



The Way It Is

Ajahn Sumedho

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A NOTE BEFORE YOU BEGIN



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

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

During this monastic retreat, Ajahn Sumedho offered reflections based on the dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) teaching of the Buddha. The dependent origination traces the process whereby suffering (*dukkha*) is compounded out of ignorance (*avijjā*), and conversely suffering is eliminated (or rather

not created) with the cessation of ignorance. Ajahn Sumedho suggests that in terms of direct experience, ignorance is the illusion of selfhood, the conceit ‘this is what I am, this I am not’, that is a prime condition for the arising of suffering.

This sense of identity can be detected in a latent state as self-consciousness, or as a habitual mood of the mind – such as conceit or self-criticism – or it can manifest as selfish bodily or verbal activity. The profundity of the dependent origination is that it describes how even at its most passive, this ‘self-view’ initiates habitual actions (*kamma*) and attitudes through which even a silent and well-intentioned meditator experiences suffering.

These habitual actions range from sustained thoughts, inclinations and attitudes on the ‘internal’, psychological plane to the ‘outer’ realm of verbal and bodily action. All such intentional activity is termed *saṅkhāra*. Even moral action based on self-view can lead to anxiety, doubt, ‘sorrow, grief, pain, lamentation and despair.’ Such is the meaning of the first ‘link’ of dependent origination ‘*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*’, or ‘dependent on ignorance are kammic formations.’

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

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

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

*‘avijjāyatveva asesavirāgaṇirodhā saṅkhāranirodho,
saṅkhāranirodhā viññāṇanirodho, viññāṇanirodhā
nāmarūpanirodho, nāmarūpanirodhā saḷāyatanaṇirodho,
saḷāyatanaṇirodhā phassaṇirodho, phassaṇirodhā
vedanāṇirodho, vedanāṇirodhā taṅhāṇirodho, taṅhāṇirodhā
upādāṇanirodho, upādāṇanirodhā bhavaṇirodho,
bhavaṇirodhā jātinirodho, jātinirodhā jarāmaṇaṃ
soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā nirujjhanti,
evametassa kevalassa dukkhakkhandhāsa nirodho boti’*

In English this can be translated as: ‘Dependent on ignorance are habitual formations; dependent on habitual (*kamma*) formations is consciousness; dependent on consciousness are name-and-form (mentality-corporeality); dependent on name-and-form are the six sense-bases; dependent on the six sense-bases is contact; dependent on contact is feeling; dependent on feeling is desire; dependent on desire is grasping; dependent on grasping is becoming; dependent on becoming is birth; dependent on birth is old age, sickness and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

‘Through the entire ceasing of this ignorance habitual formations cease; through the ceasing of habitual formations consciousness ceases; through the ceasing of consciousness name-and-form cease; through the ceasing of name-and-form the six sense-bases cease; through the ceasing of the six sense-bases contact ceases; through the ceasing of contact feeling ceases; through the ceasing of feeling desire ceases; through the ceasing of desire grasping ceases; through the ceasing of grasping becoming ceases; through the ceasing

of becoming birth ceases; through the ceasing of birth old age, sickness and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to cease. Thus is the ceasing of this whole mass of suffering.’

There are many forms of dependence that are concerned in this analysis. It is helpful to remember that *paccaya* can mean ‘dependent on’, ‘supports’ or ‘conditions’. It does not necessarily mean ‘creates’. For example one could say ‘walking is dependent on legs’ or ‘ice is dependent on water’ or ‘catching the train is dependent on getting to the station at the right time’ or even ‘the view is dependent on the non-appearance of intervening objects.’ Understanding this, the contemplative begins to realize that just as ‘arising dependence’ need not mean ‘creation’, the ‘cessation’ so valued by the Buddha need not mean ‘annihilation’, but may also be understood as ‘comes to rest’ or ‘doesn’t create anything.’ So in this lifetime, when *nibbāna* is to be realized, mentality-corporeality can ‘cease’ – i.e. the identification with physical and mental kamma-formations can cease so that life is no longer lived from the pleasure/pain principle dictated by the senses (*nāma-rūpa-salāyatana-phassa-vedanā-taṅhā*). In this spirit one could interpret the sequence in a more fluid way, for example:

‘To the extent to which (*paccaya*) the mind has not comprehended (*avijjā*) Truth, habitual drives (*sankhāra*) manifest and condition (*paccaya*) awareness into a discriminative mode (*viññāṇa*) that operates in terms of (*paccaya*) subject and object (*nāmarūpa*) held (*paccaya*) to exist on either side of the six sense-doors (*salāyatana*). These sense-doors open dependent (*paccaya*) on contact (*phassa*) that can arouse (*paccaya*) varying degrees of feeling (*vedanā*). Feeling stimulates

(*paccaya*) desire (*taṅhā*) and, according to (*paccaya*) the power of desire, attention lingers (*upādāna*) and so personal aims and obsessions develop (*bhava*) to give (*paccaya*) rise to self-consciousness (*jāti*). That self-consciousness, mental or physical, once arisen must follow (*paccaya*) the cycle of maturing and passing away (*jarā-maraṇa*) with the resultant sense of sadness (*soka*) varying from sorrow (*parideva*) to depression (*domanassa*), to anguish (*dukkha*) and emotional breakdown (*upāyāsa*).

‘When the mind looks into the sense of loss and comprehends Truth (*avijjā-nirodha*), habitual drives cease (*saṅkhāra-nirodha*) and the awareness is no longer bound by discrimination (*viññāṇa-nirodha*); so that the separation of the subject and object is no longer held (*nāmarūpa-nirodha*) and one does not feel trapped behind or pulled out through the six sense-doors (*saḷāyatana-nirodha*). The sense-doors open for reflection, rather than being dependent on contact (*phassa-nirodha*) and impingement does not impress itself into the mind (*vedanā-nirodha*). So there is freedom from desire (*taṅhā-nirodha*) and attention does not get stuck (*upādāna-nirodha*) and grow into selfish motivations (*bhava-nirodha*) that centre around and reinforce the ego (*jāti-nirodha*). When no personal image is created, it can never bloat up, nor can it be destroyed (*jarā-maraṇa-nirodha*). So there is nothing to lose, a sense of gladness, uplift, joy and serenity (*soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsa-nirodha*).’

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

Ajahn Sucitto
1990 (revised 2025)



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

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

Before you came to this retreat, you may have been having problems at home and thinking, 'I can hardly wait until I go on retreat.' And then here you wish, 'I can hardly wait for the retreat to end.' Maybe you become very tranquil sitting there and thinking, 'I want to be like this all the time', or you try to attain that blissful state you had yesterday but instead become more and more upset. When you achieve these nice blissful states you grasp them, but then you have to get something to eat or do something, so you feel bad at losing the blissful state. Or maybe you haven't been having any blissful states at all, just

a lot of miserable memories, anger and frustration arising. But everyone else is blissful, so you feel upset because everybody else seems to be getting something from this retreat except you

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

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



2 | RETURNING TO THE WAY THINGS ARE

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

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

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

on the water we're swimming in. We can observe the sensory realm for what it is. We're not trying to get rid of it. We're not complicating it by trying to add to it – we're just being aware of it as it is. We're no longer deluding ourselves by appearances, by fears, desires and all the things we create in our mind about it.

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

Now we're not judging it; we're not saying it's good or it's bad, or you should like it, or you shouldn't; we're just bringing attention to it – like the water. The sensory realm is a realm of feeling. We are born into it and we feel it. From the time the umbilical cord is severed we're physically independent beings; we're no longer physically tied to anybody else. We feel hunger; we feel pleasure; we feel pain, heat, and cold. As we grow, we feel all kinds of things. We feel with the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body; and, through thinking and remembering, the mind can also generate feeling.

All this feeling can be lots of fun and wonderful, but it can also be depressing, mean and miserable; or it can be neutral – neither pleasant nor painful. So all sensory impingement is ‘the way it is’. Pleasure is this way; pain is this way. The feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is this way. To be able to truly reflect on these things, you have to be alert and attentive. Some people think that it is up to me to tell them how it is: ‘Ajahn Sumedho, how should I be feeling right now?’ But we’re not telling anybody how it is; we’re being open and receptive to how it is. There’s no need to tell someone how it is when they can find out for themselves. So this two months of finding out how it is, is a valuable opportunity. Many human beings, it seems, are not even aware that such a development of wisdom is possible.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Yet conventionally, one can be all these things – a man, an American, a Buddhist, a Theravadin; these are merely perceptions of mind. They are adequate for communication;

but they're nothing more than that. They're what is called *sammuttidhamma* – 'conventional reality'. When I say: 'I'm Ajahn Sumedho,' that's not a self, not a person; it's a convention. Being a Buddhist monk is not a person – it's a convention; being a man is not a person, it's a convention. Conventions are as they are. When we attach to them out of ignorance, we become bound and limited. That's the sticky web! We're blinded; being deluded by the convention.

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

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

With mindfulness we can open to the totality. In the beginning of this retreat, we open to the whole two months. On the first day, we've already accepted in full awareness all possibilities: sickness and health, success and failure, happiness and suffering, enlightenment or total despair. We're not thinking: 'I'm only going to get ... I only want to have ... I want to have

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

If we practise this way, then despair and anguish take us to calm and peace. When I was in Thailand I had a lot of these negative states – loneliness, boredom, anxiety, doubt, worry and despair. But accepted as they are, they cease. And what's left when there's no more despair? The Dhamma that we're looking at now is subtle. Not subtle in the sense that it's high up – it's so ordinary, so very much here and now that we don't notice it. Just like the water for the fish. Water is so much a part of its life the fish doesn't notice it; even though it's swimming in it. Sensory consciousness is here, now. It's this way. It's not distant. It's not really difficult. It's just a matter of paying attention to it. The way out of suffering is the way of mindfulness: mindful-awareness or wisdom.

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

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

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



3 | INVESTIGATING THE MIND

The root of suffering is what we call *avijjā* – not knowing or ignorance of the way things really are. This is the basic ignorance of not understanding our true nature. We suffer because of views and opinions, habits and conditions which we do not understand. We live our lives in a state of ignorance, not understanding the way things are. If you listen to yourself very much, you can sometimes hear such statements as, ‘I should do this but I shouldn’t do that’, ‘I should be this way, I shouldn’t be that way’; or that the world should be other than it is, or our parents should be this way or that way, and shouldn’t be the way they are. We have this word ‘should’ ringing through our minds because we have an idea of what shouldn’t be or should be. In meditation, listen to that opinion within yourself of what should be and what shouldn’t be; just listen to it.

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

should have wise leaders, the world should be at peace and so forth. But the world is as it is at this moment in time, and things are as they are. When we don't understand this we will struggle. So listen inwardly to yourselves, to the constant crying, 'I am this way, I am not this way,' and penetrate this 'I am, I am not' with awareness.

We tend just to react and take it for granted that 'I am' and 'I am not' are the truth. We create ourselves as a personality and attach to our memories. We remember the things we learnt, we remember what we've done – generally the more extreme things, we tend to forget more ordinary things. So if we do unkind, cruel, foolish things, we have unpleasant memories in our lives and feel ashamed or guilty. If we do good things, charitable things, kind things, we have good memories in our lives.

When you start reflecting on this you will be more careful about what you do and you say, because if you have lived your life foolishly – acting on impulse out of desire for immediate gratification or an intention to hurt or cause disharmony or exploit others – you are going to be faced with a mind filled with very unpleasant memories. People who have led very selfish lives often have to drink a lot, take drugs or keep themselves constantly occupied, so they don't have to look at the memories that come up in the mind.

In the awakening process of meditation we are bringing awareness to the conditions of the mind here and now, just by being aware of this sense of 'I am, I am not.' Contemplate the feelings of pain or pleasure, the memories, thoughts and opinions, as impermanent, *anicca*. The characteristic of

transience is common to all conditions. How many of you have really investigated this in every possible way while sitting, standing or lying down? Investigate what you see with your eye, hear with your ear, taste with your tongue, smell with your nose, feel and experience with your body, think with your mind.

The thought ‘I am’ is an impermanent condition. The thought ‘I am not’ is an impermanent condition. Thoughts, memories, consciousness of thinking, the body itself, our emotions – all conditions change. So, in the practice of meditation, you must be quite serious, brave and courageous. You must really investigate, dare to look at even the most unpleasant conditions in life, rather than try to escape, to seek tranquillity or forget about everything. In fact, in *vipassanā* meditation the practice is one of looking into suffering; it’s a confrontation with ourselves, with what we think of ourselves, with our memories, and our emotions, pleasant, unpleasant or indifferent. In other words, when these things arise and we are aware of suffering, we take the opportunity to examine it rather than rejecting, repressing or ignoring it. So suffering is our teacher. It’s teaching us, so we have to learn the lesson by studying suffering itself.

It always amazes me that some people think they never suffer. They think, ‘I don’t suffer. I don’t know why Buddhists talk about suffering all the time. I feel wonderful, full of beauty and joy. I’m so happy all the time. I find life a fantastic experience, interesting, fascinating and never-ending delight.’ These people tend just to accept that side of life and reject the other side, because inevitably what delights us disappears and then we are sorry. In this way, our desire to be in a constant state of delight leads us into all kinds of problems and difficulties.

Suffering is not just caused by massive things like having terminal cancer or losing someone you love; it can occur around what is very ordinary, like the four postures of sitting, standing, walking and lying down. There is nothing extreme in them. We contemplate the normal breath and ordinary consciousness. We contemplate ordinary feelings, memories and thoughts, rather than grasping hold of fantastic ideas and thoughts to understand the extremes of existence. So we don't become involved in speculation about the ultimate purpose of life, God, the devil, heaven and hell, what happens when we die, or reincarnation. In Buddhist meditation we just observe the here and now. The birth and death that are going on here and now are the beginning and ending of the most ordinary things.

Contemplate beginning. When you think of birth you think, 'I was born', but that is the great birth of the body which we can't remember. We experience the ordinary birth of 'me' in daily life as, 'I want, I don't want, I like, I don't like.' That's a birth through seeking happiness. We contemplate the ordinary hell of our own anger that arises: the heat of the body, the aversion, the hatred we feel in the mind. We contemplate the ordinary heaven we experience: the happy states, the bliss, the lightness, the beauty in the here and now. Or we contemplate the dull state of mind, that kind of limbo, neither happy nor unhappy, but dull, bored and indifferent. In Buddhist meditation we watch these within ourselves. We contemplate our desire for power and control, to be in control of someone else, to become famous or someone on top.

How many of you, when you find out someone is more gifted than you are, want to put them down? This is jealousy. What

we have to do in our meditation practice is see the ordinary jealousies, the hatred we might feel for someone who might take advantage of us or annoys us, or the greed or lust we might feel for someone who attracts us.

Our mind is like a mirror which reflects the universe, and we watch the reflection. We used to take these reflections for reality, so that we became entranced, repelled or indifferent to them. But in *vipassanā* we observe that they are all just changing conditions. We begin to see them as objects rather than as a self, whereas when we're ignorant, we tend to seek identity with them.

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

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

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

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

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

I found asking myself unanswerable questions which would cause doubt to arise, a useful way of emptying the mind. Doubt is an impermanent condition. Form, the known, is impermanent; not knowing is impermanent. Some days I would go out and look at Nature, observe myself just standing there, looking at the ground. I'd ask myself, 'Is the ground separate from myself? What is that, who is that who sees the ground? Is that ground with those leaves, are those leaves in my mind or outside my mind? What is it that sees, is it the eyeball? If I took my eyeball out, would it be separated from myself, taken out of the socket, would I still see those leaves? Or is that ground there

when I'm not looking at it? Who is the one who's conscious of this anyway?' And sound – I did some experiments with sound because the objects of sight have a certain solidity – they seem fairly permanent, for today at least. But sound is truly *anicca* – try to get hold of it and hold it. I'd investigate my senses in this way – can my eyes hear sound? If I cut off my ears and burst my eardrums, will there be any sound? Can I see and hear in exactly the same moment?

All sense organs and their objects are impermanent, changing conditions. Think right now, 'Where is your mother?' Where is my mother right now? If I think of her in her flat in California, it's a concept in the mind. Even if I think, 'California is over there', that's still the mind thinking, 'over there.' 'Mother' is a concept: so where is the mother right now? She is in the mind: when the word 'mother' comes up, you hear the word as a sound and it brings up a mental image, a memory or a feeling of like or dislike or indifference. All concepts in the mind which we take for reality are to be investigated, so know what concepts do to the mind. Notice the pleasure you get from thinking about certain concepts and the displeasure that other concepts bring.

You may have prejudices, biases, about race, nationality – these are all concepts or conceptual proliferations. Men have certain attitudes and biases about women, and women have certain attitudes and biases about men; this is just inherent in those identities. But in meditation, 'female' and 'male' are concepts and feelings – perception in the mind. So, in this practice of *vipassanā*, you penetrate with insight into the nature of all conditions, coarse or refined. Insight breaks down the illusions that these concepts give us, the illusions that they are real.

When we talk like this, people might question, ‘How do you live in this society, if it’s all unreal?’ The Buddha made a very clear distinction between conventional reality and ultimate reality. On the conventional level of existence you use conventions that bring harmony to yourself and the society you live in. What kind of conventions bring harmony? Things like being good, being mindful, not doing things that cause disharmony such as stealing, cheating others, exploiting others. Having respect for other beings, having compassion, being observant, trying to help: all these conventions bring harmony. In the Buddhist teaching on the conventional level, we live in a way that means doing good and refraining from doing evil with the body or speech. So it’s not as if we are rejecting the conventional world: ‘I want nothing to do with it because it’s an illusion.’ But that thought’s just another illusion!

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



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

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

Abrahmacariyā veramaṇī, the third precept, is the vow of celibacy. At this time there's much concern about AIDS and venereal diseases. A total misuse of sexuality has developed over the past few decades, whereby people have been completely irresponsible and sought pleasure from sexual activities

1. In Buddhist cultures, the phases of the moon are celebrated as the lunar 'Observance Days.' These are days when Buddhists come to the monastery, commit to moral precepts, listen to Dhamma talks and practise meditation. On these days, the bhikkhus participate in the fortnightly recitation of the *Pāṭimokkha* – the core of the Monastic Rule. *Anagārikas* are people who are undertaking monastic training at a preliminary stage.

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

But when we really consider our life as human beings, there's a more skilful way to live. We can take on responsibility for our existence and refrain from involving others, or even exploiting our own bodies for the pursuit of that kind of pleasure. To undertake celibacy is a rather ennobling precept. It lifts us up: to be celibate is a potential, a possibility for developing meditation through the restraint necessary for the realization of truth.

Celibacy is something one has to take on for oneself. It's not something which can be forced; that would not be chastity anymore, it would be tyranny. It has to be something we choose, something we rise up to as individual beings, not an imposition on us. We don't want to go back to a puritanical position of 'Thou shalt not', and threaten people with 84,000 aeons in fiery hells, burning in absolute pain, for any kind of sexual enjoyment. We are not trying to bring fear into the mind or to intimidate, but rather to encourage what is noble and beautiful in our humanity.

I assume that you are capable of motivating yourselves, and so I present this opportunity for practice. Sometimes people

can have very low opinions of themselves which are not really true. Maybe they've never had an opportunity to motivate themselves, or never felt that anyone trusted them enough to do so. We are trying to bring that kind of value, that kind of beauty into our monastic life, so that monasticism is something that is 'beautiful in the beginning, beautiful in the middle and beautiful in the end', and not a kind of imposed tyranny or a forced march. We need to take on that responsibility for ourselves, rather than turning it over to somebody else, expecting someone else to come along and enlighten us or love us, drive us or scold us.

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

With speech, *musāvādā veramaṇī*, the precept is to refrain from incorrect speech: how easy it is to get caught in self-view if we use 'I am', 'poor me' speech habits. Notice the way the Buddha used language: 'There is suffering', 'there is' anger, greed or delusion. This is an example of refraining from wrong speech. If we start reflecting in that way, it affects how we see things. In this community we have a willingness to learn how

to communicate, and try to have a way of speaking which is clear and honest, but not demanding or deluding in any way. By contrast, in society one tries to be clever in one's speech, witty, droll – and, with an intelligent mind, one's speech habits can be quite cruel and unskilful. But we give that up and try to use speech as something beautiful and clear, without giving forth wrong views to others.

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

Then *surāmerayamajja-pamādaṭṭhānā veramaṇī*, refraining from intoxicants: think how fortunate we are that we don't have to drink, take drugs and shoot up heroin. That problem affects all levels of society. Men, women and children, all races, all classes, are being caught in the grip of these addictive drugs. There are also cigarettes and alcohol, all harmful and deluding to the human mind. When we become clouded with drugs and drink, we can't be responsible for what we say?

I remember that when I used to drink, it was so that I didn't have to be responsible for what I said. When intoxicated, you lose your sense of timidity and shame with regard to sexual conduct. You have a few drinks, and suddenly a lot of inhibitions just drop away. I wasn't into murdering people, but I certainly had no hesitation about getting rid of annoying insects and other

things that I didn't like. One could see how easily one's sense of moral propriety and commitment could disappear under drugs and drink. Nowadays you find young people prostituting themselves to get money to buy drink and drugs – even people twelve or thirteen years old, those we used to call 'children'.

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

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

Admittedly, the attractions of the mainstream are strong, and it isn't part of my teaching to condemn them. I'm not against the worldly life, nor am I trying to raise monasticism up as something everyone should be doing. One can live a very good, wholesome lay life too – wholesomeness is not just the prerogative of monks and nuns. Sometimes laypeople think I'm a 'monk fanatic' because I emphasize the value of this way of living. But the attitude is one of reflection rather than having an axe to grind or a position to take on anything. We aim to develop that reflective ability of the mind, and the particular conventions we find ourselves in are developed around that. This is what the Buddha's teaching is about.

All the conventions of the Vinaya (monastic discipline) and Dhamma teachings are designed to help in that way. Some people say you can follow the teachings fully as a layperson, and this is not to be denied; but if monastics can't use the lifestyle which is deliberately established for Dhamma-Vinaya, what makes them think they'll ever do it in any other form? This is what I want to get you to look at. Look at yourselves as wanting something you don't have, or wanting to get away from what you have. Just watch that in yourself, that restlessness, discontent and movement of your mind.

Sometimes, of course, one doesn't want to give up the world yet, one still wants rebirth and happiness and worldly things. Fair enough. But I don't want you to go round lying to yourselves. If you want to have your own way, have rebirths and worldly happiness, that's your decision – but don't delude yourselves by thinking that you are doing something else, because if you really understand the teaching of the Buddha, there's nowhere to go and nothing to do. This is the way it is. We are living a life

that is for that kind of reflection. Then you can observe that desire to be somewhere else as a movement of your mind, to see that and recognize it for what it is. Whether you follow that desire or not is still up to you.

Allow yourself to die to the moment. Investigate and observe how things are. Everything that arises ceases. In all, everything fits into that pattern. In this way we can reflect on the mundane day-to-day ordinariness of our lives. Since we monastics can't dance and sing, go to shows, pubs, football games or restaurants and follow the pleasures and distractions of the world, the ordinariness of our lives takes on more significance. If you're used to a high level of excitement, ordinary things are boring and one is always aiming at some new thrill or experience.

Monasticism is a boring lifestyle, just a routine. We're not aiming at having exciting things to do or distractions, because in meditation we are being aware of how things ordinarily are in consciousness. So we no longer try to find and follow the extraordinary – because it's only through calming down and through restraint, not following restlessness and not being caught up in emotions, that we have a chance to realize the Unconditioned. It's only when we can let go, calm down and reflect that there is a realization of the ending of the conditioned realm – in which everything that arises ceases – and a realization of *nibbāna*. There is no way of realizing *nibbāna* by striving and trying to attain, achieve and be caught up in the arising side. You have to let go of that.

The realization of letting go of what arises in the mind leads to witnessing the cessation of that which has arisen. Then there is the true peace of allowing things to be as they are. No longer

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

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

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

EVERYTHING THAT ARISES | 5
PASSES AWAY



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

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

We generally conceive the truth as being a thing, *nibbāna* as being some peaceful state of mind or some kind of ecstatic

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

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

As you look carefully, very patiently and humbly, you begin to see that the created arises out of the Uncreated and goes back to the Uncreated; it disappears and there is nothing left. If it

were really you and really yours, it would stay, wouldn't it? If it were really you, where would it go, to some kind of storehouse of personality? But that concept, like whatever you conceive, is a condition that arises and passes away. Whenever you try to conceive yourself or any concept or memory of yourself as this or that, it is only a condition of your mind. It's not what you are – you're not a condition of your mind. So sorrow, despair, love and happiness are all conditions of mind and they are all not-self.

Notice when you suffer, feel discontent in your life – why? It's because of some attachment, some idea of yourself or someone else. Someone you love dies and you feel sorry for yourself, or you think of and dwell on the good times you've had with them, creating more conditions of mind. Maybe you feel guilty because you weren't giving or loving all of the time – that's a condition of mind also. You have a memory, you conceive of them as being alive – but that very idea of a person is a perception of mind, it's not a person. Remembering someone who is alive, someone you wish you could be with right now, is a condition of mind. And remembering someone who's died, so that you'll never see them again, is also a condition of mind.

Buddhist meditation is a way of looking at the conditions of mind, investigating and seeing what they are rather than believing in them. People want to believe – when someone close to you has died, somebody may tell you, 'Oh, they went up to heaven with God the Father', or, 'They're living in the delights of the Tusita Heaven.' They say this so that you'll have a pleasant perception of mind: 'Well, now I know that my grandmother is happy up there in the heavenly realms, dancing with the angels.' Then somebody else says, 'Well, you know, she did some pretty

dreadful things, she's probably down in Hell, burning in the eternal fires!' So you start worrying that maybe you'll end up there too – but that's a perception of mind. Heaven and hell are conditioned phenomena.

If you reflect back to ten years ago, that's a condition of mind that arises and passes away, and it arises because I've just suggested it to you. So that condition is dependent upon another condition; memory is what we have experienced, and the future is the unknown. But who is it who knows the conditions of the moment? I can't find that 'who': there's only the knowing, and knowing can know anything that is present now – pleasant or unpleasant, speculations about the future or reminiscences of the past, creations of yourself as this or that. You create yourself or the world you live in, so you can't really blame anyone else.

If you do, it's because you're still ignorant: We call the One Who Knows 'Buddha', but that doesn't mean 'Buddha' is a condition. This is not saying that a *Buddha-rūpa* knows anything, but rather that 'Buddha' is the knowing. So Buddhist meditation is really being aware, rather than becoming Buddha. The idea of becoming Buddha is based on conditions – you think you're someone who isn't Buddha right now, and in order to become Buddha you have to read books to find out how to become one.

Of course, this means that you have to work really hard to get rid of those qualities which are not Buddha-like. You are far from perfect, you can be angry, greedy, doubtful and frightened, and of course, Buddhas aren't like that because Buddha is that which knows, so they know better. In order to become Buddha, you have to get rid of these un-Buddha-like qualities and try to develop Buddha-like qualities such as compassion. But all

these are creations of the mind. We create ‘Buddhas’ because we believe in the creations of the mind. But they aren’t real Buddhas. They’re only false Buddhas. They’re not wisdom Buddhas, they’re just conditions of our mind.

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

If you come into the meditation hall thinking, ‘I’ve got to spend this hour looking for the Buddha, trying to become something, trying to get rid of these bad thoughts; I must sit and practise hard, try to become what I should become – so I’ll sit here and try getting rid of things, try to get things, try to hold onto things’ – with that attitude, meditation is a really strenuous effort and always a failure.

But if you are just aware of the conditions of mind – if you see in perspective the desire to become, to get rid of, to do something, or the feeling that you can’t do it, or that you’re an expert or whatever – you begin to see that whatever you’re experiencing is a changing condition and not ‘self’. You’re seeing a perspective of being Buddha, rather than doing something in order to become Buddha. When we talk about

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

Gotama the Buddha was one whose wisdom came from observing Nature, the conditions of mind and body. That's not impossible for any of us to do. We have minds and bodies; all we have to do is to watch them. It's not as if we have to have special powers to do that, or that somehow this time is a different time from that of Gotama the Buddha. Time is an illusion caused by ignorance. People in the time of Gotama the Buddha were no different from people now – they had greed, hatred and delusion, egos, conceits and fears, just like people nowadays. If you start thinking about Buddhist doctrines, different levels of

attainment, you'll just get into a state of doubting. You don't have to check yourself with a list in a book, but just know for yourself until no condition of body or mind deludes you.

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



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

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

can reflect on your own body for long periods of time, meditate on the breath rather than on consciousness, because it is within our ability to concentrate on breathing. Ordinary people can contemplate their own breath.

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

You can reflect on the forms that you see. Just look at something beautiful, like flowers. Flowers are probably the most beautiful things on the earth and so we like flowers. So note when you look at a flower, how you're drawn to it and want to keep looking at it, being attracted to what is pleasing to the eye. Or look at something that is unpleasant to the eye, say excrement. When you see excrement, cow dung on the path, you politely ignore it. Look at your own excrement. We produce it ourselves and yet it's something that we don't really want to go round

showing other people. It's something we'd rather nobody ever saw us producing. You don't really feel drawn to go looking at it like you would a flower, do you? But we're quite willing to wear flowers, carry flowers around, have flowers on our shrine. It's not that you should find excrement attractive. I'm just pointing out that you can meditate on this force of the sensory world. It's a natural force. It's not bad or wrong, but you can meditate on it to see how you tend to react to sensory experiences.

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

The mental *khandhā* also operate on that same principle. *Vedanā* is a mental state, the feeling you have of attraction and aversion to the physical things that you hear, see, smell, taste, touch. The sensation of pain is just as it is, but then there's the reaction of liking or disliking, or not even that, but just a moving towards or away from it. You can be aware of feelings, moods. Note the heat that comes from anger, the dullness that comes from doubt and sloth and torpor. Note the feeling when you're jealous. You can witness that feeling. Watch instead of just trying to annihilate jealousy. When jealousy conditions your mind, begin to reflect on it rather than reacting to it or

trying to get rid of it because you don't like it. When you're cold, what is coldness? Do you like it? This coldness, feeling cold, is that something terribly unpleasant or do you just make a lot out of it? Hunger, what is hunger like? When you're feeling hungry, meditate on that physical feeling to which you tend to react by trying to get something to eat.

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

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

and constant rather than being the way it is at this time. My perception of him is just a perception of the moment; it's not a soul that carries through time, not a fixed personality. So *saññā* is to be meditated on.

Mental formations are *khandhā*. There are perceptions of the mind (*saññā*), and on the basis of them are our mental activities (*saṅkhārā*). So the assumptions you have about yourself, from childhood, parents, teachers, friends, relatives, and whether you perceive yourself as good and positive or in a negative way or a confused way – all these are the *saññā/saṅkhārā khandhā*. Memories come up, or fears about what you might be lacking. You can worry that there might be a serious flaw in your character, or that some horrible repressed desires might be lurking way down deep in your mind, which might come up in meditation and drive you crazy. That is another mental condition, not knowing what we are, so that sometimes we imagine the worst possible things. But what we can know is that whatever we believe ourselves to be is a condition of the mind; it arises, it passes away, it's impermanent.

If we come from certain fixed perceptions of ourselves, we conceive all kinds of things. If you operate from the position 'I am a man' you assume that perception of yourself is what you are. So you never investigate that perception; you just believe that you're a man and then conceive manhood as being a certain way, what a man should be. Then you compare yourself to what the ideal for manhood is, and if you don't live up to those high standards of manhood, you worry. Something is wrong! You start feeling upset or guilty, or hating yourself, because of your basic assumption that you're a man. On a conventional level this might be true: men are this way and women are that way.

We're not denying the conventional reality, but we're no longer attaching to it as a personal quality, a fixed position to take at all times in all places. This is a way of freeing ourselves from that quality of being bound to unsatisfactory conditions. If you believe in being a man or a woman as your true identity and your soul, that belief will always take you to a depressing state of mind. All these are perceptions we have. We create so much misery over perceiving ourselves to be black or white, or members of a certain nationality or class. In England people suffer because of their perception of belonging to a certain class; in America we suffer from not having any perceptions of class, from the perception that we're all the same, we're all equal. It's the attachment to any of these, even to the highest, most egalitarian perception, that takes us to despair.

By investigating these five 'heaps',² aggregates or groups, you begin to see them. You can know them as objects because they're *anattā*, not-self. If they were what you are, you wouldn't be able to see them. You'd only be able to be them. You'd have no way of witnessing them or detaching from them, you'd just be caught into them all the time, without any ability to detach and observe them. But being men, women, monks, nuns, Italian, Danish, Swiss, English, American, Canadian or whatever is only a relative truth, relative to certain situations.

Yet we can operate our lives from fixed positions, of being 'I'm American' and 'We're this way'. Throughout the world we have those national prejudices and racial prejudices. These are just perception and conception (*saññā/sañkhārā khandhā*) that we can observe. When you have a fixed view about somebody

2. The literal meaning of *khandhā*.

(‘One thing I can’t stand is Hondurans’), you can observe that in your mind. Even if you have strong prejudices and feelings but you try to get rid of them, that comes from assuming that you shouldn’t have any prejudices at all; that you shouldn’t have any bad feelings towards anybody, and you should be able to accept criticism with an equanimous mind and not feel angry or upset. That’s another very idealistic assumption. See that as a condition of mind and keep observing. Rather than hating ourselves or hating others for being prejudiced, we observe the very limitations of any prejudices or perceptions and conceptions of the mind. We meditate on the impermanent nature of perception. In other words, we don’t try to justify, explain, get rid of or change anything. We just try to observe that all things change – all that begins ends.

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

With this you have a perspective from which the conditioned world is infinitely variable and complex. But where do you separate *saññā* from *saṅkhārā* or *saṅkhārā* from *viññāṇa*?

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

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

the conditioned phenomena of the sensory world and the Unconditioned, the Deathless.

Notice that Buddhists make no claim for Deathlessness as being a self either – ‘I have an immortal soul’, or ‘God is my true nature.’ The Buddha avoided all statements of that nature. Any possible conceiving of oneself as anything at all is an obstacle to enlightenment, because you attach to an idea again, to a concept of self as being part of something. Maybe you think there’s a piece of you, a little soul, that joins the bigger one at death. That is a conception of the mind that you can know. We’re not saying it’s untrue or false, but we’re just being the knowing, knowing what can be known. We don’t feel compelled to grasp that as a belief; we see it as only something that comes out of the mind, a condition of the mind, so we let even that go.

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

feeling of being intimidated by other religions when they come on strong, or feeling averse to them, or having prejudices against religions. What you can know is that these are perceptions of the mind; they come and go and change.

Keep a constant cool reflection on these things, rather than trying to figure them out or feel that you have to justify being a Buddhist. Christians may say: ‘You don’t do anything for the Third World’, and you say: ‘We ... we ... we ... chant! We share merit and we radiate loving-kindness.’ That sounds pretty weak in a situation where you’re talking about malnutrition and starvation in Africa. But now, at this time, there’s this opportunity to understand the limits of what you can do. All of us would definitely do something about starvation in Africa if we could, if we felt that there was something one individual could do here and now at this time. Reflect on this – what is the real problem at this time? Is it the problem of starvation in Africa, or is it human selfishness and ignorance? Isn’t starvation in Africa the result of human greed, selfishness, and stupidity?

Therefore we open our minds to the Dhamma. We wisely reflect on it and then realize it. Truth is to be realized and known within the context of personal experience. But the practice is a continuous one – I still practise all the time. Things change: people praise and blame, the world goes on. One just keeps reflecting on it through: ‘*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā.*’ When you recognize the conditioned and the Unconditioned, you have what is called the ability to develop the Path, and there’s no more confusion about that. The goal now is to realize *nibbāna*, or the Deathless, or non-attachment – to realize what it’s like not to be attached to the five *khandhā*. Realize that when you’re sitting here and you’re really at peace.

There's no attachment to the five *khandhā* then, but you might make a perception out of that peacefulness and attach to that, and always try to meditate in order to become peaceful again according to a perception. That's why the practice is continuously letting go rather than an attainment.

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

Start to investigate and wisely consider '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā*', rather than thinking you've attained something or that you've got to hold on to that attainment, and starting to resent anybody who gets in your way. Note what is attachment. When your mind is really concentrated, let go of it. Rather than just indulging in that peaceful feeling, attach to something. Worry about something. Do it deliberately, so that you begin to see how you get out and grasp things or worry about losing them.

In your practice, as you begin to understand and experience letting go, you begin to realize what Buddhas know: '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā, sabbe dhammā anattā*.' It's not just a string of words – even a parrot can say the words, but it's not an enlightened parrot. Insight is different from conceptual knowledge. But now you're penetrating, going deep into this, breaking through the illusion of self as being anything at all

– or nothing; if you believe that you don't have a self, that's another belief. 'I believe I don't have a self. We believe in no self.' You see that the Buddha pointed to the way between those two extremes of believing you have a self and believing that you don't have a self. You cannot find anything in the five *khandhā* which is a permanent self or soul: things arise out of the Unconditioned, they go back to the Unconditioned. It is therefore through letting go, not through adopting any other attitude, that we seek to no longer attach to mortal conditions.



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

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

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



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

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

For example, consider the people here, the monks and nuns we live with. Maybe we feel attracted to some, we feel averse to some, we sympathize with some, we understand some, some we don’t understand; but whatever view we have, we can see it as just a ‘view’ of a person rather than a real person. We can hear ourselves saying, ‘I don’t want him to be like that ... I want him to be otherwise. He should be this other way, shouldn’t be

like this.’ ‘I want it to be otherwise’ is the wail of the age. Why can’t life be otherwise? Why do people have to die? Why do we have to grow old? Why this sickness? Why do we have to be separated from our loved ones? Why do innocent children who wouldn’t hurt anyone in their lives, old people who wouldn’t hurt anyone, have to suffer from starvation or brutality?

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

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

Saying, ‘This is the way it is’ is not approval or a refusal to do anything, but a way of establishing oneself in the knowledge that Nature is ‘like this.’ In the animal kingdom it’s very much

a question of survival of the fittest, a natural self-selecting law where the weaker strains are destroyed, so in that way even Nature is quite brutal. We think of Nature as being everything it 'should' be – sweet, with flowers, and sunshine – but Nature is also very brutal. What is our position in Nature? We can live on the level of the animal kingdom, with its emphasis on the survival of the fittest, the strong over the weak, and living by fear and power. We can live like that because we share that animal mentality. We have an animal body and it has to survive like any other animal body on this planet. So the law of the jungle is something human beings can subscribe to – and many of them do. But this is only a lower level. If we live on that level, we must expect the world to be as it is, in a state of fear, and anxiety. But as human beings we can get beyond this animal level; we can decide to have some kind of moral standard to abide by, so that we don't have to live our lives in a state of anxiety.

But even higher than that is our ability to realize the Truth – to contemplate existence, to cultivate the reflective mind through which we can transcend personality. At the level of moral behaviour we still have very strong personality view, and in our civilization we've developed a sense of 'me' and 'mine' to absurdity. So strong is this sense of 'me' and 'mine', that it seems to dominate everything and taint everything we do, and there's always a sense of anguish and suffering connected with it. Contemplate that whenever there is a sense of 'me' and 'mine' in anything, it always seems to give rise to discontentment, uncertainty or doubt, guilt, fear or anxiety. There is this view of 'me' as an individual being, that 'this' is mine, that 'I' should or should not, coming from a belief in oneself as the body or mental conditions. However, this view is based on an illusion;

it comes from conditioning, not from insight. So as long as we identify with the limitations of the body and the mind, then of course we are going to experience doubt, despair, anguish, sorrow, grief and lamentation – these mental forms of suffering. How could it be otherwise? We're certainly not going to get enlightenment from distorted misunderstanding and wrong view.

We have this opportunity now to establish right view and right understanding, which free us from the personality illusion: identification with what are called the five *khandhā* – body, feeling, perception, mental formations and consciousness. So we contemplate consciousness through the senses – the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body. We can contemplate mental formations, the yesterdays of our own creation and the thoughts and views that we create. We can see them as impermanent.

We have this ability to contemplate the nature of things, the ability to say, 'This is the way it is.' We can notice 'the way it is' without adopting a personality viewpoint. So with the breath of the body, its weight, its posture, we are just witnessing and noting, observing how it is now, in this moment. The mood of the mind, whether we feel bright or dull, happy or unhappy, is something we can know, we can witness. And the empty mind, empty of the proliferations about oneself and others, is clarity. It's intelligent and compassionate.

The more we really look into the habits we have developed, the clearer things become for us. So we must be willing to suffer, to be bored, and to be miserable and anguished; this is an opportunity to bear with these unpleasant mental states rather than suppress them. Having been born, this is the way it is, at this time, in this place.



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

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

We can blame it on the weather, the people or whatever, but that's not the point, because even if someone is treating us badly, that's just the way the world is. Sometimes people treat us well, sometimes they treat us badly, because of this worldly concern for conditions; but the suffering is something we create.

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

I think of how easy it is to create you in my mind: 'The nuns are like this: the *anagārikas* are like that, bhikkhus are like this,' and so forth. One can have these biases: 'Women are this way; men are that way, Americans are like this and the English are like that.' We can believe that, but these are perceptions of the mind, views that arise and cease. And yet we can create a lot of suffering about them: 'This one doesn't come to the morning chanting', or 'That one isn't doing their share of the work and this one thinks they're too important', or whatever. But the

important point is the suffering, the *dukkha*, because when we have that, we create despair in our minds. We become annoyed, indignant and that takes us to a sense of despair. If we don't understand *dukkha* here, we won't understand it no matter where we are: in London, Bangkok or Washington DC; on a mountaintop or in a valley; with good people or bad people. So it's really important to observe suffering, to know *dukkha*.

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

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

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

When there is the insight, 'The origin of suffering has been let go of', there is knowledge of that result – actually letting go. You know what it's like not to be attached to something. Holding a clock is like this, and when I put it down I'm aware of what not holding it is like. If I'm holding things and I'm

heedless, I don't even notice when I'm no longer holding them, when there's no grasping. I'm not aware of it. Really ignorant and heedless people are so caught up with grasping that even though they're not grasping something all the time, the habit is such that they only notice when they are grasping at something. Many of you may only feel fully alive when you're filled with greed or anger in some form or other. So letting go can be quite frightening to people; when they let go of things, they may feel they're no longer alive.

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

This evening we're going to sit in meditation until midnight. It's a chance to observe more fully what it's like to be sitting; what it's like when the mind is filled with thoughts and when there are no thoughts; when there is suffering and when there isn't suffering. If you have a view that sitting until midnight

is going to be suffering, you have already committed yourself to suffering until midnight. But if you start examining that very view, fear or doubt in your mind for what it is, you can observe when it's present and when it's not present. If you're not suffering, you're not thinking there's any suffering. Then this feeling of suffering comes and you attach to the view, 'I'm suffering, and I have to sit up and I'm tired.' This is the first Noble Truth: 'There's suffering, suffering is to be understood' through an admission, a recognition and an understanding.

The insight of the second Noble Truth is to let go, to leave alone, not to make anything out of an all-night sitting. These are perceptions. They're nothing, really: if you're using the situation for reflection and contemplation of when there is suffering, then there isn't suffering. I'm aware of holding this thought, grasping this thought or not grasping this thought. One can pick things up or put them down, knowing how to use them rather than having a blind obsession to grasp or reject them. I can put down the clock but I don't have to throw it away. But it's not that holding the clock is wrong, unless there is ignorance about it. One is aware of grasping and the non-grasping, holding and not holding.

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

realized, and then there is the third insight – that cessation has been realized.

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

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

But there's still enough suffering here to contemplate these Four Noble Truths with their twelve aspects. You can memorize them: then wherever you are you've got something to contemplate. Eventually you let go of all these things, because they aren't ends in themselves either, but like tools to be used. You learn to use these tools, and when you've finished you don't need to hang on to them.

To signify this the Buddha referred to his teaching as a raft that you can make out of the things around you. You don't have to have a special motorboat, submarine or luxury liner. A raft is something you make from the things around, just to get across to the other shore. We're not trying to make a super-duper vehicle, we're able to use what's around us for enlightenment.

The raft is to carry us across the sea of ignorance, and when we get to the other shore, we can let it go – which doesn't mean we have to throw it away. This 'other shore' can also be a delusion, because the other shore and this one are really the same shore. It's merely an allegory. We have never really left the other shore; we've always been on the other shore anyway, and the raft is something we use to remind us that we don't really need a raft.

So there's absolutely nothing to do but to be mindful, to be able to sit, stand, walk, lie down, eat food, breathe – and all the opportunities as humans to do good.

In the human realm we have this lovely opportunity to be good, to be kind, to be generous, to love others, to serve others, to help others. These are some of the most lovely qualities of being human. We can decide not to do evil. We don't have to kill, lie, steal, go around distracting ourselves and drugging ourselves, getting lost in moods and feelings. We can be free from all that. The human form is a wonderful opportunity to refrain from evil and do good, not in order to store up merit for the next life, but because this is the beauty of our humanity. Being a human can be a joyful experience rather than an onerous task. So when we contemplate this, we really begin to appreciate this birth in a human form. We feel grateful to have this opportunity to live

with our teacher, the Buddha and our practice, the Dhamma, and to live in the Sangha.

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

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

It's so important to develop insight through practice, because inspiration wears out, and if you are attached to and blinded

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



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

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

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

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

So I vowed that my practice would be patience, and that during this time I would develop patience. I’d come to all the talks and sit through all of them as long as I could physically stand it. I determined not to miss them or try to get out of them, and just practise patience. And by doing that, I began to find that the opportunity to be patient was something that helped me very much. Patience is a very firm foundation for my insight and understanding of the Dhamma; without it I would just have wandered about, drifting as you see so many people doing.

Many Westerners came to Wat Pah Pong and drifted away from it because they weren’t patient. They didn’t want to sit through three-hour *desanās* and be patient. They wanted to go to the places where you could get instant enlightenment quickly in the way you wanted.

Because we can be driven by selfish desires and ambitions even on the spiritual path, we can’t always really appreciate the way things are. When I actually contemplated and reflected on my life at Wat Pah Pong, I realized that it was a very good situation: there was a good teacher, there was enough to eat, the monks were good monks, the laypeople were very generous and kind, and there was encouragement towards the practice of Dhamma.

This is as good as you can get; it was a wonderful opportunity, and yet so many Westerners couldn't see that because they tended to think, 'I don't like this, I don't want that', and 'It should be otherwise' and 'What I think and what I feel, I don't want to be bothered with this and that.'

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

In those days I was just a very junior monk, and one night Ajahn Chah took us to a village fête. I think Satimanto Bhikkhu was there at the time. We were all very serious practitioners and we didn't want any kind of frivolity or foolishness; and of course going to a village fête was the last thing we wanted to do, because in these villages they love loudspeakers. But Ajahn Chah took Satimanto and me to this fête, and we had to sit up all night with the raucous sounds of the loudspeakers going and monks giving talks all night long. I kept thinking, 'Oh, I want to get back to my cave – green-skinned monsters and ghosts are much better

than this.’ I noticed that Satimanto, who was incredibly serious, was looking really angry and critical, and very unhappy, and we just sat there looking miserable. I thought: ‘Why does Ajahn Chah bring us to these things?’ Then I began to see for myself. I remember sitting there thinking, ‘Here I am getting all upset over this. Is it that bad? What’s really bad is what I’m making out of it, what’s really miserable is my mind. Loudspeakers and noise, and distraction and sleepiness, one can put up with them, but it’s that awful thing in my mind that hates them, resents them and wants to leave – that’s the real misery!’

That evening I could see what misery I could create in my mind over things that one can bear. I remember that as a very clear insight of what I thought was miserable, and what really is miserable. At first I was blaming the people, the loudspeakers, the disruption, the noise and the discomfort – I thought that was the problem. Then I realized that it wasn’t, it was my mind that was miserable.

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

ACCEPTING THE WAY | 11
THINGS ARE



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

How does your body feel? Just notice that the body is this way. It’s heavy, it’s earthbound, it’s coarse; it gets hungry, it feels heat and cold, it gets sick; sometimes it feels very nice, sometimes it feels horrible. This is the way it is. Human bodies are like this, so this tendency to want them to be otherwise falls away. The world is this way. Things happen: it snows and the sun comes

out, people come and go, people have misunderstandings, people's feelings get hurt. People grow lazy or inspired, depressed and disillusioned; people gossip and disappoint each other. There's adultery, theft, drunkenness and drug addiction; and there are wars, and there always have been.

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

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

it's not very nice; because the only real misery is not wanting it to be like that. Whether things are going well or not so well, if we don't accept the way things are, the mind tends to create some form of misery.

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

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

From the viewpoint of the self, there's a tremendous fear of rejection, ostracism or being despised in our society. There's a fear of being left alone and unwanted; there's a fear of being old, and left to die alone, there's natural fear of physical danger, of being in situations where our bodies are in danger; and there's the fear of the unknown, the mysterious, ghosts and unseen spirits. So we gravitate to security – cosy little places with electricity, central heating, insurance and guarantees on everything – taxes paid and legal contracts. All of these give us a sense of safety. Or we seek emotional security: 'Say you'll always love me, dear. Say you'll love me even if you don't mean it. Make everything safe and secure.' And in that demand there's always going to be anxiety because of the grasping at desire.

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

there is acceptance and non-anger, non-greed and the ability to cope with life as it's happening.

We are not here to become anything, get rid of anything, change anything, make anything for ourselves or demand anything, but to awaken more and more, to reflect, observe and know the Dhamma. Don't worry that things might change for the worse. However they change, we have the wisdom to adapt to them. And I can see that this is the real fearlessness of the alms-mendicant life. We can adapt, we can learn wisely from all conditions, because this lifetime is not our real home. This lifetime is a transition we're involved in, a journey through the sensory realm, and there are no nests, no homes, no abiding in this sensory realm. It's all very impermanent, subject to disruption and change at any moment. That is its nature. That's the way it is. There is nothing depressing about that if you no longer make the demand for security in it.

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

The idea of owning, and hanging on to things is the illusion of the worldly life. The view of the self sends forth all these delusions, from which we have to protect ourselves all the time. We're always endangered, there's always something to be

worried about, something to be frightened of. But when that illusion is punctured with wisdom there is fearlessness; we see this is a journey, a transition through the sensory realm, and we are willing to learn the lessons it teaches us no matter what those lessons might be.

CONSCIOUSNESS | 12
AND SENSITIVITY



Sometimes we approach meditation from a way of thinking that is based on trying to get rid of unwanted mental states and control the mind. However, it's better to see meditation as an opportunity to be mindful, to be at peace with yourself and with whatever mood you happen to be in at this moment, rather than trying to achieve some kind of desired state. Learn to be one who's at peace with the way things are.

When I started meditation in Thailand, the way I had lived my life before I became a monk affected my meditation practice. I began to let go of things and to accept all my ambitious and aggressive tendencies, and to be attentive to the way things are. The more you trust in this, the more quickly you will understand it's the way out of suffering.

Notice how things affect your mind. If you're starting a meditation period having just come from your work, notice what that does to your mind. If the mind isn't tranquil and pure and serene, don't criticize it, notice the busyness of it all: you've been travelling in the rush hour, working at the keyboard, talking on the telephone, and maybe having to work with people you don't like in difficult, aggravating situations.

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

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

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

like, and feel threatened by the possibility of being separated from them. Right meditation really allows you to be brave and adaptable, to be flexible and all that implies.

Things happen. Mother Nature has a way of letting us know that she's not just going to go along with our desires. If we try to control everything, and make it so that we are not being affected by any of it – or only affected in the ways we like, then even if we get a measure of control over things, we just increase the suffering because conditions are changing all the time.

We have to live with this body for a lifetime, and bodies are conscious and sensitive forms. This is what being born means: getting old, sickness and then death. By knowing the way it is, you find you are capable of accepting life, not bewildered by the way life happens to be. If you understand it and see it in the right way, you're not going to have wrong view; you're not going to add to it with fears, desires, bitterness, resentments and blame.

We have the ability to accept the way life is. Understanding Dhamma allows us also to have a fearless attitude. We begin to realize that we can accept whatever happens. There's really nothing to be afraid of. Then you can let go of life; you can follow it because you're not expecting anything out of it, and you're not trying to control it. You have the wisdom, the mindfulness, the ability to go with the flow, rather than be drowned in the tidal wave of life.

Take time to be silent, listen to yourself: the breathing, just the natural rhythm of the body, the way your body feels now. The body is a condition in nature – it's not really you. It's not 'my' breathing any more; it's not personal. You breathe even if

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

Thought can be a way of reflection, a way of focusing attention on Dhamma, rather than of creating problems of self-criticism or anxiety about yourself and humanity. When you get angry and you're thinking, 'He said that to me, how dare he! That dirty so and so!' – if you stop thinking and just use the breath, eventually the feeling of the body that comes with anger will fade away, and then there is no anger. So if you feel angry, just reflect on what it feels like as a physical feeling.

It's the same with any mood: contemplate, reflect on the mood that you're in; just work with it – not to analyze it or criticize it – just reflect on it, how it is. Some people say, 'I get very confused when I meditate – how can I get rid of confusion?' Wanting to get rid of confusion is the problem. Being confused and not wanting it to be like that just creates more confusion. So what does it *feel* like? Confusion may not feel like the more stimulating passions we can have that are quite obvious. We tend to not pay any attention to the more subtle states like hesitation, or doubt,

and slight anxiety. Of course, one side of us just wants to get rid of all that, just stomp it out – but with the right understanding, we see that the very ‘desire to get rid of’ is suffering. In fact, we can bear with the feeling of insecurity if we know what it is, and that it’s impermanent. With this understanding you begin to feel more and more confident in just being aware and mindful.

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



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

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

One problem with meditation is that many people find it boring. People become bored with emptiness. They want to

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

One can believe that the sound of silence is 'something' or that it is an attainment, but it is not a matter of having attained anything, but of wisely reflecting on what you experience. The way to reflect is that anything that comes goes; and the practice is one of knowing things as they are. No kind of identity is involved – there is nothing to attach to. Some people who hear that sound want to know: 'Is that stream-entry?' or: 'Do we have a soul?' We are so attached to concepts. All we can know is that we want to know something, we want to have a label for our 'self'. If there is a doubt about something, doubt arises and then there is desire for something. But the practice is one of letting go. We keep with what is, recognizing conditions as conditions and the Unconditioned as the Unconditioned. It's as simple as that.

Even religious aspiration is seen as a condition. This doesn't mean that you shouldn't aspire, but just that you should recognize aspiration in itself as being limited. And emptiness is not-self either – attachment to the idea of emptiness is also attachment. Let go of that! The practice then becomes one of turning away from conditioned phenomena, not creating anything more around existing conditions. So whatever arises in your consciousness – anger, greed or whatever – you recognize it is there but you make nothing out of it. You can turn to the emptiness of the mind, to the sound of silence. This gives conditions like anger a way out to cessation, you let them go away.

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



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

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

3. *Jhānas*: Refined states of mind-consciousness experienced through meditative absorption.

that arise, so that you're always fresh with the next inhalation, the next exhalation, completely as it is. You're not carrying over anything. So it's a way of relinquishment, of letting go, rather than of attaining and achieving.

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

The first year I meditated, I didn't have a teacher. I was in this little kuti in Nong Khai for about ten months, and I had all kinds of blazing insights. Being alone for ten months, not having to talk, not having to go anywhere, everything calmed down after several months, and then I thought I was a fully enlightened person, an arahant. I was sure of it. I found out later that I wasn't.

I remember we went through a famine in Nong Khai that year, and we didn't get very much to eat. I had malnutrition, so I thought: 'Maybe malnutrition's the answer. If I just starve myself ...' I remember being so weak with malnutrition at Nong Khai that my earlobes started cracking open. When I'd fall

asleep I'd have to pry my eyelids open; they'd be stuck shut with the stuff that comes out of your eyelids when you're not feeling very well. Then one day a Canadian monk brought me three cans of tinned milk. In Asia there is tinned sweetened milk and it's delicious. He also brought me some instant coffee and a flask of hot water. So I made a cup of this, put in a bit of coffee, poured in some of this milk, poured hot water and started drinking it. And I went crazy. It was so utterly delicious, the first time I'd had anything sweet in weeks, or anything stimulating. And being malnourished and in a very dull, tired, apathetic state, this was like high-octane petrol – whoomph! I gulped it down immediately, I couldn't stop myself – and I managed to consume all three tins of milk and a good portion of that coffee. And my mind actually went flying into outer space, or it seemed like it, and I thought, 'Maybe that's the secret – if I can just get somebody to buy me tinned milk ...'

When I went to Wat Pah Pong the following year, I kept thinking, 'Oh, I had all those wonderful experiences in Nong Khai. I had all those wonderful kinds of beautiful visions, and all those fantastic floating experiences and blazing insights, and it seemed I understood everything. And I even thought I was an arahant.' So I just kept trying to do all the things I'd done in Nong Khai to get those results. But after a while even strong cups of coffee didn't work any more. I didn't seem to get those exhilarations, those fantastic highs and blazing insights that I had in the first year. So after the first Rains Retreat⁴ at Wat Pah Pong, I thought: 'This place is not for me. I think I'll go and try to repeat what happened in Nong Khai.' And I left Ajahn Chah

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

and went to live on Phu Phek Mountain in Sakorn Nakorn Province. There at last I was in an idyllic spot. However, for the alms-round you had to leave before dawn and go down the mountain, which was quite a climb, and wait for the villagers to come. They'd bring you food, and then you had to climb all the way back up and eat this food before twelve noon. That was quite a problem.

I was with one other monk, a Thai monk, and I thought: 'He's really very good', and I was quite impressed with him. But when we were on this mountain, he wanted me to teach him English – so I was really angry with him and wanted to murder him. It was an area of North East Thailand where there were a lot of terrorists and communists. Sometimes helicopters flew overhead, checking us out. Once they came and took me down to the provincial town, wondering whether I was a communist spy.

Then I became violently ill, so ill that they had to carry me down the mountain. I was stuck in a wretched place by a reservoir under a tin roof in the hot season, with insects buzzing in and out of my ears and orifices and horrible food. I nearly died, come to think of it. I almost didn't make it. But it was during that time in that tin-roof lean-to that a real change took place. I was really despairing, sick and weak and totally depressed, and my mind would fall into hellish realms. With the terrible heat and discomfort, I felt I was being cooked; it was like torture.

Then a change came. Suddenly I just stopped my mind; I refused to get caught in that negativity and I started to practise *ānāpānasati*. I used the breath to concentrate my mind and things changed very quickly. After that I recovered my health

and it was time to enter the next Rains Retreat, so I went back – I'd promised Ajahn Chah I'd go back to Wat Pah Pong for the Rains Retreat – and my robes were all tattered and torn and patched. I looked terrible. When Ajahn Chah saw me, he just burst out laughing. And I was so glad to get back after all that!

I had been trying to practise, and what I had wanted were the memories of those insights. I'd forgotten what the insights really were. I was so attached to the idea of working in some kind of ascetic way, like I did the first year when asceticism really worked. At that time being malnourished and being alone had seemed to provide me with insight, so that for the next few years I kept trying to create the conditions where I would be able to have those fantastic insights. But the following two or three years seemed to be years of just getting by. Nothing much seemed to happen. I was six months on that mountain before I returned to Wat Pah Pong, deciding just to stay on and follow the insights I had had.

One of the insights the first year was that I should find a teacher, and that I should learn how to live under a discipline imposed on me by that teacher. So I did that. I realized Ajahn Chah was a good teacher and had a good standard of monastic discipline, so I stayed with him. Those insights that I had were right, but I'd become attached to the memory of them.

People get very attached to all these special things like meditation retreats, and courses where everything is under control, everything is organized and there is total silence. Even though you do have insight then, reflection is not always there, because one assumes that to have those insights you need those conditions. Actually, insight is more and more a matter of

living insightfully. It's not just that you have insight sometimes, but that more and more, as you reflect on Dhamma, everything is insightful. You see insightfully into life as it's happening to you. As soon as you think you have to have special conditions for insight, but are not aware of that thought, you'll create all sorts of complexities about your practice.

So I developed letting go, not concerning myself with attaining or achieving anything. I decided to make little achievements possible by learning to be a little more patient, a little more humble and a little more generous. I decided to develop in this way, rather than going out of my way to control and manipulate the environment with the intention of setting myself up in the hope of getting high. It became apparent through reflection that attachment to the insights was the problem. The insights were valid insights, but the problem was attachment to the memory of them. Then the insight came to let go of all insights; not to attach to them, just to keep letting go of all the insights one may have, because otherwise they become memories. Memories are conditions of the mind, and if you attach to them they can only take you to despair.

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

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

Once Venerable Vipassi was meditating in the shrine room and someone else was making quite distracting noises. Talking to him about it, I was quite impressed, because he said he first felt annoyed, but then decided the noises would be part of his practice. So he opened his mind to the meditation hall with everything in it – the noises, the silence, the whole thing. That’s wisdom. If the noise is something you can stop, like a door banging in the wind, then stop it, close the door. If it’s something you have control over, you can do that. But you have no control over much of life. You have no right to ask everything to be silent for ‘my’ meditation.

When there is reflection, instead of having a little mind that has to have total silence and special conditions, you have a big mind that can contain the whole of it: the noises, the disruptions, the silence, the bliss, the restlessness, the pain. The mind is all-embracing, rather than specializing in a certain refinement of consciousness. Then you develop flexibility, because you can concentrate your mind. This is where wisdom is needed for real development. It’s through wisdom that we develop, not through willpower, or controlling or manipulating environmental conditions, getting rid of the things we don’t want and trying to set ourselves up so that we can follow this desire to achieve and attain.

Desire is insidious. When we are aware that our intention is to attain some state, that’s a desire, so we let it go. If we are sitting here with even a desire to attain the first *jhāna*, we recognize that this desire will be the very thing that will prevent its

fulfilment. So we let go of the desire, which doesn't mean not doing *ānāpānasati*, but changing our attitude to it.

So what can we do now? Develop mindfulness of one inhalation. Most of us can do that; most human beings have enough concentration to be concentrated from the beginning of an inhalation to the end of it. But if your concentration span is so weak that you can't even make it to the end, that's all right. At least you can get to the middle, maybe. That's better than if you gave up totally or never tried at all, because at least you're composing the mind for one second and that's the beginning: to learn to compose and collect the mind around one thing, like the breath, and sustain it just for the length of one inhalation; or if not, then half an inhalation, or a quarter, or whatever. At least you have started, and you must try to develop a mind that's glad at just being able to do that much, rather than being critical because you haven't attained the first *jhāna*, or the fourth.

If meditation becomes another thing you have to do and you feel guilty if you don't live up to your resolutions, you start pushing yourself without an awareness of what you're doing. Then life becomes quite dreary and depressing. But if you are putting a skilful kind of attention into your daily life, you'll find much of daily life pleasant. That may not be so if you are caught in your compulsions and obsessions. Acting with compulsiveness becomes a burden, a grind, and we drag ourselves around doing what we have to do in a heedless and negative way.

However, we have this time for a retreat – we can sit and walk; we don't have a lot to do. The morning and evening chanting can be extremely pleasant for us when we're open to them. People are offering the food. The meal is quite a lovely thing. People

are eating mindfully and quietly. When we're doing things out of habit and compulsion, they become a drag; a lot of things which are quite pleasant in themselves are no longer pleasant. We can't enjoy them when we're coming from compulsiveness, heedlessness and ambition. Those are the kinds of driving forces that destroy the joy and the wonder of our lives.

Sustaining your attention on the breathing really develops awareness, but when you get lost in thought or restlessness, that's all right too. Don't drive yourself. Don't be a slave driver or beat yourself with a whip and drive yourself in a nasty way. Lead, guide and train yourself; leading onwards, guide yourself rather than driving and forcing yourself. *Nibbāna* is a subtle realization of non-grasping. You can't drive yourself to *nibbāna*; that's the sure way of never realizing it. It's here and now, so if you're driving yourself to *nibbāna*, you're always going far away from it, driving right over it.

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



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

You're developing this practice of stillness, the stillness which is everywhere, whether you are in a group or alone. In order to be with the silence, we have to realize the stillness, the silence. In other words, be that way – be still and silent. If one just follows the restless sensations of the body and the proliferations of the mind, then of course silence is impossible. It can even be a threatening experience, because one is so identified with the agitation and restlessness of the sensory realm and endlessly seeking to be born into it.

The emphasis now is to recognize that restlessness for what it is, no longer to follow it, but to train oneself towards calm. This means not just suppressing or persecuting the bodily

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

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

Then as these forms start to calm down, we begin to feel much more aware of the silence of mind. We can abide more and more in that emptiness, where there is no self, just the present moment as it is. The stillness and silence are ever-present wherever we are, no matter what condition we happen to be in. You can abide in emptiness by just standing among the barren trees of winter and looking at them, without creating anything from them. You can feel a sense of perfect calm and contentment

with just being still and silent like the trees. Our ego might say, 'Well I do not want to become like a tree. I want to express my true inner creativity, my unique personality.' We listen to the inner voices that complain and grumble, the wanting to become something, that which stands out or exists. But we are not feeding these creatures, we are letting them go and moving towards the stillness, the silence.

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

In Western values the emphasis is on being special, a unique individual, a child of God. This attitude is very much supported by culture and religion. There are the 'chosen people of God', the sects which feel that they have been called by Jesus (and all the rest haven't), and they are the ones who are going to make it and live in an eternal paradise. But what happens to you if you have all these views of being special, of being an individual, all

those self-views? From my own experience, the result of all of this was suffering. There seemed to be a tremendous investment in having a unique and sizzling personality. Sometimes I used to think, ‘Wait a minute, maybe I don’t have a very nice personality. Maybe I don’t have *any* personality.’ There was so much anxiety, frustration, jealousy and fear. You didn’t want to be a failure, didn’t want to be a mediocrity, to be the ‘ordinary guy.’ It was very painful to be always caught in that desire to become somebody. And as long as you have that desire, you’re always going to fear you’ll become something that’s not very good, because fear and desire go together.

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

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

When I was young I was very self-conscious – to say something in public was absolutely terrifying for me. Even when I was in the Navy, just having to raise my voice to say ‘Aye aye, sir!’ in public in a roll- call would have me shaking from self-consciousness. Then I became a schoolteacher. Teaching eight- to nine-year-old Chinese kids in North Borneo for a couple of years wasn't such a threat. But then becoming a monk in Thailand and eventually having to give talks to Thai people in Thai ...! All this self-consciousness became apparent. I'd get highs when I felt I'd given a good talk and everybody said: ‘You're really good, Sumedho, you can give good Dhamma.’ Then sometimes I would give a really stupid talk and think: ‘I don't want to give another talk ever again. I didn't become a monk to give talks.’ But the idea was to keep watching this. Luang Por Chah⁵ would always encourage me to remain aware of the pride, the conceit,

5. Luang Por: the Thai term translates as ‘Venerable Father’, although the English does not convey the mixture of affection and respect that it signifies. It is used in addressing an elderly monk.

the embarrassment and self-consciousness that I would feel. And fortunately, in Thailand the people are such that they're just grateful for a monk giving a talk. Even if it's not a very good talk, that doesn't seem to upset them very much. They still seem quite grateful for it. So that made it quite easy.

One time at a *Kaṭhina*⁶ ceremony where we had to sit up all night, Ajahn Chah said: 'Sumedho, you have to give a talk for three hours tonight.' Up until then I'd only talked for half an hour. That was a strain, three hours! And he knew it. But with Ajahn Chah, I always felt that if he said something, I'd do it. So I sat up on the high seat and talked for three hours. And I had to sit there and watch people get up and leave; and I had to sit there and watch people just lie down on the floor and sleep in front of me. And at the end of the three hours, there were still a few polite old ladies sitting there!

That wasn't Ajahn Chah saying, 'OK Sumedho, go in there and bowl them over with some scintillating stuff. Entertain them, really sock it to them.' I began to realize that what he wanted me to do was to be able to look at this self-consciousness, the posing, the pride, the conceit, the grumbling, the lazy, the 'not wanting to be bothered' attitude, the wanting to please, to entertain, to win approval. All these have come up during these talks of the past fifteen years. But in meditation one feels more and more a real understanding of the suffering of a self-view. And then through that insight one realizes the abiding in emptiness.

6. *Kaṭhina*: a ceremony held at the end of a Rains Retreat when laypeople make offerings to the monastery.

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

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

For example, when Ajahn Chah first visited England, he was invited to a certain woman's home for a vegetarian meal. She obviously had put a lot of effort into creating the most delicious kinds of food. She was bustling about, offering this food and looking very enthusiastic. Ajahn Chah was sitting there assessing the situation, and then suddenly he said, 'This is the most delicious and wonderful meal I have ever had!' That comment was really something, because in Thailand monks are not supposed to comment on the food. And yet Luang Por suddenly manifested this charming character, complimenting a woman who needed to be complimented because that made

her feel happy. He had a feeling for the time and place, for the person he was with, for what would be kind. So he could step out of the designated role of what is supposed to be according to a tradition, and manifest in ways that were appropriate. That shows wisdom and the ability to respond to a situation; not to be just rigidly bound within a convention that blinds you. That was a manifestation, and also a disappearance, because I have never heard of his doing that again.

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

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



16 | REFLECTIONS ON
SHARING BLESSINGS

Now let us chant the verses of sharing and aspiration.

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

*Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
And through this act of sharing,
May all craving and attachments quickly cease
And all harmful states of mind.
Until I realize nibbāna, in every kind of birth,
May I have an upright mind
With mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigour.
May the forces of delusion not take hold
Nor weaken my resolve.
The Buddha is my excellent refuge,
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma,
The Solitary Buddha is my noble guide,
The Sangha is my supreme support.
Through the supreme power of all these,
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.*



17 | TURNING TOWARDS
EMPTINESS

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

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

than working in a factory.’ Whichever way you’re feeling now, either extreme or just indifference, that’s the way it is.

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

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

How much energy does it take to stop the thinking process? Have you ever noticed that? ‘Just can’t stop thinking’ – the

mind goes on and on. ‘Can’t stop, what can I do? I don’t know how to stop thinking – it keeps going. I can’t stop it ...’ I know about this because I’ve always had a problem with a mind that just seemed to be endlessly thinking about something. And the desire to stop thinking and the effort to get rid of it create the conditions for more thinking. It takes effort to do this, not just thinking about doing it.

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

So if you are averse to thinking, instead of trying to stop, go to the other extreme and deliberately think something; and watch yourself deliberately thinking, so that it’s not just a wandering thought process in which your mind goes round and round in circles. Use your wisdom faculty: deliberately think something, some thought that is completely neutral and uninteresting, like ‘I am a human being.’ Deliberately think it, but observe the space before you’re thinking, and then deliberately say: ‘I am a human being.’ Then note the end of the thought, the moment

when you stop thinking. Pay attention to the moments before and after the thought, rather than to the thought itself; just hold attention on where there is no thought. Investigate the space around the thought, the space where the thought comes and goes, rather than thinking. Then you'll be aware of an empty mind, where there's just awareness but no thought.

That may last for just a second, because you start grasping, so you just have to keep being more aware by thinking something again. With practice you can use even very unpleasant thoughts. For example, you might have strong emotional feelings of, 'I'm no good, I'm worthless', and they can be an obsession. In some people's minds they can become a background to their lives. So you try thinking: 'I shouldn't think that. Venerable Sumedho says I'm good. But I know I'm no good.' However, if you take that obsession and use it as a conscious thought: 'I am no good', you start seeing the space around it, and it no longer sounds so absolute. When it becomes obsessive it sounds absolute, infallible; the honest truth, the real truth: 'This is what I really am, I'm no good.' But when you take it out of the context of obsession and think it deliberately, intentionally, you see it objectively.

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

In contemplating the Four Noble Truths you have the truth of suffering, its arising, its cessation and then the Path. You can't know the Path and the way out of suffering until you are aware

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

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

It's not like being in a trance, totally oblivious to everything; your mind is open, empty – or you might call it whole, complete, bright. Then you can take anything, like a fearful thought – you can take it, deliberately think it and see it as just another condition of the mind rather than a psychological problem. It arises, it ceases; there's nothing in it, nothing in any thought. It's just a movement in the mind and therefore it's not a person. You make it personal by attaching to it, believing it: 'And I'm such a hopeless case. I know I can never be enlightened after all

the things I've done; the stupid things. And I'm so selfish and I've made so many mistakes. I know there's no hope for me.' All that arises and ceases in the mind!

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

Even the most beautiful thoughts and aspirations, as well as the most evil and nasty ones, arise and cease in the mind. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not saying good and evil thoughts are the same. They have the same characteristic of arising and ceasing, that's all. In other respects they're different. Good thoughts are good thoughts, evil thoughts are evil thoughts. So I'm not saying it's all right to think evil thoughts, but I am pointing beyond the quality of the thought: love and hate arise and cease in the mind.

In this perspective you're going to the reflective mind, where most people are totally unaware. People are generally only aware of themselves as a personality, an emotion or a thought – in other words, as a condition. For practice, don't worry about the qualities that go through the mind, how wonderful, interesting, beautiful, ugly, nasty or neutral they might be.

We're not investigating qualities or denying the quality of any thought, but just noting the way it is. Then you leave it alone so that it ceases. You create a thought, deliberately put it into the mind and let it go. To let go doesn't mean you push it away: you leave the thought alone, though you're aware of it during the whole time: the moment before the thought, the interstices and the ending.

We don't notice the space around thought very much. It is just like the space in this room, I have to call your attention to it. What does it take to be aware of the space in this room? You have to be alert. With the objects in the room you don't have to be alert, you can just be attracted or repelled: 'I don't like that, I like this.' You can just react to the quality of beauty and ugliness, whether it pleases or displeases you. That's our habit – our life tends to be reaction to pleasure and pain, beauty and ugliness. We see beauty and we say, 'Oh, look at that! Isn't it absolutely fantastic?' or we think 'Oh, disgusting!' But the beautiful objects and the ugly ones are all in space, and to notice space you withdraw your attention from the beautiful and ugly objects.

Of course they're still there; you needn't throw them out, you don't have to tear down the building so that we can have a space here. But if you don't concentrate on what's in that room with love or hate, if you don't make anything out of it, your attention withdraws from the objects and you notice the space. So we have a perspective on space in a room like this.

You can reflect on that. Anyone can come and go in this space. The most beautiful, the most ugly, saint and sinner, can come and go in this space, and the space is never harmed, ruined

or destroyed by the objects that come and go in it. The mind works on the same principle. But if you're not used to seeing the spaciousness of your mind, you are not aware of the space that the mind really is. So you're unaware of the emptiness of the mind, because you're always attached to an idea or an opinion or mood.

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

'Venerable Sumedho' is a perception in the mind – in my mind it's a perception, in your mind it's a perception. Right now the perception of it is: 'Venerable Sumedho is alive and kicking.' When the body dies, the perception changes to: 'Venerable Sumedho is dead.' That's all. The perception of death is there along with the name 'Sumedho', where now it is alive and kicking.

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

When we view life as just a passage, we are not going to hang on to it. We're not going to become mean and selfish, because we realize that nothing is worth holding on to – not material wealth, property, status, worldly values, or anything else. Nothing is worth bothering with that much, because it is not really ours anyway. Of course, we can believe that it's ours.

But in actual investigation, in looking into the way the mind actually is, we see that nothing really belongs to us anyway, and there's nobody to own anything. With the reflection that the body is in the mind, this grasping changes. You have to start contemplating, 'What is mind, then?' – because your body's certainly not in your brain. Nor is your blood-pumping heart. They're in your body.

This evening I was standing outside and looking at the dusk, and the trees, the barren trees on the borders of Amaravati; just contemplating that the trees are in the mind and that trees are conscious. There's a certain level of consciousness in all life, in the fact that there is receptivity to the environment, and trees are very receptive to the environment they are in. This leads to beginning to change the perception of mind to that of a consciousness that pervades everything. Then it's not just a human mind, there's something more to it. But in Buddhism it is never named, you never try to form a concept about it.

Instead you contemplate the totality, the whole of sensitivity, the sensory realm and what it is really about. And we have to contemplate this from our own ability to be conscious and to feel, but not see it in terms of ‘me’ and ‘mine’ – ‘I feel these things, but nobody else does’; or ‘Only human beings do, and animals don’t’; or ‘Only mammals do, and reptiles don’t’; or ‘Only the animal and insect kingdoms do but not plants.’

Consciousness does not imply thought, but it does imply receptivity to what is impinging, to what comes to it. We begin to see that consciousness is a vital, changing universal system. It’s like a plenum, it’s full with all possibilities, all potentials of form, of what can be created. We can see whatever we can think of in terms of the human ability to imagine, through which we can create all kinds of fantasies that come into material form. But the greatest, most profound and meaningful human potential is overlooked by most people. This is the ability to understand the truth of the way it is, to see the Dhamma, to be free from all delusions.

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

We must recognize that we have to learn through being totally humbled, by never succeeding at anything we are doing in this meditation, never being successful, never getting what we

want – and if we do get what we want, we lose it right away. We have to be totally humbled, to the point where any form of self-view is relinquished willingly, graciously, humbly. That’s why the more that meditation comes from willpower based on a self-view, and on ‘me’ achieving and attaining, the more you can expect only failure and despair, because this is not a worldly pursuit.

In worldly situations, if you are clever and strong, gifted and have opportunities, and if the conditions are there, you can barge your way through and become a great success. The survival of the fittest means you can manage to get on top and destroy the competition – you can be a winner. But on the worldly plane even a winner is still going to be a failure, because if you win something you are going to lose something too. Winning and losing go together. So winning is never as wonderful as it might look, it is the anticipation of winning. If you’ve actually won something – so what? You have a moment of elation, maybe – ‘I’m a winner!’ – but then it’s, ‘Now what do I do? What do I have to win next?’

Winning, worldly goals and worldly values are not really going to satisfy us, so if we apply that same attitude towards the religious life it’s clearly not going to work. We will just feel a sense of total despair, helplessness. And we need that, we need to lose everything, to let go of everything: all hope, all expectations, all demands, to be able just to be with the way things are, and not expect or demand them to be otherwise.

The practice of the Buddha is to accept life as it is. This is the way it is. Our reflection as mendicants is that we have enough to eat, robes to wear, a roof over our heads and medicine for

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

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

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

One of the supports for enlightenment is devotion, a kind of emotional sweetness and joyfulness. We tend to want everything on the level of intellectual concepts, but we also need to humble ourselves to the joy and sweetness of loving the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, especially if we find our practice is getting a bit dried up.

This is to advise you not to be frightened of loving and joy, and open-hearted generosity. Human life without this is a dreary desert, just like living in some antiquarian museum. It's all nice and clean with marble corridors, but cold, ordered, catalogued. In museums everything is dusted and put in order, but it's cold.

Religion also gives us this opportunity for warmth, joy, love, devotion, offering, giving. They are very much a foundation and a necessity for religious life. See our life here in the community as an opportunity to manifest generosity, love and joy, not just as an obsession with looking at our *citta*⁷ to see what is moving through it at this moment, seeing that it's *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. We do that in order to reflect on the way things are, to be free from illusions or attachments to love and generosity – because if you attach to concepts of love and generosity, that will also bring you to despair.

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

7. *citta*: the centre of mental consciousness; also 'heart' or 'mind'.



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

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

I got fed up with all this, and went to see Luang Por Chah and said: 'I can't meditate here'; and he started laughing at me and telling everyone, 'Sumedho can't meditate here!' I was seeing meditation as this very special experience that I'd had and quite enjoyed, but Luang Por Chah was obviously pointing to the ordinariness of daily life: getting up, the alms-rounds, the routine work, the chores; the whole thing was for mindfulness. And he didn't seem at all eager to support me in my desire to have strong sensory deprivation experiences by not having to do all these little daily tasks. He didn't seem to go along with that, so I ended up having to conform and learn to meditate in the ordinariness of daily life. And in the long run that has been most helpful.

It has not always been what I wanted, because one wants the special. One would love to have blazing light and marvellous insights in technicolour, and incredible bliss and ecstasy and rapture – not just be happy and calm, but over the moon! But if you reflect on life in this human form, it is just like this. It's being able to sit peacefully, get up peacefully and be content with what you have; it's that which makes our life as a daily experience something that is joyful and not suffering. And this is how most of our life can be lived – you can't live in ecstatic states of rapture and bliss and do the dishes.

I used to read about the lives of saints who were so caught up in ecstasies they couldn't do anything on any practical level. The blood would flow from their palms and they could do feats that the faithful would rush to look at, but when it came to anything practical or realistic they were quite incapable.

And yet when you contemplate the Vinaya-discipline itself, it is a training in being mindful. It's about mindfulness with regard to making robes, collecting alms-food, eating food, taking care of your kuti, what to do in this situation or that situation. It's all very practical advice about the daily life of a bhikkhu. An ordinary day in the life of Bhikkhu Sumedho isn't about exploding into rapture, but about getting up and going to the toilet, bathing and putting on a robe, and doing this or that; it's just about being mindful while one is living in this form and learning to awaken to the way things are, to the Dhamma.

That's why, whenever we contemplate cessation, we're not looking for the end of the universe but just the exhalation of the breath, or the end of the day, or the end of the thought, or the end of the feeling. To notice them means that we have to pay attention to the flow of life – we have to really notice the way it is, rather than wait for some kind of fantastic experience of marvellous light descending on us, zapping us, or whatever.

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

Now reflect: one can observe breathing, so what is it that can observe? What is it that observes and knows the inhalation and

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

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

There is the desire of the mind to call it something, to have a name for it, have it listed as some kind of attainment or project something on to it. Notice that, the tendency to want to make it into something. It has been said that it's probably just the sound of your blood circulating in your ears. Somebody else called it the cosmic sound, the bridge to the Divine – that sounds nicer than 'the blood in your ears.' It might be the sound of the cosmos, or you might have an ear disease. But it doesn't have to be anything; it's what it is, it's 'as that.' Whatever it is, it can be used as reflection, because when you're with it there is no sense of self; there is mindfulness, there is the ability to reflect. So it is more like a straight edge that you can go to, to keep you from wobbling. It is something you can use to compose yourself in daily life, when you're getting dressed, brushing your teeth, closing a door, coming into the meditation hall, sitting down. So much of daily life is just habitual, because we focus on what

we consider to be the important things of life – like meditation. So walking from where you live to the meditation hall can be a totally heedless experience, just a habit – *clump, clump, clump!* Then *slam!* goes the door! After which you sit here for an hour trying to be mindful!

But you can begin to see a way of being mindful, of bringing mindfulness to the ordinary routines and experiences of life. I have a nice little picture in my room of which I'm very fond, of an old man with a coffee mug in his hand, looking out of the window into an English garden with the rain coming down. The title of the picture is 'Waiting.' That's how I think of myself: an old man sitting at the window with my coffee mug, waiting, waiting, watching the rain or the sun, or whatever.

I don't find that a depressing image, but rather a peaceful one. This life is just about waiting – we're waiting all the time, so we notice that. We can be just waiting, not waiting for anything but just waiting. And then we respond to the things of life: to the time of day, the duties, the way things move and change, the society we are in. That response isn't from the force of habits of greed, hatred and delusion but a response of wisdom and mindfulness.

How many of you feel you have a mission in life to perform, something you've got to do, some kind of important task that's been assigned to you by God, or fate, or something? People frequently get caught up in that view of being somebody who has a mission. Who can be just with the way things are, so that it is just the body that grows up, breathes and is conscious, gets old and dies? We can practise, live within the moral precepts, do good, respond to the needs and experiences of life with

mindfulness and wisdom – but there’s nobody who has to do anything. There’s nobody with a mission, nobody special; we’re not making a person or a saint, an avatar or a *tulku*, a messiah or Maitreya. You may think, ‘I’m just a nobody’, but even being a nobody is being somebody in this life. You can be just as proud of being nobody as of being somebody, and just as deludedly attached to being nobody. But whatever you happen to believe, whether that you’re a nobody or a somebody, that you have a mission or are a nuisance and a burden to the world – however you might view yourself, the knowing is there to see the cessation of such a view.

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

You might think that this is a barren philosophy of life, because there seems to be a lot more heart and feeling in being somebody who’s going to save all sentient beings. People with self-sacrifice who have missions, help others and have something important to do are an inspiration. But when you notice that as *dhamma*, you are looking at the limitations of inspirations and their cessation. Then there is the *dhamma* of those aspirations and

actions, rather than somebody who has to become something or do something.

The whole illusion is relinquished, and what remains is purity of mind. Then the response to experience comes from wisdom and purity rather than from a personal conviction of a mission, with its sense of self and other and all the complications that come from that whole pattern of delusion.

Can you trust that? Can you trust in just letting everything go and cease, not being anybody and not having any mission, not having to become anything? Can you really trust in that, or do you find it frightening, barren or depressing? Maybe you really want inspiration: ‘Tell me everything is all right; tell me you really love me; what I’m doing is right and Buddhism is not just a selfish religion where you get enlightened for your own sake; tell me that Buddhism is here to save all sentient beings. Is that what you’re going to do, Ven. Sumedho? Are you really Mahayana or Hinayana?’

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

I remember that in my own experience, I always had the view that I was somebody special in some way. I used to think, ‘Well I *must* be a special person.’ Way back when I was a child I was fascinated by Asia, and as soon as I could I studied Chinese at university, so surely I must have been a reincarnation of

somebody who was connected to the Orient. But consider this as a reflection: no matter how many signs of being special, or previous lives you can remember, or voices from God, or messages from the cosmos, whatever – I’m not denying those things or saying that they aren’t real, but they’re impermanent. They’re *anicca, dukkha, anattā*.

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

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

This I trust: this is what *saddhā* is – it is faith in the Buddha’s word. *Saddhā* is a real trust and confidence in Dhamma: in just waiting, being nobody and not becoming anything, but being

able just to wait and respond. And if there's nothing much to respond to, it's just waiting – coffee cup in hand, watching the rain, the sunset, getting old, witnessing the ageing process, the comings and goings in the monastery – the ordinations and the disrobings, the inspirations and the depressions, the highs and the lows, inside the mind, outside in the world. And there is the response – because when we have vigour, intelligence and talent, life always comes to ask us to respond to it in some skilful and compassionate way, which we are very willing and able to do.

We like to help people. I wouldn't mind going to a Buddhist leper colony – I'd be glad to – or working in the shanty towns of Calcutta, or wherever, I'd have no objections; those kinds of things are rather appealing to my sense of nobility. But it's not a mission, it's not me having to do anything; it's trusting in the Dhamma. Then the response to life is clear and of benefit, because it's not coming from me as a person and the delusions of ignorance conditioning mental formations. We observe the restlessness, the compulsiveness, the obsessiveness of the mind, and let it cease. We let it go and it ceases.



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

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

What happens as a practical experience when you let things go and they cease? What's left, what's the remainder? This is what the Buddha is pointing to in teaching about the arising and cessation of conditions.

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

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

All these things are still very good and praiseworthy. But it's through attachment that we suffer, because if we attach to any perception, we are not realizing the truth. We are just attaching

to symbol, and grasping the symbol as being the reality. If I said: 'You see the Buddha sitting up there on the shrine? That's the real Buddha. That is Buddha', you'd think: 'Ajahn Sumedho has really gone crazy.' Yet we can still attach to a perception of Buddha as Buddha. We are not at the stage where we are going to believe that the vast statue is Buddha, but we can be very attached to a view about Buddha. And it might be a very nice view, just as that Buddha-rupa is a very nice Buddha-rupa. I like that Buddha; it is very beautiful, and we don't have to get rid of it because Buddha-rupas do not delude. What is dangerous is our attachment to a perception – of self, of others, of Buddha, of God, of Oneness, of wholeness.

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

I'm not asking you to attach to a position of non-dualism, but I have asked you not to try to inspire your mind or read about inspired monistic teaching and various other religions during this retreat, because in order to really learn how to use this particular tool, you have to follow the instructions and observe the results. And it can seem pretty barren, but we have to let go of that need for inspiration, right up to that point of despair. We have to learn to accept that emptiness, that silence, the cessation, the loneliness, the lack of warmth; and not ask for benevolence and kindness. We have to open to the silence and

contemplate it, learning from it rather than running away from it and looking for a nice warm mother or a nice safe father.

Then one way you can describe this holy life is the growing up of an individual being to that maturity where we no longer linger in the warmth of adolescence or childhood, or in the pleasures of the world.



21 | REFLECTIONS ON
TEN DHAMMAS

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

What are these ten?

*'I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values.'
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*'My very life is sustained through the gifts of others.'
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*'I should strive to abandon my former habits.'
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

*'Does regret over my conduct arise in my mind?'
This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.*

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

'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.'

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

'I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma; whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be heir.'

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

'The days and nights are relentlessly passing, how well am I spending my time.'

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

'Do I delight in solitude or not?'

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

'Has my practice borne fruit with freedom or insight, so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions?'

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

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



22 | DEPENDENT ORIGINATION I: IGNORANCE IS SELF-VIEW

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

The problem lies in the fact that ‘not-self’ seems like annihilation, and what frightens people about Buddhism is that ‘not-self’ and ‘no soul’ sound like an absolute position that one has to take as a Buddhist. People who hate God and resent Christianity may become Buddhists because they’ve got a grudge against God, the soul, sin and guilt. They really want Buddhism to be a kind of atheistic philosophy and a total rejection of the whole Christian experience. But that’s not what it is. Buddhism is not atheistic or nihilistic.

The Buddha was very careful to avoid such extreme positions. Instead his teaching is a very skilfully and carefully constructed psychology. Its aim is to help us see through and let go of all the habitual attachments – attitudes born out of ignorance, fear and desire – that create this illusory sense of a self. So for over 2,500 years now Buddhism has managed to survive and keep

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

If we practise with this in the right way, we can really begin to see the suffering and misery we create over the illusions about ourselves. We're not trying to create an illusion that there isn't any self. The point is not to go from the illusion of self to the illusion of 'there is no self', but rather to investigate, contemplate and have insight until the ineffable truth is realized by each one of us for ourselves.

Each one of us has our unique experience – we don't all experience exactly the same things. We have different memories, experiences, tendencies and habits. And yet we always relate these infinite varieties to Dhamma teachings, so we are not just making totally subjective interpretations. We apply the Dhamma teaching to our experience, in order to be able to communicate and understand it in a context that is wider than that of personal subjectivity.

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

In the contemplation of *paṭiccasamuppāda* we're coming to agreements on how its terms relate to contemplative experience.

When you first read *paṭiccasamuppāda*, you don't understand it at all. 'Ignorance conditions kammic formations; kammic formations condition consciousness, etc.' So what? What does that mean? You imagine it must be very profound and probably takes a lifetime of studying Pali to understand, so you tend to brush it aside.

In Buddhist circles the Four Noble Truths can be glossed over. 'Oh yes – basic Buddhism. Yes ... now, let's get on to the real advanced Mādhyamaka Buddhism!' Or: 'What did Dogen say?' Or: 'Milarepa is absolutely fascinating, isn't he?'⁸ And you think: "Suffering, Origin, Cessation and Path", yes, we know that, now let's get on to the real nitty-gritty.'

So the Four Noble Truths tend to be perfunctory beliefs. People don't investigate or use them, because the teachings in themselves are not interesting. 'Suffering, Origin, Cessation and Path' is not an inspiring teaching, because it is a teaching for practice, not a teaching intended as inspirational. And this is why we use it: because that particular way of thinking and contemplating is psychologically valid.

With it we can begin to understand that which we've never seen or understood before. In following this way of practice, you're actually developing your mind and intelligence in a way that is very seldom done. Even in the most advanced educational systems, people don't really train their minds in this particular way of reflection and contemplation. To think rationally is

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

highly regarded, but to understand what rationality is as a function of mind, you have to reflect on the nature of the mind. What is actually happening? What is it all about? And of course, these are the questions of existence, the existential questions: ‘Why was I born?’ ‘Is there a meaning to life?’ ‘What happens when I die?’ ‘What is it all about?’ ‘Is it meaningless – just a cosmic accident?’ ‘Does it relate to anything beyond itself, or is this merely something that happens and then that’s it – that’s the end?’

We have great problems with relating the meaning of life to anything real beyond the material world. So materialism becomes the reality for us. When we explore space, it’s always on the material plane. We want to go up in rocket ships and take our bodies up to the moon, because according to the materialist view that’s what’s real. Western materialism lacks subtlety and refinement: it brings us down to a very coarse level of consciousness, where reality is this gross material object, and the emotions are dismissed as not being real because they’re subjective. You can’t go round measuring emotions with electronic instruments. But of course the emotions are very real to us individually – what we’re feeling is really more important to us than a digital watch. Our fears, desires, loves, hates and aspirations are what really make our lives happy or miserable. And yet these can be dismissed in modern materialism for a world based on sensual pleasure, material wealth and rational thinking, so that the spiritual life seems to many people to be an illusion, because you can’t measure it with a computer or examine it with electronic instruments.

Yet in pre-scientific European civilization, the spiritual world was the real world. How do you think they built the

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

In meditation you're moving towards that. You're letting go of all these attachments to the changing conditions of the material world, the emotional plane, the intellectual plane, the symbolic plane, the astral plane. All that is let go of in order to realize the still point, the silence. This letting go is not an annihilation or a rejection, but it gives you the perspective to understand the whole. You cannot understand the whole from being out on the circumference, where you just get whirled around.

Being whirled around on the circumference means that you're lost in attachment to all the things that are whirling around. It's called *samsāra*, where you're just going around in circles and you can't get any perspective in *samsāra*. You have no ability to stop and watch or observe because you're just caught in this circular movement.

In this way of the Four Noble Truths and *paṭiccasamuppāda*, the aim of meditation is to stop the mind's whirling. You abide in stillness, not as an attack against the conditioned world, but in order to see it in perspective. You're not annihilating it or criticizing it, or trying to get out of it in any way through aversion or fear of it. You're getting to the centre, to the still point where you can see it for what it is, and know it, and not

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

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

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

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

With understanding more and more, there can be a letting go of the desire to develop and become anything. And as one's mind is freed from all that desire to become and get something, to attain something, Truth starts revealing itself. It's ever present, here and now. It's a matter of just being able to be open and sensitive so that Truth is revealed. It's not something that is revealed from outside. The Truth is always present, but we don't see it if we're caught up in the idea of attainments, of 'me' having to do something, having to get something.

So the Buddha made a direct attack on 'me and mine.' That's the only thing that's blocking you. The obstacle is the attachment to a self-view, that's what is the problem. If you just see through that self-view, let go of that, you'll understand the rest. You don't need to know all the other kinds of elaborate esoteric formulas. You don't have to go endlessly into the complexity if you just let go of the ignorant view of 'I am.'

See that, and know and understand the way of letting go, of non-attachment. Then the Truth reveals itself wherever you are, all the time. But until you do that, you'll always be caught in creating problems and complications.

*‘Avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā, saṅkhārapaccayā viññāṇaṃ,
viññāṇapaccayā nāmarūpaṃ, nāmarūpapaccayā
saḷāyatanaṃ, saḷāyatanapaccayā phasso, phassapaccayā
vedanā, vedanāpaccayā taṇhā, taṇhāpaccayā
upādānaṃ, upādānapaccayā bhavo, bhavapaccayā
jāti, jātipaccayā jarāmaraṇaṃ soka-parideva-
dukkha-domanassupāyāsā sambhavanti.’⁹*

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

9. For an explanation of this sequence, please see ‘A Note Before You Begin’ at the beginning of this book.



23 | DEPENDENT ORIGINATION 2:
MOMENTARY ARISING

In Ajahn Buddhadāsa's book on dependent origination, he emphasizes that his approach has been on *paṭiccasamuppāda* as working in the moment, rather than in terms of past, present and future lives. When you contemplate, when you practise, you realize that that is the only way it could ever be. This is because we are working with the mind itself.

Even when we are considering the birth of a human body, we are not commenting on the birth of our own bodies, but recognizing mentally that these bodies were born. Then we note in reflection that mental consciousness arises and ceases. So that whole sequence of Dependent Origination arises and ceases in a moment. The arising and the cessation from *avijjā* are momentary, it is not a kind of permanent *avijjā*. It would be a mistaken view to assume that everything began with *avijjā* and will all cease some time in the future.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

That word ‘*nibbāna*’ is generally defined as ‘non-attachment to the five *khandhā*’, which means no longer experiencing a sense of a self with regard to the body and mind – *rūpa*, *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā*, *viññāṇa*. We no longer contemplate the five *khandhā* with *avijjā*, but with *vijjā*. We see that they are all impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.

Nibbāna is the realization of non-attachment wherein the self-view ceases. The body is still breathing, so it doesn’t dissolve into thin air, but the mistaken identity that ‘I am the body’ dissolves. The mistaken identification with *vedanā*, *saññā*, *saṅkhārā*, *viññāṇa* – all that ceases. The self dissolves, you can’t find anybody. You can’t find yourself because you are yourself.

In the traditional view of Dependent Origination occurring over the span of three lives, the five *khandhā* are seen as a kind of permanent form from birth. The body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness are considered as being continuous from birth. But that's an assumption we make, and the reflection of momentary arising points to the mind itself. The body isn't a person anyway: it's not 'me' and 'mine', never was, never will be. There's only the perception of it as 'me' and 'mine', the belief that I was born.

I have a birth certificate to prove that this body was born. We carry birth certificates in our mind – we carry around the whole history, the memories and so forth of our lives, giving us this sense of a continuity of a person from birth to the present moment. But examination of perception alone shows that perception arises and ceases. This perception of me as a permanent personality is just a moment. It arises and ceases.

Consciousness too is just momentary and conveys the attractive, repulsive and neutral qualities of the conditioned realm. When one sees that clearly, there is no longer any interest in that attachment and in seeking for happiness, trying to be reborn into happiness or beauty, pleasure, safety or security. Rebirth is a grasping of the conditioned realm, so we let that go. The five *khandhā* are still the five *khandhā*, but they are seen for what they are, as impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self.

So this reflection on the truth of the way it is, is very direct, very clear. From the confused, amorphous, nebulous, insecure, unstable, uncertain to the certain – whatever it is, we are no longer choosing which we prefer, we are just noting that whatever arises ceases. As you realize this through your

practice, a lot of the vagueness, and fuzziness of your mind are seen for exactly what they are. Confusion is confusion, just that, it's a *dhamma*.

Confusion is just confusion in the moment, it's not permanent or the self. So what before was a problem or something deluding us is transformed into a *dhamma*. The transformation is not through changing the condition, but through changing the attitude from ignorance to clarity.

People say: 'All this is very well, but what about love and compassion?' The block for all that is desire. Love is no problem once there is no delusion; once there is no self, there's nothing to hinder, block off or prevent love. But as long as there is self-illusion, love is just an idea that we long for but always feel disappointed with – because the self is getting in the way. The self-view is always blinding us, making us forget and deluding us that there isn't any love. We feel alienated, lonely and lost because there doesn't seem to be any love, so we blame somebody else. Or maybe we blame ourselves for not being lovable, or we become cynics.

But the Buddha pointed to this and asked what the real problem was. It's the illusion of a self. It's attachment to that perception. That affects consciousness and everything else, so we are always creating separations and dissatisfaction, and identifying with that which is not ourselves. Once we are free from that illusion, love is ever-present. It's just that we can't see it or enjoy it when we are blinded by our desires and fears. As you understand this more and more, your faith increases and there is a willingness to give up everything. There is a real zest, a joy in being with the way things are.



24 | DEPENDENT ORIGINATION 3:
THE FORMATION OF SELF

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

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

What is your suffering in life, anyway? Why do you suffer? If you investigate you can always trace it back to *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*. There’s natural suffering, going hungry, getting old

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

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

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

they really wanted. So suffering comes out of the creations we make about ourselves and others, about our parents, and the people closest to us.

What is suffering? Really ask yourself, what is the suffering of your life? Yesterday the cold winds were blowing through me as I was walking out there in the field. Is that suffering? I could make it suffering. I hate this cold wind. But actually it was all right – I mean it was something I could completely bear. If I didn't make anything about it in my mind, it was just cold wind, that's all. Yet we can spend time in Amaravati creating attitudes about monks, nuns, and laypeople.

You can really make senior nuns into big ogres! We can have strong views about seniority. If we are in a senior position we can be very attached to it – 'I am senior to you. You are just a new monk. Do that. I'm boss.' So we can create ourselves as being senior monks. But we are not here to create kamma based on ignorance. The conventions we have are merely expedient means. They are simplifications, moral agreements and community agreements to make life simple and uncomplicated, and also to allow us to reflect on the way we relate to people above; senior people, equal people, junior people.

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

When there's *avijjā* it conditions the *sankhārā*, which condition consciousness or *viññāṇa*. Consciousness conditions mentality

and corporeality (*nāma-rūpa*), which conditions the sense bases (*saḷāyatana*), which condition contact (*phassa*), which conditions feeling (*vedanā*). When ignorance is the primary condition, the rest are all affected by it. The sensory world, body and mind are related to in terms of ‘me’ and ‘mine’. This is the self-view. In contrast to Brahmanism, where the Hindu talks about the Atman, or the higher self, the One, when the Buddha talks of self, it is related to attachment to the five *khandhā*, to body, feeling, perceptions, volitions and consciousness. Attachment to that, ignorance, conditions kammic formations. All this creates a sense of a self.

This self-view starts to become strong when you are aged six to seven. You go to school and you compete and compare, and this strong sense of a self starts being conditioned into your mind. I remember the first five or six years of my life being magical, and then after six or seven it started getting increasingly worse. Before that there wasn’t very much a sense of self.

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

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

Examine desire during this retreat; really get to know what desire is. From my own reflection on it, I see it is always energy aiming at something, whether it’s restless and scattered or aimed at something definite. There is a strong desire to get rid of things we don’t like as quickly as possible. We want to get what we want instantly and get rid of what we don’t like instantly; we don’t value patience any more in our society. We want efficiency. Everything looks nice, and then something comes in and makes a mess, and we have to clean it up immediately because we don’t want obstacles or hindrances, or anything unpleasant. We want to get rid of it quickly, so we are very impatient and we can get very upset and annoyed at things because of this desire to get rid of, this *vibhava-taṇhā*.

The desire to become, ambition, *bhava-taṇhā*, is often a motivation within the religious life – we want to become an enlightened personality. So *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā* are to be studied and examined. You can reflect on them; you can listen to these desires: ‘I want to get enlightened.’ ‘I want to get *samādhi*. I want to make the best I can out of this retreat so I can

have some kind of achievement or attainment from it all.’ Or to get rid of things: ‘I hope I get rid of all my lust and anger during this retreat. I hope to get rid of the jealousy, so I never have to be jealous again. During this retreat I am working on jealousy. I’m working on doubt or fear – if I can get rid of my fear by the end of this retreat I will have no more fear left, because I’m going to get right in there and annihilate fear.’ That’s *vibhava-taṇhā* – ‘There is something wrong with me and I have got to make it right. I have got to become something else by getting rid of these bad things, these wrong things about me.’ It’s all ‘I am’ and ‘me-and-mine’.

Kāma-taṇhā is quite obvious – it is the desire for pleasurable sense experiences. These forms of desire are to be known and understood. The trap is that we tend to think the Buddha teaches us to get rid of our desires. That is how some people interpret Buddhism. But that’s wrong: the Buddha taught us how to look at and understand desire so that we do not grasp it. That’s not telling us to get rid of desire, but to really understand it so that it can no longer delude us. The desire to get rid of desire is still desire, it is not looking at desire. With that desire you are just grasping a perception that you shouldn’t have desires and you have to get rid of them. But through understanding Dependent Origination we see *taṇhā* as Dhamma rather than as self -- you are looking at *taṇhā*, desire, as that which arises and ceases. That’s Dhamma. In twenty-two years of careful looking and close observation, I have not found one desire that arises and keeps arising. If any of you do find one, please tell me.

Kāma-taṇhā is fairly coarse and fairly obvious: ‘I want something to eat’, or sexual desires. But *vibhava-taṇhā* can be very subtle, righteous and important, and one can be deluded

by that righteous quality. The desire to get rid of evil can seem so right. We can dedicate our lives to getting rid of the evils in this world and become fanatical. This is what you can see in modern social problems. There are the degenerate tendencies of this society, leading to sexual aberrations and drugs, and then there are the very righteous forms of fundamentalism which condemn the degenerate, loose-living, immoral behaviour of one element of society. But we are looking at desire itself, from the gross forms of want and lust to the righteous passion of ‘wanting to kill and annihilate these degenerates.’

Contemplate that as something within your mind. I have seen both tendencies in myself. I can become attracted to sensual pleasures, and I can also be really hard and self-righteous, and critical of others or myself. *Bhava-taṇhā* can be very sweet too, when it is intended for the welfare of others. It’s not just that I want to attain something so I can say I have attained something. There is also the *bhava-taṇhā* of wanting because I feel I would like to help everyone else. There is still the ‘I am’ – ‘I want to get enlightened, and then I am going to really help everyone else, and I want to become someone who is not selfish but works totally for the welfare of all sentient beings.’ That’s very altruistic – it’s beautiful and inspiring, but it can also be *bhava-taṇhā* if it is coming from *avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*.

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

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



25 | DEPENDENT ORIGINATION 4:
FEELING CONDITIONS DESIRE

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

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

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

Every human being has the ability to see the way things are clearly and not create suffering about it. Admittedly we've all experienced unfortunate things or done foolish things. This is just ordinary human experience. Once we're born, anything can happen to us. The whole range of life's experiences is possible for us, from the most fortunate to the most unfortunate ones. That's the result of birth. There's nothing wrong with that; it's just the way it is. Birth in the human realm is risky – we can't be sure what we're getting into. It could be a real mess, or it could be a delight; or it could be sometimes messy and sometimes delightful, or one-quarter messy, three-fourths mediocre and no delightful things at all.

Being born in this human world, into sensory consciousness, is like this: it's unstable, uncertain, it changes, and we cannot find any security within it. This is what we all have in common. From the most fortunate to the least fortunate human beings, we are all vulnerable, being in a shape and form that can be damaged, hurt and diseased. When we look at this side of our human existence, we don't feel prejudices and strong views

concerning race, class, sex, nationality and so forth. We're all brothers and sisters in old age, sickness and death.

Having been born, there's *viññāṇa*, consciousness, there's body, *nāma-rūpa*. There are the sense organs – *saḷāyatana* – the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. There is *phassa* or contact with the sense objects; and there's *vedanā*, feeling. This *vedanā* is the result of birth and consciousness, and in this sense is applied to sensory experience, to the attractive, neutral and un-attractive qualities.

The experience of *vedanā* through the eyes doesn't mean your eyes ache or hurt; it means that when you see beautiful flowers as attractive, the *vedanā* of attraction is pleasant. There is also unpleasant or neutral feeling. That whole process will then stimulate desire, grasping and becoming (*taṇhā-upādāna-bhava*). We become what we desire. Now apply that to all the senses and their objects – to sound, smell, taste, touch and thought. Some of our thoughts are very pleasant, some are neither pleasant nor unpleasant, and some are unpleasant. This is the sensitivity of these bodies; they're totally sensitive conditions, they're conscious and they feel.

This is just the way it is. Some of you only want to be partially sensitive. You're frightened of being totally sensitive. You'd like to become sensitive only to nice things, and you'd like to pray to God and say: 'Oh God, please give me everything nice, only pleasant feelings, and please make everything beautiful for me. And never let me suffer, and let me always have success and happiness and beautiful people around me until I die.' That's the whinging human mind wanting only partial sensitivity.

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

So contemplate this ‘I am’ that cries and weeps and fears and desires. Why are we frightened? What are we frightened of and anxious about? It is the possibility of pain, isn’t it? – of being physically harmed, diseased or emotionally exploited, or hurt in some way; of being rejected, unloved, looked down on, getting cancer or Parkinson’s disease. ‘I don’t want that, I want perfect health. I’m afraid I might have some terrible disease. What if I have one of those heart attacks where for the next thirty to forty years I’m a kind of cabbage and the monks have to do everything, put me on the potty? I don’t want that, I couldn’t bear to be a nuisance or a burden to anyone.’ ‘I don’t want to be a burden’ is an English obsession.

So ‘I am’ is something to contemplate and observe because it is something that we’re convinced is a reality. Because of ignorance, ‘I am’ is truth for most human beings. And it’s very natural to want happiness and want to run away from pain. You see something beautiful, you grasp it, you want it. You see something ugly, you want to get rid of it. Those are the natural reactions on the sensory plane. If that’s all there is to it, you just have to try to get all the best you can and run away from all the bad, and there’s no way out. It’s each one for themselves –

survival. The clever and the strong survive, and the stupid and the weak will be at the bottom, in the pits.

But the human being is equipped with a reflective mind; we can reflect and contemplate *vedanā*. We can observe and contemplate what attraction is and what beauty is. We're not just dumb animals: we can actually watch ourselves wanting to grab and possess the beautiful. We can observe and reflect on our aversion to anything ugly and unpleasant; and we can also contemplate what is neither pleasant nor unpleasant.

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

Ānāpānasati is boring to most people at first; just inhalation-exhalation, the same old thing. The breathing of the body is neutral *vedanā*. When we do the meditation of sweeping through the feeling of the body, the pressure of the body sitting on the seats and the clothes touching the skin, that's neutral feeling. Then we can observe the *vedanā* through the ear, the

nose, the tongue, the eye, the body, the mind. And we start to see that this is just the sensory realm, not a person, just the way it is. There's nothing wrong with that, nothing bad about it at all. *Vedanā* is all right. There's just the pleasant and the painful and the neutral; they're just what they are. However, to be aware of pleasure, pain and neutral *vedanā* means that we have to bear it, really accept it rather than just reacting to it. We reflect on it, contemplate it so that we really understand it. If we don't contemplate and have insight into *vedanā*, we just continue this process of *paṭiccasamuppāda* – so we have desires, because *vedanā* conditions *taṇhā*, desire. But with insight we can break the habit. We can contemplate *vedanā*. Then we begin to understand how desire arises: wanting the pleasure, not wanting the pain, and just ignoring the neutral.

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

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

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

The Buddha advised us to bring our attention to the neither-pleasant- nor-painful things in life, because to accept and notice neither-pleasure- nor-pain means we have to be attentive and alert. If something is not attractive or repulsive, it doesn't

make us react. It doesn't stimulate our minds at all. So we have to bring our attention to it, be awake to it. That's why in meditation we sit, we stand, we walk, we lie down; four basic postures, normal breathing, things that are so ordinary, but are not pleasurable nor painful. The practice of mindfulness is to bring our attention to *vedanā*. But we're not attaching to neutrality either: we're not trying to attach to either pleasure or pain. So to study *vedanā* we're not trying to live a neutral existence, but bringing attention to it means that we have to put effort into just sitting, standing, walking, lying down; being awake, being here and now. We have to pay attention, we have to learn to concentrate the mind.

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

We can observe these three kinds of desires: we can observe and reflect on them because they're objects of the mind; they're mind objects, they're not the subject. Desire is not you, in

other words. But out of heedlessness, out of *avijjā*, it becomes a subject, it becomes you. You grasp desire and you become the desirer: ‘I want this and I don’t want that. I want to become a success, I don’t want to become a failure. I’ve got to get rid of these faults.’ So there’s the grasping of desire, and then you become somebody who wants things or doesn’t want things. And that’s endless.

When we become a person who wants things and doesn’t want things, it just goes on and on and on. There’s always something we want, something we don’t want. If we don’t watch and observe this process, our whole life is just this endless cycle of *saṃsāra* going around and around, just wanting; becoming somebody who wants something, becoming somebody who doesn’t want something. And that, of course, conditions rebirth, *jāti*. It conditions old age, sickness, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair – depression, misery; ‘*jarāmarañam soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā*.’

To be somebody who always has to be getting something or getting rid of something is such a painful way to live. Just contemplate: what is the real suffering in your life? When you think you’ve suffered, what is it that you suffered from? It was from being somebody who wants things or doesn’t want things. We talk about the first Noble Truth, *dukkha*. We all have this suffering. When there’s *avijjā* we suffer, our life is going to be a realm of suffering. This is becoming very obvious in affluent Western Europe, in places like America and Australia; affluent societies where people get very much what they want, and where suffering isn’t the suffering of starvation, deprivation and brutality. But in affluent countries there’s so much misery and suffering – from what? Wanting and not wanting, because

even when we get everything we want we want more, and there are things that we don't want.

Just trying to satisfy all our desires and get everything we want is not the answer. That's not the way out of suffering, because that process doesn't end until you see it, until you use *vijjā* rather than *avijjā*. So contemplate that, this wanting and not wanting, desire and the grasping of desire.

When you contemplate *vedanā*, then you see it's just natural: attraction, repulsion and neither attraction nor repulsion. It's just being sensitive. For example, these flowers in front of me are attractive to me right now. That's just the natural way of things. There's no desire in that. If I contemplate at this moment: 'I don't want those flowers', there's no desire. I don't want to get rid of them either. There's no wanting or not wanting, but they're still pleasing; their attractiveness is this way. That's *vedanā*. Or something ugly like these curtains. I find them ugly. Whenever I come into this room my mind says, 'Those curtains are ugly', so I don't really want to look at them. But I can be aware of the displeasure when my eyes contact those curtains without desiring to get rid of them; it's just awareness of their unattractiveness. Or the wall, which is neither attractive nor unattractive, just a neutral wall.

Reflecting in this way, you see that's just the natural way of things: attraction and aversion, neither attractive nor averse, just *vedanā*. Desire is what we add, like for those flowers: 'Oh, I really want those flowers, I want to have those flowers in my room, I've got to have those flowers!' Or the curtains: 'I wish they could get rid of those curtains, they really upset me.' One dwells on wanting to get rid of the curtains, wanting to grab

the flowers. Of course, one doesn't even notice the wall unless something attractive or unattractive appears on it. And what about the space in the room? Space is neither attractive nor unattractive, is it?

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

This is a way of reflecting on desire – desire for sense pleasure, desire to become, desire to get rid of. If we really contemplate and know *vedanā* exactly through *vijjā*, through mindfulness and wisdom, then we don't create desire. There's still the pleasure, the pain, the neither-pleasant-nor-painful, but

things are as they are. This is the suchness, the way things are; it's the Dhamma, the Truth. There's no suffering when things are as they are. Suffering is a result of desire-grasping-becoming (*taṇhā-upādāna-bhava*). From there the sequence of *paṭiccasamuppāda* goes on to birth, ageing, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair (*jāti jarāmaraṇam soka-parideva-dukkha-domanassupāyāsā*). The whole sequence of misery follows from *taṇhā-upādāna-bhava*.

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



26 | DEPENDENT ORIGINATION 5:
LETTING GO OF DESIRE

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

Some people think that all I teach is: ‘Whatever happens, let go.’ But the teaching involves a real investigation of suffering; insight into letting go occurs through that understanding. So letting go does not come from a desire to get rid of suffering – that is not letting go.

Vibhava-tanhā, or the desire to get rid of is quite subtle, but wanting to get rid of our defilements is another kind of desire. Letting go is not a getting rid of or putting down with any aversion. Letting go means being able to be with what is displeasing without dwelling in aversion, because aversion is an attachment. If you have a lot of aversion, you will still be attached. Fear, aversion – all this is grasping and clinging.

Dispassion is acceptance and awareness of things as they are; not creating anything, letting go of the aversion to what is ugly or unpleasant. So ‘letting go’ is not a trick phrase coined as a way of dismissing things, but a deep insight into the nature

of things. Letting go is therefore being able to bear with something unpleasant and not be caught up in anger and aversion. Dispassion is not depression.

How many of you dismiss and refuse to acknowledge the unpleasantness of the functions of your own bodies? There are certain functions of the human body that aren't beautiful, that we do not mention in polite society. We use all kinds of euphemisms and ways of politely excusing ourselves at the appropriate moment, because we do not want the perception of ourselves to be connected to those functions. We want our presence or image to be connected with something pleasing, interesting or attractive. We want our photograph taken with flowers in an attractive setting, not on the toilet. We want to disguise the natural processes of life, cover up the wrinkles, dye the hair, do everything to make ourselves look younger, because ageing is not attractive.

As we grow older, we lose what is beautiful and attractive. So, on reflection is to be really aware of sickness and death, that which is attractive and unattractive; the way things are in this realm of sensory consciousness.

Being an entity with sense organs which contact objects – they may be anything from the most beautiful and pleasing to the most hideous and ugly – we experience feelings. Feeling, *vedanā*, entails the alternatives of the pleasant, the painful and the neutral; this applies to all the senses: taste, touch, sight, hearing, smell and thought.

So *vedanā*: I use that particular word, that *khandha*, as the concept for all that attraction/repulsion. We are experiencing *vedanā*, we are aware of the pleasant, painful, beautiful, ugly,

neutral; through the body or through what we hear, smell, taste, touch or think. Even memories can be attractive. We can have memories that are pleasing, unpleasant or neutral. And if we are heedless and operate from *avijjā*, self-view, the unquestioned assumption that ‘I am’, the attractive, unattractive and neutral are interpreted with desire. I want the beautiful, I want the pleasant, I want to be happy and successful. I want to be praised, I want to be appreciated, I want to be loved. I don’t want to be persecuted, unhappy, sick, looked down on or criticized. I don’t want ugly things around me. I don’t want to look at the ugly, to be around the unpleasant.

Consider the functions of our body. We all know that these functions are just part of nature but we don’t want to think of them as being ours. I have to urinate, but I would not want to be known in history as Sumedho the Urinator. Sumedho the Abbot of Amaravati, that’s all right. When I write my autobiography, it will be filled with things like the fact that I was a disciple of Ajahn Chah, about how sensitive I was as a little child, innocent and pure – maybe a little mischievous now and then, because I don’t want to be seen as a kewpie doll. But in most biographies the unpleasant functions of the body are just dismissed. We are not to go round thinking we should identify with these functions, but just to begin to notice the tendency not to want to be bothered with them, or pay attention to them, and observe a lot of what is part of our life, the way things are.

In mindfulness we open our minds to this, to the whole of life, which includes the beautiful, the ugly, the pleasing, the painful and the neutral. So in our reflection on the *paṭiccasamuppāda*, we see it is connected to the second Noble Truth.

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

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

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

When you think, ‘What does an arahant know?’ it is this: they know there is suffering; they know suffering should be understood; they know when suffering has been understood; they know the origin of suffering, they know it should be let go of, knows that it has been let go of, etc.

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

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

And so the grasping of the conditioned world as a self is based on delusion or ignorance (*avijjā*), the illusion of a self as being the five *khandhā*. And because of that, we live our lives based on ignorance. The volitional activities (*saṅkhārā*) from that ignorance interpret everything from ‘I am’ and from the grasping of desires: the result is *jarāmaraṇa*, ageing and death. If I grasp the body as self, ‘I’ get old. My body is ageing; it’s sagging and wrinkly. And the belief that ‘I am getting old’ because the body is getting old is a kind of suffering. If there is no sense of self, there is no suffering. There is an appreciation of the body’s ageing. There is no feeling that there is anything wrong with the body getting old; that is what it is supposed to do. That is its nature. It is not me. It is not mine, and it is doing what it is supposed to do. Perfect, isn’t it? I would be upset if it started getting younger – eventually I’d be back in nappies and I’d have to go through everything again.

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

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

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

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

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

So in the Holy Life there is a lot of *vibhava-taṇhā*. We can live this life solely to get rid of things, and to become something by getting rid of something. Notice then that the second Noble Truth is the realization that desire should be let go of, should be laid down. It is not a rejection of desire, but an understanding; you let it go, because otherwise it is *vibhava-taṇhā*, the desire to

get rid of desire. Know it, see it, but don't make anything out of it. If you are coming from ignorance, your desire says, 'I want to become an enlightened being and I shouldn't think like that, I shouldn't have the desire to become a Buddha; I shouldn't want to become anything.' All that can be from ignorance conditioning mental formations (*avijjāpaccayā saṅkhārā*). The insight knowledge then is: 'Desire should be let go of.'

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

I remember a psychiatrist who lived in Bangkok, who used to take somebody's wristwatch. The person would get upset and he would say, 'You are attached to your wristwatch.' Then he would take his own watch and throw it away to prove he was not attached. He was bragging about this to me. I said, 'You have missed the point. You are attached to the view that you are not attached to your wristwatch.' Throwing the watch away like a smart aleck and saying, 'You are attached, I'm not, I threw

mine away’ wasn’t letting go. There was a lot of self in it: ‘Look at me – I’m not attached to these wretched material things.’ You can be quite proud of being non-attached. With reflection we see attachment and we don’t have to get rid of things, but we can be not attached to them; we can let go of them, not by throwing them out, but by understanding the suffering from being attached.

As you understand the peace of non-attachment, of letting go, the second Noble Truth leads to the third. When you let go of something, you are aware there is no attachment to the five *khandhā*. There is awareness that desire has been let go of. Then the insight into the third Noble Truth of cessation arises. There is cessation. Cessation should be realized. As we realize cessation more and more, we begin to notice non-attachment.

Not many of you are aware of non-attachment. You are usually conscious through being attached to things. A totally deluded human being only feels alive through attachment and desire. Contemplate that when you are not caught up in attachment to the five *khandhā*, you do not feel alive, you are nobody.

Having neurotic problems makes people feel interesting and alive: ‘I have fascinating neuroses from all kinds of traumas in early childhood.’ So it’s not Sumedho the Urinator, it’s Sumedho the Interesting Neurotic, the Mystic, or Sumedho the Abbot – these are conditions to which we can be attached. But realizing cessation allows you to let the self cease. There is letting go. The realization of letting go is cessation, that whatever arises ceases. And cessation is noted. Cessation should be realized.

So our practice is one of realizing cessation. That is when we talk about emptiness: we realize the empty mind where there is

no self. There is no sense of the mind being anybody. As soon as you think of it as ‘my’ mind, if you grasp that thought you are deluded again. But even if you have ‘my mind’ and see it as that which arises and ceases, with non-grasping of it, then it is just a condition. There is no suffering from that, it is peaceful.

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

I observe that when there is no self, no attachment, the way of relating to others is through the *brahmavihāras*, the Divine Abodes: *mettā*, kindness; *karuṇā*, compassion; *muditā*, sympathetic joy; and *upekkhā*, serenity. These are not from a self or *avijjā*. It is not that there’s an idea that, ‘I must have more *mettā* for everyone, because I have a lot of aversion and I shouldn’t – I should have loving-kindness for all beings. I should feel compassion. Sometimes I just want to kill everybody, but I should feel a lot of *mettā*, *muditā*, be kind and joyful and sympathetic with people. I should be serene, too.’ However, the desire to become someone who has lots of *mettā* and *kāruṇa* and all that kind of thing is still *bhava-taṇhā*. But as the illusions of self fall away, this is the natural way to relate. You do not become a vacuous zombie through understanding Dhamma. You still relate to each other, but through kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and serenity, rather than through greed, hatred and delusion.

What do unselfish human beings generally manifest in society? You could explain *mettā*, *muditā*, *karuṇā* and *upekkhā* as

energies that manifest through unselfish human beings. Then apply that to our own practice now. When there is *vijjā*, knowing and seeing clearly, that gives full opportunity for the practice of kindness, compassion and the rest. But it is not me, not mine, not Sumedho the *mettā*-filled Ajahn, Sumedho the Good Guy rather than Sumedho the Urinator. As soon as Sumedho- delusions step aside and cease, kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy and serenity can manifest. This is why the human state is a great blessing: when the self-view is relinquished, what remains is a great blessing. But it's not me. 'I' am not a great blessing. All I can do in this conventional self is let go of delusion, be mindful and not get attached to things, see clearly – that is what I can do.

That is the practice of the Four Noble Truths and development of the Eightfold Path. It amounts to being vigilant, mindful, seeing things clearly. Then what happens is up to other things. There is no need to go around trying to become Sumedho the Good Guy any more. Goodness can manifest through this form if there is no delusion; and that is not a personal achievement or attainment at all, merely the way things are, the way it happens to be. It is Dhamma.

THE SHINING THROUGH: | 27
OF THE DIVINE



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

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

In our lives as separate, individual beings we relate to things; we have to meet and contact and react or respond to objects all the time throughout our lives. On the physical level we have to respond to each other's presence in some way, by ignoring, embracing, paying respects or cursing. In relationships, when

there's no self, there is a divinity that manifests. Thus you can see that the human form is a form for the divine.

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

Mettā, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, and *upekkhā* provide a reflection: they form a sequence of how to relate to the human realm, to the animal kingdom and to nature. *Mettā* is very much how we should relate to ourselves, too. It's how to relate to ourselves with kindness and acceptance, rather than with aversion and judgement. *Mettā* implies accepting something that may not be very nice, such as physical pain, or things that aren't very nice about your body or your character. Maybe you have a lot of fears or bad temper, or something similar. If you have *mettā*, that means you can accept those things for what they are. You're not judging them or condemning them from an ignorant, self-conscious position. You're aware of them as painful, unpleasant, or ugly – but *mettā* practice is the ability to accept patiently the flaws, pain, irritations and frustrations within our minds and bodies, and the unpleasant and annoying things that impinge on them from outside. This is because with *mettā* such things

are no longer seen as personal; there's no me and you, no 'You've done this to me' or 'I've done this to you.'

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

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

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

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

Flowers are a lot prettier than we are. We admit they're prettier, we expect them to be; we don't envy them their beauty. But we might really hate somebody else for being beautiful, because then it's a threat. Somebody else's beauty makes me look not so beautiful. This is to be observed, not to try to force a kind of

false happiness onto the situation, but to let these things cease in your mind. To be clearly aware of this particular problem is to stay with it and not make a problem about it from the self-view. Recognize it as *anicca, dukkha, anattā*; let it cease; let go of it. Then, in that letting go, we find a rejoicing in the talents, the goodness and the beauty of other beings.

When you look at flowers you experience a joyful feeling, and that's *muditā* – you're rejoicing in or glad at the beauty of something. Maybe you've never reflected like that. We see beautiful things in nature, and because they're no threat to us or anything else, we can rejoice in the sunset or the beauty of trees and mountains and rivers. So that's *muditā*: a rejoicing in beauty, goodness and truth. And we rejoice in the goodness of others. When somebody does something good or you hear about some noble action, heroic effort or self-sacrifice, a sense of *muditā* arises. That's joy, sympathetic joy.

But we tend to fall short of this when it becomes a matter of 'you' and 'me'. We can be very jealous of somebody's health and beauty if we are caught in the self-view. We might feel joy at the flowers in the garden, but then go to a neighbour's house where the flowers are more beautiful than ours. We might feel envy because from a self-position it's, 'Her flowers look better than mine, and she is more beautiful than I am'; or, 'He is better looking than I am'; or, 'He is more intelligent'; or, 'He has a better personality.' So we suffer from envy and jealousy. It's a very common problem; in fact, many human beings are really stuck in envy and jealousy.

If one were to go to a rich person's house, with beautiful grounds, a swimming pool, beautiful oriental carpets and lovely furnishings, a selfless person might rejoice at being in a

beautiful place. Or, one might think, ‘Hum, wealthy people, probably got rich from cheating the poor and ripping off the underprivileged ... grumble, grumble, grumble.’

I remember once going into a beautiful church in London with somebody. I said, ‘Oh, what a lovely church.’ He said, ‘Yeah, it was probably at the expense of all those colonies the British exploited.’ But I wasn’t commenting on history, but experiencing the gladness of being in a beautiful place. And yet we can think that maybe that church was built out of the slave trade or the opium trade. Perhaps slave traders and drug traffickers centuries ago felt guilty, so they built a magnificent church in London. But that doesn’t mean that it’s not beautiful. We’re not judging it on the moral plane, but reflecting on the joy, on the experience of beauty, goodness, and truth: these are what bring joy into our lives. People who can’t see the beauty of the good or the true are really bitter and mean at heart; they live in an ugly realm where there’s no rejoicing in beauty, goodness and truth.

To rejoice in these things doesn’t mean that we get carried away with them; the experience of joy no longer occurs if we indulge in beauty and try to grasp it, or if we hold on to the experience of joy to try to have it all the time. But *muditā* is certainly a part of our human experience. *Muditā* is our ability to be joyful with the beauty and loveliness of life’s experiences. It is the sense of joy and appreciation and gratitude for the beauties and the lovely things of life, the lovely things in other people. So when there’s no self, then there’s joy; we find joy in the goodness, the beauty of the people around us, or in society or natural conditions. Once you have insight, you find you enjoy, delight, in the beauty and the goodness of things. Truth, beauty and goodness delight us: in them we find joy. That is *muditā*.

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

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

We can reflect on how things affect us. Always to want *muditā* – the beautiful flowers, the waterfalls and the beautiful birds singing means that you can't rejoice in them any more, because you're trying to hold on. You're trapped in all kinds of views

and opinions about them, so that even if you're in the midst of them you're not really enjoying them, rejoicing in them any more, because you've been separated from them through your desire for them.

In our life as *samaṇas*,¹⁰ contemplating nature, contemplating the Dhamma, we don't have to think that all beauty is just there to corrupt us and give us another rebirth. That's another self-view. But be aware of how beauty affects you. When you see a beautiful woman or a handsome man, how does that affect your mind? There may be an initial attraction, and then you can easily start to feel threatened and reject the person because we have a life of celibacy. Or you might give a second glance and dally with the sexual thoughts that might arise from that eye contact. But the more you are mindful, the less you tend to follow things as desire, the less you tend to create or add to the feelings with desire and attachment. When you're mindful, you don't do that.

Enlightenment doesn't mean a kind of bland indifference. Sometimes enlightenment is made to sound as if it means becoming emotionless zombies, people who don't feel anything any more. Well, as long as there's self, what we would call joy tends to be tinged with selfishness; it becomes stained with our selves. We become jealous if we have something beautiful and somebody else has something more beautiful, because selfishness always turns beauty into possessiveness. If the beauties of life, the joy of truth and beauty and goodness, are coming from self, they're always corrupted with jealousy, envy and begrudging people. So if there's selfishness, even being the most beautiful of all is not really a joyful experience, because

10. *Samaṇa*: a renunciant contemplative, a monk or nun.

you are always worried that someone else might claim that crown. If you adopt a self-view, there's always that possibility. But when there's no self, beauty doesn't belong to anyone. It's not mine or yours; we realize there's no possibility of possessing it anyway, so there's no desire to possess.

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

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

Upekkhā doesn't mean indifference. Sometimes it's translated as 'indifference' but it actually means serenity when things are ugly, unpleasant or ordinary. If you follow the *asubha* practices, noticing, paying attention to the unbeautiful, the not-beautiful, you begin to create *upekkhā*, equanimity or serenity.

There was a hospital in Bangkok which received all the murder victims and violent deaths, corpses found in the canals and things like that. If you went in on a Monday they would have a collection from the weekend, a variety of gruesome, macabre objects that would first give you a strong feeling of revulsion. You'd go in and say, 'Yuk! Let me out of here!' because we don't generally like to look at human bodies that have been butchered and mangled, and are in a state of decay. Such things are what civilized society always keeps away from. We have

institutions to take care of them, so they never have to meet our attention. But if one meditates on these things, the result is actually equanimity or serenity. If you get over the initial aversion, horror and negativity towards a rotting human corpse or a human corpse that's been cut up in an autopsy, the result is equanimity – a tremendous peacefulness and serenity. Not depression. Not aversion. When there's no self, one can abide in a state of serenity. If there's self, then we say, 'I hate it, I don't like it, take it away, I can't stand it. I can't bear this. It's foul, it's disgusting.' But when there is equanimity, actually, there is no self, so one is not making problems about the process of living, and the way things move and change and go from beauty to decay. With *muditā* you find joy in the beauty, and when the beauty fades there's equanimity rather than sorrow.

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

Traditionally, the *brahmavihāras* are considered as *lokiya dhamma*, mundane Dhamma, not the transcendent or *lokuttara dhamma*. Because of the way the mind tends to think, the view arises that they're not worth bothering with: '*Lokuttara dhammā* are the important ones. You don't pay much attention to *lokiya dhammas*.' But with mindfulness you're with the

relationship of the *lokiya* to the *lokuttara dhamma*. We relate on the *lokiya dhamma* level through the *brahmavihāras* – *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*. When there's no self, when there's no ignorance conditioning the mental formations, then there is the way of things, the *lokiya dhammas*. But we're not asking *muditā* to be a permanent experience. We are not expecting to have a continuous, absolute, eternal experience of rejoicing and joy in our lives, because we are not attached to that as a viewpoint.

So the *brahmavihāras* represent a spontaneous response to the experience of birth and consciousness when there's no self. They're a spontaneous response from selflessness, from *anattā*, rather than an impulsive reaction from desire. There's a difference between a spontaneous response to wisdom and mindfulness and an impulsive reaction to desire. The difference lies in that view of a self. In the self-view one is still grasping, just reacting impulsively with desire to life's impingements and experiences. When there's no more ignorance, there's spontaneity. That's what spontaneity is. There's no self in it. It's just a more and more natural way to respond to beauty, truth and virtue; or to pain and misery; or to winter, spring, summer and autumn; to the fortunate beings or the unfortunate ones; and even to the waiting, holding your cup of tea, looking out of the window at the rain. This is just a contemplation of what divinity is.

If you reflect on the instinctive nature, the earthbound body, its sexual desires, its reproductive abilities, survival, eating, drinking, sleeping, all these basic instinctive necessities, there's nothing bad about them; they're just the way a form like this survives. It has to reproduce itself. In fact, human beings are

becoming too good at reproducing themselves. It's rather frightening. How many billions is the world population? Six billion and rising on this planet? And if they were all just like animals, just operating out of instinct, they would be several billion selfish, undeveloped, neurotic, screwed-up human beings. It's terribly frightening. Or take it to the opposite extreme – several billion enlightened human beings – now, that might not be so bad! Several billion enlightened human beings rather than several billion ignorant, selfish human beings; several billion human beings who can manifest the divine in their daily lives, through *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*. That doesn't sound so bad – it sounds rather nice. But several billion human beings manifesting greed, hatred and delusion is a pretty grim picture. Yet we don't have the right to comment on them: this one here, this is what we have, this is what we can work on. Don't worry about the others. This is what you can develop through reflection and through meditation.



With the emphasis Buddhists place on reflection, mindfulness and wisdom, the Holy Life might sometimes seem to be an almost unfeeling attempt to look at everything in very objective ways. Rather than feel things, we're supposed to see everything as *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*. That's how it might seem. But remember that the heartfelt experience of life is a loving one, so love and devotion are not to be dismissed.

If we're looking at the experience of love as just *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, that might seem cold-hearted. Objectivity, however, is merely a way of having things in perspective, so that love is not something that blinds us. If we're attached to the idea of love, we can be quite blind to its reality. We can become very inspired by talking about it or meditating on it – seeking it in others, demanding it or feeling somehow left out. But what is love in terms of our lives as we live them? On an emotional plane you might want to have feelings of tremendous oneness, or maybe aim the feelings at some particular person, wanting to have a special, loving relationship with another person. Or love can be abstract – love of all human beings, love of all beings, love of God, love of something or some concept.

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

of it. It's when you're not attached, when your heart is open, receptive and free, that you begin to experience what pure love is. Loving-kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, equanimity – the realm of the Divine Abodes, the *brahmavihāras* – these come from an empty mind; not from a sterile position of just annihilating feeling, but from a heart that is not deluded, not blinded by ideas of self or others, or by passions of some kind or another.

You may think the Holy Life is cold and heartless, because in a community of *samaṇas* such as this, living according to a way of restraint and discipline, we're not demonstrative in our expressions of love and joy. This community does not bubble with feelings of devotion. It is quite formal and restrained in its form and expression. But this does not necessarily deny love. With mindfulness, with the way we relate – to our own bodies, to the Sangha, to the laypeople, to the tradition and to society – there is openness, kindness, and receptivity. There is caring, a joyfulness and compassion that we can feel. It is still *anicca* and *anattā*, and it is *dukkha* in the sense that it's not in itself the end of anything; it's not satisfying as an identity or an attachment. But when the heart is free from illusions of self, a loving quality arises in the pure joy of being. It's not expected to be anything or anybody, nor is it expected to last or be permanent. It is not to be made into anything. It's just the natural way of things. So when you contemplate in that way, that is the way of faith and trust and devotion.

Faith, confidence and trust are nothing you can really grasp. Faith is not anything that you can create. You can say the words, but really to have faith and confidence in Dhamma is to be willing to let go of any demand or affirmation or any

attachment whatsoever. And that experience of faith comes to us as we examine and understand the Dhamma, or the true way of things. If we really contemplate Dhamma, see Dhamma, then there is faith, this strong sense of total trust, confidence in truth.

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

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

You might think you just have to let go of all your feelings and see that the love in your heart is just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. You feel love for the Buddha and you think: ‘Oh, that’s just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. That’s all it is!’ You feel love for the teacher and you think: ‘That’s just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*. Don’t get attached to the teacher!’ You feel love for the tradition: ‘*anicca, dukkha, anattā*, don’t get attached to traditions or techniques.’ Not getting attached to anything can be merely a way of suppressing everything. It’s not necessarily letting go or non-attachment, it can be merely a position you take, and if you take that position and operate from it, all you’re going to feel is negativity, stress. ‘You shouldn’t be attached to anything, you shouldn’t love anything, you shouldn’t feel anything – feeling anything is just *anicca, dukkha, anattā*.’ That means you’re just taking the words and using them on your mind like a bludgeon, a big club. You’re not reflecting, watching, observing, opening, trusting.

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

being attached to feeling delight or happiness at doing things for others? This is the beauty of humanity – just being able to love, to give, to share, to be generous.

Try contemplating what the great delight of being the richest person in the world would be. What would be the truly delightful thing about it? To get what I want? No, it would be the opportunity to give it away. That would be the true delight of being rich and wealthy – so that you could give it away as *dāna*. Whereas to be rich and not be able to give it away would be a real burden. What a burden that would be, to be the richest man in the world, and be selfish and hold onto all my wealth and keep it all to myself!

The joy of wealth is in one's ability to share it and give it, without any kind of corrupt intentions or selfish demands. So this is what is lovely about our humanity: we can experience this joy of giving. And it's something we all experience when we really give something, when we help somebody without any selfish request or demand for something in return. Then we experience joy.

It is certainly a lovely human experience – but we don't expect it to make us joyful for the rest of our lives. The joy of generosity and kindness isn't permanent, doesn't make us permanently happy, but we don't expect it to. If we did it wouldn't be *dāna* any longer, it would be a deal we were making. It wouldn't be an act of generosity, it would be buying something. Real joy comes from giving and not caring whether anyone even knows or acknowledges it.

As soon as the self comes in – for example, 'I'm giving this *dāna* to you and it is very important that you know who's giving it.

ME, I'm giving it!' – the amount of joy that comes from giving is probably very minimal. If I'm so concerned about being recognized and appreciated, that you should appreciate my generosity and my goodness, that becomes a joyless state of mind. One cannot feel happy or have real joyfulness in living if there is attachment to the idea that one's actions should be recognized. There's nothing wrong with people appreciating somebody else's goodness and generosity, but when we don't demand it, there is joy.

Romantic love is usually based on the illusion of a self and a demand for something back. Spiritual love is altruistic love or universal love and is represented by the *brahmavihāras* – *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā* and *upekkhā*. Such love is a unitive experience. It brings together, it unites. It is a communion. Hatred is the experience of separation. When we hate there's no union, communion, or oneness. Hatred is separative, divisive, and discriminatory. Love is unitive, and we want unity because living in a world of hate, discrimination and separation is a miserable hell-realm. The community is a communion, a Sangha, a whole. If we're divorced from the sangha, if we hate the sangha: 'Hate this nun, hate that monk – and I don't like that, don't like this', then this is not a community, it's a dis-unity. The feeling is one of alienation, separation, emphasizing me and you and your faults and my feelings, and my anger at your faults. Or it can be my emphasizing the things that are wrong with you – things that are wrong with the monks, with the nuns, with the *anagārikas*; things that are wrong, full stop. And attaching to those perceptions will make me feel alienated, separated, angry, discontented, unhappy and depressed.

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

When we take refuge in Sangha, we're taking refuge in *supaṭipanno*¹¹ (those who have practised well), *ujupaṭipanno* (those who have practised directly), *ñāyapaṭipanno* (those who have practised insightfully), *sāmīcipaṭipanno* (those who practise with integrity). Rather than taking refuge in Americans, British, Australians, or in men or women, or nuns or monks, we take refuge in those who practise the Dhamma – in the good, the direct, and the sincere.

We have tendencies towards both union and separation, and we can be mindfully aware of this. The way things are has

11. These terms form part of the daily chanting in honour of the Sangha.

to be recognized as Dhamma. There is uniting and there is separating, and with clear awareness one does not identify with either extreme. There's a time for union, communion, a time for non-discrimination, for devotion, for gratitude, for generosity, for joy. But there's also time for separation and discrimination, for examining what's wrong. There is a need to look at the flaws; to look at anger, jealousy and fear, and to accept and understand those emotional experiences, rather than judging them and taking them as self and as something we shouldn't have. This is what being human is all about: we're born into a separate form and yet we can unite. We can realize unity, community, oneness, but we can also discriminate.

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

Is being a Buddhist monk or a Buddhist nun a denial of love? Is the Vinaya-discipline merely a means of suppressing feelings? It can be just that. We can use Vinaya-discipline and monastic tradition as merely a way of avoiding things. Maybe the monks are just frightened of women. Maybe the nuns are petrified of men, so they become nuns and don't have to face their fears and anxieties with regard to relationships with men. Of course, many worldly people think like that. They think we're all here because of an inability to cope with the real world.

But is that really how it is? If it is, if that's why you're a monk or nun, then you're in this way for the wrong reasons. It is not an instrument for avoiding reality and life, but for reflecting on them, because in restraint and the dignity of restraint, the way of monasticism is an expression of love for all beings, men, women, both inside and outside. We no longer choose one person on whom to focus our attention and devotion, but devote ourselves to all beings.

I realize that if I were a family man, I would have to give my whole attention to my wife, children and immediate family. That's the result of family life and what marriage is about. They have priority. You have to relate to your marriage partner and those for whom you are responsible. Or one can be an alms-mendicant and live on faith alone, on trust in the goodness and benevolence of other beings, because one feels love and respect for all beings. That love and respect are what generate the alms that sustain us in this life as alms-mendicants. And the funny thing is that the power of the Buddhist Sangha is so strong that even if you personally hate all other beings, the alms still come in. The power of the robe seems to be so strong that you will still be fed by kind-hearted beings. This is because of the *pāramī* of the Buddha. That doesn't mean you should develop hatred or justify it in yourself in any way. Rather, it's a reflection on the power of a very skilful convention that was established by the Lord Buddha. When you appreciate that you really feel love and trust.

Why do these monasteries here in England work? Why should they work in a non-Buddhist country? Why should anybody want to mail a cheque, bring a sack of potatoes or prepare a meal? Why should they bother? This is because of the *pāramī*

of the Buddha. The goodness of the lifestyle he established generates generosity. The loving-kindness, the compassion and joy of the Holy Life reach out and open other people to that same experience. It is a mystery. From a practical, worldly attitude of justifying our existence in the eyes of society, we don't seem to do all that much for anyone. Many people think we just sit here and try to become enlightened for ourselves, have nice, pleasant mental states, because we can't stand the real world. But the more you contemplate this life and understand it, the more you realize the power of the goodness, the faith, the *pāramī* of the Buddha, which allow communion to take place in an interconnection of goodness. It needn't be demonstrated, talked about and emphasized a lot.

It speaks for itself. We don't have to go out telling people: 'You should give us alms because we are practising the Dhamma and we are disciples of the Buddha.' Our requisites are offered because people appreciate and respect the Holy Life. It brings joy and happiness into people's lives, because we rejoice in the beauty of others and in the goodness and benevolence of this experience of living.

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



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

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

*May all beings be released from all suffering
and may they not be parted from
the good fortune they have attained.
When they act upon intention,
all beings are the owners of their action
and inherit its results.*

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

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



THE WAY IT IS

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The Way It Is

This collection of edited talks centres around meeting and resolving the conflict between how things are and how we *want* them to be. This simply-stated but profound release takes us into the heart of the Dhamma, the Buddha's teachings.

Speaking from the depth of his personal experience, Ajahn Sumedho presents practices and reflections that are accessible, penetrative and illuminated with humour and compassion.