertain people and bring all that into mind. We arrange the schedule, so you just follow it. You eat at *this* time, wake up at *this* time, sit at *this* time, walk at *this* time. And even though you may resist it in a sense, in another way it makes life very simple; you don't have to think about it. You are not encouraged to go outside the monastery, or distract yourself with reading books or watching videos, and so forth, so the whole atmosphere is one of internal reflection and mindfulness.

At first there may be some resistance, a kind of restlessness, and that is natural. You are, after all, changing from a busy, habitual life to a more passive and meditative one. Gradually you begin to tune into the silence of your mind, the sound of silence. Most people don't appreciate this, or don't even know about it, so they are always talking

or distracting themselves doing things. They simply don't know what else to do. It seems that for many people it is just a matter of going from this to that, killing time, waiting for the next thing, doing something now in order to get what they want in the future ... on and on like that. But in meditation we become aware that contentment is *now*, gratitude is *now*, silence is *now*, a continuous refrain of 'here and now'.

Be mindful here and now: 'Do good, refrain from doing evil, and be mindful.' This is the advice of all the Buddhas. Live in society doing good whenever you act or speak; do that which is kind and generous, and refrain from action and speech that is cruel, disruptive, exploitative, or selfish. This is the basic teaching of morality. It is, however, such a simple thing to say: 'Do good; refrain from doing evil!' And it can be so hackneyed: it sounds like being back in school. Now, though, I am taking responsibility: I *want* to be good. I don't want to use my physical body and my presence as a human being for doing bad things to myself, to this being here, to you or society. And I am determined not to use it in any intentional way to exploit, to take advantage, to abuse or deceive anyone. So that is something that gives me a sense of self-respect. I have made that decision – the decision of how to live my life as a human being in this society – and this is something I can respect. I respect people that do that; I also respect myself for doing it.

Being generous and kind, doing good in society, not being stingy and mean, selfish and vain, we practise kindness and generosity because this brings action in society which is giving to society, sharing what we have, being a good influence.

We also develop awareness, mindfulness and heedfulness, which means being able to recollect right now the way it is. To be mindful is to just *be* right now, bringing into consciousness the way it is: being aware of what we are feeling, our mental states, the place we are in, the group we are with, the conditions around us. On this meditation retreat, for example, we are mindful of the fact that this is a meditation retreat; this is not daily life as most of you live it ordinarily. We are aware of the

schedule, the rules, the people, the conventions that exist here, and we live in a way that isn't disruptive or will cause conflict.

When you leave the retreat and go back into society, try to be mindful of the way it is. It may be frustrating, unpleasant, demanding or stressful, but just try to be mindful of it. Use clear comprehension: it is like *this*. So, this is not criticizing anything, but noticing the way things affect you and how to live within the structures you have to endure and bear with. That, then, is using wisdom; you learn how to live in a way that isn't just heedless, selfish, blind, blaming, complaining, critical or resentful.

In my early monastic life I wanted various things to be different. When they weren't very good, I didn't want them to be like that. Also, I would sometimes be very critical of other monks. I didn't want them to be the way they were. I wanted them to be some other way. And I didn't want a lot of the things within myself: these thoughts, feelings, emotions. In reflective awareness, however; in this embracing quality, irritations are seen to be a part of it: the frustrations, the worm in the apple, the snake in the garden, the fly in the ointment, the hair in the soup, the cement mixer in the monastery ... You can find a tremendous ability to endure situations you thought you could not.

So many times I would find myself thinking that I just couldn't take any more of it ... had enough ... fed up ... But then I noticed that I was still there and that I *could* take it, and that maybe I shouldn't go around believing all that negative stuff. Then something else would happen and again I would think, 'I've had enough ... fed up ... can't endure any more ...' But when I really looked at myself, I could endure a lot of things that my emotions said I couldn't. So I began to mistrust emotional habits – because they made me into a coward, a weakling who had: 'had enough ... and I can't take any more!' Then I realized that I am not weak or precious. So now even though the emotions can go off like that, I don't believe them.

I've been here in England for twenty-three years, but I never thought I would actually live here! I still feel quite surprised about it.

In some ways it seems like a long time, but in actual experience it feels as though I have only been here for a few years. And during this time, I've had these feelings of 'I've had enough!' When life gets difficult and unpleasant for me I have a habit of wanting to get away. I don't suppose any of you have that problem! So one of my refrains was always: 'I want to go to my cave.' I had this idea of a cave in the Himalayas, you know, like a hermit, like Milarepa. And I had these thoughts of going off and living in the mountains, alone. Then I found myself in Hampstead, London, then at Chithurst, and then at Amaravati, surrounded by people. It wasn't my intention when I became a monk to end up in this position. I mean, I don't think I would have become a monk if I had known what was going to happen. Somehow, though, the flow of life brought me into this.

In Thailand they treasure physical solitude – going off to some cave or some remote place and practising in solitude – and this is what I loved and inclined towards when I was there. But living here in England and being the kind of focus of the monastery and community life, made me realize that I wasn't going to have that any more. In fact, over the past twenty-three years, I've had very little opportunity to go off and meditate. When Hammer Wood was given to us I had fantasies of sitting in a little hut there for years on end – you know, listening to the sounds of the birds, watching the squirrels and deer, and living out this kind of fantasy life of a hermit! But, actually, I've hardly spent any time in Hammer Wood. The conditions just never came for that kind of practice. So then I adjusted my standards to a mental solitude rather than a physical one, and used that as a reference point.

I put emphasis on *cittaviveka* (that solitude of the heart) and became successful at finding it within rather than seeking it externally. And *upadhi-viveka* is enlightenment, living in the light, in the awareness. 'Viveka' is translated as a kind of solitude, a sense of peacefulness (physical or emotional) and enlightenment; it is learning how to work with the life we have rather than always thinking: 'I can't

practise because I don't have enough physical solitude.' So I gave up complaining about that. This *cittaviveka*, which leads to *upadhi-viveka*, is just an example of how I use this tradition and adapt myself to the conditions that I find myself in.

I haven't been chained to the monastery, of course. I could have gone away, run away, disobeyed, gone back to Thailand and stayed there; there was no one holding a gun to my head and making me stay there. There is, however, this feeling that I should not act on my own feelings, on my own impulses of the moment, and that I would rather work it out through the mind than in the feeling of, 'I've had enough! Fed up! Need more space and time to myself!' I would rather work things out in terms of patience, endurance, contentment, gratitude; getting down to being grateful for just *this* – this room here and this room here – just finding the joy of the very simplicity of life, the joy of seeing this beautiful hibiscus flower, the beautiful colour. The mind rejoices in the beauty of something. It is very simple, isn't it? I am not saying I have to have this plant: 'Can I have this plant? Can I take it away?' That is being a killjoy, isn't it? No, I am talking about learning to trust, have faith, be content with very simple things like the sunshine and the blue sky, or even grey days. Some time ago I decided not to prefer sunny days, but to rejoice in whatever kind of weather there was. So my emotional state is not dependent on whether the sun is shining or not.

Now, this is a challenge, I admit, and I'm not always successful at it. But it is certainly a direction and a way that gives life its truly spiritual quality. It is a very simple way of living. The irony is I have had a fascinating life: I have been all over the world, and been in beautiful situations, and met interesting people. Actually, I am inclined to make it less fascinating because it gets *too* interesting. I could go all over the world all the time and give retreats. All kinds of things are made available to me – not due to anything I have been seeking – it just happens that way. Last year I was hardly in Amaravati for more than a week at a time. People would say, 'If you want to see Ajahn Sumedho, don't go to

Amaravati!’ So this year I am determined to limit my excursions and to feel that the life of a monk at Amaravati is enough – just the sitting, standing, walking, lying down, the four requisites, the rain, the sun, winter, spring, summer, autumn, morning puja, eating, evening puja – things like that; just the simplicity of the life and the contentment and joy that comes from that.

We human beings can realize the Dhamma, and that is a great gift. We have this opportunity and ability to practise the Dhamma, to begin to really understand ourselves and the world we live in, and to develop wisdom so that we are not just helpless victims of circumstance. Then we feel that our lives have tremendous significance. Not that I think of myself as significant, but I don’t feel that I have wasted my life. I feel that I have learnt many things I needed to learn, and this has all been made possible through the generosity and kindness of others: of the Lord Buddha himself who established the teachings, of people like Luang Por Chah in Thailand, and of all of the lay people. One feels content and grateful just for a very simple life. This is the joy of the holy life within this human realm. So I offer this as a reflection.



We can reflect on the way it is now; on this tropical kind of weather, for example. In the attitude of acceptance we can allow ourselves to be receptive to life rather than try to control it, run away from it, or resist it. This receptivity contrasts resistance. Culturally, we tend to be conditioned into resisting things. There is a fear of being open and receptive, as if by doing so we will allow something to take us over. We feel we have to develop some kind of protection in order to keep ourselves from being annihilated or taken advantage of. It's a kind of paranoia of the mind. We feel we need to resist evil, kill the devil, and destroy the evil forces.

The Buddhist attitude, however, is one of loving-kindness (*mettā*), of open acceptance of everything as it is. And if we take loving-kindness to its ultimate, all conditioned phenomena will be accepted for what they are. That doesn't mean we approve of everything; it's just that they are accepted. Everything *has* to be the way it is in the moment. You can't say you don't want the weather to be like this, or you don't want things to be this way. If you do, you are not accepting the way it is. You are instead creating suffering around something that you don't like or want.

You can also have loving-kindness for your dislike of the way things are, so you are not even criticizing yourself for being critical. Feeling despair and self-aversion for being critical or selfish is another trap of the mind. Even if you are sitting here hating yourself, thinking of yourself as selfish and critical and not a very nice person, you can have *mettā* for that; you can have loving-kindness for the critical mind. Patient acceptance is non-aversion to everything that is happening now. Everything is accepted; nothing is left out; there are no loose ends or exceptions.

I was giving a talk the other day about how to change your attitude from negative to positive, but somebody took umbrage at that! This person gets very annoyed if I imply that one should be thinking positively, like in this idea of the power of positive thought. But how does he know that I mean it in the way he takes it? And what about resistance and acceptance? This is resistance. To have *mettā* for resistance is an attitude of mind, not a position to take. It is not that we should grasp the idea of having loving-kindness for everything, because then we will think we are never loving enough. There may always be something or someone in our lives for which or for whom we can't generate any positive feeling. A name comes up and you think, 'I should be able to have *mettā* for this person; I should be able to forgive.' But you just can't do it! You simply can't say, 'May you be well!' without feeling bitter and hypocritical. Grudgingly saying 'May you be well,' is the best you can do.

Sometimes *mettā* is presented as a kind of 'think pink' idea, where we are just saying very nice things and wishing everybody well, and it is all very sweet and nice. But underneath there might be a kind of volcano of rage and resentment.

Idealism is a mental function. You can think of the highest ideals about eternal love, loving all sentient beings. Unconditioned love is an ideal. Intellectually we can create ideals about how things should be if they were at their best, and that is a function of the mind. We

might then get inspired by these ideals. And if we talk about love and forgiveness and loving-kindness, tears can come into our eyes – the joy of being so high-minded. And then, after spreading loving-kindness throughout the universe, maybe something happens: somebody slams the door and suddenly we're angry. Now we can become confused, because anger is not part of the ideal. Nevertheless, anger and rage are emotions that we all experience; so then we can have a war going on between our ideals and our emotions.

A woman came to me once – a well-educated woman – and she was in a very emotional state. She started crying and said, 'I'm so sorry; I know I'm being foolish; I'm just being so foolish and stupid.' Then she cried again and said, 'I know this is ridiculous, but I can't help it.' Her intellect didn't approve of this at all. The intellect was being hard line: 'You shouldn't be crying. You shouldn't be doing that, just weeping and soft. You're losing control! You're disgracing yourself!' One can be very hard and tyrannical on the intellectual plane: 'If I were a really together woman and got my act together, I wouldn't be weeping and crying like this; I'd have control of myself. But look at me! I'm a mass of jelly in front of this monk. He must think I'm just another one of those emotional women!' We can be very cruel to ourselves, very judgemental: 'I shouldn't be like this. I shouldn't feel these kinds of feelings. If I were a *decent* person I would *never* have done the things I've done!' Inner tyrants are relentlessly hard, cruel and judgemental. That is the intellectual mind thinking in terms of how things *should* be. But ideals don't feel anything. When you attach to an ideal, you don't feel life at that moment. You can be very insensitive to somebody who is having problems, because you are attached to ideals. Even the ideal of sensitivity is not sensitive. We may say we must be sensitive to each other – grasp that as an ideal – and yet not be sensitive at all; we simply shut ourselves off by attaching to the ideal of sensitivity.

In reflective awareness, however, we are saying sensitivity is like *this*; it feels like *this*. This is a sense realm. It isn't an ideal realm, a utopia.

This realm has everything – the best, the worst, and all gradations between – from refined subtleties of beauty, aesthetics, and loveliness, to the most hideous, gross, totally disgusting conditions. In terms of reflective awareness, then, we are not judging, we are just noticing that life is like *this*. It is not what it should be according to an ideal, but this is the way it is.

The habits that we have acquired – the emotional habits, the way we react to praise and blame, success and failure, sickness and health, prosperity, depression and elation, and so on – are not rational; they are not ideal. The intellect is rational, but emotions are like *this*. You can be blubbering on the floor, a mass of jelly. That is not being reasonable or rational, is it? So then your rational mind can be critical and say, ‘You shouldn’t be like this.’ It can judge according to ideals.

My own experience of life is that when I reached the age of thirty I was horrified to discover that, emotionally, I was still very immature. I thought thirty was old. My youth had gone, but emotionally I felt very childish. This was a horrible realization. Physically I had matured, and intellectually I had developed and could put on an act of maturity. A friend asked me once, ‘Why did you become a monk?’ I told him it was because I had been suffering so much.

‘You suffered?’

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘I was suffering all the time.’

‘You never looked like you were suffering;’ he said, ‘you always looked so happy.’

‘Did I? I didn’t know I looked happy, because I wasn’t.’

This appearance of being happy was probably my persona, how I presented myself. He was surprised that I had suffered, but I thought everybody could see it; I thought it was as plain as the nose on my face.

I could act out a role at the appropriate time. In the quiet of my room, however, it wasn’t like that. I wasn’t mature and cool, a man who had his life together; I was frightened and feeling insecure, disappointed with life, and had childish reactions to things. So what

do you do with yourself in such a situation? How can you change? The inner tyrant said, 'Well, just grow up!' And I tried that; I tried to act as though I was grown up. It wasn't that I went around throwing temper tantrums in front of people, but sometimes the tantrums were going on inside. I could be smiling, smoking a cigarette and drinking a cocktail, but inside I was anything but cool and calm.

Meditation was the light at the end of the tunnel, for me, the only hope I had of growing up, of really maturing and taking that to the ultimate of enlightenment, complete liberation. Why settle for maturity in a childish society? Society is pretty childish anyway (at least the one in which I had lived). People were vain. And in those days nobody seemed very interested in spiritual development. If you talked about such things they would look at you as though you had said something inappropriate, or were an idiot. The people I knew were only interested in appearances, fashion, political movements, in trying to make the world better and so forth. But on the level of spiritual development, nobody seemed to have even a slight inclination towards that.

While training and living these past thirty-three years as a monk, I have had the opportunity of getting to the root of this issue. This way of intuitive awareness, emptiness, can resolve our emotional habits. There is a way of freeing ourselves from those habitual reactions, and it is the only way I have found that works. Endlessly discussing them and thinking about them just seems to lead one in circles. What we need is an escape from the conditioned realm. Awareness opens the gate to the deathless, opens the mind and heart to the deathless reality, to the Dhamma, to where emotional habits can be liberated from the mind. Otherwise, as Ajahn Sucitto likes to say, 'It's just like rearranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.' Trying to change conditions is like rearranging your furniture. You are tired of the sofa on that side of the room so you put it on this side. That is the best you can do. If you begin to see the way out of the whole thing, however, you see that mindfulness is the Path to the Deathless.

The intellect can easily judge emotions. We can condemn ourselves for having them – feeling despair and hopelessness with ourselves because we seem to regurgitate the same stuff over and over again. The *mettā* then is towards the intellect, the inner tyrant, the self-criticism. *Mettā* is the willingness to accept the way it is without any condition. It isn't like a deal you make: 'I'll accept you if you change. I'll marry you if you promise to change your ways and do what I want. That is some people's way of relating to each other: I can only love you when you act in the right way. If you conduct yourself appropriately, I will love you. But if you act in a bad way and don't respect me, then I won't love you any more.' That is conditioned love, isn't it? Unconditioned love, which is *mettā*, does not make any conditions. 'No matter how nasty it is, I still love you. No matter how horrible you become, I still love you. There is nothing that can destroy my love for you. You can be the most maniacal, horrible, nasty human being in the whole world – you can become a demon – but nothing can diminish or taint that unconditioned love.'

This unconditioned love doesn't necessarily mean liking or approving. The word 'love' is often used to mean 'I like you and I approve of you', but unconditioned love and *mettā* isn't a matter of liking. You have *mettā* for what you don't like as well as for what you do. You can have *mettā* for devils. You can love your enemies in the Christian sense. That doesn't mean you like your enemy. If somebody wants to kill you, you are not going to like them. 'Liking' is a different thing, isn't it? 'Liking' is when people do things which you approve; it is good and you like good.

Unconditioned love isn't a matter of liking, but of not hating, not condemning, of accepting, of being patient, being non-critical towards the way it is – whether it's anger or the inner tyrant, the immature emotions or the foolish, silly thoughts you have. Unconditioned love or *mettā* makes no conditions; it is the way it is. And all conditions are impermanent.

Apply that to your practice. When negative, dark things come into consciousness, practise saying to yourself, 'I accept this.' Really embrace

it and see what happens. With the sound of silence you can cut off your thinking, so that you are not thinking about it but feeling it, getting to the raw feeling. Just hold that in a totally accepting, uncritical, patient way, and see what happens. Prove this practice to yourself. Now you are liberating these unresolved and immature emotions. You are resolving these emotions rather than manipulating them, rearranging, or suppressing them. So there is a way out; there is a way of freedom and liberation even within the limitations of human kamma.

Sometimes we find that life is a real challenge; we have our Achilles heel, our weak point. And when we get hit there, we fall apart; we collapse into a heap. It is important, therefore, to know where our weak points are, not in order to criticize them, but to be more prepared. I find that I now have the ability to walk into the lions' den, as it were, like Daniel. I used to be a coward and wouldn't go near the lions' den. If the lions' den were over there I would walk over here. Now I am willing to enter because I have learnt how to deal with acrimonious, threatening or frightening situations. But I encourage you to work on the little things in daily life, the petty stuff. There is no need to wait for the big moments, you know, when there are real lions around. Probably none of us will have to go into a real lions' den, of course, or be crucified on a cross, or anything dramatic; we will probably just get older, smaller, lose control of our faculties: sight going, hearing going, and so forth. Some people die in a grand or inspiring way, but most of us just kind of pack up. But that's all right, isn't it? If that's the way it is, then that is *dhamma*.

Sometimes we are criticized for bypassing our emotions, for being spiritual bypassers. This is a term I have heard applied to me. They say, 'You're bypassing your emotional life!' Alternatively, there are people who like to talk about their feelings a lot. Admittedly, this has a certain value, especially if they have always kept their feelings to themselves. But endlessly talking about their feelings is still being caught in the trap of self-view. And those who always want to talk about their feelings can be very annoying to others!

The way to deal with feelings and emotions, then, is not through bypassing them – nor through judging them or trying to change them – but through directly accepting them, knowing them for what they are. At first it is very difficult to do this, because there is a lot of habitual resistance to emotions. Begin to notice what resistance is like – this tendency to dismiss or dislike emotional experience: the feeling of discomfort, embarrassment, or being ill at ease and wanting to get away when people become emotional. In this practice of intuitive awareness, however, we can have *mettā* for our embarrassment and for everything. Otherwise we start telling ourselves we should get in contact more with our emotions. We have these ideas: ‘I’m not in touch with my emotions so I should get in touch with them.’ You may hold onto this idea of being someone who is not in touch with your emotions and should become somebody who *is*. Then you go out of your way to try and feel everything and be emotional – and this can be very contrived. You attach to the idea, try to force things, try to make them happen according to what you want or how you conceive they should be, rather than having *mettā* and letting things unfold, letting things flow.

As Buddhists, we take refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. And taking refuge in the Dhamma is taking refuge in intuitive awareness. We can let Dhamma direct us. We can trust and rest in the silence and attention; and if we see any resistance, we can have *mettā* for it. But just thinking, ‘I’m trying to accept this, but I’ve got this terrible resisting habit,’ brings you back into, ‘I’m someone who’s got this habit, and I shouldn’t have. I should be able to accept my feelings and get in touch with my feelings, but sometimes I can’t do it! It doesn’t work for me.’ Then we are back in the same trap, because one condition can’t know another. Only the unconditioned knows the conditioned. The conditioned can’t know the unconditioned. When we are grasping conditions, we cannot realize the unconditioned, the ultimate reality. When we are in that realm of the conditioned, we just go from one

condition to another, and there is no way that one condition can really know another; we just associate one condition with another. In intuitive awareness, however, we can actually know the conditioned as the conditioned; we can know the world as the world, anger as anger, greed as greed, suffering as suffering. We can simply and directly know the way it is without criticism, without condemnation of anything. Things are allowed to flow and move according to Dhamma, according to the way things are. If we were to talk in terms of enlightened beings, we could say that an enlightened being is just a flow of light. They are not spiritual bypassers sitting under trees saying, 'I don't want to know.' There is this immediacy, this intuitive awareness, which is not intellectual. We can actually see and know things very directly, very clearly – not theoretically, not bound by definitions in Pali dictionaries or Buddhist treatises – but actually. This is a refuge. It is not a matter of somebody else knowing; it is we who are trusting and knowing. It is not theoretical or dependent on interpretations of scriptural teachings. The Buddha's teachings can be used for mindfulness rather than just for collecting a lot of ideas *about* Buddhism.

When we liberate the mind from emotions, what is left? Will we just be lifeless zombies? Maybe our emotions give us a bit of glamour and colour, give us our unique characters and personalities? If we don't have them, are we all going to be the same, like toy soldiers all in the same uniform with the same blank expressions? Or maybe we will discover how to live in a way that is 'right speech', 'right action', 'right livelihood' and so forth? But the liberation of all our emotions will not lead to our just sitting under a tree in a kind of permanent *samādhi* where our eyes are shut and we don't hear anything – a situation in which NATO could start bombing, or twenty elephants could dance on the roof of Amaravati temple – and we wouldn't hear a thing.

In the past I developed a way of existing whereby I could protect myself. The world was and is very competitive – at least the society I am from – and one learns how to play the game in order to survive.

There is a part of one in that, which just shuts off: one becomes quite insensitive. Monastics, on the other hand, become increasingly more sensitive. In a way, this can be rather frightening. Where you used to be pretty tough, you knew: 'Nothing bothers me!' Suddenly you find you are not tough. So how do you interpret that sensitivity? If it is on a personal level it can be very frightening, because it seems as though you are more fragile and delicate rather than stronger and unshakeable. Something that didn't bother you before, suddenly shatters you. That is because the basic delusion is still there; you are living a life that is opening, but you are interpreting it in a personal way. You have no refuge; you are just getting used to the more refined manners which are encouraged in the monastic life.

The sense of refuge is very important; it is where one's faith is in the Dhamma rather than, say, in a refined situation with good, moral and pleasant people. The refuge is in intuitive awareness and that is quite independent of polite manners, morality, and everybody being good and nice and pleasant. This means that I can go anywhere, even into the lions' den or the battlefield, because it is unshakeable and deathless, not refined or special.

As you begin to recognize intuitive awareness more and more, trust in that. Put it to the test and keep working with it in your daily life. You can develop awareness around a lot of the irritating, frustrating things in your family or profession, or whatever. You might have to live with people who are irritating, coarse or selfish, but you can use that situation for Dhamma. To apply this to the flow of your life is like a challenge. But, as you have insight into it, you begin to trust it. You see it working, and that increases your faith and confidence in it, so that after a while you feel a sense of unshakeability, a mental clarity. The mind is clear and unshakeable rather than rising and falling with emotions or the physical conditions in which you may find yourself.

## 45 | You Are Not a Permanent Person

One way of dividing up the conditioned realm is into five aggregates (khandhas): body (*rūpa*), feeling (*vedanā*) perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*saṅkhārā*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Now, when I first started meditating many years ago, I could understand the definition of these five aggregates. However, I did not know their reality; I had never really contemplated these things in an intuitive way through observing my own body, my own feelings, my own perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Initially, I only contemplated the physical body, the four elements (earth, fire water and air); the parts of the body, (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, etc); and, the body itself. I contemplated material things only: that which is formed.

We can meditate on our own physical body, and we can also meditate on feelings: pleasure, pain, or neutral sensations, through the senses. We can become aware of sight as being pleasant, unpleasant or neutral; the same with sound, odour, and taste. Mental states, too, can be contemplated as pleasant, unpleasant or neutral.

Feeling (*vedanā*) is the sense realm in which we live. This is a feeling realm. When things come into consciousness, we experience them in

terms of either pleasant, unpleasant or neutral feelings. We can investigate pleasant sensation: the pull towards what is beautiful, pleasant or happy. We can also contemplate looking at something ugly where one is repelled, draws back, and doesn't want to go near it. And we can contemplate neutral feelings, sensations, and experiences that we hardly notice. Most of our experiences are fairly neutral, but we don't notice them until they go to the extremes of pleasure and pain. The sensation of our clothing, for example, is generally neutral. We can feel the sensation of our clothes, but we have to make an effort to notice it; we have to look. If you think of your right arm, say, you may suddenly become aware of the sleeve of your shirt on the skin. It isn't a pleasurable sensation and it isn't a painful one. I would say it is neutral. So we can notice the sense realm, the experience of sensitivity, as pleasure, pain and neutral.

Then, perception (*saññā*) is the ability to perceive things as something; it is language and memory. You perceive this item here, for example, as a bell. You can hold it up and think, 'This is a bell.' But if you don't know what it is, you may perceive it as a dish – that is a perception! Then someone says, 'No, Ajahn Sumedho, it's not a dish, it's a bell.'

'Well, it certainly looks like a dish to me. You could put cornflakes in it. You could use it as a dish.'

'No, that's a bell; that is a Tibetan bell.'

The point is, we perceive things as things, as forms – a clock, a picture, a man, a woman – and these perceptions are a function of the mind. People live through what they perceive. In the London Tate Gallery you can see people getting frustrated when they look at modern art: 'What is this? Is it a buffalo on a mountain, or a ...!?' We want to perceive it, give it a perception that we feel comfortable with. It is very frustrating just looking at it and not knowing what it is '... It makes no sense to me! A child of two could do just as well!' These are the sorts of comments you sometimes hear. And then somebody might try to explain it to you. Perhaps it has a title: 'Cleopatra on a barge in the Nile.' Then at least you have a way of perceiving it: 'Cleopatra is ... where?'

Somebody gave me a postcard once of a Mark Rothko painting. It had two big squares and then a little line above another kind of rectangle. The squares were perfectly perpendicular. The top one wasn't a pure colour (it was a kind of mixture of colours), the second one was a different mix, and the third one was a kind of mauve. I looked at it and thought: '... wonder what that is?' When I looked on the back of the card, it said 'untitled.' So, then one can perceive it as a Mark Rothko painting.

Notice how we are conditioned to hear certain sounds. If we learn a foreign language, we may not actually hear some of the sounds in that language. When I was learning Thai, I came across sounds that I could not perceive as vowels. I had never been taught that those sounds were vowels, so I couldn't hear them. Then, through training the ear, I began to observe them, so now they are very clear to me. If you never study another language, however, you probably only hear the sounds that you are used to, that you are conditioned to hearing and perceiving.

It is interesting to consider how much one experiences through perceiving things in certain ways. With mindfulness one can actually transcend this perceptual conditioning to where one is in the flow of experience. One then no longer experiences life through the narrow limits of conditioned perception. Here in England, for instance, the word 'foreigner', among people who are rather right wing, may trigger off feelings of: 'Well, you don't know what they're going to do ... !' whereas, within one's own ethnic group, class, or village, one is conditioned into feeling a sense of security. It is predictable, and everyone is conditioned in the same way. Then somebody comes from another country, and ... 'you don't know what they're going to do, do you?' That leads to a state of anxiety. When you don't know what they are going to do, you feel nervous and anxious, but there is a sense of security when you are with your own kind, your own group, your own friends, your club, your religion, your class. As soon as you move out of that, you can feel very frightened. I have seen people freak out just because they are outside of the social milieu they are used to. They

have a culture shock. They are frightened by things that they cannot predict, understand, or perceive in the way that they consider normal.

Next, mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) are like emotional habits. We have agreed to perceive this as a bell and, if anybody says it is a dish, we are going to frown on them; we are going to look disgusted with them – and this will make everybody agree that this is a bell. Anyone who says it's a dish will get a dirty look, and that will fix it. So, when somebody then says, 'That's a dish!' we can say, 'No it's not! It's a bell, stupid; every-body knows that's a bell!' But these are just mental formations – 'I like this! This is a Tibetan bell.' We proliferate around it, and we do this through consciousness (*viññāṇa*).

Consciousness is a function that we acquire through being born into a human body. When a baby is born, it has *rūpa* and *viññāṇa*; it has a physical body and is a conscious being. It also has feeling (*vedanā*), so it feels pleasure, pain and neutral sensations. Perceptions (*saññā*) and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*) are then instilled through cultural conditioning. One is not born with perception and mental formations. Those come through the conditioning process. We acquire language and memory, and begin to perceive ourselves as boys or girls, or as belonging to a certain group, a certain class. These things are acquired, as are the emotional habits we have around them. It is easy to think that this is a bell and that it is permanently a bell, when actually we could perceive it as a dish. That is fair enough. Alternatively, we don't have to perceive it as anything; we don't have to project anything onto it; it just is what it is – it's *this*. Through consciousness alone we can put it into your line of sight, and then – it is what it is. There is consciousness, but we have not yet perceived it as anything – as a bell or a dish. In this way, we begin to understand how conditioned we are.

So much of our suffering is around attachment to perceptions, views, opinions and emotional habits, but in the enlightened mind one breaks out of conditioning. There is an infinite range of conditioned phenomena, but the Buddha talked in terms of just five groups (five

khandhas) in order to get a perspective on them. And this is to be understood in a very direct way, rather than in a theoretical way. Each one of us knows experience through the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness; and consciousness is functional. We are culturally conditioned through perception and mental formations, and they come into consciousness. So, consciousness is like a doorway or a mirror into which things rise up. We become conscious of – *this* – of a knowing of something, but it isn't emotional. Consciousness is never emotional. Emotions arise in consciousness, and consciousness can be conditioned through ignorance, so we actually educate conscious experience through wisdom.

In Dhamma teachings, the Buddha is actually informing conscious experience with wisdom rather than with ignorance. 'I am' is the convention: 'I am Ajahn Sumedho!' That is conventional. If I don't question that, I am attached to it as an identity. Somebody I knew in the Peace Corps years ago knew me as Bob, so when we met again, he called me Bob. After getting used to Ajahn Sumedho, Bob sounded very strange to me. But both are conventions. If you contemplate in terms of Dhamma, you are aware of that. They are perceptions (*saññā*) and mental formations (*saṅkhāra*). 'Ajahn Sumedho' is a convention only. There is no Ajahn Sumedho as a permanent thing. In terms of experience, am I Ajahn Sumedho all the time? You probably think I am. You come to the monastery and ask, 'Where's Ajahn Sumedho?' 'He's resting in his caravan right now.' That is the conventional way of talking. You might think that I am Ajahn Sumedho when I am resting, Ajahn Sumedho when I am showering, Ajahn Sumedho when I am walking. Whatever I am doing, you think I am Ajahn Sumedho. And then somebody comes along and says, 'Where's Bob?' 'He's resting in his caravan.' In terms of direct experience, conscious experience, Ajahn Sumedho is a condition that arises and ceases. In my own experience as a conscious entity, that perception 'Ajahn Sumedho' only affects me under certain conditions – I'm talking about direct experience now, not conventional reality. Only

at certain times and under certain conditions do I perceive myself as Ajahn Sumedho. I don't perceive myself as Bob all the time, either. This is the way of contemplating experience.

As you begin to recognize the silence of the mind, the sound of silence, the emptiness of the mind, you will recognize that there is no self there, is there? In order to become your personality, you have to start thinking and remembering things: 'I am Ajahn Sumedho, and I don't like to be called Bob!' Then I become that person, and that person arises and ceases. You begin to really see how personality-view (*sakkāya-ditṭhi*) is always dependent on other conditions. You are not really a permanent person; your personality changes. You are a different person at different times. When you are with your mother, when you are with your best friend, when you are with the boss at work, your personality changes to fit the different perceptions that exist between mother, boss, and best friend. There is no kind of permanent personality there. It is a condition that is dependent on other conditions. This is a way of breaking down the assumption that you are a permanent person, a permanent man or woman.

One identifies with the body and the perception of being male or female, but in the empty mind there is no gender. The body is male or female, but in pure awareness you are not the body. When you think of yourself as male or female, you have to start identifying with that, and you think: 'I have a male body: women are like this; men are like that.' You create a perception around these two conditions of male and female and your identity with it, which is conditioned into the mind. But when you go back into the silence, you are not anything; you are not male or female; you are not English, French, Sri Lankan or anything else; you are transcending any ethnic, racial, class, or cultural identity, because the stillness of the mind is not 'mine', not 'my personality'. When you begin to take refuge in that stillness of the mind, then you do not get caught into the momentum of habits, emotions, conditions and perceptions; you have a way out of that realm.

Someone may have done you harm in the past. Now, if you hate him for that and then someone mentions his name, ‘Percival came to see me the other day!’ suddenly, simply on hearing his name, Percival: Oooh! ‘Do you remember Percival, Ajahn Sumedho?’ ‘Yes, yes, I certainly *do* remember Percival.’ It’s just a word, isn’t it – ‘Percival’ – but I connect it with a memory. I believe that I have really been wronged by Percival, and I can wind myself up into a terrible state about him even when he isn’t in the same country. Forty years pass, and someone says, ‘Do you remember Percival?’ ‘How could I *ever* forget Percival? He did this and that, and said this and that to me, and I’ll *never* forgive him!’ The same programme goes off after forty years even though I have not seen him in the meantime. If you want to push my buttons, if you want to watch me react, you say ‘Bob!’ or ‘Percival!’ Percival might even be dead for all I know.

How do we liberate the mind from that kind of conditioning? It has to be in the stillness and silence of the mind. It is there that we can see the whole reactive tendency. Somebody says ‘Percival’ and in the silence of mind I can feel the anger arising. When I’m aware of that anger arising over that perception ‘Percival’, and when I don’t resist or indulge in it but just let it be, then it resolves itself. We can liberate ourselves from that habit. It really works. When I was in the navy forty years ago, it wasn’t Percival, but Lieutenant Harris. I remember that name! He really did me wrong, and just thinking about him years later would get me into a rage. Even after I became a monk, the mere thought of Lieutenant Harris got me into a rage, even though rationally I could say, ‘Oh, it doesn’t matter! It was a long time ago ...’. I could rationalize, but if I looked at the emotion, the anger and resentment were still there. By deliberately putting that perception into the stillness of the mind, however, where the emotion was not being fed or reinforced, the conditioning was broken down. Now anyone can say ‘Lieutenant Harris’ and I don’t feel anger – nothing! I can even feel gratitude to Lieutenant Harris because I learnt a lot through contemplating that perception; a lot of wisdom came from just the memory of that one person.



## Glossary

<b><i>ānāpānasati</i></b>	mindfulness of breathing
<b><i>anattā</i></b>	literally ‘not-self’, i.e. impersonal, without individual essence; neither a person nor belonging to a person; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<b><i>anicca</i></b>	impermanent, inconstant, uncertain; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<b><i>arahant</i></b>	a fully enlightened person; according to the Pali Canon, the fourth stage on the path
<b><i>asubha</i></b>	‘non-beautiful’; <i>asubha-kammaṭṭhāna</i> is a practice that involves contemplating the various unattractive parts of the body
<b><i>avijjā</i></b>	ignorance, not-knowing, delusion
<b><i>bhava</i></b>	becoming
<b><i>bhava-taṇhā</i></b>	desire to become, achieve or obtain something
<b><i>bhāvanā</i></b>	(spiritual) cultivation, that which develops calm, kindness and wisdom, as in the Eightfold Path
<b><i>brahmavihāras</i></b>	four sublime states of mind: loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and equanimity

<b><i>citta</i></b>	mind, heart, psyche
<b><i>cittaviveka</i></b>	the heart's non-attachment to sensory phenomena
<b><i>dāna</i></b>	generosity
<b><i>desanā</i></b>	a talk on the teachings of the Buddha
<b><i>deva</i></b>	heavenly being
<b><i>dhamma/ā</i></b>	mental qualities, skilful or unskilful, that are pertinent to the process of awakening
<b>Dhamma</b>	the way it is, the true order of reality; often, the Buddha's teachings
<b><i>dukkha</i></b>	suffering, stress, unsatisfactoriness; one of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena
<b><i>jāti</i></b>	birth; rebirth
<b><i>jhāna</i></b>	state of absorption
<b><i>karuṇā</i></b>	compassion
<b><i>kāma-taṇhā</i></b>	sense desire, desire for sense-pleasure
<b><i>kilesa</i></b>	defilement, unwholesome qualities that cloud the mind
<b><i>khandhas</i></b>	heaps, aggregates: the five categories by which the Buddha summarized how existence is experienced (see <i>rūpa</i> , <i>vedanā</i> , <i>saññā</i> , <i>saṅkhārā</i> , <i>viññāṇa</i> )
<b>Luang Por</b>	(Thai) literally 'revered father'; a title of respect and affection for an elder monk and teacher
<b><i>Mādhymika</i></b>	'The Middle Way': a school of Buddhism based on a philosophical exposition by Nāgārjuna (c. 150-200 CE)
<b><i>mettā</i></b>	loving-kindness, goodwill
<b><i>muditā</i></b>	sympathetic joy
<b><i>nāma-rūpa</i></b>	name and form
<b><i>nibbāna</i></b>	(equivalent to Sanskrit nirvana) literally 'extinguishing of a fire'; freedom from attachments, quenching, coolness

<b><i>nirodha</i></b>	cessation
<b><i>papañca</i></b>	conceptual proliferation
<b><i>pāramī</i></b>	‘perfection’; skills and virtues that deepen the mind. In the Theravada there are ten: giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity
<b><i>paṭiccasamuppāda</i></b>	dependent origination: a step-by-step presentation of how suffering arises dependent on ignorance and desire, and ceases with their cessation
<b><i>rūpa</i></b>	form, often the body
<b><i>samādhi</i></b>	meditative concentration, unification of mind, collectedness
<b><i>samaṇa</i></b>	renunciant, contemplative (term for ordained monks or nuns)
<b><i>samatha</i></b>	calm, tranquillity, steadying
<b><i>saṃsara</i></b>	endless wandering, unenlightened existence
<b>Sangha</b>	1) community of renunciate disciples (monks and nuns); 2) collective of those who have experienced some degree of realization ( <i>ariya Sangha</i> ): as a Refuge, ‘Sangha’ refers to the second meaning
<b><i>saṅkhārā</i></b>	‘mental formations’; the impulses, reactions and psycho-physical ‘activities’ that generate kamma; also the resultant habits that they create
<b><i>saññā</i></b>	perception
<b><i>sīla</i></b>	morality, virtue, precept
<b><i>suññatā</i></b>	‘emptiness’: in this context, the realization of the selfless and substanceless nature of <i>dhammas</i>
<b><i>taṇhā</i></b>	craving, thirst
<b>Tathāgata</b>	the ‘Thus-gone-one’, i.e. the one who has transcendent knowledge; an epithet of the Buddha
<b><i>upadhi-viveka</i></b>	the heart’s non-attachment to any sense of selfhood

<b>upādāna</b>	attachment, clinging, grasping
<b>upekkhā</b>	equanimity
<b>vedanā</b>	feeling (pleasant, unpleasant or neutral)
<b>vibhava-taṇhā</b>	desire to get rid of, desire for oblivion or annihilation
<b>vijjā</b>	clear knowledge, genuine understanding, insight knowledge
<b>viññāṇa</b>	consciousness
<b>vipāka-kamma</b>	results of intentional action
<b>vipassanā</b>	insight, an aspect of wisdom; it arises in meditation through investigating the causes and nature of <i>dharmas</i>
<b>virāga</b>	dispassion
<b>Visuddhimagga</b>	<i>The Path of Purification</i> , a treatise on Theravada Buddhist doctrine written by Buddhaghosa in approximately 430 CE in Sri Lanka









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