
THE PROCESS OF
REALISATION

Twelve talks by Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu

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Inclining the Heart and Mind Towards Peace

A Collection of Twelve talks by
Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu

FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION



This Collection of teachings by
Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu has been sponsored
for free distribution by a group of dedicated
Thai, Malaysian and Singaporean
lay students, in honour of several significant
occasions occurring in the year 2020.

This year Ajahn Achalo enters his 24th year
as a bhikkhu, which is exactly half of his
life thus far. It is also the tenth year since
Anandagiri Forest Monastery
was established.

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FOREWORD

by Phra Rachabodhivitate

Some students of Ajahn Achalo have made a request for a compilation of his teachings in order to create a book or two in honour of several things that are occurring in the year 2020 - one is his upcoming 48th birthday, another is 24 years in the robes and the last is to mark the 10th year anniversary of Anandagiri. In Asia time is often marked in 12 year cycles so Ajahn Achalo will be completing his 4th cycle in the world and his second cycle in the robes. Half his life as a bhikkhu!...and ten years of all the hard work that it takes to establish a monastery. That is all worthy of celebrating.

The compilation of teachings will cover a range of topics and themes that should prove useful for those new to Buddhism, as well as those who are experienced in this practice. There are some special contributions on the theme of faith, or confidence, in Buddhism - its benefits and how to nurture it. The collection of teachings given here are well grounded in the traditional discourses of the Buddha, along with practical explanations and illustrations from personal experience. There is also a wealth of guidance from Ajahn Achalo's experiences on pilgrimage, but the themes explored are also useful for daily life practice in the "ordinary world".

All in all, I am pleased to see this collection of teachings come into being and I extend my blessings to all who helped to make it happen.
Anumodana!

Phra Rachabodhivitate

(Ajahn Pasanno - Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery)

INTRODUCTION

by Ajahn Achalo

Greetings,

‘Realisation’...it’s a lovely word, isn’t it? I like it very much, which is why I chose it as the title for this book. The experience of realisation can be a moment or a process. It can be small or life transforming. It has so many pertinent connotations with regards to a disciplined spiritual practice. It means waking up to see things in a new and more accurate way, in a manner that is more ‘real’. It suggests a potential that is already here within us, one that we just need to actualise. It also suggests that something is already true yet simply needs to be seen or recognised. This is very much what the Lord Buddha’s teachings are about.

In the Buddha’s training of developing mindfulness and wisdom, we pay attention to the way things actually are, in order to weaken and uproot delusion and ignorance. When our minds are affected by ignorance and delusion, there will be difficulty and suffering. With a deeper recognition of the way things truly are, our deluded clinging and attachment—the cause of so much pain—can fall away.

Realisation can also be understood in terms of developing insight and understanding. It is the result of generating more clarity in the mind and of paying closer attention in a sustained way. Small insights can lay the foundations and be a powerful conditioning cause for deeper ones later on. The teachings presented here are offered as a support to this process. Think of them as an encouragement along the path of purifying virtue and generating and training in mindfulness, and as a support to cultivating skilful concentration and wisdom.

This book contains a collection of twelve talks selected from various teaching contexts. Three are from meditation retreats. One talk was given while leading a pilgrimage in India. Three were given at an Australian Buddhist centre. I wrote or delivered five here at Anandagiri Forest Monastery or elsewhere in Thailand.

These talks have been shared over a period of nine years. I hope that by presenting this broad selection of material, I have been able to touch on a rich variety of subjects. These include basic practice, intensive practice, the life of the Buddha and his central teaching themes, and — an area of great interest to me — the role that qualities such as loving-kindness and compassion play in supporting the cultivation of mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

This collection does not need to be read from front to back in order to be understood. Three of the talks included in this collection are centred around the Buddha's 'wisdom teachings' theme of *anattā* or not-self. I've included three on this theme because each looks at the subject from a different angle or with a different attitude. Although it is a central Buddhist theme, it is not often addressed in contemporary Dhamma talks. Yet for anyone hoping to uproot ignorance and experience deeper peace, it is a subject that ought to be considered frequently. We learn through repeated exposure to teachings and through frequent consideration and contemplation, so I'm happy to share these here. The wisdom teaching themes have been balanced with talks pertaining to cultivating beautiful qualities of the heart, which support the 'conventional self' along the path to realising 'not-self'.

The book has come about due to the request of a number of kind students in several countries. Most of the talks already existed in an audio form. However, in recognising that different people learn through different modalities, they have been edited and sometimes expanded upon slightly, now, in written form.

In Asian culture we tend to imbue various types of anniversaries with special meaning. In Thailand as well as in most countries with a large ethnic Chinese population, people like to acknowledge twelve-year cycles. This year marks my forty-eighth birthday and is also my twenty-fourth year as a Buddhist monk. So I will have completed four cycles as a human being and two cycles as a bhikkhu by the end of 2020, which feels like good timing for such a publication. This is the first time that I have presented a book of teachings.

Reflecting upon the fact that half of my life has now been spent as a bhikkhu and that it is also ten years since Anandagiri Monastery was established gives rise to feelings of deep gratitude. Neither of these things would have been possible without the generous support of many kind people. It feels wonderful to acknowledge all of the support I've received and the great opportunities that were made available to me by sharing a suitable Dhamma gift in return.

Of course I would have nothing to share, were it not for the many wonderful teachers who have shared their experience, understanding, and instruction with me. So I'd like to take the opportunity to acknowledge and thank them, in the order that I met them or their teaching in this lifetime. A big thank you and much gratitude and respects to S.N. Goenka, Steve and Rosemary Weissman, Tahn Ajahn Jayasaro, Tahn Ajahn Pasanno, Luang Por Sumedho, Tahn Ajahn Anan, His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, and Luang Por Piak. There have been many other senior monks, including my Venerable preceptor, Luang Por Liam, who have taught and helped me many times, for whom I also feel deeply grateful. May all merits produced through this work be dedicated to the good health and long life of my teachers, and to all teachers everywhere.

Thank you and anumodana also to Liv Conquest, Judy Hayes, and Mike Adair for help with transcribing, to Ajahn Pavaro and Narissa Doumani for assistance with editing, to Aparajita Ghose for help with layout and design, and to Jintana Lertlumying, Lynda Bor and

Cliff Chang, Oranuch Taejamahaphant, and Phongphan and Kritsana Hwangmanidakul for generous contributions towards the costs of publication. A group of long term students in Malaysia also contributed significantly, thank you and 'Sadhu Anumodana'!

I sincerely hope that something contained here is helpful to you wherever you are in the world, and wherever you are in your practice.

With Loving-Kindness,
Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu

*Anandagiri Forest Monastery
Khaokho, Petchabun
Thailand*

April, 2020



CHAPTER ONE

The Importance of a Daily Meditation Practice

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*The Importance of a Daily Meditation Practice **

I live on a mountain in a remote rural province in Thailand. On a usual day I meditate by myself in my kuti several times, and along with a few other monks and laypeople in the evening. It's quite a quiet place. The monastery sits on about fifty acres and is surrounded by farms and forest reserve. At about 6:30 a.m. we monks wander down the hill and are offered our alms food. At that time most of the villagers are getting ready to go off to their farms. It's an area where people are growing rice, corn, squash, and snow peas. Every day is very similar, day after day.

I guess as human beings there is a common theme that we all know well. Everybody wants to be happy, yet there are struggles. I think a large part of our practice is how we relate to those struggles. What do we do with this human experience so that it's ennobling, so that we learn from it?

The villagers are friends. They're all well known to one another and they rely on each other very much. They see the monastery as their monastery as well as the monks' monastery. Their theme of struggle is that they work very hard, but they never seem to make enough money to get ahead. They're paying off their pickup trucks, their motorbikes, and paying for mobile phones. Everyone has a mobile phone, even the kids. It's great for convenience, but all that phone credit adds up. Coming back to a physically more comfortable, but also a more complicated, urban context here in Melbourne, I talk to a few friends who have different office jobs. One lost his personal assistant and suddenly has to work a lot harder with less help. Another is also dealing with staff reduction, having to do the same amount of work with fewer people. You get the sense of

** From a talk given in April, 2016 at the Buddhist Society of Victoria, Melbourne Australia .*

a slightly different kind of stress, but it is nonetheless this shared human experience.

In rural Thailand, the villagers begin the day preparing some food and making offerings to the monks. I also encourage the villagers to come and join in the chanting and evening meditations when they can. Not many people rise to the occasion, but once a week on the lunar observance days about thirty people will come. During the rainy season retreat we get more—fifty to sixty people. People make more of an effort for those three months. But here in the city, people have to do their daily practice at home by themselves most days and this is very important.

Refuge is also very important. Having the refuge of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha makes your entire life meaningful. And if you recollect that refuge often, then it forms a context for the way that you live your life and what you're intending to achieve. I think a challenge that we all share is dealing with our mundane habits. Some of our bad habits are very deep, as opposed to the ideals that we aspire to, and the basic practices that we really hope and wish to do. Even as a monk who generally has a lot of time to practise, I often have the feeling I'm not doing quite as much as I'd like to, which is frustrating. So in this life we have to consistently think of ways to refocus, and of skilful ways to generate urgency. We need to remember what's important, remember why it's important, and then try to focus. At the same time we have to be a little bit patient, a little bit forgiving, and a little bit humble in the face of the power of our bad habits.

That doesn't mean that we don't keep trying. We actually have to keep on trying, and then try harder and harder. This is a path and practice that requires great effort. If you believe, as I do, that we've had thousands of lives before this one, with various deep habits quite firmly entrenched in the mind, then we have a lot of work to do. But we also meet with these teachings likely having heard them before, and probably having practised before too. We wouldn't be here otherwise. So we have a combination of

unskilful habits, wholesome habits, and neutral habits. We have to engage these with our sincere spiritual aspiration and then the determination to keep increasing wholesome and skilful efforts. It's a bit of a struggle and it's something we all have to work with—not quite doing as much as we'd like, not quite getting ahead in our spiritual practice as much as we'd like. But if we keep plodding away, we will then find the energy and determination to go a bit faster. Stopping and starting again and again doesn't really work though. Being consistent is crucial.

In order to nourish our efforts we need to maintain a long-term optimistic view. But first there is the question: what is there to be optimistic about? As students of the Buddha we know that the mind is affected by greed, hatred, and delusion. The power of greed, hatred, and delusion is actually terrifying, if you ask me. These energies delude the mind. There's no end to the unskilful things we can do, think, and say under the influence of delusion. And then there's the fact of kamma. We create all sorts of terrible kammic obstructions for ourselves. If you focus on all of that, it can be quite depressing. It can be frightening. But we do have to look at it. And we do have to become a little bit frightened, actually, because it's in looking at the truth of the samsāric predicament that we realise it's a dangerous place. We realise that we really ought to be doing things to ensure some kind of relative safety within the samsāric cycle, but also to be working quite hard to get liberated from it. That's where the optimism comes in.

With regard to what there is to be optimistic about, there is the fact of enlightenment, the fact of the ultimate nature of your mind and your ultimate potential, and the fact of deeper truth. The deeper truth is that greed, hatred, and delusion is not the nature of your mind. It's because of this wonderful path of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*, being generous, being virtuous, and training your mind, that there's a clear path with which you can weaken greed, hatred, and delusion. Then eventually these things can literally be exploded out of your mind with the power of Dhamma. Having confidence in these things leads to having confidence in your

potential and in the value of practice. It is inspiring and uplifting.

That's not necessarily the kind of experience we have in the beginning of our practice. We don't have the experience of exploding the kilesas, of exploding and uprooting greed, hatred, and delusion and then experiencing an unending, unshakeable, blissful peace. But I do have great confidence that this is where the practice goes. And I have great confidence that this is what our nature and potential is. And I think many of you, as well as myself, have had the good fortune of meeting people who have accomplished that, who affirm that this is indeed the nature of the mind, the potential of the mind.

At the same time, these energies of greed, hatred, and delusion are powerful. So we're in a struggle. It's a bit of a wrestle. Then you understand the strategy explained very skilfully by Lord Buddha: be generous to the extent that you can; share your time, your talents, your money, whatever it is that you can give. This has several functions. Sharing, giving away a portion of what you're attached to, weakens greed. It's very important to weaken the power of greed, and to actually do it by giving away things that you want. It's not that you don't want them. Most people feel that they want more money. Even billionaires want to be trillionaires. It never ends. The whole point is to give it away because you want or aspire to something better. And you can have something better by giving away part of your wealth, part of your time. You can chip away at or starve the energy of greed that oppresses the mind.

You can get into a habit of thinking that if you can have the thing that you want when you want it, then this is happiness. No, it's only a few moments of pleasure. When you act compulsively to get the things that you want, then you end up wanting them again, and again, and again. It doesn't end. This is opposed to the path of Dhamma practice, which the Lord Buddha explains leads onwards to something better. Weakening your greed means increasing your capacity to relinquish things and go against the power of craving. When you do that, you increase the likelihood of

experiencing your mind when it's not oppressed by greed. And when you experience the mind not oppressed by greed it's very peaceful, spacious, and radiant. Lord Buddha described peace as a superior type of pleasure.

We have to keep up with these practices for long enough to experience this. What's it like giving stuff away? Going against greed? Patiently enduring desire? It's not the case that desires don't come up. The more you practise relinquishing desire, the more powerfully these desires can come into the mind. You really see the power of desire when you try to restrain it. This is when patient endurance becomes necessary, because you patiently endure the desire until it ceases. And then you experience a spacious, peaceful mind with a cool quality of presence and steady awareness. You know for yourself a peaceful mind not oppressed by greed, and you notice that it's actually much more pleasant than the pleasure you would have gotten from the sensual craving if you'd fulfilled it. But it requires determination and courage to practise in the face of the power of your greed. It's important to be confident of the greater potential you have, the ability to experience a pleasure that is superior to sensual pleasure. That is, pure mental pleasure coming from the nature of your mind when you cultivate it.

Most people recognise that being generous also brings other benefits. The good kamma produced will eventually ripen as good opportunities and situations for ourselves. So a gift to others is also a gift to oneself. It is harder to recognise that patiently enduring and then relinquishing a desire will also bring greater benefits. But it does. It builds patience, which is an extremely noble and useful quality to have. Also, after seeing a desire arise, stay for some time and fade away, over and over again, we will deepen our understanding of impermanence and train ourselves to grasp less. Patient endurance of painful mind states within meditation teaches us about impermanence and deepens wisdom. Recognising this deeply will help us see the value of doing it.

Even more subtle, but profoundly important and useful, is the

fact that relinquishing hindrances to peacefulness in the practice of meditation also produces a very particular type of supportive kamma. The merits produced in meditation are an important support for the deeper peace and insight that will ripen later on. We sow the causes with skilful habits, and the merits will help to ripen the fruits. It is hard to prove this scientifically, but my own teachers, who are very peaceful people, have assured me that this truly is the case. I can also see that after two decades of practice my own meditation is much more peaceful than before.

It's similar with hatred energy and aversion energy; we engage them skilfully by consciously developing the opponent power of mettā. Train yourself to hold loving-kindness in your body and mind. If you do this in a disciplined way, when irritated and angry thoughts come up in the mind and things don't go how you want them to, you find that you don't say the angry thing you want to say or have the reaction you would otherwise have. At the very least you know there's anger in the mind and you know to be careful. You might go away and be quiet and meditate for a bit. And if you can sit with the power of aversion and hatred but not give in to it, and then experience the moment when those mental feelings cease in the mind, then you experience the coolness of a mind that isn't angry—without having had to say anything. Without having to express your anger, it ceases of its own nature.

The mind needs enough integrity and clarity to be able to do that, to just go and sit on your cushion, or be alone in your bedroom, or watch the mind from some distance without feeding the story. To see thoughts as thoughts and feelings as feelings. To be really interested—'will it cease'? And then to notice when it does. To simply feel what it's like to be aware of the cessation of anger and hatred without having to express it. To feel that which oppresses the mind leaving the mind. To feel the ordinary mind in its natural state when there's some awareness can be very serene and peaceful.

There is a lot of social conditioning in the modern world encouraging

us to be confident and assertive in expressing our irritation or disappointment. Not necessarily aggressive, but assertive, so as not to suppress negative emotions. This can be helpful at times. If we find ourselves in an abusive situation it can be very useful to learn how to set a firm and skilful boundary. But it is powerful in a different way if we can simply see our anger and aversion as a non-personal quality that will arise and cease of its own accord if we simply don't attach to it. One healthy way to engage with aversion when it arises is to truly know it with a quality of mindful awareness. Give it some space, and then allow it to cease. Experienced meditators understand that there are always several choices when it comes to responding to mind states. It is not just a matter of suppressing or expressing. These things can be sublimated—that is, transformed into something sublime by engaging opponent forces. Or they can be consciously pacified with mindfulness and patient endurance.

Lord Buddha said that peace is the highest happiness. One of the ways he describes Nibbāna is unshakable peace. So that's our nature. Our ultimate nature, if cultivated and purified, is unshakable peace. But at present we have these energies of greed, hatred, and delusion banging around, running around, rolling around in the mind, and we have to wrestle with them. We need a container. That's the function of the ethical precepts. You have a container that you try to live within as strictly as possible. If mistakes are made, occasionally I just like to encourage people to investigate—what's the result? If you break one of your precepts, don't believe the thoughts that justify it. I'm not asking you to justify breaking precepts. I'm asking you to have an honest look at the longer-term consequences when you do. I think you'll find it doesn't increase your peaceful happiness. I think you'll probably find that it actually increases your misery to some degree. So we have to be honest. We are disciples of the Buddha. Buddhist practitioners are spiritual warriors engaging these negative powers in the mind with a different power—the power of Dhamma, the power of sila, the power of mettā, the power of renunciation, the power of humility, the power of patient endurance,

the power of virtue. With these opposing forces you can weaken greed, hatred, and delusion. You can tame them, uproot them, and eventually experience a mind that is not affected by them at all anymore. Wouldn't that be wonderful?

I know some people in Thailand whose minds, I believe, aren't affected by greed, hatred, and delusion at all anymore. If someone has abandoned these, what occurs is that they then experience a deeper nature of the mind. The purified mind is experiencing what is sometimes called the Nibbāna element. The kilesa are temporary conditions, but Nibbāna is described as the 'unconditioned', and it is stable.

With regards to our current bodies and minds, we are still affected by the greed, hatred, and delusion that are experienced in the world. The word for 'world' in the Pali language is *loka*, and this word also means darkness. Our minds are affected by darkness. They become dark when we deludedly grasp at conditions as a self and as permanent. But the mind in a natural and balanced state is light. With training it can be purified, becoming truly clear and bright. *Aloka* means 'no darkness'—not of this world, or above the world.

What will happen in your practice is that you'll glimpse your mind with greed, hatred, and delusion in some moments and you'll experience it without greed, hatred, and delusion in other moments. You should derive a great deal of confidence from that, from the fact that there are times when the mind is experiencing wholesome and neutral states. This is something people forget to do, affirming their deeper nature, affirming the ultimate truth, and affirming their capacity. No matter how slow your progress might seem to you, or no matter how powerful negative habits might seem, they're not there all the time. One of the tricky parts in practice is learning to notice the ordinary mind.

Ajahn Chah says a large part of practice is keeping the mind in the middle, because the mind is flying off into cravings for things, and

fantasies, and infatuations, and then flying off in the other direction towards irritations and aversions. We don't really notice when the mind is in a neutral state. But that neutral state is much closer to your ultimate nature. You can learn to 'keep the mind in the middle', as Ajahn Chah said. Then the qualities of peace and contentment will deepen. This is where our training in meditation is so important. When you sit, keep coming back to the moment. Don't fly off into the infatuation, the fantasy, the craving. Don't fly off into the aversion. Come back. Start again. Just one in- or out-breath at a time. Keep the mind in the middle. If you can do that, the quality of clarity in the mind will increase and become more stable. If the awareness is weak it can be deluded, it can be carried away with defilement. This is why we need to train in mindfulness, to make the awareness more consistent and firm. Train in just being aware of the feelings of the breath, and then aware of mind states as just mind states. Whatever feelings come along with the mind states as well, you're training to be aware of the feeling. See feelings as simply feelings. Sensual craving can be hot, anger can be cold and icy, sleepiness and boredom can be dull or numb. Step back a little, don't believe the story. Then the sense of clarity, the presence of mind, gets more palpable, becomes more established. Then you experience a quality of balance and peace that I'd like you to begin to affirm as being closer to your actual nature.

Don't believe the delusion. That's not you. The thing about a spacious, clear, peaceful mind is that there's not much to identify with, which is good. It's actually good that there's not much to identify with, but you have to train the mind to recognize times when there is a vivid sense of clarity and presence of mind, 'That's it! That's the nature of the mind'. That sense of a self, bobbing around in samsāra will keep coming back, but that's not you. This is why a daily meditation discipline is so important, because you'll have these moments of peace and clarity, and then these moments will last longer. As you get skilled in meditation, you'll have periods of time when there isn't greed in the mind and there aren't powerful forms of aversion or delusion. Then there is just presence of mind and peacefulness. You can trust this—'that which knows'. And this becomes a true refuge.

Going for refuge in Dhamma means practising *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*. This is the path. That's what we need to do. The refuge of Dhamma on an even deeper level is the nature of peaceful awareness that you yourself can and will experience. That is why it is a true refuge, because it really does give us a safe place to rest. The path is leading to the realisation of your deeper nature, the mind's deeper nature. Then when you experience this nature for moments, and in deeper moments over longer periods of time, that capacity to be mindful and peaceful becomes a refuge of Dhamma in your heart. And it's a real refuge. But it's a refuge that needs to be cultivated, deepened, and affirmed. You need to experience that refuge again and again until you get it—'that's my nature'. That's the real refuge. The other stuff we chase after is not a real refuge.

The difficult thing, however, is when you come to your cushion and you've got sleepiness, you've got restlessness, you've got tiredness, and it oftentimes doesn't seem very inspiring. You'll probably wonder, 'What's the point'? You may have that experience—what's the point?—because this refuge is subtle. It doesn't announce itself as incredibly wonderful or to be 'the point'. Every moment where there's more clarity, more spaciousness, more awareness, it's strengthening the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a *sankhāra*, a 'kammic formation', something that has to be generated in the mind. It's an enormously important part of the practice, because it's one of the conditions that leads to the unconditioned. Yet it doesn't announce itself as that. There's a little bit of mindfulness that you have at the end of a fifteen minute sit. There's a bit more clarity. After twenty minutes there might have been five minutes of peace. That won't announce itself as the condition that's going to liberate you. What's going to happen is that the thoughts are going to come back, and you're going to think, 'What's the point'?

The point is that every moment of mindfulness, every time that you consciously cultivate mindfulness, and every time you give yourself over to the practice, you're investing in a deeper quality of mindfulness in the future. If you keep it up, the five minutes of peacefulness with greater

clarity becomes ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, and then half an hour of mindful clarity. That clarity is what you can bring into your life. The same delusions come up—powerful greed or powerful hatred—but there's something else in the mind that notices, 'Oh, the mind's affected by greed. Oh, the mind's affected by irritation and aversion'. And that gives you choices. You can begin to choose whether to act on it or not. That becomes more and more powerful. But it's a subtle thing, so in a way we have to affirm it ourselves, because it's not going to affirm itself.

Looking to the suttas, the Eightfold Path is frequently mentioned. *Sammā-sati*, right mindfulness, is one of these eight path factors. Practising with right mindfulness is what I have come to understand as one of the main focuses of Ajahn Chah's approach, because consistent right mindfulness conditions right collectedness, or right concentration. That Ajahn Chah was an arahant is something that I personally have no doubt about. His closest disciples also have no doubt. You read his teachings and they are very wise. With regard to the attitude we need when we practise, he says when we are lazy we practise, and when we're diligent we practise, and when we want to practise, we practise. When we don't want to practise, we practise. When we're peaceful we practise, and when we're not peaceful we practise.

So that's what we're talking about, the spiritual warrior. You're not going to want to meditate all the time. It's not going to be great every time. It's that you don't want to do it, and yet you do it. It's that the mind isn't peaceful, and you still do it. Then what happens is when it does become peaceful, it's more peaceful, and it's peaceful for longer. Mindfulness becomes stronger through this consistency of effort. You begin to trust this and see the true benefit of keeping the mind in the middle throughout the day, and of practising consistently. You begin to have the capacity to keep the mind in the middle, seeing the way that it gets swayed to the left or to the right, and you can choose not to do that. Or not get swayed as much. Or wake up more quickly. This is *sammā-sati* working in tandem with some *sammā-samādhi*.

There is more clarity and more steadiness.

I often talk about the five spiritual powers: faith (*saddhā*), energy (*virīya*), mindfulness (*sati*), right collectedness (*samādhi*), and wisdom (*paññā*). Faith is something we need to lift up. The Buddha said we have an extraordinary nature and an incredible potential. We can experience unceasing bliss, unshakable peace, and complete liberation from all greed, hatred, and delusion. We can experience the Nibbāna element. My teacher Ajahn Anan once said to me that he can come out of a particular meditation state, and he can then decide to spread loving-kindness into the ‘world element’. That’s an interesting statement, isn’t it? The world element is called *loka dhātu* in Pali. We’re still swimming in the *loka dhātu* and we don’t yet know the Nibbāna *dhātu*, the mind that is established in its own liberation. You don’t know your true nature yet. But if you realise it, as some of Ajahn Chah’s disciples have done—they’re experiencing the Nibbāna element, unshakable peace, clarity, awareness, and constant mindfulness—then from that space, from the liberated mind, you can spread loving-kindness into the world element. That means the entirety of *samsāra*. It’s possible to establish the mind in liberation, and then from that liberated state radiate loving-kindness into the whole of *samsāra*, where all of these other beings are still spinning around in greed, hatred, and delusion. I also once heard another great master, Luang Por Pblin, make the same statement. When struggling with ordinary, mundane, boring challenges, we have no inkling that this is possible. But that’s your nature and potential as well.

That’s why I wanted to talk about the long-term optimistic view. Every moment of peacefulness, every moment of clarity is weakening greed, hatred, and delusion. You can strengthen your capacity to experience these moments, and then experience them for longer, to the point of it being unceasing, where the old stuff that used to be a struggle—the greed, hatred, and delusion—isn’t a struggle anymore at all. It becomes something the mind saw clearly and let go. Then the liberated mind can have compassion for all those billions of beings who haven’t done that yet.

That's where the practice goes, which is a truly wonderful thing.

It's something worth really giving energy and time to and investing in, so you can experience unceasing and unshakable bliss. Unceasing peace. Complete freedom from the oppressive energies that darken the mind. The mind can be enlightened to the point where that darkness cannot come in anymore. Such a mind has transcended it and let it go. It's seen the darkness clearly for what it was and recognised, 'That's not me! For thousands of lives I've been thinking my greedy thoughts were me. For thousands of lives I've been thinking that if I give in to desire I'll be happy. Now I can see that the desire itself is a dark quality, and I don't have to pick up the desire'. Let it go: its characteristic is suffering. Then you can experience something that isn't suffering. That's worth giving attention to, it's worth affirming, and it's worth putting effort towards.

So how are you going to lift your faith? Obviously Dhamma reflection is a very good thing to do. In Thailand people chant daily and I think many Sri Lankans here probably have a daily chanting practice as well. It doesn't work for everybody, but it's a very good thing to do, because when you do the chanting you recollect the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. In doing this the mind is already forgetting about the challenges at work. It's forgetting about the depressing thing you heard on the news. It's thinking about the refuge objects and your highest aspirations just because you're doing the chanting. It's like Ajahn Chah says, 'If you want to do it, you do it. If you don't want to do it, you do it. If you can see the point, you do it. If you can't see the point, you do it.' Then over time it becomes a refuge. It becomes a skilful means. It becomes a powerful practice because of the consistency. But if you do it sometimes and you don't do it at other times, if you do it when you want to but not when you don't want to, then there's that sense of not really getting ahead, and of one's practice not becoming powerful.

You have to be patient with that. You have to be forgiving. You need to have compassion. The power of greed, hatred, and delusion is awesome.

The power of our habits is strong. But through lifting the faith faculty, you can generate the energy to do something about it. Lifting up our faith gives rise to energy in the mind. Then you remember you have faith in this practice and that it's worth doing. 'Okay, now there's energy!' Then we apply the energy to being mindful. Maintain mindfulness consistently. Collectedness will also develop, and with the collected mind you can see things according to their nature. That's what wisdom is. The suttas describe truth from certain angles. But in terms of how you'll experience wisdom, it's when you see things clearly: that's impermanent, it arises and ceases; that's not me, it's not a self. That's what wisdom is. When you can see that clearly in your mind, that's what mindfulness and samādhi lead to: 'That's not me'. And when you see that it's not you, you don't grasp at it. You let it go. You can experience something better. So those five spiritual powers are what the Buddha said lead to the Deathless, merge in the Deathless. 'Deathless' is another word for Nibbāna, a state where there's no greed, hatred, and delusion. The unconditioned. Liberation from painful conditions.

I hope I've been able to share something that might have stimulated some faith and helped you to increase and commit to your efforts. Understand that there is tremendous value and a tremendous point to it all, that through consistency and maintaining momentum our practice gains some real power. At the same time, you need to be patient. It's tricky, isn't it? To be patient with your limitations without being really lazy. This is the area where we all need to do quite a bit of wrestling.

I was in Bodhgaya for most of February and (I'm going to say something impressive followed by something not impressive just to keep it balanced) I did three hundred hours of meditation in thirty-three days. One of the reasons I did that is to establish a habit of doing more, and to prove to myself that I can do more. But I did it in a place where it's easier to have faith and to recollect that faith. You open your eyes and see the Bodhi Tree. The Buddha was enlightened there! Okay, sit for longer! It's possible to do a lot more if you have a stronger faith faculty activated in

those places. It doesn't work for everybody. Other people go and they get very irritated. It's noisy. It's dirty. People can be quite rude. So it doesn't work for everybody, but it works for me.

A lot of what I was doing was realising, 'See, Achalo! You can do so much more than you think you can! So when you go back to Anandagiri, be more diligent!' And then I came back and things didn't change that much, actually. And it's frustrating. So I think, 'Okay, do it again'. I've done that five or six times now, three hundred hours of intensive meditation in Bodhgaya. But actually I do understand that a complete transformation and total liberation is going to take a few lifetimes. It's a matter of picking it up again, doing it again, starting again. Part of it is that I come back and I'm tired, because I actually don't sleep enough while I'm in India. I meditate nine-and-a-half hours a day for weeks, and the mind is wide awake late at night and it doesn't want to fall asleep and I've got to get up at 4 a.m. So I come back and sleep for a week and think, 'No, that wasn't what I was hoping would happen!' And then Thailand has been having one of the hottest hot seasons it's ever had, and it's not easy to meditate when it's thirty-eight degrees! But I try and just keep on trying. Humbled by the power of old habits. Keep on trying anyway, because the Path factors are superior to the defilements. They will liberate the mind if we keep on going.



CHAPTER TWO

Breathe for Peace and Insight

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Breathe for Peace and Insight *

It's quite extraordinary how little attention we modern people give to understanding what a mind is. It's the very thing that experiences life, yet few people have a genuine interest in understanding what it is, how it works, or notice its level of fascination with things outside. When we attend to sights and sounds outside, or think about other people, various concepts, and the past and the future, then our mindfulness becomes scattered. This is normal. But we don't understand what the mind is and how it works. That's not very balanced. Well, it's actually completely imbalanced.

As Buddhists we're very fortunate, because Lord Buddha helps us to see the importance of looking inwards and noticing what we're thinking and how we're thinking. Our habits of thought will tend to flow out into speech and actions, so we have to train ourselves to think skilfully, or at least to notice and keep the unskilful in check when it arises. If you look at some of the simple teachings recorded in the *Dhammapada*, it states that 'mind is the forerunner'. Other teachings tell us that whatever the mind attends to, the mind becomes like that. It takes on the attributes of things it attends to. These are very useful things to know. It's quite obvious when we actually think about it, but if we forget, as people so often do, we can make kamma with some deeply unskilful habits and create a lot of problems for ourselves.

As students of Lord Buddha, due to the compassion and wisdom of our teacher we get a lot more help than other people. He explained to us in the teachings on the Four Foundations of Mindfulness to be aware of the body, just aware of its postures, which is so subtle and so simple

* From a talk given at the Buddhist Society of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia in April 2016.

that we normally overlook it because concepts, in contrast, are fascinating to us. The Lord Buddha said, 'Pay attention to this. Know when you're sitting. Know when you're standing. Know when you're walking. Know when you're lying down'. He even said to know when you're defecating and urinating that one should know what one is doing with the body. What he basically said is that the awareness of what you're doing with your body should be consistent in all postures. So keep a percentage of your awareness established in your body.

With feelings, the instructions are to know pleasant feelings as pleasant feelings, neutral feelings as neutral feelings, and unpleasant feelings as unpleasant feelings. Here is where we come to our breath meditation. Lord Buddha said that Anapanasati, or breath meditation, is the crown jewel in the crown of all meditations. I would encourage you all to be aware of the feelings of the in-breath and the feelings of the out-breath, coming in through the nose, the chest, into the abdomen, and out from the abdomen, the chest, and the nose. It's not a concept. It's not an idea. It's not a visualisation, and it requires absolutely no controlling. This is difficult for modern people. We like distraction. We like sophistication, and this act of being with bare attention and bare awareness can seem difficult. The only reason it's difficult is because we haven't applied ourselves in trying to do it frequently or consistently enough.

Experienced meditators, people who make a commitment to meditate daily, especially those who meditate a couple of times a day, come to understand the benefits. We're all trying to be happy; we're all looking for pleasure in our own way. The untrained mind doesn't yet understand that to be still, to be collected and not to be fascinated is actually extremely pleasant. So we have to go against the current of the world. We have to be interested, and at first we have to trust the Lord Buddha when he said cultivating the Four Foundations of Mindfulness leads to the Deathless, merges in the Deathless. The Deathless means Nibbāna, enlightenment, liberation, unshakeable peace. That sounds very interesting for all of us

who would like to go beyond every type of suffering. It's a very clear instruction, and it gives cause for optimism.

We have to commit to practise with a certain degree of faith in Lord Buddha and his enlightened disciples. We simply place the awareness, and know one in-breath and know one out-breath. Usually you will find within breath meditation that when we sit, thoughts take us away and sometimes we experience heavy sleepiness. We fall asleep for a second and then wake up. Or thoughts carry us away and we don't feel much of the breath. We might initially only get parts of it, but then through persistently trying, inclining towards knowing the breath, we become aware of more of it. It's important not to get impatient or frustrated, not to be too controlling, but just keep trying. It's more about gentleness and consistency. We come back to the breath and start again, over and over again.

When mindfulness gets a little sharper, you'll find that you're able to be more fully aware of the experience of breathing. The mind is like a hand that is holding many different tools and using them to multi-task. It's picking up the past, picking up the future, picking up thoughts about other people. In our practice we drop those objects. We put them down again and again. Your mind has to put down all these objects, and then when you recognise that you're picking something else up, that's okay. You recognise it and put it down too. Instead, we can practise picking up awareness of the breathing. Placing the awareness on this meditation object—the breath—we're able to put down the other objects of the mind's attention.

What's different about this mental object, the meditation object, is that it's in the very centre of your conscious experience. When you're able to be with this experience, your energy that was dissipating starts to collect. And when the mental energy collects there's an experience of being more awake. There's an experience of clarity. We might not realise it, but for many modern people the mind is very tired.

It moves between thinking about many things and then falling asleep. Ajahn Chah explained to us that a large part of practice is keeping the mind in the middle. Becoming aware and mindful of neutral feelings, such as the feelings associated with breathing, helps you stop craving for that which is pleasant and having aversion for the unpleasant. Craving for pleasant experiences and trying to run away from unpleasant experiences is very tiring. You'll never succeed. You can't only have pleasure. You can't avoid all displeasure. But by being in the middle, we can restrain craving and aversion.

Craving and aversion are hot. Place your awareness in the heart area when you're angry and you'll notice heat. Similarly, if you have a strong craving then you might notice some kind of spinning and dizziness in the head. Your mind is dizzy with desire. By placing the mind in the middle and trying to restrain the mind, to keep it in the middle, what you'll notice is that the spinning slows and the heat cools down. The more consistently you're able to just be with the awareness of the feelings of the breath, these neutral feelings, the more your mind becomes cool.

When we think about the past or we think about the future, about other people, about things we want and the things we don't want, the mind feels cluttered. It's like you're bumping into things—sharp things, hard things—and reacting to them. But when you're able to keep the mind in the middle with breath awareness, a sense of space opens up. You realise that when the mind doesn't pick up these objects, it has an empty nature, an empty awareness. The mind's nature is just to know. It knows sights, it knows sounds, it knows tastes, and it knows thoughts, but when mindfulness is weak we're lost and we don't know them. When you know these things as they are, a feeling is just a feeling. A body is a body. A thought is a thought. An emotion is a mind object; it's a series of feelings in the mind sense base. Memories are memories. Perceptions are perceptions. When you know those things with some aloofness, with some equanimity and equipoise, the mind is able to rest. There's an experience of spaciousness, clarity, and silence, and it's very pleasant.

The wonderful thing about breath meditation is that as your awareness becomes more clear and refined, the breath becomes shallower and more refined as well. You then have to refine your awareness to know the more refined breath. This is a beautiful meditation tool. I believe that this is why Lord Buddha describes it as the crown jewel of meditation methods, because it takes you from an ordinary, coarse, agitated state to a very refined and peaceful state.

What starts out as a neutral feeling can become a refined and pleasant feeling. This is the case when knowing the beginning, the middle, and end of an in-breath and then knowing the beginning, middle, and end of an out-breath. Rapture can arise in the mind, and the feelings associated with the breath can become very pleasant. If you stay with such awareness of the refined breath, that sense of clarity can become crystal clear, and the sense of coolness can become deep like an ocean. People can experience this deep, cool, clear clarity, and the awareness of the breath and feelings are pleasant. When rapturous feelings arise, sometimes people's hairs stand on end. Sometimes people have tears running down their face just from being aware of the breath. As tranquility deepens the pleasure becomes ever more subtle and sublime.

We have to give ourselves to this practice with a lot of interest and trust. And then put forth a good and consistent effort. The Lord Buddha is pointing us in this direction. The 'crown jewel of the meditation methods' is no small statement. That the Four Foundations of Mindfulness 'merge in the Deathless', a state completely beyond all suffering, is not a wishy-washy statement either. That is the most profound statement the Buddha could make. These methods will liberate you. This awareness, when cultivated fully, purifies the mind of its greed, hatred, and delusion. Sometimes this process is likened to refining gold. After you've taken the other elements out, all that's left is the gold. So all we do is keep coming back to the breath. If you are with the awareness of the breath, then the practice is just to stay, stay in the center.

Ajahn Chah used an analogy of being the one that sits in the seat of the mind, not allowing other guests to come and take that seat. He's not talking about placing our personality in that chair, but rather about a presence of mind—'that which knows'. The 'other guests' in this instance could be cravings for certain experiences, cravings to not have other experiences, thoughts about the past, or thoughts about the future. When you are sitting in the chair of the mind, those things can't come in and take over. They can't sit down. See them as if from a distance and don't let them sit down. Then they'll walk in the door and they'll walk back out the door. When mindfulness is fuzzy, weak or scattered, however, all sorts of guests come in and sit. Some of them are welcome, some of them not. But if we keep on applying mindfulness of breathing and maintain awareness of those feelings, then neutral feelings become refined feelings. Rapture can arise in the mind, and tranquility as well.

Sometimes the rapture is likened to the waves on top of the ocean. These thrilling sensations can fill the entire body, giving you a sense of joy—in Pali it's called *pīti*. Other people can feel heavy and solid like a mountain, and that's another form of rapture. Others still can feel a sense of vast empty space like the sky, while some people can feel like they're floating. These subtle mental feelings all arise because the mind is collecting and becoming still. People have these experiences and over time develop some skill. They realise this pleasure is superior to the pleasure that comes from pleasant tastes, touch, sights, and sounds. They realise, 'this is what I've actually been looking for. I've been looking for happiness. I've been looking for pleasure'. Lord Buddha said, 'Peacefulness is the highest pleasure'. We don't know that until we experience it, and we don't experience it until we develop consistent mindfulness. It's not like fleeting worldly pleasure and happiness, which is hot and leads to more craving; rather it's cool, and leaves one feeling contented.

In being more aware, more centered, more in the center of conscious experience, you begin to see mind states as mind states. You see they are objects and that they're not you. When mindfulness is scattered and fuzzy

you think your thoughts are you. With fuzzy mindfulness, you think about your thoughts; you wish you didn't have those thoughts; you wish you had good thoughts; you wish you didn't have nasty thoughts; you get sick of thinking those thoughts, sick of yourself. It's very painful. When you develop a little mindfulness, you develop some skill in being aware of the breathing, and you simply see a thought as a thought. You don't have to identify with it, you don't have to like it or not like it, and you don't have to wish you didn't dislike yourself for having that thought. It's such a relief! If you establish mindfulness of breathing and you're just aware of an in-breath and aware of an out-breath, when a thought comes up it's just a thought. You don't have to pick it up. You don't have to identify with it. How wonderful!

We can come to see mind states as mind states, mental objects arising and ceasing. We also understand that the reason we have our thoughts is because we've thought them in the past. You can't annihilate them, nuke them, or wish them away, because they're arising according to conditions. Those conditions can often be far in the past; the way you think could be the way you've thought for lifetimes. But you don't have to destroy all of the bad thoughts. You just need to know wholesome thoughts are not self. Neutral thoughts are not self. Unwholesome thoughts are not self. They all arise, stay for some time, and they cease.

In terms of cultivating insight, when the mind becomes more peaceful and clear, you see the beginning, the middle, and the end of the breath, and then there's some space. You can then choose to notice the moment of cessation. One in-breath arising, staying for some time, ceasing. Space. One out-breath, arising, staying for some time, ceasing. There's a little birth and a little death in every breath. When you have a little more space in the mind, a little more clarity, a thought comes in but you don't pick it up. You see the thought arising and ceasing. You just notice the cessation, become aware of the cessation, and even if you don't develop amazing, profound insight knowledge, you do develop more wisdom. You develop the spiritual faculty, or spiritual power of wisdom, so that the next time

when you might be affected by an unwholesome mind state, you also know that it will cease. This is very, very valuable.

If people have developed spiritual practices in past lives, this breath meditation can lead into deep concentration or absorptions. The way my teachers explain it, at a certain point the mind isn't aware of the breath. The breath becomes more and more refined, very subtle, and the space between the breaths becomes longer. As the mind is experiencing more rapture, more tranquillity, that deep feeling of contentment and peace becomes the meditation object. The perception of the breath falls away. Many people get confused at this point. They think they've stopped breathing. Breathing is still occurring, but it's very subtle. What's happening is that the mind is turning inwards. It's not aware of the feelings. And if you just stay, many people can see light, often a white or a golden light. At this point you just stay with the peacefulness. When the mind is ready, it will come out of that state and it will have more power and clarity, and you can use that. When it comes out of that peaceful state, the mind has become full of peace to the extent that it has collected inwards. It goes in and it rests, and then it comes out again. Then it's important to pick up the meditation object again, and really notice that moment of cessation. Try and use the extra clarity to truly see the feelings associated with the breath as simply feeling. Arising, staying for some time, and ceasing. This sounds so simple that we can fail to recognise its importance. Very deep insights can occur by simply doing this with a good level of collectedness.

When there is a little more integrity and stability in the mind, we can explore the sense of having a centre. Rest in the centre of conscious experience, keeping presence of mind firm. Then we can have a closer look at things like knee pain or back pain without aversion, without fear, without resentment. Taking a closer look, you'll see it's not just one feeling. There are an extraordinary amount of feelings there, and they're changing constantly. When the mind is dull and mindfulness isn't very clear, knee pain appears like a solid thing that you want to get away from. If you're with the breath and experience a bit more peacefulness and clarity, you

can investigate the knee pain and see an incredible play of intermingling, complex feelings which are moving. You see the area the pain is moving in and it's actually very interesting. Once again, if the mindfulness is able to see that clearly, rapture can arise in the mind. The pain, the unpleasant feeling, is one thing but the part of the mind that knows it as a feeling can be experiencing a great deal of rapture at the very same time. We can train in separating out the awareness from 'that which is known' in this way.

With the kind of space and joy that comes from good mindfulness and some collectedness, that internal nourishment—the knee pain—becomes something to be investigated. You will learn a great deal about the nature of feelings. You learn that when mindfulness is weak, we suffer. We identify with the feelings; we want them or we don't want them, and then there's suffering. Latent kilesas swell up and fill the mind. The mind becomes dark. Mindfulness, on the contrary, is likened to diamond-like clarity. When mindfulness is held in the mind, knowing these thoughts, these four foundations, these four bases of reference, the darkness can't swell up in the mind. The more mindfulness you have, the more wisdom you have, and there's very little suffering. The part of the mind that can be with and mindfully know unpleasant feelings experiences mental peace. When mindfulness is fuzzy, there's a sense of me—my body, my knee pain, my back pain, my bad habits, my sleepiness, and my restlessness. It's quite oppressive.

So this 'crown jewel' is something that you can use. It's a method to realise your inner worth, your true inner worth as a conscious being, a human being. To be born human, a lot of merit has been accumulated. Only through a lot of good deeds, kindness, patience, and virtue do you get this human form and this human mind with its sophisticated abilities. Ajahn Chah said, 'Having a human mind is like having a mansion. Most people spend their whole lives in one or two cramped, dusty, dirty rooms'. He went on to say that once you learn what a mind is, how to train it, and how to use it, then you realise there are many beautiful rooms in this mansion that is your inheritance. Most people don't pay any attention to

their inheritance. We need to recognise and fully utilize it.

A friend once told me that somewhere in France somebody knocked down a wall in their apartment and found a masterpiece that was worth many millions of dollars. Our minds are like that. We've got walls that we've built up through delusion. We can knock them down with mindfulness and wisdom, and suddenly there's great treasure there. What kind of treasure? The four divine abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. When you train the mind to incline to these sublime states it's extremely pleasant. The Lord Buddha calls them the divine abodes because we can abide in them, like a heaven realm in the here and now. We don't have to be reborn in heaven. Train your mind in meditation and in mindfulness, and then once you've established some clarity and stability, consciously pick up loving-kindness as the meditation object. When people are disciplined, *mettā* can be cultivated to a state that is described as boundless. The divine abodes are sometimes called the immeasurables, because there's no limit to the extent they can be radiated from a well-trained mind into the conditioned universe. Amazing! But it requires committed discipline.

Many of the things we pursue aren't worthy of the attention and energy we give them. They don't give very good results. These practices, however, give wonderful results. A heaven-like state here and now. The way these things get powerful is through repetition.

Train yourself to have compassion, train yourself to have *mettā*. It's like a muscle. You might see the same people who used to upset you, who you used to react to, but once that muscle is strong, you can decide to respond with *mettā* instead of being upset. Before, you'd usually get upset. You had no choice. When you train your mind, you can see those people and smile, understanding that their mind state is just a mind state, it's not them. You understand that it's painful, and you truly wish that person could be free from painful mind states. You don't identify with it either, you don't see them as that mind state. And you don't have to react

to that mind state. It will arise, stay for some time, and cease. It's just a feeling. It's just an energy. You can look that person in the eyes, you can smile, and you can think, 'May you be well, may you be happy'. It requires cultivation, but it's well worth the effort. Not only does it reduce suffering and allow you to experience a pleasant abiding here and now, it generates enormous amounts of merit. Lord Buddha said there's no other quality more conducive to heavenly rebirth than loving-kindness.

And so there's just this simple training, just coming and sitting and inclining the mind to be with the felt experience. Knowing that you are sitting. Trying to know the breath. Letting go of other perceptions—past, future, other people—and gently restraining. Just staying with the awareness of breathing. It's such a simple activity, but one that leads to profound states of samādhi, to great insight, liberating wisdom, and incredibly blissful, boundless experience.

Hopefully I've aroused your interest and faith in the practices of breath meditation, and developing mettā, and just trying to really know the beginning, middle, and end of an in- and out-breath. Really know the feelings. Just be aware, hold it in awareness and keep the mind in the middle. Allow a sense of clarity to rest in the present. Don't pick up the past or the future or other people. Allow yourself to rest. Keep your mind in the middle. Sit in the chair in the mind.



CHAPTER THREE

*A Complete Practice of Mindfulness
With the Cultivation of the Four Brahmavihāras
as a Support*

CHAPTER THREE

A Complete Practice of Mindfulness With the Cultivation of the Four Brahmavihāras as a Support

Our precepts are a training. It's always good to recollect what we're doing when we commit to them in a ceremony. We're recommitting to a process or training. It's actually very difficult to keep the precepts purely, especially in the area of speech, as many people will know. When we take the precepts we wipe the slate clean and we start again. We recommit our intention to sincerely adhere to these ethical precepts and to understand these rules. Five precepts are what the Lord Buddha recommended as the foundation for successful meditation, the foundation to experience wellbeing.

We should have a look at how we have been going. Are we keeping the first precept or are we killing or being violent and aggressive towards beings? Where are we with our second precept, refraining from taking that which is not given? Are we only taking that which is given freely? As for the third precept, avoiding sexual misconduct, I try to think of this in terms of being responsible with sexuality. Are we being careful in this area? How about the fourth precept? It's not only about not telling lies (*musāvādā*), it's also avoiding harsh speech, frivolous speech, white lies, and exaggerations. And where are we with the fifth, with intoxication? It's very difficult in Australian culture. Alcohol is everywhere!

I was noticing yesterday how all of the big supermarkets now seem to have a liquor store right next door. That's a new thing. It's probably been happening for a few years, but I just noticed it. Liquor is everywhere. There's a lot of social pressure to drink. I think if possible, it really is better

** Given as a Sunday talk at the Buddhist Society of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia in July 2011.*

not to drink alcohol at all. One reason is that this is something you can do which gives you a feeling of confidence in your Buddhist practice. It's not always understood that keeping these precepts in a squeaky clean way can give us such confidence. We can feel confident about our respect for the Buddha as well. We make it an offering to the Buddha.

There is the mind-set that says a half a glass of alcohol with dinner is okay. Okay, maybe that's true. It probably isn't too bad. But we're also justifying doing something we want. However, if we give up that half a glass because we respect the Buddha and his teachings, and we want the confidence, dignity, and wellbeing that comes from surrendering to this training wholeheartedly, we probably get more wellbeing and happiness. The other thing about the half a glass is that it often becomes two glasses. And then you have a little more! Once you've had a few sips and it's very pleasant and the people around you are drinking too...so, sometimes it's simply best to have a very clear line. Then you have the happiness that comes from pure ethical conduct and knowing that you're surrendering to this training in a sincere way.

Intoxication isn't just from drink and drugs. It's good to have a look at what we do with our screens too. How much time do we spend in front of them? Someone told me there's a famous monk in Taiwan who has a TV station that has a couple of million viewers. Apparently this monk is quite gifted in samādhi, and Māra appeared to him in his meditation and said, 'What are you doing using my tool?' Māra was upset about this.

Intoxication can be allowing the mind to be lost or distracted, allowing the mind to be dull. I guess when you work all day you probably need to relax a bit. It's okay to watch a little TV, but show some discernment, some discrimination. What are you watching? The problem, of course, is that once you are relaxing on your lounge chair and you're having some chips or nuts, mindfulness isn't so clear. The remote control is in your hand, so it's very easy to watch the next thing and the next thing, and then you're going to bed with a very dull mind. That's to be avoided if possible. With

TV, you should only watch useful or consciously relaxing things, and put a limit to it. After you've relaxed you should go do something skilful.

Perhaps even more challenging, more dangerous now, is the Internet. I don't use it very much myself, but I know that when one is using it, time seems to go by very fast. Also, the pornography available is very dangerous. You have to be careful what you expose your mind to. Ask yourself if you are nourishing wholesome dhammas or unwholesome dhammas. Just because we like something doesn't mean it's good for us. It's the same with the news. It's very engrossing, but how much do we actually need to know? Sometimes watching too much news can be depressing. We can also become very self-righteous. Or we can end up despairing, losing our sense of trust in human beings. So keep the news at the right amount. Keep entertainment at the right amount. Keep distraction at a minimum. The point I'm trying to make around the precept of intoxication is that we're trying not to be lost, trying not to be distracted. We are trying to maintain a focus in our lives.

I like to go over the refuges and the precepts every so often, so that when we do the ceremony we do it with some understanding. Then we're resetting the intention to train ourselves, and asking, 'How am I going with these five precepts? How deeply am I taking refuge?' Thank goodness we have the refuges of the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. The Buddha was proof that our lives have a greater potential. There's a state completely beyond dukkha in all of its manifestations. That's pretty amazing. We glimpse this when we have moments of peacefulness. When we have insights, we glimpse what it's like to have an absence of dukkha. All Buddhist practitioners will experience that in moments, to some degree.

The historical Buddha was someone who went completely beyond all forms of dukkha. He transcended suffering. He was liberated. That's amazing. The historical Buddha is a refuge. Symbolically, he also represents our potential, which is a refuge too. We understand that the Buddha

started, like us, as a deluded being deeply affected by greed, hatred, and ignorance. Through training himself he became the Buddha and so must we, too, train ourselves in order to transcend suffering.

The Buddha had the capacity to explain actual reality. Our problem is that we don't perceive reality correctly. All unenlightened beings are ignorant to the deeper truth, and because of ignorance we're deluded. Because of delusion we don't perceive things correctly. The Buddha explained things in a lot of detail and in many different ways. He gave us a training that leads to directly perceiving truth, and transforming the mind to a state beyond suffering if we live according to the truth. This is a very important principle. If we take refuge in the Dhamma, we're taking refuge in truth. The ultimate truth. The Dhamma also includes the path that we cultivate, and live in accordance with, so that we might realise that truth. That's training in the precepts, training in meditation, and being generous.

Then we take refuge in the Sangha—in all of those people who have practised correctly since the time of the Buddha and have realised the same result. It's incredibly encouraging that there's not just one very special being who comes around every few aeons (though it's said that in this aeon there will be five Buddhas, with one more to come). It's not only the Buddha that gets liberated; it's anyone who follows the training. I believe that even in the world today there are people who are liberated and free from suffering. This is truly wonderful and affirming.

So that's the highest end of Sangha, people who have actually realised the full results of the training. Sangha also includes those who are currently practising correctly, those who are keeping the precepts and meditating a lot. All your lay friends, your good lay friends, that's your lay Sangha. Monks and nuns who are putting in a fair effort are also Sangha. People who put on robes but aren't really training themselves, who didn't have a good intention to become a monk or nun, they're not Sangha. Sangha is people who are cultivating mindfulness, cultivating

wisdom, cultivating samādhi, all on the foundation of ethics. That is your Sangha. Those who realise the full result of practising that way, they're the Noble Sangha.

In addition to being generous, going for refuge, and training in the precepts, we have the Buddha's encouragement and recommendation to cultivate the four brahmavihāras: loving-kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity. They're sometimes called the 'divine abidings' or the 'highest emotions', for they are extremely wholesome mental qualities. The word 'Brahmā' means highest, or superior. It is also the name given to the supreme god in Hinduism. 'Vihāra' means to dwell, to live, or to abide. Thus ideally, the brahmavihāras are not emotions one occasionally feels, but rather, are mind-states that one habitually abides in. That's what we aspire to.

Like any emotion or mental habit, the more the mind becomes acquainted with them, the more the mind takes on those qualities. Just as we might have a suspicious tendency or a cynical tendency or a habit of being angry towards oneself. These things became deeply imbedded habits over time. If we train ourselves to respond in these more wholesome ways and cultivate them as attitudes, eventually we are able to abide in them. The divine abidings start as thoughts and then become emotions, and they can be developed to a level where they become types of samādhi. If we can train ourselves to hold any of these four qualities in the mind, it means that other less wholesome qualities are not present in the mind at that time. When held in the mind with right intention and with skilful effort, they can become very powerful forms of concentration.

A lot of what we often experience and a lot of our attitudes aren't based in these qualities. When we consciously recognise that these qualities are wholesome and skilful, this holds up a mirror to what's present in the mind. Seeing what's present in comparison to what's possible gives us an option—to work at cultivating that which is wholesome.

These days many people seem to be quite seriously affected by cynicism and suspicion. We're all very good critics. We become faultfinding. If this is pervasive in our culture we might not even notice it; we might think that's just what people do. They complain, say what's wrong about the government, with the economic policies, immigration policies, environment policies, and so on. That's not to say some things aren't wrong, but it's important to notice and to ask: is indulging in these kinds of thoughts and acting from this attitude helpful or skilful? Is it going to help us to be happy people? Is it going to help us have samādhi? Is it going to help us develop wisdom?

We might actually know that we're cynical and critical. We might even know that we have a habit of withholding kindness towards ourselves. But we might not feel that we can do anything about it. This is part of the problem of the modern world. I attended a talk in America recently by a Tibetan lay teacher. He grew up in a very traditional, religious Buddhist family surrounded by other Tibetan Buddhists, but then went and studied in England and got a couple of degrees. I think he has a degree from a Tibetan monastery, but also a PhD in Psychology and one in Comparative Religion. I was interested in his perspective on Western culture. He said when it comes to psychopathology, knowing the various things that can be wrong with people psychologically, there's a manual that is a comprehensive listing of everything that could be wrong. It's called the DSM 4, and they were just about to come out with a DSM 5, which would probably be even thicker. He pointed out that there's no manual we look to that outlines the good, things that you can do to stimulate wholesome mind states and what you can do to be happy. There's no standard that we look to as modern people that tells us how to go about being happy and having a healthy mind. I found that very revealing about our culture.

This is something that human intelligence tends to discern. It's very good at knowing what's wrong, and our modern culture has cultivated that a lot. This does have some advantages, but it needs to be kept in

perspective. The brahmavihāras, in contrast, are more emotional. They radiate from the heart. So we need to train our thoughts. Suppose we want to cultivate loving-kindness. We start with the wish, 'May I be well, may I be happy'. That's a thought. We continue, 'May all beings be well, may all beings be happy'. What we're doing is trying to stimulate the blossoming of an emotion in the heart centre. It starts with the head, but it's bringing us down into the heart.

Most modern people think a lot. So in meditation I think it's good to learn to use thought. When you come to your cushion and you find that you're thinking a lot, you can pick up these phrases and these words and even spend a while contemplating why it's helpful to have loving-kindness. You can look at the drawbacks of being grumpy, getting angry, or holding on to grudges.

Similarly, with compassion we wish, 'May I be free from suffering, may all beings be free from suffering'. Developing compassion, we're trying to empathise with the suffering of others. It's not looking at why there's a problem, or why there shouldn't be a problem, or who should be doing something about the problem. It's going underneath that to the central fact of suffering and then responding with something wholesome.

The next brahmavihāra, *muditā*, empathic joy or sympathetic joy is incredibly helpful. This is a wonderful antidote to cynicism, sarcasm, and suspiciousness. This is where we train ourselves to notice what's okay about ourselves and good about our situation, and also that of others. It's a very good and powerful tool.

Then there's the last brahmavihāra, equanimity, which is actually very profound. We tend to think that equanimity is nothing, or that it means indifference. Equanimity is more like understanding things the way they are. Having a very good understanding of the way things are one can remain in a state of equipoise, a state perfect balance and serenity. So it's actually a powerful emotion that is neither moving towards, nor moving

away from. It's an emotion with an incredible amount of clarity, stillness, and balance.

These are powerful tools with which to train our mind. We have our habits, but then with this mental training we can choose to develop the mind in a different way. We are subject to social conditioning and the ways that society affects us, however Buddhism is a religion, a philosophy, a science, for people who want to take responsibility. It's a religion for grown up people. The Buddha said that he only points the way, and that we have to walk that way. At a certain point, we decide that we're going to train ourselves whether the people around us are behaving skilfully or not. We decide that we are going to train our own minds to become more wholesome, and we establish that wholesomeness as the foundation for developing insight.

Understanding this concept doesn't mean we can do it right away, rather that we understand the potential. By being generous, practising the precepts, and meditating skilfully, we can become habituated to abide in these attitudes most of the time. That is the result of the Buddha's training. The four brahmavihāras—loving-kindness, compassion, empathic joy, and equanimity—can be understood as four related, not separate, qualities. They are spiritually mature ways to relate to oneself and others. Just use your own contemplative faculty to look at the benefits of thinking with loving-kindness, and you'll come to a sense that loving-kindness is wholesome, skilful, and valuable.

We have to understand ourselves. We have to want to have success in meditation. We have to see the value of what we're meditating on, and to really bring that into our hearts with sincerity. So we actually spend a minute or two contemplating. The Buddha said loving-kindness is really valuable, really helpful—but is it? You can ask yourself. If you just sit and think, 'May I be well, may I be happy', you might not get much of a response. However, if you really recollect why loving-kindness is valuable, you may be more successful. Think about what it's the antidote

to, what it balances in the mind, and what the result of cultivating it is. Recall the experiences you've had where loving-kindness meditation has been effective. What was the result? Did you feel happier? Was the mind brighter? Was it more spacious? Was there an absence of habitual heaviness, or hardness, or darkness? When you can see that loving-kindness is wholesome, skilful, and valuable, then empower and use the thought 'May I be well, may I be happy'.

Another thing we can do is ask what it would mean to be truly and deeply well. I like to encourage people to invest these words with special meaning. You can spend some time contemplating it. For you it might mean having three espressos a day instead of four, spending one hour on the Internet instead of five, or only having one maxed-out credit card instead of three. So when you think the thought 'May I be well', you really wish that you may make skilful decisions, keep healthy disciplines, and abandon that which isn't skilful. It means doing a little bit better so that you will have more wellbeing. You can spend a couple of minutes contemplating that way, but be careful not to get too far out of the contemplation or to mentally proliferate too much. You just want to establish a sense of sincerely applying yourself to the meditation, of seeing the value in it.

Next we use the phrases 'May I be well, may I be happy', within regular meditation, hopefully opening the heart with some warmth, good will, and unconditional love, and allowing that to abide in the body and mind. After establishing some loving-kindness towards ourselves, then we train in radiating it outwards. First we direct it to people for whom it's easy to have loving-kindness. We bring them to mind. Breathing in, we think, 'May you be well'. Breathing out, we actually picture that person or get a feeling for that person being there, and we radiate warmth out towards them. If it's your long lost friend in London, you don't try to send your mind to London. That's too exhausting. You just try to bring that person to you and feel confident they're there. The mind is not bound to space and time in the same way bodies are. I've heard many stories of

people feeling something when people on the other side of the world radiated loving-kindness towards them or dedicated merit to them. So you can feel confident that if your loving-kindness meditation really has some integrity, it will affect people in a positive way.

Something to be careful of is affection. It's known as the near enemy to loving-kindness, because when there's affection there's attachment. Loving-kindness is a kind of good will. It's not about grasping at the person, but simply wishing them well.

The next step in loving-kindness meditation is that we move on to neutral beings. If we want to take this practice on as a discipline, it is actually very important that we radiate loving-kindness to neutral people. We might bring to mind the cleaning lady we hardly ever talk to, or the gardener, or the taxi driver. 'May they be well, may they be happy'. Recall people you see but don't know personally, people who are not in the category of friends, but with whom you habitually come into contact. 'May they be happy'.

Then we train the mind to be able to offer this attitude to more and more beings. We start to include those it's difficult to have loving-kindness for. We can train ourselves to have loving-kindness for those people who have hurt us, who have hurt people that we know, or those who are making stupid decisions that effect us badly. We can radiate loving-kindness towards them. It doesn't mean that we don't understand what is conventionally skilful or not skilful; it just means that we sincerely wish people well. In fact, if people were truly well they wouldn't be doing unskilful things. So we wish, 'May they be well, may they be happy'. Once we can maintain those thoughts in a focused way, it gives rise to a wholesome feeling. When that wholesome feeling grows stronger, it's then possible to direct that to the people we would usually find it difficult to have loving-kindness towards. Again it is important the near enemy of affection does not affect our meditation.

The far enemy of loving-kindness is ill will. When we habituate the mind to loving-kindness, we will notice when those feelings of ill will come up. Before we meditate, we may not even notice how often we experience such moments. When we begin to meditate, we realise, 'Even though I'm a fairly nice person, every now and then I want to kill somebody'. It is important to become aware of it and to be truthful about it, because we all have that potential. I think prisons are full of people who may have made one bad mistake. We tend to get an image in our mind of 'murderers' who are bad people, but it might have been the case that they were pushed into a painful corner, lost their temper, and ended up in jail. We all actually have this potential. If we were in enough pain and if we lacked mindfulness, we could all end up in jail. It's very important to become mindful of these things. It's important to cultivate the antidotes, such as loving-kindness, that weaken our tendency towards ill will.

Then there's compassion, a subtle yet profound quality. It doesn't get mentioned very often in Theravada Buddhism. Compassion is feeling the suffering of another without becoming distressed. This is tricky. That's why it's a type of samādhi. If it wasn't samādhi, we wouldn't be able to maintain it with integrity. It starts as thoughts, but it's important to investigate it further. When it's really functioning, what is it like? It isn't pity. Pity is the near enemy of compassion. There's too much self in that. If we feel pity, we forget that we are still in this samsāric story, that we are still in this situation where we might be just like that person. We understand that any of us could all of a sudden be in a situation with very coarse suffering. Unfortunately this is part of our samsāric predicament.

There's a beautiful phrase in the suttas, 'The Buddha's mind is full of compassion, quivering for the sake of beings'. He went to enormous trouble to help us. That's an expression of compassion. There are examples in the suttas where the Buddha scanned the world and saw that twenty miles away there was someone who could be liberated, so he walked that distance. These are examples of his incredible compassion. When he was

under the Bodhi Tree after enlightenment, he was thinking, 'That which I've discovered is very refined, very difficult to realise, and beings won't understand it. If I try to teach it, it will just be troublesome for me and wearying, so maybe I won't'. The fact that he did is testimony to his compassion. When he was experiencing the bliss of liberation under the Bodhi Tree, he didn't have to teach anybody, but he did. He started the monks' order and then the nuns' order, and a huge lay following. This is all an expression of his compassion. He doesn't talk so much about compassion, but you can see that he's trying to train kings and he's trying to train courtiers, and he's even trying to train prostitutes. He's incredibly compassionate. That his order was open to people from every caste at that time is profound, revolutionary. So his compassion was also impartial. Anyone who had the faculties and who was free of debt was able to become a monk or a nun. Pretty amazing.

To have compassion is to be aware that all not-yet-liberated conscious beings are vulnerable to terrible suffering. It's to feel with, to respond by wishing it were otherwise, to wish to do something about it, and yet not to be distressed. Now this is really tricky! You don't take on the suffering as your personal suffering, but you do truly wish it were otherwise. So if there isn't some samādhi present as well, it's not actually possible.

Sometimes people who are 'heady' with wisdom and understanding can lack compassion, while others who might not have very much intellectual understanding may be very compassionate. You don't necessarily need to have understanding to be compassionate. It's a heart quality. It's when you see suffering and you wish that person wasn't suffering. If you apply your intelligence to it as well, it's good. You can train in it as a discipline, though a lot of traditional people in agrarian cultures naturally respond to suffering with acts of kindness. You don't have to have a profound understanding. You don't need to know that it's a brahmavihāra to do it. It can be a challenge for people who are too intellectual to get down to what it really is.

Compassion can sometimes come more easily to someone who has suffered. Suffering can lead to a kind of humility. It can also lead to bitterness, resentment, feeling closed off, or a kind of victim consciousness. But suffering can also lead to greater empathy. It's part of what connects us to one another. We see ourselves as a vulnerable, sensitive being who is suffering. If we then come to the basic insight that every other being has this same vulnerability, this same sensitivity—and that each type of suffering has its own validity, and is very real to the person experiencing it—then empathy and compassion can increase. When we've suffered, we notice certain things are helpful and others aren't helpful. Then hopefully we bring that understanding to others. I think having suffered a bit is very good for being compassionate.

Sometimes people speak of compassion fatigue. That would mean there's not yet enough samādhi. When we have compassion in terms of samādhi, it charges up the battery and then that's radiated outwards. If when you hear about misery you become another suffering being, there isn't clarity. There isn't centeredness. That's part of what happens in our culture when everyone specialises. A social worker has to hear about terrible suffering day after day. Nurses have to work with people in terrible pain day after day. In a more traditional culture you have a sort of shared burden. The whole village would be somehow helping with the elderly, the sorrows, the deaths, and the grief.

If you are someone who works in one of those industries and you end up experiencing compassion fatigue, what do you do? Many people end up doing retreats because they feel that's the best thing. The best thing to do to recharge the heart is to give it that kind attention. Bring the energy back inwards and have a break for a while. People who spend a lot of time with people who are suffering need to find ways to set boundaries with it and take care of themselves, as well as understanding that they also suffer. When we see our own suffering, we can set the intention to cause as little suffering to other beings as possible, because we know that suffering hurts. Then at least our suffering has some benefit. We can develop sensitivity

to other people experiencing difficulties and set that intention to be a wholesome influence and not an unwholesome influence upon people's lives.

To really have compassion requires a lot of maturity. It requires the understanding that it's not pity and it's not about taking on suffering in an overwhelming way. It is about wanting to do something, and then actually doing something if you can. However, for these qualities to balance one another, a certain amount of equanimity is needed. Equanimity cannot be overlooked. It plays a role in making sure that loving-kindness really is loving-kindness, impartial good will. It sees that compassion is not pity, and keeps us from falling into a state of misery because of the suffering in the world. If you have a lot of compassion, in that very same moment a part of the mind will actually be very serene and peaceful. If it's real compassion, you'll want to do something to lessen the suffering in your and others' experiences, and if you're capable you will.

As for *muditā*—sympathetic or empathetic joy—it's genuinely feeling good about the good fortune that you and others have. This is a really good thing to practice if you find that you are depressed, you're grumpy, you're negative, or feeling like you can't be bothered. We all find ourselves in these states at times. When you come to your meditation you can ask yourself, 'What in my life can I feel good about?' If things are really bad, you'll think, 'Nothing!' You shouldn't believe that. If you have food on the table today, you are a person of extraordinary good fortune, because I think about seventy percent of the world's population is malnourished. We forget this. Living in our suburban world, we forget that most beings on the planet are struggling just to get enough to eat. And if you live in a place where you're not confronted with coarse violence on a daily basis, you're very fortunate, because there are many parts of the world where that's not the case. In some communities little children grow up playing with guns. If you're not experiencing threats to your life on a daily basis, you're very fortunate. Although we see it on the news, we tend to forget it. We don't realise the

incredible benevolence that we're currently experiencing.

Having food and experiencing relative safety is a result of merit. You can rejoice in it. You are experiencing the results of having lived with virtue in the past, having not been violent and having been generous. That's why you have enough food on the table, and why you're not being confronted with violence daily. You have to do some work here. First of all you have to see that you're experiencing an enormous amount of good fortune that you're not recognising, and decide to recognise it. Challenge your depression. Challenge your cynicism. Your physical health is also good fortune. People complain about the health care system, but Australia's is one of the best in the world. A lot of people in other countries don't have health insurance at all. We're very lucky. We can always find fault with the way things are, but the amount of good in this culture is extraordinary. There's a lot to feel joy for!

Gratitude is very similar to *muditā*. It doesn't really work to tell yourself that you should feel grateful. You have to recognise that which you have to be grateful for. Gratitude is the natural response. For instance, you recognise that most beings are hungry, while our biggest issue is not wanting to get fat. We have more suffering about feeling fat than we have about feeling hungry, that's suburban reality, but instead we can cultivate gratitude for what we have.

What if someone else gets the promotion that you wanted? This is where we have to train ourselves in *muditā*, sympathetic joy. If someone has done something good and is rewarded for that, we feel happy for them. We share their happiness. This is the opposite of competitiveness and jealousy. It's an antidote to a lot of those negative things. Suppose you've wanted a baby for ten years and you haven't had one, while your sister's just had her fourth boy—you'd still feel happy for her. When things that you want happen to other people, you feel happy for them. This is a training. It doesn't happen automatically, but it's perfectly possible to experience appreciative joy or sympathetic joy. You can

recognise what is good in your life and appreciate it while seeing what is good in other people's lives and being happy for them. Considering deeply that kamma produced in past lives is an important unseen factor can help us to cultivate *muditā* and let go of jealousy and resentment.

When it comes to cultivating equanimity, the very best way to do it I believe is by meditating. When we meditate, we see a thought as a thought and we pull back from it. We see a feeling as a feeling and we pull back from it. In the process of cultivating breath meditation, we develop the understanding that thoughts will arise, they'll stay for a while, and then cease. Feelings will arise, they'll stay for a while, and then cease. With equanimity, a part of the mind can see phenomena as they are without moving either towards or away from them. As we meditate more and more, equanimity will be the result. Equipoise. Ajahn Sumedho uses the word serenity.

In terms of *samādhi*, equanimity can become the fourth *jhāna*. It's a profound quality. Although most of us aren't training in *jhānas*, it's good to know where it leads. After the first few *jhānas* of intense rapture and tranquillity, the mind goes deeper. It goes more deeply into the peacefulness than the rapture or pleasure. The types of pleasure that are experienced in *samādhi* are pure pleasure. A deepening of *samādhi* happens when the mind is going more and more deeply into peacefulness and is not attached to the pleasure. *Samādhi* is a process of letting go—letting go of the five senses, letting go of the world, letting go of outside conditions, and turning inwards. When we do that, incredible pleasure arises in the mind. Then one goes even deeper into *samādhi* and into the state of pure equanimity. That's the fourth *jhāna*.

According to what I've read and what I've discussed with my teachers, once people become *sotāpannas* and *sakadāgāmis*—stream enterers and people who only have a couple of lives until liberation—fourth *jhāna* is the foundation for purifying the last remaining defilements. By placing the mind in such a deeply peaceful, unmoving state, their remaining

greed and hatred are starved of nutriment. It steadily weakens and then falls away from the mind. So it's a profound quality with a profound role to play. When we're trying to embrace a training and trying to understand the value of something, it's good to see where it can lead. Equanimity will take us all a great distance if we do whatever we can to cultivate serenity, equipoise, mindfulness, and the wisdom that results in equanimity. It's very good to do as much of that as possible.

Having talked now a little bit about how and why these qualities are wholesome and useful with regards to weakening and uprooting greed and hatred, there is another aspect to the cultivation of the brahmavihāras that I'd also like to mention. Because these divine emotions are on the extreme spectrum of kusala, or wholesome qualities, cultivating them also actually supports the development of mindfulness. How? Well I'm sure you've all noticed that if ever you get really upset about something – get really grumpy, or really upset, or really angry. Then even after the biggest wave of emotion has rippled through the mind, the mind still remains negatively affected for quite some time. If a negative emotion really gets in and takes hold for some time, it actually damages the feelings of contentment and well-being. And it also damages the quality of clarity and presence of mind. Powerful negative emotions weaken mindfulness. The mind can be dull, brittle and weak for some time after having got lost in a strong reaction about something. And during that time we are prone to having more negative reactions to situations in life.

It can take quite a diligent and consistent effort with our meditation to establish a resilient sense of clarity and presence of mind. So if this gets shattered by a powerful negative emotion then this is really a terrible shame. The brahmavihāras on the other hand literally incline the mind towards meditative states. In the sutta on the eleven benefits of cultivating loving-kindness, the Buddha clearly states that for those who have cultivated mettā, the mind concentrates easily. For people who are wondering what they can do to develop more concentration or collectedness more quickly or easily, you have a very big and helpful pointer here!

But suppose we have been diligent in cultivating the divine attitudes of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy and serene equipoise. If we have become skilled and adept at generating these emotions and attitudes, when faced with a situation where it is possible to have a big negative reaction, we now actually begin to have some choices. Rather than get upset, we can choose to respond skilfully.

Suppose for example someone is being very rude or inconsiderate towards you. Ordinarily you might feel quite justified in feeling angry and then in giving them a piece of your mind. But when you are skilled and habituated to generating mettā in the heart, and you've cultivated some mindfulness, you will feel the hurt and irritation quite quickly. The brahmavihāra practices support the mind in becoming more sensitive and aware. And because you have become accustomed to pleasant mind-states you will be aware that you are beginning to suffer, you will feel the unpleasant feelings in the heart area, and then you can immediately generate either compassion or loving-kindness towards yourself. With mindfulness and clear comprehension, you consciously pick up a wholesome mind object rather than give rise to a negative mind object. Using mindfulness and the divine emotions in this way, negative experiences can actually become the proximate cause for the further deepening and development of goodness. And you will notice that the quality of clarity, presence of mind and well-being can actually be enhanced by committing to these types of responses, rather than it becoming shattered by negative reactions.

Even if the mind falls into a negative state, if we have become skilled at picking up wholesome states, we can do a practice that is sometimes referred to as 'replacement by opposites'. As Buddhist practitioners committed to being generous, virtuous and engaging in mental cultivation, we cultivate our mind. Seeing that there is anger, we consciously generate mettā. If we observe cruelty or indifference, we incline the mind towards a compassionate attitude. If there is jealousy, we reflect on kamma and give rise to sympathetic joy. All of these kinds of skilful responses will actually generate useful types of auspicious merit that will help your

mind to experience deeper peacefulness in meditation later on. These practices will affect future lives in a positive way too. And perhaps most pertinently, they will help you to suffer less in the here and now as well. So please be diligent and enthusiastic with regards your cultivation of the four brahmavihāras.



CHAPTER FOUR

Experiencing and Applying the Five Spiritual Powers

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Experiencing and Applying the Five Spiritual Powers

What is Buddha? Who was the Buddha? What conditions gave rise to the Buddha? What were the qualities of the Buddha? In taking refuge, we should contemplate these questions sometimes. We can recognise that Lord Buddha demonstrated our ultimate potential. Understanding that refuge in the Buddha is refuge in our ultimate nature, we can then affirm that. Then at the heart of our experience lies an extraordinary potential, one that gives rise to the first of the five spiritual powers. Faith. When it's in the right place, faith is extremely powerful and useful. It's followed by energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

These faculties come up in the thirty-seven wings to awakening as two separate lists. The first list is the five faculties; the second time they're listed as the five powers. These faculties exist in our minds. We have a faculty of faith. You will find that if people don't have faith in Lord Buddha they put their faith in something else. Sometimes that faith is skilful and sometimes it's not skilful. Sometimes it's wise and sometimes it's unwise. A lot of young people these days can become devoted to singers and actors if they don't have a spiritual world view, if they don't have a spiritual mentor, or they haven't met spiritual practitioners with integrity. They plaster their walls with pictures of movie stars and listen to every silly thing they say on Twitter. For many people, celebrities have become the deities of the modern world. Unfortunately, we so often see celebrities fall from grace. In many respects, they're not very sound role models. When you have faith in Buddha, however, you place your faith in Buddhahood, Lord Buddha, and the qualities of a Buddha, and then you recognise it as your potential. It's sometimes called Buddha nature.

** From a talk given during a nine-day retreat in Geelong, Victoria, Australia, April 2016.*

Our minds are affected by greed, hatred, and delusion. That's our starting point. However, the mind can be purified, which makes clear what our work is—to follow the teachings of all Buddhas. That is, to do good, to avoid harm, and to purify the mind. The doing good and the avoiding harm is a very important part of purifying the mind. Within the container of our ethical precepts, and by practising patient endurance, we weaken the powers of greed and hatred. In a way this nurtures our potential. However, if we allow coarse forms of greed and hatred to take root and grow, to find expression in our speech and our actions, then the mind does not become purified. Such a mind is defiled.

Our ethical training, on the other hand, allows our potential to shine through. Ajahn Anan explains that when you keep the precepts it's not just the case that you refrain from unskillful things. What occurs is that virtue grows. It's a palpable quality that then resides in your heart. I don't like using the word 'morality' to describe this, but I love the word 'virtue'. And I like the terms 'ethical responsibility', 'ethical conduct', and 'ethical standards'. In keeping the precepts, we maintain an ethical standard. Then your virtue is able to blossom. You become a person imbued with virtue. It's a very beautiful quality. When you keep the precepts long enough, you can feel an inner goodness and inner worth.

When you break the precepts, you can feel that you've harmed something and there's a healthy sense of remorse. You need to take care of your goodness. You have to nurture your faith in your Buddha nature, your Buddha potential. Work in accordance with the laws of nature so that you can blossom, shine, and grow in these beautiful ways.

Faith in Buddha's liberation is also faith in your potential. Before he was a bodhisattva he started out just the same as us. The starting point of any Buddha is an ordinary mind affected by greed, hatred, and delusion. Through incredible sincerity and a great deal of effort and determination over a very long period of time, the Buddha first became a bodhisattva, and then a great bodhisattva. At a certain point he would have met a

Buddha, and committed to becoming such himself. But even before meeting that Buddha, he or she was a being with exceptional compassion, aspiration, and altruism, wanting to help many beings to be free from suffering. At some point, a bodhisattva meets a Buddha, and being so inspired, he makes a lot of offerings, and then makes a vow: 'Due to this merit may I be a Buddha also'. Then he would have received a prediction. Through the power of that merit and the power of the bodhisattva's own significantly developed mind, that past Buddha would have been able to see the future aeon where this bodhisattva would also become a Buddha.

After that point, he spent an incredible amount of time working on the perfections, the *pāramīs*. If we consider this, we can all feel grateful and even in awe of the millions of extraordinary acts of kindness, the millions of acts of renunciation, and the millions of acts of restraint it would have taken. He would have spent thousands upon thousands of lives in contemplation and meditation, listening to Dhamma, perfecting the wisdom *pāramī*, the *sīla pāramī*, and the *mettā pāramī*. It's incredible. In terms of our own Buddha potential or our Buddha nature, we don't have to develop all of those qualities to the same degree. We can look at Lord Buddha's teaching, the path of *dāna*, *sīla*, *bhāvanā*. The eight-fold path. We become generous, warm-hearted, good-hearted, and then ethical. We practice meditation and develop our mindfulness. This is putting faith in the right place.

We need faith in the ultimate truth, faith in our ultimate nature, and faith in the path. The only way to realise our ultimate nature, the only way to get liberated from the delusion that obscures our ultimate nature, is through practising the three-fold training. The phrase that is sometimes used is 'living in accordance with Dhamma', or 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma'. It means you have to walk the path so that you can realise Dhamma. You might have studied and obtained a lot of knowledge, and you might have listened to a lot of Dhamma talks, but if you still can't get it together to keep the precepts and have a daily meditation practice, you're not going to realise it. The thickness of the

kilesas will obscure insight. But if you do practice correctly in accordance with Dhamma, the kilesas get thinner and thinner, while mindfulness gets stronger. Wisdom also gets sharper, and then you have penetrative insight. The stages of insight weaken and then finally uproot and destroy the kilesas. That's how the mind becomes purified, but it is a gradual process.

We need to understand what we have faith in, and then really make a lot of that faith. Take care of your faith. Find ways to express it. You can do morning and evening chanting. You can bow. I've always liked offering candles, nice flowers, or fragrances. These are ways that we express our faith and our gratitude.

In terms of the five powers, there is faith, then energy, and then sati, which is mindfulness. We need consistency of mindfulness. Place it on the breath. Come back to the breath, being aware of thoughts as thoughts but not picking up the thoughts, not following the thoughts. You will notice that through restraining the mind in a skilful way—coming back to the breath again and again, not following on with the thoughts, not picking up the thoughts about the past and not letting the mind go off into the future—what happens is that energy builds up in the mind. It manifests as a feeling, a palpable sense of presence, and a sense of clarity or space around your thoughts and around your feelings.

So there's *saddhā* (faith), *virīya* (energy), and *sati* (mindfulness). Because of those, we come to the next one: *samādhi*. I like to call it collectedness. *Sammā-samādhi* is right-collectedness. We modern people have a debilitating habit of not recognising the *samādhi* that we do have, yet wanting more. I really like the way my teacher Ajahn Anan talks about *samādhi*, because he doesn't just talk about the *jhānas*. There is *khanika samādhi*, when the mind is peaceful for a couple of minutes, and *upacāra samādhi*, when the mind is peaceful for longer periods—perhaps five, ten, or twenty minutes. Basically, this is all *samādhi*. By appreciating the *samādhi* that we have, and inclining the mind to rest in its collectedness,

that's exactly what will condition the arising of jhāna in its own time according to nature. But we have to bring the mind to whatever stillness and collectedness it will come to, and bring it to that time and time again, and then just stay still. It's with this attitude of appreciation and contentment that the samādhi deepens by itself.

The way I understand Ajahn Chah's focus is that it's about maintaining mindfulness and clear comprehension in all postures. Mindfulness with clear comprehension is knowing pleasant feelings, neutral feelings, and unpleasant feelings, but also knowing wholesome thoughts as wholesome, unwholesome as unwholesome, and reflecting upon various factors of skilful view. It's through maintaining mindfulness and clear comprehension that the samādhi develops by itself. When it does, it is sammā-samādhi — correct samādhi. It's samādhi that is wholesome and not unskilful.

You can see how faith plays a large role in having the energy and resolution to apply mindfulness consistently. There are examples of monks and nuns going off to meditate in places where there are ghosts or tigers. They do this because they have faith, but are concerned about laziness, or a lack of consistency. So they go to a location where a little bit of fear will stimulate more diligence. They take themselves to a place where they really have to pick up this practice as part of their refuge, and then see what it's like when embracing the meditation object and maintaining it consistently. They often get really great results. We don't have the tigers or the haunted cemeteries, so what do we do? I recommend contemplating—not only death, but also rebirth. As for myself, I have a fear of taking an inauspicious rebirth if I can't be mindful as I'm dying. I have some fear (and I think it's a wholesome and skilful fear) of not being able to patiently endure with painful, wracking feelings if I should have a debilitating disease as I approach death. With that kind of healthy concern, I then feel inspired and determined and I resolve to be consistent with the practice.

We should understand that the limited time we have is our time to really investigate. If we're consistent with our mindfulness, does some samādhi arise? If we're looking for amazing, blissful, radiant states then we won't even recognise the samādhi that we experience. Those periods when there isn't much thinking, and there is a sense of stillness, a sense of coolness, of clarity and tranquillity—that's samādhi! It's in bringing the mind to that, and then resting, and doing this repeatedly that that samādhi becomes the jhāna samādhi that people crave for. But it only comes through laying the causes.

We have our faith in Buddha and our potential. We have the energy that arises both from faith and also from consistent practice. Energy also arises from keeping the precepts. When you don't keep the precepts, you'll experience a lot of remorse, anxiety, and a lack of dignity and self-respect. I also focus on forgiveness, because there's no point dwelling on past mistakes. What's done is already done, though hopefully we do learn from it. I emphasise forgiveness and loving acceptance, because mettā is another way that we empower and energise the mind. With it, we bless the present moment rather than having useless regrets about the past. The past is the past and it really is gone. We all make mistakes, but we have to learn from them. It's when we have mettā for ourselves that we don't make the mistakes again, because we care for others and ourselves. So mettā practice is another way we give rise to energy. Faith also gives rise to energy, and so does consistency of mindfulness practice—not allowing the mind to run off into fantasies, not being distracted by social media, or the news, or gossiping, and so on. Then when energy comes up, that's what becomes samādhi. When the mind's energy settles and collects, when the mind isn't flowing out the sense doors as much, when it isn't flowing out into thoughts about the past or future, but is able to be in the present, then it gets more and more energised. The sense of energy becomes palpable, and that can become rapture and tranquility.

Once we've got faith, energy, mindfulness, and collectedness or samādhi, then we come to wisdom. We practise noticing impermanence,

notice arising and ceasing. That's wisdom practice. Not thinking about the past, not thinking about the future, but trying to stay in the present and to see a thought as a thought with less identification is also wisdom. We see that a thought arises and ceases, and that it's not self. When you pick up the thoughts, follow on with thoughts, or get lost in thoughts, there's no wisdom. When you're able to detach a little and see a thought as a thought, there is mindfulness and wisdom present. It's the same with feelings. I encourage people to bear with them as much as they can and investigate the constant change and flux in feeling. That's awareness of *anicca*, impermanence. And when you're able to detach, it's no longer my knee pain; it's just pain. When mindfulness is good and clear, sometimes it's not even pain. Sometimes it's rapture. Sometimes there are just feelings—pleasant feelings, neutral feelings, painful feelings—all of them arising and ceasing and changing. If we have a closer look with clearer mindfulness, we see that what we took to be one feeling is actually made up of millions of little feelings.

By looking at things as they are, wisdom arises. Mindfulness is sometimes called 'truth discerning awareness', which is a phrase I like. Mindfulness is that which sees things more correctly as they are, with less delusion permeating the experience. In the *Four Foundations of Mindfulness*, Lord Buddha is asking us to see the body as a body, feelings as feelings, thoughts as thoughts, mind objects as mind objects, and dhammas as dhammas. By applying bare awareness this way, our sense of identification falls away. Then we can look closer and closer as if with a magnifying glass and see the characteristics of things with more objectivity. When you don't identify things as being a self, that's wisdom. We can let go of the feeling of being a self—not picking it up, not projecting it, not making *kamma* with it—and just be aware of arising and ceasing, arising and ceasing. There are just feelings—not my feelings; there are just thoughts—not my thoughts. This is mindfulness and wisdom.

If we are diligent in our practice, this gains momentum and our insights get deeper. We can really start to see impermanence. Our sense

of self drops away for periods and we experience a radiant mind that knows the body without perceiving it as a self or thinking that it's a self. So the practices we are doing here are correct. The methods we are using are correct. You already have some mindfulness, some samādhi, and some wisdom; it's through continuing to build momentum that these things become deeper. The little insights become deep insights, and deep insights can become profound insights. Profound insights can become liberating insights. Nobody says it's easy. It requires diligence, consistency, and that we surrender to the path, really embracing the practice wholeheartedly.

When you recognise your potential and your nature a little more clearly, it's important to make a commitment or a resolution to take care of these practices. A Thai phrase that Ajahn Anan uses is 'arya-sap'. It means noble wealth. Often people are chasing external wealth, however Ajahn Anan says noble wealth is our inner wealth. This is the wealth that you take with you when you die. If you're not yet liberated and have to take a rebirth, this is wealth you can take. Ajahn Anan has said quite beautifully, 'No flood, no fire, no storm, and no earthquake can destroy your inner wealth. Even death can't destroy it'. Accumulating this inner wealth should be the focus of our lives. For people who have grown up in materialistic cultures and consumerist societies it's a subtle thing to really understand, but every moment of mindfulness, every period of collectedness, and every little insight is actually wealth. It's noble wealth, and it's the only wealth that you can take with you. This is how the spiritual powers lead to the Deathless.

When the Buddha first taught on the theme of not-self, he gave a discourse in the Deer Park to five monks. This is what we know as the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*. These five monks had been with the bodhisattva when he was practising the extremes of austerity. He was taking less than half a palm of rice per day and said that he became so emaciated his stomach skin was touching the back skin in his body. When he rubbed his arms the hairs would fall off and when he got up to go to the toilet he would fall over. That's how weak he was. He said that

he wasn't allowing himself to enter jhāna even though he was adept. The Bodhisattva had studied with two teachers who had taught him both the form jhānas and the formless jhānas. He had mastery of the first eight jhānas. He had seen that they are conditioned phenomena that degenerate. It would have been incredibly blissful and boundless, and most people would be completely deluded by that. However, the Bodhisattva, with incredible mindfulness and wisdom already present as spiritual powers, could see the jhānas were not the Deathless. Not the unconditioned, or Nibbāna.

Then he experimented with the absolute extreme of patient endurance. I assume he was sitting there doing pain practice. We all know what it's like to have knee pain if we don't move for an hour. Imagine the Bodhisattva sitting all day in the one posture with wracking pains, not to mention hunger pains, the cold, the heat, and all the rest of it. It was heroic striving. And the Bodhisattva did this for six years! He said that it was possible for a spiritual practitioner to have suffered as much in the past (because, as we know, there have been many previous Buddhas) but that it was impossible that any spiritual practitioner had ever suffered more. So we know that it was intense. At a certain point he realised it wasn't working. He decided that he was going to take a bath and have some nourishing food, because he remembered that as a young prince he had entered an absorption sitting under a rose apple tree. It had been the rice plowing ceremony at the beginning of the wet season and he was under the rose apple tree looking at the beautiful colors, the nice ceremony, and the lovely weather. Then he closed his eyes and entered jhāna. (If we cultivate jhānas for lifetimes, it might one day be that easy for us too!)

When the Bodhisattva was looking back on that experience, he realised that it was a harmless and pure kind of mental pleasure. He wondered, 'If I were to combine that kind of concentration with focused investigation, might that be the way that leads to the Deathless'? And he had a direct knowing, 'Yes, that's it'. So he decided to give up the austerity

practice. What happened next is that those five other monks thought he had reverted to luxury! That's the phrase they used, 'Gautama has reverted to luxury'. They were disgusted and they abandoned him. Now the Bodhisattva wandered down, had a bath, and Sujata the milkmaid offered him some milk rice, which he accepted. He also accepted eight bundles of kusha grass for a seat, then as he sat under the bodhi tree he made the aspiration, 'I will not get up until I'm liberated. Let the blood dry up'. Fortunately for us, he was liberated.

After he was liberated, he thought, 'This is subtle, this is profound. Most beings won't understand and this is going to be difficult to teach', and he delighted in the peace of the liberation for a week. At a certain point Brahmā Sahāmpati came down and said, 'Lord, please teach, because there are beings that will understand. They have little dust in their eyes'. You can imagine that the spiritual powers of the newly enlightened Buddha had now fully blossomed. They would have ripened to their fullest potential. His divine eye was extraordinary—in fact, part of his enlightenment experience was reviewing hundreds, perhaps thousands, of past lives. He had incredible divine eye faculties with laser-like precision and a vast capacity to contemplate.

The Buddha scanned the beings of the universe and he saw that their minds were like lotuses. Most were like small buds either in the murky water or down in the mud. It was indeed true that those beings would not understand the teachings on the Middle Way. They would not understand the instructions pertaining to the four Foundations of Mindfulness. But then he saw that there were minds like lotus buds higher up. Some were close to the surface of the water and already beginning to open, and some were above the water. He realised that those were the beings with little dust in their eyes. They would understand. Brahmā Sahāmpati implored, 'These beings are wilting through not hearing the teachings. Please help them! There is the possibility that beings could degenerate if they don't hear this in time'.

The Buddha wondered, 'Who could I teach'? He thought of his first two teachers who had taught him the jhānas, but saw with his divine eye that they had already died and been reborn in very high Brahmā realms as a result of their absorptions. Then out of compassion he thought of his five companions, even though they had rejected and insulted him. He saw their spiritual faculties were ripe enough that he could teach them and they would understand. So he walked from Bodhgaya to the Deer Park near Varanasi where they had moved. When he arrived, they said, 'Here comes that monk who reverted to luxury. Don't greet him, don't pay respects to him'. However, as he approached they saw that he was very radiant. They got up and took his bowl and his robes and made him a seat. They couldn't help themselves.

He was intending to teach them the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, and they said, 'How could you know anything? You reverted to luxury'. He replied, 'Have I ever spoken to you like this before? I have found the Deathless. If you listen to me, I will explain'. They did listen, and Kondañña became a sotāpanna upon hearing the teachings of the Four Noble Truths. In hearing that there is a cause of dukkha, the cause of dukkha can be abandoned, and that the mind can be liberated from dukkha, Kondañña had the insight. 'All that has the nature to arise has the nature to cease'. He entered into the first level of liberation and became the first sotāpanna, that is, a 'stream enterer' possessed of deep insight and now destined to realise complete liberation within seven lives.

In the following days, Lord Buddha taught the sutta on not-self. We too can look at these words and do the suggested contemplations, developing a little more wisdom, and yet when the five monks heard it they became arahants. These monks were like spiritual heroes. They had been practising austerity at a similar level to the Bodhisattva Gautama. They had great patient endurance, incredible resolution, and incredible sincerity. We may read this simple teaching and understand it as a theory, but by the end of the two pages we're not arahants. When Lord Buddha

explained it to these bhikkhus, they were arahants. This is because of the extent to which they'd developed the five spiritual powers. When cultivated, when made much of, they lead to the Deathless and merge in the Deathless.

When you cultivate faith, develop energy, sustain mindfulness, develop insights, and establish concentration, then these become powers. If they are not yet powerful, then even if you hear the correct teaching you won't become enlightened. They need to be at a certain level. That lotus has to be about to blossom. So if we're still down in the mud we've got work to do!



CHAPTER FIVE

Contemplating Not-Self With a Skilful Attitude of Mettā

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The central subject of the *Anattalakkhanna Sutta*, not-self, is a fundamental wisdom teaching and one which is unique to Buddhism. To understand not-self is not merely to grasp an intellectual concept. Rather, it requires proper investigation. We need to consider how we apply the concept and understanding, and with what attitude, which is all a bit tricky.

In Buddhism we have study and we have practice. The two go together because words and concepts are limited; we have to investigate deeply and practice a lot so that we come to a correct understanding of the teachings. The Lord Buddha explained that there are three modes for developing wisdom: through listening, through studying and contemplating the subject matter deeply, and by practising in accordance with what we have considered in order to experience direct insight.

In Hinduism there is an ideal that stems from Brahmanism, namely of becoming one with God, or Atman. It's not a case of abandoning one's attachment to a self-view, but of becoming one with God through one-pointed love and devotion. As far as I can tell, it seems to be a common approach within what are called theistic religions, including Christianity. Lord Buddha's teaching on not-self or anattā, however, was revolutionary in his day. It is a little difficult to understand, as it requires a nuanced view. You have to learn how to reflect on the subject as a representation of ultimate truth, without abandoning conventional truths. You have to practise with conventional reality while working towards gaining insight into deeper reality. This requires patience and sophistication. Having properly understood the concept of not-self, it is not then the case that

* Based on a talk given during a nine-day retreat at Sam Po Buddhist monastery, Cameron Highlands, Malaysia, November 2018.

you no longer have self-view. This is the tricky part and where some people get confused.

Since the feeling of being a 'self' is so persistent, it is good to give some thought to what it is exactly, what its drawbacks are and, importantly, how to begin to let go of our attachment to it. I'll go through what Lord Buddha taught in the sutta, but first let's explore skilful attitudes for contemplating this subject. The following is an excerpt from Bhikkhu Nyanamoli's *The Life of the Buddha*:

At the end of seven days, after emerging from that concentration, the Blessed One surveyed the world with the eye of an Enlightened One. As he did so he saw many beings burning with the many fires and consumed with the many fevers born of lust, of hate, and of delusion. Knowing the meaning of this, he then uttered this exclamation:

This world is anguished, being exposed to contact,
 Even what the world calls self is in fact ill;
 For no matter upon what it conceives (its conceits of self)
 The fact is ever other than that.
 The world, whose being is to become other,
 Is committed to being, is exposed to being, relishes only being,
 Yet what it relishes brings fear, and what it fears is pain.
 Now this holy life is lived to abandon suffering.

Lord Buddha is saying here that what the world calls 'self' is an illness. Because of our attachment to it, we are exposed to sense contact. We have a body and a mind. We think it's a self, we grasp at it, and then we have sense contact. Sense contact is always pleasant, neutral, or unpleasant, but even the pleasant constantly changes. As Lord Buddha explains it, even the pleasant is suffering because it comes with the inevitability that we will be separated from it. We will grieve its passing and long for it.

After another week under the Bodhi Tree, contemplating what he

had realised and enjoying the bliss of liberation, the Buddha made this observation:

Seclusion is happiness for one contented,
 By whom the Dhamma is learnt, and who has seen,
 And friendliness towards the world is happiness
 For him who is forbearing with living beings.
 Disinterest in the world is happiness
 For him that has surmounted sense desires.
 But to be rid of the conceit 'I am'—
 That is the greatest happiness of all.

These eight lines have a profound meaning, which is to be expected. After all, Lord Buddha had just become enlightened and had meditated for a week under the Bodhi Tree, having profound experiences, insights, and realisations.

In this paragraph we find some interesting suggestions about attitude. Lord Buddha states that seclusion is happiness for one who is contented. Ajahn Chah once said, 'Wealth depends on contentment. If you are content, you are wealthy'. He also said on another occasion that he'd never met a truly wealthy person. By that time he was famous and of course he did know people with lots of money. But he had observed that he only ever met people who still think that they don't have enough. 'I've never met a wealthy person', he said, 'I've only met people who want more'!

Next we have the statement that friendliness towards the world is happiness for one who is forbearing with living beings. This is a valuable suggestion of the attitude needed for contemplating not-self. Contentment is a foundation. The point about forbearing and friendliness suggests that an attitude and practice of loving-kindness is then appropriate. Such a practice starts with one's own conventional 'self' and then includes others. This is a necessary foundation upon which we can begin to contemplate not-self.

Self-view is very powerful. Lord Buddha considered not teaching about not-self and Nibbāna because he thought that people would be incapable of understanding. We are so committed to perceiving things in terms of 'self' and 'other'. It's as ubiquitous to our worldview as water is to a fish. We simply can't see it. While perceiving everything in terms of self, it's very difficult to see and experience not-self. It can be done with training—that's what Lord Buddha teaches—but how? You can't take the approach of trying to destroy the self-view, as tempting as that may seem.

When I was a young man there was a guy I'd done some meditation retreats with who decided that he was going to 'practice not-self'. He wasn't going to be a self. He'd studied it and was determined to take this on. He said, 'Self isn't real. It's a delusion', and it was one he wasn't going to indulge anymore. Sadly, he actually went quite crazy trying this approach. That's the kind of thing that can happen if you do this with the wrong understanding or wrong attitude. You can't destroy the self. Rather, we need to accept it's a kind of illness that we have. We need to consider how to live with the illness while we treat it. This requires a compassionate and patient attitude.

When we acknowledge that self-view is a kind of illness, we don't generate contempt for it. We don't need to hate or resent it. Instead we need to use compassion. If your friend had cancer, there'd be no point hating the cancer. It would be better to have compassion for the person with the cancer. I find this a much more skilful attitude. We know we have the conceit of 'I, me, mine', and we're very attached to it. Given that, we have to steward the healthy functioning of the self to the degree that we can. The healthy self is a self that knows contentment, knows how to be humble, generous, and kind. It's a forgiving, patient self. In a way we train ourselves to become more like devas. This is the appropriate type of foundation for deepening our insight.

I once asked my teacher Ajahn Anan whether devas could get enlightened. He replied, 'Only devas get enlightened'. His point was that

even humans who develop insight have a deva-like mind at the time of the insight. Because of this he was confident that devas could liberate themselves, so long as they were inclined to practice. There are occasions mentioned in the suttas where the Buddha taught devas and they attained to the paths and stages of liberation. And Lord Buddha himself sometimes described his teachings as ‘leading to heaven and beyond’. If the mind of a person with deep insight is on the level of a deva, this means they have mettā, a present and functioning conscience, a respect for others, an awareness of kamma, and fear of wrongdoing. Goodness is well established in such a person. From that foundation, people can have insights into not-self.

The four brahmavihāra practices are also important tools. These are loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity. They are means to develop a healthy, humble self-view that becomes a foundation for contemplating not-self. So don’t try to destroy the self. We don’t hate it or have contempt for it. We should, however, be fed up with our experience of limitation, because there is something much better. It is a bit tricky and there’s a lot of nuance to explore here, but basically we should be world-weary. We should be fed up with being pushed around by greed, hatred, and delusion based on ignorance. But we have to employ great care and patience to channel this energy of being fed up. We should channel it into skilful study and practice, not into anger. If you’ve tried this you’ll know it doesn’t work!

So be careful. Don’t aim resentment at your conventional self-view. Instead, you have to channel energy into skilful effort and practices to weaken its grip. That’s what works. That’s what will help you have insight into not-self. Slowly weakening that delusion undermines our attachment to it.

If you have the chance to visit an enlightened master, you can also observe that they still have a personality. When they become an arahant they don’t become like a pristine, white glacier. They don’t coldly project

the judgement, 'I destroyed it all. I got rid of my conceit. Now you should do that too'. In fact, they are often very humorous. I've seen my teacher slap his thigh laughing when something funny happened. So conventionally speaking, there are still funny things and great masters still have quite distinct personalities. But they know their personality is not the truth. Their liberation isn't in the personality. The liberation is in their realisation of the unconditioned—that which knows conditions as conditions without being confused by them.

It's also curious to note that many of the Lord Buddha's teachings to those who come to with questions start with the lines 'When the courteous and amiable speech was over...'. Basically he would have a chat with people. He might have asked, 'How are you doing? How are the crops? How's the kingdom?' before teaching them the Dhamma. Oftentimes people had profound realisations after chatting and then listening respectfully. The Buddha didn't scold them for their delusion the moment they sat down! So we're not going to try to destroy the self-view. We shouldn't hate it or have contempt for it. Neither should we overly indulge it. Instead of trying to kill or eradicate self-view, we simply try to see the delusion of it and let go of our attachment to seeing life and the world, the body, and the mind in this way.

The tricky part of the Middle Way is encouraging a healthy functioning of the self while slowly humbling it and uprooting its attachments, its vanity, and its conceit. It takes time, but it can definitely be done. Keeping the precepts and being generous are powerful methods, because we can easily become identified with our wealth. So give of yourself, give away what you can, and practise giving happiness to others. Empowering others is a very effective training for us. We learn the happiness that comes from seeing others happy. This is *muditā*. People have a tendency to be happy when they have personal victories, but that's very dangerous because the self can get bigger and bigger. It's good to have personal victories in areas that are important, but it's also good to enable or empower others at the same time. We do this to become humble, not to feed our vanity and conceit.

Now let's take a look at the benefits of mettā practice, before we get to the sutta on not-self.

Discourse on the Advantages of Loving-Kindness

(AN 11.15; trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Pub.)

'Bhikkhus, when the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness has been pursued, developed, and cultivated, made a vehicle and basis, carried out, consolidated, and properly undertaken, eleven benefits are to be expected. What eleven?

(1) One sleeps well; (2) one awakens happily; (3) one does not have bad dreams; (4) one is pleasing to human beings; (5) one is pleasing to spirits; (6) deities protect one; (7) fire, poison, and weapons do not injure one; (8) one's mind quickly becomes concentrated; (9) one's facial complexion is serene; (10) one dies unconfused; and (11) if one does not penetrate further, one fares on to the brahma world.

When, bhikkhus, the liberation of the mind by loving-kindness has been repeatedly pursued, developed, and cultivated, made a vehicle and basis, carried out, consolidated, and properly undertaken, these eleven benefits are to be expected.

This is quite a short sutta, but a suitable and important one. Let me tell you about a couple of related incidents. Last year a Sri Lankan monk stayed at my monastery, Anandagiri, and was bitten by a snake. It was a little green viper. He stood on it during the night. He's a very good monk and I'm sure you'll be inspired by what he did next. He went in and cleaned up his kuti so that if he died he wouldn't be leaving behind a mess! Remarkably, he had no symptoms. It seems that the snake bit him but did not inject its venom. He later told me that he had been cultivating a lot of mettā while he was in that part of the forest. It seems to be the case that he experienced the benefit of number seven—'fire, poison, and sword cannot touch him'. I do think these things are real.

Here's a second curious incident. About twelve years ago, a friend and I were in Ladakh in northern India and at that time there was some serious flooding and landslides. Sadly a lot of people were buried alive in the mud, in their sleep. We were staying by Lake Tsomoriri, a large and beautiful turquoise-coloured lake. It's in a remote part of Ladakh, close to the Tibetan border and at close to five thousand metres elevation. I had really wanted to go and meditate next to a Himalayan lake, as I was curious as to what it would be like. We also attended the Amitabha Pureland puja at the local Tibetan monastery on some evenings.

At the time we didn't know that it rarely rains in Ladakh. It usually only snows in the cold season and the snow slowly melts as the weather warms up. This time, however, it rained heavily through the night. We had seen impressive storm clouds and my friend took pictures of them, but we had no idea that the rain might be a problem. Coming from Southeast Asia where heavy rain is common, we thought nothing of it.

We'd planned to attend an event the following day where Tibetan nomads would be competing in an archery contest on horseback. A Tibetan friend who lives in Australia was there with a group of her students as well. She had encouraged us to attend the event, which happens only once a year. It was an exciting idea, and the kind of thing you might only see once in your life. But I had this irritated feeling in my heart. It's hard to describe, other than to say I had an itching heart. The thought kept coming to me, 'You have to go! You have to go! You have to go!' It was irritating, unsettling and baffling, because normally I can manage some well-being and serenity.

I didn't want to disappoint my friend by not showing up. We'd also gone to the effort of travelling all that way and hiring a car, and then gotten over altitude sickness and headaches too. But I eventually said to my travelling companion, 'François, I've got a really strong feeling that we should leave'.

He replied, 'Me too! I have that feeling too, but I didn't want to say anything'!

We decided to leave the following day, however we had prepaid for both our accommodation and food. When I brought it up, François said, 'No problem, let's just get out of here!'

My Tibetan friend was also committed to doing some eye treatments for the nomads there. Many people get cataracts since the sunlight is so bright at that altitude, so she was giving away Polaroid sunglasses and treating their eyes. She'd also brought some Indian doctors along with her. She was a bit miffed, and asked, 'Why are you leaving? The big show is tomorrow'. But we apologised, said our goodbyes, and left. As it happened, only two hours later, the road was closed by a very big mudslide! Bridges also got washed out.

The mountains in this part of the Himalayas are not solid rock. Two continents have crashed together over time, forming mountains made largely of dust and boulders piled very high. There's no tree cover because of the heavy snow in winter. So if it rains, there's instantly a lot of mud. We later heard that our Tibetan friend's group of forty students spent a few days walking directly up the mountainside and down steep inclines into adjacent valleys until they found another road out. They were without sleeping bags and had a challenging time climbing out of that place.

In hindsight I personally believe we had experienced the benefit of the devas' protection, benefit number six for a person who cultivates loving-kindness. We both had the feeling to get out of there so strongly. Where did that come from? I believe that it most probably came from a benevolent unseen being who knew what was about to happen. I believe there are many benefits to cultivating loving-kindness, including preventing disasters and having a long opportunity to keep practising. But enough stories! Let's get to the sutta on not-self.

Of all the benefits of cultivating mettā, the aspect that I really wish to focus upon for our purposes is the fact that it helps to keep our attitude healthy by lessening irritation and aversion. It also inspires and nourishes

us. Because once we genuinely care, we will be motivated to work towards establishing a more dependable foundation of well-being. We become determined to uproot the causes of suffering and lay the causes for true peace. And because mettā practice supports a mind to become more concentrated or collected, this in turn supports our development of wisdom and insight.

I am not suggesting here that the mettā practice alone is what will lead to an insight into not-self. But rather, that it will help support and ripen qualities of mind so that such an insight can occur. A healthy attitude, a foundation of well-being, and a capacity to be still enough in order to investigate the body and mind more closely in meditative discipline are what is needed. When it comes to the task of contemplating and investigating the not-self characteristic of the body and mind, we should see mettā practice as a necessary preliminary practice. An important part of the foundation which we must rely upon. And as a quality that will help give the mind the steadiness and stability it needs for further investigation.

Let's have a look at the sutta now to get a sense of the basic teaching to understand the concept and to see what Lord Buddha is pointing to. In a subsequent talk we will examine some of the ways that we can investigate the nature of the body. We will also consider the arising and ceasing of feelings in a disciplined manner that can lead to penetrative insights into not-self.

If you recall, Lord Buddha first realised his liberation and then considered who he would teach. He thought of his first two teachers (those who had taught him the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth jhānas), but saw that they had already passed away and been reborn in a Brahmā world. Since he couldn't teach them, he thought of the five monks he had practised austerities with. He saw that they did have spiritual powers or spiritual faculties that were developed enough to realise the Dhamma. So he went to them and taught the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* on

the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Aññākondañña had the insight that all that has the nature to arise has the nature to cease, and he attained to the first level of enlightenment, which is referred to as stream entry.

On a subsequent day Lord Buddha taught the five bhikkhus the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-Self. (*Anattalakkhana Sutta*, SN 22.59. This translation is from the Amaravati Chanting Book – Vol. Two):

Form, bhikkhus, is not-self. If, bhikkhus, form were self, then form would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to form, ‘Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus’. But since, bhikkhus, form is not-self, form therefore leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to form, ‘Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus’.

It’s true, isn’t it? We might wish that we were younger and will it to happen, but we don’t actually have much control over it do we? If you get sick, can you just wish that the illness away? You can’t, and I can’t wish the hair back onto my balding head either! The sutta continues:

Feeling is not-self. If, bhikkhus, feeling were self, feeling would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to feeling, ‘Let my feeling be thus, let my feeling not be thus’. But since, bhikkhus, feeling is not-self, feeling therefore leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to feeling, ‘Let my feeling be thus, let my feeling not be thus’.

We can investigate the peaceful mind states that we have in meditation. Are we able to hold on to them? Or do we only experience such peaceful states briefly? How often does a peaceful mind state degenerate before being replaced by a painful one? Or have we experienced a painful mind state becoming a peaceful one? We can’t will the feeling to be the way we like when we like. What about knee pain when we’re sitting—can

we decide that it goes away? How about arthritis? Can we decide to no longer have these painful feelings?

Perception is not-self, bhikkhus. If, bhikkhus, perception were self, perception would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to perception, 'Let my perception be thus, let my perception not be thus'. But since, bhikkhus, perception is not-self, perception therefore leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to perception, 'Let my perception be thus, let my perception not be thus'.

The way we perceive things is conditioned by past memories, past experiences, and very deep impressions. We can't just decide to perceive all the people around us as *devas* and appreciate their beautiful qualities. When you see certain people you might have an aversive reaction and with certain others you feel drawn to them. It's the same with how people perceive the weather. On grey, chilly mornings the mind can become depressed, whereas it can become happy and exuberant when it's sunny. We're not in control of these things. Sometimes you want to be kind and you want to be good to people, but then you meet somebody and you just don't like them. They haven't done anything wrong and you really wish you could like them, but you don't. It's possible that you have had some conflict in past-life relationships and there's an intuitive awareness saying, 'Oh no, him again!' But we wouldn't choose to have that perception. We would ideally have impartial loving-kindness for everybody. Forgiveness practice plays an important role in not developing more of these grudges in *samsāra*, but sometimes we have to recognise that we can't love everybody from the get-go.

It's possible to give yourself a hard time as a result of such an aversive reaction to someone. You might perceive yourself as not good enough. But if you could see the really big picture, it might be the case that you're doing fine. In fact, you don't know how much you've improved. You don't know how bad you used to be! We can't see exactly where we are because

we don't see the big picture. Maybe you give yourself a hard time and you try hard to be sincere, but there's a part of you that sneers at yourself and says, 'Not good enough!' It's unhelpful and very painful, but sometimes we can't stop it. The way we perceive ourselves can be painful. We don't have mastery over it yet. Our perceptions of ourselves, others, or occurrences within the world, are largely influenced by past habits.

So we perceive things according to our memories and according to our experiences. We perceive them in a certain way, which is largely due to the way we've perceived in the past. We can be mindful of them. We can try not to let them overcome or overpower the mind, but we can't control the way we perceive things. The Buddha continues to the next aggregate:

Mental formations are not-self. If, bhikkhus, mental formations were self, mental formations would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to mental formations, 'Let my mental formations be thus, let my mental formations not be thus'. But since, bhikkhus, mental formations are not-self, mental formations therefore lead to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to mental formations, 'Let my mental formations be thus, let my mental formations not be thus'.

I often instruct people not to pick up thoughts about the future. Deal with the future when it comes. Even with this instruction, many people find that the mind runs off into the future and they can't really stop it. The same goes for the past. There's a practice I do of noting how many times I think a thought when I get a bit fed up with it. I give myself the message, 'Yes, I heard it the first hundred times'. But you can't just say, 'Don't ever think that thought again'. The mind is particularly stubborn, because if you try not to think that thought again, you'll probably find that you'll think it more! You have to see a thought as a thought and not identify with it. You can't forbid thoughts. It doesn't work. We come to understand their nature, but everybody feels tormented by their

thought formations at times. Mental formations do lead to affliction.

If you could, you would only choose to have kind thoughts, compassionate thoughts, and wise thoughts. It can happen that we come to meditate with a fairly peaceful mind. We intend and expect to have a peaceful meditation, but after five minutes an unwholesome fantasy swells up in the mind. So we have to train our mental formations skilfully, but we do not yet have mastery over them.

Consciousness is not-self. If, bhikkhus, consciousness were self, consciousness would not lead to affliction, and one might be able to say in regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus'. But since, bhikkhus, consciousness is not-self, consciousness therefore leads to affliction, and one is not able to say in regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus, let my consciousness not be thus'.

I remember times as a young monk when a small thing could trigger a depression that would last three or four days. It was frustrating because the thing that triggered it never justified my becoming so dejected. I would assume that it was kamma operating in the mind, some kamma that had to be worked through. When you want to have energy for practice, to be diligent and consistent, and you want to put forth a lot of effort, a depressed mind is a very difficult thing to work with. It's one kind of consciousness. All mind states change. Even true masters can only master them to a degree. They are subject to the law of nature.

Consciousness is complex to understand. We have ear consciousness, eye consciousness, nose, tongue, body, and mental consciousnesses. We can have a radiant mind state. That is, the sense of brightness and happiness that comes with some samādhi. That's a radiant consciousness, but we can't will that into being. It's the same with depression. If the mind falls into a depression and there's a sense of gloomy, grey heaviness in the heart and in the mind, we can't just will that away either. We can't simply decide

on our state of consciousness. If you could, you would enter jhāna at will, when the mind that is absorbed into bright radiant states. Most of us can't absorb into these so readily. Even if we could, it's still not-self, because it keeps degenerating and the practitioner has to establish the mind in samādhi again. That was the Bodhisattva's insight, that even the jhānas have causes and conditions and are not permanent. We can't have the state of the infinite base of space constantly. One has to keep generating that conscious state. Therefore, it's not dependable, and because of that it leads to affliction.

The Buddha continues:

'What do you think about this, bhikkhus? Is form (feeling..., perception..., mental formations..., consciousness...) permanent or impermanent?'

'Impermanent, Venerable Sir'.

'But is that which is impermanent painful or pleasurable?'

'Painful, Venerable Sir'.

'But is it fit to consider that which is impermanent and painful, of a nature to change, as "This is mine, I am this, this is my self"?''

'It is not, Venerable Sir'.

'Wherefore, bhikkhus, whatever form (feeling..., perception..., mental formations..., consciousness...) there is, past, future, present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, whether it is near or far, all forms should, by means of right wisdom, be seen as it really is, thus: "This is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self"'. .

Notice how Lord Buddha masterfully, like the spiritual physician that he was, went about treating the illness of self-view. The self-view is a delusion coming from ignorance. The Buddha had the bhikkhus look directly at this delusion with mindfulness and wisdom, so they could see through it. We all grasp at these phenomena and take them to be a self, but when you look at them one by one and investigate sincerely, there's

no self to be found! What we think is a self is actually the mind deludedly grasping a conglomerate of things that function together.

Seeing in this way, bhikkhus, the wise noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, becomes disenchanted with feeling, becomes disenchanted with perception, becomes disenchanted with mental formations, becomes disenchanted with consciousness. Becoming disenchanted, their passions fade away; with the fading of passion the heart is liberated; with liberation comes the knowledge that it is liberated and they know: ‘Destroyed is birth, the Holy Life has been lived out, done is what had to be done, there is no more coming into any state of being’.

Thus spoke the Blessed One. Delighted, the five bhikkhus rejoiced in what the Lord had said. Moreover, while this discourse was being delivered, the minds of the five bhikkhus were freed from the defilements, through clinging no more.

That’s a really wonderful and awesome declaration: ‘Becoming disenchanted, their passions fade away. With the fading of passion the heart is liberated’. It’s so simple!

‘Disenchanted’ is an interesting word. In Pali it’s *nibbidā*. ‘Passions fading’ in Pali is *virāga*. There are some important things to acknowledge about that process. We are engrossed, fascinated, and deluded by our bodies and our minds. When things go wrong we like to blame the government or the weather. Or it’s the neighbours’ fault, the kids’ fault, or the dog’s fault. We don’t often see that it’s our grasping that’s the fault. It’s our attachment that’s the fault. When we become more mindful and wiser, we understand that. We see, ‘It’s my attachment. It’s thinking I’m a self and my liking and disliking—that’s the real problem’.

While most people don’t come to a Dhamma talk wanting to hear about dispassion, it’s very important to understand. With the arising of

true dispassion towards worldly things, the mind becomes more and more peaceful, tranquil, and content within itself. It sobers up and the burdensome weight of delusion lessens. With weariness the mind turns inwards, rather than constantly flowing out into the world. Dispassion restrains greedy and angry energies, and their presence and power in the mind is also diminished.

With a sense of dispassion, you get fed up with all of that. This is wholesome. This is growth in wisdom *pāramī*. Having a sense of being weary and fed up doesn't mean to say that you get angry and depressed or bitter and cynical. You have to understand that spiritual weariness is a wholesome thing. You no longer think that you're going to be able to get *samsāra* right or in order. You're not going to be able to arrange it in a suitable way. You understand that conditions are flawed. They are painful and they are impermanent. You see that you have to let go of your attachment to them. That's when you become disenchanted with all of the tastes, the sounds and the sights, because you know they only give you so much pleasure, and that pleasure doesn't last.

Being attached to pleasure, you don't just get the pleasure. You get all the pain that's associated with the body and the mind as well. With dispassion you come to the sense that it's not worth it. It's not a good deal. Then you develop the intuition that there's something better, and the confidence that you are capable of experiencing something more dependable, more satisfactory. This process of being disenchanted and weary is often what brings people to meditation retreats. This is what brings people to their meditation cushion. Suffering is one of the proximate causes for the arising of faith. If you don't have much suffering, you don't get around to investigating spiritual refuges, unless perhaps you're born into a spiritually rich culture that still has some integrity. But for most people, it's when life gets painful that they start to seek spiritual refuge.

Becoming disenchanted means that you don't go chasing after sense

pleasures anymore. That's what allows the passion to weaken and gives rise to *virāga*. You experience weariness. You spend more time alone. You spend more time meditating. You restrain and refine your *śīla*. By not acting on greed and not acting on hatred, they are starved. The thickness of the *kilesas* that obscures your capacity to see things truthfully gets thinner, the darkness of the greed and hatred becomes lighter. When there's only a thin veil of greed and hatred, then the spiritual powers—faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom—have the capacity to throw the *kilesas* off the mind. You can explode them out of the mind. Becoming weary is actually an important part of the process.

Ajahn Anan says the beginning stages of practice can feel like you're in a burning house. Everything's on fire and you don't have anywhere to go. But seeing the *dukkha* clearly is really important, because that's what inclines the mind to want to go inwards to the only place where there isn't *dukkha*. The only place where there isn't *dukkha* is your own purified mind, and to go there requires letting go of your attachment.

Ajahn Sumedho says, 'That which knows suffering isn't suffering'. And Ajahn Anan has said, 'It's through patiently enduring those painful feelings, patiently enduring while mindfully knowing the unsatisfactoriness, that it becomes possible to see the burning house, but not be in the middle of it burning'. The part of the mind that knows this *dukkha* is cool. Our mindfulness may start out a bit weak, but through consistent practice it becomes strong. Strong mindfulness becomes consistently strong mindfulness, which eventually becomes what is called *mahā-sati*. *Mahā-sati* has the power to destroy the *kilesas*.

The more you contemplate these things, the more you will experience your inner refuge—a more dependable tranquillity, serenity, and clarity. And you start to see that as you begin to let go of craving and grasping, there is less pain. Dispassion and weariness allow the mind to come inwards, because it lets go of its fascination with outer things. Then it's able to reel itself in, and when it does so it has more energy. Its energy

no longer dissipates out the six sense doors. This is the second of the five spiritual powers. Your faith also deepens, as you understand this practice really does work.

When you see that worldly stuff isn't worth grasping at or identifying with, you get fed up with it. You develop a sense of weariness with the sense contact coming from the sense bases, feelings constantly changing, and having a body and mind that are constantly exposed to all of this contact. You become weary of praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and ill-repute, and pleasure and pain. However, when the mind is trained in wise contemplation and meditation, then your mindfulness increases and you have more concentration. So while one part of the mind is becoming disenchanted and weary, another part of the mind—'that which knows, that which is aware'—is actually becoming more serene and even blissful. It's a little difficult to describe, but diligent meditators will know exactly what I am talking about. You might be very weary and dispassionate and at the same time be the happiest you've ever been!

In general I prefer to give this talk on the Buddha's teaching on not-self around the two-thirds point of a nine-day retreat. Because people will have usually experienced some weariness and yet at the same time, due to the amount of consistent meditation practice that has occurred, will also be experiencing some periods of deep peace. It is easier to understand this teaching and the process of realisation when you have an intimate experience of feeling such weariness, and of resting in a peaceful quality of awareness that knows it. And through trusting and abiding in this peaceful knowing, some experience of letting go can also occur. When we have the experiences of knowing the unsatisfactory nature of conditions, and bear with this patiently until we are able to let go of some attachment, we can then experience some very deep peace. This leads us to feel confidence in the path of practice. Knowing dukkha, abandoning its cause through practising right mindfulness and right concentration, and then experiencing the cessation of suffering—at first this will occur in moments, and then for periods. Eventually the mind will realise a

quality of true peace from letting go such that it will be liberated from all suffering. And that liberation will be totally secure. Experiencing these things directly for oneself is more likely to occur within the context of a silent retreat where a lot of practice is occurring.

All of this is a process. Becoming weary, you have to put energy into cultivating your spiritual powers, because if you want something better you have to work to establish that which is better in the mind. Other people have done it—The Buddha and the Ariya Sangha—but we have to do it for ourselves. That's when it becomes an inner refuge. Your spiritual qualities become your own inner Buddha, your own inner Sangha. You become one who is practising skilfully, practising rightly. The Dhamma is functioning in your mind. Then you experience what it's like to have good sati. Being able to detach, being able to see things as objects, as feelings, as a body. By doing this more consistently, the passions fade, and through their fading the mind is ultimately liberated.

It's good to have confidence in where the practice leads. The five spiritual faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom work together. They support and embolden one another. You cultivate them all at the same time. Skilful meditation supports this process. Once the five faculties have become powers, and once those powers are powerful enough, the day will come where you will be able to say, 'Done is what had to be done. There is no more coming into being'. You will have become one of the Noble Ones. So I encourage you to meditate a lot. It will help you to move beyond weariness and dispassion into deeper peace, and eventually to complete liberation, just as it did for Lord Buddha and the first five disciples in the Deer Park over 2,500 years ago.



CHAPTER SIX

Contemplating Not-Self with Firm Resolve

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This chapter has been adapted from a commentary of the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* I gave at the historical Deer Park, Isipathana Migadaya, near Varanasi in India. This is the site where Lord Buddha originally taught the sutta to the first five disciples. To show our respect to the Lord Buddha's words, the group chanted the full sutta in Pali before the talk.

The previous day, we had gone through the First Sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, in the place where it was taught. It covers the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to both chant and then study the teaching there, as well as to hear other groups of pilgrims also chanting it in the original language it was taught in. To review it a little, dukkha (suffering) is to be known. Lord Buddha understood it, he knew it. The cause of dukkha, craving, is to be abandoned, and Lord Buddha abandoned it. The truth of the cessation of all suffering is to be realised. Lord Buddha realised it. It is to be realised through cultivating the Eightfold Path which Lord Buddha cultivated to perfection.

During this teaching of the Middle Way, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, Aññakondañña attained to stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment. And so at that point the Sangha was officially born into the world. The Dhamma as a body of teachings was also officially born into the world on that occasion, now that the first sermon had been taught. A short time later Lord Buddha taught the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*, the sutta on not-self. On that occasion, all five of the pañcavaggiyā as they are called became arahants. These were the five

samanas who had been the companions of the Bodhisattva when he was striving through practising austerities.

Lord Buddha taught that form, feeling, perception, mental formations, and consciousness are not-self. If they were self, we could say, 'Let them be thus, let them not be thus'. But since we are unable to say, 'Let them be thus, let them not be thus', they are not-self, and they lead to affliction. When we think about the way the Lord Buddha addressed the bhikkhus the message seems kind of obvious. But what is curious about the unenlightened state is that we don't actually think about it. So this is precisely the problem or the challenge that we worldly beings face. It seems that we're born with the tendency to grasp at things as being a self. Our parents and teachers do the best they can, but they are all also interpreting their own experience in terms of 'self'.

When you have a pain you identify with it very personally. You say, 'Mum, my belly aches', 'Dad, I fell over', or 'My knee hurts'. We assume that our bodies are a self. But Lord Buddha was asking the bhikkhus to investigate whether they had any control over their bodies. Think about it. Can you stop your body ageing? Can you make it younger? Once it's sick, can you will it to be healthy?

The body is a phenomenon that we all have. We have to live with it and steward its healthy functioning, but we have very little control over what really happens with it. It will grow, even if we don't want it to. It will age, even if we'd rather it didn't. We can try to take care of our health impeccably, but at some point it's still going to get sick. We might not want to die, but that's not our choice to make.

When my students and I visited the burning ghats in Varanasi there must have been about fifteen or twenty bodies burning around us. Between two and three hundred corpses are cremated there daily. The Hindu tradition is to burn the corpse within twenty-four hours, so all of the bodies we saw were recently alive. Many of those people would

have been old and may have even felt like it was their time to go. But some of them would not have known that they were going to die when they did. This is good to consider.

A Teaching Buddha has had a liberating insight and is no longer affected by ignorance and delusion. Thus he can say something that seems quite obvious, but that we would never work out for ourselves because we have so many assumptions based on ignorance. Ignorance is not knowing. Delusion is misapprehending. The reason we don't recognise the truth is that we are deluded. It's important to understand this. We need to recognise the power of our greed, hatred, and delusion. We understand having a lot of greed isn't good. It causes ourselves and others to suffer. We can also see that aversion, anger, irritation, and hatred aren't good. They cause us stress and upset people around us. But we don't actually give much thought to delusion. Yet we should, because it's the root of the problem. We start by deludedly perceiving the body and feelings as a self, and then the whole calamity unfolds. You have to deal with all the things that you would like to experience and all the things that you would not like to experience. When you get the things that you like to experience, you're happy—but only for a while. When you don't get to experience the things that you want, you have irritation. There's a pertinent line that we often chant: 'Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair'. This is a part of the characteristic of dukkha. It's inevitable in life, if you think you are a self. It's part of your inheritance. It comes with the package!

At the Ganges, we saw a Brahman puja that has been performed for thousands of years in honour of the goddess of the Ganges River and in honour of Lord Shiva. One of the reasons that particular burning ghat is considered sacred is because Hindus believe that Lord Shiva once left his earring there. The human qualities of the Hindu gods can be quite endearing. If you have a theistic worldview, then the fact that an all-powerful God left his earring somewhere is incredibly significant. The place becomes sanctified. Locals also believe that the Ganges River is

actually flowing out of the hair of Lord Shiva. The Hindus believe that if you have your ashes sprinkled into that river then you will be instantly transported to live with Shiva in the Brahmā realm.

The overarching characteristic of a theistic worldview is the idea of self and other. You may be a fairly evolved spiritual person, but if you're still thinking in terms of this 'self and other', you will have to contend with the self-view—a view that is limiting and problematic and which is a cause of suffering. One type of belief to overcome such limitation and suffering is that you can pray to a big beautiful 'Self' in the sky, and then fuse with that to become one with the Godhead. A lot of what you hear about in the teachings of the Hindu tradition, the Vedic tradition, is aimed at becoming one with the 'Supreme Self', realising your 'Deeper Self', or actualising the 'True Self'. But it's all still bound up with the idea of a self. It may be the case that Shiva is a Brahmā deity with boundless radiance and loving-kindness, and it may well be that if you develop samādhi and think of Shiva with loving devotion that you could be reborn in his presence. But you will not yet have liberated yourself from samsāra, the conditioned realms, the cycle of birth and death.

The problem, Lord Buddha explained to us in many suttas, is that devas and deities eventually pass on from their heavenly state. He taught that there is no permanent state, not even in heaven, and that even the very high beings that humans consider to be gods don't get to stay there forever. Given the Lord Buddha's teaching on kamma, I personally do believe that deities exist. People with amazing samādhi and incredible generosity cultivate a lot of virtue and may be reborn in illustrious, radiant states where they possess a lot of power. Having had a lot of power previously, having given power to others, having given wealth to others, and having given opportunity to others, they then receive a similar benefit. But Lord Buddha explained that all that is of the nature to arise is of the nature to cease. Every single conditioned thing arises, stays for some time, and ceases. Including

deities. This is why Lord Buddha points us to ‘the unconditioned’.

When Lord Buddha taught about *anattā*, not-self, he was pointing to something superior that he had realised. He addressed ignorance and delusion directly. When ignorance and delusion fall away, what remain are clarity, presence of mind, and mindfulness with clear comprehension. This allows us to see things the way they really are. Without Lord Buddha pointing out the path to this realisation, we wouldn’t be able to work it out for ourselves. So we’re very fortunate indeed. He was like a physician who said, ‘This is an illness. Stop doing these things that feed the illness and start paying proper attention!’

When we don’t feed ignorance or delusion and when we cultivate a lot of mindfulness, clear seeing arises. The ‘dust in our eyes’ is being washed away. Obviously these five spiritual warriors whom the Buddha first taught were capable of the most incredible insights and had remarkable *samādhi* too. They had very little dust in their eyes and so were liberated upon hearing the teaching.

Significantly, the next teaching on not-self after this one was the Fire Sermon. Many of the fire-worshipping ascetics to whom it was taught would surely have had amazing *samādhi* too. But even so, the Buddha needed to point out the fact that there is no self. He pointed out that we’re habitually doing something with these phenomena—the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness. We perceive them as a self. We interpret them as a self. But when you really have a look at these phenomena using investigative discipline, you can see that you don’t have much control over your body at all. The same goes for feelings, perceptions, and the rest.

The Lord Buddha further pointed out that these phenomena are impermanent and therefore painful, and that it’s not fit to consider them as ‘This is mine, I am this, this is myself’. This is really important. It’s an ultimate truth that is logical, rational, or scientific in nature. It

holds true whether you investigate your form or the bhikkhus' forms. They are all not-self. What the Lord Buddha taught is true of the past and the future—no matter how gross or how subtle, inferior or superior, whatever form, regardless of how people deludedly see it, is not-self. 'This is not mine. I am not this. This is not myself'. The same is equally true for feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.

Just consider the habit we all have of identifying with our thoughts. It can be easier to observe in other people. Sometimes really nice people can judge themselves harshly and it seems so unfortunate. You might find yourself saying, 'Why would you think that? Why do you do that to yourself'? But we can end up doing the same thing too! We all get really deluded by our thoughts and identify with them. The good ones, the bad ones, the sensible ones, and the neurotic ones. Lord Buddha taught that none of them are 'me' or 'mine'. He went on to say,

Seeing in this way, bhikkhus, the wise noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with mental formations, disenchanted with consciousness. Becoming disenchanted, their passions fade away; with the fading of passion the heart is liberated; with liberation there comes the knowledge: 'It is liberated', and they know: 'Destroyed is birth, the Holy Life has been lived out, done is what had to be done, there is no more coming into any state of being'.

This is one of the most amazing declarations in the whole Sutta Pitaka, said to contain 84,000 Dhamma verses. If we were to summarise how to get enlightened in one paragraph, it would be right here, beginning with becoming disenchanted!

'Disenchanted' is a very interesting word to consider. I would translate the Pali word 'nibbidā' slightly differently—as weariness, becoming weary of something. Another way I like to consider 'nibbidā' is meaning 'not being fascinated anymore'. When you recognise that

something is burdensome to hang on to, that your misidentification and deluded grasping really hurts, you see it as dukkha. When you see that clearly you become weary of it and the mind becomes oriented in a different way. It turns inward, because you've recognised that grasping at things outwardly is really painful. This weariness is actually a spiritual emotion. It's not being completely fed up with the body and feelings or having a big, angry sense of self that is enraged. It's not based in aversion. This is very important to understand. This cool kind of spiritual disenchantment is the result of a lot of meditation. By seeing clearly, 'Gosh, it really isn't a self, but I keep interpreting it that way and it's really painful', the mind will try to find respite. It will try to seek out and discover something else that isn't painful.

This was part of the Buddha's insight under the Bodhi Tree. He saw that grasping is a large part of the cause for birth. We constantly grasp at the five khandas because of our attachment to the pleasure that can be gained from them. The danger is that the pleasure is fleeting. When it changes, it's painful. So Lord Buddha would talk about knowing the pleasure. In a way this is similar to his teaching that 'dukkha is to be known'. We should investigate: 'What am I attached to? What am I getting out of this?' He also said that after knowing the pleasure we must see the danger.

So first we know the pleasure. We can see our attachment to birth, which is due to our attachment to pleasant sensual experiences—nice sights, sounds, tastes, pleasant bodily feelings, and pleasurable mind-states. But then we can ask what else comes with that, and see that we also experience unpleasant sights, sounds, tastes, touches, and bad moods. We can see that with joy of youth and vitality also comes ageing, illness, and death. This is seeing the danger. It's not a good bargain. It's not a good deal.

Next the Buddha would encourage us to, 'Cultivate the escape', referring to the Eightfold Path. Having seen the pleasure and understood

it's what we're attached to, we've then seen the danger; with attachment to pleasure comes pain—lots of it. We are subject to birth after birth and death after death...until we cultivate the escape. The good news is that there is an escape.

Because the spiritual faculties of the five bhikkhus were highly developed, they were able to see the erroneous nature of perceiving things with self-view when it was pointed out to them. The Lord Buddha directly challenged them to see, 'This is not mine. I am not this. This is not my self'. It is important to notice here that he did not define what they are. He didn't replace the self-view with another concept.

What is beyond 'self'? The Tibetan traditions call it Buddha nature. It's the enlightenment potential in all of us. Different traditions have various ways of describing it, including original mind, ground luminosity, the mind of clear light, or the clear knowing nature of mind that is not clouded by ignorance and delusion. To know it directly, all that really needs to occur is to let go of our deluded grasping and misperceptions. Weariness plays an important role in this, as it restrains us from chasing after things with craving. Then, as it says in the sutta, 'The passions fade'. When we stop stoking the fires of passion, the embers simply burn out and the mind becomes liberated.

Grasping, or upādāna in Pali, has to be let go of. It takes discipline because our habit of deluded grasping is very, very deep—likely millions of lifetimes deep. But letting go is essentially all we have to do. Then what we call 'enlightenment' takes care of itself. Enlightenment isn't the 'self' getting anything. Enlightenment is sometimes described as relinquishment. It's actually about what you've given up. You've given up perceiving life as filled with things that are 'me' and 'mine'; you've given up trying to squeeze as much pleasure as possible out of your experience. Instead, you allow the body and mind to be as they actually are, with a profoundly stable and precise quality of clear knowing that sees things as they truly are: This is not mine; I am not this; this is not my self.

Going back to the sutta, the Buddha said, ‘The wise noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with mental formations, disenchanted with consciousness. Becoming disenchanted, their passions fade away’. Passion means the various types of lust and craving that we consistently face. If you’re not fascinated with forms anymore, what is there to crave? When you understand that the amount of available pleasure is so little, that this pleasure is also fleeting, and that there’s much more suffering than pleasure, your hankerings subside. Things are simply not worth lusting after. But this is a process and it takes time for most of us.

By not chasing after pleasure through forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and different types of consciousness, the passions fade away. And with the fading of passion, the heart is liberated. Lord Buddha said that when he had his own enlightenment experience he knew that it was his last birth. After he was enlightened, he considered not teaching the path. He made this interesting statement:

Men dyed in lust, and whom a cloud
Of darkness laps, will never see
What goes against the stream, is subtle,
Deep, and hard to see, abstruse.

So that’s the problem—people are dyed in lust. Once again, this points to our passions and craving. Our passion and craving to pursue pleasant things and avoid unpleasant things sustains the ‘cloud of darkness’ in the mind.

When Lord Buddha taught us about not-self, he taught us to lessen and then abandon our habit of trying to constantly fulfil craving. This is where keeping precepts and meditating plays such an important role. The precepts keep the craving tendency within clear boundaries. And as meditation develops, the quality of clear seeing, or mindfulness with

clear comprehension, deepens. Eventually the mind develops enough stability, strength, and power to abandon the passions and relinquish the delusion behind them. Seeing things clearly as they truly are explodes the darkness of delusion out of the mind. Enlightenment!

What we can't see from our current perspective is how many thousands of lives of skilful effort the five disciples and others like them put in before they suddenly attained arahantship. But we can be sure it was a long time. We also don't know, of course, just how much we have practised. Hopefully we've done quite a bit of practice in the past. Whether we have or we haven't, what remains is the practice we have to do, however long it takes.

In order to develop some insight into the not-self aspect of form, Ajahn Anan encourages meditators to contemplate both the inevitability and uncertainty of the time of the body's death. This weakens the deluded grasping at permanence and helps ripen the mind for insight. Ajahn Anan also instructs meditators to contemplate the elemental nature of the body. For example, we do our usual breath meditation and when there is some clarity and peace established we turn to investigate our bones, or teeth. In this way we are working with the earth element.

Ajahn Anan strongly recommends that before turning our attention to *nāma-dhamma*, 'mind-based phenomena', it is best that we train to see the impermanent and not-self nature of this body, the one that we rely on in this lifetime. First, he notes that the body is where most of our grasping and identification is based. It's also the easiest and clearest place to observe the characteristics of existence. While it can seem more interesting to try to focus on mental phenomena, investigating the *nāma-dhamma* is in fact more subtle. But Tahn Ajahn explains that as the quality of mindfulness gets stronger by maintaining it on the body in all postures, training in breath awareness, and contemplating the nature of the body, then the clarity and power of mind which has begun to see the body's true characteristics will begin to notice the

impermanence of more subtle things like thoughts, moods, and mind states. In this way, body-based mindfulness is a more dependable place to establish a consistent and resilient practice. And it moves on quite organically to embrace the more subtle foundations of mindfulness.

Similarly, the impermanent nature of feelings is easier to investigate than that of perception, mental formations, or consciousness. When each in- or out-breath ceases we can notice the change, and especially the cessation, quite clearly. Or, it is easy to notice the way shoulder or back pain throbs and moves around, then disappears at times. Understand it as a process of deepening wisdom and insight. Ajahn Anan explains that with feelings, it's easier to observe the change and cessation than the not-self characteristic. However, when impermanence is seen with great clarity of mind, insights into not-self occur by themselves because the residual or habitual self-view is based upon a perception of solidity or permanence. When impermanence is seen, the deluded grasping falls away and, as Ajahn Anan explains, not-self is then experienced. A letting go occurs. Mindfulness, collectedness, and wisdom working together reveal the empty-of-self nature of the body and mind.

There are suttas where the Lord Buddha explains that it is possible to experience deep, liberating insight while practising *jhāna samādhi*. Particularly while noticing the way the quality of the mind changes as the mind absorbs in and out of various levels of *jhāna*. But that is a practice for people with extraordinary abilities in *samādhi*. In the time of the Buddha it is possible that many people practised in this way. But more recent masters have given more emphasis to working within the context of the body and feelings. Of course, as insight develops *samādhi* will deepen too, and such insights may well occur in our minds as well.

It was wonderful to contemplate these subjects at the holy site where the first five disciples became completely liberated. Their liberation affirms our own wonderful potential. Millions more beings have realised these same liberating insights since that time. We should

feel encouraged and emboldened by this. Please set the firm resolve to follow in these great practitioners' footsteps.

Incidentally, the day I gave this teaching was also the day that the *Ovāda Pātimokkha* was taught over 2,500 years ago in the Veluvana, the Bamboo Grove, at the very first monastery in Rajagaha. Māghā Pūjā day is one of the most holy days in the Buddhist calendar and is celebrated to mark this special event. The *Ovāda Pātimokkha* marked the beginning of the laying down of the code of discipline, the code of ethical conduct for the monks. The few short verses the Buddha taught on the occasion set out the standards and attitudes that we need to keep to support this very process we've been talking about. Most people understand that they should practise generosity and keep precepts to grow in the Dhamma. But there are other important principles or aspects of the path that are talked about less often, yet are beneficial to consider.

In the beginning, Lord Buddha didn't lay down any specific training rules, because the monks' behaviour was already of a very high standard. As the order grew and the behaviour of some was not of the highest calibre, rules became necessary. He subsequently laid down a set of guiding principles, which is what became known as the *Ovāda Pātimokkha*. It's important to recognise that Lord Buddha refers to his own teaching as 'this Dhamma-Vinaya'. He didn't refer to it as just 'the Dhamma', which is highly significant. Dhamma-Vinaya means the truth and the discipline, or the teaching and training. These two things go together. If you lack discipline in your meditation and discipline in your ethical behaviour, you won't realise the ultimate truth.

Many lay teachers tend to be a bit lax in mentioning this. They prefer to talk about the highest Dhamma teachings and inspiring subjects, often neglecting to mention just how morally scrupulous and consistent you have to be to realise the higher goals. This is a place we Theravada meditation monks have an important role to play. We remind

people of the tremendous emphasis the Buddha placed upon restraint and discipline. So let's take a look at the short yet profound teaching that is the *Ovāda Pātimokkha*. It begins:

Not doing any evil, to be committed to the good,
And to purify one's mind; These are the teachings of all Buddhas.

Most people will recognise this often quoted verse. But what about the next one, which is hardly ever mentioned?

Patient endurance is the highest practice burning out the defilements.

Now this is very interesting. We really need the Buddha to explain this to us and we need the example of people who have patiently endured and reaped the rewards. That is, if you're not yet at the level of the five disciples and you didn't get enlightened while reading through the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*! There's a process of having to patiently endure our craving. We need wise people telling us it's a normal part of the practice and that there are lots of mind states that we have to patiently endure. Sometimes it doesn't feel like the defilements are being incinerated though. It feels like they are burning us! Craving swells up in the mind, just as the Lord Buddha said—'Minds are dyed in lust'.

Because we've previously acted on our craving energy without mindfulness, we tend to act blindly upon our passions again when they return. We feed them, creating a kammic formation, a kammic tendency. It's that same energy, the same desire, that comes swelling up in the mind again. When the pressure builds up, we feel like we have to act on it again. It's really not very different to a drug addict. You need the fix because you don't want to deal with the withdrawal symptoms. For people who want only pleasant results in meditation and who want them quickly, it's important to understand that this is not actually possible. But we shouldn't be too disheartened by this, because patiently

enduring or 'bearing with' the unpleasant is actually very valuable.

Lord Buddha said that patiently enduring this energy of craving and not acting on it is what incinerates the defilements, the negative qualities that darken the mind. When one commits to keeping the five precepts strictly, you'll notice when the desire to do something that you can't do comes up. You still really want to do it and there's definitely some friction, there's some irritation. What you will notice later, however—perhaps after six months, a year, or a few years—is that the level and the power of that desire is less. You initially thought that you really had to do it and that it was really hard to give up, but you now find you hardly ever want to do it anymore because you see the benefit of not doing it. We do need the Lord Buddha to explain this to us.

Through not feeding our craving, through patiently enduring desire without acting on it, the power of that defilement in the mind is getting thinner and weaker. You can imagine how little craving the first five disciples would have had, given that they had been the companions of the Buddha during those six years when he was eating just a half a palm of rice daily. Obviously these spiritual warriors were accustomed to patiently enduring desire.

Next in the *Ovāda Pātimokkha*, the Buddha said, 'Nibbāna is supreme'. This is important too. He taught this within a culture that believes that either Shiva or Brahma the Creator God is supreme. Lord Buddha refuted this by saying Nibbāna is supreme. That's quite revolutionary for its time. So what is Nibbāna? Well, Nibbāna is not-self, that's one part of it. There's no God there, and no God can help you to realise it. We have to have some faith in the Buddha's statement to commit to the practice that will lead us to experience it. Is it a state? I think the best way to consider it is as a realisation. It's a realisation, and then the abiding in that which has been realised. It's what's left when greed, hatred, and delusion fall away from the mind. It's the purified mind. It's not simply 'nothing' or nihilism. Lord Buddha did say that it's

unshakable peace, so something must experience that.

In general he seemed careful not to define it as a ‘thing’, because he knew we have the habit and tendency to grasp at concepts and ideas and then misinterpret them. While he seemed reluctant to define it, he did say that it’s Deathless. Nothing there can die. It’s unshakable peace. It is attainable by those who strive rightly and correctly. It can be experienced individually by the wise. These are the kinds of phrases he used.

It’s also not just available to Brahmans. You don’t have to be born into a high caste to realise Nibbāna. People from every caste—be they men or women, humans or devas—can realise Nibbāna when they practise correctly according to the Eightfold Path.

Realising Nibbāna may be achievable, but is it really an achievement? Like I said, it’s actually a relinquishment. But we have to be consistent in our practice so that our spiritual faculties become spiritual powers—powerful enough to relinquish what needs to be relinquished: the greed, hatred, delusion, and ignorance. So keep the five precepts and eight precepts when you do retreats or on lunar observance days. And meditate daily. That is the path. Listen to teachings that point out anicca (impermanence), dukkha (unsatisfactoriness of conditions), and anattā (the characteristic of not-self), and just keep chipping away at your practice.

The next part in the *Ovāda Pātimokkha* is about harmlessness.

Not a renunciant is one who injures others,
Whoever troubles others can’t be called a monk,
Not to insult and not to injure.

We can see it’s important to hold an attitude of harmlessness and not to be contentious. Lord Buddha is firm on this point. He didn’t

say it's okay sometimes if you have a really good self-righteous reason! There are no forced mass conversions or holy wars that can be justified by our peaceful Lord's wise words. You can see how this supports the development of meditation too, by inspiring humility and having nothing to feel regret or remorse about. Next the sutta says:

To live restrained by training rules,
Knowing one's measure at the meal.

The rules are there for a reason and they are important. When everyone keeps the same standard, it creates an incredible quality of harmony within a community. And eating too much makes us sleepy. Then when we get over the grogginess of over-eating, we find we have too much energy. So the right amount of nourishment is important. The sutta concludes:

Retreating to a lonely place, a secluded place,
Devotion to the higher mind,
These are the teachings of all Buddhas.

Here we are instructed to take time out and avoid constant company so that we can apply ourselves to meditation. This is a beautiful, pithy teaching. It's always good to remember these points. If you meet any teachers who are saying something that's not in accordance with these verses and these principles, then you should take note...and perhaps choose another teacher—one who teaches and lives in accordance with these beautiful wise words.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Weariness Leading to Great Bliss

CHAPTER SEVEN*Weariness Leading to Great Bliss**

The *Anattalakkhana Sutta* (the Discourse on Not-Self) is a fairly straightforward and yet very profound teaching. Among other things, the Buddha tells us matter-of-factly in this discourse that, ‘Feelings are not self’, precisely because we cannot control them. If feelings were our self, naturally we would choose to be happy. We’ve all had some experiences of emotion in the mind, such as an unpleasant mental feeling that we really didn’t want. We would have wanted to let it go. Maybe we even had enough mindfulness and wisdom to see it was unskillful and unnecessary. With these experiences we often think, ‘I don’t need it, I don’t want it, it’s time to let it go’—and yet it’s still there. Sometimes with mindfulness and wisdom we can let painful reactions and feelings go, and sometimes not, but we don’t actually have much control over it. The same goes for feelings in the body like knee pain and sore shoulder muscles. We can’t just say, ‘Go away!’ They have their own nature. It’s also the case with mental formations and consciousness etc.

At the end of the sutta the Buddha described a profound process. He said, ‘Seeing in this way, bhikkhus, the wise noble disciple becomes disenchanted with form, becomes disenchanted with feeling, becomes disenchanted with perception, becomes disenchanted with mental formations, becomes disenchanted with consciousness. Becoming disenchanted, their passions fade away; with the fading of passion the heart is liberated’. Now that’s quite an amazing and succinct description of a very profound process. Seeing these things clearly gives rise to disenchantment, which is the cause for the fading of passion, which results in liberation. Another way to understand the wise noble disciple’s ‘disenchantment’ in this context is that they’ve stopped being deluded

* From a talk given during a seven-day retreat taught at Chempaka Buddhist Lodge in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, in June 2012.

by the five khandhas. Not being deluded, there is nothing longed for. By not feeding craving, its power over the mind is weakened and the mind can be released.

Because of ignorance, forms, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness delude us. We tend to think that they're a self and that other minds and bodies are a self as well. That's a type of delusion. But when we see things more truthfully, something interesting occurs. We become weary. The Pali word for this is *nibbidā* ('disenchantment', 'weariness'). Those of us who are interested in being peaceful and becoming enlightened don't tend to think that weariness has much of a role to play, but clearly it does. For the first five disciples who the Buddha taught this discourse to were liberated only after experiencing it.

When the Buddha became enlightened, while reviewing his accomplishment he saw that the reason for beings developing attachment, clinging, and craving was pleasant mental and physical feelings within experience. We become attached to pleasant feelings and we desire them; that causes clinging to them, and the clinging is the cause of birth. There is delusion, there is craving, and there is attachment. However, weariness then plays a very important role when we begin to look at the whole picture and we start to think, 'Okay, there is this much pleasure, but then there's this much pain and unsatisfactoriness as well'. You start to get a sense that it's actually not a very good deal. You start to wonder what it would be like to let go of your attachment. When you do let go in moments, you experience more space, clarity, and serenity in the mind. Then you begin to trust your inner refuge of mindful awareness and become inspired to cultivate it further. In this way, you begin to experience the wisdom of the Lord Buddha's instruction to 'Know the pleasure... see the danger... and cultivate the escape.'

When people first begin to meditate sincerely, it's not uncommon for them to feel an intense kind of weariness and boredom after a while. I experienced this as a young monk and even as a young man before I

became a monk. I once told Ajahn Anan many years ago about how I felt so oppressed by my own mind states that sometimes I actually wanted to kill myself, and he said that this is quite normal. He said if I didn't have that quality of being bored and fed up with the world, I wouldn't have sought out the monk's life at the age of twenty-two. This emotion of weariness plays a powerful role in propelling beings towards seeking a way out of *samsāra*. I was very grateful for the compassionate, encouraging and affirming response of Ajahn Anan at that time, as it helped me to see the bigger picture. To see myself and this painful experience within a greater process.

Ajahn Anan also explained that sensitivity to unsatisfactoriness tends to develop before equanimity does. Because of this, at times a practitioner can feel overwhelmed. The Venerable master explained further that it is though seeing the characteristic of suffering clearly, and patiently enduring with it, that more *samādhi* and equanimity develop over time. When that occurs there will be less identification with all of that unsatisfactoriness, and a sense of having some space from it. Ajahn Sumedho sometimes describes an experienced meditator's quality of mindful awareness similarly. 'That which knows suffering is not suffering'.

When you experience this quality of weariness and begin to pay attention to it, you get a sense of how tiring things are. It's tiring trying to get what you want and not getting it. And it's very tiring getting what you want and then not be able to make it last. I remember talking to a man in Thailand who once owned a BMW. He said he'd had two happy days in the ten years that he owned his BMW—the day he bought it and the day he sold it. In between, he had ten years of dissatisfaction, because it didn't live up to his expectations and it was also expensive to repair. That's just one example. We are often let down. We often think if we just get this one more thing we'll have everlasting happiness. But we get it and it doesn't quite work. So then we're onto the next thing.

After a certain amount of time, we look at how many of those next things there have been. We start to grow wiser and we see that they've brought us a certain amount of pleasure, but it never really lasted very long. That's when we can start to feel tired. As practitioners we need to have a really good look at this, because the experience doesn't have to be only one of weariness—inner peace can also occur if you can let go of the craving. On one level there's weariness and boredom, which you'll find have a sobering effect on the mind. Being weary and bored is painful, but forces you onto your cushion because you are losing interest in distraction in worldly things. We would never guess it, because we don't feel like doing anything at such times. But meditating when there is a lot of weariness present can actually be very fruitful. The sobriety it brings can be truly useful. Because if you sit and then you sit some more, you can experience cessation of all these painful emotions. When that emotion has subsided within the act of meditation, there's no particular craving or aversion, the weariness has settled and faded too, and then you experience serenity. Finally you get some true peace.

What occurs after practising with weariness is dispassion. You might begin to feel dispassionate towards all conditions, the five khandas, the world, and even towards everyone that you've ever loved. You've seen the greedy and aversive tendencies of mind that hurt yourself and others, and you want to put them down. This might feel unpleasant, but it is very important because the mind has been flowing out for aeons—out the eyes, out the tongue, out the nose, out the ears, and into an interest in other beings. It's been like tentacles stretching out of the sense bases in all directions, and this has been binding us to *samsāra*. Now, through this process that started with weariness, due to the resulting dispassion the tentacles begin to retract.

The Buddha said in this sutta that the wise noble disciple's passion faded, and with the fading of passion his heart was liberated. It's good to calm down the passions, to sober the passions, to become weary and dispassionate. It's necessary to understand this. We may think the

Buddha's path of practice is about becoming ever happier. It's actually not, and I don't even really like the word 'happy' very much. I prefer the word 'peaceful'. Because we can't obtain a solid, unchanging state of happiness. If we could, the Buddha would have discovered it and said, 'This is it. This is happiness'. But he didn't say that, he said, 'This is liberation from suffering – this is unshakeable peace'.

This is what Buddhas teach. Buddhas teach suffering, the causes of suffering, and the way leading to the end of suffering. The Buddha didn't teach the path to happiness. That doesn't mean there isn't happiness or joy along the Buddha's path. There is, but it's not an unchanging, solid, dependable happiness. It's important to understand this because as our practice develops we might experience moments and periods of real weariness, and it's not necessarily a bad thing at all if we know what this is and how to work with it. But if we have fixed, pre-conceived ideas, and expect and only want happiness as a result of our practice, then we won't recognise the value and function of this world weariness and may actually lose heart. We might practise less, when what we really need to do at such times is to practise more—with a lot of patience, determination and humility.

There's another spiritual emotion that occurs at times too. In Thai it's called 'sulot samwaed'. This is a quality of profound sadness. As we begin to not be fascinated, we sober up, and we get some sense of how sad it all is when we think we're a self and are bound to suffer. Suffering's going to come at you from every direction. You have to age, you have to sicken, and you have to die. The people that you care for are also ageing, sickening, and dying. You have to be associated with what you don't want and you have to be separated from what you do want. That's the lot of everybody—even kings, movie stars, Buddhas and bodhisattvas. Buddhas, however, have let go of their attachment to it all, so they don't suffer about it. They understand it's natural.

I remember I was experiencing this sadness a lot when I was

staying with Ajahn Anan in my second pansa (the Thai term for the annual rains retreat). I noticed this sadness would well up in my mind so powerfully. I wondered, 'Oh, is it repressed emotions? Is it depression?' and I'd go and sit with it. The sadness was so huge that my sense of self was squashed by it, or kind of knocked out of the way. I wasn't sure if it was wholesome or not, so I asked Ajahn Anan about it. He said it was actually one of the types of rapture. I was interpreting it as being a result of social conditioning, thinking that because it's not happiness it mustn't be good. But it was very, very peaceful. I asked Ajahn Anan to explain further and he said, 'This is rapture. This is a mind with some concentration.' He asked me, 'Is there peace?' I hadn't paid attention to the fact that there was a very palpable quality of peacefulness in the experience, and not much of a sense of self, just this vast sadness. Ajahn said, 'Good, good, good'. I began to notice the quality of that sadness. It comes when you really see how much dukkha there is, and how much frustration you've practised with, lived through, and continue to grapple with. There's a sobering and a saddening that occurs as the mind becomes dispassionate.

The Buddha said that trying to train and liberate the ordinary mind is like trying to make a fire with a green piece of wood in a puddle of water. To develop insight and samādhi and become liberated, you need a dry piece of wood on dry land. Then you can light it. Keeping precepts, being generous, being ethical, and then allowing the mind to become weary and sobered is just like taking the stick out of the water and leaving it on dry land. Delusions about what we would like the world to be fall away. It's very characteristic is limiting and frustrating; we finally recognise this, and the mind reorients. It turns inwards, sober and dispassionate. Having become dispassionate it is liberated. These few words from the sutta are so very instructive and important.

The important thing to understand here is that the liberated mind experiences incredible bliss. The reason that I don't like the word 'happiness' is because it confuses people about what we should aim for.

What the liberated mind experiences is superior to ordinary happiness. It's something very profound, subtle, and yet vast, that shines through above and beyond the self-view. And indeed above and beyond all samsāric conditions. Yet I must make the point that practice is definitely not only about experiencing weariness, dispassion and sadness. These are important spiritual emotions that are part and parcel of the process, which will lead to experiencing qualities of contentment and serenity that are superior to any worldly happiness that we've ever experienced before.

In the course of practice we will experience a deep quality of peace in moments and for periods before complete liberation. It's not all just suffering until some final big bang! This is also important to understand. As concentration or samādhi develops it will bring great coolness and peace. When we train to sit with painful emotions until they cease in the mind, we will also experience periods of 'the cessation of suffering'. As insight develops there will be moments where there is a profound letting go of attachment and a subsequent experience of great peace for a period of time. And these experiences give us a glimpse of where the practice eventually goes. My teachers speak of these experiences as being like temporary liberations, or present moment based liberations. These temporary liberations are laying the causes for a more enduring liberation to come. This occurs when the spiritual powers are developed enough to fully 'merge in the deathless'.

Ajahn Anan has said that samādhi is a very bright quality, and that beings with samādhi have a distinct quality of brightness. He then said that insight is like crystal clear clarity. Insight occurs when there is mindfulness, concentration and wisdom functioning in the mind at the same time. It is a deep and direct seeing of conditions with true penetrative wisdom, in view of what is highest and purest. Although the brightness of samādhi is indeed very bright, purity of insight combined with samādhi is much brighter. Both the radiance and the merit that insight produces are greater than that of samādhi alone. This is why when the Buddha became enlightened it is said that radiance blasted through the ten-thousand-

world system and the whole world shook. In that moment, his powerfully wise mind with amazing samādhi could fill the universe and also let go of the whole universe in an instant. He let go of all his attachment and the clarity and brightness of that insight shone through the universe. That's how profound an insight it was.

Although I said I don't like the word 'happiness', most people find that when they keep the precepts, are generous, and they meditate, they are happier than before. They suffer much less, which is one of the ways to measure happiness. They experience more well-being and contentment. (Now those are some words that I do like.) Then, of course, as the mind becomes more sensitive, we become more sensitive to suffering. That's an important part of the process. Nothing's going wrong. You're supposed to become sensitive to suffering, because as the Buddha said in the teachings on the Four Noble Truths, suffering is to be known; through knowing it, we learn how we are causing it. Then we can get down to the task of letting go of those causes.

Sometimes Ajahn Chah used to condense the teachings very succinctly. He would say that we suffer because of wrong thinking. So if we are suffering, we have some kind of wrong view. With right view, we know everything is impermanent, nothing is a self, and unsatisfactoriness is the nature of all conditioned things. When you know this, there's nothing to contend with. You accept the truth. And in that acceptance there's a certain type of peace, a deep peace, which is very nourishing.

In the suttas, the Lord Buddha explains that to have a sense of refuge is also a type of happiness. When we recollect the qualities of the Buddha, it is joyful. When we recollect the profundity of the teachings, there is joy. When we recollect the example of the enlightened disciples there is also joy. Then when we keep the precepts, there is a lack of remorse and a sense of dignity and inner confidence. That could be said to be another kind of joy. Then there is the pleasure involved in samādhi. And even more pleasure arises from developing insight, because there's a

tremendous sense of letting go of a terrible burden, and experiencing the mind that no longer holds that burden. But you only get to that blissful and serene stage by having a really honest look at suffering and the causes of suffering. That's why the eminently wise Buddha put the teachings in that order.

It's a truly good thing to know the experience and characteristic of suffering and to begin to let go of the causes, because it leads to more and more moments of rapture, serenity, and insight. Even if we can only experience these things for short durations of time, we will come to appreciate what an incredible resource the human mind is and the great potential we have. Then we can derive some genuine confidence that one day we will be able to put all the suffering down and never pick it up again. We will also be able to help a lot of people along the way, which will be a very good thing as well.



CHAPTER EIGHT

Compassion: the Attitude, Quality, Practice, and Power

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Compassion is a profound and transformative quality and theme. It can both nourish and teach us as we develop along this path. I feel it's important to try and do this subject justice, at least as best as I can. This being the case, while on a personal one-month silent retreat I have spent an hour or two each day composing this chapter and the accompanying guided meditation. Reviewing the theme has been nourishing for my practice, and it feels good to now be able to send this lovingly out into the world.

Compassion is a quality both praised and embodied by the Lord Buddha. In the monasteries of our Thai Forest Tradition, we chant Pali verses every morning. We recollect the Buddha and his teachings, and one of the lines is: *Buddho susuddho karunā-mahannaṇṇo*: 'the Buddha, absolutely pure, with ocean-like compassion'. This makes such a beautiful contemplation. It also says a lot about this quality and its central importance in Buddhist practice. I would like to suggest that since compassion and purity are two of the hallmark qualities that remain after greed, hatred, and delusion have been abandoned, both must also play an important role in establishing the mind in the liberated state.

Before we dive into this subject in more detail, I need to add a small qualification. As a Buddhist monk who has lived in Asia for more than two decades, despite the fair skin colour on my Australian-born body, by now I am probably what you would call a traditional Asian Buddhist. Perhaps even a faith type at that. This is a little unusual among Western-born monastics, who usually prefer the methods and philosophy of Buddhism without much cosmology. I am not apologetic about my

** Written at Anandagiri during the rainy season retreat, August 2018.*

manner of presentation, however. It is the result of more than two decades of serious study and of living with wonderful, realised teachers. I certainly understand the Buddhist methods and philosophy, but I choose to include the cosmology as well. If you pick up any collection of suttas, you will find this element consistently present. Throughout this chapter I will refer to concepts such as kamma and rebirth, the existence of devas and heaven realms, and stages of enlightenment as matters of fact, not artful metaphors or quaint Asian concepts.

I often don't emphasise them, but with regards to purposefully cultivating a deep and vast quality of compassion, I believe that these aspects of the Buddhist worldview are helpful. We need motivating factors to inspire us to commit to the rigorous disciplines of spiritual training. If there were only this one life, then why would we bother cultivating saint-like qualities such as boundless compassion? If, however, we embrace the possibility that our spiritual practice has positive consequences for beings in this realm and others, and for ourselves in future lives as well, then there is a lot more benefit to be gained—and many more reasons to practise.

If you are not fully committed to believing such things, that's fine too. It's a fair enough approach not to fully believe something until one knows for oneself. But I ask that you try not to be attached to disbelieving. Sometimes modern people, determined not to be 'superstitious', develop a superstitious belief in their doubts! They don't believe in devas or kamma as literal truths, but they fully believe their doubt. So try to simply have an open mind. If we don't know, then we don't know. Let's be truly honest about that. Yet if we sincerely want to know for ourselves, we must have humility and openness. In any case, I am sure that parts of what I have to say about cultivating compassion could be helpful.

What is compassion exactly? Compassion is becoming aware of and sensitive to the qualities of pain and suffering that we and others experience, as well as the sincere wish that the experience of pain and difficulty could be removed or resolved. It means genuinely caring. Compassion is a

quality of the heart, which when meditated upon frequently can become a habitual attitude. When further cultivated, it becomes a powerful force for spiritual transformation—a very pure and wholesome type of samādhi, or concentration—which also serves to uproot qualities such as selfishness and indifference. If we train ourselves to have a profound quality of compassion for all beings, including ones who appear very negative, compassion then has the power to transform our minds to become truly saint-like in the manner in which we perceive and respond to others in life. Similar to loving-kindness, mettā, when cultivated as a form of samādhi in samatha practice, the bright, wholesome, and steady quality can provide an excellent foundation for developing insight into the impermanent and not-self nature of conditions.

Lord Buddha describes his teaching and path of training as leading to heaven and beyond. Loving-kindness and compassion support us on this journey. At first the sincere and diligent meditator experiences more heaven-like radiant mind states. These create the foundation for purifying insights that lead to deeper experiences of peace—ones that are superior to the happiness of the devas.

The thought of cultivating broad and expansive compassion can seem more daunting than cultivating loving-kindness. Simply being kind is actually quite pleasant for oneself as well as for others. Radiating qualities of warmth, love, and goodwill is uplifting and comfortable. In mettā practice, it can take time to get over some bumps or limitations and learn to be truly kind to ourselves and even to people we don't like, but it is achievable. With mettā we learn to overcome the quality of meanness. We experience the joy of a heart released from the power of ill-will and selective liking and disliking. Genuine compassion, however, denotes truly caring. With true caring, a sense of commitment and determination also often arises—a determination to actually do something to lessen another's suffering. This feels less safe, less comfortable. Less warm and fuzzy. If cultivated sincerely, however, the expansive joy that pure compassion brings to the heart can be liberating in different ways. It

is powerful and cool, and it can make us brave and determined in the face of pain. It facilitates growth outside our often closed, bubble-like experiences of mind.

The Lord Buddha recommends cultivating all four of the divine abodes, or brahmavihāras. They weaken the negative qualities that darken and obscure the mind, making it more likely for a meditator to see life and phenomena in accordance with deeper truths. We may come to see things in accordance with Dhamma, rather than through the filter of ignorance and delusion and through habitually grasping at the idea of self. They are also conducive to brightening and stabilising the mind, and can eventually deepen into different types of samādhi absorption. In the suttas, Lord Buddha consistently explains that stability of concentration is very helpful for developing deep and truly liberating insights. The mind needs a certain amount of steadiness from which to investigate and penetrate deeper truth. Ignorance is a powerful force in the mind, so we need something even more powerful to remove it. Given this, all meditation subjects that incline the mind towards brightness and stillness are a tremendous support to our mental cultivation.

These qualities of loving-kindness, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity are also sometimes referred to as the ‘four immeasurables’, because they are attitudes and mind states that can be cultivated to be truly boundless. The degree to which a practitioner decides to cultivate these qualities is a personal choice, but we all need to cultivate them to some degree. They are important tools that play a fundamental role in the process of purifying the mind. They work against self-centredness, selfishness, cynicism, cruelty, and harshness, while at the same time sensitising the mind to the universally shared experience of pain and suffering.

Becoming more sensitive to the existence of suffering is actually very important. It can seem counterintuitive because, after all, we are trying to get away from suffering! Yet according to the Lord Buddha’s first

liberating teaching on the Four Noble Truths, dukkha, unsatisfactoriness, is to be known. Having an honest look at the experience of dukkha lays the foundation for transcending it, whereas avoiding it does not. Becoming sensitive to and aware of the degree to which suffering affects oneself and others plays a very important role in orienting the mind correctly towards liberation. When we can truly and simply be with the experience of suffering, with genuine sensitivity combined with some deep steadiness, several things begin to occur in the mind. It grows truly weary of the samsāric experience and begins yearning for a genuine way out. At the same time, it becomes spiritually mature enough to actually experience a quality of insight that will reveal the deeper nature of mind. Truly seeing dukkha as a pervasive characteristic—seeing the unsatisfactory and suffering nature of conditioned experience—is precisely what causes delusion to fall away from the mind, and for true vision and knowledge to arise. We come to realise the deeper potential we all possess, one in which suffering does not affect the mind at all. Minds can be liberated from all suffering through understanding how it arises and then relinquishing its cause.

Whereas in the past we may have tried running away from suffering by distracting ourselves with fleeting pleasure or craving for a different type of becoming, when spiritual maturity starts to ripen we begin to see that this approach is futile and that the experience of suffering is unavoidable. A sense of weariness often arises at this point, and many people wonder what is wrong with them. Others seem to be happy enough. But for the person who is becoming wise, worldly aspirations lose their allure. We might not realise it at the time, but this weariness is actually quite wholesome and plays an important role in orienting us inwards towards something more dependable. What we really need to do is sit down, have a good look at the recurring experience of suffering and unsatisfactoriness, learn the deeper causes for this experience, and methodically work to uproot and abandon them. Deeper peace will follow.

Having true compassion for ourselves motivates us to take action in

ways that might actually be effective, while loving-kindness supports us through the process. Compassion is a quality that will nourish us deeply, while at the same time compel us to bring about a positive change.

Staying Human in a Degenerating World

Before going much further into a contemplation of the higher value of compassion in spiritual practice, I think it is important to recognise the degree to which different qualities have become prevalent in our society and world. The advent of social media, where people can make comments in a somewhat removed context from the subjects that they are commenting about, seems to have had a terrible effect upon human decency and courtesy. It's similar to the way that otherwise nice people in cars can suddenly become rude and aggressive towards other drivers—and for the slightest infringement—when separated by a metal and glass bubble. Users of social media can become quick to insult and say nasty things that they would most likely not say face to face. Read the comments below almost any YouTube video to get a sense for how many jaded, cynical, and critical-minded people are out there these days. The problem is that after some time it becomes normalised. People's levels of patience, tolerance, and courtesy are taking a big nosedive and harsh behaviour is spilling out everywhere.

As social creatures, we are influenced by the people and trends around us. It is very important that we recognise the degree to which the level of virtue and courtesy is degenerating in the world. Forget compassion as a method for complete purification and liberation for just a moment: If we hope to retain our human decency and dignity it is vital to recognise that we need these brahmavihāra-based practices just to restrain our minds from degenerating into the subhuman state that many around us now dwell in. Simply desiring to resist this trend by applying a different and utterly wholesome one is good enough reason to commit to a diligent and regular mettā or compassion practice. The benefits are far greater, of course, as the practice deepens and broadens through persistence.

Cosmologically Speaking: Heaven and Beyond

When cultivated correctly, these divine attitudes also become a place where a meditator can rest in his or her mind—quite literally a ‘divine abiding’. There are two methods of practice: the more active or dynamic expression, where we sincerely bring others to mind and radiate these qualities outwards, and the mode where one allows the energy to pervade and brighten one’s own mind and simply rests within this. In the latter, we do not think of self and other, but simply generate and then abide in one of these radiant, pure, and expansive mental qualities. Thus we can experience a heaven-like, sublime state in the here and now. According to Buddhist cosmology, we understand that there are, in fact, many realms of Brahmā devas. They live in high and subtle ethereal realms, enjoying the bliss of samādhi precisely because they have cultivated these qualities in the past.

When absorbed in one of these states, the mind is considered to have attained one type of purity. It becomes aloof from the five hindrances to concentration, and in doing so becomes truly bright. It is worth noting that Māra the Evil One (a kind of CEO of the kilesas of greed, hatred and delusion), apparently abides in the heaven realm just below the Brahmā realms, but he cannot see any of the Brahmā devas abiding above his head. Nor can he physically locate any spiritual practitioner while their mind is absorbed in deep concentration. By entering jhāna one can remove oneself from his snare for periods of time. Only through the deluding five hindrances can Māra have his way with ignorant beings.

The samādhi states are a kind of jumping board for going to heaven and beyond. All who are interested in this ‘beyond’ should give some attention to these heavenly states, for they play a role in realising it. It’s okay if we don’t have any jhānas yet, but we should incline the mind towards peaceful states to the degree that we can. We do this through breath meditation and brahmavihāra-based practices as well as other reflective methods. This pacifies the hindrances to a significant degree

and makes wise contemplation and investigation more effective.

Many people wonder how a being as evil-minded as Māra could get to such a high place in samsāra. This is a valuable contemplation. He clearly cultivated great merits and many virtuous qualities in the past, but then serious delusion took hold. This can and should act as a warning to all of us; it's a snakes and ladders game of life that we are all embroiled in. Merits can gain us high positions, but if in that position we serve evil, our next post will be low and painful indeed. 'Heedfulness is the path to the Deathless', said Lord Buddha. He also said, 'The heedless are likened to the dead', because countless rebirths (and deaths) ensnared by heavy kamma await them.

In samādhi absorptions, the obscuring darkness of the hindrances disappears. The latent grasping to self-view is often still present, however, which is why we must cultivate wisdom and insight along with concentration. It's even possible for those with amazing samādhi to become proud, attached, and identified with the very radiance of their mind once they come out of their absorptions. It is important to investigate the causal conditions for the arising and ceasing of even these states, because we are not simply aiming for heavenly rebirth—we are aiming for heaven and beyond. Nibbāna is superior according to the wise.

Interestingly, just as Māra cannot locate the mind of someone in jhāna or see the high and subtle Brahmā devas, the Brahmā devas cannot locate the mind of an arahant when he or she is abiding in their liberated state. There is a wonderful sutta where Sāriputta meditated upon voidness, or suññatā, which is the ultimately empty nature of all phenomena. The radiance of his mind in this state was so bright that tens of thousands of Brahmā devas came to honour him and pay their respects. They exclaimed, 'So bright and radiant is this light shining from Venerable Sāriputta, yet amazingly we cannot discern from where this light comes'. Keep in mind that these are the most radiant beings

in the conditioned universe celebrating the radiance of the arahant's liberated mind—the radiance of the unconditioned.

This is a useful contemplation for people who assume that Nibbāna is a kind of annihilation. The liberated and purified mind abides in Nibbāna, which Lord Buddha also described as a 'deathless' state. We are not just trying to get rid of suffering and annihilate the self; this is a common incorrect misunderstanding. Our aim is to realise our ultimate potential, which will shine a radiance so vast that even Brahmā devas bow their heads in honour. Naturally, the habit of grasping at things as being a self will be shed along the way. The liberated, purified mind will remain and experience unshakeable peace.

I sometimes talk about devas and psychic powers in my Dhamma talks. Many people appreciate this and some people don't. This is inevitable. But because most Western monks hardly talk about these things at all, I feel it is important that some of us sometimes do. This aspect of the teachings of the Buddha inspires many. For some people, a visual analogy speaks more directly to the heart. And let's face it—we can't address divine abidings and beautiful boundless qualities without devas and heaven realms becoming relevant. At least, I can't! Many devas cultivated these qualities in the past, which was precisely why they were born in heaven.

Bright Light, Diamond-like Clarity

I personally know some monks who can actually see different classes of devas in their meditation. I won't mention any names or I may get into trouble. Suffice to say these experienced senior monks are very well respected within our tradition. After coming out of samādhi absorptions, while the mind is still very bright and lucid, these bhikkhus can see subtle-bodied beings and even have conversations with them. I have enjoyed asking them many questions over the years and have been enthralled by their descriptions.

One of these monks explained that at a glance he could tell the difference between a Brahmā deva who had attained to a realisation of Dhamma and one who had not. Many human beings who become stream enterers, attaining the first stage of enlightenment on the path to arahantship, will naturally also develop deep concentration and will subsequently be destined for a rebirth in the high heaven realms as one of their few remaining births. In the time of the Buddha many beings attained arahantship swiftly, so ripe were their spiritual faculties. However, in general we understand that it takes most beings a few lives between entering the stream, and realising complete and final liberation.

When I asked how he could tell the difference between the two types of Brahmā devas, the Venerable Master explained that the Brahmā devas with amazing concentration have extremely bright auras that stretch vast distances. The brightness, although impressive, is also somewhat cloudy. The Brahmā devas who have deep insight into the impermanent and not-self characteristic of conditions, however, have extremely bright and vast auras that are also as clear as a diamond. I found this so interesting! If a person has such abilities, they can literally see the manner in which self-view clouds the mind, and how deep insight makes things crystal clear. The insight of such wise devas will deepen, particularly at the time of death, and within a life or two they will attain to complete liberation from all births, enjoying the unceasing bliss of unshakeable peace, Nibbāna, after which they will have no more births in any conditioned realms.

One should note, of course, that in the very same manner these monks can also tell whether humans have samādhi or insight. If you don't keep precepts, hardly ever meditate, and haven't developed much wisdom, your aura will appear dull and cloudy. If you have good ethical standards and meditate regularly, your mind will be quite bright and the radiance will shine around you to some degree. Even our ordinary eyes can see that good monks and nuns appear quite bright and radiant, as do most lay people straight after an intensive meditation retreat. If one has deep insight and concentration, then a bright diamond-like clarity can be seen

in the aura and mind as well. There are no secrets! You can't hide anything from those with clear seeing.

Apparently devas who are advanced on the bodhisattva path appear slightly different. When I asked how, the Venerable Master explained that the vast merits and profound spiritual qualities that bodhisattva practitioners develop over many lifetimes generate a radiance that is broader and vaster than that of ordinary beings. This radiance can also be very clear. Such beings can have both great wisdom and great samādhi, yet do not fully enter final Nibbāna, as their attachment to the welfare of others restrains them. I asked the Master how he could tell the difference between an advanced bodhisattva practitioner and an extremely advanced one. This might sound like splitting hairs, but it's the kind of thing that fascinates me. He explained that if a truly well developed bodhisattva were to visit him, he would not be able to see the point where the radiant aura ceased. The radiance literally fills all of space!

We can deduce from these descriptions that no effort at cultivating the mind or wholesome qualities is ever without consequence. The radiance from the goodness of such effort grows and shines in all directions. Perhaps this will inspire some people to get serious about developing the compassion brahmavihāra and to let their love shine. I could relay many more things pertaining to the interesting attributes of devas and fascinating manifestations of the subtle mind, but that may prove a distraction. It is, however, helpful to have a sense of the bigger picture and amazing, transformative nature of this path, so I am happy to share this much.

Firmly Setting Aspiration and Resolve

Our own suffering can seem both unbearable and unresolvable at times. Many people struggle with a sense of being overwhelmed and stuck. When this is the case, taking on additional burdens seems quite scary. Radiating warmth and love from one's own mind in all directions is

truly lovely; you don't have to think of other beings much, just smile and bathe them in love whether they want it or not. Yet genuinely wishing all others to be completely free from harm, including people currently exhibiting cruel, mean, or harmful behaviours, requires more spiritual guts. However, we can feel scared and weak. So what do we do?

We first have to challenge our fear by refusing to believe it, and to stop believing that we are weak. Having compassion for another's suffering will not harm you. And sincerely wishing to help others does not require that you take action right away. In the beginning stages, we are working on our attitude and ability to simply care and to wish for other beings to be free. If we see the genuine value of becoming deeply compassionate and truly want to grow beyond our current limitations, we can do so. It takes determination, but our human potential is amazing. Extraordinary results grow from plodding, consistent efforts.

In order to generate deep and powerful compassion, we need to have several things in place: courage and aspiration are a good start. If we can back these up with a sound understanding of compassion's benefit and value, we will begin to find the necessary energy, and our efforts will more likely be consistent and sincere. Aspects of the traditional Buddhist worldview can also rouse our courage, aspiration, and understanding. Just as important is a belief in our own potential and a determination to realise it.

One simple question we can ask right now is: wouldn't it be great to be courageously compassionate and powerfully forgiving? Can you imagine how cool, bright, and fearless your mind would become? It is good to spend some time imagining this, and then affirming that it is entirely achievable and worthwhile aspiring to. It's also important to consider that if we don't get serious about these kinds of practices, we may instead grow more angry, frightened, and resentful. We should all wish the very best for ourselves, especially if it has the potential to make us more selfless, as cultivating the brahmavihāras does.

Replacing Normal Habits and Perceptions With Wise Responses

I am presenting this chapter with reference to certain important principles of the traditional Buddhist worldview for good reason. Even if you don't believe in kamma and rebirth, I do believe it's possible to cultivate compassion for many of the people and beings in our world. In order to cultivate compassion for beings displaying cruel, negative, and harmful behaviours, however, the traditional Buddhist belief system is truly helpful. If we believe in the law of kamma and the truth of rebirth, we also take into account the kamma generated in past lives. Herein lies an explanation for so much of the suffering that we see now. Without such a belief or understanding, not only is our deeper cultivation of compassion likely to fail, but when we consider the serious suffering of others we may fall into unwholesome states as well.

Suppose you had a friend or family member who was addicted to drugs. You would really want them to end the crippling addiction that's ruining their life. Though wishing for this and truly caring, it's possible to fall into anger about the heartless drug dealer, ineffective police officers, and perhaps even corrupt politicians who are too compromised to take action. If we are not mindful and lack a wise perspective, our love and compassion for our friend may quickly give rise to feelings of rage and ill will towards scores of others. This is why we must not only cultivate compassion, but also cultivate a wise perspective that fosters equanimity. We must hold the balm of compassion in one hand and the sword of wisdom in the other.

One of the biggest challenges to cultivating compassion is our tendency to see things in fixed and limited ways. We are prone to see things in terms of victims and perpetrators, abusers and abused. We naturally feel compassion for the one harmed and anger at the one causing harm. In order to broaden our compassion, we must actually challenge this perception and learn to restrain our anger. It takes real work, but it is absolutely necessary.

When I have attended the teachings of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I have repeatedly heard him say that it is normal to feel some anger about cruel actions. However, he advised that we should not feel anger towards the actual being who is being cruel. We must take the energy of anger and resolve to try and improve the situation if we can. We must transform anger, not aim it at others. To do so would only increase our own negative karmas, which lead to painful future consequences. Even if you found yourself having to restrain another forcefully, it's possible for this forcefulness to come from a caring space instead of an angry one.

His Holiness further explained that ideally we would have compassion for a harmful being, even while they are being harmful. We do so through understanding that they, too, are suffering. They suffer with minds totally ablaze with greed, hatred, and delusion. We see that they oppress others, but meanwhile their minds are oppressed. If we cannot manage this yet, then we try to have compassion for the painful karmic consequences they will have to endure in the future. If we cannot manage to have compassion for them at all yet, at the very least we must restrain our hatred and ill will. We do not add fire to fire.

If we fall into angry, self-righteous reactions, we have to challenge these old habits. We can ask ourselves whether it is wholesome to have loving feelings towards one group of people while feeling anger and even hatred towards another. The answer is no. Tolerating such reactions doesn't serve us in the quest to abandon craving and the liking and disliking that bind us to cyclic existence. It is fundamentally important to understand this.

Our unskilful habits may be deeply ingrained, so we have to confront them forcefully. When we feel angry at a cruel person and begin to wish them harm, it can be good to catch ourselves in the moment and ask, 'If I were to die right now, where would I most likely be reborn?' Keep in mind that your self-righteous justifications will not be the determining factor—it will be the quality of your mind! Mindfulness of death is often

taught in Buddhism, but on these occasions mindfulness of rebirth can be just as sobering.

The Ways I Still Get Stuck

I don't want to harp on about what you need to do to further develop yourself. It's important to be honest about the fact that I am still training, still learning, and sometimes still struggling. But I am sincerely working at cultivating this path. After more than two decades of disciplined meditation and mental cultivation, there is definitely more mettā and compassion in this mind than there was before. Because of this, there is also less suffering. Although I am not liberated yet, I can see the way these practices readily enable us to relinquish negative qualities in the mind. I can truly see the value of cultivating such qualities, and I can envision their power continuing to gain momentum and becoming even more effective in the future.

For the sake of truthfulness and humility, let me reveal a little of my own struggle as someone still walking the path. Unfortunately I still get triggered at times. Becoming an abbot and being involved in creating a monastery has helped me to see where this happens. I am prone to react when someone is especially greedy or ungrateful.

There have been times when a nominally Buddhist neighbour has informed us that they wish to sell their land. Thailand has poor zoning rules, so it is generally considered wise to establish a large forest buffer around modern forest monasteries, otherwise a resort complete with karaoke bar could literally be built on your doorstep! For this reason we have an active interest in expanding our forest. When we've asked the price of the adjacent land, the owners have come back with an inflated figure. Forget a discount for the monastery—they want double what it's worth! Amazingly, we have had the support to purchase several plots despite the price. Kind and generous practising Buddhists were willing to pay the greedy, non-practising ones. However, these people have repeatedly

been the outer approximate cause for irritation and aversion to arise in this bhikkhu's mind! The inner approximate cause is my own greed for a peaceful forest and attachment to the principle of being reasonable.

There is one last segment of land we would like to acquire, as it is just fifty metres from our meditation hall. Recently a generous donor who saw the long-term benefits pledged the entire amount—double the normal price. When we approached the owner, he replied, 'No, that was the price I gave you a few years ago. I want more than that now!' I couldn't even bring myself to ask the new price, and so I had to get back on my cushion after huffing and puffing for a while. At such times, what helps me let go of my irritation is being brutally honest with myself about my own attachment and negativity, not harbouring negative thoughts about the greedy landowners. In this case I had a serious chat with myself and challenged my reaction. First I acknowledged that yes, this person was being greedy; yes, their demand was unreasonable; and yes, it is unsuitable for a Buddhist to try to extort a Buddhist monastery for personal gain. But then I asked myself whether the landowner was the cause of the negativity and irritation in my mind. The answer was no. My attachment to establishing a forest and protecting a quiet meditation monastery was the cause. In this way, difficult characters like the landowner can help us see where we are still attached. They reveal the work that is yet to be done. As for the forest buffer, I can still try and expand it, but with less attachment and negativity if it doesn't go how I'd like.

By taking advantage of good people and virtuous meditating monks for temporary worldly gain, people like those landowners give up the opportunity to make auspicious kamma and powerful merits. When I recall this and think about the heavy kamma they incur in the process, I quickly feel a deep sense of concern and compassion for them. The kammic outcomes might mean that they will have great difficulty finding qualified Buddhist teachers and places to practise in the future. What could be more frightening? How will they even begin to dig themselves out of such a samsāric mess? My mind shudders at the thought. It's

hard enough for most of us to make progress, even with good teachers and supportive situations. Seeing this, I am able to let go of my painful reaction. It allows me to develop compassion for myself and for the people I find challenging.

One can witness the results of not training to let things go or allow things to be as they are. When elderly people talk about their big disappointments in life, you can see the resentment and grudges they're holding even though decades have passed. On the other hand, we can see someone like His Holiness the Dalai Lama always ready to smile and laugh, despite having every reason to be resentful. He is both compassionate and wise. Who would you rather be—someone who is cramped-minded, reactive, easily irritated, and bears grudges, or one who is gracious, forgiving, and wise, and who understands the causes and conditions for both the arising and cessation of suffering? The latter can smile in the face of terrible difficulty and suffering, even while their hearts quiver with compassion. It is they who represent our true potential.



CHAPTER NINE

Cultivating Deep, Vast, and Boundless Compassion

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We've considered the benefits of developing compassion and the dangers of neglecting this practice, and we have set a strong intention and resolve. Now it's time to dive in more deeply. What are some of the things to watch out for in our cultivation? And how do we learn to include the difficult people and eventually all beings in the heart of compassion?

Near and Far Enemies

Lord Buddha explained that all of the brahmavihāras have enemies to their successful cultivation which we must guard against. The far enemy to compassion is cruelty. This makes it clear that if we continue to harbour ill will towards mean or unskilful beings, our compassion simply will not develop. The near enemy (that is, something that looks or feels similar) is a sense of pity. With pity we feel sorry for others while holding ourselves above or remaining aloof. True compassion melts our boundaries and we truly feel for those who suffer.

Until we have accomplished complete liberation, we are not actually free from the sort of experiences we are tempted to feel pity for. So we are not in a position to be proud or haughty. Many of us will be able to remember rough patches where we might have been contentious and mean. Some of us may have had difficult experiences that were quite literally pitiful. Understanding that people and circumstances both change, we should try to have a patient heart that looks at the big picture.

In fact, recognising our precarious predicament should make us

** Written during the rainy season retreat at Anandagiri in August 2018.*

quite humble. Ajahn Anan, a close senior disciple of Ajahn Chah and one of my primary teachers, has said, 'As long as we still have the kilesas in our minds, we are literally capable of doing anything'. If our own circumstances changed for the worse our latent negative traits could rear their heads and we ourselves might become mean or nasty. Considering this, we are definitely not in a position to judge. We also don't know what terrible kammās we have made in the past that might strike us down at any moment. Then it could be we who inspire pity in others. If we were down and out, I daresay we would definitely prefer compassion to pity. I find it helpful to consider all these things.

As a monk, at mealtimes I eat from my bowl at the monastery. It is quite a formal affair with little talking. But on occasions when I am visiting family or away teaching it can be more practical to eat in a restaurant, so some of my students may take me out for lunch. Over the course of a meal I usually wind up asking the waiter or waitress what religion they are, how many siblings they have, whether they are studying, and any number of other nosey things. Sometimes my confused students ask me, 'Ajahn, why are you asking so many personal questions'?

I reply, 'I used to be a waiter and I remember how much I hated it when people just wanted food and drinks without the slightest interest or courtesy towards the person serving it. I hated how rude they were when they were in a hurry. Waiters are people and they like to be seen and acknowledged'. It's been twenty-five years since I was a waiter wondering what to do with my life, and I still make a point to remember.

Similarly, in India the beggars can sometimes be rude and aggressive. If you give something to one, others yell at you for neglecting them. Even so, I sometimes still insist upon giving something even to the really rude ones. Then I have to ask a reluctant steward, 'Please give something to this beggar'. I make a point of giving to trustworthy charities, clinics, and schools as well, but giving to the occasional mean or rude beggar is useful in a different way. Through such a practice, we

train ourselves to be less conditional with our giving.

One student asked, 'Aren't you encouraging this poor behaviour, Ajahn?'

My reply was, 'No. I am responding to the fact that this person needs money in order to eat'.

They continued with their enquiry, 'But do you really think there is any merit in giving to such aggressive and ungrateful people?'

I responded, 'Would you ever wish to be born in the circumstances that this person is in now? Of course not. Let me tell you something that I have great confidence and faith in. If I am generous to every class of being, the nice ones and the horrible ones, the polite ones and the mean ones, there is absolutely no way that I could ever fall to that state. So my gift to them is a gift to me too'. My student scratched his head and then rubbed his chin. I continued, 'Do you think if you were very, very poor and day after day you saw wealthy people walking past you indifferently, you might become a little impatient and rude?'

To challenge our deep habits with wisdom, we need to apply elements of skilful view. I believe that if someone causes me harm, it is because I have either harmed this person or another in a similar way in the past. The harm flows back to me as that past kamma ripens. So who is the actual victim in such a scenario? Perhaps I am for now, but the person who is being unkind may have been the victim before. It is good to remember that this universal law of kamma applies to all beings.

We must not, however, use the recollection of kamma as an excuse to become indifferent. It's a mistake to think, 'Well it's just their kamma anyway', and take that as absolution from needing to care. (Incidentally, indifference is the near enemy of the equanimity brahmavihāra.) Understanding the law of kamma deeply will make us truly equanimous. But equanimity is a serene state of balance and equipoise, not a hard and callous indifference.

Seeing the way that we are all caught in this deadly wheel of harming each other and then being harmed is actually terrifying. When we consider this subject carefully, we will come to feel compassion for both the one receiving the fruits of past unskilful deeds as well as the one performing harmful deeds in the present. We come to see that in time the positions will be reversed and the abuser will be the recipient of abuse.

Don't Delight in Thoughts of Retribution and Punishment

On the subject of this law of kamma, there are skilful and unskilful ways to hold this view. To maintain a skilful view we need correct understanding. How many of us, if we are honest, actually feel happy when we think of a harmful person receiving the fruits of their bad deeds? I must admit that I sometimes fall into this habit. I try to catch it very quickly though. As seductive as it is, this is actually cruelty affecting our minds, and we need to recognise that it is an enemy of compassion.

We have to challenge our fixed perceptions and drop all forms of ill will. I would like to suggest that you try imagining it a different way. See this person as a young child in a future life. They have no recollection of the harmful things they did in the past. Now see that innocent-looking child being harmed and abused and crying out for a caring elder to help. No one comes to help them. This is in fact a likely outcome, possibly for many lives, for people who cause terrible harm. When we consider the bigger picture over a longer time span, our heart will melt and we will be able to wish with full sincerity, 'May all beings be free from suffering'! With frequent wise reflection, we'll come to understand compassion to all beings is a beautiful and skilful response. In time, it will become an outlook that we carry through life.

Once we've seen the value of compassion, there is the question of how we train to cultivate it. In the suttas, Lord Buddha does not give detailed instructions on how to go about cultivating compassion.

Rather, he simply instructs the bhikkhus repeatedly that they have a duty to radiate all four of the brahmavihāras each day. His instructions are as follows: after almsround, a bhikkhu should radiate loving-kindness towards the people of the village upon which he is dependent for almsfood. Then he should radiate loving-kindness in the northern direction, the eastern direction, the southern direction, and the western direction. After this, the north-eastern direction, the south-eastern direction, the south-western direction, and the north-western direction. Then above and below, around and everywhere, and to all as to oneself. The same should be done with compassion, then appreciative joy, and then equanimity.

Clearly most of the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis in the time of the Buddha were very gifted meditators. So Lord Buddha could instruct in this way—just do it! But the fact that he repeatedly stated this was one of the daily duties of the renunciants illustrates its central importance. It's a practice not to be neglected. No doubt there were many benefits for the recipients as well, as these mettā and compassion blessings were radiating from the minds of ardently meditating Sangha.

If one is not yet capable of radiating compassion in all directions, above and below and to all as to oneself, then one needs to actually train in stages. When we cultivate compassion in a disciplined way through meditation, traditionally we work our way through different classes of beings. We start with those it seems easy and natural to feel compassion towards. Then we move onto neutral beings, towards whom we might normally feel indifference. And then we work on developing compassion for 'difficult beings', those whom an untrained mind would normally be repelled by. These might be murderers, rapists, child abusers, despots, tyrants, dictators, dishonest or compromised elected leaders of nations, and psychopathic CEOs to name but a few.

We hold the attitude and energy of compassion in our hearts and train it to become stronger and stronger. It's rather like a mental muscle that we can develop to take on heavy weights over time. Eventually our

training extends to include all beings everywhere. What a wonderful goal and creative challenge!

Learning to care for the difficult types

There are many ways to soften the heart towards these so called 'difficult beings'. For example, we can use skilful reflection. It can be good to ask, 'How many people who become cruel as adults suffered cruelty when they were young?' The answer is probably most. In my own efforts to develop compassion for difficult people, I have sometimes watched documentaries where prisoners from high security facilities were interviewed. In the overwhelming majority of cases, these hard and mean people were abused as children and came from homes in which drug and alcohol abuse was a serious issue. Oftentimes they had no positive role models at all. The people who might have protected them often harmed them. Seeing this gave rise to genuine compassion. It is hard not to shed tears when hearing the sad stories of 'difficult ones', if we take the time to enquire and listen.

I once watched a fascinating documentary about prison reform in the United States. In an experimental program, a group of prisoners who used to be in solitary confinement because of their dangerous status were enrolled in an intensive program to learn empathy—a quality that many were completely lacking. Social workers and clergy as well as many other volunteers taught these prisoners listening skills, and they were given the opportunity to share their life stories with one another in a controlled environment. They also took acting and singing classes as a skilful way to channel their energy.

Another important component to the program was that relatives of their victims came to visit them and offer their forgiveness. The program coordinators required the inmates to listen to the families' experience of loss as a part of this exchange. Both parties benefitted. The relatives of the victims learned how these people had become cruel, indifferent, or

compulsive; the prisoners learned about the pain their actions caused and how it felt to be forgiven. When family members demonstrated that they cared for and forgave them, the inmates felt they had been given another chance. They subsequently resolved to be good people.

Curiously, most of these inmates became completely non-violent and genuinely empathic human beings within a period of just a few months. A small percentage did not respond well, perhaps due to the weight of the kamma they were experiencing or the extent of the trauma in their past. But most responded exceedingly well. It was an educational documentary for me that affirmed the Buddha's teaching that all beings have the potential for goodness; no being is inherently or permanently evil. It is very heartening to consider this. In fact it is a relief to know!

The Difficult Ones Are the Real Treasures

In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, all monastic practitioners take a bodhisattva vow as a part of their ordination. Naturally, great emphasis is placed upon the cultivation of compassion. It is not possible to develop the boundless and impartial loving-kindness and compassion that would qualify one for Buddhahood without learning to include all beings everywhere, without exception.

Some great masters of that tradition have trained their students to see negative and difficult people as being like treasure. They are considered a special opportunity to test and stretch one's abilities. They train to see these people as their teachers who help them develop the compassion and vast merit that will help to ensure their Buddhahood. The following two verses are from a text composed by Geshe Langri Tangpa, an eleventh century Lama:

Whenever I meet a person of bad nature
Who is overwhelmed by negative energy and intense suffering
I will hold such a rare one dear
As if I had found a Precious Treasure

When someone I have benefitted
 And in whom I have placed great trust
 Hurts me very badly
 I will practise seeing that person as my supreme Teacher

It is the difficult people and challenging circumstances in life that give us our real opportunities to develop wisdom, patience, forbearance, forgiveness, and compassion. Whether you aspire to complete Buddhahood or not, training to see difficult people and situations as a good opportunity to grow and develop noble qualities is very skilful. It will no doubt help along the path to arahantship as well, as it weakens our attachment to aversion.

Firm Conviction in Nibbāna Inspires Us to Be Spiritually Bold

It's sad that so many human beings live with such a limited understanding of their incredible potential, and subsequently do little to cultivate that potential. We roll over too easily in the face of delusion and kilesas, where we really ought to put up more of a fight. This is one of the main reasons why I personally appreciate compassion-based contemplations and practices. They can empower and embolden us. We need this. We need to care more, to do more, and to put up a noble fight.

It is empowering to recollect the potential for enlightenment in all beings and the existence of the enlightened state. We need to consider deeply what enlightenment is and what it really means. By enlightenment I mean 'penetrating into a deeper truth, a deeper reality'. It causes the deluded way of perceiving and experiencing life and the world to completely fall away. As delusion fell away and ignorance was uprooted irreversibly, the Buddha's mind experienced a new reality—the liberated and enlightened state, which we call Nibbāna. This has been described by the Buddha as spotless, immaculate, devoid of all suffering, unconditioned, and deathless. It is experienced as unshakeable peace.

If this was just the Buddha's experience and no one else shared this realisation, we might simply feel in awe of the Buddha. We might also feel happy for him. However, the Buddha saw that this was the potential of all beings, and that the spiritual faculties of some were developed enough to be able to realise exactly what he had. So he set about formulating ways of teaching, and subsequently wandered and taught for forty-five years.

When he taught the first sermon and Aññāṅkondañña penetrated to stream entry, the first stage of enlightenment, Lord Buddha exclaimed, 'Kondañña knows! Aññāṅkondañña knows!' After this, Lord Buddha taught the sermon on not-self to all five of the ascetics in the Deer Park, and each of them realised complete liberation through listening, contemplating, and then through direct penetrative insight. This demonstrates something fundamentally simple yet important and we unfortunately skip over it much too quickly. It shows us that the realisation of Nibbāna is indeed the potential of beings if they train themselves in the appropriate and necessary way.

In case we were mistakenly thinking that only superhero-like Olympic-grade ascetics can penetrate this deeper reality, a couple of days later Yassa the merchant's son wandered into the Deer Park wearing gold slippers. He was an especially delicate, princely person and had come wandering into the park after his first sight of courtesans drooling as they slept. Having awoken before them, he was horrified! 'It's awful', he kept saying, 'so awful!' Lord Buddha called him by name, which impressed him, and said, 'Come here Yassa, I'll show you something which is not awful'.

After the Buddha then taught him the gradual training in generosity, virtuous conduct, and mental cultivation, Yassa the merchant's son also attained to stream entry, the first stage of liberation. In a later teaching he then attained complete liberation as an arahant. I really love the way the first few days of the Buddha's teaching career panned out. It is wonderfully illustrative of the point I am trying to make.

Yassa's wife and mother loved him dearly. Lord Buddha knew the distress it would cause them to find that their princely Yassa could no longer return to the sensuality of a householder's life, so the Buddha accepted an invitation to a meal in their home. At this meal he taught them both, and they too attained to stream entry. One can witness the Buddha's decency and compassion here. After they had glimpsed Nibbāna for themselves, they had unshakeable faith in the Buddha and the Dhamma. Naturally, they then supported Yassa in living the Holy Life. Their own deeper happiness was now rooted in realisation, and no longer dependent upon a loving husband or a son. Obviously these people had practised well in past lives and had very ripe spiritual faculties and close kammic ties to the Buddha. But the point is valid just the same.

The heart of the matter is that all of our suffering, which is a result of craving based upon ignorance and delusion, can be completely eradicated. After this point the purified and liberated mind experiences unshakeable peace. So how does this tie in with our main theme of compassion? Well, we should recognise that the beautiful, precious, and compassionate wish 'May I be free from suffering' can actually be accomplished. It is valid. It is tenable. It is real and achievable. It is to be experienced individually by the wise.

We need to meditate upon this until we really get it on a deep level and with strong conviction, because it is a tremendous source of confidence and courage. We shouldn't roll over easily in the face of delusion and the kilesas. We should put up a good fight in the manner of a true spiritual warrior and be determined to realise the truth of the end of suffering. The potential of the mind is superior to that which deludes it. Delusion has to fall away eventually. Even if it does so incrementally, our suffering will gradually decrease and the moment of liberation will come closer.

When you make the wish 'May I be free from suffering', mean it as sincerely as you can. Remember that it is your potential and that it is certainly possible. Stare the darkness of delusion in the face and

say: 'It might take some time, but I am definitely kicking you out!' Of course there will be no one doing the kicking out when that time actually comes...but during the process our conventional sense of self does have to create the intention to uproot and eradicate the causes of suffering.

We must rely upon the wholesome and skilful spectrum of conditions so that this conventional 'being' can realise 'non-being' and the unconditioned. The Eightfold Path lays the kammic conditions that lead to the unconditioned, and the unconditioned is beyond kamma. When we wish ourselves well on this path, and we wish to be free from suffering, we are blessing our mind stream with the very best influence—the resolve to realise liberating truth. This is what will release us.

Furthermore, by recognising that we really can be free from suffering, that all of our misery, challenging experiences, pain, and confusion is not necessary, we begin to sincerely wish this for everyone else as well. Conviction in the deeper potential of all beings will give us the confidence and courage to bring them to mind and to sincerely wish them to be free. Simply because they truly can be.

As we wish for the eradication of our own suffering, why not wish for the eradication of every being's suffering? It expands the heart and mind. We can stop discriminating between good beings, nice beings, horrible beings, nasty beings, and scary beings, and just see potentially free beings. Then we wish them complete freedom. It is such a wonderful thing to offer yourself and others, and it's achievable—firstly in occasional moments, and then in a multitude of moments as our training progresses.

As the great disciple Sāriputta meditated upon his realisation of 'voidness', tens of thousands of Brahmā devas came to honour him. We can similarly imagine all beings experiencing blissful voidness, their radiance completely eradicating the darkness of ignorance and delusion everywhere. It is great to imagine and envision this sometimes. Although

it might not be likely anytime soon, it is encouraging to comprehend that at least there is this potential.

Training in Meditation to Include Everyone

Our shared nature and potential is one of the reasons why we train in developing compassion to include everybody, but do so in a systematic way over a long period of time. We start with those who are easy to care for, then add larger numbers of neutral beings, next include the challenging ones when we feel strong enough, and finally we extend our wish to all beings everywhere.

Once again, bring to mind the ‘difficult types’ it can be hard to care for. We understand that if they realised deeper truth, all of their greed, hatred, and delusion would fall away, and subsequently all of their terrible behaviour would cease. We wish: ‘May all beings, especially the difficult ones, be liberated through realising the Dhamma!’

We may further contemplate kamma and rebirth. And we understand that ignorance and delusion and all of the ills that stem from them, no matter how horrible, are temporary phenomena obscuring the fundamental goodness at the core of all beings. This goodness is the Buddha nature or Buddha potential that we all possess, whether we’re aware of it or not. Contemplating in this way is very helpful for cutting through our tendency to grasp at and react to current appearances. With training over time, we learn to look to something much deeper, and with a much bigger picture in mind. The good news is that the big picture is a bright one—it is the beautiful potential that we all share.

Hopefully my deep faith and passionate feelings about our opportunity to realise Nibbāna will have aroused some deep interest and courage in you. May you diligently lay the causes for such realisation. I sincerely hope you do.

Compassion for the Suffering of Harmful Beings

Let's come back to our practice of being mindful of suffering and its causes in the present moment. Obviously it is easier to feel compassion for the apparent victim in any given scenario than it is for the person acting or speaking negatively. However, when we contemplate the felt experience of both parties more deeply, we understand that both are suffering. One suffers from being abused, the other from afflictive and oppressive mind states that have deluded them to such a degree that they are acting out.

It is fine to feel compassion for someone on the receiving end of abuse or neglect, but if we are to restrain ourselves from generating negativity towards the perpetrator, we must develop compassion for that person too. So try to consider how a very upset, mean, or cruel person actually feels inside. While some people do seem to enjoy being sadistic and cruel, I am absolutely certain that a mind overwhelmed by such dark forces is actually in a lot of pain. Oftentimes these people cause pain to others in a neurotic and misguided attempt to escape their own.

Keep in mind that if we are able to develop a broader, more inclusive, and impartial attitude of compassion, it will serve us in our aspiration to be free from suffering. While it is still possible to use wise discrimination to recognise when actions are unskillful, we can prevent the arising of negative and unwholesome mind states such as self-righteous anger, rage, and the desire to take revenge. Even though we might feel appalled by the degree of unskillfulness we observe at times, we avoid falling into hatred for those acting out. Over time, this wiser and more skilful perception will weaken the strength of the aversion-based kilesas in our own minds too. In this way, difficult beings can help us to weaken our own attachment to afflictive emotions.

In order to set up the kind of resolve necessary to develop true compassion, we should think long and hard about the negative qualities

and attitudes that currently affect our mind. We have to sincerely wish to overcome them. A compassionate attitude and response will serve us well here. We must be ready to put this sincere aspiration to work on a moment-to-moment basis. We have to catch our negative reactions quickly, and if we can't, then we must let go of them as quickly as possible.

We should not try and justify the habitual cynical attitudes that instantly close our hearts to cruel or unskilful beings. We must be ready and prepared to ask ourselves: Is my reaction skilful? Is it beautiful? If we are truthful, we can see when it is not. In fact, at times our own mind falls into negativity in reaction to the negativity of others. Lord Buddha talks about the Dhamma as being a path 'leading onwards'. Is closing the heart towards others, no matter how tempting, ever going to be a way of moving onwards? It is not.

It is said that Lord Buddha's heart 'quivered with compassion for all beings'. Great compassion was a component of his enlightenment, which certainly suggests it is necessary and unavoidable to cultivate this quality along the way. We should consider this seriously, as the Buddha is our Lord and guide, the teacher of gods and humans.

Sometimes it's necessary to avoid harmful people or to set clear boundaries in the process of caring properly for ourselves. Sometimes we may even need to call the police. But the point here is that we do not set these boundaries with anger and hatred. We set firm and skilful boundaries because we care. You can avoid an unskilful person because you care for yourself, and because you do not want that person to make bad kamma in relation to you. But in our hearts we should wish them well. Sincerely.

In the *Mangala Sutta*, the Discourse on the Highest Blessings, taught at the request of a beautiful female deva whose radiance illuminated the entire Jeta Grove Monastery, Lord Buddha explained the thirty-eight practices that bring the most auspicious blessings. One of them is simply

to be humble. Whenever we do not wish to be kind, but would rather harden our heart towards another, we can ask ourselves whether we have a strong sense of ‘me and mine’ reacting to ‘they and them’. Are we experiencing a big sense of self? If so, we must see this clearly and be truthful about the level of ignorance and delusion present in our mind. We should reflect that the cause of rebirth in *samsāra* is ignorance and delusion fuelled by craving and attachment. If we continue to indulge these habits, will we ever find a way out of *samsāra*?

To do good, avoid harm, and purify the mind: this is the teaching of all Buddhas. There are many practices and recollections that can empower us in this process. Compassion is a very powerful one. Compassion is an amazing quality. It is a wholesome attitude, skilful response, divine emotion, and pure form of concentration. When cultivated sincerely, it will transform your mind and the way you experience your life, yourself, others, and the world. It will help you respond to pain and suffering with grace, courage, forgiveness, and understanding. It will also help weaken negative attachments, produce vast merits, and lay a foundation of stability for deeper insights to grow. You have a rough but pure diamond in your heart and you have the polishing stone right here with this practice.

I hope what I have shared has been useful to you. • May we all grow in compassion and wisdom, so that we may, in time, become like the Buddha—absolutely pure with ocean-like compassion—seeing all phenomena as transient and ultimately empty, yet responding with kindness.



CHAPTER TEN

Practising With a Broken Heart: A Contemplation

CHAPTER TEN

*Practising With a Broken Heart: A Contemplation **

This meditation is intended specifically for people going through some kind of significant emotional trauma. If that's not you then the practice might not make much sense, but if it is you I sincerely hope it is helpful.

Right now I'm on solitary meditation retreat in my cabin in the monastery where I've lived for the last six-and-a-half years. I've been editing a few Dhamma talks in between meditation sessions. I alternate between walking, sitting, and chanting, and am taking time to share some talks that I've given to make sure they reach a good number of good people all around the world. It brings me quite a bit of joy to be able to share and encourage others. Perhaps the reason I'm preparing this while sitting in front of my shrine in my cabin is that it's not the kind of meditation you would share with a group of people on retreat. Rather, it's relevant to a certain type of person going through a certain type of situation.

I have been looking at my website and at items I've shared on the Insight Timer meditation app. I've been considering what subjects I've covered and whether there is anything else I should talk about that might be helpful to people. I've realised that there is. This subject of having a broken heart, feeling terribly hurt and devastated, is an experience that so many people have lived through. I hope I am able to offer some words of encouragement on this topic that may help you if you're going through a difficult time.

We're all extraordinarily vulnerable. To use some Buddhist terminology, we are body and mind phenomena in the form world. We have minds; we have bodies of flesh, blood, and bones made of the

**Recorded in my kuti at Anandagiri during the rainy season of 2017.*

four elements, and we're trying to navigate this sensual form world. We are very complicated, sophisticated, emotional beings, and yet we're so vulnerable in this human birth, our experience of childhood, and various other things that we go through. Often it seems that we wouldn't choose the things that we have to endure, and that's what I mean by vulnerable.

I'm currently forty-five years old. By the time we get to be middle aged, most of us have probably had a few broken hearts. We have all gotten through some painful emotional times. So what are the kinds of broken hearts we can have? A difficult relationship with our parents is one. Oftentimes people don't receive the kind of care that human beings need. Often there is neglect or unskilfulness. People then repeat habits of neglect that they experienced themselves. Sometimes people do a really terrible job of parenting their kids. Even so, some of those people are doing a better job than their parents did. Or perhaps your children are breaking your heart by being vengeful, rebellious, and forgetting to be grateful.

Betrayal can also break our hearts. This could be a betrayal of trust from a business partner, a best friend, or, as is often the case, a romantic partner. The experience of falling in love can hit us so hard that oftentimes people feel they have no choice. That somebody special seems completely trustworthy. We might feel very safe in their company, and we give our hearts to them. Then if things change it can be devastating.

If there's attachment, clinging, or craving present, as there usually is, the degree to which we love somebody is the degree to which we feel hurt if something in the relationship changes. Perhaps the person dies, gets a terrible illness, or has an accident. We'd been depending upon this person and trusting that they would be there—then it changes and they are not there in the same way. It's really heart-wrenchingly painful. Or it could be that the person we fell in love with has fallen out of love with us, fallen in love with someone else, or done something that we never thought they'd do. We might have had an overly positive projection. Perhaps we

projected more goodness onto a person than was actually there. It turns out that they are human. They have weaknesses. They make mistakes. People change.

Perhaps you broke your own heart with your unskilful actions—a terrible mistake, a bad habit that you just couldn't kick, or a combination of many mistakes. Sometimes we disappoint ourselves so much that we break our own hearts. It's a common experience for us vulnerable human beings.

Different people have varying levels of sensitivities. Some become broken-hearted more easily than others. Some people have to practise with this experience of a broken heart several or many times in their life. It could be because of disappointments with a parent, then a teacher, then a romantic partner, and then a friend. Time after time, they experience disappointment and have their expectations and hopes dashed. What seems like a wonderful situation can easily turn into a nightmare.

So what do we do with this experience? How do we practice with it in a way that we might grow from? First of all, we might have to ask how we get through it. There can be so much pain in the heart that it feels like you can't cope, like you can't survive this. The pain feels like it is killing you. It's important to understand that what we're experiencing is an emotion, a mental feeling. Our wisdom component understands this. We need to see that the emotion will arise, stay for some time, and cease.

When we're freshly disappointed or recently broken-hearted, it seems like those feelings do not arise and cease. We might have a pain in the heart all day. But we can sharpen our awareness through meditation. Just sit and close your eyes. Don't pay attention to your thoughts. Have a look in the heart and notice those feelings are changing. They're throbbing, swirling, gushing. It can be like fire, it can feel like stabbing, or like ice. But when you have a look, you see it's changing. There's constant flux. If you're really patient and you sit long enough, if you can bear with the

painful feelings in the heart, then you'll notice there are moments where the pain is much less. Then another round can come, and we feel a wave of excruciating pain. We have to make time to just feel and be aware of the incredible pain. It can stun us. At such times all we can really do is know mindfully, not conceptually. We know by being aware, being conscious: this is how much life can hurt. It's like this. Without judging, just be able to feel, 'Wow, so much pain'.

Once you allow the space for that pain to be as it is, then try to notice it changing. Sometimes it seems completely overwhelming. If you use the analogy of an ocean and waves, then some of these waves are like tsunamis of pain. But just like a tsunami, even such a huge wave has to recede. Then there will be smaller waves.

When the waves of emotion are incredibly strong, sometimes what we need is to give ourselves the love that we were depending on from someone else. Maybe they died, maybe they let us down, or maybe they loved someone else instead. Whatever the reason, whatever occurred that made the situation change and left us feeling broken-hearted, come to reflect on this. Meditate with this. Try to be with it and heal it. The story doesn't matter so much. What we need to do is just be with the feeling, understanding that what we need is love. Sometimes all you can say gently, softly, quietly is 'Love, love, love'.

Try to offer love to the terrible, painful, excruciating grief, and broken-heartedness. Try to make space in the mind. Relax the sense of boundaries, constriction, and contraction. Make the mind open and spacious and just feel the pain. Be aware and say to yourself quietly and slowly, gently: 'Love, love, love'.

When others have not loved you to the degree you felt you needed, that's the time to learn how to love your experience; the time to find a refuge inside; the time to give love to that terrible pain, that incredible grief—to offer it love and acceptance. Hold it without judgement. We

might have to do this many times but it will be helpful to notice that it's a feeling, a feeling arising in consciousness. Notice that it changes and try to see those waves.

Sometimes it can feel like molten steel was poured down your throat and your intestines and heart are burning with pain. Sometimes it can feel like you've been stabbed in the heart repeatedly. Sometimes the heart feels shattered and sometimes it feels bruised and raw. However it feels, we can simply be aware of a painful feeling, an emotional feeling, and hold it in awareness without judging it. We can know its qualities and then try to notice the ways it changes and moves around.

Using the breath is really helpful here. Pema Chödrön, a nun in the Tibetan tradition, uses the word 'ventilate'. You can use the breath to ventilate through the painful feelings. Breathe in and just allow the breath energy to flow through the pain in the heart. Breathe out, allowing that breath energy to cool down the fire of pain and suffering. Take a few deep breaths and use the breath to pacify the feelings, to calm them down. At other times the feelings are red raw. They seem to fill the room and to make the mind bigger. The feelings appear to fill the sky and all you can do is be aware and try to love them and allow them to be until they change. Know that they will change.

When these feelings change, the big waves of emotion come in and then leave the mind naturally. It's really important to notice when they change, when they cease. It's important to notice how a huge emotion can become a smaller emotion. With time, you'll find that something completely unmanageable—something you felt you couldn't cope with—has become perfectly manageable and easy to cope with. Then another wave of feeling might come. But if we've noticed the way that it changes, then when it's at its highest velocity or greatest intensity our wisdom component knows it's going to change. It's going to get better. There's not going to be this much pain forever. Knowing this can allow us to ride those waves. We can wait it out and when it really, really hurts,

say 'Love, love, love'.

Give yourself the loving acceptance that you feel separated from, that for some reason you didn't receive. Give it to yourself and use the breath. Breathing in: 'I lovingly accept this'. Breathing out: 'May I be well, may I be happy'.

It's important to be optimistic. Have some hope. I once heard someone say, 'The heart that breaks can hold the whole world'. I actually believe this. For in the beginning, we ordinary human beings love a few people. We love our families, our friends, and people we fall in love with. Then we get hurt and the pain prompts us to try and find more resources, wiser perspectives, and a bigger picture. As we train ourselves to be with the pain of life and difficult situations, we learn to hold this incredible pain. We become more compassionate and more empathic. It becomes possible to offer this kind, non-judgemental acceptance and love to more and more people.

Through the experience of having a broken heart, being incredibly disappointed, and feeling betrayed and abandoned, we can learn to take better care of ourselves. We can cultivate a true refuge in our capacity to be aware, still, wise, and loving. Then we can bring those qualities into our life and share them with others. But it takes a lot of patience, determination, courage, and kindness to just be with the honest experience of emotional pain, and to know: 'This is it. This is what it feels like to be a human being with a broken heart.' It's also important to acknowledge how common this experience is. That's not to negate or dismiss it. It has to be tended to with great care. Yet at the same time, we can know that so many people in the world share this experience.

When our emotions calm down, there's more clarity. We can wish, 'Wouldn't it be great, wouldn't it be better, if beings were without suffering'. Just make this wish. Breathing in: 'May I be free from suffering'. Breathing out: 'May all beings be free from suffering'.

We can move from incredible pain into an experience of genuine compassion. Then we deeply, sincerely wish ‘May I be free from suffering. May all beings be free from suffering. May all beings attain to a state where this kind of experience no longer affects them. May we all be well, may we all be happy, may we all be free from suffering’. Get in touch with that genuine, broad, and boundless compassion and offer that which you would most wish for yourself—to be free from this incredible pain—to all beings everywhere who are still in this vulnerable state. ‘May all beings be well. May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from suffering’.

We can reflect upon this truth: we all have to face this. We all have bodies, minds, and hearts; we have emotions; we’re not yet saints, not yet arahants, not yet Buddhas; we get disappointed when we are separated from things that we like and love; people betray us; we’re subject to the workings of kamma manifesting in our relationships. When it comes to this word ‘kamma’ there’s no judgement. In Buddhism we understand that we’ve had many previous lives and we’ve all made mistakes. The response to that should be compassion and wisdom. We should get serious about not making any more mistakes, but we don’t judge ourselves or each other—we open our hearts.

Under the influence of ignorance, still affected by craving and aversion, we get irritated and make mistakes. When we make mistakes, we make bad kamma and that bad kamma ripens as painful experiences and painful feelings. So let’s get in touch with the wish and the aspiration to train ourselves to make wholesome kamma, skilful kamma. Let’s cultivate the qualities that will eventually liberate us and also develop compassion and equanimity. Equanimity, equipoise, and acceptance come from the wisdom that sees that much of what we are experiencing is the working of kamma. Try to see this without judging. All beings make mistakes. All beings experience the ripening of skilful and unskilful kammas. When it’s really painful, the very best thing you can offer is a non-judgemental, compassionate response: ‘Love, love, love. May I be well, may I be free from suffering’.

Trust that no matter how painful or how huge these emotional feelings are, they change. They cease. The feeling will gradually lessen. Sometimes with the experience of grief, strong feelings can come around again with the anniversary of a death, a wedding, or the day that things changed. We have to understand that this is the way the mind is. This is the way emotions are. We can't completely control them. We have to work with them, and so we need to develop the space to be compassionate and kind, to allow it within awareness. Then we take care of it as best we can with kindness and compassion, while being determined to notice the way that it changes.

Eventually the pain subsides a bit, after we have given it a lot of loving-kindness. Then the practice of forgiveness is also helpful. It might be appropriate to forgive yourself if you have made mistakes. It might be helpful to forgive people that you perceived as having hurt you. Holding onto a grudge is but another way that we hurt ourselves.

When it is possible, we offer forgiveness, if only so that we don't have to keep holding onto the pain. We can allow it to arise and cease. We understand that just like we've made mistakes, other people make mistakes. People's minds are affected by ignorance. They don't understand the truth and they don't understand kamma. Their minds can become more deluded, sometimes through greed for more money, sometimes through intoxication, becoming obsessed, or through compulsive sexuality. All sorts of things affect the minds of human beings. We make mistakes and hurt people because of delusion. In a way, we get lost.

We need compassion for the mistakes that people make under the influence of delusion, but it's usually a several-step process. We need compassion, loving kindness, patience, and determination to be with the painful feelings. Give them kind attention. Give them spacious awareness. By allowing them and giving them time, they begin to heal. The heart can heal. It's important to understand that nothing can kill this awareness, the nature of the mind, our clear knowing awareness.

No matter how painful, how huge, or seemingly overwhelming an emotion might be it cannot kill awareness. You can trust mindful awareness to take it. The feeling will arise, it will change, and it will eventually cease, yet the awareness that knows will still be there. It's a primordial awareness that knows. In the Thai tradition we talk about 'buddho'—that which is awake, aware, and has a knowing nature. The same thing that knows smells, tastes, sights, and sounds also knows emotional feelings and mental feelings. No feeling can kill the awareness that is mind. It's much more resilient and spacious than we realise. As we train ourselves to cultivate this awareness, it becomes a refuge. You can trust the clarity that knows feelings that arise and cease, thoughts that arise and cease, that which is impermanent and not-self.

I just wanted to say these few words as an encouragement to any of you who might be experiencing great pain. Hang in there. Hold this pain in your heart with all of the love that you can. Give yourself the love that others may not have given you. Sometimes we have to be a mother or a father to ourselves. Offer the nurturing of an ideal mother to yourself in meditation. Offer the discipline that a responsible, ideal father would by being consistent with your daily practice, by not taking intoxicants, and not doing things that will degrade your clarity. Sometimes we have to be our own teacher and remind ourselves with wisdom to behave wisely and skilfully. And sometimes we have to be our own romantic partner and offer ourselves tenderness, kindness, sweetness, and good humour. Be kind, be a friend to yourself.

Whatever it is that you might be experiencing, I wholeheartedly wish you every success in coping with it, surviving it, learning from it, and becoming a better, more whole, more beautiful human being as a result. You can survive and grow from the experience of having a broken heart. The heart that breaks and heals can hold the entire world in loving-kindness.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Heroic Effort Nurtured With Love

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Heroic Effort Nurtured With Love *

This is an interesting time to be asked to give a reflection. I don't begin all of my talks with the statement that I have to be careful not to sound too impressive, but on this occasion I have to be careful not to sound too impressive. So I'll sound slightly impressive first and then I'll explain later.

I made a vow to sit three thousand hours of meditation at the Bodhi Tree, in northern India, at the Seat of Enlightenment of Lord Buddha. I first went to Bodhgaya as a six-pansa monk. That was sixteen years ago. I would say I'm a 'faith type', which is a little bit unusual among Western monks but very common for Thai monks. I found I was deeply moved by the place and I had a very peaceful meditation there. It was as though you could almost feel, smell, taste, and touch Nibbāna. It's so close. This affected my mind at the time with a desire to sit longer and longer, hoping of course to realise Nibbāna. That didn't happen, but at least feeling closer to it was encouraging.

After my tenth pansa I asked Ajahn Anan, whom I had been living with for quite some time, for his permission to go and spend six weeks in Bodhgaya to try and explore this further. And I went back again at the beginning of building my monastery. I realised that I was going to need some help, and not just on the material level. I was building the monastery from scratch on top of a mountain, where there was no water system or electrical system, and the road was impassable in the wet season. So I knew I was going to need help and I wanted to go and ask for the help of the devas. I'm someone who believes in devas—beings in parallel realms that have good will toward human beings. Some of them have a lot of merit, and sympathy towards Buddhist practitioners.

* From a talk given to the monastic community at Wat Pah Nanachat in April 2018.

Around that time, I realised that I was approaching one thousand hours of meditation under the Bodhi Tree and I thought that it would be a good thing to work towards. I returned a couple of years later and finished off the thousand hours as an offering to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. It felt really good to be able to do that. Bodhgaya is very noisy. There are a lot of people. So basically I was meditating in public all day with large crowds moving around behind. It's hard work, but because there is some special quality in the air there, many people find that it is possible for the mind to become peaceful despite the noise and the crowds. It's possible if one has faith and keeps trying.

I felt so pleased to have accomplished that one thousand hours that in a rapturous, blissful moment I made what might have been a foolish aspiration to sit two thousand more hours there in order to make an offering of my practice. One thousand for the Buddha, one thousand for the Dhamma, and one thousand for the Sangha. I kept going back once a year and at first I could only sit about six-and-a-half hours in a day, but I worked up to about eight hours. Then getting from eight-and-a-half to nine hours a day was really hard. I had to get past my inner resistance. I think we all want to spend some periods of time being quiet and alone, so there's a certain point when you're in a noisy, busy place where you've had enough, and knee pain and back pain also get to you. So to get past the eight-and-a-half hour point was a bit of a struggle. But I did. I was able to work up to sitting ten hours a day in Bodhgaya.

I think the reason this was possible is because of the strong faith that I have in Buddhas and the gratitude that I have for Lord Buddha. You can think of the particular vow Lord Buddha made there. He sat down and said, 'Let my blood dry up. I'm not moving from this place until I've realised the Deathless'. And he did. It's an incredible affirmation about the potential that we have, which Lord Buddha fulfilled and realised. When you get a bit fed up in Bodhgaya, you open your eyes and you see the Bodhi Tree and you look at the Vajra Asana and you can remind yourself, 'Lord Buddha was enlightened here'. It's quite a

powerful skilful means and offers a lot of encouragement.

So I was able to work up to ten hours a day and I would try to do that for at least a month. On earlier trips I was doing two hundred hours a month. On later trips I was trying to do three hundred hours in thirty-three days. Most recently I've been doing four hundred hours in forty-five days. I've done that three times. And just five days ago I completed my vow. I have now sat meditation for three thousand hours under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, and I'm very relieved! I don't have to keep doing that to myself anymore. It was never really about getting to a certain number. It was about using that place as a source of inspiration for more practice, and what we're all involved in: cultivating the five spiritual powers of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom.

After his enlightenment, Lord Buddha was reviewing what actually made it possible to realise what he realised, and he came up with this quite beautiful, succinct list of the five powers. These five qualities when cultivated, when made much of, lead to the Deathless and merge in the Deathless. When Ajahn Sumedho, was a young monk, he used this as a bit of a mantra. *Saddhā, viriya, sati, samādhi, and paññā*. He had the clear intuition that all of these qualities need to be strong and balanced. So he was checking in his practice which ones were strong and which ones were weak, then making adjustments. I think this is very valuable.

With regards to faith, sometimes we have faith in the Buddha and in the arahants. But many modern people don't actually have very much faith in their own ultimate potential. Many people withhold loving-kindness from themselves. This is a kind of deep-seated self-aversion. It manifests as a kind of sneering at oneself internally, judging everything you do as being not quite good enough. We understand that the Buddhas are enlightened. We understand that arahants are enlightened. We understand the teaching and we read Luang Por Mun's biography or Luang Por Tate's biography and we want to do that too. Then I think many people start judging themselves compared to their examples. Modern people

aren't very patient. So what can start out as very virtuous—having faith, finding the teachings, doing the correct practices—can then get infected by negative qualities. Because this tendency is so culturally pervasive, many people don't recognise it.

Judging your own efforts in this way, sneering at yourself, and having ill will towards the self-view saps away energy and decreases your chances of realising the mind's potential. I feel modern people need to practise mettā to remove this curse from their minds. Mettā practice starts with one's own conventional self.

I've found that while practising in Bodhgaya, to avoid become irritated you have to practice a lot of mettā. One of the benefits of mettā is it allows you to accept things the way they are. When you have good will and you wish well, you're not being critical, rejecting, or discriminating. You have a loving, accepting, embracing quality. A soft quality. I had to practise it at least thirty percent of the time in Bodhgaya. That's at least three hours a day of mettā meditation. That's what makes it possible not to be irritated when a Cambodian group comes around with a very loud speaker with reverb and echo. They chant loudly right behind you. Then a Vietnamese group does the same thing five metres away, and a Sri Lankan group do it fifteen metres away. Sometimes bodhi leaves fall on you there. Sometimes birds shit on you also. In order to be able to work with this interesting range of phenomena, with various things falling on and around one, mettā is very helpful. I have a lot of experience with that.

What makes it possible to be able to sit under the Bodhi Tree for ten hours a day when it's hot, when it's cold, and when you're sick? Faith in the Buddha and mettā, a capacity to be with things as they are. This is important. So I'd like to encourage the Wat Pah Nanachat community to give good energy to your mettā bhāvanā. 'May all beings be well, may all beings be happy' is where we'd like to be able to take it. But that loving-kindness towards all beings has to be radiated from the centre of your conventional self. If you can't yet hold profound, beautiful, nourishing

loving-kindness in the core of your being, there's no way you're going to be able to radiate it profoundly to others. This is something that has to be accomplished.

You shouldn't think it's selfish, self-indulgent, or vain to wish yourself well and to fill your own heart with loving-kindness to the utmost of your ability. This is fundamentally important. It only becomes self indulgent if you don't move on from there. If you do move on from there, as the traditional training encourages, you include beings you find it easy to have loving-kindness towards, and then larger numbers of beings you feel neutral towards, and then finally beings that you have aversion towards. You have to be able to hold a genuine quality of unconditional love, loving acceptance, and good will, which isn't judging, rejecting, or pushing away. Please try to feel confident in the value of that. If you feel a lot of resistance to it, well then you have to have mettā for that first. With persistence this will shift, you'll be able to move through it.

Compassion works as a pair with the mettā. A good way to get a compassionate response going is to ask yourself one simple question when you are feeling a lot of resistance to mettā practice. That's a kind of a suffering. Put your awareness in your heart area and ask yourself, 'Is this suffering'? If you can feel that it is suffering, then ask yourself, 'Can I respond to this with kindness'? With compassion meditation you don't have to do anything physically or with your speech. You respond directly with your heart, with the simple wish 'May I be free from suffering'. Become aware of the suffering and then soften the heart to this. Then you make the kind wish, 'May this be able to be resolved. May I be able to go beyond this. May I be free from suffering'.

Compassion for ourself as a conventional being who suffers is why we're here. I don't think you'd be maintaining precepts regarding celibacy and all the things you have to give up if you didn't have some suffering and if you didn't believe that there was a way to go beyond it. That's what brings us here. So have kindness. Don't be judgemental

towards your own suffering. That will be very nurturing.

I'm twenty-one pansas now and I've seen many monks disrobe—very good monks too—many of them around ten, twelve, or fourteen pansas. They got a bit fed up because they wanted more results than they'd gotten. There was something in them judging this perceived lack of results and they decided to leave the training. I've met many of these people after they've disrobed and asked them, 'Ok, well do you feel that you've developed further since disrobing'? I've never met a single person who said they had. I asked whether they felt good about disrobing. I think only one of all the people who disrobed felt that they were in a better state. Most felt that things degenerated. So we have to be careful if we're interested in doing this for a lifetime. I could never commit to it when I first came to the training. I could only get through one pansa and then commit to another pansa. When I got to five pansas, I committed to ten pansas. When I got to ten pansas, I committed to twenty. Now I'm intending to be a bhikkhu until I die. But one has to work up to that kind of resolute determination and stretch one's capacity. If you have faith in this training, there's not much point in going backwards.

One of the things that helps people stay in the robes is cultivating the brahmavihāras. The Buddha described the brahmavihāras as a pleasant abiding here and now. If you genuinely have mettā for yourself, meditating isn't a painful experience. You can just be kind to yourself. Then contentment isn't difficult to attain. But if there's something inside you saying, 'It's not good enough yet. You should be better than this. Why don't you have the jhānas? Why don't you have the ñānas (insight 'knowledges')? You should be a sotāpanna by now', then that's really painful. Ajahn Chah said that you can water the tree, but then you have to wait for the sun. You can fertilise it, but you don't have control over when the fruit comes. It is self-view that thinks it knows when the fruits should come. That's not what you should be listening to. That's delusion. Trust the Kruba Ajahns. Trust the path. And trust that it will ripen in its own time. Really, I've seen many, many monks disrobe and somehow

I'm at twenty-one pansas and intending to continue. One of the things I diligently cultivate that many of my friends didn't is the brahmavihāras. I do think it's very helpful.

We should have faith in the Buddha, in the path of practice, in the Kruba Ajahns, in the teachings—and then in our own ability. It's very important. It's not possible that the nature of one being is different to the nature of another. So consider the fact that the Buddha could become a Buddha. He didn't start as a special being. He started as an ordinary being with greed, hatred, and delusion. At some point in his kammic history he probably had more greed, hatred, and delusion than we all have right now. This is important to reflect upon. But he kept training himself and didn't give up. We need a willingness to be patient with the process. Think about the Buddha spending four asankhya and a hundred thousand aeons to build the qualities and the virtue to be a Buddha. An aeon is the time encompassing the big bang and the expansion of the universe and then the universe contracting and burning up again. That's one aeon. And a hundred thousand aeons is the small part at the end, after the four asankhya the Buddha spent perfecting his qualities. Only a Buddha can measure that sheer amount of time. So I think it's good to challenge our impatience sometimes. It's good to challenge our expectation of quick results. If you really surrender to this training and this process, it doesn't matter when the results come. That's present moment Dhamma. It is how it is now. You keep practising and at some point there's going to be a moment where things change significantly. Until then, you do have small insights, which become bigger insights, which become deeper insights, which eventually become universe-exploding, liberating insights.

Check the levels of faith in your practice. Faith gives rise to energy. Sometimes we want to have faith in a place, but that's only one of the things you need to have faith in. No single place is going to be perfect. No single place is going to inspire you a lot. It might for a little while. When you come from your worldly life to Wat Nanachat it's very inspiring. When you stay here for six months it's less inspiring. Then you have to

maintain a perspective. Something you see in India is a lot of poorly behaved monks and even fake monks. There are robbers in robes selling bodhi leaves under the Bodhi Tree. When you come back to a place like Nanachat, trust me, it is inspiring!

You have to have enough faith in the place where you're training. You don't need great faith. What you need great faith in is the Buddha and the Kruba Ajahns. And you need faith in your ability. The other thing I want to suggest is that you need to have faith in effort. No one else can do this for you. This is something we have to give attention to. We have to put forth the effort. This is a kammic path. The Eightfold Path is a set of kammic conditions that lead to a state beyond kamma, but we have to use the conditions. We have to cultivate certain qualities and generate certain types of merit. Realising the unconditioned is the result, but we have to work with these causal conditions and put a lot of effort into it.

Ideally we're motivated by compassion and faith. This is different from being motivated by willpower. An idealistic self with an agenda doesn't actually produce a good quality of nourishing energy. If you can get some good energy from a correct quality of faith and take away or drop some of the things that sap energy you'll then find that when you put forth an effort, good energy arises. We then have to invest that energy in our effort to maintain consistent mindfulness. If you're mindful consistently throughout the day and you meditate every morning, afternoon, and evening, then you will develop samādhi and see things more clearly according to their characteristics. That's wisdom. Wisdom is seeing things according to their real characteristics, not according to delusion or misinterpretation. In terms of wanting profound results in this lifetime, I think it's wholesome, but it has to be held in a certain way. It can't be held with expectation. It's good to be determined to sow the causes, but without putting a timeframe on it. That's the tricky part.

I'm twenty-one pansas and a middle aged, grey-haired man now, but I'm not reducing my efforts. I don't want to be one of those monks who gets to twenty or thirty pansas and looks back and thinks that I was really inspired and practised hard as a young monk. Actually I wasn't very impressive as a young monk. I complained a lot, cried quite a bit in my kuti, and bitched and moaned about various things. I wasn't very impressive as a young bhikkhu, but I did have a strong quality of faith. And I did have quite a bit of courage and determination, in addition to the complaining. What I have faith in is slowly increasing your efforts over time and not giving up. If you do that, then you become capable of doing more than you thought you could and eventually you do get good results from your practice.

I kept a journal when I was in India and I'm going to share a few paragraphs with you. They capture some of what I was practising with. I wrote this when I'd reached day forty-two out of forty-five days of intensive retreat. It was the day I reached ninety-nine percent of my goal.

Today was the day I allowed myself to feel confident that I'm going to make it to three thousand hours. I haven't ever allowed myself to feel this since I completed the first thousand hours and made a vow to sit two thousand more. I knew finishing could not be taken for granted. There was a lot of hard work to be done and infinite potential for obstructions. For instance, the bomb scare the month before we arrived could have led to greater restrictions and made sitting all day an impossibility. Or a bomb could have actually exploded. The sharp pain I felt in my left knee on the first day could have gotten worse. The food poisoning and chest infection might have been followed by a more serious illness. The fatigue and exhaustion could have been more intense (especially if more weddings kept me from sleep!). I may have lacked the physical and mental energy to carry me through. Tripping up the staircase might have been truly debilitating, rather than just leaving an apple-sized bruise in shades of purple, red, and blue. Yet here I am, and day forty-two has come and gone!

Reaching the ninety-nine percent point of my goal was a watershed moment. An enormous pressure fell away from my heart and I shed quiet tears of joy and relief. By mid-afternoon, the end of this meditation marathon felt close. This has been the day I actually felt the true accomplishment of this task, and felt relieved of the enormous burden too. Those bittersweet yet delicious tears on the cushion this afternoon were hard won!

This meditation vow has never actually been about reaching a certain number. I have been clear about this from the beginning. Setting this goal was about forcing myself to commit even more deeply to a transformative process. It was about stretching my spiritual capacities and abilities and increasing the chances of experiencing true insight and deep peace. It was about taking several steps further along on a journey towards final liberation, and doing so in the very place where the Buddhas in this universe reached their final goal.

I have been deliberately working at the limit of my ability, stretching and stretching it further. It is possible to do more here if you have great faith and recollect the example and efforts of the Buddha. In meditation retreats, the five spiritual powers of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are developed a great deal. Lord Buddha explained them to be qualities that lead to enlightenment. Perhaps it's especially so in this place where there is much faith and spiritual energy. You couldn't meditate in Bodhgaya with all of its noisy, chaotic, crazy charm without great faith. This faith deepens further still through the practice.

My experience here has not only been one of struggle. I have known wonderful moments and periods of deep peace and seen the mind temporarily let go of all things that cause suffering. I have experienced extremely deep faith and gratitude towards the Buddha and this path. Sometimes my loving-kindness meditation became so vast that I could not have imagined it possible to feel such love. I have also been able

to experience profound equanimity towards the most extraordinary impingements, to a degree I would never have considered possible a few years ago. There were many other interesting and uplifting experiences I observed in meditation too. Suffice to say my practice at the Mahabodhi Temple has been very difficult at times but also wonderfully encouraging and rewarding.

In ending this talk I want to point out that if you'd told me ten years ago, when I had already been a monk for more than ten years, that I would repeatedly meditate ten hours a day in Bodhgaya for periods of a month-and-a-half, I don't think I would have believed it. Other senior monks, my good friends Ajahn Pavaro and Ajahn Nyaniko also joined me repeatedly on these occasions. So I would like to suggest that you should be willing to have a longer time frame than most. Don't just think about what you want to achieve within this month, one year, two years, or five years, but of what you might be able to do after a couple of decades, within one lifetime, and a few more lifetimes. Then I think you'll be able to do much more than you ever imagined. And I sincerely wish you every success in your practice and cultivation.



CHAPTER TWELVE

Mindfulness-Based Delusion Reduction

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*Mindfulness-Based Delusion Reduction **

The wonderful thing about the Buddha's teachings, practice, and training is that the basics are always relevant. In fact the basic training is what liberates people, because the basics deepen and deepen. People's understanding of those principles becomes more sophisticated and refined over time. As we know, we have the Noble Eightfold Path discovered by Lord Buddha. This is often abbreviated to a threefold training: *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*. That is, virtue, concentration or collectedness, and wisdom. Lord Buddha's teachings are also understood as a threefold training in *dāna* (generosity), *sīla* again, and *bhāvanā* (mental cultivation). I think for mental cultivation to be effective, holistic, and balanced, it needs to incorporate the last three of the five spiritual powers. They are *sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (right collectedness), and *paññā* (wisdom).

When Lord Buddha was in the process of becoming enlightened under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, his remarkable powers allowed him to recollect thousands of past lives. Seeing all of these births, resulting in death, he was wondering how he could avoid death, liberate himself from death, and realise something deathless. He considered that the cause of death was birth and then investigated further—what's the cause of birth? He was able to see it with his laser-like mental faculties. His capacity to focus combined right concentration with sustained, focused reflection, and he was able to discern that the root cause of birth was ignorance.

Because beings are ignorant, they're affected by craving. There's craving for pleasant experiences; there's a kind of inverted craving, experienced as aversion toward that which is not liked; and there is

**This talk was given on the eve of the Kathina ceremony at Anandagiri Monastery, October 2018.*

craving for becoming. Ignorant beings perceive things as self and other, which is valid in terms of conventions. However, Lord Buddha was able to see the problem in this. It is actually a view, a way of seeing things. It's an assumption, a convention, and also a deep habit. As it turns out, it's a very bad habit. Lord Buddha was able to perceive something deeper and more dependable: that conventionally there is a self, but ultimately there isn't one. To come to this understanding takes a lot of contemplation, the kind with enough power to weaken and uproot ignorance. There also needs to be a certain type of collectedness, *samādhi*, and then the direct insight to see that everything arises and ceases. The body changes from its time in the womb, becoming a few cells, then a young child, a teenager, an adult. The process of ageing culminates in death. It's constant change. Every thought, feeling, mind state, emotion, and the body—all of it is constantly changing.

It was the Buddha's wise reflection, his penetrative insight, which uprooted and destroyed ignorance. When ignorance is uprooted and destroyed, what remains is the clear knowing of the truth of the way things are. Because we don't know this, we're affected by delusion. We perceive things incorrectly. Applying mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom uproots and weakens ignorance and then the mind directly perceives ultimate truth. It sees that the self is a convention. While we refer to the body as 'me' and 'mine', it is actually just a form arising due to conditions. Feelings arise due to conditions. They stay for some time, change, and cease. All thoughts and all conventions—past, present, future, oneself, and others—arise and cease, but there's no inherent, unchanging, stable self there.

Let's go back to *dāna*, generosity, for a minute. Along with *sīla*, ethical conduct, and *bhāvanā*, mental cultivation, this is the path that leads to complete liberation from all suffering. It's important to consider the profound role *dāna* plays in this training. We train ourselves to give physical things, give up some of our time, or some of the money that we worked hard for. In the beginning we might give because it feels good.

It also gives others some happiness, helps them, or relieves them from a certain type of difficulty or suffering. But on a deeper level, we're training ourselves to relinquish. This has profound implications, because it leads to having the capacity to keep *śīla*, to keep the five precepts, and maintain ethical conduct.

Being able to relinquish is very important when it comes to keeping the precepts, because certain desires will come up. If you've made a commitment to keeping the precepts, you can't follow those desires. You have to relinquish the desire. If you can't completely relinquish it, you have to contain it and be patient with it. However, generosity trains us to be able to let go of craving. Craving is a dangerous thing. Lord Buddha explained that there is no river that floods as violently and variously as the craving in beings' minds. If we follow our craving in an unabated way, it leads to terrible things. People hurt other people's feelings, they cheat, steal, and even rape, all by following their cravings and their greed. On a bigger level still, people in power invade other countries to increase their power. They send in armies to destroy other nations. This is how far craving can go.

We obviously don't want to be a king, a prime minister, or a president who decides to destroy a country in the future. We would prefer to be a Buddha, a bodhisattva, or an arahant. That means relinquishing craving and keeping the precepts. That means you can't kill another being, no matter how angry you are or no matter how much they might have hurt your feelings. Likewise you can't steal. You simply can't do it. You can't tell a lie. You can't have sexual pleasure with someone else's partner; you have to be sexually responsible. And you can't get intoxicated. Desires to do these things in some form can keep coming up in the mind until one is an *anāgāmi* (a 'once returner' whose mind is liberated from all greed and hatred, and who has just one remaining life). So the ability to restrain craving and desire is central to our practice.

Craving and aversion manifest in various ways. We need to be able

to see a craving and recognise it, as sometimes certain types of desires aren't all unwholesome. It requires mindfulness with clear comprehension to discern those desires that need to be relinquished, those that need to be contained, and those that need to be resisted. Otherwise we can fall habitually under their sway.

Underpinning this is faith, the first of the five spiritual powers. I'm going to talk more about this list because it covers things simply and holistically. When you have faith in the value of not following your desires, because you have faith in your enlightenment potential, you can follow the path that the Buddha laid down. You too can walk the path that led to his liberation. You have faith that following the path leads to incredible consequences in terms of your own future happiness. When you have to resist a desire—and as we know, desires can be very strong—you have faith in the value of not following it. You have faith in the value of patiently enduring and the value of relinquishing. So faith is very important. It makes renunciation easier.

After Lord Buddha was enlightened, on one of the weeks before he wandered off and started teaching others he reviewed what had led him to his incredible realisation. He was able to see that the five spiritual powers 'lead to the Deathless, merge in the Deathless'. He also said the same about the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. I think this is very pertinent. After his complete and utter enlightenment, his abandonment of greed, hatred, and delusion, Lord Buddha was able to distil this simple list of five faculties that can be developed into powers. Faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom lead to the Deathless and merge in the Deathless.

This brings us back to *dāna*, because one of the things we have faith in is being generous. We Buddhist practitioners also have faith in the Sangha. We practise generosity towards the Sangha because we understand the Sangha has predominantly handed down Lord Buddha's teachings to us. We feel grateful. Ajahn Ganhā, who was a nephew of Luang Por

Chah, once said the Buddha sāsana (the dispensation of the Buddha) is not actually monks and nuns. The way he saw it, the Buddha sāsana is mindfulness and wisdom. He said that beings who have mindfulness with wisdom are the Buddha sāsana in the world. Some monks are good. Those monks hopefully have a good quality of mindfulness and good wisdom. But many monks are not practising well. They're just wearing a robe. That's not the Sangha. On the other hand, there are some laypeople that really make efforts at being generous, keeping the precepts, and meditating. They start to have a firm and resolute quality of clarity and to see things according to deeper truth—they see the impermanent nature of phenomena, the unsatisfactory aspect of conditions, and begin to have some insights into not-self. Such a layperson can be a more noble part of the Sangha than a monk or nun who doesn't keep their rules or meditate. I thought that was an interesting insight, an interesting way of looking at the Buddha's teachings and practice.

Energy, the second spiritual power, arises from faith. It also arises from keeping precepts. When you keep the precepts, craving energy isn't flowing out of your mind all the time. Good energy builds up in your mind and lays the foundation for samādhi, or collectedness.

Again, the order is saddhā (faith), viriya (energy), then sati. And what is mindfulness? Ajahn Munindo sometimes refers to it as truth discerning awareness. We often hear teachings these days about just being mindful. What does it mean to just be mindful? I think we can delude ourselves, following all sorts of desires and telling ourselves we're just being mindful. You could watch another movie, smoke a joint, have one more beer and 'just be mindful'. I think a lot of Buddhists in Western countries are practising Buddhism in quite creative ways that were probably not recommended by the Lord Buddha.

Consider the fact that there is fuzzy mindfulness, poor mindfulness, weak mindfulness, and scattered mindfulness. Everybody has some mindfulness. You couldn't put on your shoes, drive a car, open the door,

or go to the bathroom without it. You know what you're doing with your body and where you're going. But that doesn't mean that it's good mindfulness. This is where keeping ethical precepts is important. It gives the mind a certain integrity and clarity, in which the mind doesn't spill out through following sensual cravings, acting on aversions, and saying everything you think. When you keep ethical precepts and try not to practise harsh speech, not to lie, and to be careful with speech habits, you notice the mind develops more clarity. So mindfulness is like a presence of mind. It's an awareness that pervades or embraces the phenomena of the body and the mind. In addition, mindfulness is often coupled with 'clear comprehension'. This adds the wisdom component. That's why I love the five spiritual powers—they're comprehensive. When people talk about mindfulness but don't include wisdom, it's not a whole training and it's not going to be effective. Actually you need several components functioning in the mind. The Eightfold Path is sometimes described as being like a wheel. We have a sandstone carving of a Dhamma wheel on a post in the middle of our monastery. But the Dhamma wheel isn't the sandstone image—it turns in beings' minds. Right view, right thought, right speech, right action, and the rest, function in your mind.

Practising meditation is how we sharpen and clarify our mindfulness even further. When you try to be with one object, such as the breath, for a period of time each day, then you're training mindfulness to be aware of one phenomenon rather than being scattered. Trying to be mindful of everything at the same time isn't helpful. Perhaps you hear an insect, hear somebody else wriggling on their mat, feel a sensation in your toe, and various other things. If you send your mindfulness out all around while trying to be aware of everything, you'll end up with a weak quality of mindfulness. You'll have a scattered mind. However, if you train in restraint for periods of time, just trying to be aware of the feelings of in- and out-breathing (*ānāpānasati*), then you're not giving attention to other things. You might hear a sound but you're not listening to it. You might be aware of a thought, but you're not thinking it. You're not following along. Then energy stops flowing out the sense bases, and

stops flowing out into concepts of past and future; and your clarity becomes more palpable, more present, and more powerful. Because of that it becomes more discriminating, more discerning. That's how it's able to see things as they are more correctly and truthfully.

A good quality of mindfulness will see things according to their characteristics. It will know a body as a body and forms as forms. It knows a feeling as just a feeling—arising, remaining for some time, ceasing. It notices impermanence. It sees a thought arising, a feeling in the heart, liking, and not liking. Mindfulness can see the way things overlap and the way the mind can fall into reactions. If the quality of mindfulness is very good, however, oftentimes the mind won't fall into a reaction. It can simply be aware of a pleasant feeling or an unpleasant feeling. If mindfulness is good, less craving tends to arise.

So if we have faith and we practise mindfulness in all postures and practise meditation, energy arises in the mind. This lays the foundation for samādhi. Samādhi is often described as concentration, though I prefer right collectedness. Sammā-samādhi is a certain collected quality in the mind. We started with being generous. It weakens greed and hatred. It also produces merit and the mind becomes brighter. Then you have good energy in the mind and can develop samādhi. Ajahn Maha Boowa talked about the energy of the kilesas walking all over your mind like it's a doormat. Greed and hatred, they're kilesas. He encouraged people to put up a fight against them and not let these energies have their own way. When we restrain them, we relinquish our desires; we practise generosity; the darkening qualities of greed, hatred, and delusion lessen. Mindfulness with clear comprehension, concentration, and wisdom are the direct antidote. When you practise these things the mind becomes brighter. You should notice a feeling of lightness in the body and mind.

When these things are in place, you can start to experience right collectedness. You might be practising mindfulness of breathing and the

mind can become quite collected, bright, and still. This becomes wisdom. Wisdom sees arising and ceasing. It questions how this phenomenon that is constantly arising and ceasing can be a permanent self. Wisdom sees that it's not. The self is a convention. Ultimately, the body's just a body, thoughts are just thoughts, and feelings are just feelings.

All of the spiritual powers work together to chip away at ignorance and weaken craving. Then you begin to have insights into what's actually true. For a mind that starts to have insights, suffering, or dukkha (First Noble Truth) falls away from the mind. The cause of dukkha is ignorance, delusion, and craving (Second Noble Truth). The Eightfold Path leads to the cessation of dukkha (Fourth Noble Truth). You start to glimpse and experience a mind that doesn't contract around a self-view. You might have what Ajahn Anan calls 'temporary liberations', experiences where you're aware of the body, aware of sounds, and aware of feelings, but without a sense of self. The sense of self can fall away for periods of time, in which case there's an absence of suffering (Third Noble Truth). This is where we realise that the self-view can be a harmful thing.

Perceiving things in terms of self—things I like and don't like, people I like and don't like, and places I like and don't like—is a lot of suffering. There has to be a self there to like and not like. If there's no self, it's just a feeling. There's a pleasant feeling or an unpleasant feeling. A mind that has some equanimity and composure isn't affected by a pleasant or unpleasant feeling. This is where samādhi becomes a place the mind can rest. You see how these factors overlap and help brighten the mind and reduce suffering. Of course the practice deepens and deepens, so that small insights and temporary liberations become profound insights and, eventually, complete, final liberation. Some of us are fortunate to have met beings who have completely realised this. It's really wonderful. More than 2,500 years after the Buddha's final Nibbāna, there are still beings who practise correctly and experience this.

Earlier today a monk friend of mine came to visit. Thailand has lots

of interesting monks. Some of them are interesting in a good way, and some in a not-so-good way. This monk is interesting in a good way. He's twenty-nine but everybody calls him Luang Pu, which means Venerable Grandfather. He remembers his past life when he was the old monk in the village. He was reborn in the same village, and that's why the villagers still call him Venerable Grandfather, as if he was the same monk. He's also missing a certain gland that causes ageing, so although he's twenty-nine he looks about fourteen. Yet everybody calls him Venerable Grandfather!

Now this monk has some skill and was telling me how he had *jhāna samādhi* from his first *pansa*. He felt that's all he needed, to enter *jhāna*, go beyond the five hindrances, and rest in deep peacefulness. So he wanted to live alone. He didn't want to bother with people. He thought that was enough. So many Buddhists struggle to have an experience of *samādhi*. Everybody wants *jhāna*, and wants to know what it would be like to have blissful, rapturous, cool *samādhi*. I'm sure it's wonderful. But what happened is that this monk's *jhāna* degenerated, even though he was living alone and though he was quite adept. Because he still had aversion present and he'd been neglecting other aspects of his practice, his *jhāna* degenerated. In response, he nearly committed suicide.

I sometimes tell people, 'You shouldn't be too worried if you don't get your *jhāna samādhi* together very quickly, because whatever efforts you put into developing your mindfulness and clear comprehension, being patient with craving, enduring, not following them, is actually developing important spiritual faculties. You're developing your mindfulness. You're developing patient endurance. You're developing a capacity to be content with the way things are, even though they're not yet perfect'. Wisdom grows. My teachers, the disciples of Ajahn Chah, have taught me that way. And so this beautiful, amazing monk who got his *samādhi* together in the first year almost killed himself when it degenerated. He told me there was a pair of grass cutters. He was looking at them and was going to use them to slash his wrists.

It's important to recognise that if we don't weaken craving and

if we don't have mindfulness of these craving energies, then that very craving energy will attach to samādhi. And then if you get separated from that which is loved, there's suffering. The news is full of stories of bitter, jaded, jilted lovers who kill the person their partner had an affair with. Sometimes they kill the person that they were in love with, because they don't love them anymore. Affection, or strong craving with attachment, can become hatred if mindfulness and wisdom aren't present. Similarly, this monk was perfectly content with samādhi for a while, but when it degenerated he experienced profound grief, dissatisfaction, and longing.

I asked this monk, 'Where do you think you would have been reborn if you'd done that'? He said in a ghost realm, a hell realm, or an animal realm. That is probably the case, because the mind in that state is very unwholesome. A mind going from a Brahma deva state to a depressed, negative state could have wound up in hell. And this happened to someone who already has samādhi. This is why I love the list of the five spiritual powers. You need to have mindfulness and wisdom as well as samādhi. If all three of those rest on your foundation of generosity and ethical conduct and your faith in the Buddha, then you're going to have a very balanced, powerful practice. And it will all come together in the right ways when the time is right.

The good news is this monk had some insight about how to practise in a more balanced way. He said that jhāna samādhi is like being in the shade of a tree. However, when you come out from the shade you are faced with greed, hatred, and delusion, the hindrances that come back, and it's like being in the baking sun. It's hot again. Then if you don't have jhāna you're stuck with the heat. He said a good quality of mindfulness—resilient, pervasive, clear presence of mind—is like having an umbrella. Then you come out of the samādhi and you take this with you. You're walking in the heat, but you have some protection. You're able to see pleasant feelings as just feelings, unpleasant feelings as just feelings, thoughts as just thoughts, and not create a really big sense of self that falls in love or falls into hate, or is going to become a Brahma deva

or a hell being. That good quality of mindfulness is what understands that thoughts and feelings arise due to conditions, stay for some time, change, and cease. Curiously, this monk said that once he maintained his mindfulness more consistently with wise reflection, *jhāna* returned and it hasn't degenerated since. Outside of that time he experiences very little suffering because he's able to discern phenomena as they really are without grasping.

So we practise generosity, relinquishment, keeping precepts, and we put our craving into a wholesome place, a place of aspiration. We aspire to realise what the Buddha realised. We aspire to realise what the arahants realised. That's a very wholesome aspiration. In Pali it's called 'chanda'. That's how we train ourselves. Whereas in the past we might have loved diamonds, French champagne, and Ferraris, we train ourselves to love the Buddha. We love the path of training. We love the noble enlightened beings. We love the bodhisattvas. We train ourselves to have a more impartial and broad love, a love that embraces all beings equally. You will experience a lot more happiness and pleasure from that kind of love. It's pure *mettā*, an impartial and kind disposition towards all beings equally.

Lord Buddha said this training is like refining gold. We take out the silt, the black stuff, and refine gold so all that's left is the wholesome. It's a process of recognising what isn't wholesome, and training to relinquish and contain that. Small relinquishments become great relinquishments, because what we eventually put down in the training is ignorance. We put down attachment to self-view. We put down cravings. Our practice of generosity is a training in giving things up. Eventually you give up all of the causes of suffering. And what's left? Unshakeable peace.

This path is a noble training, a wonderful training. The longer I've studied and practised Buddhism, the more I get the sense that *samsāra* is very long. We've been at this for a long, long time. Progress can seem slow, so it's good to consider the fact that you've already come a long way. How much further there is to go I don't know. It depends just how much

one has practised. However, Ajahn Anan says that even if you don't attain the first stage of enlightenment in this lifetime, practising *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā* reduces your number of future lives. So it's not that you're not progressing. You are. Perhaps not as quickly as you'd like, but what else can we do? We just keep going. I offer this for your reflection and I hope it's helpful. I rejoice in your practice of *dāna*, *sīla*, and *bhāvanā*, and I hope that your spiritual faculties become truly powerful and that those powers lead you to the Deathless and merge in the Deathless.



GLOSSARY

anāgāmi - one who has attained the third of the four stages of enlightenment and has cut through the five fetters of self-view, clinging to rites and rituals, skeptical doubt, sensuous craving, and ill will or aversion

anicca - impermanence

anattā - not-self; that there is no unchanging, permanent self or soul

Ajahn - (Thai) respectful term meaning teacher; a common term of address for monks who have passed ten rains retreats

arahant - one who has attained enlightenment and gone beyond suffering

Ariya Sangha - assembly of noble ones; those who have attained to any of the four stages of enlightenment

asankhya - also asamkhyeya; an 'incalculable' period, a vast measure of cosmic time bhāvanā development or cultivation

asura - a demigod characterised by wrath, pride and envy, one of the forms one can take in rebirth according to Buddhist cosmology

bhajan - Indian devotional song

Bhante - a respectful term of address for Buddhist monks in the Theravada tradition

bhikkhu - an ordained male monastic; a monk

Bodhisattva - a person who is on the path towards buddhahood; the Buddha before he attained enlightenment

brahmavihāras - also known as the Four Immeasurables or the Divine Abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, empathic or appreciative joy, and equanimity

chedi - a stupa; a mound-like structure usually containing relics that is a place of devotional practice and meditation

dāna generosity; gift, alms, donation

Deathless, the - see Nibbāna

deva - a being who has taken birth in a heaven realm

Dhamma - (Sanskrit: Dharma) the Buddha's teachings

dhātu` - element, substrate

dukkha - unsatisfactoriness of conditions

deva a being who has taken birth in a heaven realm

Eightfold Path - see Noble Eightfold Path

five spiritual powers - faith (saddhā), energy (virīya), mindfulness (sati), concentration (samādhi), and wisdom (pañña)

Four Noble Truths - the first teaching given by the Buddha. The truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, that suffering can be overcome, and the path to end suffering.

jhāna - one-pointed absorption in meditation

jongrom - walking meditation, usually taking the form of walking back and forth along a prescribed path

kamma - (Sanskrit: karma) the principle of cause and effect; wholesome actions diminish suffering and lead to future positive experiences, whereas unwholesome actions lead to negative experiences

kammic - (Sanskrit: karmic) pertaining to kamma

khandas - aggregates or heaps: namely form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness

kilesas - defilements; unwholesome states that cloud the mind; the three unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion

Kruba Ajahns - (Thai) senior monastic teachers, commonly used in northern Thailand

kuti - small hut or lodging for a monk or nun

loka dhātu - world element

Luang Por - (Thai) Venerable Father, a term of respect for senior monks mahasati (see sati) great mindfulness, recollection, or awareness

Mae Chee - (Thai) an eight-precept nun. The eight precepts are to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual activity, false speech, intoxicants, eating after midday, dancing, music, and adornments, and sleeping on a high bed

Mahāparinibbāna - the great parinibbana of the Buddha; although Buddha attained enlightenment during his lifetime, upon death and the dissolution of the body he was released from the cycle of samsara and all rebirth—he attained parinibanna. See also Nibbana.

mandala - a circular figure symbolically representing the universe

Māra - a demonic celestial being who challenged the Buddha before his enlightenment

mettā - loving-kindness, unconditional friendliness

Middle Way - the Buddha's path of moderation between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification

ñānas - insight knowledges; various stages that one is said to pass through on the way to Nibbāna

Nibbāna - (Sanskrit: Nirvana) the goal of the Buddhist path; liberation from suffering and otherwise endless rounds of rebirth

nibbida - disenchantment, revulsion

Noble Eightfold Path - the path to liberation taught by the Buddha: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration

Pali - a literary language of classical India in which the Buddha's teachings were first recorded

pañcavaggiyā - the name given to the five ascetics Buddha preached his first sermon to. They had been his companions prior to his enlightenment, but abandoned him when he renounced the path of austerities in favour of practising the Middle Way

pañña - (Sanskrit: prajñā) wisdom; insight into reality

pansa - (Thai) also vassa; rains retreat

pāramī - (Sanskrit: pāramitā) perfection. The ten perfections in Theravada Buddhism are: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom,

energy, patient endurance, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity

precepts - training rules governing ethical conduct. The five precepts commonly observed by lay-Buddhists are refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. The eight precepts further include refraining from taking meals after midday, abstaining from dancing, music and other entertainments as well as wearing makeup, jewellery or other adornments, and refraining from taking a high or luxurious sleeping place

puja - a religious ceremony which may include chanting, offerings, and reflection

saddhā - faith, the first of the five spiritual powers

sadhu - an ascetic, sage, or holy man; an expression meaning good, excellent, or auspicious

sakadāgāmi - once-returner; a partially enlightened being who will be reborn into the realm of the senses once more at most

samādhi - collectedness; mental calm; a concentrated, equanimous state of mind

samana - a seeker; an ascetic; one who has entered the holy life

samatha - calmness; tranquillity of mind

sammā-samādhi - right concentration; right collectedness; the eighth factor of the Noble Eightfold Path

sammā-sati - right mindfulness; the seventh factor of the Noble Eightfold Path

samsāra - the repetitive cycle of birth and death; one who is liberated from samsara has attained Nibbāna

samsāric - pertaining to samsāra

sangha - community of those who follow the Buddhist path; often more specifically those who are undergoing monastic training

samkhāra - mental formations; volitional formations

sasana - teaching, practice, or doctrine; the Buddha sasana is the teaching of the Buddha

sati - mindfulness, awareness, recollection

sīla - morality; ethical or virtuous conduct

sotāpanna - one who has attained the first of the four stages of enlightenment and has cut through the three fetters of self-view, clinging to rites and rituals, and skeptical doubt

stream enterer - see sotāpanna

sutta - (Sanskrit: sūtra) discourses of the Buddha; Buddhist scripture

upādāna - clinging; grasping; attachment

vihāra - Buddhist temple, monastery, or central hall

Vinaya - the rules and procedures that govern the Buddhist monastic community

virāga - disillusionment, detachment, fading away

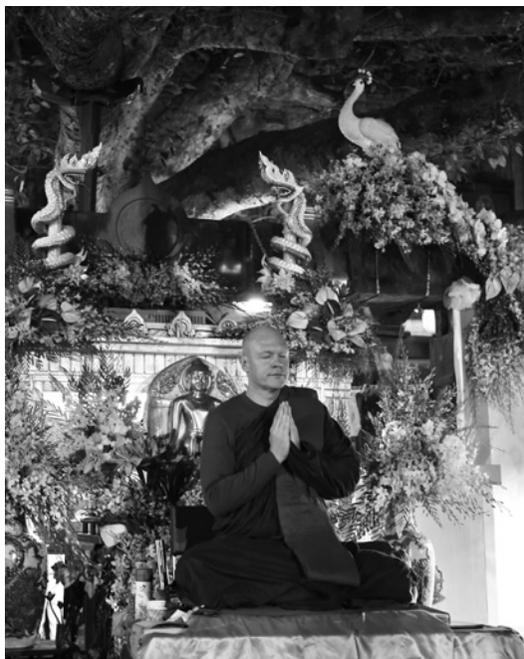
virya - energy, diligence, enthusiasm, effort

wat - (Thai) temple

yakkha - (also yaksha) a class of nature spirits. In Thailand, sculptures of yakkhas resemble ogres and commonly guard the gates of Buddhist temples



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This book contains a collection of twelve talks selected from intensive meditation retreats, teachings given at Buddhist centres and from pilgrimage in India. Covering a diverse selection of subjects including...Going for and understanding Refuge...the Threefold Training in generosity, ethics and meditation...Practising with the Four Foundations of Mindfulness...Cultivating the Four Brahmavihara...and Developing the Five Spiritual Powers. There is an emphasis upon developing Compassion as well as understanding, and harnessing the power of Faith.

Ajahn Achalo was born in Australia in 1972 and went forth as a bhikkhu at Wat Nong Pah Pong in Ubon Rachathani province, Northeast Thailand in July 1997. His teachers include Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Anan and Ajahn Jayasaro. He currently lives at Anandagiri Forest Monastery in Petchabun province in Northern Thailand.