

**TIMES AND THE TIMELESS**

AJAHN CANDASIRĪ





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REFLECTIONS FROM  
MILNTUIM HERMITAGE



FOR FREE DISTRIBUTION

*Also available as a free eBook*

*I would like to dedicate this beautiful collection of teachings with gratitude to all the teachers in the tradition of Ajahn Chah who have inspired and supported me; to my grandparents, parents and family who, in their differing ways, have travelled with me on my journey and to my fellow practitioners on the Path in Bath, Banbury and beyond.*

SARAH WALLIS

## ABBREVIATIONS

**MN** *Majjhima Nikāya* – The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi. Wisdom Publications 1995.

**DHP** *Dhammapada* – a rendering by Ajahn Munindo. Aruna Publications 2006.

**SN** *Samyutta Nikāya* – The Connected Discourses of the Buddha, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi. Wisdom Publications 1995.

## FOREWORD

This little collection was never intended as a ‘collection of teachings.’ It came about in response to a request and a suggestion. The request was from Sarah Wallis who wanted to sponsor a publication in celebration of her sixtieth birthday, and to mark thirty years of the Banbury Buddhist Group. The suggestion, also from Sarah, was to gather together the reflections that had been individually prepared for the twice-yearly editions of our Milntuim Hermitage Newsletter.

It was a surprise to find that there are twenty of these – and even more of a surprise to find that the reflections are all quite different. Every time I wrote a reflection, my intention was to offer encouragement for practice with the prevailing conditions; it seemed to me that it was always the

same Dhamma<sup>1</sup> practice that I pointed to. However, what I had failed to appreciate was that the actual conditions were different each time!

So, after an initial hesitation, I asked some of my monastic and lay friends to read what was there. Ajahn Sucitto, Ajahn Munindo and Ajahn Sundarā all offered encouraging and helpful feedback, as did several kind lay friends. Members of the Lotus Volunteer Group gathered the material in one place, and Mariah O'Neill gave it a thorough edit. Eleonora Monti has helped to prepare the text for publication. Nicholas Halliday offered his expertise in preparing the practical and artistic elements, patiently to-ing and fro-ing with proof-readers until it was 'just about right' enough.

May it serve as an encouragement to attune to the Dhamma, the Timeless, as we navigate the uncharted waters of the times to come.

*Ajahn Candasiri*



# 1. WALKING THE PATH

WINTER 2012

In our first newsletter we included a picture of two of us walking in October sunshine along this wide, clear path in the Milntuim Woods. The path itself is clear. To the right and left are interesting digressions (in this case, there is a swamp on the left and a thicket on the right). Ahead, there is open countryside and the radiant light of the sun. It reminded me of the journey that each of us is following in our lives.

It's a simile that the Buddha used to describe his teaching and way of practice. He said it was like an ancient path through a dense forest that he had rediscovered and opened up – for anyone. Anyone, that is, who – rather

than continuing to follow the familiar, well-worn loops that go round and round and round – is interested in finding a direct way out from those thickets and swamps of the mind.

Of course, it takes courage to leave the familiar and also, perhaps more importantly, a sense of disenchantment (Pali: *nibbidā*). In the Thai language the expression used is: *bua lok*, meaning something like ‘a sombre weariness with the world’. This may seem surprising (and that’s no bad thing) and I would probably have explained it differently. I would have described it as having recognised the limitations of human existence – even the wonderful things – and the way we readily make life more difficult than it needs to be, often through turning a blind eye to what is most obvious.

We want something, and we reach out for it; we feel angry and upset at anyone or anything that gets in the way of our having it – and we really believe that that thing; whether

it be a relationship, object, status or mental state, is what we need to be perfectly happy – forever! I wonder if this sounds familiar?

The Buddha spoke of three fires: greed, hatred and delusion. He pointed out that they continue to burn until we learn how to stop feeding them – until we become interested in the possibility of finding the way out. Milntuim Hermitage (from the Gaelic, meaning ‘mill on the hillock’) is dedicated to that way out. This path of practice described by the Buddha is referred to as ‘the *Dhamma*’, a Pali word that means ‘Teachings’, or ‘Truth’.

For a journey, particularly one that may take us through unfamiliar territory, it is helpful to have good friends. So it is very fortunate that the Buddha both pointed out the path and also, in the course of his long lifetime, established a community (*sangha*) and way of life that can benefit many many people.

As nuns, we are bound by a code of training that enables us to live in a mutually dependent relationship with lay people who provide material support. Through contemplating our own lives in the light of these teachings, we gain confidence that they really work; we see with our own eyes that they are of direct benefit. Then, when suitable occasions arise, we can share this understanding with others who are interested in walking the Path to Freedom.

A wooden signpost stands in a lush green field. The signpost consists of two vertical wooden posts and a horizontal dark grey sign. The sign has a white wavy line at the top and the text 'Milntuim Hermitage' written in white. In the foreground, a white wooden fence is visible. The background is filled with dense green foliage and trees.

Milntuim Hermitage



## **2. CONTEMPLATING INTERDEPENDENCE**

SUMMER 2013

One of the aspects of this lifestyle that I find most difficult – and most rewarding – is being an alms mendicant.

For those of us who have grown up within a culture where independence is greatly valued – where one's status is measured, to a large degree, according to material wealth and power – putting oneself in a position of total dependence on others is not easy.

Yet interdependence, in fact, is the reality for all of us sharing this human existence. No one lives in a vacuum. The Rule for nuns and monks of this tradition makes this explicit. We are forbidden both from using money, and

from storing food overnight; what we eat each day must be offered to us between dawn and midday.

Milntuim Hermitage has been a residence for Buddhist nuns for almost two years now, and it has been hugely encouraging that generosity, in the form of both material and practical support, has been shown to such a degree by local friends, and by others from further afield. People seem eager to help: ‘Sister, please tell us what you need!’ – occasionally tinged with concern, and always with a sense of joy. There is joy for me, too, in being part of something that enables such radiance of heart, such generosity: the brightness of our humanity.

In the past, walking for alms near our monasteries in England, I would bring this to mind; it is what enabled me to rise above the voices of conditioning: ‘What do you think you’re doing?... Making yourself vulnerable, dependent on others’ goodness – a burden on society!...’

Such conditioning goes deep, and yet, as I stand there in the street, bareheaded, holding my almsbowl, it is clear to me that the intention of the heart is to bless, not to demand.

‘May all beings be well. May all beings be free from suffering...’ are the thoughts that come to mind, and usually someone approaches with an offering. It may not be much – it may not be a ‘balanced meal’, but it can fill the belly for the day, and gladden the heart for both giver and given to.

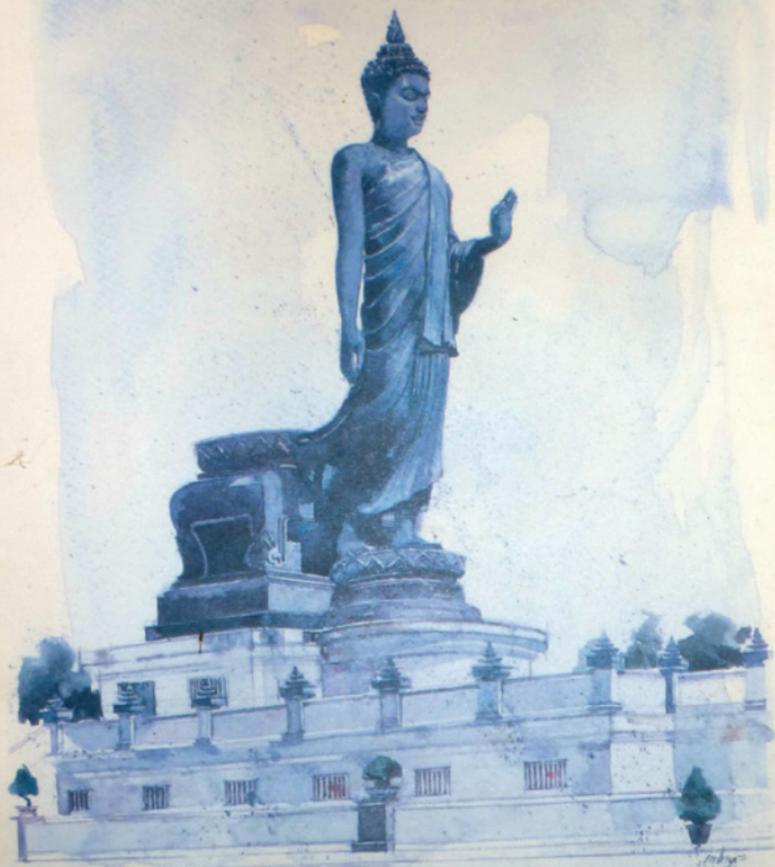
In 1977, when Ajahn Sumedho was preparing to come to Britain from Thailand, he too had concerns about living on alms in a non-Buddhist country. However, when he voiced these concerns to his teacher, Ajahn Chah’s response was immediate: ‘Are there no kind people there?’ Ajahn Chah also reminded him that to maintain the practice of the almsround was part of his duty as a monk.

A verse in the Dhammapada expresses the spirit of this practice beautifully:

*As a bee takes just what it needs, without harming the flower, its colour or its fragrance, so too should the samana<sup>2</sup> wander in the village. [DHP 49]*

At this time of global concern about the catastrophic effects of climate change (all the more poignant for Comrie folk, many of whom suffered extensive damage to their homes from recent flooding) this can be seen as a timely reflection: What do we need? Are there ways we can alter how we live, so as to cause less disturbance to the delicate balance of nature? Can we all live more lightly on this precious earth?





1910  
M. S. S. S.

### **3. LETTING GO**

WINTER 2014

Life is uncertain. It was this reflection that led the young prince, Siddhartha Gautama, to leave the apparent security of his family and the palace where he had grown up in search of a different, more reliable state of security and inner peace. For some people, what he eventually discovered during his search may seem shocking. He had surrendered his position, relationships and material comfort, and made enormous efforts to subdue the energy of desire, in an effort to find peace of mind – only to discover that that very mind was not really ‘his’ at all!

However, when he reached that understanding, after six years of strenuous effort, what was left was a state of unshakeable peace. He no longer had anything to worry about

or to protect. There was no longer any reason to think of himself as a separate person with a personality that needed to be maintained at all costs. He was free.

Appreciating the possibility of such freedom for each one of us – that we too can find and know such peace – interests me greatly. Glimpsing it, albeit fleetingly, is what keeps me walking this path. External events can be sudden, disturbing and dramatic; they can be tragic and confusing. They also provide a stark reminder of impermanence and enable a deeper appreciation of the fragility of our world. The Buddha would frequently point to this as an encouragement to keep inclining towards that state of inner stability.

Then questions arise: ‘But how do we do it?’ ‘How can we experience that state for ourselves?...’

Ajahn Chah<sup>3</sup> put it nicely:

*If you let go a little, you will have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you will have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you will have complete peace...*

One might respond by saying, ‘But does this mean that I just let go altogether and allow everything to fall apart, without caring or trying to do anything?’... Well, no – because we *do* care. There are many things that are important to us. We would like to make sure that these are looked after in a responsible way, so we do our best to fulfil those responsibilities. The key question is: can we do that with a heart of letting go?

We need to begin in small ways, noticing how we respond when things don’t go according to plan. Are we angry, or discouraged? Can we quietly accept the feeling of not getting our way (however noble or altruistic our intention might have been)? Can we take a deep breath in, can we let the out-breath happen gently? Can we touch the

earth like the Buddha? This is how we discover the inner steadiness that enables our life to be a blessing, both for ourselves and for others. We incline away from the habitual responses of reacting, struggling, or blaming others or the Universe for our unhappiness.

When we begin to practise letting go like this, no longer obsessed with trying to keep things the way that is familiar or comfortable for us, we find that we can simply witness and enter into the flow of life. We see how ‘bad’ times become ‘good’ times, and ‘good’ times get better – or change to ‘bad’! Just as the weather – especially here in Scotland – is in a constant state of change. There are bright clear moments, sudden downpours, mists and gale-force winds. While inconvenient at times, it’s not ‘bad’: we don’t waste our precious energy with blaming or trying to control it. Instead, our effort is to support an inner attitude of clarity and calm that can adapt to whatever comes along. Fearful

holding on is replaced with bright curiosity. Knowing that change is inevitable, we love and care for each other, cherishing the moments we share, bearing the sorrow of separation with courage and dignity.

This is life.

We can't freeze it or hold on to it so, really, there is no choice other than to struggle, or to let go...



## 4. IT MATTERS WHAT WE THINK

SUMMER 2014

*Whatever a person frequently thinks and ponders upon, that will become the inclination of their heart. [MN 19]*

In the light of this teaching, it has been interesting to notice the responses of first-time visitors to the Hermitage. Some see a tranquil haven; others see only the amount of work to be done, or worry about the winter months. Some delight in the quiet of the night time; others are fearful of intruders, who may be out to cause harm. I suspect that all of us tend to oscillate between these types of thinking, and it can be a useful exercise to try to discern which of the extremes is our most usual response.

In Buddhism it's not a matter of 'right' or 'wrong', 'good' or 'bad' – even though the factors of the Eightfold Path<sup>4</sup> are often translated as '*right* understanding', '*right* intention' and so on – it's more an appreciation that different ways of thinking, speaking or acting tend towards different and quite specific outcomes. We call this the Law of Cause and Effect, or the Law of Kamma.

This raises interesting possibilities. For many people, it can seem that there is just one way of responding to things: 'My Way'... and that to deliberately change that response is a dubious contrivance likely to result in a sense of confusion – or worse. As we reflect on our lives, it becomes apparent that most, if not all, of our patterns of response arise because of conditioning; we call it 'upbringing'. However, having learned such patterns as children we can, as adults, consider the possibility of learning different ways of seeing and responding.

It is not surprising that the Buddha emphasized the importance of good friends, or *kalyāṇamitta*. He encouraged association with the 'wise': thoughtful, considerate people whose inclination of thinking, speech and activity is such as to bring benefit. Such people can guide us – directly, and through their example – towards the good. He also recommended the avoidance of foolish people who, unclear about what brings real benefit, tend to opt for courses of action that may bring only short-term benefit for themselves, and that can cause untold suffering to others.

Legal systems provide detailed guidelines to regulate outward behaviour for different societies; but, there is no such litigation to govern our inner life. It is, quite rightly, a private matter – our own concern – and yet it is our innermost fears and longing that determine our response to the world 'out there'.

The suggestion that we could be aware of our thinking process may seem a bit of a quantum leap, if our habit has

always been to identify with thoughts, and if we never challenge what those thoughts may be telling us about ourselves, each other, the state of the world, or what we should do about it. The thinking mind is full of ideas about everything, and what's more: we tend to believe everything it tells us, and to respond accordingly! Then we wonder why we feel so stressed, confused, depressed or angry.

I find that when I take time to walk up and down my meditation path – aware of the feet touching the ground and the arms hanging from their sockets at my sides – I can begin to observe the mind in a different way. I can notice when there is thinking and also when the mind is quiet, free from thought. It's possible to discern when there is total involvement with some issue that has arisen, or if there is simply a light touching in to the internal commentary on what is perceived: dappled sunlight, the warmth of the air on the skin, fragrances, sounds – and thoughts. Little by

little it becomes clear that we can choose where we place our attention; there can be a loosening of grip around the persistent concerns – whether they are trivial, or extremely serious: about ‘me’, my neighbours or the Universe.

There are certainly innumerable matters of grave concern, and it is natural to feel concerned when our attention is drawn to them. Can we keep the heart light and balanced, attuned and yet not overwhelmed? This question brings us back to the importance of noticing and being willing to abandon thoughts of greed, ill will, and cruelty and to actively cultivate generosity, kindness and compassion. It is this that can lead us to contribute effectively to the welfare of humanity.



## 5. BUT WHAT DO YOU DO...?

WINTER 2014

This question is often asked as we approach our time of winter retreat, which extends from January until the end of March. The answer: Actually, it's more a question of what we *don't* do. Anything that is not necessary, or that we can postpone, we don't do, or we postpone. This way we clear the endless list of 'things to be attended to, now', and focus more exclusively on the inner work that we could call the 'work of the heart'.

Rather than a 'doing', this work is more of a watching – a witnessing of internal events and responses. It is somewhat akin to those people at the airport who observe x-ray images of our baggage, watching out for anything that could be harmful to ourselves or to others, and taking appropriate

action. The difference is that, for them, while some effort is needed to maintain focus and interest in what they are witnessing, they are unlikely to identify with what they observe; it is clearly 'other'. For us, this is not the case. Whether going about our ordinary daily life or in retreat, we are all too ready to identify with our bodies, and with the emotions and moods, ideas and thoughts that make up our mental landscape. How many times do we comment: 'I am a fat/thin/healthy or sick person' or, 'I'm a good/bad/jealous/grumpy/easy-going/intelligent or fantastic person'...?

When we are able to step back for a time, and to relinquish our usual distracting activities – the phone calls, emails or friendly conversations – the mind, after an initial rebellion, begins to settle. Then we can observe the flow of life as we experience it through the senses: the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and the mind itself. We can notice the

tension that arises when what we perceive is at odds with how we think things should be or how we would like them to be, and we can calm the voices of dissent with a simple mantra<sup>5</sup>: ‘But this is how it is...’. Settling the mind in this way, we can allow things to change naturally. We no longer need to give in to the belief that following the desire to manipulate or control will eventually produce a state of lasting satisfaction.

The methods employed by the Buddha for guiding his disciples were practical. He would point directly and repeatedly at what can be observed – by anyone who is willing to look. Focusing on our mortality and the unsatisfactoriness of life may not be a particularly comfortable way to spend time. However, this is how we learn and, for some of us, the lesson needs to be repeated many times! Then we really know for ourselves, and there is a readiness to let go of what is familiar as we

begin to explore different ways of relating to life in this human realm. It's a way that is based on the acceptance of the limitations of our flesh and blood bodies, and of our mysterious and fickle minds. We no longer ask more of life than it can offer or provide; instead, we make the best of it as it is.

So that's what we're up to as we go about quietly, sit for long hours, or pace back and forth. We are just watching – like those people at the airport – making the effort to maintain focus, so as to thoroughly appreciate that none of what we observe belongs to us.

We watch life's drama as it unfolds – irrespective of our desires to keep what we like or to get rid of what we dislike, discovering that it changes anyway. Only then, having seen for ourselves, can we speak with authority about these simple yet subtle truths. Yes. They may seem like reasonable ideas – common sense – but it's the application

of them to our own lives that allows real understanding to take root.

We can all do this, moment by moment. Whenever there is stress, we establish ourselves in the present by taking a deep breath in and, with the out-breath, relaxing and acknowledging: 'but this is how it is...!'

That's what we do.



## 6. FINDING THE BALANCE

SUMMER 2015

As the only nun staying here at Milntuim, I have made it a practice to try to enjoy everything I do. This entails being vigilant in regard to the arising of unhelpful states, like worry or ill-will.

For me, decisions are often difficult. I tend to worry about them, particularly when the issues in question are clouded with personal biases and preferences. As I ponder the different options and the possible responses to ideas and proposals that are put forward, I have found it helpful to keep remembering the aspiration for this Hermitage. For example, I ask myself: ‘Will this particular course of action support Milntuim as a place for the secluded practice of the nuns?’ ... ‘Will it support a sense of goodwill within the

local community?’ ... ‘Will it provide encouragement and inspiration for lay people who look to this Hermitage as a place where they can come to be supported in their spiritual practice – and for those who find joy and inspiration simply in being able to offer support, even although they may never have a chance to visit?’

The Eightfold Path of the Buddha<sup>6</sup> is a way of balance. The prefix for each of the different factors is ‘*samma*’, a Pali word which is often translated as ‘right’ or ‘perfect’. However, these words can imply a fixity that may not always be helpful – since life itself is not fixed in any way at all. The circumstances of our lives are continuously shifting; no set formula can possibly cover the myriad possible scenarios. It seems to me that regarding the Path as a way of balance is more accurate.

We are invited to be mindful: to wake up, to stay in touch with whatever is happening within and around us – and to

find our balance with it all. Sometimes we may tip over in one direction, at others we may tend towards the opposite extreme, so we need constantly to watch, to feel things out. This could sound like a big demand on our time and attention but, as we get used to practising like this, we find that it's very simple – no different from standing up, or walking in a straight line. We simply feel, notice and adjust our approach, re-establishing that 'middle-way-balance'.

Here at Milntuim, there's a balancing between careful consideration and worry. There is the consideration of, on the one hand, preserving the quietude and seclusion of the Hermitage; and, on the other, enabling people who may benefit to be informed and welcomed. I also need to consider the balance between remaining here at Milntuim, and travelling – either to teach, or to maintain supportive connections with our other monasteries. I notice that this

last polarity seems to shift. As I get older, I am somewhat less inclined to travel!

However, I have found that the determination to enjoy life enables me to maintain a lightness and sensitivity around these polarities. If we are too serious, we become tense; there is a sense of heaviness – of being burdened by the concerns of life – and we lose touch with the beautiful, the Dhamma. The Buddha’s ‘Words on Loving Kindness’<sup>7</sup> speak of being ‘unburdened with duties...’, and ‘not holding to fixed views...’. I find these words helpful in enabling an enjoyment of this dance of life – a letting go of anything unhelpful with each breath, so as to be free to respond in a beautiful way to whatever life has to offer...





## 7. MEETING FEAR WITH WISDOM

WINTER 2016

The Buddha himself and other forest masters of old would often speak of practice in charnel grounds or remote wilderness areas, where there was the possibility of being assailed by terrifying ghosts or attacked by tigers or other dangerous animals. They would encourage their disciples to seek out such places, and to contemplate the fear and dread that would arise there.

In our own lives there can occasionally be times when we find ourselves in mortal danger. Sadly, there are many people throughout the world living in situations of conflict where this is a constant reality. However, there is another more pervasive and insidious type of fear that can affect all of us. We may not even recognise it as fear, or notice how

we habitually ignore or override it. This fear is related to another kind of survival: the preservation of Selfhood.

I became very interested in this some years ago when, at one of our monasteries, someone said something to me that seemed to threaten both my own position, and also the standing of our whole nuns' community that I had cherished and been part of for more than thirty years. It was a small incident. What was surprising was the force and irrationality of my reaction – which seemed completely out of proportion to the incident itself. It was as though an enraged three-year-old who had been sleeping for many decades had suddenly woken up, and was unleashing her fury – lashing out in the only way she knew – in an attempt to annihilate the aggressor. My first reaction to this was of shame (even though I hadn't actually said, or done, anything that anyone would have seen as out of the ordinary!). Then, when I looked deeper, I recognized fear,

and saw that that fury was part of a primitive struggle for survival. Given my perception of what was happening, the reaction was, in a sense, completely appropriate.

I was glad to see this so clearly, and began to appreciate that this is something that happens in varying degrees among people all the time. We see or hear something; we interpret it in a certain way, and there is an inner and outer response to that perception. It is a physiological response: a sense of softening and ease when we receive kindness, or a sense of tightness and arousal when threatened.

As long as we identify with our vulnerable bodies and with the even more ephemeral sense of Self, thinking of them as 'Me', that 'Me' can be destroyed – or, at least, harmed in some way. So it is no accident that the teachings of the Buddha constantly encourage a challenging of that identity: are the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and sense consciousness really a Self? Are they really 'Me'?...

Such questioning can bring us to a place of deeper knowing – a place of true Refuge and peace. In these times where, on a daily basis, the media expose us to atrocities happening both nearby and far away, it is more important than ever that we discover such a Refuge – where the mind can find steadiness and clarity to enable an appropriate response. Instead of furthering terror, hatred, and confusion, we can calmly consider:

*Will this response be for my own welfare?*

*Will it be for the welfare of others?*

*Will it be for the welfare of both myself and others?*

(MN 61)

Thus we become a vehicle for peace, and for the cherishing of all beings.





## 8. THE LISTENING HEART

SUMMER 2016

Our lives tend to be taken up with all kinds of doing: making things, fixing things, taking things apart, putting them together – not to mention all those conversations to be had – whether virtual through email, on the phone or face-to-face. There always seems to be plenty to do.

Even our meditation practice can be a subtle and intensive kind of *doing*, as we strive to calm or focus the mind, develop this or that (patience, kindness, compassion are all close to the top of the list of things to be developed), restrain or transform the negative patterns of thinking, and so on... There are certainly many good things to be doing in meditation...

However, problems can arise if this is our only mode of being: doing and reacting, in a continuous effort to find and maintain some sense of inner or outer equilibrium.

In our Buddhist practice we are reminded that suffering arises through attachment to any desire for things to be otherwise – and ceases when we relinquish that attachment. Desire and attachment are what fuel a significant proportion of human activity and speech, whether we actually say things out loud or simply murmur and grumble inwardly.

Interesting questions that we can ask ourselves include: ‘Is it possible to have a desire without attaching to it?...’ ‘What would that look like?...’ ‘What would it feel like?...’

We can also ask, ‘Is it possible to notice and to be fully conscious of what happens when a desire has been relinquished?’

Of course, the answer is ‘Yes.’

This is possible – and liberating!

So often I hear people saying things like, ‘But I have all these attachments, and so many desires. I’ll never be able

to get rid of them. It seems hopeless; this practice is much too difficult for me.’ My usual response to such concerns is something like, ‘That’s just how it seems right now. It’s all right; it can change... this is the very stuff of our Buddhist practice.’ However, in a sense, it’s not something that we can *do* anything about or think ourselves out of.

For the past few weeks, I have been struck by the level of anxiety expressed by many people concerning the result of the Scottish independence referendum. While there will be many people who feel glad about it, many I have spoken with are deeply disturbed.

Some have asked me: ‘How can we respond skilfully to this situation?’

One of my favourite skilful means (*upaya*) is what I call the ‘don’t know mind’. This works by acknowledging that – while we can have all kinds of ideas about what might happen and what’s best to be done – in reality, there are

times when quite simply we don't know. When we can allow that sense of not knowing to be there, alongside the inner chatter of ideas, concerns and strategies, there can also be a relaxing into a space of not-doing. I would call this 'the listening heart'. Instead of objecting, reacting, or feeling overwhelmed, this can offer a quiet space where real listening can happen. Such listening is deeply peaceful; it allows a different kind of knowing, a different kind of response: a response-ability, rather than mere reactivity.

In a field of concern and agitation, the presence of just one person who is able and willing to do this can make all the difference. The listening heart can help to re-establish a wise balance. Rather than simply adding to the turbulence, there can be a subtle settling, within which what is truly beneficial can be seen.





## 9. THE STATE OF THE WORLD

WINTER 2017

Sitting on a train as it heads south, feeling the body weary and restless, listening to the sounds of the train creaking as it moves at speed – of the engine and metal wheels on metal tracks – and of people talking, while watching the sun slip away to the west.

This is the state of the world as I perceive it right now.

My thoughts drift to the past days spent at Milntuim – and to the future: meetings, more travel... ‘my world’.

Catching sight of a newspaper headline: *Terror across Europe at Christmas*. There is a shard of interest, of fear and concern. Then I come back to the body: weary and mildly uncomfortable... ‘my world’.

But I'm privileged; I don't have regular access to newspapers or TV. For me, the big news is of a red squirrel on the apple tree, squirming as it reached to pick a big juicy apple treat, and the small deer we passed, lying dead on the road, as we made our way to the station... 'my world'.

The media has a lot to answer for, and we fall for it time, and time again; and then wonder why we are so stressed and unhappy. Sadly, we all too readily allow impressions to invade the mind where they ferment, proliferate and disturb what is our birthright – peace of mind. We allow the mind to be exercised, seeking solutions: 'There must be something that can be done!' dreading the worst, or sinking into a state of weary outrage.

This is not to suggest that we ignore what we see or hear of world news, or that those making a sincere effort to influence things for the better are misguided in any way at all. What seems to be lacking is a sense of perspective.

We need to keep in touch with that peace, our birthright from which true wisdom and compassion arise. When we can fully accept our fear, there is the understanding that can let go of it. We no longer allow it to tumble us into a state of anger, outrage or confusion, as we struggle with those distorting perceptions that we are fed by our devices day by day, hour by hour.

For those called to an active response to climate change, terrorism, the refugee crisis, poverty, or to any one of the myriad helpful initiatives, the challenge is to keep in touch with a belief in the essential goodness and wisdom of humanity. Such goodness and wisdom is there in our own hearts; it is a potential within each one of us. Just as there are the fires of greed, hatred and delusion that our practice reveals (fortunately, yet to our consternation!), there is also immense goodness to be seen and brought forth. It puzzles me that so many people still choose to run

endlessly, like hungry ghosts, after material wealth and power – ever fearful of their slipping away – when, just one breath away, there is the potential for lasting peace and happiness.





## 10. DILIGENCE AND VIGILANCE

SUMMER 2017

Sometimes I reflect on these qualities – pondering how each of them can be applied to our practice of Dhamma in everyday life, as we work towards freeing the heart. It seems that ‘diligence’ is about application – about making an effort in undertaking some particular task. ‘Vigilance’ seems more concerned with keeping things on track, making sure that our efforts are bringing results that are in line with our original aspiration.

I will always be grateful to have come across a way of practice that offers such clear – and simple – guidance for freeing the heart from the thing that makes us most miserable: the sense of ‘Me’, with its attendant fears, longings and ill-will (manifesting as such states as fury,

outrage, self-denigration – call it what you will). Put like this, it can seem like a tall order: almost as though we are being asked to destroy our very sense of being, and to lay aside all of the values that have been inculcated in our hearts throughout our entire lifetime... However, there is another way of putting it that, to me, seems more do-able. It's a matter of vigilance: of developing that natural quality whereby we attend to each moment, and release the heart from entanglement – right here – now.

But we need to know what we're looking for. Mara is clever, and can appear in many guises. We can choose to make it a pastime to learn about these. Instead of feeling overwhelmed or discouraged by our apparent foolishness or inadequacy, we can come to appreciate the laser-sharp power of present-moment awareness – or mindfulness. Mindful vigilance enables a discerning of the myriad

stumbling places along the way – just like tree roots on the path by the river that I could trip up on, if there's a moment of inattention as I walk to the village for alms.

When we can live fully in Dhamma, there is a sense of inner ease. It's like being at home with ourselves – completely normal (interestingly, the word 'Dhamma' is sometimes translated as 'the Norm'); I can observe this in my own mind. I might be quietly engaged in some particular task, and then Mara comes along and says, 'You should be more diligent, meditating!' So I sit down to meditate. Then, 'What about that job you were doing? You should have been diligent, and finished that first!' So I get up to finish the job... and on it goes... Or, as on a recent weekend retreat, when people were talking loudly outside the meditation room where we were sharing the blessings of our practice for the welfare of all beings. It took vigilance to quiet the

automatic thinking: ‘Don’t they realize that we’re doing a special practice of spreading blessings to all beings.’!

There are so many ways it can happen: the subtle and, sometimes, not so subtle internal bullying of ourselves and others; the pride that says, ‘I’m much more diligent than they are’; the fear: ‘Maybe I’ll never be any good at this. I am not diligent enough!’ – and so it goes on...

So let’s learn how to stay peacefully ‘at home’. Instead of looking out and comparing ourselves with others, or with some idea of what or how we should be, we can be inwardly quiet, simply attentive to the moment: ‘This is how it is right now. This is what is needed.’ There can be a sense of inner kindness and respect, as we rest with the fount of goodness and joy that is our birthright. This, we can do for the lasting benefit of ourselves and of all beings.





## 11. THE HOUSE IS HALF-PAINTED

WINTER 2018

...and it looks awful. The little hut, the Santuṭṭhi Kuti, is even worse. Around the base there are big slabs of wood, resplendent in white primer and in stark contrast to the brick red of the rest of the kuti – while door and window frames are an odd variety of dowdy colours from our assorted tester pots. Clearly, *something* is happening – and that’s good; to the critical observer, it’s a mess. However, a kinder observer would regard it as a ‘work in progress’ – only a mildly deranged optimist could see it as an ‘interesting effect’!

Our practice can also seem like this; and I’d suggest that a ‘work in progress’ would be a happier way to regard it than ‘a mess’. I like to be encouraging, so one response I

have to people who tell me what a mess their practice is, is to suggest that – instead of feeling downcast – they could celebrate this observation. Having seen that there are difficulties, now there is an opportunity to examine them carefully, and to devise strategies for working with them. It becomes a ‘work in progress’.

After some weeks, months or years of diligent effort, we might find it hard to accept that we are not yet perfect: that we can still be irritable or mean; that we still occasionally have a temper tantrum when things don’t go the way we want them to; that we still nod off during meditation. We’d like to always live according to our own high standards – and we don’t; we can’t... What we can do is acknowledge, humbly, that this is the case. This may not be so easy for those of us who are in the habit of making quick assessments of our performance, and who are ready to regard anything short of the perfect response to the manifold situations of

our lives as signs of being a total failure: a reject, flawed, worthy only to be thrown out onto the rubbish heap! We might think of this as an accurate appraisal of our shortcomings, as being modest, but actually it's one way that we add to the misery of our lives. So it's important that we take time to challenge these assumptions.

Of course, in some ways, it's easier simply to give up on ourselves as a hopeless case but, in a sense, this is a cop-out. A much more skilful response is to remind ourselves that practice is for a whole lifetime and that, as with any skill, it takes patience and application. Also fundamental is the spirit of curiosity; this is what enables us to learn the lessons of life. We look closely at the root causes of our unfortunate speech or actions: What were we telling ourselves? What were we thinking about?... Such questions may seem strange at first, but they are important... They are like keys that allow a glimpse into the assumptions that

we live by – sometimes for decades at a time – the ideas that contribute to the distorted view of who and what we are, and of our place in this vast universe.

So perhaps we'd be better off if we experimented with putting any assumptions to one side and taking a fresh look, through the lens of mindfulness and clear seeing. Only this can enable both freedom from our own suffering, and also the capacity to live in a way that is less harmful: to ourselves, and to all the other inhabitants of this remarkable planet.





## 12. FAITH AND GRATITUDE

SUMMER 2018

Faith empowers; it gives energy. If there is no faith that a particular project is going to be of benefit, it is difficult to get started or to carry it through to completion. However, from the perspective of our Buddhist practice, it is important that our faith is linked with a wholesome, wise intention. For example, we may have faith that investing in a particular company will bring the maximum financial return. However, if our intention is simply to amass wealth with its attendant privileges, it is likely that any apparent success will lead simply to more wanting. It will keep us bound onto the treadmill of accumulation. There may be some momentary satisfaction, but such pleasure tends to be fleeting and quickly replaced with a renewed vigour and

effort to accumulate more, and better! This can happen for anyone: the super-rich, those with very little, and anyone in between.

Once we have recognised this acquisitive tendency in ourselves, it can be helpful to contemplate our lives noticing carefully the results of our speech and action. In this way, we begin to discern what it is that can enable a settling of the heart, rather than simply fuelling this desire for more.

There's a verse in the Dhammapada<sup>8</sup> which speaks of contentment (*santutṭhi*) as being the greatest wealth. This is not something we see written on buses or on the sides of buildings! Consumerism requires that we are not content; it leads us to forfeit our inherent sense of discernment, which knows: 'I have enough.'

Rev. Heng Sure, an American disciple of Master Hua<sup>9</sup> wrote a cheerful little blessing that I sometimes hum to myself:

*I have enough.  
I am grateful.  
Share the blessings,  
Halleluia!*

Of course, sadly, it's true that for many, many people it's simply not the case that they have enough – of anything: food, clothing, shelter, love, nurturing – anything. Many people are living in appalling conditions... but will our anger, fear, confusion or despair contribute in any useful way to the general state of things? I think not. It seems better that we generate what is positive, what brings blessing. We can contribute materially or practically, if we're in a position to do so. At the very least, we can bring forth kindness, compassion, joy and serenity; these *Brahmavihārās* are qualities of the heart described as 'abundant, exalted and immeasurable'. Although our contribution may seem insignificant in the face of

such need, just having the intention to bring forth these qualities lightens the heart. It can also be a powerful antidote to the pull of desire for more, and the deeply rooted fear of losing something that seems important to us. Furthermore, they bring us into touch with what is truly of value, and that can *never* be taken from us: our sense of integrity and goodness, and the faith that enables us to continue to walk our chosen path to wholeness.





## 13. IT'S FOR NOTHING

WINTER 2019

One bright summer morning earlier this year I went for a walk up the glen. On the road I met a neighbour who has lived here all his life. As is usual, we exchanged a few words and I made some comment about how incredibly beautiful it is around here. I loved his response: 'Yes. And it's for nothing.'

It set me pondering. I realised that all of the truly precious and beautiful things in life are 'for nothing'. All that's needed is a moment of attention, a withdrawal from the stream of thoughts and concerns that can fill our minds, so as to see the subtlety of life: the changing conditions throughout the day – the light, the cloud formations; so as to breathe in the fragrance of the earth, feel the cool

touch of air on the skin, hear bird song or kind words, feel a gentle touch. Such impressions are soothing to the mind and – ‘for nothing’.

But can we be that simple? Sometimes it seems that everyone in the whole world has been hijacked, and hooded or blinkered. On trains, on buses, in cafés or dentists’ waiting rooms, people are transfixed by their devices; fascinated by the movement of images on a tiny screen, or plugged into some hearing experience. The intention, presumably, is to take them away from *Now*. This seems to have become normal – and it’s not for nothing. Often, it’s really harmful in gross or subtle ways. Sometimes I wonder whether we have lost the capacity to simply rest in awareness and to enjoy a childlike sense of wonder – so intent are we on

being distracted from what is most precious, by the forces of greed, aversion or delusion.

We make jokes: 'If your computer doesn't work, ask a three-year old to fix it...' But it's not a joke. It's not funny to see little ones playing with mobile phones. It's not funny to hear of children ending their lives because of some malicious taunt through social media.

What's happened? How is it that have we lost touch with those simple pleasures of life – that are 'for nothing'? ... So please, please breathe, look, listen, taste, touch! Even in cities there are trees, there is earth, there are tiny weeds struggling up through the cracks in the pavement. There is human kindness too... and if ever it seems that that too has disappeared, take a look inside and see what you can generate from within your own heart. It'll surely multiply – and it's for nothing!

## It's for Nothing...

*A smile*

*A wave*

*A friendly greeting*

*...and it's for nothing*

*Dry grasses' dance in the gusty sunshine*

*Birds' soars and dives,*

*blown about hither and thither*

*A sharp chill and the warm sun*

*...and it's for nothing*

*Beaver's splash*

*Squirrel's surprise*

*The mind's quiet*

*...and it's for nothing*

*High 'gainst the sky  
Aspen leaves a'tremble...  
Fallen aspen -  
chewed right through, leaves a curling -  
Tender, fleeting sorrow  
...and it's for nothing*

*Snail-like critters  
noticed on sunlit white wood  
of a willow stripped bare  
How it is...  
...and it's for nothing*

*Ancient, rugged land,  
holding it all.  
It's for nothing...*



## 14. SOME THINGS ARE BEYOND OUR CONTROL

SUMMER 2019

...but we forget. Over and over again, we find ourselves trapped in a struggle. It is as though we imagine that we can actually direct the course of events, if we just *want* hard enough! Then, when things don't turn out the way we think they should, we resort to blame. It is as though finding something, or someone to blame – anyone will do – will, in some mysterious way, bring relief from the disappointment; or at least provide a valid object towards which we can direct our fury.

Yes. There is plenty happening that seems out of our control, that can give rise to a sense of fear, dread or

anger. For example, it is normal to be concerned about the phenomenon known as ‘climate change’, as it manifests in significant changes that we see happening all around us... and to look for something or someone ‘out there’ to blame.

If only it were that simple.

However, the result, if we continue on our present trajectory will affect everyone – sooner or later. Measures to change that trajectory, and to bring about the shift needed to temper the effect, will require enormous adjustments by everyone. It’s all very well to demand the closure of factories, the termination of huge engineering initiatives – the drastic reduction of this or that – but how many millions of people depend upon these very businesses for their jobs, their livelihood?...

It can seem that there is no easy solution.

...and yet... and yet religious teachings of all traditions, if carefully pondered, reveal insights that can enable

members of the human family to work together in harmony, sharing skills and resources, for the benefit of all – and of our planet home.

For example, in the *Kosambiya Sutta* (MN 48.6), the Buddha sets out six things that support harmony in community: thoughts, speech and actions that are based on kindness; the willingness to share resources; the commitment to ethical guidelines that support us in living carefully and responsibly; and Right View, which includes the regular contemplation that all of us are subject to ageing, sickness and death. No amount of wealth or power can prevent that happening, for any of us. This is what all of us share, as human beings. So let's try to remember that when we find ourselves in a situation of conflict or fear – not forgetting that the power of kindness is very, very great.

Let's consider a different approach in our response to what we see or hear of the current situation in the world.

Without denying the severity of it, can we look inward and discern whether or not the heart is ready to embrace all of our sisters and brothers – whatever their creed, colour or political persuasion?... Or is there still work to be done in challenging those internal barriers that hinder our working together, for the good of all?





## 15. HEART WISDOM

WINTER 2020

This morning we began our day with meditation and chanting. We chanted the words of the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (MN 135), the Verses on One Fortunate Attachment:

*Today the effort must be made. Tomorrow Death may come,  
who knows?*

For some, the Buddha's stern and compassionate injunction may seem alarming. However, it is simply an invitation to attend and to be concerned about what really matters – to the point where we discover that we have a choice: to contribute, or not, to suffering or well-being.

I find this terse reminder helpful in countering the enticement of mainstream life. So often we find ourselves

bombarded with information that generates perceptions which lead automatically to a strong inner reaction. It may be fear, rage, or confusion, often with the sense: ‘Something has got to be done!’ (to enable, or to prevent, a certain course of events) – in order to protect our interests most effectively. With the abundance of such messages continuously presented through the media, is it any wonder that we feel stressed and frantic?

And yet, it doesn’t need to be like this.

Looking closely at the Buddha’s liberating insight into Dependent Arising<sup>10</sup>, we begin to see that there is a pattern, a series of internal events that lead to stress. As our mindfulness increases there also comes an appreciation that, with attention and care, we can interrupt this pattern, this flow – and end up with a very different result.

Instead of feeling (*vedanā*) leading to wanting (*taṇhā*) [to

hold on, or to have more, in the case of pleasant feeling; to get rid of, or to change, in the case of unpleasant feeling]; and instead of investing energy towards reaching a desired result (*upādāna, bhava, jāti*) – we can simply let go. We can recognise, if we like something: ‘This is pleasant... I’d like more...’; and if we’re afraid, or we don’t like something: ‘I feel afraid, angry...’ We stay present. We breathe, and allow the focus to shift from the problem-solving mentality, to the wisdom of the heart, which is accessible here and now. This heart-wisdom, or Dhamma, has a much, much broader perspective on what seems to be before us. It offers a clarity that can enable a compassionate response, and the heart stays calm.

It is very encouraging that mindfulness training has become readily available and that, for so many, there is an interest in developing and exploring the alternative strategies that this offers. These strategies, when based on

clear ethical values, further personal well-being. They also, quite naturally, have a positive effect on our families, our communities and the whole of our society.

It is no small thing. All that's needed is the courage to test it out for ourselves – and to keep going!





## 16. NATURE IS HAPPY

SPRING 2020

Who would have thought it possible?

A matter of weeks ago we were deeply concerned about the grave effects of human activity on the climate and ecology of our sensitive planet. Suddenly, now, there has been a shift of concern, as a deadly virus sweeps across the world. It is affecting every town, village and neighbourhood on every continent – and bringing monumental changes that no one could ever have envisaged, or dared hope for. There has been the grounding of all but essential flights; the halting of road traffic and transport systems (other than those needed for work in connection with supporting the sick and dying, and for maintaining relative well-being of the populations of the world); and the cessation of

production of countless industries.

The air is cleaner.

Nature is happy.

But, for humans, it's tough.

This disease is a common adversary; it is not confined to one racial, religious or political group. As such, it has the potential to bring us together. We can share information and resources; we can co-operate to combat its devastating effects. Sadly, it seems that only such an immediate, extreme and dangerous event can bring this about. The climate crisis, clearly, was not quite immediate enough; and vast amounts of time, energy and resources were expended – to enable just a fractional improvement. So... a window has been opened on what *could* come about.

However, time will show the extent to which humanity returns to its former competitive and greedy ways, once

the pandemic is no longer front-page news. It would be really wonderful if some lessons have been learned, and if we never return to the destructive aspects of ‘normal’...but the way of the Buddha does not demand, or even expect, this. Instead, it invites each one of us to work on our own hearts so that, according to our capacity, we are able to contribute in the best possible way for the betterment of all.

There is plenty to do – both directly and indirectly. We can gently open to the suffering and fear of those around us. We can bring forth the heart of compassion. We can cultivate the inner steadiness that enables us to attune to the impossible circumstances that many are having to endure... The Buddha explained it well, using the simile of two acrobats<sup>11</sup>. By helping ourselves – through cultivating mindfulness – we help others. By helping others – through patience, non-harming, friendliness and sympathy – we support the well-being of our own hearts. Contemplating

this teaching, we can keep our minds bright and ready to respond to every conceivable challenge that may come our way.

We wish you well.





## 17. EQUANIMITY

SUMMER 2020

What is it about our lives that makes equanimity, or *upekkhā*, so significant? According to Buddhist teaching, it is the fourth (out of four) *Brahmavihāras* or Divine Abidings, the seventh (out of seven) Enlightenment Factors and the tenth (out of ten) Perfections.

As the pandemic is demonstrating, all too clearly, we actually have very little control over our lives. Things change, whether we want them to or not: sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. We can experience fame and shame, praise and blame, gain and loss, happiness and sorrow, in rapid succession. Each state gives rise to a corresponding reaction: ‘Woopee!’, or ‘Oh dear!’ and that’s just the start of it. The mind quickly starts to proliferate:

creating a wonderful future, or looking around for someone to blame. We may even start blaming ourselves – tumbling into a sense of dreary pessimism – as we recollect past failures and anticipate more of the same, when things don't work out as we would have liked.

This is what happens when we have overlooked the significance of equanimity as part of our cultivation. When things seem fantastic or wonderful, we lose touch with reality. When things seem really dreadful, we lose touch with reality. It doesn't occur to us to challenge our conviction that this, really, is the truth of the situation!

Actually, we don't know how things will unfold in the future – but we *can* know how it is right now. We can tune in to the body, as it is, right now. We can be aware of impressions we receive through the senses: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, touch and, most importantly, thoughts. How are we perceiving things? How are we reacting? Can we step back

a little and simply notice, rather than be convinced by our limited perceptions?

In Truth, we don't know...

This can be unsettling, or even alarming. With mindfulness our view of reality, and of ourselves as part of that reality, is gradually eroded. Our self-centred view begins to change, and there is an opening to a greater whole, wherein life is experienced as an on-going flow of conditions shifting and changing, subtly or grossly, moment by moment. Over time, equanimity becomes the only response that makes sense. What might seem to be unfortunate can turn out to have consequences that are beneficial – to a degree that is far beyond what our more limited view might have anticipated. The reverse can also be the case.

For many, this time of lock down has been, and continues to be, incredibly challenging. Even when a degree of 'normality' is restored, it will take a very long time for

everyone to return to any kind of balance. However, there are also many people who (slightly guiltily!) admit that, for them, it has been a kind of blessing. They have enjoyed the solitude, the time to take stock of their lives. We have all learned about Zoom and other technologies that allow us to 'meet' without travelling thousands of miles; and there are many uplifting stories of heroism and cooperation. It's clearly not all 'bad'.

We don't know...

Can we be peaceful with that? Can we shift our intention and effort – from trying to sort things out for an imagined future, to attuning to Now?...

Just a question. You might like to give it a go!

May we all enjoy equanimity and ease of being, whatever our outer circumstances.





## **18. WISE CAUTION, JOYOUS SURRENDER**

WINTER 2021

It's the ending of the year, and nature seems dormant. The trees are without leaves. ...Compared with the exuberance of springtime and summer, and the quiet majesty of autumn, winter is gentle for the mind and images arise of the past weeks and months: the strangeness and fear of a disease appearing, and quickly spreading to affect the life of every human being. Impossible to ignore, this heavenly messenger has rampaged over the entire globe, and the governors of each nation have responded with the imposition of different protocols in efforts to limit the spread of infection. Many people have died of the disease. Many have endured extraordinary domestic, social and

financial hardships brought about by the measures that have been taken to contain it... and, it seems, it will go on... perhaps for a long time to come.

It's a massive shock for us all...

Reactions have varied. At one extreme there is fear, together sometimes with a surprising rigidity and hostility towards anyone who doesn't appear to share such concern. At the other extreme, there has been an attitude of disdain towards the fearful, and a wilful disregard of protocols. Both reactions are understandable. Neither is conducive to harmony.

As disciples of the Buddha, we need to take time to listen deeply to this heavenly messenger. Can we allow it to speak to our hearts?... Can we seize this opportunity to allow ourselves this glimpse into the fragility of our lives – and the preciousness of all of our relationships?... Have

we realised the joy that can come through simple gestures of friendliness, of kindness?... We live in a world that is far from perfect. It is impossible for any of us to only experience happiness, and to avoid suffering altogether – even if we spend the whole of our life trying to maintain an environment that is always pleasing to us and never irksome, or threatening to our sense of well-being.

This is how the world is.

Human beings have the remarkable capacity to reflect on experience. Having, through this particular disease, been brought face to face with the transience of existence, we now have an opportunity to consider a response that can benefit everyone. This pandemic, coupled with the climate crisis, is prompting us all to think bigger. We are invited to set aside our immediate personal concerns, and to consider what will be best for everyone. This is a huge step, especially for those of us for whom it has been ‘normal’

to be concerned primarily with our own immediate comfort and well-being, and to put our own family or community first.

How would such a change look?... What would it involve?...

As a start, we can consider following established safety protocols which, though frustrating, limiting, and even perhaps intensely irritating, is do-able. Wise caution suggests that at least we do that, to the best of our ability. Then, through the practice of meditation, we can learn to stand outside of the grumbling mind and to listen to the litany of complaints, justifications and rebellion, without giving that internal monologue too much importance. In this way we avoid falling into a state of ill-will or judgement. We keep the heart open, attuned to the sense of loss, deep fear and exhaustion that is being experienced by many of our fellow world citizens.

The sense of 'Me', as separate from all other beings, can begin to fall away, taking us to a place of peacefulness, a place of joyful surrender. It's not that, personally, we need to believe that all the measures being imposed are absolutely necessary – but, for our own inner well-being, we relinquish whatever stand we've taken: for or against hand sanitizer, social distancing, face masks and all the rest. Instead of cutting ourselves off from our fellow human beings through holding to our strong views and opinions, we discover our true place in the intimately connected web of life.



## 19. A STEADY PLACE WITHIN

SUMMER 2021

The Dhamma, the Truth, is always here, now... It was 'here' when we were born, when we were growing up, and throughout our adult lives. It can be known – clearly and directly, just like the heady scent of honeysuckle – by each one of us; whether we are young, middle-aged or old. It will be here, now, wherever we find ourselves at any moment as we experience the different conditions that come with nature: the nature of our own minds, of the body itself, and the world around us. For more than a year – alongside more localised catastrophes wrought by the climate emergency or tragic political circumstances, we have been living with a worldwide pandemic. Humanity is 'dealing with' these events to the extent that conditions allow in different regions, with varying degrees of success. It seems

far beyond the capacity of any of us even to glimpse the full complexity of what is unfolding: globally, medically, socially, economically, politically.

It's completely beyond us.

However, if we shift our focus, and go to the Refuge of Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha – here and now – we can come to a steady place within the heart that allows a clearer perspective. We see that what is happening now is simply a more obvious, and less avoidable, manifestation of the reality that has always been. Life is uncertain, we are not in control, and we could die at any moment. So, in a sense, this time is a blessing; almost like a rallying cry for humanity to wake up to what we have always faced – and avoided acknowledging. It's been too awesome, too overwhelming.

The sages of the past all pointed to the fragility of our lives, and have offered guidelines on how to live in a way

that has meaning and value. Some people have heard these teachings, understood them, and have practised accordingly. Others, sadly, have turned their backs on what they found inconvenient or uncomfortable, or have even distorted the message for their own ends.

What did those sages say?

They said that life is uncertain. They also said that if we are willing to acknowledge the harmful tendencies of the mind, and to investigate them, we can come to an understanding whereby they can be abandoned. Furthermore, they pointed to beautiful qualities that can come forth from a heart that is fearless – free of self-concern and ill-will. As we learn to respect and to care for ourselves and each other, we can live with joy – even in the midst of great difficulty and uncertainty. It's not a particularly easy path to follow, but having found it, it seems to be a pretty good way of making sense of this human condition.

May we all find and abide in that steady place within...



## 20. DIFFICULT TO DIGEST

WINTER 2022

We are coming towards the end of a second year of the pandemic. It's been dynamic – with frequent announcements about new developments in the disease process, and new accompanying measures to manage those changes. The mood around it all is also changing and the optimistic thoughts of 'return to normal' have faded, to be replaced by an eagerness simply to put in place something that may be effective in protecting people and maintaining the services we rely on.

It all feels quite shaky.

Then there is the climate, briefly eclipsed by the pandemic: powerful storms (Milntuim lost its power and Wi-Fi

connection for several days with Storm Arwen), forest fires (several of our Sister monasteries in the US and Australia narrowly escaped total destruction), flooding and drought. Such happenings make what is now referred to as ‘the climate emergency’ harder than ever to ignore. Glasgow’s COP 26 seems to have not been as effective as some had hoped in supporting necessary adjustments to slow these catastrophic developments.

However, there will be many who are relieved that – at least for the time being – they can continue to live according to standards they habitually enjoy. I wonder how that feels?... I wonder too how it must feel for people whose livelihood requires them to be involved in industries that are known to cause long term damage to the fragile ecological balance of our planet?...

It’s not quite as clear-cut as we might have wished.

On top of this, there are almost daily reports of individuals

and families leaving their homeland and almost everything they possess, to escape from danger — embarking on a most perilous journey in search of what they are hoping will be a better place. Sadly, there are also reports of many perishing on the journey.

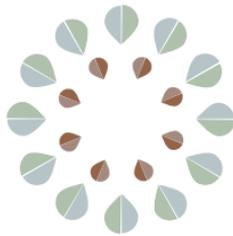
Bringing all of this to mind, together with many more matters of concern, could be unbearably distressing. The sense of helplessness and hopelessness can be very real, and sometimes difficult to digest. Of course, we could decide to follow the option of escaping to somewhere ‘safe’: unplugging the phone, the TV and all the media gadgets, and continuing to live out our days for as long as possible — hoping that nothing will go wrong.

We might feel ashamed or critical of this response but perhaps, in fact, each of us needs to take time to ‘escape’ in that way — in order to accommodate these disturbing impressions. Unlike the Buddha with his

‘oceanlike compassion’, our capacity to stay attuned is limited; we can only take so much – before we collapse, or burn out altogether. It seems more important than ever now for us all to develop strategies to access and maintain inner balance and well-being in order to meet the challenges of our time, without shutting off or being overwhelmed by it all.

So let’s hold on tightly to our meditation cushion, and spend time there each day. Through the practice of honest, open, present moment awareness, the fixed views we hold of ourselves and the world can be revealed for what they are – and we can appreciate how they contribute to our suffering. Guided by the wisdom of the Buddha, we begin to relinquish these distorted views, and our horizons widen. It becomes clear that there is no place for blame or ill-will – however much we may fear or dislike the views or behaviour of a difficult family member, neighbour or policy maker. If

we remember that, like us, they would all like to be happy and to not suffer; if we reflect that all of them have gone through the process of birth – now they are ageing, and at some point they will die – we can no longer see anyone as ‘other’. This may not be a comfortable insight, but it’s an important one. May we keep remembering it as we walk together on this remarkable planet – our home.





## END NOTES

1 (P6) *Dhamma*: a Pali word referring to Truth; also, the Buddha's teachings that point to that Truth.

2 (P18) *Samaṇa*: Harmless one, a mendicant disciple of the Buddha.

3 (P23) Ajahn Chah was a highly respected monk of the Forest Tradition in Thailand, upon whose teachings the way of practice at Milntuim Hermitage is based.

4 (P28) *Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*: The Eightfold Path (*aṭṭhaṅgika-magga*): usually referred to as

1. **Right View**

2. **Right Intention/Thought**

3. **Right Speech**

4. **Right Action**

5. **Right Livelihood**

6. **Right Effort**

7. **Right Mindfulness**

8. **Right Concentration**

5 (P35) *Mantra*: A word or phrase that can be repeated internally or aloud to steady the mind on what's beneficial.

6 (P40) *Aṭṭhaṅgika Magga*: The Eightfold Path (see 4 above).

7 (P42) The Buddha's '*Words on Loving Kindness*': see Amaravati Chanting book, volume 1 page 37, also, Sutta Nipāta Ch 1, section 8 *Metta Sutta*.

8 (P76) Dhammapada v. 204 'A healthy mind is the greatest gain. Contentment is the greatest wealth. A trustworthy friend is the best of kin. Unconditional freedom is the highest bliss.'

9 (P76) Master Hua was a highly respected Chinese master. He established a monastery in California, the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, that has close links with Western monasteries of our tradition.

10 (P94) Dependent Arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*): This is a formulation of the great insight that arose in the Buddha's mind on the night of his awakening. It describes how, starting with ignorance, suffering comes about through twelve links:

- |                                                     |                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| 1. <b>Ignorance</b> ( <i>avijjā</i> )               | 9. <b>Grasping</b> ( <i>upādāna</i> )  |
| 2. <b>Mental formations</b> ( <i>Saṅkhārā</i> )     | 10. <b>Becoming</b> ( <i>bhava</i> )   |
| 3. <b>Sense consciousness</b> ( <i>viññāṇa</i> )    | 11. <b>Birth</b> ( <i>jāti</i> )       |
| 4. <b>Body and mind</b> ( <i>Nāma-rūpa</i> )        | 12. <b>Old age, sickness and death</b> |
| 5. <b>The six sense bases</b> ( <i>salāyatana</i> ) | ( <i>jarāmaraṇa</i> ) sorrow,          |
| 6. <b>Contact</b> ( <i>phassa</i> )                 | lamentation, pain, grief               |
| 7. <b>Feeling</b> ( <i>Vedanā</i> )                 | and despair ( <i>soka-parideva</i> )   |
| 8. <b>Craving/desire</b> ( <i>taṇhā</i> )           | <i>dukkha domanassa</i> )              |

11 (P101) Acrobat sutta Saṃyutta Nikāya: (Bhikkhu Bodhi translation) Book V page 1648 Sedaka.

**TIMES AND THE TIMELESS**

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