

Mindfulness and Buddhism in the West: Where are they headed and what challenges do they face?

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When we consider Buddhism and Mindfulness – what are the prospects? What are the challenges? What can we look forward to? What direction are they heading in?

My first response is ‘Good question!’ The future is unknown. It is uncertain but we can possibly see various trends that are already taking shape. There are projections that we can make into the future. One small caveat that I would make is that sometimes things that seem to be obvious trends in a powerful direction, can collapse. And things that seem to be small, insubstantial and insignificant, can turn out to be the defining or dominant quality.

I will give a few examples. Theravada Buddhism was just one of many Buddhist groups. But because the school of Theravada spread to Sri Lanka, an island culture, there is a particular strand of Buddha-Dhamma that was sustained there. That strand informs what we now call Theravada Buddhism, which is the Buddhism of the southern Asian world all these centuries later. But at the time it was just one of many different schools.

Or going further back into history, to the era of the dinosaurs. Mammals are our physical ancestors. They were the ones that survived the effects of the meteorite striking the Earth. They made it through, after the era of the dinosaurs came to an end. They found ways to adapt and survive, and so, here we are. These are our ancestors, strange as it may be to consider that. So that’s a caveat in terms of the themes or threads that we see today, they might not be the defining qualities into the future. But the best we can do is to look at the picture as we see it now and extrapolate a little bit. Then to use that extrapolation to help us make skilful decisions and guide things in a helpful way.

This question of bringing the Buddha’s teachings to the Western world, and how they can function usefully here, has been very much the centre of my whole adult life. Since 1979 I have lived my life as Buddhist monastic in the West. That is nearly forty years. So, I have been very close to this question for a long time. Also, I am a kind of card-carrying flag-wearing

traditionalist; I have been very much part of an orthodox order. I have been part of a group of people with a method of practice and a way of life that is very strongly informed by classical models and forms.

Along the way, however, I've also been collaborating with, and offering teachings to people who have not been using the classical forms. People who are not robe-wearing or not living according to the Vinaya, the monastic code of discipline. Over these years there's been a constant dialogue between the forces of traditionalism, or the reference to the classical forms, and the endeavour to be authentic and relevant to the current age. It is a dialogue that endeavours to be sincerely representing those classical models, but to also be in a constant mode of adaptation. The Buddha-Dhamma is a living teaching. It is a living tradition. It adapts to, and needs to be able to work within, the environment in which it is established and is being practised.

For many decades there has been this dialogue between adaptation and authenticity. Over the years I have attended many Buddhist conferences and been involved in interactions. I have led events where sometimes there would be a lay teacher and a monastic. In July I was at a conference on mindfulness in Amsterdam. There were six hundred delegates at the conference, with one person in robes, me. I was invited to give a talk about stream-entry, which was one of the reasons I attended the conference. I thought, well, if you have six hundred academic psychologists, therapists and researchers who want to hear about stream-entry, that is an interesting sign of the times.

When I speak about authenticity, I am not just referring to representing classical forms or ancient traditions. Ancient traditions like the robes, the shaven head, and the adherence to the Vinaya discipline. If we are talking about authenticity, it's also important to see that in following the Buddha's teachings we need to be authentic in terms of his pragmatism. The Buddha brought a teaching into the world that in many respects was a revolutionary teaching. That transformative quality of the teaching was not just a belief system, it was not just another set of costumes or forms or rituals. Rather it was a set of tools that he brought into Indian society in that era. A set of tools to help people transform their lives. That was what it was for.

With regard to authenticity, it is not just about being an authentic monk, just following the forms, reciting Pali suttas and carrying out the traditions and rituals of the ancient times. But authenticity is strongly connected with the question: how useful are you? How much can your life – what you do, what you teach, and how you are – be of practical benefit to the beings that

you encounter? When people are meeting you and drawing upon your tradition or your teachings, to what degree can that benefit their lives?

So, this means being authentic in terms of the practical results of these teachings. When we talk about this dimension, it is important to recognize that there is authenticity in relationship to form and classical structures. But there is also authenticity in terms of the spirit and the intention behind the Buddha's teaching. The effort he made to establish the monastic order and the fourfold assembly of disciples: lay women, laymen, and the monastic communities of nuns and monks. He spent the 45 years of his teaching career bringing that all together and establishing that in a way that could sustain itself over a long period of time.

So, Buddhism and mindfulness, how have things been progressing? Obviously, my perspective is biased. I would be presumptuous enough to say that mindfulness is an offshoot of Buddhism. But there are other mindfulness trainings that have come out of other traditions to certain degrees. I wouldn't say that Buddhism has the monopoly on mindfulness. But I'd say that its presence in the world, particularly in the West at this time, has very directly sprung from, particularly, Jon Kabat-Zinn's experience and practice. It has sprung from his life and his work, which has been very directly informed by Buddhist practice. In fact, at a conference in San Francisco in 2013, he said: 'I've always used "mindfulness" as a placeholder for "the Dharma".'

There's a lot of very powerful benefits that Buddhism and mindfulness have brought and are bringing into society. Nowadays, according to the statistics that I've been shown, there's what might be referred to as an epidemic of mental health problems, particularly, depression and anxiety. Globally there are double the number of workdays lost per year from depression than from any other kind of injury or illness. It's not just a personal issue, it's an economic issue as well. So more than double the number of workdays lost around the world from heart disease, from hand injury, from eye injury, or back injury. Depression is the cause of more workdays lost. It is a huge social issue.

I also saw an extremely shocking statistic in the UK this year. It was reported in a reputable newspaper, that in the UK 40% of girls between the age of thirteen and sixteen had received some kind of psychiatric help or advice. That's a staggering number. Forty percent! That is saying that in the UK 4 out of every 10 teenage girls in that age bracket have needed to go to a counsellor, psychiatrist or school medical assistant. One girl reported: 'I need help. My mind is in such a state. I need support. I can't handle my mind; my life is too painful. It is too difficult.'

I feel that mindfulness and Buddhism in the Western world, particularly Buddhist meditation, is doing a great job. It is doing a great service in providing resources that can meet those kinds of difficulties. Obviously, this is blowing our own trumpet a little bit. But the work that developed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for depression gave excellent results. That work was developed by John Teasdale, Mark Williams and Zindel Segal, in the 2000s. This method of working with the mind, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), is directly informed by Buddhist meditation practices.

Prior to 2007, if someone had a repeated instance of depression the most successful methods for treating recurrent depression had a 5-10% recovery rate. So, if you'd had more than one episode of depression, you were 90-95% likely to have it come back again. Whether you had therapy, psychoanalysis, shock treatment or medication, no treatment had a better than 10% recovery rate. When they began to use Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, they had a 50% percent recovery rate. When they first published this study, the rest of the academic community said, 'Rubbish! This can't be right. You can't be 500% better than anybody else. You've fudged your statistics. You must have made a big mistake, or you're just wrong!'

They did that initial study in the UK, then they repeated it in the USA and got the same results. That's when interest in mindfulness started to escalate because it was a massively impactful result for that approach. It's not going to solve all the world's problems. But this is one indication of the way that mindfulness and Buddhist meditation can have an extremely meaningful and direct impact on society. I feel very positive about that.

In terms of direction, another positive is that a number of government bodies are involved. There was a book published here in the US: *A Mindful Nation* by the US senator Tim Ryan. Then there was a similar title published in the UK: *Mindful Nation UK*, a publication which was supported by the United Kingdom government. It was describing effective programs in several fields: in academia, in education, in mental health, in physical health, in criminal justice and in the business world. The publication was about the introduction of mindfulness trainings in these different domains and the benefits that had been experienced.

A full 20% of the Members of Parliament who had signed up and put their names on this. That is a huge amount of support from Members of Parliament; it is significant that they are effectively saying, 'Yes, this is something that I support, this is a good thing.' It is a wonderful sign, that government, in a bipartisan way, can pick up these trainings. That they are saying,

‘This is something that the nation would benefit from, and we support its development.’ That is a very positive sign.

In terms of positive aspects of mindfulness and Buddhism, by my reckoning this is the sweet spot. We’re in the Goldilocks period for Buddhism in the West. You are probably unlikely to get a lot of votes by calling yourself Buddhist. It’s not as if, if you happen to be born into a Buddhist family, that that will get you an ‘in’ at Stanford. It doesn’t carry any weight. It doesn’t carry a huge social cachet. We are outliers. We’re fringe dwellers. It is not an established religion in the West in any particularly strong way. It is present, but we are basically politically and socially powerless. So, from a spiritual perspective, this is great!

The teachings and practices are available. There are good teachers around and there are good amenities and facilities. Here in the Bay Area, you have a lot of options, and not just from the Theravada tradition: the Insight Meditation Center with Gil Fronsdal or Spirit Rock. But you also have the Zen tradition. You have the Zen Center, Tassajara, and Green Gulch. From the Chinese lineage you have The City Of Ten Thousand Buddhas and the Berkeley Buddhist Monastery. And you have numerous Tibetan centres. There are many different traditions.

These are places that have a practical benefit. The teachings are here. They are practised in sincere ways. Most Westerners were not born into Buddhist families. Most of us have come into Buddhism through meditation and practice. We have come into the practice of mindfulness out of a pragmatic need, out of a personal interest. We’re not inheriting a tradition or a form from our ancestors or our parents. We are doing it because it helps. We are putting energy and effort into it because it helps.

In one hundred years’ time, I suspect that Buddhism will have put down its roots and it will carry some kind of social weight. Now it doesn’t. I feel that’s a good thing. It is a good thing to be an outsider, to be a freak. I feel it’s an advantage to be an outlier; to be able to use these traditions in a very uncluttered way. To relate to them not because there is an inherited value system, but because the qualities that the meditation, practices, and teachings possess, are of direct benefit. You can test that out and know that for yourselves. It is not just an inherited or an assumed value, but it is value that is coming from one’s own experience. So, I think: ‘Make hay while the sun shines!’ Be glad that you’ve been born in this period. This is a precious time. It is a time of good opportunity, where these amenities, teachings and practices are available.

I trained in Thailand, where Buddhism has been established for about eight hundred years. There and in other Buddhist countries it is an ancient tradition. The Buddha's teachings carry a lot of weight. Being dressed in a robe stands out. In the West you're a bit of a freak. People come up and say, 'What are you?' Nowadays they say, 'Are you from Thailand?' You can stand on the London Underground, on the BART, and people will just squash up against you and not think twice about it. If you're in Bangkok, if you get onto the Sky-train there, people will be kneeling the ground, hands in *añjali*, saying, 'Oh please, have a seat! How can I get out of the way? Can I get you a cold drink?' You are a rock star. As a monk you are a deity. There's a huge amount of assumed value just in wearing a robe and being a monastic. It can be enjoyable, but also, there's an automatic assumed worth just by carrying the credentials, by wearing the robe. I'm not saying that's a bad thing. But I feel that it's helpful to be in a time and place where it doesn't have that weight of custom and tradition and ancestry behind it. A time when its appearance is very fresh and alive.

Another one of the positive aspects is that the Buddha's approach is a very experimental one. The Buddha didn't proclaim 'I'm telling you the absolute truth and you should believe it.' There is a significant teaching, the *Kalama Sutta* (A 3.65), that caught the attention of the European intelligentsia back in the nineteenth century. The Buddha said, 'Don't believe things just because they're told to you by spiritual authorities. Don't believe things just because they make logical sense, or because your family follow these customs and have these beliefs. Take a teaching and try it out. See if it's beneficial for yourself.' That fits in very well with the scientific ethic. You have a null hypothesis, you create an idea, you try it out, and you see whether it works or not. What is the result? Right from the very beginning the fact that the Buddhist approach, in its core ethos, fits right in with western scientific method and critical examination, is another way that makes it very accessible.

At Amaravati Monastery we have a very broad and eclectic group of people who come to regular retreats and classes. It's certainly not just Asian people. We have people from all religious ancestries and dispositions coming to meditation classes. There are many Westerners, Middle Easterners as well as Asians. They come regardless of whether they come from a Buddhist background, a Christian background, an atheist background, a Muslim background, or a Hindu background. Ajahn Sumedho said right from the beginning, 'Don't assume that the people who come through the door want to be Buddhist. They want to have instruction on how to make their mind more peaceful and how to understand their life. They want to know how to live more skilfully. So don't teach in a way that assumes people want to be a Buddhist, or that they're fed up with being a Muslim, or a Christian or that they're going

to benefit by shedding their old religion and becoming Buddhist. No, it's important to speak in a way that completely respects people's own preferences in terms of religious disposition, spiritual inclination, or the lack of it.'

That is one of the great strengths of Buddhism and the mindfulness teachings. They offer a set of tools. They are completely faithful to their sources and faithful to the Buddha's word. But they are not saying, 'If you were wise, you would think like me. If you really want to straighten out your life, be a Buddhist like me.' But rather, they offer some tools that can be used whether you're a practising Christian or a Hindu or a Muslim, or you're a sceptical materialist. These tools work just the same. Just like water comes out of the tap and it is water, whether you're a Muslim or a Christian or a Hindu or you're from Alpha Centauri. Wherever you are from, it is still water. So, the Buddha's teachings function in a very practical and accessible way.

In terms of the challenges and obstacles for mindfulness and Buddhism, they are many and various, one of the ongoing issues and discussions is commercialism; the challenge in the marketing of the Dhamma. I've been in many conversations and discussions with different groups and individuals over the years. Again, I feel we are somewhat in the sweet spot. Even if people try to market Buddhism, it's not that marketable. It's not a hugely compelling item. But still, it is drifting in that direction. Sometimes you'll see meditation courses or mindfulness programs that do make outrageous promises. 'Just pay \$5,000 for this weekend and your life will be changed forever. You will be happy, liberated, enlightened' and so on. These are very sweeping statements. I'm not quoting adverts verbatim, but I think we've all come across those pieces of literature and their promises.

I do feel that the commercialising of Dharma is an uncomfortable drift. When things have a big price tag on them, they have to be dressed up in a way that makes them interesting, sexy, and attractive. That means that sometimes the challenging aspects of the teaching may be trimmed out. For example, those teachings that point to your opinions, your middle-class value systems, your attachment to your appearance or to your wealth. And teachings like 'renunciation' or 'unattractiveness of the body' are deleted because they don't help to fill the seats at your events.

It is an ongoing dialogue, but I feel the degree to which the challenging or less attractive teachings get edited out, or left in the fringes, is a weakness. That can weaken the teaching. In 1979, when our teacher from Thailand, Ajahn Chah, visited the USA, he was invited to teach at a ten-day retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Massachusetts. He was asked to give

advice to the teachers: Jack Kornfield, Sharon Salzberg, Jackie Schwartz (now Jacqueline Mandel) and Joseph Goldstein. They asked Ajahn Chah to give them advice as teachers. He said: 'You will succeed only if you are prepared to challenge the attachments and obsessions of your students.' The Thai phrase was literally, 'If you're ready to stab their hearts.' Ajahn Chah had a good way of getting people's attention. Because that is the kindness of the teacher, in being ready to point out things that students are deeply attached to. Particularly to point out the things that students really don't want to let go of. That is the job of the teacher. That is the kindness of the teacher.

Probably there are a few doctors and surgeons here. How could a surgeon operate if you didn't use a knife occasionally? These days there's a lot of microsurgeries but you need the knife sometimes, to get to where the trouble is. That was pointed advice from Ajahn Chah. The kindness of the teacher sometimes needs to manifest as giving advice that's painful or challenging. It manifests as giving advice that goes against the preferred version of the student's reality.

Another story that comes to mind is from a friend of ours, a Tibetan lama, Tsoknyi Rinpoche. He would refer to editing the approach to Dharma practice according to your own preferences, as 'California Dharma'. 'Yes, I see, all things are empty, nothing is worth attaching to, but I simply like my comforts. I like to have a few beautiful things around but I'm not attached. I just like to have a beautiful home in Marin County, with a nice view, with a picture window looking out over the Bay. But I'm not attached!'

He was staying in a particularly beautiful house in Marin, and his host was from a very wealthy family, and he was talking in these terms. Rinpoche picked up a coffee pot that was sitting on the table, and he started tilting it towards the hand-made Turkish carpet. He asked, 'How much did this carpet cost you?' The host replied, 'About \$35,000.' Rinpoche said, 'So, tell me about your non-attachment...' as he tilted the coffee pot a little bit more and a little bit more. 'You say you really like this place and you enjoy having beautiful things around, but you're not attached? So how not attached are you?' And then he tilted the coffee pot a few more degrees. 'Alright, alright, alright! I'm attached! I'm attached! Just don't spoil the carpet.' That was a very practical teaching. It is also the kind of teaching you get from the Thai Forest Ajahns. Teachings that are very to the point.

One other weakness that is happening in the West – in this trimming and editing of the Dhamma teachings to fit people's preferences and opinions so that it is not challenging – is

particularly with respect to mindfulness teachings and the absence of reference to ethics, the deliberate omission of teachings on ethics. For example, the Five Precepts that the Buddha established as guidance for the lay community. Those Precepts are very deliberately left out of the mindfulness trainings: such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). I've had long discussions and correspondence with Jon Kabat-Zinn, (founder of MBSR) on this and he speaks very strongly for the need to leave ethics as *implicit* rather than *explicit*, within those trainings. The same approach has been taken with respect to MBCT.

I'd like to read a piece in relationship to that. There's a rich ongoing discussion within the field of whether ethics should be articulated or not. My own (probably biased) opinion is that it's a weakness. It would be much more helpful to be more explicit, to spell things out in terms of what really benefits us as human beings. I would say that ethical guidelines, the Precepts, can be articulated and held, without them being seen as religious dictates or uptight Victorian formalisms. But rather the Precepts can be held as skilful guidelines for living wisely, carefully and compassionately.

As it seems very relevant to the theme, I'd read this extract from a commentary I wrote on an article in the academic journal *Mindfulness*. It addresses some of the aspects in the relationship between MBSR and the ethical field. The original article was written by Elaine Montero, who is from the University of Toronto, and her partners.

Jon Kabat-Zinn in 2004 defined mindfulness as: 'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way, on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.'

My comment is: 'His definition is somewhat broad and though useful, is open to misinterpretation or misuse.' On this issue, Montero et al. commented:

'On the implicit rather than the explicit role of ethics in the teaching and practice of mindfulness. This omission of silā may result in concepts such as 'non-judgmental awareness' fostering a range of negative stances from self-indulgence to passivity. And this is where, in the absence of proper teacher-training, a poor grasp of concepts such as bare awareness, non-judgmental awareness, nonduality and so on, are likely to misguide participants into bypassing their experience rather than connecting with it.'

Then in a different section it says:

“The response to this central issue concerning mindfulness-based interventions from the founder of mindfulness-based stress reduction is significant. Elaine Montero stated: ‘Reflecting on the choice to keep the teachings of ethics implicit, Jon Kabat-Zinn states that, “Each person carries the responsibility both personally and professionally to attend to the quality of their inner and outer relationships.” At the same time, he indicates that this must be supported “by explicit intentions regarding how we conduct ourselves both inwardly and outwardly.”’

Further, Kabat-Zinn, in 2007, responds to earlier concerns about the exclusion of ethics by indicating that personal and professional ethical guidelines are intrinsic to the delivery of MBI (Mindfulness-Based Intervention Programs.) He also argues that because there is a societal tendency to be incongruent with respect to inner and outer moral stances, an implicit teaching of silā is preferable.

My comments:

‘Jon Kabat-Zinn’s words here seem particularly carefully chosen, as though balanced on a tightrope between his acknowledged respect for the source of MBSR: “I’ve always used mindfulness as a placeholder for the Dharma” [Jon Kabat-Zinn, 2013] and his intention to make MBSR as accessible to as broad a field of people as possible. ‘However, the guidelines he gives are, from the Buddhist perspective, significantly vague, in my opinion. The statements that “each person carries the responsibility both personally and professionally to attend to the quality of their inner and outer relationships” and that one should have “explicit intentions regarding how we conduct ourselves both inwardly and outwardly” could comfortably be assigned to the fictional characters of Tony Soprano (the Mafia boss) or Walter White (methamphetamine cook).’ (That’s my comment.)

‘Of even more concern is the statement that: “because there is a societal tendency to be incongruent with respect to inner and outer moral stances, an implicit teaching of silā (ethics) is preferable.” This seems to state that, because there’s a disparity between the ideals people hold and what they actually do, it’s best not to talk about the subject at all. ‘If this is a correct interpretation of the comment – and again from a traditional Buddhist standpoint – this is a very dubious principle on which to structure a pedagogical approach and a system of would-be beneficial psychological practices.’

I was having a bit of a rant there, and I was wondering what Jon Kabat-Zinn would say about that. But he read it and to his credit, he was quite okay with it. But I felt that sense of things being implicit was so vague. And yes, Walter White (from ‘Breaking Bad’) he was cooking methamphetamine and making millions of dollars for his family. Yes, he was doing it on purpose, it was deliberate. He had an intention in mind. He was surveying his internal

concerns. Yes, thousands of people are going to have their lives messed up by this, but it's worth it because this is what my family needs to survive, because I'm dying of cancer. That is his ethic. That is the story of the whole series. And so, yes: it was deliberate. It was thoughtful. He is paying attention to the standard. And he is a meth cook.

So also in the scenario with Tony Soprano, the mafia boss in 'The Sopranos': what he does is deliberate, it is intentional, and it is for the family. And a few people get rubbed out along the way... Those things are not insignificant. Again, this is my biased viewpoint.

There is a way that our actions and our speech can be guided by concerns that there are results. There are beneficial results and harmful results. The Five Precepts create a very helpful standard of conduct to stop creating trouble for ourselves and for others. The Five Precepts are: to refrain from killing, to refrain from stealing, to refrain from sexual misconduct, to refrain from lying and to refrain from using intoxicants. They are a helpful standard for people so that they can live skilfully and kindly.

It doesn't have to be a decree from above: 'Thou shalt not...', a diktat from outside, held as a Victorian moralism. But rather it is like the way the law requires you to have effective brakes on your car. If you're going to be on the road, if you get pulled over, and the police want to check your brakes and they don't work, then you're off the road. So, similarly, I feel it's helpful to think of these ethical guidelines in terms of driving safely amongst the other members of the traffic on the road.

Another challenge is the ongoing meshing of ancient traditions and patriarchal Asian societal forms, with an egalitarian Western society. That is an interesting mix. We must bear in mind that the Buddha was teaching 2,500 years ago. It was a very long time ago. The forms that you have in traditional Buddhist societies – such as Thailand, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, China, Japan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Nepal, Tibet and into Mongolia, Siberia and so forth – are forms which have been the body of Buddhist practice developed over many centuries. There are a lot of challenges in taking those forms and planting them into Western society. Challenges in terms of what to keep, what to delete, how to adapt things, how to change things. It is an ongoing dialogue. In some respects, it is a weakness and a challenge; because some things don't fit very well in terms of the customs, the traditions, the superstitions, and the forms. They are an uncomfortable fit in Western society.

Other things do fit well, but they are unfamiliar and strange to our perceptions. For myself, in my own community, that's been a very rich ongoing dialogue. When Ajahn Chah first came to teach in Great Britain, he received an invitation from a group in London to visit their little monastery in Hampstead, in Haverstock Hill in London. He accepted the invitation and told Ajahn Sumedho and a few other monks that they should stay there. He said, 'You can change the robes if you want to, and you can change the chanting. This is a cold country. You can adapt those if you want to, but you must go out on alms-round every single day.' They thought that was a bit strange, they thought he would insist on the robes and the ritual forms. But why go on alms-round? 'Who is going to put food in our bowls in London?' But Ajahn Chah was insistent about the alms round. He said, 'You must go out. Your job is to be the fourth heavenly messenger [the sign of renunciation]. You must go out every day.' That became a very strong ethic for us that we have adapted a little over time.

But it is an ongoing question, and something that we're working with, particularly with women in monasticism. In Asia, especially in Thailand, the nuns' position, is a very lowly position socially. The monks' position is very high. In the Buddhist world it's probably the most stratified of any country. With our roots in Thailand, it's a big challenge to develop a form whereby the female monastics have a comparable status, authority and responsibility within the community.

Ajahn Sumedho made some very courageous changes and adaptations back in the early eighties. Those adaptations informed the particular form that we have for women's monastic training within our community. It an area is of very rich discussion, an ongoing dialogue between us and various different groups around the world.

That was probably the most gnarly area in working together. Back in the early eighties we had moved out of London. We had been invited to move to the countryside. The house in London was sold. We had been given a forest, and a house in the country near that forest was purchased for us. Then Ajahn Sumedho started carrying out ordinations. He was given permission by the Thai Sangha to be a Preceptor. He had already done some novice nuns' and novice monks' ordinations. So, the first ordinations for monks were in 1981. This was a very auspicious occasion at Chithurst so everyone went, 'Oh, *Sādhu, Sādhu, Sādhu!* This is all very good! This is great!'

Each year there were a few more men going into the *bhikkhu* life. Meanwhile, the women had been coming and taking on the traditional Thai, Eight Precept form for women's training, the

maechee. And, very naturally, the people who were supporting the monastery were saying, 'This is great that all these men are going forth and taking on the monk's life. Are Sister Rocana, Sister Sundara, Sister Candasiri, Sister Thanissara and the others going to be in the kitchen forever?'

To his great credit, Ajahn Sumedho said, 'Good question. That can't be sustained. That's not fair. That's never going to work in the West. We have to do something about that.' He started thinking about it and discussing it with Elders in Thailand. After time he got permission to create a Ten Precept ordination for the nuns, to establish what we call the *Siladhāra* ordination. They gave the nuns brown robes. They have Ten Precepts, they don't use money, they don't cook, and they don't drive. He was establishing a renunciant form for women's monastic training that was acceptable by the Thai authorities and the Thai community. It was a form that also fitted in with Western society, to a degree. Although it is equally awkward on both sides because it is a bit too much for Thailand and not quite enough for the West. But we live in two worlds. For the Westerners: 'It should be better!' And then for the Thais: 'It should be better!' So that probably tells us we've got it about right.

Things will change and continue to adapt over time. But I do a lot of what I call 'mindfulness of awkward feeling' as a practice. This is the 'Yeah, this isn't a perfect fit' feeling. You have got a 2500-year tradition. Even in Thailand it's eight hundred years old. When there is a meshing of an eight-hundred-year-old system with twenty-first century life, there's bound to be a bit of awkwardness. The most important thing is working in that spirit and doing the best that one can. To have the practical nature of the training and living opportunities as the primary concern, rather than the ideal of how it 'should' be in a supposedly perfect world.

A little more in terms of challenges and possibilities. Again, returning to what I was saying about sensitive dependence on initial conditions: that small things can have a big effect. We can see how things are progressing at times with the books that are popular, like the Dalai Lama's *The Art Of Happiness* - this is a million-selling book. Also, the very large scale of the events the Dalai Lama holds. When His Holiness is teaching, the event fills the Oakland Coliseum, there are tens of thousands of people showing up for grand teachings or celebrations. These things can get our attention. We think, 'Oh that's a sign of major activity, they are grand and visible.' But I'd also suggest that the signs of Buddhist practice, or important Buddhist events that deeply impact the well-being of the society, that are based on mindfulness and Buddhist teachings, they can be very small. They can be apparently insignificant.

For example, for the monastic community at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, a significant thing about living there is that they've developed a method of making brown dye from manzanita bark. Wow, this is great, this is really important! I'm not making a joke about it. It is important. They are dying their robes with trees that grow in these Californian soils! Yay! And for some people that's more important than giving a teaching to twenty thousand people in the Oakland Coliseum.

Or, tomorrow, a couple of the monks who are here today, are going to be dropped off on the way back to Abhayagiri Monastery. They will be let out of the van and they're going to walk the rest of the way back to the monastery, relying on alms from strangers. There's no organized food given for them. We do not carry food. We do not carry money. And many of our community members have done that. They have walked through the countryside without money, relying on the kindness of strangers.

Those are small things in the eyes of the world but they can have major consequences. For example, Master Hsuan Hua led a seminar on the Surangama Sutra in 1968 for the Buddhist community, in San Francisco. At that time, he was a mostly unknown Buddhist teacher. He could hardly speak any English. A number of fairly hirsute American hippie Buddhist students gathered around him for this. He taught for many weeks during 1968. That seminar on the Surangama Sutra produced the first Westerners who became his disciples. They formed the basis of his monastic community. That community now has many centres around the world. The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, the largest Buddhist monastery in the West, grew from that core period of teaching in 1968. That lit a fire. Who in San Francisco knew that there was this Chinese monk down in an old mattress factory in the Mission District, carrying out these teachings on a Chinese text to a bunch of dedicated hippies? It lit a fire and all these years later, there is a big effect that came from that.

The last little thing I'd like to say relates to what Buddhist teachings and mindfulness can bring to society. What they bring to society in terms of the goals of our life; what both adults and children can look forward to as possibilities for our human life.

I realize that this is probably a self-selected group. You have come to listen to a Dhamma talk on a weekday evening when you could be doing all sorts of other interesting things. As a group, you may have goals that are less worldly goals than others. But for most of our society, what is there to look forward to? Apart from a comfortable retirement, making a pile of

money, becoming famous as a writer, or getting a lot of Instagram followers. Having 1500 academic papers published or getting a Nobel Prize. That's the best we can look forward to. And most of us are not looking forward to Nobel Prizes or a thousand publications. But, at least, having a good retirement home and getting your kids into a good college. That's the most that we look forward to. Hoping that we don't have too much pain before we 'pop our clogs' before our life comes to an end. That's what we look forward to: coping in a comfortable way and hoping that we can leave a little bit of a mark if that's what interests us. That's what the children are educated to look forward to. And the most exalted people are the ones who are famous because of being movie stars, or Instagram or YouTube stars. Some people literally die in the process of trying to get YouTube followers.

But I feel that one of the most skilful and beneficial things is that we have a tremendous potential as human beings. Our minds can do more than just cope. We can be more than just comfortable. We have the potential to develop the mind to qualities of excellence. To develop the mind to the qualities of freedom, the qualities of joyfulness, peace and fulfilment, that the Buddha defined in his teachings: stream-entry, the once-returner, the non-returner and Arahantship.

There is that potential of raising up those qualities of well-being. Maybe in the next Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-VI) they will have a section on stream-entry, who knows?

We can expand the nature of our view of well-being beyond just survival, coping and having a good retirement plan. We can do that. That is the richness of Buddhist practice: the message to us as human beings, that we can do something with our mind. We can work with our mind. Our mind is not just a neutral blank page. It can be cultivated. The mind, the heart, can be cultivated to degrees of well-being, clarity, peacefulness, and wisdom that are truly wonderful and delightful. We can really enjoy our life. Our life can be a genuine blessing to others. I feel it is beneficial to raise that up as a possibility, not as an inflated ego trip. But I would say that it's not crazy to think of the idea of stream-entry as something that we could talk about in schools. We could talk about these qualities of well-being and human excellence. It's not just about academic achievement or Instagram followers or writing the great novel, or publishing thousands of papers. We can develop our hearts and minds to qualities of great maturity and wisdom. And that can be a tremendous blessing for the world.

Question and Answer

I am confused about the difference between *chanda* and *taṇhā*, could you please talk about that.

Ajahn Amaro: For those of you who are not familiar with these terms, they can both be translated as 'desire'. But the word *taṇhā* is related to the Sanskrit *tṛṣṇā* which means literally, 'thirst'. So maybe a better translation to English is 'craving'. Because the English word 'craving' has a sense of agitation, obsession and self-centeredness to it. *Chanda* is 'desire'. It is also translated as 'enthusiasm' or 'zeal' or 'interest'. It is the mind's 'Yes!' It is the mind turning to an object and engaging with it in a positive and energetic way. The mind focuses on something with a spirit of engagement and interest in it.

So, with *chanda*: not only is it sometimes wholesome, but the Buddha named it as a necessary condition, as a *sine qua non* of any kind of spiritual development. You need to be interested. It is within the group called 'The Four *Iddhipāda*', the four bases of success, or the four sources of power. So with any task that you undertake, whether it's making breakfast, sitting down to meditate, cooking meth, or pursuing a degree at Stanford University, you need these four qualities.

And the first one is *chanda*. You need to be interested. If you want to make your breakfast, you need to be interested in making breakfast. The first three of these four work together. *Chanda* is interest or enthusiasm.

The second one is *virīya*. You need to use energy. If you're interested to have breakfast but you're not going to get out of bed, there's not going to be any breakfast. Energy needs to be engaged.

The third one is *citta*, which, in this instance, means thinking things through, reflecting, contemplating. How am I going to do this? What needs to happen? Those first three qualities work together: interest, energy, and contemplation or reflection. If you want to meditate: can I find a place to sit quietly? Are there other things I need to put aside? How much time have I got?

The fourth one is *vimāṃsa*. It means 'reviewing' or, in a sense, 'recollection'. It is looking back on the results of what you've done. The first three work together in initiating an action, or a project, and the fourth one reviews. Well, did it work? Did I get my degree? Does my essay make sense? I sat down to meditate, and what's been happening for the last hour? Where has my mind been? I was trying to become a meth cook. Did it work? Am I succeeding?'

And I'm deliberately using a range of wholesome and unwholesome and neutral examples because the four bases of success are morally neutral. They apply in the same way whether it is a morally positive, negative, or neutral quality. So *chanda* in that respect, is that motivating force. It's a necessary condition to carry out any kind of work.

Taṇhā means craving. When we think of craving, then it's usually craving for food, the craving for a cigarette, the craving involved in sexual attraction, or craving to get some kind of sensory pleasure, like going to the movies. That's the most obvious or clearly delineated kind of craving. But in the Buddha's very first teaching, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* (the 'Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma'), he outlines three different kinds of craving: *kama-taṇhā*, *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*.

Kama-taṇhā is sensual desire, it is the most obvious and clearly delineated one. *Bhava* means 'to become', in the sense of inclining towards or wanting to be. So, *bhava-taṇhā* is often translated as the desire to be, or becoming, the craving for existence, the craving for defined being, wanting to *be* something, to *be* someone. For example, 'I want to get concentrated, I want to be admired, I want to be a successful academic, I want to be liked.' It involves more subtle qualities of craving. Often in meditation: 'I want to get concentrated; I want to get insight; I want to develop wisdom'. They seem to be very good things to want. But *bhava-taṇhā* always has a self-view element. It has that selfing element in it – *ahaṅkāra* (I-making) and *mamaṅkāra* (mine-making), they are woven into it.

And then *vibhava-taṇhā* is the desire to get rid of. 'I've got this incessant chattering mind. I need to shut it up. I've got to get rid of my laziness. I've got to get rid of greed and fear and aversion.' And that desire for annihilation: 'I just need to stop feeling. I've just got to get this thing to *shut up!* If only I didn't care.' With *vibhava-taṇhā* as well it can seem as though we are doing as we are instructed to do. They tell you let go of greed, hatred, and delusion, to get rid of your chattering thoughts. It can seem like we're dutifully following the advice of the teacher, but in working with the mind in meditation, it can be completely hijacked and taken over by these subtle forms of *taṇhā*, thereby leading to *dukkha*.

Bhava-taṇhā and *vibhava-taṇhā* sneak in the back door and take over. It is like a computer virus that sneaks into your computer and takes over the whole operating system. It is a very common theme, to the great anguish of some people who've been meditating for many decades. We've been putting a lot of sincere effort and doing what we think is following the

right instructions. We have put effort into *trying* to get concentrated, *trying* to get insight, *trying* to get rid of our defilements, *trying* to get enlightened, *trying* to become a stream-enterer. But the more that it is: 'I need to become. I need to get rid of', the more it compounds the sense of alienation, discontent, and stress.

So, 'What to do?'

There are four elements in the quality of *sammā vāyāmo* (Right Effort) that the Buddha speaks of in the definition of the Eightfold Path. The first one is restraining the unwholesome from arising. The second one is, if the unwholesome has arisen, to let it go. The third one is to cultivate the wholesome. The fourth one is, if the wholesome has arisen, to sustain it. So: restraining, letting go, cultivating, maintaining.

Now, maybe you think, 'How's that different from *bhava-taṇhā*, and *vibhava-taṇhā*?' That sounds like the same stuff: stopping defilements from arising, getting rid of them if they've arisen, getting concentrated, or developing loving-kindness, or keeping hold of my concentrated state. But pay attention to how those qualities are phrased. In that development of Right Effort, there is no self involved. If any kind of efforting and choosing was intrinsically stressful, how could it be part of the Noble Eightfold Path? How could it be something that leads towards peace if it was intrinsically stressful?

So, there must be a way that we can make effort and give direction to the mind that brings peacefulness. A way to have a desire, a goal, and giving the mind direction to act in following that goal, that directly leads towards peacefulness, that is in tune with peacefulness. The trick is to learn how to make effort without there being 'me' around. So that there is the 'restraining of the unwholesome' but there's not 'me' stopping the unwholesome arising. There is a recognition of anger, fear, aversion, or greed as unskillful. 'Let there be the effort for it to not arise. If it has arisen, let there be the effort to let it go.'

Mindfulness and wisdom drive that work, they drive that effort. This is where mindfulness very definitely comes into it. The guidance for action and decision-making is the mind's attunement to the time, the place and the situation. That capacity to act is informed by the recognition of what is wholesome and what is unwholesome. Mindfulness has an intrinsic sensitivity to the wholesome and the unwholesome. If it's mindfulness that is in tune with reality, with Dhamma, then it recognizes, 'Oh, this goes towards conflict, this goes towards agitation, this goes towards confusion: let it go. This goes towards peacefulness, this goes

towards clarity so keep that one, keep that alive.' So, there is effort, there is work being done. *Chanda* is being applied, a direction is being given, but it is not based on self-view. It is not based on 'me trying to get something'. Rather, it is the mind's attunement to the living situation guiding things in a way that is going to bring benefit for this being and bring benefit for others.

Q: I have something to offer that might be difficult to hear. So, I guess I ask for your sensibility about this concern.

My biggest concern about mindfulness in the West is the way that white supremacy can kind of get tangled up in how you would be teaching and how would you understand the practice that we do. I think about this a lot. So, in hearing you speak, and feeling the impact of what I see as possibly being of harm, using words like 'cluttered' or 'superstitious' to refer to other forms of wisdom that I don't personally practice and I think maybe other people in this room have practised or are connected to. And of hearing you say, something around the way that there might be these privileges conferred on Buddhists in the future, as if there's a PhD or something that's looked upon in a certain way that's not how it is now. And to see how that's connected to whiteness and white privilege. Buddhism has existed in the United States for over a hundred years, and it's not new here. I just feel a lot of concern for how the mindfulness movements and Buddhism can sometimes – yeah, cause harm in this way, and wanted to really bring that up a little bit for discussion or consideration.

Ajahn Amaro: Thank you. Yes, the 'clutter' word gets used a lot, and in a casually abusive way. I live in a very 'clutter-filled' environment and have a lot of respect for all those forms and customs. I live mostly in the West, but we're still very connected to our Asian roots. So, I would agree that in many respects there's a kind of superiority that can be voiced in terms of looking at Asian forms and customs.

There was a very interesting, ironically significant and somewhat embarrassing incident that occurred many years ago when Spirit Rock Meditation Center was about to be launched. They created a little promotional film for this new centre that was opening. It was 1990 and Ajahn Sumedho had just led a ten-day retreat at the Angela Center. I was there with him. The President of the Spirit Rock Board had been on the retreat. It was called IMW, Insight Meditation West in those days. He said, 'We're launching this new centre. Can we show this promotional film to everybody at the end of the retreat? We all sat there. Jack Kornfield was doing the commentary in the film. It showed some scenes of the valley where Spirit Rock is.

I'm not trying to malign Jack. We are good friends, but this was how it worked out. Then the film changed to a film of our monastery in Thailand. It showed the community of laypeople, monks and nuns chanting and bowing. There was a large golden-coloured Buddha image. And Jack was saying, 'This is exactly what we're *not* going to be bringing to California. This is the 'clutter' of Asian Buddhism that people are not interested in and that we're going to be leaving behind.' That is a paraphrase. It is probably not completely accurate, but it was along those lines.

So... Ajahn Sumedho and I are sitting there. This is our home monastery, this is our heart. It is our people, our team and our beloved community. And there's Jack's voice very sweetly saying, 'This is what we're *not* going to do. This is what we're not about.' This was at the end of a ten-day retreat. Then the fellow who was the president of IMW at the time, Howard Nudelman, who had been very inspired by Ajahn Sumedho's teachings on the retreat and who had asked to show the film – you could feel him dying a thousand deaths as this was playing. 'Oh dear...'. He had forgotten what the film said. But Ajahn Sumedho took it in good spirit. He said something along the lines of, 'Well that was embarrassing, wasn't it?' with a big chuckle. He was able to meet it. But message of the film had been incredibly condescending – at least from our point of view.

I'm a bit cautious about using the term 'white supremacist' but it was certainly elitist. It was that sense of looking down on these Asian customs and forms, and stating, 'These are the sort of accretions to the Buddhist tradition that we're leaving behind. This is going to be a new Western Buddhism that we're cultivating here.' So, a consciousness of that kind of elitism, and the thinking, 'Oh that's a problem other people have that I don't have that. I'm not subject to that.' That is a danger in our society.

I didn't realize how privileged I was in my life, as a white educated male Brit. You come into the world assuming, of course, that *your* experience is what life is like. But over time I have had very different experiences of life. In particular, living in Asia; living in a rural society with a basically non-financial economy. When I first lived in Thailand in the seventies, it was a farming economy that was based on subsistence. People grew the food that they ate. They didn't really use money very much. It was extremely poor. There was no electricity or running water in the village. It was a very simple society. Living in that world gave me an extraordinarily clear perspective on the privilege that I'd grown up with. The way that I saw the world was not 'The Way'. It was the perspectives that came out of an English 'public school'

educated lifestyle. A lifestyle that was extremely different from the people that we were living with and the environment that our spiritual teachers had grown up in.

Different experiences help us to see that the world that we are in is not *'the world'*. It is *'our version of the world'*. What we perceive is our mind's version of the world. It is helpful to recognize the limitations of our view. A view that is conditioned by our language, our culture, our age, our gender, and our education. All of that contributes to what we see and what we call *'the world'*. It is very beneficial to get a perspective on that. To say, 'This is just my mind's version of the world, it is not *'the world'*. So how does this other person see it? What is her perspective? Where does the truth lie? Just because I see things in a particular way, does that mean it is true? Does it mean that is the whole story? No way.'

The more that we recognize that our opinions can only be partially true, the better. Our opinions are partial truths or convenient fictions. When we get a perspective on that, we are much more able to respect and attune to the perspectives that others have. I feel that Buddhist meditation can do a lot to inform that. It can reveal our biases and help us to have the humility to say, 'Wow. I never saw that! That's extraordinary.'

I had powerful experiences when Abhayagiri Monastery first opened in the late nineties. One of the novices was an African American man. He had grown up here in California and he had been through several foster homes growing up. His life and his teenage years couldn't have been more different from mine in many ways. He was a philosophy undergrad from a Californian university, and he'd gone on from that to come into the monastery. As Buddhist monastics we had a lot in common. But we had very different upbringings, with his experience growing up as an African American male in California in the late twentieth century. It was so powerful to engage with him and to have him walk us through, to the extent that he could, what he grew up with. To have him share the world as it appeared to him, even as a philosophy student. He said he'd go to a faculty meeting, and people would put their bags under their chairs and move close to the door. He had wanted to say, 'This is a philosophy department. I am not dangerous.' But that was the kind of thing that he grew up with.

We learn the degree to which we can open the heart and really empathize with such a different world. An important part of our maturing is that kind of readiness to be informed and to have our view changed. To really appreciate other people's perspectives, to the degree that is possible, is one of the potentials we have as human beings.

Also, I didn't realize how English I was until I came to live here in California. I thought I was pretty liberal. But a liberal Brit is still an uptight Californian. I felt I was fairly open, adaptable and liberal. But seriously, it was a real eye-opener. The degree to which people would just tell you everything about themselves within minutes of meeting them. In England, I was a freewheeling hippie type. I was very open and flexible in my attitudes, I thought. But often in conversation here in California, I found myself thinking, 'Oh dear!' My upper lip went stiffer. I found myself tightening up, 'What do I do with this? Oh, I'm a bit more English than I realized I was!'

I really appreciate that ancient saying, 'It's difficult to be a prophet in your own country.' I feel it was a great blessing and benefit to come out of my safe zone in the UK. To come into a place where there were very different mores, different standards of communication, and where people were just that much more open. And to meet the challenge of that, to find a way of being at home with that.

Q: Generally, at this time it seems that mindfulness is being given more importance than concentration, what are your thoughts about that?

Ajahn Amaro: At the moment, mindfulness is the *mot du jour*, the hot topic of the time. Particularly because of the work of people like Jon Kabat-Zinn and those who developed Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy. It has had a big impact. Mindfulness is something that's had a very visible and beneficial effect on many people. It's got people's attention. But I suspect that as time goes on and people's interest develops, then they will be more looking into other aspects of Buddhist teachings and traditions in the forms that are available.

The earliest Buddhists in this country were the Chinese community involved in the gold mining, and the indentured labour here in the Bay Area. Chinese labourers were brought in, and they created their own temples back in the nineteenth century. They were the very first Buddhists in the USA. You have the immigrant Asian communities that are carrying on the traditions from their home countries. With the Westerners who developed an interest in Buddhism and who were learning from Asia teachers, the main thing has been meditation. In particular, the aspects of concentration and insight that come from meditation. With teachers like Goenka-ji in India, Mahasi Sayadaw in Burma, Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Buddhadasa in Thailand, the lynchpin of interest was with meditation. Meditation was the cause for people's attention, for the effort and time spent listening to those teachers and in practising according to their advice. That has been a very strong presence since the 1970s in the Western world. So,

it may well be that meditation, together with its aspects of concentration, will become as widespread as mindfulness – who knows?

A little about my own little schtick with ethics. Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction was launched in the late seventies and became more popular in the eighties and nineties. Then Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for depression became popular in the 2000s. The compassion element was introduced later. So, compassion is the new hot thing, for example, mindfulness and compassion, self-compassion or compassion for others. So, my hope, or my aspiration, is that Mindfulness-Based Behaviour Therapy, living according to the Precepts, will become the new hot thing. People will discover that if you stop telling lies, you'll feel much better about yourself and you'll be less anxious. Wow, look at that, amazing! If you don't steal things, you won't worry about being caught. I am playing it up a bit. But I do hope that along the way, there will be a realization that the Precepts are primarily functioning as an extension to the practice of compassion. The realization that if you don't kill things, if you don't steal things, if you are responsible in your sexual relationships, if you're honest and discerning in the way you form relationships, and if you are careful with your speech in that you refrain from lying and suchlike, then you will find yourself far more at ease. You will find you are able to live a life that is peaceful and beneficial for yourself and others. And then the Fifth Precept of refraining from intoxication has a special place, in that it helps the first Four Precepts to stay alive.

I like to think of the Precepts as 'ring-fencing the reptile brain' (if you are familiar with Jurassic Park?). The trouble really begins when the fence comes down: when the raptors get through the boundary. Drugs and alcohol knock down that wall that keeps the reptile brain contained. They knock down the restraining influences to those impulses in the reptile brain: aggressive and acquisitive impulses, greedy and deceitful impulses, and self-benefiting impulses. The Precepts help to create a little ring fence that contains those impulses. When we use alcohol or mind-altering drugs, it can knock a few holes in the fence and then those reptile urges have much more leeway. Any of you who have ever had a few drinks will probably not argue with that observation. I was a serious drinker before I was a monk, so I have direct knowledge of the free running of the reptiles.

Lastly, I acknowledge that I didn't say so much specifically about concentration there but I trust this response is useful anyway.

