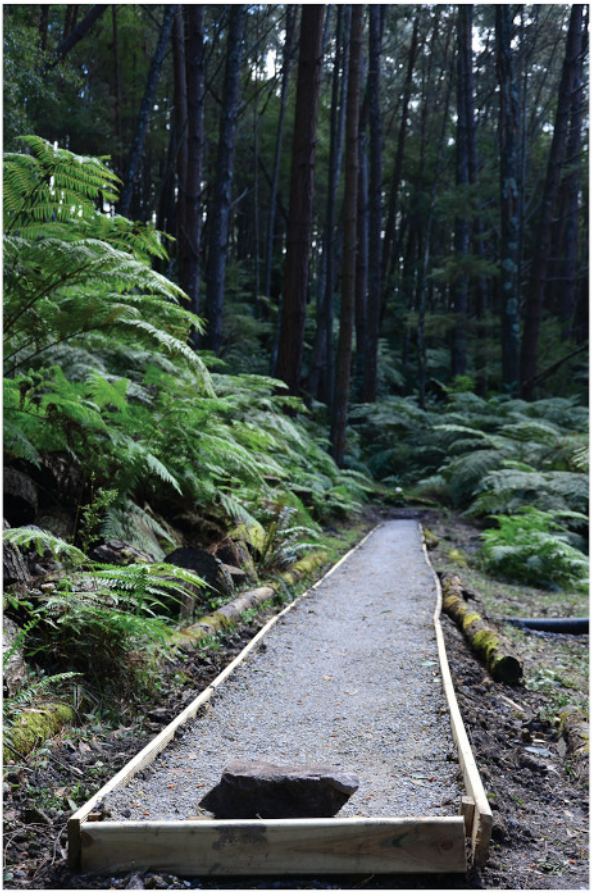
AWAKENING

Ajahn Kalyano

BUDDHA BODHIVANA MONASTERY



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Awakening

A Collection of Dhamma Talks Given
by Venerable Ajahn Kalyāno at
Buddha Bodhivana Monastery

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Contents

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May the merit made by this gift of Dhamma be a cause for countless beings to grow in virtue, meditation and wisdom. May it serve as a source of inspiration for all who come in contact with it for many years to come, and may it be a cause for their complete liberation from suffering, for the attainment of nibbāna.

Ajahn Kalyāṇo
Buddha Bodhivana Monastery
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Guided Meditation

As you begin the meditation, I suggest you bring awareness to your posture. The Buddha encouraged us to sit up with a straight back. This gives energy to the body and the mind and helps prevent drowsiness. Take a few moments to observe how you are sitting and how you feel. Try to find a position for your legs that is comfortable. If your legs are crossed, or in half lotus or full lotus, or if you are sitting on a chair, remember that you want to hold that posture for the period of the meditation. So don't strain yourself or sit awkwardly and don't ignore your posture altogether, as it may become a problem later on.

Our aim now is to develop the qualities of mindfulness and all-around awareness by paying attention to the breath. Try to find the feeling or sensation of the in-breath and the out-breath by taking a few long, deep breaths. As you do this, direct your attention to be aware of three points in the body. The first point to be aware of is the feeling of the breathing coming in and out at the tip of your nostrils. The second point to note is the centre of your chest as your lungs fill up with air when you inhale. The third point to direct your attention to is the abdomen. Note how it arises with each inhalation and falls with each exhalation.

Take a few moments to breathe a little longer and deeper than usual and pay attention to each in-breath and out-breath, first at the tip of the nostrils, second at the chest and lastly at the abdomen. Notice how the air entering your nose is cool and the air leaving is warm. Notice how some tension builds as you breathe in and how it relaxes as you breathe out. Notice how there is a pause between each in-breath and each out-breath.

Now allow the breathing to continue at its own natural pace. You don't have to make it particularly long or short, just allow it to flow naturally, but keep following the passage of the inhalations and exhalations at these three points. Breathe in: nostrils, chest and abdomen. Breathe out: abdomen, chest and nostrils.

Each time you establish awareness at these three points, you are focusing the mind on the breath and bringing attention to the mind and body in the present moment. Now you can drop the two lower focal points and bring your awareness to focus solely on one point, the tip of the nostrils. The aim from here on is to pay attention to the feeling of the breath passing in and out of the body at this one place.

The challenge in meditation is to keep paying attention to the in-and-out breath at this one point. It is difficult at first because our mental habit is to think endlessly about other things and we are not yet familiar with the breath as an object of awareness. When you are making effort to practice mindfulness of breathing, your attention will be at the tip of the nostrils, but when you become distracted by thinking or sounds or different sensations, you have lost mindfulness and it might take a while before you regain it.

We also need to rely on cultivating various skilful qualities in order to develop the ability to stay with the breath. Recollecting the Buddha and our teachers can give us faith and energy. These positive qualities support our efforts to pay attention to the breathing and let go of all the other thoughts that compete for our attention. The Buddha himself practised this form of meditation successfully and then taught it to us for our own benefit. Even though we may find it difficult at first, the Buddha and other enlightened teachers have shown that this practice can be of great benefit for everyone and bring us peace of mind and insight.

Remember that because we are beginners it is only natural for the mind to be easily distracted, and hence we accept that it will take some time to settle down. Imagine that you are totally alone, as it will help you to leave all your thoughts about other people and other business behind. When you allow yourself to let the thoughts about other issues go, you free up space and energy that brightens the mind. Remind yourself that this is not the time to solve all the problems in your life or in the world. We can't change what has happened in the past, and the future is just a thought in your imagination. So begin to appreciate the peace of the present moment and the clarity of mindfulness as you settle your attention on the breath. Become familiar with the breath. Make friends with it.

With patient effort we can change the old habits of our mind through practising meditation. Normally we find it easy to absorb into the different experiences that we have through our senses, such as sights and sounds and tastes. Now we are training to focus on the breath alone and it takes time and patient effort to appreciate the subtle peace of the breath and to absorb into it. We must keep letting go of distracting thoughts, desires and mental agitation, and at the same time brighten the mind with the quality of awareness so it doesn't become drowsy.

If you are sleepy, open your eyes for a while, but continue to pay attention to the feeling of the in-and-out breath at the tip of the nostrils. If the mind is restless and continues to get lost in different trains of thought then hold your breath for a few moments. Draw in a few long, deep breaths and return your attention to the feeling of air entering and leaving your nostrils. Keep reminding yourself to let go of thoughts about all other matters at this time. When you notice a thought come into consciousness, quietly turn attention back to the breathing and don't give that thought any importance.

The more frequently we practice this meditation, the easier it will become to pay attention to the breathing and let go of other thoughts and concerns. As your ability to maintain mindfulness improves, the mind will become firm and feel at ease, becoming brighter and more spacious. The steadiness of mind we experience is the fertile ground for peace and understanding to arise.

When mindfulness on the breath becomes more continuous your whole body and mind will feel lighter and less burdened by concerns and worries or painful feelings. The breath becomes more interesting, the mind more energised, and little by little you will feel more content and peaceful inside. This is like making friends with the breath, and just like a good friend, you can turn to the breath to find more calm and let go of stressful mental states when you need to. You never have to feel alone or at a loss, even when you are experiencing suffering.

Brahmavihāra Dhammas Lead to Peace of Mind

Today we have come together to practice meditation, chant and listen to the Dhamma. It is the occasion of the old year ending and the new year beginning. Our Western calendar begins on January 1st and it is now used almost everywhere in the world for the general convenience of society. It's a holiday when people visit family and friends. Also, and less fortunately, it's a time when people can get intoxicated and often become heedless, creating problems and suffering for themselves and others. A skilful way to make use of the occasion might be to reflect and celebrate the good fortune that we are still alive here after another year. We still have the chance to practice the Buddhist teachings that lead to liberation from suffering.

The Buddha encouraged practitioners to come together and meet as a group frequently, as one's individual practice can benefit from the support and interaction with teachers and fellow students of the Buddha. In the time of the Buddha, his students met together on lunar observance days, which fall on the full moon, new moon or half-moon. When we meet together, we can appreciate the role of the Sangha in preserving the Buddhist teachings and passing them down from generation to generation since the time of the Buddha. Looking at things slightly differently, you could say that this is simply another day and it is our good fortune that we are here and can practice the Dhamma. We have enough merit to be born in a time when the Buddha's teachings are here and available for us to study and practice.

This year we are also remembering our teacher, Luang Por Chah, who was born one hundred years ago in Ubon Rachathani province of North-East Thailand. It was there that he later founded Wat Nong Pah Pong monastery, where I became a monk. This is a time when many Buddhists from around the world, both monastics and laity, are recollecting the great wisdom and compassion of Luang Por Chah. He made an extraordinary contribution to the spread of Buddhism through his own devotion to the practice of Dhamma, and henceforth through teaching people the way to liberation, in Thailand and around the world. It is our good fortune to have encountered him, either having met him personally, or through listening to his teachings and meeting his students, the living Sangha. In particular, as members of the Sangha, we can see how valuable Luang Por Chah has been in providing opportunities for both foreigners and Thais to take ordination as monks and nuns, thereby preserving the teachings and practice of Buddhism for a wider group of people. The Sangha are those who renounce the worldly life for the practice of Dhamma and are, as we say, those who directly inherit the Dhamma of the Buddha.

One of our daily meditations is recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, or *buddhānussati*. One develops mindfulness by focusing on the virtues and wholesome qualities of the Buddha. We recollect the Buddha's pure and peaceful mind, his wisdom and compassion, his perfect conduct and excellent teaching skills, taking these as our example. We also practice *dhammānussati*, or recollecting the qualities of the Dhamma, such as having been well expounded, being the timeless truth and being apparent here and now. We practice *saṅghānussati*, recollecting the qualities of the Sangha. They are those who have practised well, with insight and integrity for the complete overcoming of suffering. We chant these recollections daily

and use them as a way to train the mind in developing both mindfulness and wisdom. However, as we are hearing these words and recollections frequently, there is always the danger that they become merely sounds that we repeat habitually and don't really take to heart. But if you recite the verses of recollection with mindfulness fully present, and truly pay attention to recollecting the virtuous qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, then you will become alert and aware as your mind begins to calm down and experience some inner happiness and peace.

Recollecting the Triple Gem with mindfulness and all-around awareness can affect you in a deep and profound way. It is a source of inner joy which nourishes your sense of well-being as you face the daily challenges and difficulties of living in the world. These reflections also give us wisdom and direction in our practice and some principles and values to guide us in our lives. We can also recollect the wholesome qualities of Sangha members that we have met or lived with, the monks and nuns and also laymen and laywomen who have practised well and had insight into the Dhamma. When we recollect their excellent qualities it can be a cause for us to experience deep joy as faith and conviction in the teachings arises, with a growing feeling of gratitude for those people. Skilful reflection can give rise to an immediate feeling of well-being in our heart, even when we are facing suffering. Such recollection is not bound by time and place. Really, any time you think skilfully of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, it brightens and illuminates your mind.

On occasions when you are ill, tired or even exhausted you can chant or recite these recollections out loud or silently inside the mind as a way to bring up confidence and other skilful mental qualities. Even if you're lying in bed, without the strength to sit up, you can still chant a recollection of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, or even meditate in that posture. In the different situations you find

yourself in, whether travelling, working, or even at a social event, you always have the opportunity to turn the mind to recollect the Triple Gem. There are no limits to this. It is your good fortune that you've heard the teachings of the Buddha and have the faith and interest to practice. Now you have to bring that to fruition. We all have the potential to practice what the Buddha taught and improve our own well-being. This requires that we make the teachings central in our lives and give them priority, value and meaning in our heart. Otherwise the Buddha's teachings remain as something external that, although doing good in the world, don't really improve us personally or elevate our consciousness that much. We bring Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha into our heart by focusing the mind on the skilful qualities they represent and resolving to bring them up frequently through the practice.

One beneficial result arising from practising as a group is that we can support each other, both directly and indirectly. We give each other advice and encouragement and we can be a good example to each other through our practice. Tonight we are aiming to practice meditation for the whole of the night and are dedicating our efforts to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and to Luang Por Chah. By taking refuge in the Triple Gem one is devoting oneself to improving one's life as a human being and finding inner peace and happiness. Following the way of the Buddha means directing oneself to develop the causes for inner peace and understanding through abandoning that which is unwholesome within the mind and cultivating the good. The causes for peace and happiness lie within all of us. Although the path we follow begins externally through hearing the teachings, it progresses through turning attention inwards and awakening to the Dhamma.

The Dhamma is *opanāyiko*, meaning it leads us to pay attention inwardly to the mind itself. Through shining the light of awareness

on the truth of the way things are, we change the mind for the better. From gaining this understanding we can eventually fulfil our potential as human beings by liberating the mind from the causes of suffering. The Dhamma is the truth, so it isn't something external, mysterious or distant from us. It's apparent right here and right now. By developing the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path we can bring our mind in line with the Dhamma, which constantly illuminates the truth for us. The truth is just as it is. The effect the truth has on us is to awaken us, to wake us up. This is especially important to reflect on tonight as we are dedicating the whole night to meditation practice, and we'll likely have to arouse energy to wake ourselves up more than once. You must use the Dhamma to help you awaken. Out there in the world you might rely on music, entertainment and other stimulants to keep you awake, but here we use the energy of the Dhamma and the skilful qualities of mindfulness, patient effort and wisdom.

Practising Dhamma includes training your mind to be aware of a meditation object. Through perseverance in paying attention to that object, one goes beyond the mental hindrances, such as sleepiness, dullness and distraction. Both chanting and listening to Dhamma can be used as objects for meditation to awaken and brighten the mind. The effort we summon up to develop mindfulness will awaken the mind. When we practice as a group we tend to put forth more energy into arousing mindfulness, because when we see others making an effort it encourages us to be more persistent with our own meditation. When we come to the monastery and see others putting forth effort into their practice it can inspire us. This is in contrast to practising at home where it's easier to give in to feelings of tiredness or to follow different desires that can take over the mind. At home it's easy to follow one's moods and desires. The reality usually is that in such a comfortable environment we only

make an effort when we feel like doing it and stop when we don't want to do it any more.

Luang Por Chah used to say that if you are still following your moods, then you haven't begun to practice. When you come to the monastery you tend to try harder because you have made the effort to travel here and there are fewer things to distract you. Even if you don't want to practice, you may feel some inspiration aroused when you see others making an effort to practice, and this can help you to put up with any discomfort or restlessness. We draw support from the group when we practice together and it reflects the truth that we all have something in common. Whatever our background, we are all human beings who want to be free from suffering. Whether male or female, young or old, we all hate suffering and desire to be happy and liberated from it.

Tonight is the last night of the old year, which means that we are one year older than last New Year's Eve. Everybody has to deal with the fact that we are ageing and that it is beyond our control. As the body ages, things don't get any easier, because as it becomes weaker we experience more aches and pains, more illness and the gradual degeneration of our faculties. The passing of time brings certain challenges that we all must face. Everyone is in the same boat; nobody can escape the process of ageing, because having been born the natural process of ageing, sickness and eventually death, is bound to take place. We all have this in common. It doesn't matter whether you've become rich, powerful and famous, or nobody knows you at all: the truth remains the same. On this level you could say we are more like relatives and friends to each other than strangers.

Today someone reminded me about the uncertainty of life. Following on from celebrating the birth of their first grandchild, they now have to deal with the onset of cancer that could well be terminal. Through our families, relatives and friends, the experience of

birth and death stay very close to us as there is always someone we know who is falling ill or close to death. In another family we know, the mother was diagnosed with breast cancer and within only a few weeks the daughter also received a similar diagnosis. Now they have to face the illness together. It reminds us of how common these experiences are for all of us. This is the truth of living in this world. This is why we need the Dhamma, and it is so valuable because it gives us skilful ways to deal with these simple but challenging truths that affect us all.

As we learn to develop the Buddhist path, we are skilfully integrating it into our lives for the benefit of our self and others. The cultivation of the themes of the four *brahmavihāra dhammas*, the meditations known as the sublime abidings, becomes an essential part of our practice. A *brahmā* is a divine or sublime being, a certain class of deity residing in the heaven realms, and *vihāra* means a dwelling place. So the *brahmavihāra* meditations refer to four sublime dwelling places for the mind. They are both meditation objects and motivation for skilful action. We develop them frequently in order to help us deal with the challenges and problems of living together with other people in the world. They help us in dealing with the results of the kamma that we have made through our past actions. The Buddha encouraged us to cultivate these qualities daily, and often we begin by chanting verses and reflections that help establish the mind with the right attitude. Practised frequently, these four qualities become powerful factors in developing our experience of inner peace.

The first brahmavihāra is *mettā*, which means goodwill or loving-kindness. It is the wish for oneself and all other beings to be happy and well. Mettā is both a meditation object and a basis for skilful action. To practice mettā requires us to pay attention to the thought of loving-kindness and the feeling that accompanies it.

Guided by wisdom we preserve it with mindfulness and effort. The skilful intention of mettā needs to be preserved because we know how easily one can lose goodwill for oneself and others when conditions provoke us. Whether we are at home, the workplace, or even if we are totally alone, notice how often we lose this quality. As you bring more awareness to this practice of goodwill, you'll see that as soon as you lose it, your mind becomes darker and more confused and starts to suffer with the negativity and malevolence that replaces it. The Buddha taught that goodwill is a mental state to be cultivated and reinforced through frequent practice.

It's New Year's Eve today and we might assume that there are many other people who are also meditating on the theme of goodwill around the world at this time. You may feel a boost in encouragement and significance from that reflection and find it easier to direct your mind to the thought of goodwill. As you meditate, begin by paying attention to yourself while cultivating a warm feeling of relaxed calm centred in the region of your heart. Make both the feeling and the thought of wishing yourself well as clear as you can, and bathe your body and mind with it. Constantly recollecting the thought 'may I be well' can help us develop a state of calm serenity. Next, one consciously spreads the feeling of goodwill out to all other beings, beginning with our closest acquaintances, as it is usually easier to think of them. We call this meditation the cultivation of universal loving kindness because one is aiming to spread goodwill to all beings without any discrimination, not distinguishing between people of different gender, age, cultural or ethnic background and so on. One mindfully maintains the aspiration for all beings anywhere and everywhere, in any state of existence to be happy and well. In other Buddhist monasteries and centres there are people meditating, chanting and sharing their happiness with each other at this time, so we can feel a real sense of connection and

shared aspiration in wishing all beings to be happy and free from suffering.

Mettā meditation is about establishing the right resolve in our mind. Having faith in the teachings of the Buddha, we see the value of cultivating thoughts of loving-kindness on a regular basis. One way this manifests is in the way we inwardly converse with ourselves. Luang Por Chah said that part of meditation practice involves having a skilful conversation with yourself. Such as in directing your mind to the theme of loving-kindness, that conversation will be friendly and also include the willingness to listen and accept yourself for who you are. You may have noticed how often in life, when things are not going our way and we face problems, our internal mental conversation loses its mettā and falls into negativity. Something unpleasant happens and we react internally with complaints and indulge in trains of self-critical thought fuelled by negative perceptions and feelings of unhappiness. The less proficient we are with bringing up the theme of mettā, the harder it is to accept those experiences where we don't get what we want or when getting what we don't want. With no mettā present it is hard to maintain a skilful state of mind and it's much easier for us to become angry with ourselves or with the world around us. We find that the less familiar we are with the thought of mettā, the quicker we become mentally and physically agitated, and the harder it is to regain calm and clarity when we experience frustrations and disappointments.

Mettā practice as a meditation helps to guide the way one thinks and the way one speaks with oneself. It is a supportive factor for the growth of skilful mental qualities that are required when one is interacting with people and engaging with the world. You must learn to bring the intention of goodwill up for yourself first before you

can really have it for others. If you haven't got goodwill for yourself, the practice of goodwill for others will always as if have a hole in it: there will be something missing. Having said that, in a few cases of people with strong self-aversion, they have no choice but to do this practice the other way around and cultivate goodwill for others first, before they feel ready to develop kindness or forgiveness for themselves. When we identify so strongly with our self-critical thoughts and fail to be aware of the habit, it leads us to form a negative idea about who we believe ourselves to be. We can become stuck with the view that we don't deserve any goodwill. We can feel that we are simply not good enough. When we think like this it can be because we are attaching to the memories of all our faults and mistakes or the bad things that have happened to us. The self-criticism takes us in a downward spiral of negativity rather than leading us to change for the better. Often it can initially be challenging to develop goodwill towards ourselves, but actually as we develop more awareness around this theme we notice it feels more natural to have mettā for yourself.

In the time of the Buddha lived King Pasenadi of Kosala, whose character was like most of us, made up of a mixture of both the good and the bad and with strengths and weaknesses. The King did have a growing interest in the practice of Dhamma, but also had the normal desires, ambitions and attachment to power that you might expect from someone in his position. On one occasion when he was with Queen Mallikā in the bedroom, the King asked her who she loved most in the world. He was hoping that she would answer that she loved *him* the most, but the Queen was a wise student of the Buddha and answered truthfully that she loved herself more than anyone else. The King initially felt hurt by her response, but the quick-witted Queen evaded the tricky situation by asking him whether he loved himself more than anyone else. He had to agree

with her that he did. However, as is common with many husbands, he couldn't fully accept his wife's wisdom and the next day he went to see the Buddha to check whether she had answered him correctly. The Buddha confirmed that her answer was true. Once you are born, who do you love most? It's natural that we begin with loving our self.

Luang Por Chah pointed out that if you don't believe the truth that one loves oneself more than others, consider what happens when you go too near a fire. If your arm or leg gets too close to the flames, you will pull it back immediately. You pull your arm away from the flames as soon as it feels hot. If someone else was standing too close to the flames, they would pull their own hand or arm back from the heat in the same way. As soon as your hand is hot you pull it back, because you love yourself the most. That's just a normal human reaction to the pain from the heat. Each person automatically pulls their own hand back from the flames. Reflecting on the basic truth that we instinctively love ourselves the most, we can see the importance of cultivating and preserving goodwill towards oneself as the starting point of Dhamma practice. To love oneself skilfully, however, also requires wisdom.

At this time of year it is common for people to make resolutions about how they want to improve things in their life and change their habits and behaviour for the better. They resolve to abandon bad habits and take up new good habits and do things differently than before. If the resolution is made after wisely considering what would be truly beneficial for oneself, then it can be a good way to improve one's practice. Unfortunately, it also often happens that a resolution can be made hastily as an emotional reaction to a negative perception of oneself. There might be some truth in the observation that we have fallen into a particular bad habit, or made certain mistakes in our conduct that need to be rectified. However, without wise consideration, it's possible for us to go too far by indulging

our anger. Turning against our self and acting from an intention of ill-will, we seek to punish this person (oneself) that we look at negatively and critically. We can disguise the self-hatred by convincing ourselves that we need to be punished as a way to do ourself some good. If one is really to change for the better, one has to have respect and goodwill for oneself as a human being first. We need to take the time to really establish our mind in mettā for ourself, and then try to reflect on what things we need to improve that would be for our benefit and happiness. We also need to reflect on what goals are reasonable for us to achieve.

Starting with mettā for oneself, you might also decide to broaden your practice to include finding ways to express your kindness for another person or group of people. It could be a one-off action or something that you commit to regularly, like the man who was suffering from depression but decided to join a volunteer group who provided hot food for the homeless a few nights a week. When we resolve to help others, it can be uplifting for our own mind and indirectly cause goodwill for oneself to arise and improve one's state of mind. With the improvement in the feeling of inner well-being, we find it easier to make resolutions to improve our own life. In particular, deciding to practice meditation regularly for a certain period of time or undertaking to keep moral precepts regularly and live in a harmless and virtuous way. If you really wish to begin to change yourself for the better, you need to begin from a place of mettā and with words of encouragement for yourself. For any improvement in one's practice to take place, there has to be mettā first. If you're coming from anger, it's not going to work is it? If your starting point is that you hate yourself and blame yourself and want to punish yourself in some way, it's going to be very difficult to develop anything truly skilful in your life. You are unlikely to have the

patience needed to make a resolution successful and in the end may make yourself even more depressed.

When we begin the practice of mettā meditation, we are beginning to value ourself as a human being and see the potential for good within our own heart. This practice may take time to develop, but it can be done as we become more familiar with the theme of loving-kindness directed at oneself and then others. Another danger we can encounter is when we form the view that the quality of mettā directed to ourself is a form of selfishness and that other people or animals are more deserving. When we view the practice of the Noble Eightfold Path as a whole, however, we understand how it is essential to have mettā for ourselves as well as others: it is vital to let go of all forms of ill-will in order to purify the mind. Our practice of mettā is combined with wise reflection and developed in a balanced way so that we direct it to others, but without forgetting ourselves. Once we know how to love ourselves and do the right thing for ourselves, we can learn how to express that skilfully to others, thus helping others in a true way. What we learn in overcoming our own suffering opens the door for understanding others better, and we know how to help others in a way that we aren't harming ourself.

Developing mettā towards oneself doesn't mean giving in to your every desire or letting yourself do everything that you want to do. It's not true goodwill if you always spoil yourself or indulge desires that lead to discontent or harm. Sometimes it can be correct to take it easy on oneself, such as when one is exhausted or has experienced something traumatic. However, at other times it might be necessary to be firm and resist some harmful desire that is rooted in blind craving. This could be when you're wishing to indulge in a harmful habit, or neglecting to meet your responsibilities towards others, or doing something that directly hurts someone else. When

mettā is guided by wisdom it means we don't always tell ourselves what the mental afflictions of greed, hatred and delusion want to hear. Sometimes we have to tell ourselves what we don't really want to hear, and we may feel like the bad guy, but that's because it's what's needed in order to make us give up harmful habits and intentions.

Luang Por Chah used to say that training the mind is like making clay pots. The potter has to shape and turn the wet clay with her hands as it spins on the wheel, and this requires keeping a firm grip on the piece of clay. If her grip is too loose, the softly-formed shape of the pot will likely just collapse and fall apart. If the potter's grip is too firm however, it also won't work, as she will squash the shape or break it. Our mind is similar in that to train it and develop it, you must keep a firm hand on it, but without pressuring it so firmly that you oppress it or bully it. Too hard won't work, but too soft won't work either. True goodwill has to be flexible to what is needed at the time.

An important factor in Dhamma practice is learning the skill of a balanced approach, where from time to time you consider what adjustments to your approach are needed as your situation changes. Sometimes it's appropriate to really boot yourself up the back-side. Like teaching yourself to do something that is necessary for your improvement, but which you stubbornly don't really want to do. Or else like insisting to yourself that you stop following some particular bad habit which you know is in your best interest to give up, but normally you can't be bothered to and would rather indulge it. Sometimes you have to be really strong with yourself, at other times you have to learn how to relax and encourage yourself with gentle words. To know the right amount in the practice is a skill we must cultivate, but it all has to be grounded in mettā.

Listen to your own mental conversations to find out what's going on in your mind. You might have a basic meditation object such as mindfulness of breathing or the recollection of the meditation word *buddho*, but as you focus your mind on the object, also become aware of what conversations are going on in your mind. Sometimes you have to be firm and tell yourself to stop sitting there fantasising, day-dreaming, planning, and wasting time proliferating about all kinds of foolish or unwholesome things. At other times you might have to gently and patiently keep guiding the mind away from distraction and back to the meditation object. These are skills that you gain with experience in the practice and they arise out of having true mettā for oneself. True mettā directed towards oneself as a human being will lead one to develop states of calm and wisdom that free the mind from wrong views and mental afflictions. As you meditate you become aware of your state of mind and the attitudes you hold, and likewise what mental states are conducive to happiness and need to be developed, and what mental states are obstructive and need to be abandoned.

If you can cultivate goodwill for yourself, you will be more relaxed and able to direct it towards others. You see that other people are the same as you and you become more sensitive to their suffering and their wish for happiness. How often do we begin our relationships with other people by simply judging them on first appearances? Having quickly jumped to conclusions about what kind of a person we think they are, we act towards them out of bias or prejudice. We can swiftly form an opinion about someone based on our own attachments and can easily overlook what we have in common with them. To really help someone and be a true friend to them, you have to get to know them, don't you? You have to communicate with them, be with them, listen to them and get to know them. You

must take the time to appreciate their strengths and good qualities, but also learn to accept their weaknesses and faults.

Learning how to help others skilfully comes through the practice of mettā. It's a skill you develop based on a genuine feeling of goodwill in the heart combined with wise consideration. Mettā is preserved by *sati* and wisdom which help maintain the non-judgemental awareness and unconditional goodwill directed to others. It is worth pondering that phrase, because it can be subject to misunderstanding. Unconditional goodwill means having the spaciousness of mind that allows you to know and accept yourself, that allows you to know and accept somebody else, and allows you to know the way things are, without getting caught up in preconceived judgements or personal preferences. You are not giving importance to the part of the mind rooted in ill-will. To do this requires patience and a steady awareness, but the result has a liberating effect on your mind as the prejudices drop away.

When you consciously practice mettā, you may find that you have a lot more in common with others than you first think. We all have to face many similar problems in life. For example, everyone must learn how to deal with ageing, sickness and death. Everybody has to receive the fruits of their kamma, which ripens in both good ways and in painful and unpleasant ways. If someone does actually harm us, you can see that even though we may need to protect ourselves, we actually don't need to seek revenge on that person because their own kamma will eventually catch up with them. We don't benefit from holding on to toxic negativity.

There is nobody in this world that just has good and pleasant experiences all the time – that person doesn't exist. Sometimes we make superficial judgements when we look at other people and assume that their life must be so easy compared with ours. As we understand ourselves better through the practice of mettā we also

become more sensitive to others. We see how those judgements we usually make about other people are often incorrect because we're not fully aware of the other person's personal kamma. Everybody has to face different problems sooner or later in their life. Just as we develop goodwill for ourselves with the wish to attain and preserve our happiness and abandon negative states of mind, we develop goodwill for others and wish for them to be free from negative states of mind. If you develop this practice every day, it will keep bringing your mind back to the feeling of goodwill for yourself and then spreading it out to the people around you. Even the ones you don't like and don't get along with, or the ones that have harmed you, can become a recipient for goodwill. This happens as your own understanding of them as human beings deepens and as your own wish to be free from anger becomes clear. We wish for them to change and improve as human beings so that their actions become more skilful, and this will benefit us as well as them.

The practice of mettā meditation naturally prompts the arising of *karuṇā*, compassion. As you understand your own mind better and nurture your own aspiration for happiness, you become aware of the suffering and its causes in your own life, thus becoming more aware of how others must go through similar experiences. Initially, practising to develop the qualities of mettā and karuṇā can be a bit like pushing a car with a flat battery – you have to give it all you've got. It's hard at first because of the unfamiliarity with these wholesome mental states and the resistance from our habitual negativity. However, after persisting for a while, your energy builds a momentum that sustains the kindness or compassion more easily. When you're really seeking happiness you become more clearly aware of any actions you are taking that are the cause for suffering in yourself or others. As we learn from our experiences of suffering, our wisdom grows and promotes the intention to avoid any actions of body,

speech and mind that will bring suffering. Or, likewise, if we are suffering already, wisdom looks for the solution to end that suffering, because it clearly sees the pain. Having developed clarity around suffering and its causes, it is natural for a feeling of compassion towards oneself and others to arise.

If you've investigated the experience of pain in your practice, you can understand how someone else might experience pain in the same way, through similar causes. If you've been ill and suffered, then when you meet someone else who's ill, through developing compassion you are more aware of what they must be going through and empathise with them. You might not be able to actually feel their pain or take it away, but based on your own experience you can understand something about how they might be feeling. When someone else has a problem in their life, it may be something that you've also experienced, or at least you can understand how they are suffering with the pain and difficulty. Luang Por Chah is considered a great teacher because he had gone through much suffering in his own practice and later used that experience to understand and teach others. Goodwill and compassion together transcend one's attachment to personal feelings or judgements made about other people. One becomes firm in the aspiration to overcome one's own suffering and equally the suffering of others.

Goodwill naturally supports the cultivation of compassion. When you develop these sublime attitudes, it doesn't mean to say you expect to solve all the world's problems, but you are focusing on that fundamental aspiration to free yourself and others from suffering. You become more sensitive to the suffering of others and empathise with them. It becomes clear to you that it is better for everyone if any suffering is ended. Compassion is both supported by wisdom and it gives rise to wisdom. As you begin to comprehend the nature of your own suffering and its causes, you see the same in

others and cultivate the wish for them to develop the knowledge and virtues that will free them from suffering. As we identify the mental defilements that are the causes of suffering in our own mind, we see the need to let them go. At the same time we can see more clearly how others are afflicted by the same negative mental states and we develop the wish that they will also be free of their influences. We see that whenever anyone reduces their suffering, we all benefit.

Meditating on the theme of compassion you can see more clearly how the mental afflictions based in greed, anger and delusion that are the inner cause of one's own suffering will have the same effect on the mental experience of other people. This insight helps us see that mental afflictions are really impersonal mental states. Anger makes us suffer if we indulge it and hold on to it, and it will make another person suffer just the same. That's the nature of anger. It's a bit like the effect of spilling boiling-hot water onto human skin, which hurts another person just as it hurts you. Any moment when you are able to give up your anger, you are helping to reduce the overall level of anger in the world by one unit, and the same is true when another person lets go of their anger.

With other people you can't necessarily know their minds, so sometimes we practice compassion when we see the potential for suffering manifesting in the actions of others, and also simply recognising the external signs of their suffering. When we see ageing and sickness in others we know that this brings them pain and discomfort, just as it does for us. When we see others give in to their attachments and act with selfishness, anger or fear, we know this will lead them to suffer. Through cultivating compassion towards others and considering the causes of their mental stress, you go beyond blaming or simply judging their actions. This comes about through seeing the internal pain that lies behind their unpleasant or unskilful actions and seeing that those actions will have to cause

them pain in the future. You develop the wish that they desist or change so that they can stop creating suffering. Instead of just reacting with anger or displeasure you look more deeply and see the suffering that lies behind their unskilful actions. Rather than getting caught into hatred for the person, through seeing the impersonal nature of the unwholesome mental states and actions afflicting them, you look for skilful means to address them directly. Compassion replaces the negativity of anger, fear or sorrow that might normally overcome you, and leads you to cultivate the wish for that person to change for the better and be free of their suffering. Cultivating *sati* directed to the object of compassion leads you to develop the aspiration for others to stop acting in ways that are harmful to themselves or other beings, because you know it will cause them suffering. The practice of developing mindfulness in this way leads to skilful action towards that very same goal of alleviating suffering.

I remember the story of Luang Por Juan, who was an enlightened disciple of Luang Por Mun. He was once staying in a cave in the forest that was part of a Buddhist sanctuary where hunting was not allowed. One afternoon as he was meditating he heard gunshots and moments later a deer came running up and stood at the mouth of his cave. Seeing the distress of the animal, Luang Por Juan spread mettā for a while and then heard another gunshot nearby. The deer stood immobile, seeking protection with the monk, but Luang Por Juan could hear a man screaming in pain so he got up to investigate. Outside the cave he found a hunter whose gun had misfired and exploded in his face as he tried to shoot the deer. The deer was now safe but the hunter was screaming for help. Luang Por Juan went over to console the man who begged him for help, as his face was injured badly. Luang Por Juan said he had some medicine and bandages but wanted the hunter to promise him one thing before he treated his injury. The man was happy that the monk was there

to help him and promised to do whatever the monk asked. Luang Por Juan explained how the man had suffered the consequences of his own negative kamma. He requested that from that day on the hunter should keep the first precept to refrain from killing living beings, and this will improve his kamma and help protect him. After the man agreed, Luang Por Juan cleaned and bandaged his wound and accompanied him back to the village.

Muditā, sympathetic joy, the third of the sublime attitudes, is also a meditation object that leads to skilful action. The more one practices mindfulness and becoming more aware of one's own mind, the less one is caught up in unskilful mental states. It becomes easier to appreciate those aspects of your own good fortune and the happiness and good fortune of others. Muditā is the wish for that good fortune to be sustained in oneself and others. At first the theme of sympathetic joy may be developed as a discursive meditation, where you might recollect skilfully the good you have done. This can include previous acts of kindness, generosity, observing precepts, meditation and the good fortune you have received in your life, beginning with your human birth. As you expand this reflection to others, you become increasingly aware of the good fortune they have attained and wish for it to continue. As you become familiar with the theme, you maintain mindfulness by reciting a single word or phrase such as, 'May they not be parted from the good fortune they have attained.' Notice the feeling of rapture and happiness that arises as awareness of one's own good fortune and that of others becomes clear and you maintain mindfulness with the recitation.

In the same way as the other *brahmavihāra* meditation themes, the object of muditā brings you to see the common humanity you share with others as boundaries of 'us' and 'them' break down. When the mind is one-pointed on this object, you have a clear sense of the happiness that you have achieved and appreciate the happiness

and success of others. All beings are similar in their innate wish for happiness and their dislike of suffering. The cultivation of sympathetic joy cuts off and replaces the deeply-ingrained human habit of jealousy and competitiveness and also prevents your mind from descending into disappointment and depression. For example, you might be meditating and find that your mind is not peaceful, but when you turn to reflect on the object of sympathetic joy you become more settled through recollecting your good fortune at having the opportunity to meditate. This is far more skilful than becoming disappointed by your jealousy or lack of peace, and comparing yourself with other meditators who seem more successful.

Many people in this world haven't encountered the Buddhist teachings and don't know how to meditate or realise its value. Some people wish to practice but find that their life situation restricts them, or perhaps someone close to them prevents them from following the teachings. If you've had the good fortune to come into contact with the Buddha's teachings, even if you don't feel you're very advanced in your practice or have experienced much peace or insight, you may reflect on the good conditions you've encountered that have allowed you to practice. This simple reflection can generate great happiness. I remember on so many occasions having the good fortune to meet various awakened teachers in the Forest Tradition in Thailand. By simply coming into their presence, I'd be experiencing waves of rapture and happiness and feeling encouraged and inspired to continue practising, despite any difficulties I faced.

Luang Por Boodah was a fully-awakened teacher who lived for over 100 years and he came to visit Luang Por Chah many times during his life. I remember thinking how amazing it was that an arahant was willing to travel on a bus for many hours across Thailand to meet Luang Por Chah, who was also considered an arahant. On

each occasion it was really a celebration of the Dhamma. The first time I met Luang Por Boodah at his own monastery, I noticed how happy everyone in the large crowd of people visiting him that day seemed to be. Even though most of the people present didn't actually speak to him, they were happy just to be in his presence. Being a monk I was able to sit near him and so asked him how he was. He answered simply, '*yen sabai*', which means 'cool and peaceful'. We were all thrilled and uplifted. A fully-awakened teacher is someone who has given up everything for the practice, and has gone through many difficulties and overcome them, all in order to liberate their mind. It is such a blessing to meet them.

Today we might reflect on our good fortune to be here on New Year's Eve practising the Dhamma with friends and fellow practitioners. It's so much more fortunate than perhaps being out getting drunk or doing something indulgent and less beneficial, or maybe being on one's own somewhere suffering with feelings of loneliness. The fact that you know other people who are also practising Dhamma, keeping the precepts and practising meditation, is something to be happy about. If someone else attains some peace and happiness in their meditation tonight, then that is good for the whole world, as the overall suffering in the world will be reduced by one small portion.

People are different from animals, aren't they? However cute animals are and however much you love them, they don't know how to be mindful of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha or meditate. They can't realise the Dhamma in this life, but humans do have that potential. It's like we have gold waiting to be mined within our heart. We may not have got the gold out yet, but at least we've got access to it. We actually have that chance to find the good inside. This is something to be happy about. When you observe the happiness in your own experience, even if there are some other unpleasant things

in your life, it allows you to see the genuine good fortune in the lives of others.

Meditating on the theme of muditā with awareness is another kind of awakening for the mind. You are awakening to the truth and recognising the happiness that arises whenever suffering drops away from your experience, and how the same applies to other people. The potential for transcending suffering is always there. Our life is bound up with so many kinds of suffering, but the Buddha encouraged us to awaken to the way things are, be patient and develop wisdom. When we are mindful and fully aware and direct our mind to the object of sympathetic joy, we can see things in a more detached and unbiased way, rather than reacting with habitual judgements and opinions conditioned by delusion and jealousy. We are open to truth and recognise good fortune for what it is, when it occurs. It would be rare that everything is bad or that everything is good in life, but often we get caught into fixed negative perceptions about our life and who we think we are. We can fall into the same negative habit when we look at other people too. The Buddha encouraged us to be mindful of the way things are and recognise and appreciate that which is good when we observe it.

Mindfully recollecting the good things that have happened to you, or that you have achieved so far, is directing the mind to be aware of truth, and it brings happiness. The things that were not so good we also have to acknowledge and then let go. Developing the four brahmavihāra meditations with mindfulness leads to a gradual awakening to the truth of the way things are. We're not trying to develop an unrealistically positive outlook on life or fool ourselves into a state of bliss by thinking that if we can just see everything as good then we'll be happy. The Buddha wasn't encouraging us to do that either. He was encouraging us to awaken to the way things are, so that we stop grasping at that which causes us pain and suffering,

rather than create a sense of self out of the experience. We can learn from suffering and our mistakes, and we can really appreciate that fact once the lesson has been learnt.

The practice of equanimity, or *upekkhā*, is perhaps the most challenging meditation of all, but leads directly to insight into the truth of the way things are. We've just chanted the reflection, 'I am the owner of my kamma, heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma and have kamma as my refuge.' Developing an understanding of the law of cause and effect establishes the mind in equanimity, as it gives us insight into the truth. This allows us to accept things that have happened to us, good and bad, and relinquish the negative reactions and endless desires for things to be other than the way they are. Developing the quality of equanimity as a discursive meditation theme leads us to reflect on the truth that all our volitional actions have results and consequences. The more clearly we see and accept this brings us peace through understanding and a balanced acceptance of the way things are. Actions prompted by skilful intentions produce beneficial results. Actions prompted by unskilful intentions lead to suffering for oneself and others. The development of this reflection brings understanding that can counter feelings of despair and hopelessness when we encounter suffering in our life, or in the lives of those around us. It helps us to accept the differences between people, and in the experiences of happiness and suffering they have.

We also learn to examine more closely what happens to us, recognising that there are many different factors involved in every experience of happiness and suffering that we have. Even when we try to make good kamma, the timing and way in which results manifest is affected by many different factors. As we direct mindfulness to the theme of equanimity, it produces an evenness of mind in the face of changing conditions and circumstances, both internal and

external. Even if we do not know all the reasons why different situations arise, we maintain a balanced and detached awareness.

Meditating on the quality of equanimity as we experience the results of our past kamma, we must maintain mindfulness and clear comprehension. Mindfulness keeps our mind in that place of detached awareness, in the middle of experience. It is from here that it knows with full awareness both pleasant and unpleasant experiences as they arise, without clinging tightly to their attractive or painful characteristics. Mindfulness prevents the mind from being overwhelmed by craving, either for or against whatever is arising. Every day the results of our actions return to us like a well-thrown boomerang. As long as we still have delusion and attachment to wrong views, we create good and bad kamma. Nobody has *just* pleasant experiences, nobody has *just* unpleasant experiences. We all receive a mixture of pleasant and unpleasant experiences through our senses based on the previous kamma we've made. When we develop awareness with equanimity and awaken to the truth, we can understand and accept the fruits of our kamma and learn from them.

Equanimity keeps the mind balanced and unwavering. Receiving good news, or being praised by others, or gaining enhanced power and status in our life will test our equanimity. However we don't have to become lost in those experiences or cling to the excitement and stimulation they prompt, or heedlessly expect life to bring us good experiences all the time. You reflect that pleasant experiences happen according to their appropriate causes and conditions, but also know that those causes are impermanent and as they change the experience passes. Good news fades and passes, as does bad news. The presence of mindfulness brings the mind to stillness. This illuminates how it is being conditioned and brings wisdom to reflect on the law of kamma. The wisdom that arises supports equanimity. When we lose mindfulness, the mind gets caught

up in the craving prompted by the pleasant or unpleasant stimulus. You have some pleasant feeling arise based on something that's happening, or maybe a pleasant memory, and you grasp it, wanting more of the same. Craving is never satisfied.

Experiencing an unpleasant memory stimulates a reaction of aversion and the desire to resist it or get rid of it. Memories arise based on sense objects we have previously experienced and, depending on how much significance the mind attributes to them, we react accordingly and hold on to them. Observe how memories stimulate different trains of thought and internal conversations you have with yourself, reinforcing the views you have about yourself. The challenge is to maintain equanimity and prevent these internal mental objects from overwhelming your mind. Without awareness present, the pleasant memories will stimulate a longing for what has gone before, and negative ones will stimulate sadness and anger.

As we consider the workings of kamma and become more heedful, it teaches us to maintain evenness of mind. This facilitates our being aware of any memory arising while remaining steady and reflective, rather than grasping at the memory as self and thus reacting to it from a place of delusion. Now, at the end of the old year, you might reflect that you have to acknowledge and accept both the good that you did and the bad you did, or the mistakes you made over this past year. You have to accept the truth that another year is finished and you can't go back and relive it or change history. As you become mindful of this, maintaining equanimity and reflecting on your actions throughout the past year, you will learn from them. We recognise what was good and undertake to continue with it. We take the mistakes we made as a place of learning. We avoid carrying them around like extra mental baggage, weighing us down with feelings of guilt or disappointment, whereby we're bringing

them into the New Year and experiencing pain every time we remember. Sometimes when one remembers the unskilful things one said or did, or even just thought, one experiences a feeling like a mental 'ouch'. It hurts because the memory is painful. When we lose our equanimity we react with regret and feel upset. However, once we establish balance, we can examine what went on and turn the mistake or memory of the unpleasant event into knowledge and wisdom we can grow from. It becomes something good.

When you maintain mindfulness with equanimity you are calm. We need to become familiar with and fully aware of the calm of equanimity, all the way to the deepest level in meditation. The calm allows us the space to reflect on the transient nature of those past events, and the truth that whatever happened arose and passed away. We can reflect in the same way on the good we did. We can learn from the skilful things we did and see the benefit they brought to us and others. But we must also reflect that in the end we cannot cling to the good we did either, because it also arises and ceases. If one is not mindful of the transient nature of skilful thoughts and actions, one can walk around with the thought that one is a 'good' person, and thus forming conceit and self-view around the good one has done. If we don't maintain an evenness of mind, we can begin to expect things to happen in a certain way because we perceive ourself as a certain kind of person. Or it can happen that we look down on others who disagree with us or criticise us. As we reflect with awareness on the impermanence of things, we can learn to let go of the sense of self that forms around both good and bad. Our aim is to learn from what we see but then let go of the attachment, rather than allowing it to delude us into building up false beliefs and expectations that lead to suffering.

The development of equanimity towards family, friends and teachers is always challenging. Thinking about the mother and

daughter who both were diagnosed with cancer, you can imagine how shaken they must have been when they found out each other's condition. The mother is going to be worried about her daughter and the daughter is going to be worried about her mother. It's the time to practice equanimity and an acceptance of the situation, in order to allow the mind to settle so that it can cope with the undesirable news and prepare for what needs to be done. The acceptance that comes with equanimity is not a giving up and feeling defeated. It is rather an allowing the truth to sink in, while maintaining calm and viewing things in a balanced way, rather than creating additional suffering through grasping or resisting. When unfortunate things happen to the people we love our equanimity will disappear very quickly once we lose our mindfulness. This happens through worry, concern and the sense of ownership. With the balanced view that comes with equanimity, you are aware that your loved one is ill and accept that, but you are also aware and appreciate those good things in their life. You can appreciate other good opportunities that are still there for them and also the possibility of treatment from skilled professionals. This allows you to leave the illness alone for the doctors to treat, while you and your loved ones focus on what good you can still do. We let the doctors do their job while we do our practice. Equanimity grounds you in the present moment and stops the mind from simply dwelling on what is wrong or in anxiety about the future. No one knows how things will unfold in the future, as it never happens exactly how we think it will.

Consider how the people we love are also the people we get most angry with or anxious about. Because we love them, we also cling to them and are always thinking about them. We hold onto beliefs and ideas about them and want them to be a certain way. We feel like we *own* our loved ones. When things don't go the way we want, we get upset. If it's because of their own decisions and choices then we get

angry with them. If it's someone else influencing them, or harming or manipulating them, then we get angry with that other person. If someone is harming the person we love, we may even be ready to kill them because we've lost our equanimity. In the case of illness there is no one to blame. You get treatment, but you have to let it be.

In the same way as we cultivate the other three brahmavihāra meditations, we develop equanimity in equal proportion towards our own experience and towards the people around us. The cultivation and practice of these four qualities is the basis for peaceful living, whether it's in the family, in our workplace or the monastery. Even at times when we are alone we have to develop the meditation on the four brahmavihāra themes and direct them towards ourself and others.

As a monk one can live alone in the forest with no one around and it is these four qualities that will help keep your mind in balance. When one is practising alone, if one doesn't know how to develop goodwill and equanimity, one's mind becomes one's own worst enemy. If no one else is there, you are still there. Luang Por Chah pointed out that when we don't guard over our mind, our thoughts will always flow down to the lowest and unwholesome level, in the same way that water always flows downhill. If there is no one else around to blame, we start blaming ourself. It is easy for our thinking to become increasingly unskilful and negative when we leave our mind unguarded. We can even get angry with other people who have long since gone from our life and only exist in memory. When we cultivate the brahmavihāra meditations on a daily basis, we find great happiness even when alone, but without these qualities we can be totally miserable. It's easy to make the mistake of thinking that if we only can get away from all the people we believe to be the cause of our suffering, then we'll become happy. We forget that when you

go off on your own you still have your own mind to deal with, and you are still living in an imperfect world, so you still have to deal with the negative thoughts, moods and memories bubbling up into your consciousness.

When I was a junior monk, for many years I helped to assist and look after Luang Por Chah. For some periods I was fortunate to be allowed to be with him continuously for one or two months at a time, alternating between day and night shifts. Naturally, after a long period of attending on him, I could feel quite exhausted. About halfway through what turned out to be the last year of his life, having been doing back-to-back shifts taking care of him, I decided to spend some time on quiet retreat. Ajahn Anan sent me to spend the three months of the Rains Retreat in a patch of remote forest in southern Thailand. It was an area I had never been to before. My plan was to spend the three months of the Rains Retreat meditating quietly, thus having a break from the people and the work I had been involved with looking after Luang Por Chah. At Luang Por Chah's monastery there were usually seventy monks and sixty nuns, and everyday it was normal for scores of lay people to visit and pay respects to Luang Por Chah. I had the thought that I would go to a remote place and get away from everybody, so that I could meditate quietly and without interruption.

The first day I arrived at the patch of jungle were I was going to spend the Rains Retreat, the local village headman came along. He explained that until not long before, the area had been a base for armed communist insurgents. He said that since it was so remote from the outreach of government, all the local pioneer farmers carried guns and that the place was a bit like the Wild West. Most of the local people actually had strong faith in Buddhism and they were keen for monks to stay there. They wanted the chance to make merit and be reintroduced to the Buddhist teachings and practices

that they had grown up with. I considered that the remote jungle hermitage provided a suitable place to practice meditation and assumed it would remain quiet, because no other monks or lay people wanted to be there. I thought I could practice there and forget about all the other monks, lay people and busy activities surrounding Luang Por Chah, quietly focusing on meditation practice. There was no road, no electricity, no facilities and little chance of finding out about what was going on elsewhere in the world.

Even though I had found a secluded place to practice, I still had the challenge of my own mind to deal with. You can be far away from everybody, but still have all the memories and mental baggage that you are used to carrying around with you. You can sit alone in the forest hundreds of kilometres from where you normally live, without a single person that you know anywhere near you, but still you have to learn to be at peace with yourself. It's at such times that you begin to truly appreciate the value of developing the four brahmavihāra meditations. If you don't put effort into cultivating and preserving those skilful mental states, it is easy to become miserable or depressed. You could even lose your mind. Actually, Luang Por Chah used to say that really, anybody who is not yet a fully awakened being is still partially crazy. Luang Por Chah's definition of crazy meant the normal state of delusion that people are usually caught in, where they still see the world as permanent, without suffering and belonging to a self. That refers to most of us. We are all crazy! Sometimes a monastery is described as being similar to a mental hospital where people go to improve their mental health and well-being.

One way you might define 'being unprepared' for practising in a quiet and lonely place as when you lack a foundation in the practice of the four brahmavihāra meditations. When one is alone in the

forest it is easy to become prey to the mental defilements and negative emotions, especially if one's cultivation of these four qualities is weak and they are too unfamiliar in one's mental landscape. One has to face the challenge of being without friends and familiar faces, dealing with concerns about wild animals and perhaps the possibility of getting malaria or another serious illness. Internally one has to ready to deal with negative memories that can trigger unwholesome mental states, and having little to distract oneself from them. Also, when one's strongest desires are frustrated it can lead to endless negative mental proliferation and fantasising about searching for comfort and distraction. The imagination can easily take over an untrained mind, leading to states of anger, fear and even desperation. If left unaddressed, the negative mental states reinforce a negative self-view and a pessimistic view of the world. Without strong mindfulness, wisdom and regular practice of the four brahmavihāras, the practitioner might find it difficult to tame and control their mind.

When I began spending time alone in the forest on retreat, it was after I had completed my training as a novice monk and several years as a fully-ordained monk. Even though I was cautious, I felt that I had enough experience already in the practice of Dhamma-Vinaya to support myself. It was good to have the seclusion for meditation, but I could see that when you go into the forest on your own, you take your kamma with you. You must practice carefully and remain a true friend to yourself, because you can never escape your own mind and it is easily taken over by mental defilements. Whatever you've been thinking about before you go off into solitude will continue to come up in your mind once you're there. On the other hand, practising in solitude provides a good opportunity to see your own thoughts and examine some of your attitudes, views and expectations about the practice, and to dedicate long periods of time to the formal meditation practice.

During the time I had practised at Wat Pah Pong as an attendant monk with Luang Por Chah, it had been a physically tiring task that could be mentally challenging, as everyone wanted to look after the teacher well and gave their maximum effort. At the same time, I and the other monks had to navigate the array of differing views and opinions about the best way to look after Luang Por Chah put to us by other monks and lay supporters. Some people thought they knew what Luang Por Chah required better than anyone else. They would sit there discussing the best way to do things and expressing their passionately-held opinions while completely ignoring the attendant monks. We were constantly surrounded by self-professed experts in modern health care, diet, physiotherapy, herbal and spiritual remedies and so on, and many of them were happy to instruct us as if we were completely inexperienced. One day you heard one set of opinions expressed about what Luang Por Chah needed and what was the best way and what was incorrect, and another day people would bring in a whole new range of ideas, conflicting advice and opinions. Everyone had high hopes and expectations, amplified by their strong faith in Luang Por Chah, which seemed to add to the pressures on those looking after him.

When I entered the jungle on solitary retreat, I brought such memories with me and could see that if I reacted in an unwholesome way to them I would suffer. I reflected on the challenge of training my mind in meditation, with all the accumulated memories and experiences pushing up into consciousness, and recognised the value of cultivating the brahmavihāra meditations. I began cultivating goodwill towards all the kind people who offered me food every day in such a remote place, and to all those who had helped me in the past, both Sangha and laity. I reflected with sympathetic joy for myself and all the other people who had the good fortune to have met Luang Por Chah, receive training and teaching from him,

and have the honour of attending on him. I reflected with joy on the good fortune of meeting Luang Por Chah himself, and how he had achieved what is so difficult to achieve in his personal experience of awakening. That single thought brought me great happiness. Similarly, I was uplifted by reflecting on how fortunate I was to be able to practice alone in the forest at that time without any particular burdens or responsibilities. I developed equanimity towards the hardships of living in the forest, being far away from friends, family and modern comforts, and facing wild animals, disease and dealing with people I didn't know. The practice of equanimity provided an evenness of mind towards the ups and downs of the changing external circumstances and the inner moods and different reactions I experienced.

Meditation on the theme of the four brahmavihāras was not only a way to bring up inner joy and cultivate states of calm and clarity with mindfulness, but also supported the development of wisdom. I could see the importance of maintaining mindfulness and keeping attention in the present moment rather than dwelling in the past or the future. As I lengthened the time I spent doing sitting and walking meditation, I found that the mind became increasingly firm and steady and that I could meditate more comfortably for many hours each day and night. Another monk who was also keen to practice in seclusion joined me for part of my time on retreat, and we ended up meditating every night from dusk until the following dawn for the entire retreat. I kept up my efforts in the practice and really started to enjoy the situation, even though it was physically challenging. Then, towards the end of the Rains Retreat, the thought arose that maybe I didn't need to go back to Luang Por Chah and I could stay in the remote jungle and meditate all day and all night as I wanted. I could go on daily alms round to collect food and then

continue my practice without interruptions. I started to believe that I had finally got just what I wanted!

Over the period of time I lived in the jungle, the local people in the region started to take some interest in me and the other monk. They were all poor farmers living in basic conditions, without roads, electricity, town water or sewerage. News of the Western monk practising in the forest started to spread and so out of curiosity, some of the locals began to visit and then their families and friends followed as well. Some of them requested to join us overnight on the Observance Days, and because we practised all night long, they felt safe enough to stay in the simple open-sided bamboo shelter that we used for meditation and chanting in the middle of the jungle. Most of them couldn't manage to sit up and meditate all night long, so they would lie down to rest for a while and then get up again and then go back to sleep. Later the villagers confessed that they attended the evening meditation sessions partly to confirm whether the monks really *did* sit in meditation all night long.

Gradually more and more people visited to offer food or join the meditation sessions. By the end of the three-month Rains Retreat we had over three hundred people attending the ceremony for the last day, and we didn't even have a public toilet for them. The other monk left and they all wanted me to stay on and help them build a proper monastery. The thought that I had been practising in such a perfect situation began to disappear, as now I had to cope with each villager's differing views on how the fledgling monastery should be developed. People would sit there and discuss the design of the proposed buildings and determine the activities of the imaginary monastery without any thought of what the monks themselves might want or think about it. In the beginning of the retreat we had not been certain that we would even get enough food to eat, but the

support had grown continuously and by the end we had three hundred villagers telling us what to do. I felt like it was getting to be as busy as my time at Luang Por Chah's monastery. It seemed almost as if there were now as many people visiting this remote forest hermitage as I had left behind in Ubon.

The day that thought came up in my mind I laid down for a midday rest, having gone without sleep the night before. I had a vivid dream. In the dream I was happily practising on an island in the middle of the ocean and Luang Por Chah came to visit me, which made me even happier. I thought to myself that the island was a quiet, pleasant and peaceful place. Then, out of nowhere a huge cruise ship turned up with thousands of people on it. The ship stopped at the island and everyone disembarked and began having a noisy party right where I was meditating. Luang Por Chah turned to me and grinning said, 'It's foolish to think that you can get away from everything. Nobody can get away. The world is like that, there's no physical escape from it. The only way out is to transcend it.' I realised that even though the secluded forest had been an ideal place at first, those ideal conditions were temporary like everything else in the world. The real escape would have to be through developing my practice to find inner seclusion from the mental states that cause suffering. Through cultivating the wisdom to see through them, and knowing that they are not-self and to be abandoned. Eventually I felt it was time to return to Wat Pah Pong and Luang Por Chah.

Luang Por Chah taught that the most important thing in life is to look after your mind. Whether you are with lots of people or whether you are alone, you have to learn how to train your mind with mindfulness and wisdom and ground your practice in the four qualities of mettā, karuṇā, muditā and upekkhā. These qualities provide a basis for developing skilful attitudes towards yourself and others and finding peace within.

I've been talking for quite a while now, so I will finish here and wish you well in your practice. We can now pay respects to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

Getting Under the Surface Through Wise Reflection

Sometimes when Luang Por Chah gave Dhamma talks he pointed to the purpose of our monastic vocation by addressing the listeners as 'seekers of truth'. When we receive ordination in the *Buddha-sāsana* we aim to liberate our hearts from the causes of suffering and rebirth by gaining insight into the truth of the way things are. More precisely, this means training our mind to investigate and penetrate the Four Noble Truths. These form the basis for the Buddha's own realisation and the framework for his teaching that describes suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

You may notice from the life story of the Buddha or any of his awakened disciples that their practice could be described as a quest in search of truth. They were on a quest with a clear goal in mind and held the attitude that as long as they hadn't completely understood or penetrated the truth and freed their hearts from suffering, they did not consider the quest to be over. Sometimes it was a physical quest of travelling and seeking out teachers, places to practice and challenging situations from which to develop wisdom. More importantly, it was an inner quest: searching to understand the truth about the way things are from one's own experience. The internalising of the Dhamma and coming to understanding within one's own heart and mind.

Part of the practice is about breaking through assumptions, beliefs and superficial delusions about the world and why we are here. In order to understand things more deeply and see things differently

from the way we have viewed them in the past, we have to engage in a process of continued investigation of our experience. The usual starting point for our thinking and the way we look at the world is a place of ignorance, delusion and misunderstanding, whether we realise it or not. So we have to learn how to contemplate and question our experience to see through accumulated delusions, misperceptions, wrong views and confusion about truth, and to bring our minds in line with Dhamma. Our practice involves cultivating the skills and mental tools to do that.

We practice to put our minds in a position where we are well-prepared to investigate truth and to do it well. We continue to study our own experience of this body and mind closely. It is a rare person who only investigates the truth briefly followed by an immediate experience of complete realisation or awakening. For most practitioners the practice of Dhamma involves a continuous process of bringing up and developing a range of skilful qualities. In particular, qualities capable of continuously directing attention back to this body and mind, over and over again, until one understands their true nature. This might span a period of many years or even lifetimes. We aim to keep the goal of realising truth unwaveringly in our hearts and minds at all times as we practice. We are 'seekers of truth'.

Every day we train and put forth effort in cultivating mindfulness and clear comprehension, and this culminates in the experience of samādhi. Developing states of stillness and unification of mind in samādhi is at the centre of our practice. It is the unwavering stability of mind based on the continuous presence of mindfulness that supports clear vision and penetration of the Four Noble Truths. Success in this practice does take considerable effort which may only appear to bear fruit over a long period of time. Developing skill in the practice of samādhi is not easy or something we can do casually. We

will also notice that as we develop states of calm and stillness gradually, the better the conditions become for recognising suffering and its causes. However, it is through the development of wisdom where we can often see quicker results and significant changes, the deeper understanding of our experience which allows us to reduce the causes of suffering.

In fact, the development of wisdom supports the development of samādhi, even if wisdom is usually presented as the fruit of samādhi. You could say that using wise consideration directed towards a problem or an experience of suffering is like a short-cut that quickly releases us from the burden of that suffering. True wisdom cuts through delusion right to the underlying truth of the Dhamma. But developing wise reflection can assist in dealing with the mental hindrances to samādhi also, and therefore aid in bringing the mind to experience states of calm.

Wisdom can be developed by training in skilful reflection or through paying wise attention to one's experience. First we listen to the Dhamma and then we reflect on it, comparing what we've heard with what we observe. We proceed like this until we see for ourselves. That's something we can all do, but it still takes training and a willingness to turn the mind to the Dhamma and reflect. When mindfulness, clear comprehension and the clarity and refinement of samādhi improves, our wisdom faculty is strengthened and insight sharpens, allowing us to see beyond deeper layers of delusion.

At any time in our practice we can turn the mind to reflect and contemplate its own internal experience. We also give wise consideration to the external world, and likewise the relationship between the internal and the external world. Sometimes this means taking a second look at what is going on, rather than just taking it at face value. Or it may be simply looking longer and pondering more deeply our experience. We are looking at the process of cause and

effect and must learn to question our own opinions, thoughts and reactions to things. This means looking more deeply at our preconceived ideas and notions about the world, and about ourselves, and about what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false. We are looking at how the mind all the time forms biases of being for and against things, based on the feelings and perceptions arising from our sense impressions. We must remember that our background conditioning is predominantly coming from ignorance and delusion. It is this conditioning which directly causes the negative emotions and the confusion of craving and clinging as we're reacting to sense contact. That's our previous habit and we are so comfortable with it that we largely fail to question it.

The unfortunate truth is that we are bound up with various views, expectations and desires which are not grounded in wisdom. These will most likely to lead us to experience more suffering as long as we remain unaware. Not only are most of the views and attitudes we hold conditioned by ignorance, but they cause us to create more negative kamma. More negative kamma in turn brings us more unpleasant experiences, which likewise condition reactions making further negative kamma. Just this is the cycle of saṃsāra. So we really have to be prepared to take a second look at what is going on. By looking and pondering more deeply, we can deepen our understanding in a way that can help us get out of the cyclical habit of creating suffering for ourselves and others.

As long as our mind is conditioned by craving, clinging and becoming, we expect and hope for particular results from all our activities in life. This is true whether it means going out to earn money to pay for things as a lay person, or even meditating to find peaceful states of mind as a monk. We're always looking for the object of our craving to satisfy the mind. We expect certain experiences, people and things to bring us the happiness and the satisfaction that

we want, and to take away the unpleasant experiences and feelings of discontent that we don't want. We can observe how craving naturally agitates the mind, bringing it to disturbance and confusion. It is a form of mental thirst or hunger that feels insatiable. As long as we follow and give in to it, the mind will never be happy or settled in itself. Wanting just conditions more wanting. When we look at our experience and finally realise this, and recognise our craving for what it is, then we have really gained some wisdom. It's definitely a step up in the practice, even if we can't yet fully give up the habit of following the craving.

Wisdom develops as we look at how craving arises, observing what it does to the mind and seeing the way to abandon it. If mindfulness, clear comprehension and insight are lacking, craving is actually stimulated at every moment of contact. This includes all contact between our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and the mind itself with all sense objects. We long for pleasant experiences that give rise to feelings of happiness, and we crave to hold on to that happiness. We resist and reject any unpleasant experiences and try to get rid of them. As we reflect with mindfulness back on our experience in daily life, we can see how over and over again craving and wanting arises in the heart. We observe how we react to sense impressions, and hence keep falling into the different reactions which proliferate the many moods and emotions. Even if at the time craving arises we can't yet catch it, training in wise reflection allows us to follow up on it, eventually observing its origins and results. We can see what it does to us. We see how it takes away the peace and clarity of the mind and how it actually conditions more craving to arise. This is insight. It results in the mind turning away from craving. It undermines the power of craving to control the mind.

Much of our daily practice is based on developing clarity around the arising of craving and how to abandon it. Our practice of the

monastic discipline actually makes us more aware of craving. Many of our deeply conditioned habits inevitably become frustrated as we're adhering to the training rules and practices, which as monks we're required to follow. The monastic training rules act to restrain the stronger modes of craving from spilling out into our actions and speech. They form a barrier around our behaviour so that we don't cause harm to ourselves or others.

As we reflect on the use of the requisites and the help we are offered from lay supporters, we learn to develop patience and contentment with what is available to us. Our habitual greed and desires, such as for consumer products, is quickly frustrated as we are prevented from going around asking for things from people who haven't invited us to do so. We are also prevented from taking our anger out on other people, and we can't pursue any form of sexual activity. We must restrain both our habitual and more mundane forms of wanting, as well as the wilder desires that can obsess the mind. Mindfulness and wise reflection is certainly sharpened through the monastic training, giving us the means to restrain desires as they arise and make wise choices in how we interact with other people and the material world.

Unwholesome desires can periodically arise with their own tremendous force, and these are hard to restrain. As we face such desires, tension can arise in both the mind and the body. That is why striving to push back against unskilful desires rooted in greed, anger and delusion, and finding ways to overcome them, is called *noble effort*. Craving for food, sexual desire or anger and ill-will grows and becomes more deeply ingrained in the mind when left unchecked. We have all experienced frustrated sexual desire, the desire for food or entertainment, as well as aversion towards our fellow practitioners.

As we endeavour to recognise and cope with craving, we can also easily become self-critical and perhaps feel weak or helpless. This can become another form of desire: the desire to get rid of a negative or unskilful state of mind, and hence clinging to a negative perception of self. If the self-criticism leads us to put effort into changing our mental habits, and actually improving ourselves through developing skilful means in the practice, then it can be useful. However, if self-criticism is just a mental habit that's never addressed with mindfulness and wise consideration, it will lead to increasing misery and despair.

The Buddha referred to craving as like a river that's never-ending. It unceasingly agitates the mind and feeds more ignorance, which in turn stirs up more craving and so on. Even attaining the things or the experiences we crave only leads to a passing satisfaction, and if we don't recognise craving as the source of our suffering, we'll fall back into seeking and wanting, and often worse than before. Meditators also experience this as they begin gaining some experiences of bliss or peace, only to find that it also fades away, and then they are back struggling with craving again. When craving obtains the things it wants, our thirst is still not permanently quenched. Craving only goes silent when it is seen as the cause of suffering and abandoned.

We learn to train the mind to look back at itself, and develop more clearly the understanding of where the agitation and suffering we experience is coming from. The Buddha did much of the work for us, and really gives us a head start by pointing out that craving is the cause of suffering. It's a matter of fact with no excuses. Craving for the objects of our senses, craving to become and craving to resist and get rid of, must all be abandoned for peace to arise. Sometimes, the simple act of establishing clear awareness in the present moment is enough to undermine craving, bringing immediate composure to

the mind and giving us the space to employ wisdom and let go. On other occasions we have to strive vigorously and patiently endeavour to establish mindfulness and wisely consider what is happening in the mind.

Wise reflection can help ease the tension and mindfulness can bring a feeling of calm to the strong emotions we're experiencing. Patience and the willingness not to give up can hasten the victory over craving. As we look more deeply, wise reflection can reveal some of the underlying attachments and myriad delusions which are feeding craving. Developing these skilful mental states brings strength and courage to the mind. The strength and courage allow us not to believe and take every thought at face value, but to look at its characteristics and understand whether it is the cause of suffering. The stillness and strength of mind supports the ability to search for the deeper truth, and question our thoughts, words and deeds. By investigating the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness in physical and mental phenomena, wisdom sees through the conventional reality and the superficial appearance of things that surrounds and envelops us.

Craving leads to clinging. It is this body and mind, called the five *khandhas*, or aggregates of experience, that we cling to as a permanent, enduring self. As we cling to and identify with the aggregates as self, we suffer because we don't want to lose control or ownership of this body and mind, or even anything connected to it. Luang Por Chah taught us to study and observe the five aggregates continuously and suggested that we will find that in all their aspects they actually resemble a ball of red-hot iron. That means they are red hot through and through, and will burn you wherever you hold on or cling to them. When mindfulness is not present, insight is not clear and we don't see that our attachment is leading to pain and suffering.

Ask yourself why Luang Por Chah would compare the five aggregates with a red-hot lump of iron. Is this statement true? If it is, it means that wherever you touch the ball of iron you'll get burnt. Whatever part of form, feelings, perceptions, thought formations or sense consciousness you identify with as me or mine will cause you to suffer. At the very least, you could reflect that if you are engaging with a potentially red-hot ball of iron, you should proceed with caution and heedfulness. If somebody warns us that something is a danger to us, we become careful in our attitude towards that thing. The Buddha warned us that this body is subject to ageing, sickness and death. We shouldn't jump to conclusions that our body or someone else's body is necessarily good or desirable. The human body is beyond our ultimate control. Whatever ideas or views we look up to, or emotional states we experience, and even deeply satisfying ones, can turn to suffering when we cling to them as self. Whatever the experience is, being forewarned, we should develop a new habit of carefully looking at this body and mind, in the event it really turns out to be like red-hot iron.

Once we approach the five aggregates with caution, we can look at them more objectively and honestly. Through training in investigation and giving wise consideration to the five aggregates we question how permanent our experience is. How permanent and stable is the material world? How permanent and stable is the mental world? How reliable, secure and lasting are feelings, perceptions, thought formations and sense consciousness? Where is the solid and lasting self in the mental world we identify with? Keep questioning the outward appearance of the things you experience from moment to moment and you will keep noticing the transient and unsatisfactory nature of the aggregates more clearly. You might call this 'wisdom developing concentration', a leading of the mind to give less importance to the five aggregates thereby gaining a more

detached awareness from within experience. It leads one to relinquishing the grasping nature of the mind and becoming weary of following craving. The result is peace and stillness which supports the development of more refined states of samādhi.

One of the first times I realised how deluded we can be about the world was when I was five years old. My parents originally came from North Wales and as a child I spent a lot of my free time on a dairy farm. I would explore and play there happily for hours with my siblings and other local children. On one occasion we were playing 'hide and seek' and, looking for a place to hide, I wanted to run up and over a mound of earth. In fact the small hill that appeared so solid was made of cow dung that had been pushed up against a wall over many months. Sitting out in the open, the cow dung had formed a thick, solid crust that hid the smell of the liquid excrement underneath, and gave it the appearance of being solid earth. I was rushing to hide from my friends, and being young and unfamiliar with the farm, put one foot onto the pile of cow dung hoping to run up to the top of the hill. Rather than being able to sprint up what I believed to be a solid hillside, I instead found my foot sinking down into the moist excrement below the crust.

I quickly pulled my foot back to avoid it sinking too far into the soft mushy excrement. But I remember most that I was more shocked at how easily I had been deluded by the cow dung appearing as solid earth, than the surprise of my foot sinking into smelly cow dung. I remember clearly how stunned I was that something that looked so firm and solid could so easily give way to the oozing mass of smelly excrement underneath. Through my youth that memory stuck with me as a warning about how things we assume or believe to be true in life don't always turn out to be what they seem.

The Buddha encouraged us to approach the five aggregates in this way. Don't just take them at face value. Don't be deluded by

appearances. Look under the surface of things and don't take your inherited thoughts, feelings or perceptions at face value, or as necessarily true or correct. Over time we grow to become so familiar with these aggregates, we are so used to them, that we naturally take them for granted. We believe in them as belonging to a self, having accepted them for what they appear to be. Part of our wrong way of viewing the world is to assume that this is the only reality there can be. We believe that we must endlessly follow desires and attachments and that inevitably we must experience the ups and downs of our emotions. This will include anxiety about our health and ageing, for example. We can feel that there's no alternative or any other way things could be. The way delusion presents itself is as confusion and lack of clarity, and this disturbs the mind. In one way or another delusion manifests as a false belief that keeps leading us into suffering. The only way we can liberate ourselves is to keep looking and questioning, so that we can understand things better and change our perceptions. We have to be willing to go against the stream of our own desires, attachments and delusions, not just follow along with them all the time.

The cultivation of inner wisdom means developing clear knowing of each mental state, both the skilful and the unskilful as they are. The clear knowing reveals the harm that's inflicted when one follows along after unskilful mental states of craving: those rooted in greed, anger and delusion. One becomes more aware how they feed the delusion of self, how they are continually programming more self-view into the mind and cannot possibly lead to lasting peace or happiness. Wisdom looks for the skilful means to abandon craving, because craving is seen as the cause of suffering. To develop wisdom requires mental energy and practice. You are training your intelligence and reflective capacity to investigate the nature of

mental formations, and as a result becoming smarter than your habitual mental conditioning. Following craving always seems like the comfortable, easy way to go, and sometimes even when you know it leads to suffering. To change from that habit requires patience, mindfulness, wise reflection and determination. We have to be willing to stop certain unskilful habits of thought, speech and action.

The practice of Dhamma-Vinaya facilitates the practice of restraint and leads to the abandonment of craving. In the beginning of the practice we can experience tension within, as we bring up effort to train with the different rules and practices. We aim to cultivate mindfulness and a sense of moral shame, and train in giving wise consideration to our experience. We are constantly going against the flow of craving and attachment. It's a frustrating and tiring process. Sometimes you reach the point where you feel drained of all mental energy and uninspired to continue with developing mindfulness or contemplating anything anymore. One might have to patiently endure through such periods and remind oneself to return to the quietness of *samatha* practice to rest the mind, thus preventing it from falling into more unwholesome mental states.

Having rested the mind in stillness, and in the cultivation of goodwill directed towards oneself and others, we can commence continuing to cultivate more wisdom. Like someone walking a long way, we take a rest, revive and then carry on the journey. When we study and observe what is beneath the surface of that which is appearing as solid, permanent and belonging to a self, we can witness the true characteristics of form, feelings, perceptions, thought formations and sense consciousness. Our normal belief is that this body and mind is a self, and in seeking to enjoy life, we can control it and make it do as we wish. We feel that it is correct and right to view the aggregates as a self and care for them, whereby we nurture this view of ownership. But we must establish mindfulness and look

more closely and carefully, investigating their nature to see whether the body and mind really belong to us and are really under the control of a 'self'. Even grasping at feelings of pleasure and pain and views of what is right and wrong can bring us suffering, especially when we cling so tightly that they become personal possessions.

All the aggregates of form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and sense consciousness arise as a result of past kamma, and we have to accept what we get. In whatever way the aggregates are, it is largely due to kamma. The aggregate of mental formations is where we train in developing skilful volition, and is the place where fresh kamma is generated. Because of the sense of ownership, we view anything that seems to be taking away that ownership with suspicion and aversion, maybe even when we give up to the Dhamma and Vinaya.

Keeping the Vinaya rules, learning to be mindful and contemplating the teachings are all correct practices. We use the aggregates to develop the Noble Eightfold Path. We use the body as a vehicle to do good, and we use the aggregate of mental formations in developing the factors of the path. We rely on our faith in the Buddha and his teachings, but we must also cultivate insight into the lack of self in mental formations. We necessarily must experience developing the skilful qualities of the path, and having attachment to them, but at the same time reflecting on them as not belonging to a self. As the mind becomes still and one-pointed, we must wisely reflect that any grasping at knowledge and opinions about the Dhamma, or also clinging to feelings of bliss, can still delude us and feed attachment to a subtle sense of self. We can see how attachment becomes the cause of suffering when conditions naturally change and we crave to get them back, such as when feelings of bliss subside. We also suffer when we compare our current 'self' with our perceptions of a previous 'self', or maybe with the 'self' of others.

Luang Por Chah taught that if we are not sure how or what to investigate in our meditation, we should contemplate the nature of the body along with the relationship between mind and body. This means investigating inwardly and looking more deeply than we would normally do. We learn to literally 'get under the skin'. We refer to the skin as just like a sealed bag, keeping the rest of the body parts in place. Practice getting under the skin and visualising the thirty-two parts of the body. You must get used to analysing and breaking the body down into its component parts, and seeing that all the parts of the body are made of the four material elements, which are earth, air, heat and liquid. We train to place the mind on each part in turn, visualising it as it is, even if it is repulsive to us. Ultimately we observe that each part is impermanent and empty of self.

Sometimes the perception of the repulsive nature of the body can become so strong that it may even make you nauseous. The perception of the unpleasant smells emanating from parts of the body can become clear in your consciousness. The unattractive visual nature of the internal body parts, and even the ageing of the skin and external features, can become very clear to the mind. However, because the mind is peaceful and stable with the presence of mindfulness, dispassion and insight arises as a result of the investigation. Wise reflection directed to food and the process of eating and digestion can similarly lead your mind to turn away from its usual attraction and infatuation with pleasant smells and tastes, and as well the stimulation derived from eating.

When the mind is calm and steady we train it to investigate the different aspects of the body over and over again. From this we gain a more objective and detached way of viewing this body we inhabit. Notice how all the external things, such as clothes, that come into contact with our body become unpleasant, smelly, greasy and soiled.

Once you see this clearly you can quietly direct your contemplation towards the bodies of other people that you know or see. Human beings all have the same characteristics. They are made of the same four elements that bind together temporarily and produce waste products. As the human body ages, the more the truth of those elements is exposed as unsatisfactory, unstable and constantly subject to degeneration.

Dedicating oneself to contemplating and reflecting on the truth will inevitably change one's outlook on the world. As we look under the surface of our normal infatuation with body, mental states and conventional ideas about people and the things of the world, we realise that decay and degeneration are normal. We can't find lasting happiness or security in anything. The peace we experience based on virtuous behaviour, the practice of compassion, and the unification of mind in one-pointedness supports the insight into the impermanent, unsatisfactory and selfless nature of this world. This peace prevents us from falling into despair or depression. You see that the less you cling, the less you suffer.

Insight directed to see the three characteristics in the body and mind undermines the power of craving and attachment to take over the mind. It gives rise to the new experience of a mind that is clear, peaceful and free from craving. Seeing craving cease with mindfulness and wisdom present is an invaluable experience for us. It brings us confidence and courage to keep practising and letting go. During the times when craving re-emerges, we must return to the practice of establishing mindfulness and training in wise reflection, even if it doesn't yet seem to be producing results.

In periods when craving becomes strong again we must rely on patience and the training in wisdom. We must remind ourselves that just as we have seen craving arise and cease before, it will do the same again. We learn not to grasp at it or take ownership of it, but

instead watch until it ceases. When infatuation with bodies arises, notice the changing nature of your own body and its unattractive side in order to bring the mind back to balance. We do likewise whenever we are tempted to grasp at the pleasure associated with sexual attraction. Notice how temporary our moods of craving and attraction are, and similarly how negativity and resistance to certain experiences also necessarily comes and goes. Over time as our mind becomes firmer and more stable through efforts at maintaining mindfulness, we will experience states of samādhi more often and for longer periods of time. Through training the mind we can see the harm of clinging to wrong views and the moods and trains of thought associated with them, and we'll become more skilled at letting go of the old habits of clinging to self-view.

As long as we follow unwholesome desires that arise through sense contact, we'll necessarily be taken on a merry dance around the world through our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, touch, and through the inner world of ideas, views, concepts and moods. However much knowledge we acquire of the world, or even the knowledge we acquire through the theory of the Dhamma, it only leads to more mental proliferation, unless we clearly see its characteristic as impermanent and not-self. As mental proliferations are themselves inherently of a nature to arise and pass away, they cannot lead to real or lasting peace. Under the influence of craving – the longest river in the world – the heart and mind is endlessly agitated and subject to a constant process of birth, decay and death. Bringing up mindfulness, clear comprehension and wisdom is what brings craving to its death.

While we are learning how to deal skilfully with craving and attachment we must accept that sometimes we need to make changes to how we live and how we run our life. We try different practices, make new rules for ourselves, do things for the benefit of other

people and perhaps try practising in different places. This is often necessary to help us grow in our practice, but we must guard against following the restless mind of craving that just wants new and different experiences. This is why we depend on experienced teachers to guide us where we are not fully aware and why we need to train in reflecting on Dhamma-Vinaya in our decision making.

When we get fed up with our habitual negativity we often blame the place or the people around us, and we want to head off somewhere to get away from what we perceive to be the cause of our suffering. As Luang Por Chah pointed out, the danger with that attitude is that, like the analogy of the mangy dog, you simply take the disease of the mind beset by craving with you when you leave. We end up itching or suffering in every new place that we move to. A change of place for practice can be a cause for refreshing new insights to arise, but it can also be seen as a quick fix for moods of suffering. We can get caught into the habit of endlessly moving from place to place to avoid facing ourselves and the problems in our practice. In the end it can even lead to deterioration in our faith and state of mind.

We can actually never find completely perfect conditions for practice. Rather we must keep turning attention inwards and establishing mindfulness to deal with the real source of suffering – ignorance of the Four Noble Truths, which conditions craving and attachment. We must learn to relate to this body and mind with mindfulness, wisdom and compassion. Sometimes the wisest thing to do is stay put and face whatever is coming up in your own mind. You may have to make the determination that whatever conditions you are confronting, or wherever you are, the place of practice is always inside your own heart. That's the important point – knowing that one's heart and mind is the place of practice. You'll never find perfect conditions outside. You have to learn to establish a good

way of practice inside, through learning to bring up mindfulness and quieten the mind, and then little by little reflect on the Dhamma until equanimity is achieved.

When you clearly see craving as an impersonal mental state that leads to suffering, then the experience of it changes. You gain freedom as you no longer feel enslaved to that particular desire or negative emotion. The mind returns to emptiness as the feeling of self disappears. You don't have to follow feelings of attraction or resistance when ignorance is replaced by mindfulness and wisdom. You know that craving and its objects are impermanent and unsatisfactory, and that they are not a self and don't belong to a self. You no longer push to find somewhere better or to get away from what you don't like. With practice, the inner mental strength and clarity you have developed will catch each particular kind of craving and prevent it from fuelling further attachment.

The ignorance and lack of knowledge that underlies craving and attachment is so deeply rooted that as we practice we keep discovering fresh and more subtle layers. We have to keep at it with patience, working with whatever is coming up. More and more we come to rely on and value our practice of virtue, samādhi and wisdom. We see that these are the qualities needed to recognise this causal process that gives rise to craving and attachment, and to fully understand the futility of following it. The less we follow craving and let it delude us, the more energy is left to put effort into cultivating the skilful qualities of the Noble Eightfold Path which can resist and abandon craving.

As long as we cling to the five aggregates, we must continue to follow our desires to seek out pleasure and resist painful experiences. This being so, we must constantly experience discontent and make wrong assumptions about the way things are. We think that something is better than it actually is, or think something is worse

than it actually is. Ultimately, everything is just the way it is – there's no need to add craving or attachment onto our experiences. Even the body is just the way it is, isn't it? We don't have to be for or against it, we don't have to be obsessed with it, we don't have to be allured by it or hate it. It's simply the way it is. Pleasant and unpleasant feelings are just what they are. Perceptions and thoughts are just perceptions and thoughts. With mindfulness and wisdom present we learn not to grasp hold of these five aggregates and so don't get burnt by them.

If we continue to turn the mind to reflect on the Dhamma and internalise it, we can benefit even when the mind is stirred up by negative thoughts and painful feelings. The reflections left to us by the Buddha and our teachers guide us to investigate our experience more closely. The Buddha pointed out that upon realisation, the effect of the Dhamma is to upright that which was previously overturned, so that we can see the true nature of it. Liberation from craving and attachment is not anything very far away. Where we are suffering is where there is craving and clinging. When we let go, the suffering stops.

So I'll leave you with these reflections tonight.

Dying Before You Die

A verse from the Dhammapada that is often recited is

Appamādo amatapadaṃ.
Pamādo maccuno padaṃ.
Appamattā na mīyanti.
Ye pamattā yathā matā.

Heedfulness: the path to the Deathless.
Heedlessness: the path to death.
The heedful do not die.
The heedless are as if already dead.

When the Buddha taught the Maṅgala Sutta he observed that the practice of heedfulness is one of life's highest blessings. In his very last exhortation to the monks he emphasised the importance of practising with heedfulness because of the impermanent nature of formations. Throughout the forty-five years of his teaching, the Buddha frequently reminded his students to be heedful because the world is an uncertain place. One's life is uncertain and the opportunity to practice the Dhamma is uncertain. One of the verses we chant daily in the monastery reminds us that the days and nights are relentlessly passing, so we should reflect on what we're doing right now.

The word *avijjā* means unawareness or lack of true knowledge, and is the most powerful and pervasive underlying conditioning factor for the suffering of human experience. Suffering arises due to a complex set of interrelated conditions, but they all can be reduced back to unawareness. The Buddha was fully aware of the dangers

arising from our ignorance and the obstacles we face in overcoming it, and he summarised the practice for dealing with ignorance as the practice of heedfulness. When you look at the daily practices of a Buddhist monk, you can see that we train in developing skilful means in order to constantly arouse heedfulness. Heedfulness is necessary for counteracting the habits of this untrained mind, because it keeps falling back into states of delusion and complacency. The presence of ignorance and complacency prevents us from investigating truth and keeps us fettered to the world and the causes of suffering. When we are heedless we forget that all conditions are impermanent and that life is uncertain, and we mistakenly take ownership of this body and mind, grasping at everything with a sense of self. Even though the Dhamma has been well expounded by the Buddha, we ignore it.

Sadly, because we misunderstand and fail to observe the process of cause and effect, we get stuck in cycles of creating additional suffering. We even suffer through our very efforts to avoid and get away from any painful or unpleasant experiences. We look for security in feelings of comfort and convenience, and ever more extreme forms of pleasure-seeking. We try to control our world and personal life to exclude any unwanted pain and suffering, and yet feel let down and frustrated when our efforts don't work. Often, when we find the present moment painful or dissatisfying, we seek to distract ourselves by following desires. Our desires and impulsive reactions lead us to seek pleasure through our senses. We seek happiness and meaning in the material world or in mental states of more subtle and lasting pleasure. However, we continually fall into disappointment and despair when we are unable to achieve what we want. We keep getting caught in doomed attempts to avoid any physical or mental suffering, and keep trying to resist and escape from any experience of suffering that has arisen.

The Buddha encouraged us to stop and take the time to examine this suffering, or what he called *dukkha*. Our task is to recognise *dukkha* for what it is, identify its causes and then skilfully abandon them. This is the purpose of his teaching on the Four Noble Truths. The more we study and practice in accordance with the Four Noble Truths and cultivate the practice of the Dhamma-Vinaya given to us by the Buddha, the more we can learn about the way this human mind works and how to cope wisely with the experience of suffering.

Through close observation of our daily experience, the first thing we may notice is how unawareness keeps taking over our mind. The untrained mind easily slips into a mental world of daydreams and delusions, fixed views and opinions, longings and regrets based on the past, and plans and worries about the future. You may also notice how familiarity with people, surroundings and daily routines can contribute to complacency and make it easy for the mind to slip in to these states of unawareness. Observe how easy it is to carry on a familiar activity while the mind is no longer closely paying attention to it, and instead is lost in a train of thought or fantasy. Familiarity does give us a feeling of security, but if we don't put effort into developing mindfulness and clear comprehension, that very clinging to the feeling of security makes us complacent. It also supports the arising of further attachment and delusion which necessarily brings more anxiety and discontent.

Traditionally, monks seek out lonely forests, mountains and caves for the sake of seclusion, necessary for developing the practice of mindfulness and insight. We practice in order to become aware of and reduce craving and attachment, because they are what feed the experience of suffering. In the place of craving and attachment, we develop the wisdom which gives rise to dispassion and disenchantment, and to letting go of deluded attachment to the world. In

secluded places we can use our time and the simplicity of the situation to keep observing our mind and wisely reflecting on it. We see the process by which unwholesome desires, springing from ignorance, fuel mental clinging and result in different experiences of suffering. At the same time, these quiet places can also present different challenges which can give rise to feelings of insecurity and uncertainty. This can actually make us try harder to arouse heedful conduct. There can be ever-present dangers from diseases and injury, the threat of wild animals or going without food and other means of support, and this heightens the need for heedfulness in watching over the mind. It likewise encourages us to develop endurance and put forth effort in cultivating mindfulness. However, the longer one lives in a secluded place, it is still quite possible to fall back into old habits of conduct and mental behaviour, habits which are conditioned by complacency and heedlessness.

The Buddha and our teachers therefore reminded us that before going to live in the wilderness, we need to have a good foundation in the practice of the monastic discipline and to be established in morality, and the cultivation of mindfulness and wise reflection. The comfort of familiarity within the place one is living, and in the surrounding conditions, even in a secluded wilderness, means that one can still tend to laziness, apathy, absent-minded behaviour and so on. It is actually in the more secluded environments that we really need to rely on the training in Dhamma-Vinaya. Our training supports the arousing of mindfulness along with using our intelligence to investigate. What are we doing and what is the quality of mental states that are arising? Sometimes we can forget that the training in Dhamma-Vinaya is not just for the purpose of living harmoniously with fellow monks and interacting appropriately with the laity. It

also necessarily forms a system of training that supports the process of personal awakening, and gets us out of the various negative karmic ruts we can fall into.

The ways of practice of a Buddhist monk, the duties and responsibilities, give us motivation and impetus to bring up heedfulness and break through delusion in our daily life. When we follow the rules, we are prevented from following all our desires and wanting, which are fuelled by craving. For example, we can't just sleep in when we want to, or follow our laziness every time it arises and we cannot satisfy every desire to eat or consume something. The monastic routine encourages us to bring up energy and effort to go against the tendency towards apathy and indulgence. There are work meetings and daily chores to perform, we have the duty to look after the senior monks, we come to group meditation sessions, we eat together in silence at the one sitting, and there are different activities we are obliged to join in with at certain times. We get used to the practice of patience and sense restraint. We don't go out into the world to socialise very much, and we're always practising celibacy. All throughout our monastic life we are relying on these practices as supports for developing the path to the end of suffering. This holds true whether we're dwelling in solitude or among others. The training rules and practices give us a virtuous and wise standard of behaviour and encourage diligence and heedfulness.

The mental quality of heedfulness is supported by many other factors that we develop throughout the monastic training. *Hiri* is the sense of moral shame, or one's sense of conscience, and *ottappa* is the fear of wrong doing based on the awareness of the consequences of good and bad kamma. As the fruits of the practice become more tangible though our training, our faith and confidence in the value of the practice grows, and supports a careful and heedful approach to whatever we are doing. When we cultivate these skilful qualities it

motivates us to surrender to the training. Sincerely giving oneself to the training is actually vital for settling the mind down and finding peace in our life as a monk. The more we trust and respect the training, the more conviction in its benefits we have. The easier we can surrender to the training, the sooner we transcend our old karmic habits based on craving and clinging.

At first we may well like to cherry-pick from the texts and teachings we hear, trying to find backing for following our views. These are the views and opinions which underlie our moods and preferences, regarding what we want and don't want to do. As faith and wisdom in the practice matures, we see the value of the training more clearly. It becomes easier to follow the rules and practices, and to practice in accordance with the Dhamma rather than following our moods and opinions. The monastic training and meditation becomes a tool that we learn to use well. Once we become more skilled in using it, we gain confidence and contentment with the process. We can see how we are improving ourselves, becoming more peaceful and able to achieve many laudable goals.

Over time, our appreciation for the monastic training and meditation practice deepens and we value it more and more. Unlike a paid job, where even if you feel boredom and frustration you may feel obliged to do it because you need the money, the monastic life is a voluntary undertaking. We ordain as a monastic through faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and with no expectation of material reward. This is why we need to frequently reflect on what we're doing and why, as it will help us to summon up the faith and energy needed to exert ourselves. You might also compare entering into the monk's life with entering a relationship with another person. At first there maybe romance and idealistic dreams, but if the relationship is to endure, one has to develop a more practical appreciation for the value of what one is doing. No one forces us to be in a

monastery: we're here out of faith and confidence that this practice will bring us benefit. If our faith is still limited, say to 50%, we can get 50% of the job done. If our faith reaches 100% we can get the full job done.

When we develop the skilful sense of shame and fear of wrong-doing in our practice, it performs the duty of watching over the mind. As we become more skilled at guarding the mind, we become more sensitive to the different kinds of mental states that arise. We have more patience in working to let go of the unwholesome mental qualities that cause us suffering and with cultivating the wholesome qualities that solve problems, which are accompanied by feelings of peace and well-being. Whether we are new to the Dhamma practice, or have been in robes for decades, we use the same ways of training as the foundation for our progress. The skilful sense of shame and fear of wrong-doing keeps us out of trouble, provides steadiness of mind amidst the turmoil of changing mental activity, and bind us to that which is good.

In addition, heedfulness is linked to the qualities of mindfulness, clear comprehension and persistent effort. These three qualities are like three friends that constantly support our practice and directly lead to the development of samādhi. They are what we rely on to overcome the five hindrances, which are constantly blocking the development of calm and insight in our practice. Each hindrance needs to be dealt with through effort and developing clarity. The hindrances are our daily tormentors which pop up to take away our peace of mind. They waste our mental energy and drive us towards disappointment and frustration. But if we can see them as teachers, we can use them to good purpose.

As a direct response to the overwhelming nature of the mental hindrances, one subject of recollection that the Buddha encouraged monks and nuns to cultivate often is *maraṇānussati*, the recollection

of death. Frequent reflection on the impermanence of life and the certainty of death arouses heedfulness and a sense of urgency in the practice. It is said that on one occasion the Buddha asked the monks how they practised the recollection of death, and he got a range of answers from them. One monk replied that he reflected on the certainty of his own death just once a month, another monk said he reflected on his death every day, and another that he mindfully reflected on the inevitability of death every few hours. Yet another monk said proudly that every time he sits down to eat his daily meal he wisely reflects that he could die after taking just half-a-dozen mouthfuls, perhaps by choking on food, or because of a heart attack, or through some accidental cause. All of these answers were rejected by the Buddha as not fully correct because they did not show a true effort to fight off heedlessness. Then one monk said that as he ate each mouthful of his meal he would reflect that perhaps it would be his last. The Buddha said that that was an acceptable answer. Another monk explained that with every inhalation of his breath, he reflected that he might not live to exhale again, and this the Buddha considered acceptable as being truly heedful. So the message is, the more we reflect on the impermanence of life and the certainty of death, the better.

The Buddha taught the meditation on death as a method for stilling the mind. By paying attention to the thought of the inevitability of one's death, and simultaneously letting go of the five hindrances, one can achieve one-pointedness of mind. Many practitioners find that death is a powerful object of mindfulness. It immediately wakes you up and directs your mind to let go of thoughts and emotional states, those driving mental proliferation about the past and future. You could call it a practice of *samatha* meditation, aimed at bringing the mind to a state of stillness and tranquillity. However, like

many Buddhist meditation techniques, it is a method that also quietly cultivates wisdom using the perception of impermanence. As mindfulness becomes more continuous through the practice, the state of calm provides a suitable platform of stillness for developing insight, such as with investigating the impermanent nature of mind and body. Through wise reflection we can develop a clear vision of the changing nature and inevitable break up of both physical form and the activities of the mind. This body and mind are what the Buddha called *nāma-rūpa* (name and form).

When we pay attention to the thought of death, we become increasingly aware of the temporary nature of external things, and also our own thoughts and moods. We can continue to practice the recollection of death in formal meditation and even as we go about our daily business, when mindfully performing various duties. For example, when you leave your hut and walk down to the meditation hall, reflect that it might be the last time you will ever leave the hut or walk along the path. Or as a particular mental hindrance such as anger or sensual desire arises and takes over the mind, you might reflect that if you were to die at that moment, experiencing the mental state of aversion or wanting, the mind would be agitated and disturbed. If you are angry with someone, ask whether it is worth clinging to that angry state when it is certain that both you and that person must die one day. Similarly, ask yourself why you become obsessed with desires when you will inevitably be separated from the object of that desire through death.

Clarity of mindfulness and reflecting on the impermanence of life can bring up a sense of *saṃvega*, a sense of sobering sadness. At the moment when you see clearly life's tragic aspect, this can lead you to abandon unwholesome attachments right then and there. If we really want to tame our minds and resist the tendency towards complacency, dullness, ignorance and craving in all its different

forms, then we must aim to maintain this kind of present-moment awareness. One female practitioner told me how she once stopped at a roadside food stall to buy noodles for dinner, as it was well-known for the tasty food it sold. She ordered a plate of noodles, and as she was sitting eating, a motorcycle drove up and the passenger pulled out a gun and shot a man who was eating noodles at another table. The man died on the spot. The woman who witnessed the event said that the incident had always stuck in her mind as a reminder of the Buddha's words that life is completely uncertain. Each meal could be your last.

When I was a junior monastic I remember meeting Luang Por Chawp with a group of fellow monastics. He encouraged us to dedicate our lives to practising the Dhamma because our life is so uncertain and we really don't know how long we have left in the world. On one occasion when he was practising in the forest, his mother, who was a nun staying at a different hermitage, had a strong intuition to go and visit her son. She travelled on foot to her son's hermitage and arriving in the middle of the day when he was resting, waited in the small meditation hall. While she was sitting there, she saw a beautifully dressed lady unexpectedly come into the hall and pay respects to the Buddha statue. Luang Por Chawp's mother was a little surprised by this and went to find her son to tell him. She stood near his small wooden hut and called out his name. Luang Por Chawp heard his mother's voice, so he put on his main robe and came out to greet her. Just at that moment there was a huge noise as a large old-growth forest tree next to his hut, collapsed right onto the hut, smashing it flat. It had been raining for many days and the tree had become heavy from the water. If Luang Por Chawp had been inside the hut he would have been killed for sure. He went with his mother to the hall, but no well-dressed lady visitor could be found.

He said that the incident reminded him that we are only a breath away from death.

Another perception that arises through the recollection of death is that we have something in common with every person or animal we meet, because we all must face death. Even the Buddha couldn't avoid death, and every enlightened teacher must die one day as well. Death is the one sure thing in everybody's life. Sometimes we might have the opportunity to attend on a senior monk during his old age, or when he is ill and close to death. At such times the perception of death can be clearly in one's mind as one offers service to that monk. Similarly, when we take part in funerals for senior monks or nuns, even though such ceremonies can be busy and distracting events, it is a time when the perception of death is in the forefront of one's thinking: one reflects that just as he or she has died, I to must die. It also reminds you that when you die, you take nothing with you.

The way of the world is that when famous, wealthy or powerful people die, society will judge the importance of the person by how much preparation and fuss is made for the funeral, and also who attends. People like to place value on how grand and elaborate the funeral arrangements are, and how many people attend the event, and which venue is used and the kind of ceremonies that take place. We think about the inheritance and legacy that the person left behind. But in the end, the simple reflection is that regardless of their fame or status in the world, everyone must die and that at death we all experience separation from everything we love and like. Whatever is the cause or circumstances of the death of the person that we hear about, it is an occasion to reflect back on our own mortality.

I remember one occasion when Luang Dta Mahā Boowa was giving a Dhamma talk at his monastery and was interrupted by the uncontrollable wailing of a woman at the front of the crowd of listeners. He stopped his talk and out of compassion asked her what

was wrong. She replied that she was overcome by grief because her young son had just died. Luang Dta immediately asked her if she knew that she too must die. The direct nature of the question really stumped her and brought her train of uncontrollable emotion to a halt. It was as if someone had given her a pill that suddenly sobered her up and returned her to a state of calm and composure. The words of a wise, compassionate teacher can be very direct, but can help the listener out of their suffering all the same.

The Sangha we live in forms a huge network of monks and nuns stretching around the world, so it is not uncommon to hear the news that a fellow monastic has passed away through illness, old age or occasionally by accident. Sometimes it's a monastic you know, sometimes not. Although we might reflect on the goodness of that person's life and the sadness of the loss, the news also brings up the perception of the impermanence of life, and one quietly reflects on this. When I was spending my second rains retreat with Luang Por Khun at Nah Pho monastery in North-East Thailand, we received the news that Venerable Ñāṇavīro had died of malaria in a branch monastery not far away. Venerable Ñāṇavīro was a young Malaysian monk, who normally lived at the International Forest Monastery and had ordained around the same time as myself. When I had last seen him a few months before, he had been fit and healthy, but because there was no quick means of communications between the forest monasteries in those days, I hadn't heard that my friend was ill. When Luang Por Khun told me the news that he had died, it was completely unexpected. Luang Por Khun noticed my surprised reaction and reminded me, with the down-to-earth humour of a forest monk, that, yes it's possible that even young foreign monks like myself can die and that I should contemplate this truth regularly. He encouraged me to practice on with diligence, because you never know how much time you've got left to live and practice.

Not everybody dies because of illness or accident. The Buddha noted that some people die simply because the supporting karmic conditions to keep the body alive have run out. Another way to put it is that their merit has run out. Sometimes it happens through the natural ageing of the body, or sometimes the person just seems to give up on life, and sometimes it's the ripening of old unwholesome kamma of previous lives accumulated through harming other beings. When strong negative kamma comes to fruition it can be powerful enough to cut off a person in their prime, but we rarely know the details of what kamma we have made in the past and when it will ripen. It is possible that any day of our life we might drop dead for some reason or other.

Sometimes it happens that a person setting out to do something good never sees their good intention come to fruition because of the arising of an obstructive kamma. I've heard stories of laymen preparing to go forth as Buddhist monks, but then they die before the ordination ceremony. In Thai village culture, the night before an ordination, the relatives of the ordination candidate usually organise the biggest festival they can afford, celebrating with music, food and alcohol. Unfortunately many people like to get drunk on such occasions, having forgotten about the auspicious nature of the ordination, and lose track of the middle way of practice that the Buddha taught. They fall into the habit of *kāmasukhallikānuyoga*, which means the attachment and indulgence in sense pleasure, thinking it can bring true happiness. On one occasion in the local village near where I was staying in the forest, there was a young man preparing to ordain, but the night before the ordination he got so drunk that he ended up fighting another man over a girl, and was actually stabbed to death.

Untimely death can obstruct someone from receiving the fruits of their good kamma in other ways. On one occasion a well-known

senior monk from Bangkok was preparing to receive a new title to be conferred upon him by the King, but died in a car crash on the way to the ceremony. Even though his wholesome kamma was ripening, and all his valuable service to the Sangha was being recognised, he never made it to the title-giving ceremony. Another senior monk recently took his lay supporters to pay respects to the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar, but during the trip he felt unwell and returned to his hotel room to rest, while everyone else in the group went to pay respects to the pagoda and meditate. When the group returned to the hotel they found that the monk had died from a stroke. It took them a week of complex organisation to get through the bureaucratic red tape and have the body sent back to Bangkok for a funeral.

Occasionally you may hear the news about the pain and suffering of parents who tragically have to bury or cremate their own child. The child dies before the parents. Unfortunately, it happens somewhere in the world every day. Age is no guarantee of immunity from death. Reflect on the potential dangers surrounding us, such as how easy it is to slip and fall, like when walking on a wet bathroom floor or down a slippery path in the forest. There is always a small chance of being fatally bitten by a poisonous snake, or hit on the head by a heavy branch falling from a tree. There is the possibility of death whenever you get in a car to travel somewhere, or cross the road on alms-round, or perhaps if you were to unexpectedly confront a violent intruder. Wisely reflecting on the immediacy of death, or the possible ways death can occur, aims to bring up diligence and alertness in the practice. It aims to break through the habit of complacency and bring the mind right into the present moment. Luang Por Chah used to praise the senior monk Chao Khun Norawat from Wat Thepsirin in Bangkok because every night he slept in a coffin as part of his practice of recollecting

death. Chao Khun Norawat was in no doubt about the impermanence of life and used to say that the contemplation of death had only ever brought him good things: peace and wisdom.

Investigating our own body we become aware of its physical fragility and how it is dependent on many supporting conditions being just right for everything to keep functioning. We are dependent on consuming the correct kind of food and in the right amount. Our body requires a certain level of hydration, so we need to keep up liquid intake. If we don't have access to either food or liquid, we will die. Without food we will die after only many days, but without liquid we'll die within just a few days. We won't last more than a few minutes without air. If the air temperature is too cold or too hot we can die of exposure.

Examine this body to see how fragile each internal organ is and how easily we are exposed to life-threatening diseases. The brain, for example, is vulnerable to damage from blood clots, aneurysms and tumours. It's not uncommon to hear of somebody suddenly dying from a stroke or from a blood clot. When it does happen, it's not uncommon to hear the people who knew the deceased say how shocked they all were because the stroke seemed to come out of the blue. The person didn't fall and hit their head, but somehow a clot forms in the brain or blood vessels burst and they quickly lose their ability to function. Every part of the body can provide insight into impermanence in the same way. Recollect how vulnerable the lungs are to deterioration with ageing, or the adverse effects of smoking, or perhaps the environment. We need to breathe clean air but cannot always control the environment or prevent pollution. Our lungs can be affected by diseases and viruses, damp air and different materials like asbestos. One can get cancer in one part of the body but die as the cells spread to another part. The heart is similarly fragile.

The arteries can become clogged, the muscles and valves deteriorate with age, and the heartbeat can become irregular. Our kidneys might malfunction or our liver might fail, and they'll be unable to perform their vital functions for the rest of the body. Humans can experience problems with the stomach and digestive system, and it can become difficult for the body to absorb nutrition or have healthy bowel movements. The closer you examine this body the more you see how there are endless possibilities for different kinds of organ failure and fatal conditions to arise.

The purpose of wisely reflecting in this way is to develop a clear perception of the impermanence of life and to cultivate mindfulness and clear comprehension. We use this wisdom and mindfulness to pay more attention to our conduct and state of mind. You might say that the aim of the practice is to die with a virtuous state of mind that is clear and alert.

We practice the recollection of death not to become depressed or anxious about our health, but to help calm the mind and bring it to one-pointed awareness. The recollection of death can cut right through our endless distractions and fantasies, and be a cause for dropping one's stubborn attachment to harmful mental states. The recollection of death brings the mind to pay attention to the present moment and awaken to the truth. We need to realise how valuable our time is while we have it. The recollection of death also prepares us for investigating the three universal characteristic of impermanence, suffering and nonself. This investigation leads us to see the fragility, limitations and unsatisfactory nature of life as we exist in the world. We are all subject to the suffering of birth, ageing, sickness and death. As we steadily bring up mindfulness with the recollection of death, present-moment awareness brings clarity and sobriety. This is accompanied by the rapture and joy of abandoning negative states of mind. Looking into the reality of the imminence of

our death keeps the mind in the present moment, clears the mental hindrances and helps us understand life better. The peaceful mind of samādhi brings us an internal happiness which transcends the usual preoccupations and worries we have about life. It provides us with stability and clarity for considering the impermanence and relative unimportance of our mental baggage, and accepting that this body and the contents of the mind are not ours to keep forever.

The Buddha taught us to contemplate how death leads to the inevitable separation from all that we love and like. Whatever simple possessions we have can still form the basis for attachments, such as robes, lodgings, personal mementos, buddha-images, pictures of teachers, books and so on. These will all be lost to us at death. We must separate from our loved ones: parents, brothers, sisters, friends and respected teachers. Ask yourself what you can take with you when you die. We must leave everything behind. When Venerable Ānanda heard the Buddha say that he had reached his final day, he sobbed and his tears just flowed and flowed. Venerable Ānanda was said to have attained stream-entry, the first level of enlightenment, but even a stream-enterer has to temporarily experience the sadness and emotion that comes with loss and separation. One suffers because the heart doesn't fully accept the truth and still clings to the things and people one loves. The intellect understands the truth that one must die, but the heart has not been fully purified from grasping and delusion and so experiences sadness and grief.

For lay practitioners, separation from the loved can be all the harder to deal with, because of the complex ties they have formed to their family members, friends, wealth and property. The suffering that comes with clinging to our reputation and self-image can also add to the sense of loss. For one with a good reputation, death will lead to separation from that, or perhaps that person takes comfort

in the vague hope of being remembered by history. If one has developed a bad reputation, there may be regret and remorse. Death brings up the suffering of unresolved anger and resentment towards others which can fill up the heart. This is why the contemplation on the impermanence of life can be the forerunner of forgiveness for someone who's still holding a grudge. It is also the impetus to bring up thoughts of appreciation for the good in our life, and in the lives of those around us. For many Buddhists, the belief in rebirth also provides solace, as they can resolve to continue practising the teachings in the next life.

When we have faith in the Triple Gem and a desire to practice, the contemplation of death reminds us that through death we will lose our chance to practice and progress towards nibbāna in this life. Regular meditation on the theme of death can bring up a firm commitment to the practice. It can help one find the strength needed to let go of many trivial and even not-so-trivial desires and attachments. One sees the value of maintaining awareness in the present moment and focusing on wholesome states of mind. When one is caught up in anger or hatred, one can reflect that to die at that moment would mean the mind takes that kamma into the next life. The reflection on death can also bring us an appreciation of our own good fortune to be able to learn and practice Dhamma, and to appreciate the good in those around us.

Once you have established continuous awareness on the recollection of death, the mental hindrances drop away and you become clearly aware of the mind itself. The state of calm and stillness gives you the opportunity to look back at your own mind and body from a place of unwavering stability and detached awareness. As the hindrances fade away from the mind you must maintain the firm and clear awareness of samādhi. When you withdraw from samādhi, and

thoughts, sense contact, feelings and mental activities resume arising into your awareness, you must keep investigating the truth by observing the arising and ceasing of phenomena. Instead of grasping at, or taking possession of and believing in every thought, or reacting to every feeling, maintain the steady awareness with mindfulness, observing how all thoughts and feelings arise and pass away. You can see that both the wholesome and unwholesome thoughts are not a self, a being or a person. When you see that thoughts, feelings and perceptions are of the nature to arise and cease, then you can see what death really is. It's another part of the changing conditions you have always been experiencing throughout your whole life. You could say that death is another step in a process. Maybe consciousness will arise somewhere else at the time of death and the changes will continue.

Through contemplation and close examination of our body-mind experience, we can see that birth and death are taking place from moment to moment. It is the nature of mental states to arise and pass away or to be born and die. We cannot truly hold on to anything, but until we have seen the impermanent nature of mental states, we believe they are a fixed part of us. We believe that our thoughts are who we are. Imagine if you were holding on to a mind state of confusion, greed, anger or jealousy. Would you want to die with that thought in mind? Would you want to die with an angry state of mind? As you meditate and maintain awareness in the present moment, you can see the changing nature of mental states and how they arise and cease. With wisdom present you can let the moods and emotions be, and not need to cling on to them. By seeing the lack of a lasting self in your mental experience you can focus awareness solely on the cessation of thoughts and emotional states. You can allow them to die with full awareness, right there in your

mind. This is to die before you die. It means accepting with wisdom and compassion the truth of impermanence.

When our mind becomes calm, still and bright with mindfulness, we can contemplate birth and death and see that it is taking place every moment. Our mind is being born and dying from different mental states: happiness, sadness, pleasure and pain, attraction, aversion. This contemplation brings us to that point where we're neither delighting in nor averse to whatever it is that we experience. The mind remains peaceful with equanimity. With full awareness we leave things alone or let them be. It's the knowing of experience as it is, or knowing its nature as being 'just that much'. It is the nature of this body to get old, sick, and die. It is 'just that much'. The nature of all mental states is to arise and pass away; they are 'just that much'. Wise reflection and mindfulness keeps the mind in the middle, maintaining equanimity. We know the experience of sense consciousness, pleasure and pain, but don't cling to them as self. This means not grasping at or giving undue importance to feelings, thoughts and moods. As long as mindfulness and wisdom are present we can know our experience for what it is. It is 'just that much'. What arises must cease. The well-trained mind knows that it's the nature of a human being to be born, get old, get sick and then die. It knows that it is the nature of this world that we must separate from all that we love and like. There is an acceptance of the way things are. Even though the truth can be sad, we don't indulge in the feeling of sadness, and likewise don't resist or deny it. We take refuge in knowing things for what they are. This is the heart of the Buddha's teaching.

Luang Por Chah used to say that if something is not good we should let it die, and if it doesn't die we have to make it good. He taught us to practice dying before we die. We cultivate the Buddhist path to develop inner happiness, goodwill, mindfulness and insight.

It results in the deep and clear knowledge that this body is impermanent and is not a being, a self, ours or theirs. This body cannot be clung to and when we see this truth we can let our wrong views and wrong understanding cease and die. By accepting this truth we can let the mental afflictions fuelled by greed, anger and delusion die from our mind. When you reflect and see clearly the impermanence and passing away of mental states, it gives you the strength to let them go. If we are going to die, why suffer by holding on to greed, anger and delusion? Why hold on to thoughts of anger, regret or hatred? Why keep following endless desires that feed our discontent and feelings of frustration? Let death happen before death by letting the causes of suffering go from your mind. Die before you die.

Gaining right view means we know the universal truths about this body and mind and don't try to resist or blot them out. We know that we might even die before our parents, our loved ones or our friends. Maybe they'll die before us, but we know for sure that death is inevitable for all of us. We also know that we can't take anything with us from this world. This is why the Buddha said that the insight into impermanence is one of the most purifying and powerful types of good kamma. Better to live for a day seeing impermanence than one hundred years with delusion. The insight into the three universal characteristics of existence surpasses all other forms of good kamma, because it ultimately liberates us from the attachment and becoming that holds us in saṃsāra. This insight brings our heart towards nibbāna, which is that which doesn't die. It is that which just *is*.

Reflecting on death prepares you for the unpredictable nature of life. Things change and we have to be able to cope with that. We cannot control the world. The mind is really the only thing that we can control, train and educate, and we do so with mindfulness, wisdom and compassion. Every day we receive different forms of

unexpected news about people we know, our family, our friends or the wider events taking place in the world, and some of that news is encouraging, while some is sad. All the time we must learn to adjust and respond to the different internal feelings, thoughts and emotions that are prompted by the things we experience through our senses. The nature of change is stressful. Separation is stressful. Physical pain from illness and ageing is stressful. We must be patient with the things we cannot control and must learn not to create stress internally out of what we experience. These experiences are our teachers and they are teaching us to accept the way things are and let go. By reflecting on impermanence and death we actually gain the wisdom and understanding that supports this letting go. We can then experience that place in the middle, where our mind doesn't grasp blindly to anything. It is where we don't grasp to the happiness or the sadness, but know things for the way they are.

So I'll leave these words with you as an offering for your reflection tonight.

Respect for the Practice

As a preparation for chanting the *parittas* or verses of protection, it's a good idea to review the translations in your own language. Once you become familiar with the meaning, the chanting of those verses becomes a reminder of the wisdom of the Buddha. One of the well-known phrases from the Maṅgala Sutta is: *asevanā ca bālānaṃ paṇḍitānañca sevanā*. It's a very simple but profound instruction from the Buddha for practitioners to avoid associating with those who are ignorant of the teachings and to associate with the wise. The English word 'pundit', a person with knowledge, is etymologically derived from the Sanskrit word *paṇḍita*, with the same meaning.

The wisest kind of person is the *arahant*, a fully-awakened being. Another way the Buddha described a wise person is using the term *sappurisa*, or learned person. He praised the qualities of the learned person and gave great value to the knowledge gained in the quest for the end of suffering. In our life as monastics we are fortunate to be able to associate with wise people, particularly senior monks and nuns who have dedicated themselves to a lifetime of practice. What we gain from this association is invaluable to us. Everyone residing in a Buddhist monastery will already have some wisdom in them, so don't forget that sometimes the wise person can be a junior monk or nun or a well-practised lay person sitting near to you.

We gain from the example set by those with wisdom through witnessing how they live and practice, seeing what they do and what they don't do, what they say or don't say, and also in a more subtle way through their presence and radiance. A wise friend will generally be skilful in their actions, speech and the way they use and

train their mind. When we associate with the wise over a long period of time, we gain teachings, helpful memories and an example of Dhamma practice that goes deep into our heart. We learn lessons that can leave an indelible impression on our mind. Even if people don't always remember the words of a sage, the wise person's way of being, their sincerity and their peaceful and compassionate presence can help to bring calm to those around them. Associating with them can have a powerful and good effect on us over time.

One of the benefits of living in the Sangha is that one is living with other people dedicated to the practice. It helps us develop our existing level of wisdom further as we train ourselves. Even if we feel we are inexperienced in the practice of the Buddhist path, remember that our presence and the effort we put into our practice can be supportive to our fellow monastics, even if we feel we don't know much about the Dhamma. In the same way as when many trees grow together in the forest, each individual tree can benefit from the close presence of the other trees around it. The other trees provide extra protection from the effect of strong winds as their trunks shield each other and their roots intertwine and brace each other. A wise person is said to be someone who always directs us back to the practice and points out dangers and obstacles to us. Hearing the words of such a person will arouse our faith in the Triple Gem and energy and enthusiasm for the practice. Their words seldom stray far from the topic of the benefits of developing *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*.

In Thailand there is a well-known saying that whatever topic an awakened being talks about, the way they speak will naturally turn the mind of the listener back to the Dhamma. This holds even if they have to discuss the business of the world that normally seems unrelated to the teachings of the Buddha. The purity of the mind and the power of insight of an awakened being means their speech is always

a blessing to hear and always points back to the truth. The opposite tends to be true for the ordinary, unenlightened person. Even if the untrained person talks about the Dhamma, they will somehow bring the conversation back to the affairs of the world because they're still strongly under the influence of the mental defilements of greed, anger and delusion.

When you meet or live with a well-trained disciple of the Buddha you might notice how they have a certain beauty in the way they do things and interact with others. When our mind is peaceful we find the virtues and composure of such a person naturally attractive. We are attracted to the good example they provide because it's wholesome, brings a good feeling with it and leads us in the right direction towards happiness and away from harm. A true and wise friend, a *kalyāṇamitta*, will not lead you astray from the path. They understand the path and the value of the path and its fruits so well for themselves that they will always encourage others to pursue it.

When we consider our aspiration to cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path, it is vital to recognise that to realise the fruits of the practice all the eight factors need to be developed together. It's important to remind ourselves that each factor of the path is essential in its own way, as they each have a role to play in training and developing the heart to transcend suffering. Each factor supports the final goal of reducing and eliminating the mental defilements from our heart. These are the sole cause of suffering. That is why each factor of the path has the prefix of *sammā*, which means right or correct.

It often seems that in non-Buddhist countries, Dhamma practitioners who are still new to Buddhism may unconsciously ignore the value of certain path factors, such as right speech, right action and right livelihood. Many people develop an interest in Buddhism by attending meditation retreats where they read and hear about the wisdom aspects of the teachings, or are interested to attain states of

samādhi. They can overlook the role in the development of Dhamma practice played by ethical conduct, for instance. We love to hear the teachers explain about the technical details of mindfulness practice and how to develop the refined qualities found in the stillness of samādhi. It also often happens that people aspire to quickly gaining insight knowledge and understanding of the highest aspects of the practice. They may give some attention to learning about *sammā-diṭṭhi*, right-view, but then go straight onto the discussion of right mindfulness and right samādhi and seem to overlook the three factors of the path which relate to virtue. Perhaps they feel like it's just beginners stuff or so easy to understand intellectually that they feel they know it already and want to quickly move on to the higher Dhamma. Some people bring compulsiveness to the practice and are impatient to get quick results and finish the practice so that they can move on to something else. It's important to remember, however, that we can't overlook or miss out on cultivating any part of the path. If a couple of spokes of the wheel are missing, the wheel won't turn properly and you won't travel very far.

Right action refers to the cultivation of the intention to refrain from killing or harming other living beings, cultivating the intention to refrain from taking what is not given and the intention to refrain from sexual misconduct. Perhaps we've heard the words so many times that we underestimate their importance. Normally, in a monastery people do not indulge in serious wrong action because of the high standard of behaviour in the community and the peaceful surroundings. In such situations it is understandable that one might not reflect so much on the practice of right action. A Buddhist monastery is like a haven of safety and security for beings in this world, where people don't physically or verbally abuse each other. It is a place where people practice honesty and cultivate respect in their relations with others. You feel safe there.

It is important, however, to understand that we aim to completely abandon the intention to harm others through body speech and mind, and are changing our former habits through our practice internally as well as externally. From time to time we might meditate on the theme of *sīlānussati*, where we make the recollection of moral conduct and its benefits for oneself and others the object of mindfulness. As we recollect the freedom from remorse and regret we gain from observing the precepts, and how these skilful actions benefit all beings, it can be a cause for joy and happiness to arise. We also focus the mind on cultivating the qualities of *hiri*, a wise sense of shame, and *ottappa*, the fear of the consequences of wrong-doing. These are what guard over our mind and protect it from dwelling in unwholesome mental states. The Buddha referred to these qualities as the protectors of the world. They are our conscience. The practice of right action requires us to look after our heart and mind with these two qualities.

It is easy for us to feel disheartened during the practice if we only focus on attaining deep states of samādhi or complete penetration of the Four Noble Truths. When we look at what arises in our mind from moment to moment we may feel that we are still full of negativity and unskilful states of mind, and it can even seem like the practice is causing us extra stress because of the mental effort it requires. However, Developing mindfulness and wise reflection through *sīlānussati* can bring us back to observe our conduct from day to day, and also helps us to see the broader picture of how morality is an essential part of the path to the end of suffering. The practices of right action and right speech also provide the gift of safety and security to all other beings, as well as being a service to ourselves. The freedom from regret that the practice brings us gives us a feeling of inner well-being that supports states of mental calm and stillness.

I remember from the life story of Luang Por Khao that before he was a monk he was a hard working farmer who came home one day to find his wife in bed with another man. Initially, he was so angry that he was ready to kill them for their betrayal of trust. But then, reflecting on the heavy bad kamma he would make by harming them, decided it was simply not worth it and picked up his things and straightaway left to go and seek ordination as a monk. He valued maintaining his own ethical conduct above any desire to punish others for their wrong-doing. The more we practice, the more we become aware of how the training in moral conduct is gradually purifying our consciousness, and likewise developing skilful kamma that supports the arising of all the other factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. You could even say that a crucial factor for someone to feel at ease when they live and practice in a monastery is that they must have trained in *sīla* in the past. Such a person can feel comfortable in the monastic environment. So the effort we put into cultivating morality is actually like a gift to oneself, both for now and in the future, and comes through our own compassion for our self and others.

Right livelihood, or *sammā-ājīva* as a path factor is not explained in much detail in the suttas and the Vinaya texts. For a lay person there is a list of those kinds of professions for laypeople to avoid because they involve exploiting and harming others, although for bhikkhus the explanation can be as simple as: a bhikkhu practices *sammā-ājīva* by practising right livelihood. One aspect of right livelihood is that a monk undertakes to follow the Vinaya training and particularly to obtain alms without exploiting, deceiving or taking advantage of others. At one point the Buddha mentioned that monks should not follow their craving and spend their time scheming, planning or hinting to lay people how to get more personal requisites and wealth. We learn to practice contentment with what

comes to us in an unsolicited way and train ourselves to have few wishes. We train to abandon the obsession with material things and the desire for fame and wealth fuelled by untamed sense desire, cultivate contentment within ourselves and also the qualities of respect and compassion for the laity, so that we do not become a constant burden on them or pressure them with endless demands.

The qualities of *hiri* and *ottappa* have a protective influence over our thinking and actions in the way we relate to the material world, and they allow the mind to rest easily within itself. When one's conscience is working well it is easier to develop mindfulness. Even if we only receive the bare minimum of material support, we reflect wisely on what we consume and learn to get by with patience and frugality. We ask little from the world. If we are in a situation where we are well-supported and those with faith generously offer us more than we need, we still practice patience, moderation and ask little from the world. We remember that we are training to abandon greed and attachment, and to cultivate compassion for those who make sacrifices to help us. By following the monastic discipline we can benefit the world through example. Many people find it inspiring and strengthening for their practice to know that there are monks living simply in the forest, who are making few demands from society whilst dedicating all their time to developing the Noble Eightfold Path. They aspire for the end of suffering and also sharing with others the knowledge they've gained. This is something rare and a true blessing for the world.

The practice of right speech is essential because we still need to interact with other people. Our speech is a reflection of what is going on in our mind, and it can either be beneficial to one self and others or an additional cause of suffering. What we say creates good and bad verbal kamma, and it has an immediate impact on both our own mental state and on those around us. When we first enter the

monastery we can struggle with the practice of right speech and can have doubts about what is correct and incorrect speech, such as when we should engage in conversation and when we shouldn't, and so on. We must take an interest and observe our own speech habits and learn how our speech affects our state of mind and how it affects those around us. Our aim is to speak in ways that support the practice and benefit our relations with others.

The Buddha often gave instructions on how to practice right speech and likewise explained how essential it is to refrain from the different kinds of wrong speech. Teaching the Dhamma to his son Rāhula, the Buddha emphasised the value of honesty as a foundation for the practice. He pointed out that the person who can tell a deliberate lie is capable of doing any kind of evil act, because he or she can always use a lie to cover up the unskilful deed that has been done. People can even try and lie to themselves to hide or repress inconvenient truths about their own behaviour. The Buddha turned a water dipper upside down and, pouring all the water out, explained that if a person still harboured the intention to lie or deceive then there was as much good left in his or her heart as there was water left in the empty water dipper.

The state of mind that feels no shame when one tells lies or deceives others is not complete: it's like having a leak in the roof of your hut. The longer we leave the leak unrepaired, the more damage will be done to the inside of the building, and also the leak itself will grow in size. As long as we can still lie and are willing to break the precepts, the hole in our conscience will continue to expand and encourage us to act in ever more destructive and unskilful ways. We also have to bear with the remorse and mental agitation that is the result of this habit. When we dedicate ourselves to truthfulness it has a liberating effect on our heart. In the past, living as laypeople, it was difficult to maintain honesty and integrity in our speech and

actions because we were easily influenced by the standards and values of society in general, which are not always clear or impeccable. Many monks feel relieved when they enter the monastery, because one doesn't have to lie or deceive anymore. We can be honest in speech and even talk about our faults and weaknesses, and be clear about what we have done or not done.

The Buddha further instructed Rāhula about the importance of frequently reflecting on the quality of intention that lies behind one's speech and actions. He taught his son the need to pause, establish mindfulness and reflect before, during and after any action, considering whether that action is for the benefit or the harm of oneself or others. In this way we become aware of the type of kamma we are making and can develop more wisdom and sensitivity around our speech and actions. We learn to pay attention to our mind, observe any intention to speak unskilfully and always reflect on what we are about to say. Will it be of benefit to ourselves and others? Or will it be for the affliction and harm of ourselves or others? If, upon reflection, the result appears to be leading to the harm and affliction of oneself or others, one should refrain from uttering such words. But if upon reflection it is clear that the result is beneficial, one may continue. Having finished speaking, one needs to reflect again in this way.

We also practice right speech by reviewing the things we have said in the past and noting where we lost our clarity and composure and perhaps said something unskilful or untrue. We need to practice this because our conditioned habit is to react to people and situations in haste, without mindfulness or wisdom, and we frequently find ourselves speaking first and reflecting after. Without developing the practice of restraint and wise reflection, we often let all our thoughts out in unrestrained speech, without any filtering process guiding how appropriate or true the words are. Sometimes

we might realise that in some situations we don't need to speak at all. The Buddha pointed out that a person who constantly develops mindfulness will be able to remember the words of their past conversations, even from a long time ago, because they have developed the habit of paying attention.

A good daily practice for developing right speech is to pay attention as much as possible to the words you say and review the contents of every conversation you have had from the beginning of the day to its end. Some days this is easy because you might be on retreat and not say much at all. On such a day you might refine this practice by wisely reflecting on what you might have said, or through observing the thinking and verbalising taking place in your own mind. We are teaching ourselves to abandon any unwholesome speech habits before they have even been expressed externally. On other days when one has many interactions with other people, one needs to be careful and alert. It is more challenging and time-consuming to establish mindfulness and review multiple conversations and verbal interactions after a busy day. But like learning to ride a bike or anything else that initially seems difficult, if one practices regularly then a good habit can be established.

Observing oneself in this way can be frustrating, but one is constantly learning about one's mind and the intentions we are fostering. You can be quite surprised as you learn more about your speech habits, so it is important to review them with wise attention and honesty. You discover the quality of the intentions lying behind your speech, whether they are wholesome or unwholesome, and also discover more about the results of what you say and what others say to you. We can become skilful in knowing the true intentions that lie behind our speech, and about the positive and negative emotions that prompt us to speak. At the same time we are gaining more compassion and understanding of others. When we practice

right speech we are also learning to listen to others more attentively and sensitively.

The Buddha encouraged us to speak in a truthful and non-divisive way that promotes harmony between people. He encouraged us to choose words that are gentle on the ear and avoid using harsh words and insults. We train ourselves to use the kind of speech that encourages mindfulness and skilful action, and discourages delusion and confusion. A further refinement in the training is to reflect on the appropriateness of the time and place in which we are speaking. As you practice more, you realise the importance of adapting the way you communicate to different people and situations, as well as the weight of the words you use and the amount that needs to be said. Every conversation might create a little bit of kamma that would leave an impression on one's mind or the mind of others. As we develop various factors of the path we tend to become more sensitive to people, and respond more through compassion and wisdom than out of the influence of attachments and mental afflictions. Our aim is always to reduce and not increase suffering for oneself and others.

Luang Por Chah was especially gifted in communicating the Dhamma to people from many different backgrounds. He used to joke that when he talked with farmers he would speak in farmer's language, when he met government officials he would speak the language of government officials and he would speak store owners' language to store owners and so on. He recounted that in the early years of his practice he also had to go through many trials and tribulations in cultivating right speech. He found that when monks study too much and meditate too little, their speech can easily become unskilful. He noted that those who like to talk will often want to teach others, but don't always recognise the conceit motivating their actions. Some monks can get excited by states of rapture they're

experiencing when their faith is strong and an uncontrollable urge overwhelms them to tell others all they know about the Dhamma. This urge can even lead to heated arguments about what is or isn't the correct Dhamma, or it can prompt a monk to look for a captive audience to allow him to fulfil his craving to speak.

After Luang Por Chah had been wandering the forests of Thailand for some years, he went to stay and practice with one of his teachers, Luang Por Kinaree. When he was preparing to leave and continue his wandering with the aim of finding a place to settle down and build a monastery, Luang Por Kinaree warned him that even though his meditation had developed well, he should be careful not to talk too much.

In the cultivation of the Path to liberation we learn to value mindfulness and wise reflection as our most valuable tools. We aim towards realising the cessation of suffering through our practice. We learn through experience that in some situations it's better to stay silent, even if what we want to say are words of truth. Maybe it's just the wrong time, the wrong place or the person is not ready to hear the truth. As you practice mindfulness, you learn to appreciate the stillness and quietness in your mind and from here you gain more choices in how you respond to situations. When you meet different people in the course of your day, you are more sensitive to their level of understanding of the Dhamma and what kind of speech the situation requires. One moment you're talking to a friend in quite a relaxed way, the next moment you might encounter someone experiencing a lot of stress and you might have to adapt quickly. It may not be appropriate to joke or say too much to someone so stressed, so listening becomes more important. Sometimes even the mundane pleasantries of normal human interaction are not possible with someone who is extremely stressed. We may simply have to be quietly supportive and patient with them. We can't always predict

what kind of people we'll meet or their state of mind, so we must rely on mindfulness and reflectiveness to see what's appropriate at each moment through our day.

As we open up to ourself with awareness developed through the practice, we get to know our character and habits. We come to appreciate more how the practice of right speech is firmly grounded in the practice of right view and right intention. What we are thinking determines what we talk about. Luang Por Chah warned the monks to be careful what they think about, as the more often one thinks a certain way, the easier it is for it to come out in speech. Notice how when you are experiencing unpleasant feelings and reacting to something with ill-will, it's so easy for your speech and behaviour to express irritation and short-temperedness. The anger we express can vary in the range of intensity from subtle negativity or sarcastic comments to direct insults.

When you have strong sensual desire motivating you it can lead you to be unusually pleasant or ingratiating with others because you want something from them. How many times has the stores monk or the kitchen attendant become your temporary best friend until you get what you want from them and then in an instant they become like thin air to you when you don't need them anymore. By reflecting on the nature of the intentions underlying our behaviour, we can witness the process of cause and effect at work. If you are not mindful and keep habitually thinking in a certain way, chasing after a set of desires rooted in any form of greed, anger or delusion and that have been strengthened by repeated mental proliferation, it won't be long before the craving comes out in your speech and actions. If you're jealous of someone, it tends to trigger reactions of back-stabbing and obsessive criticism. We need to restrain expression of the mental afflictions through our speech, but observe how our mind gains both strength and inner peace when we do this.

Practising right speech requires us to watch ourselves more than we watch others.

When we practice meditation regularly it familiarises us with the inner dialogue of the mind and the content of our thoughts. Part of the battle with the mental hindrances involves training in removing distracting thoughts and learning not to give so much importance to the details and perceptions contained in each train of thought. As we meditate we can witness how careless speech and a lack of mindfulness in daily life encourages unskilful states of mind that clog it up. Our feelings, emotions and thoughts condition each other, and these pathways are so well-rehearsed that in a split second we can move from experiencing a certain feeling, to identifying with a perception related to the feeling, and on to speaking under the influence of a mental defilement. It might be a momentary unskilful word or sometimes it can be a powerful eruption of negative emotion like an active volcano. As we progress in maintaining mindfulness and cultivating wise reflection, it leads to more careful and restrained speech and less mental agitation. When we establish the intention to refrain from harming others, we set up a monitoring process that can interrupt the flow of our craving, and at least prevent it from conditioning wrong speech or harmful conduct, even if internally we haven't fully abandoned that craving.

If we continue to give unwise attention to objects and perceptions that stimulate anger, greed or fear, we inevitably develop strong bias for and against things. This stimulates endless mental proliferation as we think about the details of that object over and over again, and the reinforced habit fuels deluded beliefs and views, and hence suffering. Although the bias manifests at first with a feeling, the mental conversation reflects the bias and reinforces it until it spills out into our speech. Notice how easy it is to become habitually negative in the way we talk about different things, especially

ordinary daily experiences that come up frequently in our life. It's like there is an automated response waiting to be expressed through our speech in a complaint. If we keep thinking about another person's faults, we will start believing those thoughts and allow them to paint a picture of the person in our mind. As we practice mindfulness we become aware of this danger and how we create fixed views and opinions that lead to our own and other people's suffering. You might notice how you may have a certain habitual negative or unmindful reaction to a person or situation, and expressing it verbally only reinforces the bias. It's not always expressed in words, either, but perhaps more subtly with a well-timed yawn, a moan or a shriek of excitement.

We are conditioned by these subtle unconscious biases, so developing mindfulness and clear comprehension reveals some of them as well as the suffering they create. As we train in mindfulness and bring up wise attention from moment to moment, we must also rely on the practice of patience. Patience helps us restrain and turn back powerful negative habits of body, speech and mind and persevere in generating the wholesome desire to learn and change. First we change the external speech patterns by learning how to filter what we say and abandoning the intention to speak unskilfully. Next we can see how once the unwholesome intentions are frustrated they begin to fade quite naturally. By witnessing the temporary nature of unwholesome intentions we realise how we can change our internal mental habits. We have to be strong internally and teach ourselves to ignore certain unskilful thoughts or replace them with more skilful ones. In the end nobody else can do it for us: we have to do it ourselves. The value of this training is that our speech becomes a tool for supporting the Dhamma rather than an expression of inner attachments and suffering that turns into a weapon or a cause for confusion.

Most of us have the habit of complaining and speaking negatively about others, the world in general or even about ourselves. We have to teach ourselves to be more restrained and to replace the unskilful speech with either better words or silence. Negative speech is fed by clinging to negative views and perceptions, and it keeps reinforcing them as long as we don't make ourselves aware of the danger. Thoughts and speech are *saṅkhāras*, or mental formations, and it helps to remember that both mental formations and speech patterns are impermanent and therefore can be changed and improved. Mental formations are also not-self and are not a fixed part of our personality. Try making yourself focus on the good things about that person, place or situation, instead of that which irritates or annoys us, and our thinking can change. If you tend to promote yourself and disparage others, reflect on areas of your character where you still have flaws, and maybe even point out some of them to your friends in order to bring up humility.

Learn how your mood can change for the better when you educate the pattern of thinking that is moving through your mind in this way. One useful technique is to stop and prompt yourself to look for the goodness in a situation or a person when they have triggered negativity in your thinking. When we observe that we are giving too much importance to the fault-finding mind, or a particular negative attitude based on conceit or self-view, we must learn to redirect our mind to appreciate the goodness in us, or that person or situation. As you contemplate in this way, you can consciously create skilful verbalisation or images in your mind directed to appreciating the good in other, or in something that has angered you. I always remember the example of the woman who had an accident and broke her leg in five places. She was in great pain and discomfort for many months. But when asked how she coped, she replied that when she

got fed up with her broken leg, she would look at the good leg that was left.

One of the supportive factors for the development of right speech and right action is *sammā-gārava,* which translates as right respect or right appreciation. Right respect is a quality that arises out of right view, but is not always brought up in discussions of the Eightfold Path. In the monasteries in Thailand you may hear teachers mention that a practitioner is progressing because they have the quality of *sammā-gārava*. This means that they sincerely value and respect the aspirations of their fellow practitioners, the goodness of the teacher and all the aspects of the practice itself. Right respect includes respecting the monastic discipline, the practice of meditation and also can be directed universally towards all fellow practitioners – beginners as well as venerated senior monks and nuns. One reflects on the goodness of the practice and those who are doing it. Right respect nourishes the mind with skilful reflections which develop gratitude and appreciation that act as a direct antidote to the negative mental states associated with heedlessness, jealousy, rivalry and aversion to others.

Normally, our judgements and preferences for other people are based on their appearance and personality, the level of knowledge and skills they have or how they interact with us. When we develop right respect for the practice of the Dhamma-Vinaya we take our thinking beyond that bias. Anyone in the robes who has fully committed to the practice of renunciation is worthy of respect. We can cultivate respect for those senior or junior to us, whether in actual age or in the length of time they have been training as a monastic. Right respect is closely linked to the development of *mettā* (good will), *muditā* (appreciative joy) and *paññā* (wisdom), and grows when one seeks out and recognises the good in oneself and others. When

this quality is present it softens our speech and actions and brightens the heart. It's a positive emotion. Right respect could not arise from hypnosis or brainwashing because it depends on wisdom and clear seeing of truth. It inclines the mind towards the skilful qualities that we use to abandon the mental defilements. We learn to recognise, appreciate and respect that which is worthy of respect.

We can respect anyone living in a monastic community for their integrity, renunciation and practice of letting go, and their service to others. Monastics are going against the stream of their desires and doing something that is difficult to do. They have made the effort to renounce family attachments, the comforts of lay life and the use of money, and made the effort to uphold the practice of celibacy. We can respect and appreciate the efforts of our fellow bhikkhus to train in the monastic discipline and to develop mindfulness and states of calm and insight. The sense of appreciation may grow and feel more profound when we are with senior monks and teachers who have consistently practised well throughout their lives. When you recollect the many senior monks who have visited us here in this monastery or those you have visited elsewhere, it makes you appreciate your good fortune. Bringing up those memories can energise and inspire you in the practice, even many years later.

The monastic training also gives us the way to show respect through our actions and speech, and as we deepen our development of mindfulness and wisdom it leads us to internalise the quality. When we meet a senior monk we always show our respect by kneeling and bowing with our palms together in *añjali*, and we give them the chance to speak to us first. If nothing else, it's a way you get to hear good Dhamma talks. If no respect was shown to an elder, it's unlikely that the teacher would want to say much. He may say something, but it's not the best environment to receive teachings. The training in monastic etiquette teaches us to show respect through

humble and gentle conduct. We learn to look after the needs of the senior monk and address them at the proper time. We learn to listen without interrupting and to be mindful of our posture and actions when we are in the presence of a senior monk. We learn to show respect by not physically towering over the senior monk or barging in front of him when he walks. The Buddha taught us to be willing to wait for senior monks and let them take the lead when walking together. However, the Buddha was clearly aware of different issues that may arise when monks live in a community. Such as he pointed out that if two monks arrive at the toilet at the same time, one senior and one junior, the monk who arrives first gets to use the toilet first, even if they are junior. It's not an inhumane or impractical system of training.

The monastic training found in Luang Por Chah's monasteries encourages us to develop a beautiful way of behaviour based on mindfulness, wisdom and compassion. It's good kamma for the one who practices like this and their practice becomes a gift to others as well. Another observation we can make is that when we show respect to other monastics, generally that respect will come back to us. It's not that we want it or seek it, but it's just the natural karmic result. If we're honest and respectful of others in our speech and behaviour, others tend to be honest and respectful to us. If we're polite and friendly to others, they tend to be friendly to us. This is how kamma works.

The Buddha praised the monk who talks in a way that promotes and encourages others to put forth effort in the practice. He praised talk that arouses energy directed to developing mindfulness and wise reflection. He praised speech that inspires renunciation and relinquishment rather than encouraging the listeners tendency for craving and clinging to the temporary and unreliable types of worldly happiness. He praised monks who encourage the practice

of *sīla*, *samādhi*, and *paññā*, through their words and by example. We don't have to become a preacher of Dhamma, delivering a sermon to anyone or everyone we can grab hold of, but it is a blessing when you can turn a conversation back to the practice of Dhamma or encourage the good in other people.

The Buddha taught that the benefits of skilful speech lead to the brightening of the mind of the one speaking and the minds of those listening. He reminded us that when a person is speaking the True Dhamma, the radiance of their mind is even brighter than the radiance of the sun or moon. If one encounters a person who has realised the Dhamma, you find that the qualities of faith and energy in the practice easily become aroused when listening to them, and one gains confidence. That person is such a value to the world. It is why our teachers, Luang Por Chah, Luang Dta Mahā Boowa, Luang Por Plien, Luang Por Liem and Luang Por Anan arouse such faith and interest in the Dhamma when we meet them. When we gain confidence in a teacher it leads to energy in the practice, but we also have to learn how to arouse that same buoyancy and enthusiasm for the practice within ourselves. One supportive factor is the practice of right speech. As Luang Por Chah used to say, we have to learn how to give a Dhamma talk to ourselves.

When you are just beginning your monastic training and find yourself seated at the bottom end of a line of monks, you might feel sorry for yourself or feel left out of things. You might look around at the senior monks at the top end of the line and assume that everything is smooth and easy for them. It may seem that all the good things happen to them and they get all the attention while you feel undervalued and neglected. You might feel that the senior monks make all the decisions and get all the praise and perks, but the reality is different. Senior monks who have practised well have already been cultivating sight speech, right action and right respect, as well

as developing their skills in meditation and insight. It's not like it's just a show for others or just a way to get more convenience or more support from the laity. Having put effort into the training and having developed these qualities, they become part of who the monk is. Those monks have learned how to endure hardship without complaint, follow the monastic discipline and cultivate the Noble Path. They have cultivated the practice of *mettā* for others, learned how to behave unselfishly and share their wisdom freely. The Buddha pointed out that a true *thera*, or elder, shows great respect even for the newest members of the community.

Recollecting the monks who lived at the time of the Buddha, we have the inspiring example of Venerable Sāriputta who was once admonished by a young novice because he walked out on alms round without wearing his robe evenly all round. This was a small breach of the monastic training rules laid down by the Buddha. Even though the novice was a young boy and Venerable Sāriputta was considered the chief disciple of the Buddha, a highly respected senior monk with many followers, he was still gracious, humble and respectful when the fault was pointed out. Venerable Sāriputta displayed great humility and showed the novice appropriate respect because the young trainee was speaking the truth. When Venerable Sāriputta admitted his error he thanked the novice for reminding him by lifting his palms together in *añjali*. Even a great teacher like Venerable Sāriputta, who was revered like an army general, could still be humble when his fault was brought to his attention. We believe he was a fully-awakened arahant and his mind was completely unblemished by the mental defilements of greed, anger and delusion. But his wisdom saw the need to uphold the social convention by following the monastic training rule and setting a good example to others.

Venerable Sāriputta provided other inspiring examples of good practice in the way he related to his life-long friend, Venerable Mahā Moggallana. Both monks gave mutual encouragement to each other throughout their time practising together. As young laymen they both had similar levels of faith and understanding and had experienced a similar disenchantment with worldly life before becoming monks. They had come from wealthy households, but quickly wearied of the normal pathways of life on offer that led only to temporary material or sensual happiness. They began searching for a meditation teacher who could help them understand the way to transcend the suffering that they had realised accompanies human existence. They looked for a teacher who could guide them in the cultivation of calm and insight through meditation. They displayed their true friendship by making a pact that whoever found a truly wise and enlightened teacher first would immediately tell the other. They had got their priorities right. They wouldn't lead each other astray or encourage each other to forget the meditation and go back to seeking the pleasures of the world, which inevitably only bring one to discontent and disappointment.

Venerable Sāriputta was known as Upatissa before he was a monk, and like his friend Kolita (later known as Mahā Moggallana), went to stay with one of the well-known meditation teachers, but was not completely satisfied with his practice. One day Upatissa encountered Venerable Assaji, one of the first awakened disciples of the Buddha, as he walked for alms in the village. Upatissa was sure Venerable Assaji must be fully awakened by his composed and mindful presence. After having requested and heard the Dhamma from him, he rushed to inform his friend Kolita of the good news. Upatissa had a great sense of loyalty and compassion for his friend and was keen to share this good fortune.

Even after they became disciples of the Buddha and had become fully awakened teachers with their own students, they maintained their great friendship, mutual respect and appreciation. For example, on one occasion Venerable Sāriputta was meditating quietly in the forest when he was beaten on the head by a stubborn *yakkha* (giant). He was so deep in his absorption and his mindfulness and equanimity were so well established that his mind didn't waver. His wisely reflecting on the painful feeling that arose gave him the insight that it was merely an unpleasant feeling that was impermanent and without self. Venerable Sāriputta noted the changing nature of feeling and, not taking ownership of it, just let it go. Afterwards, Venerable Moggallana asked him whether he had seen or felt anything when the *yakkha* hit him and Venerable Sāriputta replied that he hadn't seen anything but had merely experienced a slight headache. Venerable Moggallana then praised Venerable Sāriputta for being so restrained and having such unshakeable mindfulness. Even when an angry giant had smashed him on the head with a club, he'd continued to meditate with pure equanimity and insight into the transient nature of the painful feeling. Venerable Sāriputta immediately and with ease returned the praise and exclaimed how amazing Venerable Moggallana's psychic powers were that he could actually see the subtle body of the *yakkha*. The way the two enlightened monks displayed their mutual respect, happiness and appreciation for each other was completely natural and arose out of true friendship. This is what is known as *noble friendship*.

How we reflect upon and develop our external behaviour towards those around us has a huge impact on our life in the robes. How we relate to other Sangha members and lay supporters is closely linked to how we relate to ourselves. If one has goodwill and respect for oneself, one can have goodwill and respect for others. Ultimately, the practice comes back to developing skilful intentions

and putting effort into training the heart. As we develop mindfulness and understanding of how our consciousness is affected by wholesome and unwholesome mental states, we become clearer in knowing what qualities support our genuine happiness and the happiness of others, and likewise what qualities can cause us harm. We see the necessity of letting go of negative mental states and cultivating skilful states.

We aim to train the heart to the point where it is normal or habitual to live in an ethical way and respond to each situation that arises with the qualities of mindfulness and wisdom. These two qualities stabilise the mind and prepare it to deal with the ups and downs of daily life, or what we call the eight worldly winds. These comprise the experiences of gain and loss, praise and blame, status and reputation and its decline, and pleasure and pain. Take the daily receiving of alms food for example. How does your mind react to what you see and hear when you are on alms-round and receiving the food offered by the laity? Do you experience discontent when you watch others taking food or compare what you have with what they have, and maybe feel annoyed or hard done by? Do you feel proud that you take so little? In Thailand we used to have a saying: do you eat to practice or do you practice to eat? Ask yourself how you feel when another monk seems to be getting a better deal than you in the distribution of daily chores in the monastery. Observe how your mind reacts with these ordinary experiences. Can you maintain your goodwill and equanimity with the unexpected ups and downs that life in the monastery brings?

We learn to practice with mindfulness and aim to prevent the mind from falling into delight or aversion towards these normal experiences. What the world deals out is never going to be perfectly fair or equal to everyone because that would be impossible. Even when you consider the most powerful ideals of democracy, or

perhaps having compassion for one and all, and the many different ideals relating to the perfect world that inspire us, the reality is that there is never perfect equality in the experiences each person receives. We are not always going to get the same allocation as the next person, because our kamma is different. The equality in kamma is in the process of cause and result that affects all beings, and the simple truth that good actions lead to good results and bad actions lead to bad results. It applies to everyone. We may put effort into correcting some of the wrongs of the world, but it's even more important to develop the wisdom to reduce our own suffering.

When we attach to pleasant and unpleasant experiences with a strong sense of self, we make everything personal and suffer more for it. Strong identification with the sense of self and unrecognised conceit feeds the habit of constantly comparing oneself with others. It nurtures discontent and makes it easy to view everything as a personal injustice when we don't get what we want. Further destruction and mental damage is caused when we allow the mind to dwell in negative thinking and we hold tightly to adverse opinions about oneself or others.

We have to learn how to establish patience and wisely reflect on our experience and observe how suffering that arises as a result of past kamma is exacerbated by reacting with negative emotions and thinking that is led by the mental defilements. Some junior monks perhaps imagine that when they become a senior monk they will be able to take it easy and do everything according to their desires. They view their time as a junior monk almost like doing time in prison. But by holding on to such negative perceptions one is unlikely to arouse the faith and energy needed to go against the stream of unwholesome desires or develop the patience to practice with difficult situations. We must try turning the discontent around and establish a compassionate intention in the mind to develop patience,

mindfulness and insight to free the mind from the real source of suffering: the mental defilements.

There are always different skilful ways to develop our mind in each situation we face, however unpleasant. If you are caught up in the fault-finding mind, try making a determination to help those people you view negatively for as long as it takes until you have taught yourself to let go of the aversion. When one sees that applying the practice of Dhamma is the most powerful way to remedy our suffering, we gain strength and inner courage. We have to learn just what it is that is helpful and conducive to peace of mind, however difficult it may be to develop. The modes of thinking that only lead to more inner suffering and turmoil are what we must learn to abandon. We really have to value the qualities of patience and equanimity and to continuously return to the cultivation of goodwill, compassion and appreciation of others.

When we invest time and energy in developing mindfulness, compassion and insight, it opens up new pathways in the thought processes that lie behind our actions. If we notice someone else doing well, we can appreciate that. With practice, it becomes easier to see and appreciate the good in others and experience happiness when we do that. If you feel things are not going well for you, don't just give in to disappointment and negativity, but try to be honest in your appraisal of yourself. If you've come this far in your practice, then you will have already developed many good qualities. Even when something goes wrong for you, there might be many good and praiseworthy things you've done prior to that one mistake or misfortune, and you must make yourself aware of them. If you are stuck in habits of self-criticism or always putting yourself down, see how limited it makes you feel and how much bias is contained in that way of thinking. We are seekers of truth, and we must be willing to witness the mixture of good and bad that we may find in this set

of the five *khandhas* we call a self. We have to be able to assess and honestly see that where there is a fault or a weakness, it must be acknowledged first in order to grow from it. Where we have already improved, and learned to restrain or let go of negative qualities, we can also witness and accept that, whereby having *muditā* for ourself.

Luang Por Sangwaan was a wise and peaceful monk and a contemporary of Luang Por Chah. He embodied many of the qualities that we have discussed today: right respect, right speech and right action and the *brahmavihāra dhammas*. He had great respect and *muditā* for Luang Por Chah and visited him on many occasions, and Luang Por Chah always reciprocated with equal warmth and reverence. Luang Por Sangwaan was highly regarded by many of the awakened meditation masters of his era, but he always maintained his humility. He spoke about himself as if he hadn't attained anything and didn't know much about the Buddhist texts or the practice of Dhamma. He would say that he wasn't a great teacher like Luang Por Chah or Luang Dta Mahā Boowa, even though everyone who knew him believed his level of attainment was exactly the same. Luang Por Sangwaan had clearly developed the *brahmavihāra dhammas* in a complete way, and his character was full of great compassion and respect for others. I noticed when monks visited Luang Por Sangwaan, it didn't matter whether they were esteemed senior monks or ones who were newly ordained, he would treat them all with great dignity and respected them as equals. He wouldn't look down on them with conceit or expect anything from them, but would emanate a tangible radiance of peace, kindness and compassion.

On one occasion a group of us went to visit Luang Por Sangwaan at his monastery after he suffered a collapsed spine. He was unable to sit up without assistance and needed to be supported by a whole set of straps and harnesses that his attendant monks had organised

for him. He was renowned for his bravery and determination in the practice, and didn't appear bothered by his own deteriorating physical condition. By the way he looked, he must have been in great pain and very tired, but he kindly spent time with our group and gave us a profound Dhamma teaching. We hadn't asked for any teaching because we didn't wish to disturb him, but I noticed how as he talked his mind seemed to become brighter and more energised. He gave the whole teaching hanging from the harness set up to support his body weight. Luang Por Sangwaan had always been like that: absolutely humble, generous and mentally strong, even when it meant enduring discomfort. He told people that he didn't know much but he clearly knew more than the rest of us, because he was able to keep his mind peaceful, even with the pains of ageing and sickness tormenting him.

Luang Por Sangwaan never complained or was negative about others, rather, he looked for ways to praise other monks and lay practitioners for their efforts in the practice. He also always showed his appreciation of other respected teachers. He talked about Luang Por Chah and Luang Dta Mahā Boowa in such glowing terms that it was a pleasure to sit and listen to him. I remember at Luang Por Chah's funeral, I had the privilege of being assigned as his attendant with the duty to look after his various needs. We got a wheelchair for him because he was too weak to walk around the monastery. Once I settled him into his lodgings, I asked him if there was anything he needed and he replied that all he wanted was to go and pay respects to Luang Dta Mahā Boowa who was staying in the next hut. Luang Por Sangwaan said the most important thing for him was to go and bow to a good and Noble monk who was a fully-awakened arahant. When the time was suitable, we took him over to Luang Dta's hut and without waiting he crawled out of the wheelchair on to the floor and started bowing. When Luang Dta Mahā Boowa saw

Luang Por Sangwaan on the floor, he immediately stopped his conversation with the other monks present and began talking to Luang Por Sangwaan in a very kind and friendly manner. Luang Dta indicated that both monks had a similar level of understanding of the Dhamma. Luang Por Sangwaan told me later that we should always honour and respect those who are worthy. He always encouraged these qualities in his students. One could say that wisdom and compassion flowed out of his presence, his speech and his actions.

When Luang Por Sangwaan had first arrived at Wat Nong Pah Pong to participate in Luang Por Chah's funeral he had been received by a group of younger monks. These young monks had been assigned to register the names of all the visiting monks, because there were so many attending the funeral. Unfortunately they didn't recognise him or realise that he was a highly respected senior monk who had already been in robes for about sixty years. The younger monks mistakenly assumed that Luang Por Sangwaan was what they call a *luang dta*. A *luang dta* is an older man or grandpa who has only recently entered the robes, so they're still a junior member of the Sangha and hence as yet inexperienced in the Dhamma practice. Luang Por Sangwaan was frail and spoke slowly and with difficulty, so the monks receiving him took that as a sign that he really was inexperienced, and didn't know anything much about the Dhamma or Vinaya. The reality was that this well-known meditation master with thousands of disciples had visited Wat Nong Pa Pong many times over the years, but those younger monks let their conceit get the better of them. They kept calling him grandpa in a careless and disrespectful manner. In response, Luang Por Sangwaan, having known and respected Luang Por Chah for decades, did something that echoed the spirit of Luang Por Chah's teachings perfectly. Despite not being shown respect and without any sign of anger, Luang Por Sangwaan got down on his knees and requested

to pay respects to the younger monks who were deluded by their conceit and wrong perception. Other monks and lay people who witnessed this incident were shocked by the treatment he received but amazed by his humility and egoless response. Later he explained that he felt the best thing to do in the circumstances was to bow to his fellow monks without judging or expecting anything from them. Luang Por Sangwaan responded with a beautiful and memorable Dhamma teaching in an unfortunate situation. He showed how an awakened being can respond to inappropriate behaviour from others, while yet maintaining their dignity and respect.

For the rest of the time he stayed in the monastery, Luang Por Sangwaan didn't complain even once about the unfortunate event. Even though others who had observed the situation did comment on what had happened, he never mentioned it again. The brief incident left a lasting impression with those who witnessed it, not so much because of the poor behaviour of the inexperienced resident monks, but because Luang Por Sangwaan displayed beautifully how somebody who has practised and realised the Dhamma can respond with wisdom and compassion in a difficult and unpleasant situation. The qualities of the Dhamma were deep in his heart and he didn't do things just for show, but actually lived and breathed the Dhamma. It is rare to see someone show no ego or signs of being hurt, or not react with aversion when being disrespected or insulted. He was undoubtedly fully aware of the conventional requirements of the situation, but his mind appeared to have completely transcended what was going on and was not bothered at all.

Luang Por Sangwaan had been fearless in his earlier years, facing difficulties and dangers when wandering the forests of Thailand in a similar fashion to Luang Por Chah. Eventually he settled down to build a monastery on some old farmland and he named it The Monastery in the Field of Harmonious Dhamma. To accommodate

the large numbers of monks and laity who lived and practised with him, he built a huge meditation hall in the shape of an ocean liner. His room was at the top, rather like the bridge of the ship, where he could oversee his 'passengers'. He was very popular because of his wisdom, compassion and sincerity in the practice. On his birthday many monks would visit him and pay respects, and he received each monk by placing gifts of food and other items in their almsbowl, even when he was so frail that he had to sit in a wheelchair. He would be the one to practice giving even on his own birthday. That's how he practised right to the end of his life.

Tonight I have given you a few examples of wise and well-practised monks that we can seek to emulate in our own way. Every day we must put effort into cultivating all the aspects of Noble Eightfold Path. The factors of the path provide the ship that will take us across the ocean of saṃsāra. As we cultivate these factors they gradually shape our heart. You can be sure that through the workings of the law of kamma, all the patience and sincere effort you put into the practice of observing the precepts, cultivating mindfulness and wisely reflecting on the Dhamma, will be a cause for good things to arise, both now and in the future. We are actually providing an inheritance for ourselves to support us all the way to nibbāna, as well as a gift for the benefit of others. Ultimately, there is no lasting self or ego in anything we do, so we don't need to cling on to the good we do, but we still do it nevertheless. We are creating the causes that will liberate us from suffering.

I'll leave you with these thoughts for your reflection tonight. We can continue our meditation for a while longer and dedicate it to the Triple Gem.

Purity, Stability and Workability of Mind

One of the traditional techniques used to make a bronze Buddha statue is known as the lost wax method. The artist sculpts the original image out of wax and when everyone is satisfied with the representation of the Buddha that has been produced, they cover the wax image entirely with a white plaster cast which is then heated and the hot liquid wax is drained away. What remains is an imprint of the wax image which can be used as a mould to receive molten bronze for casting the statue. After the molten bronze cools down it solidifies in the mould to form the statue of the Buddha.

Once the bronze statue has been cast there's not a lot you can do to change the main characteristics and features of the image. The surface can be polished to remove small blemishes, the sharp edges and burrs can be ground off and any small holes or cracks can be filled, but only minor and superficial changes can be made. At the stage when the image is still made of wax it is soft, malleable and workable and can be reshaped and changed easily and as often as you want. A skilled artist might spend many days carving and re-carving even a small area of the wax image until it is right. The artist aims to create a beautiful and inspiring Buddha statue and until they are satisfied and changes can be made and mistakes rectified easily.

The education and training of a human being is a bit like this. In order to awaken one's mind to the Dhamma, one must rely on the mental qualities of softness and workability supported by ease and stability. A few people are naturally like this, but most of us have to cultivate the right qualities and create the conditions where our

minds are malleable and workable enough that they can be changed and improved through the Dhamma practice. We aim to see and understand the Dhamma, meaning we aim to understand suffering, its causes and how to transcend it. If one's mind is too stubborn and set in its ways, or clings too tightly to false perceptions and long-cherished wrong views, it is like solid bronze that is difficult to change or rectify. In such cases the development of the path to the end of suffering will be a slower and more problematic process. We can make some small and superficial changes to our behaviour, perhaps to the way we speak and do things and even some minor adjustments to the way we think, but as long as the mind is inflexible and clings tightly to its accumulated attachments, deep down it will remain hard to make changes. The more we cling to views and perceptions with a strong sense of self or conceit, the more gruelling it is to train the mind.

An important part of our practice as Buddhist monks, then, is the cultivation of those mental qualities that make the mind workable, pliable and soft, willing to learn from experience. On the other hand, the mind still needs to be stable enough to hold on to new correct views and perceptions long enough to consider and examine them, make adjustments and accept them if appropriate. If one's mind is too undisciplined, distracted and unstable, then it becomes like liquid wax that will just flow away because it cannot maintain any form at all.

When we practice meditation we are putting effort into bringing up mindfulness or present-moment awareness, and when this is more continuous we attain states of calm (samādhi). When the mind is calm and still it is in a suitable state to observe and contemplate the true nature of phenomena. This is supported by three mental qualities that are present: purity (*parisuddha*), stability (*samāhita*) and workability (*kammaniya*). Each of these qualities is essential to help

us look at experience in a new light and support the development of correct vision and knowledge of the way things are. The Buddha's path to awakening includes the training in virtue, meditation and insight, and directly leads to the cultivation of these qualities.

Luang Por Chah emphasised the importance of grounding our practice in morality and the Vinaya training, as it is a way for us to develop mindfulness, composure and purity of intention while abandoning unwholesome states of mind. The Pāṭimokkha rules form the basis for this training, and act together with the additional monastic observances inherited from the rest of the Vinaya texts, along with the teachings of Luang Por Chah. The *abhisamācāra* rules are those training rules outside the Pāṭimokkha which govern our conduct, speech, and use of the requisites, such as the ways to show reverence and so on. Many of these rules are termed minor rules, but Luang Por Chah emphasised their role in training the heart because they help us to be alert and aware of our behaviour. They make us pay close attention to our conduct in ordinary situations throughout the day. Similarly, we follow the various training rules, or *vatta*, which guide our actions in the way we relate to senior monks, look after the monastery grounds and lodgings and so on.

Training in these aspects of the Vinaya help us to cultivate many skilful mental qualities, such as mindfulness and alertness, respect, compassion and sensitivity in the way we conduct ourselves. Our practice of these monastic observances helps us to develop a sense of personal responsibility, restraint and composure, and aids our efforts to prevent the mind from falling into unwholesome states. This training lays the foundation for the development of deeper states of samādhi which in turn can be the basis for more developing profound insight into suffering, its causes and the realisation of its cessation. In brief, the training in the monastic discipline provides a foundation of purity of mind and purity of conduct. This training

requires us to pay close attention to our actions, speech and mental volitions and remove any unwholesome intentions that would lead us into harmful behaviour. Development of the qualities of ardency, alertness and full awareness is supported by the training in monastic discipline. We always have to know what we are doing and why, and deal appropriately with any unwholesome intentions that arise. This can only support the development of meditation practice.

When hearing about the way Luang Por Chah trained monks, you might notice that he didn't always talk about the highest philosophical aspects or most advanced concepts of Dhamma. At first glance, it seems that he was often discussing very ordinary and practical things and bringing up mundane aspects of the monk's life. But one can observe how the reminders to uphold the basic training rules and monastic discipline were laced with teachings and similes that *do* point to the deepest and most profound truths. Perhaps some people who have completed higher levels of education, might overlook the importance of this way of teaching, seeing it as Dhamma teaching on a simplistic or childish level. However, when you view the training as a whole and can see the value and importance of developing the mind to be soft, workable, malleable and suitably prepared for contemplation, then you can appreciate that even these small details or minor aspects of the training can be significant.

For example, Luang Por Chah might remind his students that when a junior monk approaches a senior monk to formally pay respects, it is incorrect for him to remove his sandals right in front of the teacher. The training rule requires the monk to remove his sandals at a respectful distance, say a few meters away, or around the corner or wherever suitable. The junior monk should only approach the senior monk and request to pay respects after he has removed his sandals and so needs to be mindful and fully aware of something as simple as when and where to take off his sandals. This kind of

training makes us mindful of time and place and encourages us to be undistracted. It cuts through mental hindrances in just the same way as when we are on the meditation cushion practising mindfulness. Another example might include the rule that when a senior monk is walking on alms-round without shoes, the junior monk's duty is to remove his own shoes so that he is not walking higher than the teacher. Also, if a senior monk is sitting without a sitting cloth, a junior monk cannot place a sitting cloth or mat down to sit next to him, unless the junior monk is ill or has received special permission, because he would be sitting higher than the senior monk.

When Luang Por Chah brought up these seemingly minor details of his students' practice, it could be a useful way to highlight the importance of developing moment-to-moment alertness in daily life. It also helps the student know how to set aside their pride and conceit and give up to the Vinaya training in different situations. Luang Por Chah was well-known for his unpredictability, too. For example, when he was walking at the head of a line of monks returning to the monastery from alms-round, he might engage them in conversation for some time and then after a while finish talking. Some of the junior monks might lose awareness, becoming lost in their own conversations, only to find that when Luang Por Chah suddenly paused his walking for a moment, they might end up bumping into one another in their efforts not to crash into the stationary Luang Por Chah.

The result of taking on the monastic training wholeheartedly is that one experiences the benefit of a non-distracted mind that is attentive to detail. Such a mind is required for constantly developing skilful mental states. Not only does the monastic training help you cultivate mindfulness and clear comprehension, but also it is a vehicle for developing the path factors of right intention and right effort.

It encourages us to nurture the intention of renunciation, non-ill-will and non-cruelty and to restrain and abandon unwholesome mind states based in greed, hatred and delusion. The drawback to be aware of, however, is that while one is adhering strictly to training rules and regulations, there is a danger that one's conceit and pride can grow, and one can become irritated and angry with or look down on those that don't follow the discipline so well.

The training in the Vinaya can be effectively used to help us develop mindfulness and clear comprehension all the time. We learn to recollect where we are, what we are doing, the nature of the situation and any rules that may apply, as well as knowing our state of mind. We develop the ability to recollect ourself from moment to moment with regard to the monastic training rules, and we could say that this makes it easier to recollect our meditation object and know our state of mind. Luang Por Chah's students had confidence that he was not basing his training methods on his own personal preferences or any attachment to biased or deluded views on the practice. The monks trusted his integrity, wisdom and compassion and saw that Luang Por Chah was emphasising the training rules and observances as a way to cultivate wholesome and skilful qualities in the minds of his students.

The Vinaya training requires us to be mindful and pay attention to our actions and intentions. Through this we prevent the mind being conditioned by distracted thinking or unwholesome qualities and to nourish and support the arising of wholesome qualities. If a monk forgets to keep a minor training rule, the feeling of remorse at his loss of mindfulness serves as a reminder to be more heedful and put more effort into the practice. The aim of the training is to encourage and strengthen the student's commitment to practice and their endeavours to be diligent and alert. When one forgets a training rule or duty it can reveal a moment of distraction or delusion

when one is lost in a train of thought and not aware or clearly comprehending the situation. The monastic training is like a tool that can help us become aware of our state of mind and uproot the ignorance and misunderstanding that underlies our automatic belief in a fixed and permanent self. The clarity and brightness of mind one develops through the training makes one grateful to have such a powerful and effective tool.

The practice of Dhamma-Vinaya is aimed at arousing energy and effort in the heart of the practitioner. It requires effort to restrain both our speech and actions and cultivate moment-to-moment alertness and mindfulness. Mindfulness and alertness of the body, our actions and our speech is developed continually, and as the practice of morality is purified, we experience inner happiness and freedom from remorse. This releases and channels mental energy for the more subtle work of directing attention to a meditation object. Whatever part of the training you look at, it requires effort. It requires effort and energy to learn the Pāṭimokkha rules and put them into practice. It's not surprising if from time to time a monk forgets or is simply unaware of a minor rule, but it is important to maintain the right attitude that one is willing to learn and train oneself. We have to take the training on trust and learn from what we observe. We observe our own behaviour and make corrections if needed, rather than always resisting or brushing aside rules that we may think are unimportant. The training is a vehicle to help us recognise and abandon negative qualities such as stubbornness, conceit or pride that support the delusion of self and bring us so much suffering and conflict.

To successfully train and live in a monastic community requires open-mindedness and willingness to learn. Sometimes a newly-ordained monk is compared to a wild animal recently caught from the forest that needs to be tamed. It's really the mind that needs to be

tamed and one begins that task by following the monastic rules and observances. As lay people we were used to following all our desires and moods because we assumed that it was the way to gain more happiness and satisfaction in life. But we found that following desires and moods without wisdom fuels more craving which hardens into attachment and clinging, and leads to suffering and discontent. Now we learn how to restrain and give up the wanting and the negative desires, but this requires us to practice going without certain material things and sense pleasures that we have been accustomed to in the past. We also have to practice patience with feelings of dissatisfaction that arise whenever our desires are frustrated. The same is true when our responsibility as a monastic requires us to do any tasks or duties that we're not really interested in doing, or don't feel like doing. So it is important to remind yourself that it is all part of the process of taming the mind.

Whenever one chants the Mettā Sutta, note how the Buddha emphasised the qualities of humility, gentleness and making oneself easy to teach. These are the qualities that soften the mind and make it pliable and workable so that it can receive the Dhamma. The more patient effort we develop, the more we will receive back from the training. We are learning how to set aside our preferences, views and opinions and this results in us having more self-control, more courage and more self-sacrifice. It is the basis for warm and smooth relations with fellow monastics as well as experiencing a feeling of ease within oneself.

The Buddha and our teachers have proven that a human being can train and improve themself all the way to the point of fully awakening to the truth and finally experiencing liberation from rebirth and suffering. They have shown that the causes of suffering – ignorance, craving and anger – can be abandoned. They have given us the proof we need to invest time in the practice and put up with

the difficulties, and they have provided us with good examples to emulate. Now our job is to follow in their footsteps. We are fortunate enough that there are still living examples for us to learn from. We are developing the path to awaken to the Four Noble Truths, not merely intellectually, but through actually uprooting the mental afflictions from within our heart, which are the causes of suffering. To do this we must recognise the value in developing the correct qualities that will bring the results we seek. *Parisuddho*, purity of morality, is a vital component of this training and arises out of the practice of sense restraint and the monastic discipline. We learn to obtain our requisites without harming or exploiting others. We learn to relate to each other and the lay community through mindfulness, kindness and compassion. As we purify our morality through this training, the mind experiences freedom from remorse and becomes accustomed to reflecting on the wholesome or unwholesome nature of our intentions This is invaluable for the cultivation of calm and insight.

Simultaneous with purifying our morality, we develop the quality of firmness or stability of mind, sometimes referred to as *samāhita*. By improving our practice of mindfulness and alertness, and through the commitment to the monastic training, we experience longer periods with the continuous presence of wholesome mental states because we engage in skilful and harmless conduct. The effect of this is to change the mind. Our mind achieves stability and firmness and this gets refined in meditation as we develop the ability to put attention unwaveringly on an object. Stability and an unwavering steadiness of mind are necessary requirements to break through delusion and awaken to seeing the true nature of phenomena, and the processes by which suffering arises and how it ceases.

The mind is firm because it has let go of the remorse-producing unwholesome intentions that sway our speech and actions and create restlessness and anxiety.

The Buddha taught us to centre awareness in the present moment, not dwell on the past or the future, so we cultivate mindfulness and maintain mental firmness in all postures. As the mind becomes less distracted it calms down and becomes firm and still. Stillness brings the experience of inner happiness and unification to the mind which allows us to direct attention towards knowing an object and carefully considering it with wise reflection. If we direct the mind to know the sensation of the in-and-out breath then it will become calm and stable as it fully knows and merges with the breath. This quality of stability of mind is not restricted to the sitting posture alone. After you have finished sitting meditation your aim is to continue maintaining mindfulness from moment to moment as you change posture or activity. The undistracted mind facilitates observation and investigation of the truth, in particular to seeing the three universal characteristics of existence: impermanence, suffering and not-self. When the mind is stable and still, we can see through the internal stories and preoccupations that we believe in so much and mistakenly identify with as a self. It's like the difference between trying to read something written on paper that is flapping about in the wind and reading it once you have stepped in doors away from the wind.

The qualities of purity and stability are supported by the third quality of workability or readiness of mind, *kammaniya*. Together, like three friends, when these qualities are present in the mind they allow us to look at experience and comprehend it in light of the Four Noble Truths. The mind that is workable and malleable is like the soft wax to be sculpted into the Buddha image. There is softness and subtleness that allows us to observe, investigate and question

our experience of body and mind objectively from different angles in an undistracted way. The mind is not so soft however, in that our awareness of experience just flows away from us in distracted trains of thought leading to confusion and agitation. For example, the mind that is workable can stop and question beliefs and attachments originating from self-view that we have gained through previous mental conditioning. It can see the changing nature of thoughts, perceptions and the physical body that we identify with so strongly.

In the past we took for granted that this body and mind are stable entities that are unchanging and have an owner who is in control. But if we are to understand suffering, its cause and cessation, we need to peacefully examine these assumptions and views that we cling to. We need a state of mind that is pure, stable and ready to work, just like the wax which has to be soft enough to be shaped and worked into the Buddha image. Our external training in the monastic discipline leads us in this direction, and is buoyed by the stable presence of mindfulness and the feeling of well-being it brings. The training brings up a sense of humility, gentleness and ease of mind that can look at and see through the ingrained and deeply-cherished attachment to self.

These qualities, *parisuddha*, *samāhita* and *kammaniya* provide enough mental stability, ease of mind and continued awareness to enable us to understand the process of cause and effect and the selfless nature of our experience on a much deeper level. In the beginning, we must study the texts and listen to Dhamma talks. However, if we are determined to really change this mind, to adjust it and pull it away from its fixed views and attachment to self, which lead to suffering, then the presence of these three qualities will allow us to turn attention inwards and see the arising and passing away of phenomena in a peaceful and undistracted way. The peaceful mind

can investigate suffering and its causes with less and less bias, and can accept the results of its own investigation. This is why we do a lot of meditation – sitting meditation and walking meditation – and put effort into bringing up mindfulness in daily life. I remember how when I was a lay person and fell ill or experienced something unpleasant, I would complain and feel I didn't deserve the experience or that it was somehow wrong or unjust. The more I trained in meditation I found that I could pay attention to what was going on better, without so much bias, and accept that there was no one who was ultimately able to prevent these things from happening.

Much of our time in the practice is taken up by developing awareness of the mental formations that continuously arise and pass away, and particularly to know which of them are wholesome and which are unwholesome. Unwholesome formations cause suffering and lead us into the coarsest kinds of behaviour based on jealousy, negative desires and aggression. Contemplating and witnessing the impermanent and therefore selfless nature of these formations enables us to abandon them. As we reflect more, this awareness becomes sharper and more refined. As we continue to evaluate our internal mental activity we become increasingly aware that it is the nature of all mental states to arise and cease, even the skilful ones. We observe how our unawareness of impermanence leads us to grasp at and reinforce the clinging to the sense of self that arises both with the wholesome and unwholesome states. We become familiar with the way the distracted mind creates and follows mental pathways that make it grasp onto things and cling to views, opinions, and ideas of who we are and what we want. It is the stability and workability of mind together with the clarity of mindfulness that allows us to stop and look back at our own experience.

With deeper understanding we see the universal nature of the three characteristics that are present in physical and mental activity and all the external phenomena that we experience. Sometimes we are observing and letting go of the automatic identification with physical and mental formations as they arise into awareness. Sometimes awareness only follows up after the event, and we can only look back at a mood or a thought pattern that has just arisen to see it as impermanent and without self. Even such reflection can give us some insight, however delayed. But we really aim to develop the malleability and workability of mind to be able to stop and question what is arising from moment to moment, observing what we believe in and where we are giving too much self-importance to thoughts and perceptions.

When the mind is stable and workable, we can contemplate fluently and become fully aware of how clinging feeds suffering. The calm, undistracted mind allows us to investigate the nature of this body and expose the delusion of self-view. We need to keep reflecting on our experience and asking questions about the nature of this body. How permanent is this body? What is it composed of? Who owns the different elements that make up this body? How does it change with ageing and sickness, heat and cold, feelings of tiredness and hunger? Who does physical form belong to? Who controls it? What or who knows the body in the body?

The conditioned nature of our existence is there for everyone to observe, but we have to train ourselves in investigating the truth for it to become apparent. We learn through observing sense contact and noticing how from moment by moment sense impressions of sight, sound, taste, smell and touch condition the arising of pleasant and unpleasant feelings. We have to develop the skill of turning around to look at what's going on and maintain equanimity as we do it. Whilst we can maintain equanimity and stability of mind we

have the opportunity to see the arising of suffering through clinging. We can see how a sense of self arises and further conditions attachment to mental formations and identifies with every thought, memory and feeling as self or as belonging to a self.

If we don't question what is happening in our experience, and we don't carefully examine and learn from it, then we can never really progress in meditation practice. But to be able to look and learn, the mind has to be workable, soft and pliable and ready to put things down when needed, and then pick them up again and look at them with calm and insight. It's not that we should never attach to anything in the course of our practice. At first we need to attach to the Vinaya training as a skilful tool to purify our morality. And we attach to the texts and teachings we receive to guide us in our meditation practice. Also, we attach to the concepts of good and bad kamma which strengthen our sense of shame and moral compunction (*hiri-ottapa*). We need to be able to identify the things that will be useful to our practice and hold on to them for as long as they serve their purpose. We use them as skilful means, but avoid clinging to them so tightly that they become a source of suffering for oneself or others. Even our views on Dhamma or Vinaya can become a source of suffering. We may hold so tightly to them that we feel we must argue with or resist others because they hold different views or become angry because we dislike what they say.

We aim to constantly develop the ability to pay close attention to our own mind, both in formal meditation and every moment of the day. It means we are continually coming back to the present moment with mindfulness and clear comprehension, looking and learning from what is going on. We have to be flexible enough to question our own views on what we think is right or wrong, what is true and real and what is not, and what is self and what is not. It is correct to put our beliefs and views about the truth to the test. Then

we can choose to believe or hold onto a view because it is line with what we have found out through our practice, or likewise discard it when we can see it as delusion that leads to suffering. For example, one might view all thinking as bad and become stressed because one cannot stop thoughts from coming up during meditation. If one looks closely one might see that the suffering actually comes from the attachment to the view that one doesn't want thoughts arising in meditation, rather than the thinking process itself. Sometimes we have to be honest and recognise that by clinging to a certain view we are not gaining peace or to an improved state of mind, but only creating more problems and stress. Thought is impermanent and not self, and when one sees that it becomes less of a problem. Ultimately, we have to reflect skilfully for ourselves. Teachers and Dhamma friends can only help us by pointing out our wrong views and attachments, but they can't do the job of contemplating and abandoning them. We have to be responsible for our own practice.

It's like the story of the two villagers walking along the path going home to their village when they encounter some straw strewn about the ground. They consider the straw and agree that it could be useful for their animal pens back home and so they tie it up and carry a bundle each. Later on they find lots of sticks and branches in one place and one of them noted that the sticks were more valuable than straw because they could be used as fuel, so he puts down his straw and bundles up the sticks to carry. The other man kept hold of his straw thinking that what he had already was good enough and he firmly refused to swap it for the sticks. Walking on further they encounter some old rags and discarded clothes on the ground and again the first man swaps his bundle of sticks for a bundle of rags as they are more valuable to him. The second man continues to cling tightly to his bundle of straw. He is still determined to get some value out of the straw and convinced that he is right, refuses

to consider the possibility that the cloth is more valuable than straw and will not risk putting it down for anything new. Finally they walk past an area where some precious stones and gems were scattered about and as previously, the first man left aside his bundle of rags and collected together the precious stones to take home while the second man continues to cling tightly to his bundle of straw, firm in his belief that what he has already is the best thing for him. In the end one man goes home and becomes rich for life, the other misses out, but he does get some free straw to line his animal pens.

Another way our teachers describe the effects of the practice is that it is a process of awakening. We call the Buddha the Awakened One. We are students of the Buddha and are going through a process of awakening as we develop the qualities of heedfulness, mindfulness and wise reflection. Mindfulness is a word used a lot these days in connection with meditation and different therapies and stress reduction practices. Mindfulness is a translation of the Pali word *sati*, which literally means 'keeping things in mind'. It is an essential part of the Buddha's method leading to awakening and it has been doing its job for the last 2,500 years. As monks, we have a duty to develop a complete understanding of the practice of right mindfulness or mindfulness as practised as part of the path leading to the end of suffering. We have the duty to integrate the practice of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness with the other factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Mindfulness, developed together with the other path factors contributes to the arising of wisdom and the ending of suffering. Right mindfulness depends on the presence of the previous six factors of the Noble Eightfold Path, and together with the other factors is present in the eighth factor of right concentration, or *sammā-samādhi*. As one practices and improves one's ability to pay attention to the present moment in meditation or any activity, the practice of mindfulness will be supported by clear comprehension

and wisdom. With these qualities working together, one is mindful of a range of things at any moment and in different situations. One is alert to any relevant Vinaya training rule that applies as well as focusing on the task one is doing and developing awareness of one's current state of mind. One can also be aware of a meditation object or investigate one of the three universal characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and non-self. The practice becomes more focused and refined when one becomes still in deep meditation, but these same skilful qualities are helping one all the time.

Practising mindfulness means keeping something in mind, but it also includes all the other path factors. It's the link to wisdom. It is the quality that brings wisdom to function in the present moment, like a taxi that picks up a passenger and brings them to where they need to be. True awakening doesn't simply mean the presence of mindfulness alone: awakening to the truth is conditioned by the presence of clear comprehension, diligent effort and wisdom amongst many other skilful qualities. Mindfulness and wisdom purify our actions. The continuous presence of mindfulness and clear comprehension provides stability of mind and the workability of mind that allows us to fully understand what we are doing and what object the mind is contemplating. This is required to see the process of the arising and ceasing of suffering. To realise the Four Noble Truths there has to be a combination of mindfulness and wisdom.

As people get older they might need to use spectacles to improve their eyesight, but as they use spectacles they also realise the importance of keeping them clean. Dirty spectacles don't allow you to see things very well. We need purity, stability and workability of mind for the faculty of wisdom to function well and that comes through training. Mindful recollection of the body, feelings, mind and mind objects with continuous awareness is similar to the action of constantly cleaning the spectacles and leads to clear knowledge

and vision of the truth. With clarity of insight one sees the body and mind as being impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self. Such clarity arises as the mind is constantly exposed to the truth.

The heart of our practice is this merging of mindfulness and wisdom. The presence of these two qualities gives the mind clarity and direct insight into the nature of phenomena, where previously one relied on what one had read, heard or thought about. This is the wiping away of dust from the spectacles so that one can really see clearly the nature of body and mind as empty of self. This is the practice of vipassanā, and the clear knowledge and vision that arises from it results in the mind becoming tired and weary of the delusion and attachment that leads to suffering. The mind turns away from the endless desires and attachments that one views as self. One turns away because one clearly knows that where there is clinging and identification with that which is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, there will be suffering.

Many people join vipassanā retreats these days, which is a good thing, especially as it has become a more mainstream meditation technique for Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike. But when we say we do vipassanā for ten days, does it really mean that vipassanā is taking place? Vipassanā means clearly knowing and seeing the way this body and mind is. To see clearly, you have to develop the right supporting qualities such as purity, stability and malleability of mind. When these qualities are present you can look at whatever you experience with detachment and have a chance to break through preconceptions and the delusion of self. To see a mood, a thought or a sense object as impermanent you have to be able to see it arise and cease with clarity. You have to look carefully to see right through the attachment to self-view.

The activity which many people assume to be vipassanā is in fact remembering and thinking, isn't it? You adjust your thinking

a little to note the arising and ceasing of sensations or you might remember a teaching and say to yourself that sights are impermanent. Everyone can remember the words, but to know visual consciousness arising and ceasing or observe feelings arising and ceasing, we need to look carefully and continuously with sustained mindfulness. It's like when you walk around the monastery; sometimes you see an object in the distance and quickly recognise it as something familiar, noting its features and giving it a name. For example, you might see a shape in the distance and think that it's a tree stump or a bird or an animal. But unless you keep watching and observing you'll never really know for sure. You could just believe your initial perception and leave it there. Perhaps when you get nearer you might be surprised when the tree stump starts moving and becomes a kangaroo or something else. Or it's like that monk who was staying out in the forest and set up camp next to a big rock thinking he had found a nice spot to meditate, only to realise later on, when the rock started moving, that it was actually an elephant. He ended up not sleeping a wink the whole night long. For the truth to become apparent it requires stillness, stability and workability of mind to keep looking and observing what the mind is engaged with and not jump to conclusions. Once you have observed carefully and fully there will be fewer surprises.

The Noble Eightfold Path has to be developed and cultivated. When it has been developed well, it will lead to *sammā-ñāṇadassana*, or clear knowledge and vision of the way things are. Clear knowledge and vision cannot be gained from the texts or thinking alone, it has to come from applying the mind to the task of investigating one's experience of phenomena until you see clearly how impermanent and unstable they are. When you see clearly the impermanent nature of things, then the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness becomes apparent, because what is impermanent is unstable and

doesn't last. Things that are unstable and change cannot bring us permanent happiness, as they are unreliable and difficult to bear with. We cannot control them and can't call them an absolute self. Having a human body is hard to bear with, isn't it? Just having a human body and putting up with endlessly changing feelings and experiences is not satisfactory at all. You experience hunger and then feel full once you eat. We feel energetic and then tired, healthy and then sick and so on. The body goes its own way in spite of all the care we give it, so we say it is unreliable and unsatisfactory.

It is difficult to be with the human body from moment to moment. We sit down aiming to feel comfortable, then after a while we feel pain and have to move and change posture to find a pleasant feeling again. Then we feel pain again and have to move yet again. If you're watching and observing this, then the characteristic of unsatisfactoriness becomes clear. What is impermanent and what is unsatisfactory is clearly something that is without any kind of lasting or absolute self, because one cannot control it or make it the way a self would want it to be. This is the nature of this body and all physical phenomena. This is also the nature of thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

As unenlightened beings, we can convince ourselves that we know the way things are just by remembering the descriptions and explanations, but just observe the transient nature of your own memory and perceptions and see how unreliable they are. You can ask two monks about an event that happened five years ago and you'll get two different descriptions. We can learn to believe that things that never happened did happen, or believe that things that did happen never happened. We cling to memory and perception as self, but these change with time and we can suffer as they change. When we are not mindful of this, we'll grasp onto our perceptions as self, convinced that's who we are. If it's an unpleasant memory, it

can give rise to the view that one is an unpleasant person or a person whose life is not worth anything or give rise to a negative view of the world. Pleasant memories stimulate pleasurable feelings that can give us a perverted view that everything in our world, including ourselves, is good or perfect. It can even become what we expect or feel entitled to in life.

The process of awakening develops from training the mind to look and examine the way things are. It means awakening to the truth of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and lack of self in conditioned phenomena. As the mind awakens to the truth, it is relying on each factor of the training to support it. That is the training in the Vinaya, training in mindfulness and clear comprehension and training in wisdom. The awakened mind is characterised by calmness, contentment and is always ready to investigate the truth. If we're going to free ourselves from suffering there has to be that ability to turn our attention back to ourselves, back to this body and mind, to see how suffering arises so that we can remove the causes. We learn that wherever there is attachment to self, suffering is not far away. One develops and strengthens the skill of investigating the truth over time. We get used to observing and reflecting on experience rather than following our reactions and reinforcing our conditioned views. If we develop these skills the practice will get easier.

When the mind is calm and workable our meditation can gradually remove the mental afflictions that cause us suffering. The result is a growing sense of peace and well-being, the mind brightens and we feel at ease within ourselves. We aim to maintain equanimity, keep the mind firmly in the middle, neither siding with the pleasant nor unpleasant feelings and experiences, and learn to see everything as Dhamma. When the mind has equanimity and is at ease it can understand the nature of suffering and abandon its cause. We're

training our mind to the point where it's natural to see everything as Dhamma in this way.

So, we are here tonight dedicating our efforts to the practice of Dhamma. You might make an offering of your efforts tonight to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. I'll leave you with these words for your contemplation.

Mindfulness Directed to the Body

Living as Buddhist monks means we have left the home life and our families, but we are not without support, warmth and friendship in our lives. When people are new to Buddhism they sometimes assume that a monk must live a very lonely and austere life and that they are probably unhappy. The reality is different. When we enter the monastic community we get the support of the Sangha, both at the monastery we reside in and from the wider Sangha around the world. We get support from the senior members of the Sangha in ways of advice, warmth, friendship and material support. Our fellow monks teach us most of the essential basic skills, such us how to measure and sew a new set of robes, and how to chant, and they provide us with many other kinds of knowledge and skills that support our practice. Generally, newly ordained monks lack knowledge and experience, so they have to rely on other, more experienced members of the community for advice on various aspects of the monastic training and meditation. The other Sangha members are like a resource that is immediately available to us at a time when we might find the practice challenging. Being our good friends (*kalyāṇamittā*) they both encourage and guide us in the right way to develop the practice. A true friend will only encourage and support us in developing the correct path that leads to the end of suffering.

In Thai forest monasteries they call the teacher *por-mae krooba ajahn*, which translates as 'mother-father-teacher'. One of the roles of the senior monks in the Sangha is to take responsibility for the training and well-being of the junior monks, just like a parent takes

responsibility for the education and welfare of their children, or a school teacher their students. When we take up the ochre robes and enter the Sangha we also refer to the Buddha as our Dhamma father, and as monks we are like the children of the Buddha – the *sakyaputtā* or sons of the Sakyan Sage. He gave us the Vinaya training which lays out our duties and responsibilities in the practice and within the monastic community. The Buddha made many wise stipulations for his monks, such as that we should always look after each other when sick, share our knowledge and skills with the community and encourage each other not to hold onto wrong views. The reality is that as a Buddhist monk we can experience some of the best kind of friendship. We call it *noble friendship* and it provides support in our practice for the end of suffering.

The Buddha, as leader of the Sangha, frequently reminded his students of the various dangers that can threaten their practice as monks. Living the life of celibacy and committed to the practice of simplicity, sense restraint and harmlessness is not always easy as we have to contend with external pressures. Such pressures include the differing views and values of non-Buddhists and the confusion and temptations present in society, which are moving in a different direction than the one we take in pursuing the Noble Eightfold Path. We also have to cope with the internal pressure from our own mental defilements manifesting as craving and attachment which regularly stirs up and agitates our mind. The Buddha, like a caring and concerned parent, gave instruction to the monks and reminded them of what dangers exist and gave skilled advice on how to deal with them.

The Buddha warned the monks about the different dangers to the practice of celibacy, for example. One must learn to deal skilfully with all the various forms of sensual desire, and in particular sexual

desire, because it is the most powerful. He also warned of the danger posed by growing attachment to wealth and fame and therefore encouraged monks to cultivate moderation in their material needs, love of solitude and the qualities of contentment and restraint of the senses. He exhorted monks to go against the stream of their normal desires and attraction for the sense objects surrounding us in the world, and instead focus on developing insight into the impermanent nature of sense pleasures and the lack of a true or abiding self in material form. Our culture encourages us to indulge in seeking out and accumulating material things and equates that with happiness. Likewise it idealises the goals of fame, reputation and power as expressions of success. The Buddha praised the monk who lives in simplicity and wants for little. He pointed out that the normal measurements for success in the world do not apply to monks, and may even be a source of intoxication that obstructs one from developing mindfulness and deep insight. It can be preferable to continue one's practice in anonymity, so that one can devote all one's energy to the development of samādhi and wisdom. The Buddha also pointed out the danger of giving in to excessive greed or aggression, which necessarily leads to conduct which hurts, exploits or harms others and makes negative kamma, which comes back to us. He was constantly encouraging the monks to practice with patience and perseverance, to be alert and aware of these dangers and to keep cultivating the path.

One helpful practice the Buddha suggested is to frequently develop certain skilful perceptions as a basis for developing correct views, insight and dispassion. He encouraged us to develop the perception of the four basic physical elements of earth, air, fire and water which make up this body and the material world. We should investigate these elements to see that all beings are composed of

these elements, but in essence they are not-self and do not belong to a self. For example, the Buddha encouraged monks to make their minds like the earth, maintaining stillness and equanimity with whatever pleasant or unpleasant experiences come their way. Monks should make their minds the same as the earth, which remains unmoved whether people throw agreeable or disagreeable objects onto it. The Buddha also taught us to pay attention to the perception of the unattractive features of the body, which helps to subdue and eventually abandon sexual desire. We focus on this perception to counter the habitual fascination with the beautiful aspects of physical form and identification with the body as something desirable. We are also encouraged to cultivate the perceptions of death, impermanence, the foulness of food, the inherent suffering in the conditioned nature of our existence, and not-self, or emptiness.

We should frequently give wise attention to these perceptions as an antidote to the stream of worldly thinking that fuels delusion. Developing the perceptions of impermanence and emptiness gives insight into the universal characteristics of phenomena and helps us loosen the ties to old ways of thinking based on attachment. Insight cuts through the endless mental craving which dominates our experience and leads to cool dispassion. The Buddha pointed out that when you cultivate mindfulness directed to the body, it sobers us up from intoxications and is a cause for heedfulness to arise accompanied by a sense of urgency in the practice. As Luang Por Chah recollected from his own contemplation, with the arising of clear insight into the impermanent, unattractive and selfless nature of the human body, you feel like someone who has just realised that for many years they have been deceived by a confidence trickster and are finally able to see the reality of their situation.

When we contemplate the body in particular, we have to be aware of the challenges this activity brings with it, because our former conditioning is based on attraction to sensuality and sensual indulgence. We are used to letting our minds wander unguarded out into the world through the five senses. Focusing one's mind on the first foundation of mindfulness is to go against the stream of the world. When mindfulness directed to the body is practised regularly, one becomes familiar with holding attention within the boundaries of one's own body and letting go of unnecessary external concerns that promote attachment and confusion. Most people don't usually direct their mind to pay attention to perceive the true nature of this physical form – to see its impermanence and unattractiveness. In the beginning of this practice, as we're not used to viewing the body in such light, we have to be careful. It is not uncommon to experience states of mental resistance which can easily provoke feelings of anger or depression. We don't like it when our views regarding the happiness associated with sensual pleasures are challenged, even though it is based on wrong understanding. We need to develop supportive positive qualities to balance and calm our mind and to mitigate the unwanted negative reactions that can arise from contemplating the repulsiveness of this body.

Reflecting on the support one receives from the Sangha and one's teacher gives us confidence in the practice, and together with recollecting one's *sīla* and the service one does for other people, it helps us to generate a sense of inner well-being. The sense of ease and well-being we gain from living in a moral way and developing goodwill towards self and others is an important factor in settling the mind down and cushioning any short-term negative reactions arising from contemplating the body. When we reflect on and appreciate the goodness of leading the monk's life, the benefits of following the Vinaya training, and the wholesome kamma we're

generating through the practice, it also supports the feeling of inner well-being that prevents one from becoming depressed.

Another reflection used to prepare the mind for contemplating the unattractiveness of the body is to examine the drawbacks and dangers whenever one does fall under the sway of sensual desire and attachment to endless pleasure seeking. Whatever the object or experience of gratification that our mind is seeking out through contact with sights, sounds, tastes, smells and touch, it can only bring us to experience temporary feelings of pleasure and delight and a fleeting distraction from whatever other painful or unpleasant experiences may be occurring. The grasping at pleasurable feelings also sets us up to experience more pain in the future, because we are bound to be disappointed when we expect to find lasting satisfaction in that which is inherently transient. The nature of sense experience and also the pleasure we derive from it is impermanent. You can't draw equal amounts of pleasure from seeing the same pleasant sight or eating the same delicious food over and over again. We become addicted to forever seeking varied and more intense experiences through our senses because we get bored with the regular stimulation. It is physically impossible to maintain the same level of high from repeated experiences. The interest and pleasure gained through the senses is constantly waning and fading. As Luang Por Chah used to point out with a chuckle, the more you indulge in eating your favourite sweets, the less pleasure you get from them.

When you examine and reflect on the true nature of desire and clinging to sense pleasures, you are preparing yourself to examine the nature of the body with the right attitude and right intention. This reflection helps you to steadily cultivate the *nekkhamma-saṅkappa*, or the intention of renunciation, which turns the mind away from habitual grasping at desirable sense objects and towards gaining a more detached awareness of them.

Many years ago the normal practice for a meditation monk was to pay respects to his teacher and request permission to go and spend time in a charnel ground. A charnel ground is typically a place where bodies are cremated, or left out in the open to decompose or even be eaten by vultures. One of the practical ways the teacher would check to see if the candidate was truly ready for such a challenging practice was to ask the monk if he knew the way in and out of the charnel ground. This literally meant the route he would take through the forest when he entered and departed from that place. The teacher asked this because there was always the danger that after a monk had meditated continuously for a long time next to a decomposing corpse, powerful fear might arise and overwhelm his mind. Fear can be an intensely destabilising experience for the mind, so the teacher wanted to make sure that his student knew the quickest and best escape route in case of such an emergency.

It is a challenging practice to bring your mind to contemplate a decomposing body even briefly and even more so to spend a number of days camping next to a rotting corpse. When I was a junior monk in Thailand we had the chance to do this sometimes as a way to learn and become familiar with the process of decomposition, and to investigate one's own attachment to the body. Both the foreign monks and Thai monks agreed it was an unpleasant practice, but it was especially challenging for the Thais who, because of their cultural fear of ghosts, often had to deal with more intense experiences of fear. Despite the confrontational nature of sitting long periods in meditation next to a decomposing corpse, it was a rare opportunity to observe first-hand the natural process of degeneration that takes place after death. Even those who were less afraid of ghosts found it quite challenging to investigate and closely observe a corpse, staying with the unpleasantness of the meditation while questioning their own normal physical infatuation with the body.

Seeing the stark reality of death, the smell and the repulsive images forced one to review their normal perception of the body as a real source of pleasure. One can balance out the habitual mental patterns of sensual desire by arousing some sobering clarity. Whether the corpse one observed was male or female, it decomposed in just the same way, and eventually left no obvious trace of the physical identity of the person it once was. The result was that one was left with a deep impression of the impermanent and selfless nature of the body, and left with no doubts over the inherent unattractive nature of the body. One gained a whole range of insights from this practice and became absolutely clear how death means the complete disappearance of the person from the world.

These days we have to rely on other means to begin this contemplation. We use books, pictures and videos on the internet and occasionally we may even be able to visit a hospital to see an autopsy. Living in the forest also gives us the chance to observe the decomposing corpses of large animals. Also we can closely examine the nature of our own bodies. We can do this in quite ordinary ways such as by simply paying attention to the normal bodily functions that are always taking place, or noticing the changes that occur on a daily basis just through ageing. Everyday one's body gets soiled by the by-products of its normal functions. Every orifice becomes a channel for unpleasant waste to leave the body: sweat and grease, urine and faeces, ear wax, snot, phlegm, tears from the eyes and so on. No one wants these things once they leave the body because they are repulsive to see and smell. And once they've left the body, no one thinks of them as being a self or something that belongs to them. We don't even want to use clothing or other things that have been soiled by waste from our body.

When we contemplate the food we eat, we observe how food is only desirable and appetising for as long as it is fresh and unadulterated. Once it becomes old and stale we no longer are tempted by it. Luang Por Chah occasionally encouraged his monks to take the first mouthful of food from a meal, and after chewing it, spit it out in their hand and examine it for a moment. One observes how the perception of the food changes once it is been chewed and mixed with the bodily fluids. Such practices help one to see through the unquestioned infatuation with food and how we are tempted by its looks and smell. Then how we automatically indulge in the pleasure of eating and savouring the taste of the food, rather than consuming it simply to keep healthy and give the body energy to practice. Contemplation of the repulsiveness of food wakes you up and brings the mind back to the present moment, and with a new perception of food, and the process of eating, that is in line with the truth. We contemplate the process of digestion as well and observe how food travels through the body and comes out as waste.

Contemplating the repulsiveness of food can be a helpful practice to prepare for the meditation on the unattractiveness of the body. We must train ourselves to frequently turn attention to view the unattractive aspects of our own body, and also to notice those same unattractive aspects in the bodies of those around us. Develop the skill of directing mindfulness to recollect the unattractive and repulsive aspects of the human body until the perception is well established and you become fully aware of that side of our physical form. Over time, the clarity of insight leads us to break away from our old habit of identifying only with the beauty of the body, and undermines much of our attachment and sexual desire. We become familiar with viewing the body as it is: subject to ageing and decay. We also suffer less with superficial negative judgements about our physical appearance or that of others, and we see more clearly our

common humanity. Strongly identifying with the attractive side of the body, its youth, beauty and vitality is the source of endless negative mental proliferation for us, and especially through comparing our bodies to others or in facing the ageing process. Attachment to ideals about how our body should look leads on to much unskilful and harmful behaviour in society.

As we investigate how we perceive the body, we can observe the way craving for the objects of our senses leads us in a constant search for attractive and pleasant forms outside of ourselves. We observe how the mind becomes overwhelmed by craving and tries to grab hold of and internalise those sense objects by taking ownership of them. There is nothing as alluring as the sight, smell or touch of someone we find attractive. However, the more we attach to the attractive, the more we inevitably attach to the ugly and see it as undesirable. We are caught in an endless cycle of following and giving importance to our preferences and prejudices. This conditions and intensifies the experience of repulsion and aversion to the forms we perceive as ugly, and those are the ones we try to avoid. In this way, by viewing the physical form as attractive or ugly, we constantly reinforce our dualistic perception of the world and suffer because of it. The end result is that we get caught into the vortex of different experiences of gain and loss, praise and criticism, fame and disrepute, pleasure and pain. This outcome is unavoidable, because all phenomena are impermanent in their nature. Whatever we see as pleasant and acquire or hold dear will bring us suffering as it decays and changes form.

I remember when I was a young monk there was a young woman in the local village who would come out to offer food to the monks every morning. We practised restraint, training ourselves to not let our eyes dwell on the characteristics of the different people we met on daily alms-round. We didn't usually engage them in

conversation, either. Nevertheless, meeting someone every day like that, you can't fail to notice their age, gender and if they were physically attractive in the conventional sense, so I was aware that this young woman was attractive. Some years later I attended that same woman's cremation as she had unfortunately died of an illness. I had been away from the monastery for many years and had forgotten all about her, so when I returned I still had the memory of that woman as young and attractive. My return visit to the monastery coincided with her death and subsequent funeral, so after a long span of time I now saw her as a corpse lying in a coffin. These days we try to make corpses attractive with make-up and through embalming techniques. But in rural Northeast Thailand at that time, the corpses of people were hardly touched prior to cremation, and they were normally kept for a week while funeral chanting was performed and offerings made to the Sangha. The contrast between the image of the decaying corpse in the coffin and my memory of her from ten years before was striking. Cremations in that era were often held out in the open, and after the funeral service was completed, the monks would sit in meditation within full view of the burning body. It was a powerful image to see the pale, dead body of the once-attractive young woman and watch it disintegrate in the fire and be reduced to ashes.

As monks, another way we investigate and address the imbalance in our perception is by looking at the suffering that comes when one is overwhelmed by incessant mental proliferation arising from lust. It becomes clearer that it is the deluded infatuation with physical appearance and the attachment to pleasurable feelings associated with the body which trap us and bind the mind to endless searching. It is inevitably followed by disappointment as one cannot hold onto those feelings. By directing mindfulness to focus on the body, analysing it into its component parts and observing its

unattractive side, we are looking more deeply into the true nature of form. Through doing so, we gain a new understanding of what we think we are attracted to. When we see the unattractiveness of our own body, we can then see it in others.

Through the course of a normal day one can pay attention to the unattractive aspects of one's own body as they naturally present themselves. One establishes mindfulness and observes the truth as one eats, bathes, cleans things, defecates and urinates, and so on. We become familiar with the body from the outside first. When we meditate, we put awareness on the individual body parts as objects of mindfulness and calmly investigate internally. We can use any of the first meditation objects we are given when we become novice monks: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth and skin. Or likewise we can take up any of the remaining thirty-two parts of the body. At first we might need some visual aids from external sources, and through bringing up memories to create a mental image of each body part. We can also place our internal awareness at each part of the body as we make it the object of wise reflection. Traditionally, you pick one part of the body, visualise it and mindfully recite its name over and over until the mind settles down and becomes still in samādhi.

It is also possible to calm the mind and prepare for the contemplation of the body through developing another meditation technique first, such as mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānassati*) or recollection of the Buddha (*buddhānussati*). Once the mind is calm and gathers its energy together in one-pointed awareness, you turn and direct your attention to the body. Sometimes it is appropriate to skip the preliminary meditation and begin the practice by turning directly to the body contemplation if you find it holds your attention, or as a skilful response to the arisen hindrance of sexual desire. This technique involves mentally moving through the parts of the

body, visualising them, giving them wise consideration and separating them out, until the mind becomes firm and steady. You might call this technique wisdom developing samādhi.

They say that investigating the body by moving through the different parts is like giving a monkey work to do as part of its training. Imagine there are thirty-two trees in the forest and you allow the monkey to run up and down and explore each tree to use up some of its restless energy, then it is ready to listen to further instruction. We give the mind the thirty-two parts of the body to become familiar with, to consider, explore and visualise. You note how each part fits into the body as a whole and what its function and location are and what it looks like and even smells like. Consider the elemental nature of each part and see whether it is solid, liquid, gaseous, hot or cold. You can experiment looking at the parts from different angles, like in an autopsy, and imagine slowly taking each part of the body out and placing it on a table in front of you. The aim is to direct all your mental energy and mindfulness to stay within the boundary of the body. Luang Por Chah used to say that his foreign students have already travelled around the world many times, now they must learn to travel around in their own body and get to know it through the internal journey of meditation.

You are giving yourself a practical tool, or you might even say a weapon – a Dhamma weapon – to counteract the lust and sensual desire that is always sitting at the back of our mind waiting for the right conditions to arise. The aim of this practice is to be skilled enough to quickly and easily turn to perceive the unattractive within the attractive, when the mind would prefer to dwell on or fantasise about the attractive side of a person. We all know how to create sexual fantasies or attractive visual images of the human form based on people we've seen in the past or even imaginary people. We can be very good at that. It is second nature for humans to

eye up other people and judge how attractive they are. Now we have to get good at visualising the body objectively and honestly from a new perspective, inside and out. We can do this in meditation and also during the course of daily activities, when one observes oneself fantasising with lust, or when one encounters an attractive person whose image tempts one's lust.

When we contemplate the body and separate it into the thirty-two parts, one of the biggest obstacles is learning how to look underneath the skin. We're used to seeing people with their skin on and we judge the appearance of each person by such things as their body shape, the colour and texture of the skin, their hair style, their facial expression and so on. We identify a person by their external features and often the process is so fast that it is unconscious. As we contemplate the thirty-two parts of the body and deepen the realisation that each part is impermanent, unattractive and without a self or an owner, we are looking at the body as just a sealed bag of skin filled with unattractive things and the perception of the person disappears.

When the mind is calm and still in samādhi, you might imagine stripping the skin off and looking at the different internal organs, the blood, the bones, the skin, and so on, as if in a laboratory. Most people find that when this practice is done steadily and with mindfulness it has a powerful and sobering effect. The mind becomes still and then you can focus more precisely on a single aspect of the body. When one reflects on the body internally, it brings the mind right into the present moment, cutting through the endless stories and mental proliferation that normally occupy it so easily. It even quietens some of the more extreme moods that may be disturbing one at that time. But it is a practice that can also be confrontational, and you need to know your limits and be observant of your state of mind

after such contemplation. It's a challenging practice and we probably can't sustain it for very long at first. When the mind is calm you might contemplate in this way for fifteen minutes. If the samādhi is steadier, the peace of the mind will support longer periods of contemplation.

I remember the last night I spent at home before going to Thailand to become a monk. I had some free time after packing for the trip and so turned on the TV. By chance there was a documentary about the latest developments in neurological surgery and research into the functioning of the human brain. As the programme began there was a warning of upcoming graphic footage of a surgical operation on a young man's brain. Out of interest I continued watching as the surgeons began their work by cutting into the facial skin and then peeling it down, prior to cutting away part of his skull to expose the brain. They pulled the skin downwards like a piece of cloth and the young man's facial features completely disappeared. It certainly was a challenging image to see and the documentary lingered on pictures of the surgery for quite some time. It was the last TV programme I saw as a layman and it gave me one of the final and most powerful images of my lay life. The documentary had a happy ending as the patient recovered from the surgery, but the graphic images of the removal of the skin and the work on his brain remained clearly in my mind for many years.

These experiences can be useful. You might notice how when you intentionally look at such a confronting visual image, even on a TV screen, the close up view under the surface of a human body makes your mind stay fully aware, alert and undistracted. To keep watching is not an easy thing to do as it's not an image you see very often in your life, but mindfully observing in this way makes you question the way we normally identify with the body as a self and as something attractive. Different people have different characters;

some people might react strongly when they practice body contemplation. One person might see a drop of blood and faint, another might find the contemplation makes them irritable, another person might find it fascinating. So we must learn to investigate in a way that suits us, with the aim to counter our deluded perceptions that hide the truth. The benefits that come from this practice are that we gain states of samādhi and insight that lead on to a change in the way we view the body, thereby undermining one's blind attachment.

When we begin the practice of body contemplation, it is natural that our mind doesn't always settle down quickly. You might have to give yourself work by using your memory and the thinking process and proceed to run through the parts of the body, remembering what they look like and considering the function each part has and its changing nature. As you practice more often you might be able to hold an image in your mind's eye, keep it there and make it clearer and clearer. The mind can stabilise as you focus on that image. If the mind is still moving around and not yet peaceful, you can direct your awareness to move around the body to give it something to do, contemplating different aspects of the body until it becomes steady. Rather than holding your attention on one particular part of the body, you gradually move your attention and sweep through the body, visualising organs as you go and even mentally turning them around to get the view from different angles. Eventually, your mind might prefer to settle down to maintain awareness on the image of one particular body part, the skin or the bones or some internal organ, for example.

The factors of samādhi begin to arise as you direct awareness to the body in the same way as when you practice mindfulness of breathing or other forms of meditation. As mindfulness is sustained, the image that you have developed will stabilise and, as the mental hindrances subside, you will experience rapture and happiness from

the state of calm. When practised correctly, this meditation gives rise to a profound experience of inner peace and happiness, and the detached awareness that arises can last a long time. This state of calm and stability of mind can be the basis for further skilful investigation of the three universal characteristics of existence.

Once your mind is peaceful, it is also possible that an image of the body or a part of the body can arise on its own. It may reflect a part of the body that you have contemplated before and find easy to concentrate on. Through regular practice you can become more skilled at holding an image in mind and can use it to bring the mind to a state of calm. It's possible that you may become so familiar with the image that you can turn to focus on that image at will, even with your eyes open. When you become calm in this meditation, whether your eyes are open or closed you will be able to see that image.

Contemplation of the body is a powerful tool to counteract sexual desire and attraction towards the bodies of other people as well as one's own. We cannot always predict when a situation might arise that stimulates the hindrance of lust, so we must be prepared. You might come across someone you find attractive and sexual desire is immediately aroused, but if at that moment you begin to contemplate the unattractiveness of the body in a way that you are familiar with, you can prevent the mind from falling into and being overwhelmed by the old way of thinking. You might imagine peeling the person's skin off, or visualise their inner bone structure or bring up the perception of some unattractive part, such as their excrement. This contemplation might be taking place in the privacy of your own mind, but as it proceeds it counters the lust that has arisen or can prevent it from arising further. The calmer and clearer the mind is, the more effective the contemplation is. Sometimes you might focus on the unattractive parts of the body, other times you focus on

the transient nature of physical form and the way the body ages and decays, or else contemplating the body as a corpse.

There are many different perceptions that can be brought up to counter lust and sensual desire in general. Some people can remember the smell of a dead body they previously encountered in a hospital, at an autopsy or a funeral. Occasionally we encounter the bodies of dead animals in the forest and become familiar with the smell of decomposing flesh. You can establish mindfulness on the image of a bloated corpse, or the skeletal remains and so on. There are many different aspects that we can bring up as part of this contemplation. Those who have practised reflecting on the body as a corpse in various stages of decomposition can become adept at turning the mind to those images when it is appropriate. Generally we have to develop these types of contemplation directed to our own body first until we become more familiar with the images and reflections and then turn to contemplate the bodies of others. Luang Por Chah said that one should practice to the point where one becomes so familiar with seeing the corpse within one's own body that when you walk on alms-round in the morning you should be able to see your fellow monks as walking skeletons.

The initial aim of body contemplation is to bring the mind to a place of calm and equanimity where it cannot be overcome by lust. Ultimately it leads to developing the clear insight that sees through the fixed attachment to perceptions of beauty and attractiveness, and the deluded view of the body as a self. Lust and sensual desire are the strongest of the mental hindrances that prevent calm and insight from arising, so we must learn to how to deal with them skilfully. It is hard to completely go beyond the pull of sensual desire because it is so fascinating and alluring. It's a well-trodden mental path that we've been following the whole of our life and who knows

how many lives before. We must be prepared to bring up the reflection on the unattractiveness of the body as soon as lustful desire arises, so that the desire can be abandoned quickly. Instead of letting the mind indulge in fantasies based on the attractive images of the body and obsessing over the temporary pleasure we get from it, you focus on their opposites: the unattractive images and the perception of the transient nature of that pleasure. Restraining the mind in this way leads to the experience of peaceful detachment, and as insight deepens, we experience dispassion and the mind turns away from the former infatuation. You could say that this is the inner education of the mind. The inner peace, stillness and understanding that arise as the result of the practice of body contemplation becomes more satisfying than any temporary pleasure gained through sensual gratification. Over time the mind becomes disenchanted with its attachment to the body and stops seeing the body as a source of satisfaction or happiness.

A further practice mentioned in the Buddhist texts for developing states of calm and deepening insight is to focus on one of the ten meditations on the degeneration of a corpse. You can experiment to find out whether it is a suitable theme for your character. Begin by imagining yourself as a corpse laying on the ground in front you. Imagine the corpse is cold and stiff and the process of decomposition is already taking place. This meditation might be something like looking at a set of pictures taken by a camera with a time lapse setting. Visualise how the skin changes its colour as the blood coagulates and how blotches and different patches of green and purple colour appear here and there. Gradually, the body swells, the skin begins to peel off, fluids start oozing out of the orifices and openings in the skin, and flies lay their eggs which hatch and grow into maggots. Over time the maggots eat through the internal organs, the hair drops out, the remainder of the skin dries out and darkens

in colour and the bones become more and more prominent. Eventually, the last remaining parts of the body scatter and disappear as animals take them away, and you might be left with just a few scattered bones in your mental image. As you become more skilled in stilling your mind and holding these images with mindfulness, you can bring the image of the corpse within yourself and imagine how one day the body you inhabit will die and decompose in the same way. This practice results in a deep and long-lasting state of calm and equanimity.

When you recollect the stories of various monks and nuns who have practised the corpse meditations, it is not unusual that images of their body as a corpse have arisen spontaneously when their mind unified in samādhi. This can be a sign that they had practised meditation on the unattractiveness of the body in the past. It's their old good kamma coming through when the conditions are right and their mind has matured enough. The nun Mae Chee Kaew said that the first time she experienced a deep state of samādhi she had a clear image of herself as a corpse that lasted all night long. Luang Por Kinaree, one of Luang Por Chah's teachers, described how on several occasions in his meditation he had a clear image arise of his own body being cremated. He said that he silently observed his own cremation in the stillness of samādhi and the insight into impermanence and emptiness left him with a profound sense of sadness and disenchantment.

In the early period of my monastic training, I spent over five years helping to look after Luang Por Chah, who became increasingly ill at the end of his life. During that period I spent many hours and days in his company. I remember the morning when he finally passed away. About an hour after he died I went to pay respects to his body as it lay on the bed. As I bowed to him, it was a completely new and powerful experience to see him without life, lying

cold and motionless. After silently meditating with the other monks for a while, I bowed my forehead on his hands and touched him briefly for one last time. It became clear to me that the cold, lifeless body on the bed was no longer Luang Por Chah. I contemplated for a long time that death is the separation of mind and body and also confirmed to myself and accepted that Luang Por Chah, as I knew him, was now gone.

Later on I reflected on the natural process of human life as a journey from birth to death and turned the reflection back to myself. I became fully aware that one day my own body will also become cold, stiff and lifeless, and in this respect every human being is the same. This is just as true for the Noble Ones, our teachers, as it is for everyone else. The Buddha said that if you contemplate ageing and death regularly in this way, the view that 'I am this body' will begin to dissolve away. You will become certain that this body that you attach to so much will die for certain. All human bodies are of the nature to die, decompose and disappear from the world. Every time you direct mindfulness to contemplate the impermanence, suffering, unattractiveness and selfless nature of the human body, a small part of your conceit and attachment will disappear and be replaced by dispassion, disenchantment and the perception of emptiness. When you see these truths, the mind intuitively knows that there is nothing lasting to seek from the world and turns to seek refuge in the truths of letting go, relinquishment and the peace of non-attachment.

It is unfortunate that in the ordinary, unenlightened state we use our body to serve the mental afflictions of greed and attachment, hatred and delusion. The infatuation with our own physical form as well as those of other people means that our sexual desire continues to manifest consciously and unconsciously through our actions, speech and mental states. This state of affairs lasts throughout one's

life unless one addresses it with the Dhamma. The contemplation of the body undermines the root of this attachment. Understandably, it is not a very popular way of training the mind, but is certainly a blessing to the world when practised well by a student of the Buddha.

The contemplation of the body carried out with mindfulness and wisdom brings the mind to experience what the Buddha called the Deathless. We gain the clarity and confidence to accept the truth that the body is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not a self or a person. It doesn't belong to us and cannot be a source of permanent happiness. If we continue to contemplate to see the true nature of this body frequently, throughout our life as monks it will naturally bring up mental restraint and the insight of *nibbidā*, the quality of disenchantment. This insight manifests such that the mind becomes tired of chasing after the experiences that used to infatuate it, and it naturally turns away from its attachment to the sensual world. Not only do we learn to see the danger in sensuality and identification with physical form, but also we no longer take them as the source of real happiness as we once did.

When we contemplate the impermanence, suffering and danger of attaching to this body and the sensual realm, the knowledge of the disadvantages of clinging to them becomes intuitive. The Buddha said that upon seeing the danger and disadvantages of sensual desire, the mind shrinks away from it in the same way as a bird's feather immediately coils up and shrinks away when placed next to a fire. Just like the feather, the mind shrinks away from the desire to indulge in sexual fantasy or from promoting any kind of behaviour that aims to gratify sensual desire. The mind knows instantly that this desire is coming from delusion that leads to attachment and suffering.

When one practices body contemplation regularly, it leads to changes in the way one relates to oneself and others. You no longer have false expectations of happiness based upon this body, but know clearly that it is impermanent and, as such, is a source of suffering if you attach to it. Similarly, the bodies of others are seen as less and less desirable, and the selfish nature of that kind of gratification and attachment is thereby revealed. In its place we not only develop dispassion towards the body as an object of desire, but also can develop true respect, kindness and compassion for others. One no longer wishes to use others for one's own gratification. The insight you gain removes doubts, brings peace and the wish to help others to be free from attachment and suffering. But you must also beware of the subtle danger present in developing goodwill and compassion for others, particularly for the opposite sex. Friendliness can easily turn into affection, and then attachment, and then lust. It is important to cultivate equanimity together with the practice of goodwill and compassion, so that our way of life and practice as bhikkhus can flourish.

So I will leave you with these words for your consideration. We can now continue to practice meditation tonight as an offering to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha.

Gratitude to Nibbāna

I have just finished a period of two weeks of solitary retreat and so have only just heard the news that Luang Por Sawaeng, one of the senior disciples of Luang Por Chah, passed away after being ill with pancreatic cancer. He last visited us in this monastery about ten years ago, but before this year's monastic retreat we went to pay respects to him at the hospital in Thailand. I first met Luang Por Sawaeng over thirty four years ago when I was training as a novice. He always had a reputation for being strict in his practice of the Vinaya discipline, and being thoroughly dedicated to Luang Por Chah. The first time I talked to him was at a Kaṭhina ceremony, which in Thailand is always an occasion when the Sangha from different branch monasteries gather together and the senior monks take it in turns to give Dhamma talks throughout the night. Many monastics and laity practice meditation and listen to the talks on these occasions. I remember at about 1.00am I got up from my sitting posture to stretch my legs outside the meditation hall. Being a novice, I went over to sit with some of the teenage Thai novices, who were boiling water on a fire and making some hot drinks for the Sangha. As I sat on a crate of Pepsi-Cola next to the fire, Luang Por Sawaeng came up and joked to me saying, that we don't take ordination just to sit in the forest drinking Pepsi-Cola. He continued by teaching me that the source of happiness lies within one's heart, not out there in the world.

What Luang Por Sawaeng said to me on that occasion was reminiscent of the teachings of Luang Por Chah. Luang Por Chah reminded us that most human beings are constantly looking outside of themselves, at other people and the world around them, and as a

consequence spend a lot of time thinking about what those other people are doing and other external matters. We suffer because we get too caught up in other people's business. We spend 90% of our time looking at other people and only 10% of the time observing ourselves. This imbalance is one of the biggest causes of our suffering. We're always thinking about and getting involved with other people and their business without developing much awareness of ourselves. We end up stuck in moods of attraction and desire, or moods of aversion and conflict. Luang Por Chah noted that if one wants a life with less suffering one should change these statistics around and learn to observe oneself 90% of the time and observe others only 10% of the time. If we spend too much time watching and thinking about others we invariably end up being distracted and unaware of ourselves and prey to negative desires, views and perceptions relating to those people. We spend too much time lost in fantasies about other people based on our own imagination and conceit. We compare ourselves with them, criticise them, find fault with them, compete with them and become envious or jealous of them.

Luang Por Chah encouraged us to change our habits and spend less time looking at other people, but when it is necessary to interact with them, to do so with Dhamma in our heart. We must develop mettā towards others, and with the perception that they are our relatives, even if they are actually strangers. If you see something good in another person, it can be a good example for you to follow. If you see something unskilful in what they do, observe how it causes them suffering. When we observe other people acting unskilfully, it can motivate us to reflect on our own conduct. We ask ourselves whether we act in similar unskilful ways or if we still have the capacity to do such things. If we see that unskilful intentions and

desires are still there in our own heart, we must reflect on how we can change ourselves for the better.

Much of the learning we do as Buddhist monks involves getting to know ourselves. This includes learning how to take responsibility for ourselves and likewise being self-reliant. It's easy to know a lot about the external world in this digital age because at the push of a button all the information we desire is readily available to us. But what we don't know so much about and cannot truly find out through information technology is ourselves. The practice of the Buddha's teachings always comes back to knowing this body and this mind, which in one way makes it simple: the place of practice is right here and now, in this body and mind. We don't need a lot of other things outside of ourselves to practice. The knowledge that that we really need to free ourselves from suffering is that which we get from examining our own body and mind. Through well-established awareness and keen observation we will find this kind of direct knowledge in our own experience. We need to know the truth about this thing we call our self and how suffering comes about.

Sometimes lay people come to the monastery and ask the senior monk to choose a name for their newborn child, as it is considered an auspicious beginning for their child. To receive a name from a monk can be inspiring for people with faith and it is seen as a blessing for the baby to grow up with that name. At the same time however, you might feel uneasy doing this service because you can see that once the baby has a name, their attachment to the perception of self begins right there. The Buddha pointed out that our attachment to a sense of self is the root cause of all our suffering. Once we are born, we quickly acquire a name, whether it comes from the parents, relatives or a monk, and it becomes the brand label that we start to identify with. Like so much of conventional truth which is

based on language and the agreements amongst people in society, it is useful and convenient to have a name. We need a name so that we can talk to each other easily and communicate and get things done. But it's also the start of our problems as human beings, because once we are given a name and we learn how to use language, we start naming and labelling everything. Then we want to know all about the world, and thinking that because we know the names, we really know the world.

The untrained and unenlightened mind suffers easily because of its habit of going out through the external senses and seeking out objects and experiences from the world. It then proceeds to react to them with attraction and aversion. The pathways we use to go out to the world are the six senses. From moment to moment we experience consciousness arising and ceasing: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching and mind consciousness. If we don't train ourselves to follow up and know this mind with awareness, it will blindly follow its habit of going out to find out about the world and getting involved with it. This is unwittingly stimulating desires and attachments and creating a self-view based on the sense experiences we have. We build up a perception of self which we identify with, and this view fools us into believing that we own the world and the things of the world. We build up attachment to a whole range of experiences, which delude us and cause us endless suffering. Because we believe there is a permanent and absolute self who is in charge, we suffer. We come under the sway of craving and attachment, and if we had never heard the Buddha's teachings, we might never realise the truth of how suffering is caused or how to end it. Even if we've already heard the teachings, but have yet to apply them in our lives, we will not be fully aware of how our minds become caught into craving and attachment and how that leads to suffering.

Fortunately we do have the Buddha's path that leads all the way to nibbāna, the end of suffering. 'Nibbāna' is a word that even Buddhists don't talk about much. We often see nibbāna as some external state that's distant and exalted because it's the goal of the path, and indeed it's referred to as the best thing or the highest happiness that humans can achieve. But reflecting on it, you can see that sometimes it can be beneficial to recollect and contemplate the qualities of nibbāna. One of the ten recollections we can use to train the mind in mindfulness is *upasamānussati*, which means recollection of the peace of nibbāna. Lasting peace through the complete absence of suffering is one of the most attractive characteristics of nibbāna. One meditates, recollecting peace of mind or the absence of suffering, and when the mind is aware of this object continually, the mental hindrances are abandoned and it naturally settles into a state of firm and peaceful awareness.

Luang Por Buddhadāsa observed that we tend to view nibbāna as the goal to be attained at the end of the practice, or as something that we will experience at some far-off point in the distant future. But actually nibbāna is really something that is right here with us all the time. Nibbāna is part of our experience. The term 'nibbāna' refers to the cooling down of the mind. The experience of cooling down, or quenching, is a natural experience occurring to us throughout our life, but because of its subtlety we tend not to notice it. Luang Por Buddhadāsa also taught us to be grateful for nibbāna because its characteristic of quenching is what allows us to live as humans. That doesn't mean to say that to live as a human means we are necessarily enlightened yet, but that the quality of extinguishing or quenching, as in putting out a fire, is part of the normal experience of every human being. It is the opposite of heating up. What's quenched or extinguished is the fire of craving and attachment – fuelled by greed, anger and delusion – which the Buddha compared

to fires that burn up our mind and make us suffer. Nibbāna is the opposite of craving and attachment because it is the cooling down of the mind. Even when craving does arise and cause discontent, it must eventually subside because it is a transient phenomenon. So the mind cools down for a while and we get relief from the heat of craving as it is quenched.

Luang Por Buddhadāsa explained that in the time of the Buddha, nibbāna was a term that people would understand and even use in daily life. They might use it to describe the characteristic of coolness, as opposed to that of being hot. So when a child is waiting for hot cakes to cool down enough so she can eat one, she might ask her mother if the hot cakes had attained nibbāna yet. In the same way, a potter who had made a fire to heat bricks or clay pots and needed to find out if the fire had gone out already, might ask his assistant if the fire was still going or if it had attained nibbāna. Nibbāna was a term ordinary people would understand to mean 'cooling down', or likewise that the heat in something has been extinguished. The fire has gone out. The term referred to a phenomenon that was part of everyday experience.

The Buddha described the human being as being made up of five *khandhas*, or aggregates – the groups of form, feelings, perceptions, thought formations and sense consciousness – and that these groups are like different parts of a house. He also observed that the house is on fire, meaning that these five khandhas are hot with suffering. We are deluded and cling to the five khandhas as self, like somebody who thinks they own their house, but we don't realise it is on fire. You could say that his teachings are like a warning from a concerned friend who is calling out to you that your house is on fire and showing you the way to escape. The teachings point the way towards nibbāna, and explain to us how to escape from the fire to

where it is cool and safe. Take some time to consider the nature of your set of khandhas, how these five aggregates become hot or cool.

Reflecting on the khandhas isn't only for formal meditation. It may also be throughout our ordinary circumstances, as in simply and quietly observing and contemplating their nature while we go about our business. We constantly experience pain and discomfort arising due to this human body, such as when it feels too hot or too cold, or when we sit in one posture without moving, or in walking for a long time we experience pain. Likewise, when lying down for too long it becomes painful. Or when we experience hunger and thirst and so on. Fortunately, many such painful experiences arise and cease by themselves when we adjust our posture or activity. You could say that those painful experiences each attain nibbāna when they subside, and so we experience a momentary relief. In this way our body does not just become an intolerable mass of painful feeling. Normally we can only escape through brief moments of respite, but it is enough to allow us to reflect on the process of attachment and how it leads to suffering. The mental khandhas, the aggregates of feeling, perception, thought formations and sense consciousness, also bring us pain and stress and are unreliable in the same way as the physical. We experience mental states of love and hate, pain, anguish and despair, sadness, frustration and all the feelings and emotions that we lump together as 'stress'. These are like fires in the mind. Because these stressful experiences are of the nature to arise and cease, we can obtain some temporary relief from them. We can be grateful for this aspect of nibbāna.

Quite naturally everyone must experience some pain, or you might say some heat, with this body and mind, but it necessarily changes and doesn't last. Even if you don't practice the Dhamma, this truth still applies to everyone. Say, for instance, something makes you angry. That angry state of mind doesn't last, does it?

We've all been angry before, who knows how many thousands or millions of times in our life, but every time we're angry, even if it's an extreme state of anguish, it eventually passes. The feeling doesn't last and the mind changes. Similarly, states of sensual desire or lust don't last and the pleasure we experience through sense contact doesn't last. Aches and pains of the body don't last. Physical illness doesn't last. As Luang Por Chah used to say, when one is ill, one should consider the possibility that one will either get better or die, because eventually the conditions must change. The stressful states of mind we experience are like a temporary mental illness, but this illness of the mind doesn't last either. We've experienced many forms of stress, such as anger, worry, fear and anxiety, but none of them lasted. Eventually the mind cools down as they cease according to their transient nature.

You might say that we experience a little nibbāna every time a stressful mind state finishes and we return to normal. You don't have to be Buddhist to know this, or to experience this extinguishing of stress as it's just the way things are. Every time your mood changes or a desire passes away, it's a little nibbāna. You might experience mild irritation or extreme rage, or you might experience subtle infatuation or extreme desire, or you might experience a brief moment of doubt and hesitation or be completely overwhelmed by confusion. But whatever the state of mind may be at any given time, it inevitably changes and it passes away. The nature of our physical body and our mental activity is to constantly be arising, existing and then passing away. We are constantly experiencing brief moments of nibbāna. Our aim in developing the Noble Eightfold Path is to experience permanent nibbāna.

In fact these little nibbānas are taking place all the time, whether we realise it or not. The small moments of change in our experience allow the body and the mind to cool down from stress. When

we begin practising awareness directed to this body and mind in a conscious way, through paying attention to the physical and mental phenomena with mindfulness and clear comprehension, we can witness the occurrence of these small moments of nibbāna. We witness the cooling down of the stress of this body and mind, over and over again. We don't have to perfect the entire Noble Eightfold Path and attain deep states of samādhi and profound insight to get some understanding of this side of nibbāna. On the simplest level we can know this nibbāna as it occurs in the normal experience of this body and mind – that things don't last. We are experiencing cessation of feelings and mental states all the time. When we notice that, we begin to understand more deeply what the Buddha was pointing to. This understanding eventually results in the experience of insight we call *nibbidā*, or disenchantment, where the mind becomes fed up with and turns away from its habitual clinging and identifying with the khandhas as belonging to a self.

In your practice of *sīla* (morality), you can also notice these small moments of nibbāna. For example, when an unwholesome intention to act against the training rules of the Vinaya arises, but you mindfully restrain yourself, don't follow it, and observe how that intention passes away because you are not reinforcing it or acting it out. It remains merely an intention that arose and passed away in your mind. Being mindful of the cessation of the negative intention is like a moment when you become aware of nibbāna. For example, when you are new to the robes, you might still experience the desire to eat food in the afternoon due to the old mental conditioning. However, if you resolve to follow the training rule and not act on the desire to eat, you find that because the desire to eat is not being followed through or supported in action, it arises less and less frequently and eventually subsides altogether.

Many of us increasingly gain confidence in our practice through seeing the fruits of mindfulness and restraint. Many times have we witnessed various negative intentions and desires arising and tempting us to act in unskilful ways. But due to the presence of mindfulness, the sense of shame and awareness of the consequences of any unskilful actions, we have not allowed ourself to follow through on and complete such unskilful actions. The idea or negative train of thought fades from the mind and is gone before it can be acted on, and the unpleasant or discontented feeling that prompted the unskilful train of thought is allowed to pass away, too. A lot of us learn much from reflecting on that process and are greatly encouraged when we see how a human mind can be trained and reprogrammed through keeping precepts and following the Vinaya rules of discipline. When we see the impermanence of our own mental intentions, particularly the negative ones based on craving and aversion, and we know with clarity that they can be relinquished and abandoned, we gain insight and understanding that they are not part of a fixed self. These can be considered as fruitful insights into small moments of nibbāna.

When we begin our training in the monastery, it is sometimes necessary to use skilful desire rooted in the virtue of renunciation to help let go of other unwholesome desires rooted in greed or attachment. Sometimes you learn to say no to a desire in the short term, because by weakening its hold over the mind it will be a cause for you to become free of it in the long term. It might not yet be the full awareness of insight into the three universal characteristics of existence that leads to complete letting go and fading away of desire, but it is training the mind towards that end. Perhaps you decide that you are not going to follow some irritation and give in to the desire to kill a mosquito because you wish to observe the training rule to refrain from killing. You replace the unskilful intention with a good

intention and practice restraint. Eventually the selfishness and the irritation with mosquitoes no longer arises and what remains is wisdom and compassion.

As we practice more, we may reach the point of knowing intuitively that all mental intentions and volitions are impermanent and not-self. We don't have to restrain a negative desire with an act of will or even think about it, rather we see clearly that desire is not-self and stop clinging to it quite naturally. With training in mindfulness and wise reflection we can see the arising and ceasing of all mental volitions and unhook the mind from identifying with them as self. We experience these moments of little nibbāna more and more clearly all the time. Wisdom becomes sharper and focuses at the point where mental states, moods and feelings are ceasing. More and more, we notice the cessation quality of the little nibbāna-moments, rather than giving importance to each new perception or to holding on to the superficial appearance of mental impressions. Before the mind becomes entangled with the normal signs, perceptions and details that define what we like and dislike, what we see as right and wrong and mine and yours, it observes the thoughts and mental states ending in emptiness. This is reprogramming the process whereby conditioned desires and attachments lead on to all kinds of fantasies and imaginations about the world. The process by which our mind is so easily caught into the appearance of things, and builds up the perception of a self that is real and permanent, is being unravelled. Through repeated examination, we become familiar with the mental pattern that creates delusions of self because we see it happening over and over again and are able to address it.

The more we practice, the more we pay attention to the transient and uncertain nature of phenomena and disperse the idea of a fixed and solid self. It's like the mind keeps returning to the truth of nibbāna. We see the constant cessation of desires and this undermines

the view that there is a solid and absolute self who has fixed desires and wants. The normal way we attach and identify with experience is challenged as we see this sense of self keep dissolving back into the emptiness of nibbāna.

When the Buddha discussed the five khandhas, he observed that from whatever angle you consider their characteristics, whether internal or external, near of far, coarse or subtle, inferior or superior, past, present or future, they are always changing and do not belong to a self. They are not a person or a being, a mine or yours. Because they are always changing, they are unstable and stressful and we suffer because we identify with them. What is always changing and stressful is not a fixed or lasting self. We can also say that the constant changes taking place to this body and mind mean that nibbāna is happening all the time. The body and mind cannot exist without change. A person who has contemplated this and penetrated the true nature of their khandhas as impermanent will find that their attitude towards them evolves with wisdom and they gradually become disenchanted and cool towards them. We say that they see the body as the body, feelings as feelings, perceptions as perceptions, thoughts as thoughts and sense consciousness as sense consciousness.

Insight into the constant change and instability of these five khandhas also changes a person's attitude towards the idea of death. In our culture, many people view death as something completely final – as though there is a fixed self that carries on unchanged for a number of years and then experiences its final death. This way of viewing things brings up fear and anxiety for everyone. Death seems like the end of everything or even a *failure* of self. It's the thing people fear most. But the more you observe and learn from the changing nature of the khandhas, the more you see that death is not the end, it's just another part of a process of change.

Really, death is happening all the time. The arising and ceasing of bodily and mental functions and activities has been taking place at every moment since birth. Birth and death is taking place all the time. Mental states, memories, perceptions and feelings arise and pass away from moment to moment. Inhalations and exhalations of the breath occur at every moment. Cells are born and die at every moment. Death and cessation is occurring quite naturally all the time. The more you investigate this truth, the less you invest in the idea of a fixed or lasting self as existing in the khandhas, because you know they are constantly changing. You don't expect them to be any other way. We have experienced birth and death over and over again since we entered the world. It has allowed us to evolve and mature as human beings. We can learn from mistakes, educate ourselves and change for the better, as many times as is required until we are free from suffering.

The Buddha taught the five khandhas as a system to describe the physical and mental characteristics of human beings. In addition, they are to help us learn what it is we identify with as self. He also used the word *satta* as a general term for all sentient beings including humans. When we talk about beings in general it has the effect of depersonalising the way we look at ourself and others. We often chant the phrase *sabbe sattā* which means 'all beings', such as when we spread thoughts of goodwill we recite the verse, 'may all beings abide in well-being'. These words cover every living entity, such as human beings, animals, heaven realm beings, hell realm beings, ghosts, and just everything that is a sentient being. The Buddha used the term *being* here to minimise the identification with an individual entity or self, by using a single word to cover everyone and every entity. When we reflect that we are just beings it reduces the sense of me and you, and us and them.

In Thailand they say that the Sangha has the duty to save beings. We don't differentiate on grounds of birth, gender, ethnic background, realm of existence and so on. Out of compassion one develops the intention to free all beings from suffering. The mind of someone who has developed their practice to the point where their spiritual faculties of samādhi and wisdom are mature, is said to be at least like the mind of heavenly beings, such as a *deva* or a *brahmā*. Another person who normally experiences more coarse states of mind, clings to wrong views and regularly makes bad kamma, is said to be like a ghost or a being from a hell realm. But in the end, they all have one thing in common: they are beings. Every being has a set of five khandhas, and those khandhas are subject to change and instability. If there is a self, you could say it is a self that is constantly changing. It is still subject to birth and death.

The Buddha described the characteristics of the khandhas to help us analyse body and mind, breaking down the sense of self-identity and attachment to the idea of a solid or lasting self. Not only did he talk about the five khandhas, but he also described the six internal and external *āyatanas*, or sense bases. For example, the internal sense base of the eye and the external sense base of sights, the internal sense base of the ear and external sense base of sounds and so on. He would also describe a person in terms of the eighteen *dhātu*, or elements, such as the element of the eye, the element of the form seen by the eye and the element of eye consciousness and so on. Yet another way he might describe a person was the level of maturity of their five spiritual faculties of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. The readiness of a person to awaken to the Dhamma depends on how mature and ripe their spiritual faculties are. It's like fruit, before you pick it or buy it, you test it to see if it is ripe or not. The Buddha used these terms to help us contemplate and depersonalise our experience as we are observing it. The

Dhamma is without self. The mental defilements that obstruct us from seeing the Dhamma are not self. People are beings, and beings are made up of aggregates, elements and faculties. Even nibbāna is an element, the *nibbāna-dhātu*. Another way of referring to it is the *dhamma-dhātu*, the Dhamma-element. These terms refer to Truth – what is. The Buddha taught us to bring our attention back to what is, rather than attaching to our assumptions and stories about life from our own personal point of view.

Nibbāna is not a place or some realm far away or somewhere out in space. However, it's often seen as something just a bit higher than heaven, a crystal city or special place that people go to when they have completed their practice. But it's not a place at all. It's actually the Uncreated, Unborn and Unconditioned. Whatever description you use, the words will not be fully accurate, because thoughts, ideas and concepts are conditioned phenomena. We know and talk about what nibbāna is not, and we say it's not suffering. So when we're experiencing suffering and our mind is not peaceful and not content, then we know that's not nibbāna. If we are aware when the feeling of discontent arises, and then the train of thought associated with it passes away, we are aware of a small moment of nibbāna.

Luang Por Chah said that if you abandon all the mental hindrances and attain samādhi, or singleness of mind, then you're close to nibbāna. It's a taste of nibbāna. When you develop continuous mindfulness and the mind is in a wholesome state, the fires or the mental hindrances cool down, and you are getting closer to it. There may still be the remainder of the root causes of suffering in the mind – what we call the *anusaya*, or the latent tendencies of greed, hatred and delusion which have built up over many lifetimes – but you have had a glimpse of nibbāna. It's really cool, in the true sense of the word: it's cool and calm. Having had a glimpse of nibbāna, it becomes something we aspire to. The heat and suffering of greed,

hatred and delusion becomes increasingly apparent whenever they arise, when compared to the cool peace of the one-pointed state of mind.

Luang Por Buddhadāsa described attaining nibbāna as like being permanently in a deep freeze unit, or in a room with the air-conditioning turned on full. It is *really* cool when the mental hindrances have dropped away, because they are normally like fires that constantly burn us. Any time we notice the mental hindrances are not present, and it may be only for a few minutes when we're meditating, or even when we're not meditating, observe the characteristic of coolness in the mind. We will observe a mind without lust or greed, anger, irritation or frustration. There is no dullness, apathy or lethargy, and no worry or anxiety. There is no diffuseness of mind and no endless thinking prompted by doubt and uncertainty. The mind is peaceful, calm and aware and feels relaxed and joyful. This can develop into *pīti* (rapture) and *sukha* (happiness) and really brings a feeling of relief, because we know at that time the mental hindrances have been let go. If you were on fire and the fire was put out, you'd feel very relieved. When we let go of the fires of the mental hindrances, we feel good. It's like getting better after having been ill for a long time. Each time we are aware that an unwholesome mental state has dropped away, it is an experience of a small nibbāna.

If we keep developing our ability to calm the mind by paying attention to the breath, we can use the stillness and purity of samādhi as a basis for training in contemplation, and finally coming to know and see things clearly. We will be constantly returning to that insight that leads to nibbāna. Once the mind knows stillness, the three universal characteristics of experience – impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self – become more apparent in the activities of the five khandhās. From the spaciousness and equanimity of the mind

that is peaceful and still, the five *khandhas* become less important to us. We know the coarse material body can fade from our experience. Thoughts and perceptions can fade from our experience. The five external senses can fade from our experience and the mind can become ever more subtle. Feelings of pleasure and pain are known to disappear. Memories of the past and thoughts of the future are known and seen as impermanent mental formations. The whole idea of a solid, permanent self is broken down by knowing the khandhas as they are. Then we can leave the five khandhas to simply carry on doing their duty, just arising and passing away, without us having to interfere with them.

So we can be grateful of the truth of nibbāna. When you're sitting in meditation and are experiencing pain, and then you are aware at the moment it changes and vanishes, you can be thankful for nibbāna. Or if we keep letting go of the self-identification with the more persistent feelings of physical pain that stick with us, such as from illness or injury. Because our mindfulness and all-around awareness are able to know the feelings as merely feelings, and hence we're not grasping at it as a person or a being, a me or mine, then, again, we can be grateful for a nibbāna. When we stop thinking and worrying about the pain or stop resisting it, we can be grateful for nibbāna. When the mind is beset by sexual desire, or a strong desire to get something or become someone, or to acquire something we don't have, but we quietly and mindfully observe the desire arise and pass away in the mind, again we can be grateful for nibbāna. Nibbāna allows us to carry on in life and progress in the practice. If we continue to be fully aware of the continuous cessation happening in our experience, such as desires passing away, feelings that subside and body sensations that cease, we will keep returning to nibbāna. The more we recognise this quality and know it, the more peaceful we become and the less we will personally identify

with any experience of suffering. We won't give so much importance to it. A painful feeling is just a painful feeling, and not getting what you want is just not getting what you want. Likewise getting what you want is just getting what you want. These experiences are just what they are. In the end it's like everything is equalled out or becomes of equal value. Nothing belongs to anyone. None of it is a self or belongs to a self.

When we begin practising, every part of this body and mind seems very important. Every pain has to be reacted to and thought about and controlled in some way. But the more we practice, the more we realise it really doesn't matter so much. That doesn't mean to say that we don't care about anything or are irresponsible, it's just we don't react and suffer so much anymore. We don't identify so strongly with the painful feelings as self, as me and mine. The things we tend to worry about but cannot really control will tend to worry us less. If we can't control or change a situation, then why make ourselves unhappy through worrying about it? And possessions don't take such hold of the mind anymore because we know them to be 'just that much'. If you resolutely feel that something belongs to you, however small that thing may be, if we're not being mindful and reflecting wisely, actually that *thing* will come to possess *you*, not *you* possessing *it*. When we give in to desire and attachment, we become intoxicated with the object the mind is craving. Whether it's food and drink or a particular personal requisite or a state of mind or an ideal we cling to, craving obsesses and intoxicates the mind. But as we reflect skilfully, the way we view an object of craving begins reversing, and our perception actually changes around. We invest less energy and less self in the wanting of desirable objects, and likewise the not wanting of undesirable objects, so the mind becomes more and more free. It doesn't matter so much whether we have the thing or not. We might even see something that we have a strong feeling

of ownership for, but as a result of the practice, it changes to feeling completely indifferent. Even though we conventionally and superficially still own that thing, it's almost as if it belongs to somebody else.

When we are constantly reflecting on the impermanence and selfless nature of each of these khandhas, we increasingly know and see that we cannot own or control this body, feelings and perceptions, thought formations or sense consciousness. This change of view applies similarly with the bodies of others or the things of the world. It changes our internal relationship to things. It brings up equanimity in the face of painful experiences that we cannot avoid. It brings compassion towards others as we understand that their khandhas are also impermanent and not-self. Just as we cannot really own this body and mind, neither can they own their body and mind. Insight allows us to accept the way things are.

Imagine you picked up somebody else's alms bowl by mistake and began walking back to your hut in the forest. But after walking a few steps, you realise it's not your alms bowl, so you immediately turn around and return it to where it should be. In that situation you don't have to give it a second thought, because as soon as you recognise the characteristics of the bowl, you know instantly that it is not yours and you don't cling to it. Insight that recognises the true nature of this body and mind as not-self is like realising something that you thought was yours is not. You see through the delusion. The mind immediately knows that 'this is not mine; this does not belong to me; this is not myself.' Your view changes and you know that things are 'just that much'. Nothing belongs to you. With that knowing and insight you get peace and a glimpse of nibbāna. If you can see that you don't really own anything, you don't have a lot of things to worry about. With that experience of peace and understanding, kindness and compassion will grow. That is *true* kindness

and *true* compassion, because you're no longer relating to the world with craving and attachment.

What has the arahant, one who has attained nibbāna, got left? Well, they just have wisdom and compassion. What do they do? Well they just do things out of compassion for the benefit of all beings. Even if they don't teach very much, they might still walk on alms round and receive alms from people with faith and help them make merit. They do this out of compassion. They do it to help save beings. It is said that you make great merit when you have faith and make an offering to a Noble One. If the Noble One speaks, it's out of compassion and he or she may give some teaching or encouragement to others. People sometimes misunderstand nibbāna and think, 'if there's nothing left, no self-identity and no attachments, than what is the good of that?' But if you've abandoned all your attachments, then what remains is the pure, peaceful, unselfish mind. There is simply wisdom and compassion. The arahant understands clearly why others are suffering and can give them good advice on how to free themselves from it, because the arahant already knows how to do it. Far from being some sort of meaningless or empty state that's of no use to anyone, nibbāna is quite the opposite. It's the most valuable thing of all. It's better than anything in the world.

When we reflect that the mind of the arahant is completely free of greed, hatred and delusion and is without attachment or suffering, it energises us in the practice because we gain confidence that human beings actually *can* completely let go of the mental afflictions. If others can do that, then so can we. Even at times when we feel that we are only experiencing suffering, if we observe closely, we'll notice that there are moments of calm or normality in our mind when we're not thinking about our problems or what is making us suffer. There are still moments where there are no stressful thoughts and feelings, no worries or confusion and no anger

present. Every time we notice that, we're a little bit closer to nibbāna.

All of the monks who looked after Luang Por Sawaeng over the period of the past year since he was diagnosed with cancer praised him for being very calm, composed and patient with his illness. He was a good example of someone who, having practised the Dhamma-Vinaya continuously through his adult life, knew how to use his practice and experience the fruits of it when confronted with a terminal illness. He didn't display any fear or anxiety and he didn't complain, but he peacefully and patiently continued to practice as he endured through the slow death of his body. That's why the Buddha said that the quality of patient endurance makes the mind beautiful. These qualities in the mind of a well-practised monk can even turn the tragedy of slow death into something of beauty. When you practice mindfulness and investigation of the Dhamma on a daily basis for a whole lifetime, you no longer give too much importance to the way the khandhas are behaving, because the mind is peaceful and not identifying with them.

A well-practised monastic reflects on the way things are without reacting out of craving or aversion. Their practice of mindfulness and wise reflection allows them to know that the feelings arising are *just* feelings, and the changes taking place in the body are 'just that much', without creating suffering out of the experience. With mindfulness and wisdom present, there is little or no clinging to a sense of self. If you know that you don't own the body, then there is nowhere for the negative thought processes and emotions to become established with a sense of self. The peaceful mind just knows that when you get ill, it feels like that and the body changes in this or that way. There is the knowing of the five khandhas but no grasping at them as self. Not only was Luang Por Sawaeng able to practice and look after his own mind until the end, he also gave constant words

of encouragement to those around him who were assisting with his care, and to the groups of monks and laity who regularly visited him. Rather than being caught up in the deterioration of his own bodily condition, as long as he could still speak he offered Dhamma reflections and words of kindness and appreciation.

I'll leave you with these reflections tonight. We can carry on meditating for a while, and then we will do the funeral chanting and dedicate it to Luang Por Sawaeng.