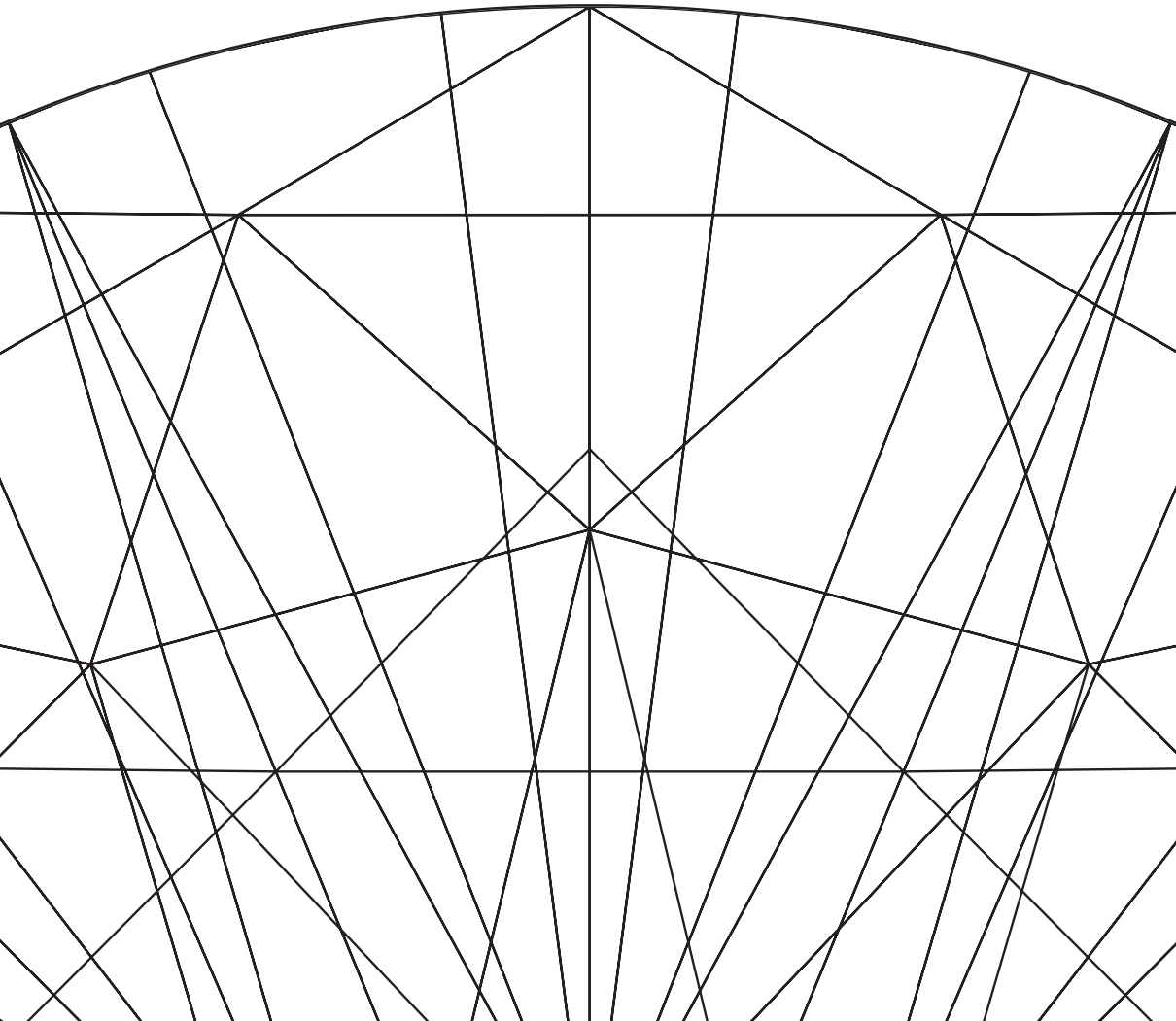
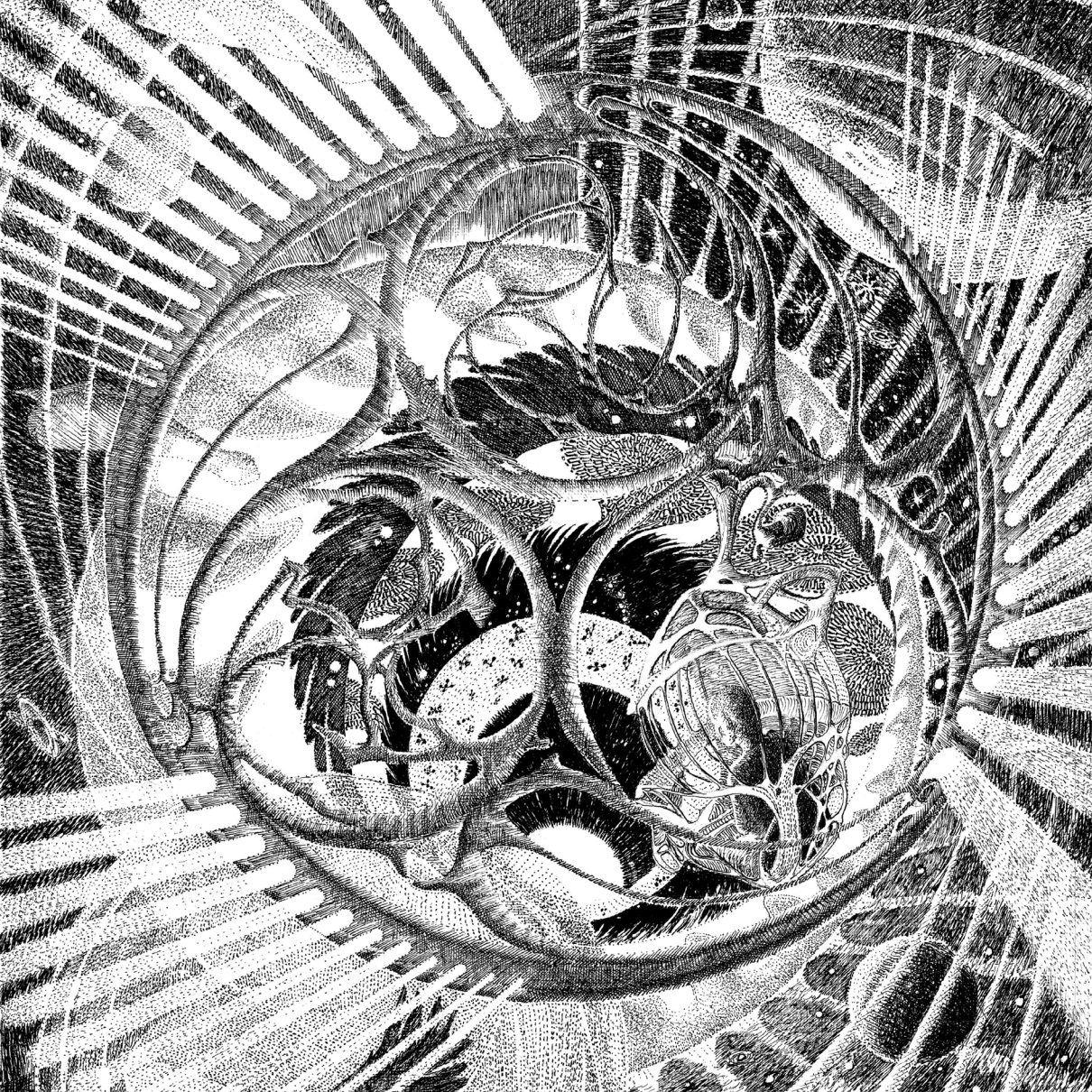
# Reality



HAPPILY EVER AFTER

# VOLUME ONE Reality

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



# ‘The Blue Pill or the Red Pill? Why Wake up When my Habits are so Pleasant?’

For some readers this may be a very obscure title while for others, who have seen the film *The Matrix* or at least heard of it, it will make a bit more sense. The plot revolves around a hero, Neo, discovering that rather than life being a situation of free will and independence and enjoyment, it is just a façade. He discovers that the life that he thinks he is leading is an illusion and that, in fact, his body is kept in a small plastic pod, like all other human beings, suspended in fluid surrounded by pipes and wires, and the mental energy that they produce in their little flotation tank is what is powering the great artificial intelligence that is now running the planet.

The Matrix is the computer program that runs it and organises the collective illusion so that all of the living beings assume they are driving to work and chatting with their family and having breakfast and life is comfortable, predictable and reliably pleasant. It becomes revealed to the hero along the way that this is an illusion and the mentor, whose name is Morpheus, presents the hero Neo with a choice: the blue pill or the red pill. If you

take the blue pill, it means your mind will continue to be absorbed in the delusion. You will carry on, somewhat happily, with your delusion of having free will, being able to walk around and live your life in a deluded state. If you take the red pill; you will wake up to what has actually been happening. He takes the red pill and then realizes, 'Oh my goodness, I spent my whole life in this little flotation tank. I've never actually been anywhere. I was just suspended in fluids, surrounded by wires and tubes, and the whole of my life, the idea of being an independent person, making choices and doing what I like has been totally delusory. It's all been an illusion.' This has become a metaphor in our culture: do you take the blue pill and stay asleep, or do you take the red pill and wake up to rude reality?

There is a very impactful moment when the hero wakes up from the delusion, he breaks free of the influence of *The Matrix* and then his mentor introduces him to the world as it actually is, and it's pretty grim. Even though he has escaped the flotation tank, it is still a desolate, post-apocalyptic world run by artificial intelligence. His mentor and the little enclave of noble warriors who are battling the evil empire of the artificial intelligence are trying to be the torch bearers for freedom. His mentor, at that moment of him waking up to where they are and how life actually is, says to him, 'Welcome to the desert of the real.' It's a bit of a shock, but it is also reality. I feel there is a useful message in this.

The blue pill or the red pill? Do we want to carry on in our deluded state based on our habits of self-view and our opinions, our preferences, our familiar way of seeing ourselves and the world, or do we want to wake up? Do we want to try seeing life through the eyes of Dhamma to make our way through the desert of the real? I feel this is the kind of question that many of us face during the course of a day: do I choose to buy into my self-centred views, my opinions, my habits, or do I choose to take a different perspective? Do I choose to let go of those habits?

There is also the question: why do we have to take a pill, why do we have to choose? The Buddha was the doctor of the world. If we didn't need medicine, life would be great. But this is where we're at, we're not blissfully happy all the time. That was the starting point for the Buddha. In fact, his first inclination was to not even try teaching humanity because he thought all beings were beyond saving. It's said that after the Enlightenment, he cast his vision around the world and his first thought was that the beings of the world are so completely intoxicated and lost in their own bubbles, that they were beyond saving. It was only when the Brahmā deity, Sahampati, went to the Buddha and said, 'It's true that beings are lost. There are many, many beings who are caught up in delusion. However, there are beings with a lot of dust in their eyes and beings with just a little bit of dust in their eyes. And so, for the sake of those with just a little dust in their eyes, please teach the Dhamma that you understand.'

When the Buddha first started teaching, he approached it like a medical diagnosis for a spiritual disease. It was a treatment for the malaise of *dukkha*, the fact that we are less than blissfully happy all the time. The Buddha created a fourfold spiritual diagnosis, the Four Noble Truths: *dukkha* is the symptom; self-centred craving is the cause of the malaise; the cessation of *dukkha* is the prognosis and the Noble Eightfold Path is the treatment – the latter being the equivalent of taking the red pill.

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The Buddha said, 'When we talk about the world, what is the world? That whereby one is a perceiver of the world, and a conceiver of the world, that is called "the world" in this Dhamma and discipline' (S 35.116). The world, in this respect, is thus not the planet or the physical universe so much as our perception of the world, inner and outer. As he points out in that teaching, 'What is it whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world? The eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind; those are the means whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world.' The world is the world of our own experience.

We can take something like colour. When you see a colour, you say, 'This is a blue carpet.' That is how you perceive the carpet, do other people perceive it in the same way? What do other people see? You can also take a sound. When

you hear a magpie calling, you may think it is meaningless, or nothing more than a natural sound, but to another magpie it is a meaningful statement.

If you have a really effective blue pill, then you can stay completely wrapped in a little bubble of your own rightness, your own preferences, your own opinions – and that is what we habitually try to do. We try to surround ourselves and sustain the world according to our own preferences so that we are always comfortable, always protected, always fully supplied with all the things that we like, with the people that we like. We would like never to have to deal with anything difficult or unwanted, which, of course, is impossible. But we keep trying for that. We keep trying to set our life up so that we will never have any difficult or painful situations; so we never have to be with any problematic or unpleasant people; so we will never have to deal with pain or loss or any of our faculties disappearing; so we will be able to see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think completely as we wish to, reliably smoothly and accurately; so we will never have any unwanted emotions like worry or fear or anger; so we will always be living in a completely clear, benign, happy state. That's the dream of the blue pill.

So, as it says in the title, 'Why wake up when my habits are so pleasant?' As long as those habits can be fed and as long as we have a good supply of our drug of choice – whether it's social approval, interesting TV programmes, perfect medical treatment, alcohol or prescription drugs, or

non-prescription drugs, that make us feel comfortable all the time – we will be able to sustain that illusion of a pleasant, independent, free existence that makes us feel content and happy all the time. We seek distraction to keep that illusion alive. Many of us have spent a lot of time drinking and using drugs – as they say, mood adjusters – adjusting our mood so that we feel 'good'. We endeavour to source enough painkillers, or spend money on consumer products, or gather glittering prizes, or just absorb into feelings of self-obsession, in order to bring that sense of at least temporary contentment and happiness, of well-being.

We like to believe in our opinions. We like to absorb into our own ideas and then criticize others who think differently. That is also a major occupation. How many of us (either ourselves or the people in our family, or our friends or people that we work with) continually criticize the world – praising this, grumbling about that, making a kind of fence, forming that bubble of our own feelings of rightness and judging others. 'This is good, that is bad. This is right, that is wrong. I approve of this, I disapprove of that.' We absorb into our opinions. We come up with rationalizations of why we feel what we do. We get a sense of comfort or reassurance through being able to explain everything. We tell ourselves, 'This is why I feel this, this is why I feel that.' We use our intellect to create that environment of comfort – or at least we try to.

So the problem, at least in my experience, is that none of this really works. You can never quite take enough of the drug, you can never quite drink enough to feel perfectly good all the time. Then, when it's taken to excess, it becomes socially unacceptable. You're not allowed to drive or you cause accidents. Your friends ask you, 'Why are you drinking so much?'

I have had this experience myself many, many years ago on a Tuesday lunchtime at the local pub, The Swan, in Sutton Valence. This was before I became a monk, I hasten to add! I think this was around the summer of 1977. There were only three of us in the pub. This friend of mine, who was quite the party animal herself, was introducing me to an acquaintance of hers who was an engineer. We were having a fascinating conversation about his work and a old friend of his who lived as a hermit up in the hills in the north of England. About an hour and a half into this conversation, this friend of mine asked, 'Why are you drinking so much?' I said, 'What do you mean?' somewhat defensively. She said, 'Well, you're on your eighth pint and it's only half past twelve. It's just the three of us. It's not like we're in the middle of a party. Why are you drinking so much?' I replied, 'Because I want to. I feel like it.' And then she said to me, 'What are you afraid of?' And that really hit me because that was both something I had never considered and an astute observation on her part. At the time I took refuge in explaining, self-justification, but it was a wake-up call for me. I had become unconscious of how I was drinking all the time to make myself

feel OK, even when the situation didn't really call for it. There were just three of us in the pub. It wasn't even one o'clock and I was already on my eighth pint. That's a true story.

So we get that feedback from the people around us, or we find out ourselves that we can't drink enough to feel good, that we can't stay distracted enough and we get bored. We spend so many hours looking at websites on the internet, so many hours watching TV. How many excursions can you go on? How many holidays? How many books can you read, or write? How many home improvements can you make? How big a *stūpa* can you build? You have changed the curtains twice this year already and still you don't feel happy. This is something that is really worthy of consideration. Mostly what we try and do is up the consumption of the blue pills. 'I'm not trying hard enough. I need a bigger TV! It's not the programs. I need a bigger screen. I need a better sound system. I need faster broadband. If I just had a higher speed internet, then I would be fine, I'd be happy.' We keep increasing the dose. We keep increasing the consumption and it's never quite enough.

Many years ago, I did a university degree in Physiology and Psychology and one of the books that we studied was called *The Physiology of Excitable Cells*, which might sound very interesting but it was a challengingly dense book to get through. The content was interesting because an 'excitable cell'

is such as the cells of the eye, the ear, the tongue, the nose, the skin – the cells of the senses that produce an electric current that can vary when they are stimulated. With cells such as the rods and the cones in the eye, that enable us to see, when light hits the cells of the back of the eye they produce an electric current that goes down the optic nerve. If you have a bright light, the initial impact of that bright light landing on those cells sends a charge down the nerve, but then each cell adjusts because if the light stays strong, it says, 'OK, we don't need to keep sending such a strong signal,' and it adjusts so that brightness becomes ordinary and bearable. No matter how strong the signal gets, the system will keep adjusting to make it ordinary, to make it normal. The stronger the taste, the louder the noise, the more variety there is in the flavour, no matter how strong or varied or intense or impactful it is, the system will always adjust to make it ordinary. Our neurophysiology is rigged for us to become bored. Change is what the system finds interesting and is evolutionarily developed to detect.

An excitable cell will keep adjusting until it receives such a strong stimulus that it physically breaks down – like when the light is too bright and destroys the cell – or it goes down to the lower limit, where the stimulus is too weak to set off an impulse – such as too quiet a sound or too faint a light.

Our whole system keeps adjusting so that anything we experience with the senses eventually becomes ordinary. That is why we get bored. When we

experience this our first reaction is usually to get a bigger screen, go to a different pub, to find a different partner or go to a different Ajahn. We keep going back to the same type of stimulation to get that feeling once more. We can do that but then there's also that aching in the heart – being dissatisfied. It's not quite enough, it's not quite right, it's not quite there, 'I'm not quite free, I'm not quite content.'

Going back to my partying days before I was a monk, I was thinking about this topic and I was reflecting how when I was a teenager, I used to feel really jealous of the friends of mine who could get completely lost in their moods or their feelings. They could get happily carried away. And I used to think, 'I wish I could just switch off like them. Why do I keep thinking about things all the time?' I would be in the middle of some party or some kind of adventure and say to myself, 'Why is this interesting? Why are we doing this? What's the point of this? Why is this supposed to be fun?' If I said something like this my friends would look at me sideways, saying, 'What are you talking about?' or, 'Get another round in!' That would be the response. As I was recollecting this, I realized I used to actually feel envious of them. 'If only I could be mindlessly carefree like my friends, that would be great!' I'm not trying to put them down, but that was the feeling that arose at the time. 'I wish I could just be as wonderfully insensitive as my dear mates.' Not all of them, but some of them. My

mind kept asking these kinds of questions, 'Why is nothing ever enough? Why are we never really free?'

This, in a way, brings us to the question of why wake up when our habits are so pleasant? That pleasantness is only one kind of happiness; that one kind of happiness is getting what you want, in whatever kind of dimension that might be. It might be that what you want is a Nobel Peace Prize – a very appropriate, beautiful thing – or it might be you want to out-compete others and get really rich, it might be you want just to stop feeling so much self-hatred, or to get totally wasted on a Saturday night, or to feel approved of, or just to feel happy and to be comfortable. That kind of happiness is the happiness of getting what you want. It is a kind of happiness, but it is a very shallow kind of happiness. The Buddha said this is a kind of pleasure, but it is a very coarse kind of pleasure. There is another kind of happiness that we can experience which is far superior to that, which is essentially the happiness of not craving anything, the happiness of true contentment, the happiness of the heart free from craving, the heart that has awakened to reality. That is a very different kind of happiness.

There is a significant *sutta* in the Middle Length Discourses called the *Māgandiya Sutta* (M 75). The Buddha is talking to a layman called Māgandiya who is quite a sensualist. He can't understand this renunciation thing. He likes his food, he likes to drink, he likes fine clothes, he enjoys things, he

has a love for the sensual world. He can't understand why anyone in their right mind would want to give up any kind of sense-pleasure, it just doesn't make sense to him. Why would you deny yourself things that are fun, that are enjoyable? He is having a dialogue with the Buddha. The Buddha is a celibate monk, he is a renunciant who walked around North-East India barefoot for 45 years. Māgandiya can't understand this issue. He asks, 'Why would you give up so much happiness, so much pleasure when life has got so much to offer? What benefit do you see in the renunciant life?'

It is a very interesting little dialogue because the Buddha doesn't put him down or criticize him at all. Instead, he says, 'What do you think, Māgandiya, if after this lifetime you were reborn in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, one of the heavenly realms, and you were a *deva* prince living in the Nandana Grove with a retinue of five hundred celestial nymphs – graceful dove-like maidens – that were your harem up in the heavenly realm, if you were there in the Nandana Grove with these five hundred dove-like nymphs, would you be interested in the life that you have here as a human being down in this world? How would that compare to living here, enjoying your favourite foods, running your business and living with your family? Would you be interested in this?' Māgandiya replied, 'Well no! I wouldn't be interested in this at all, if I was up in the Tāvatiṃsa heaven with five hundred celestial nymphs to keep me company. What would be the appeal of such worldly

kinds of happiness when what I would experience in the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven would be so vastly, immeasurably more pleasant, more delightful, more satisfying?!'

The Buddha responded, 'Exactly so, Māgandiya. It is not that I disregard or dismiss worldly pleasure in its own right, but I know a pleasure that is so far beyond it that it is as far above and beyond the pleasure of a *deva* in the Nandana Grove as the pleasure of that *deva* is above the happiness of worldly life in the human realm. So it is not that I despise that worldly pleasure, or that I hate it or I fear it; it's just not interesting to me because I know a pleasure that is far greater, far more profound, far more comprehensive. It is just not interesting.' The Buddha is deliberately using a worldly example that Māgandiya could relate to to make his point; would you be envious if somebody had a small black and white TV with one channel when you had a TV with five hundred channels and a ten foot screen? It just wouldn't be interesting because what you have available to you is far richer, far more pleasing, far more satisfying.

So this, in a sense, is to do with the red pill. This is where we get to the red pill and why it's a good idea to wake up. How do we discover that kind of happiness that is so much more profound, so much more complete? Essentially the reason why it is so superior is because it is a happiness that is independent of circumstances, where the kind of happiness of getting

what you want depends on having a supply of the things that you like, and having the right environment to experience it, and having the right people with you, and the right physiology. Someone can cook you the most delicious meal but if you are feeling sick, when they put it on the table in front of you, you feel, 'Ugh.' It is exactly what you like, it's your favourite thing, they did it especially for you, but you take one look and say, 'Ugh. Sorry, I can't even look at it.'

A few years ago, Ajahn Pasanno and I were getting check-ups at a hospital in Bangkok. They were doing a full scale health check to see how we were, and unfortunately both of us reacted violently to some of the medicine they gave us in order to carry out the tests. We were having the checks through the morning. When they were done a meal offering was made for us with half the floor being covered with many delicious foods. The hospital team had obviously spent a huge amount of time and care preparing it all, but we could not eat anything. I took one look and had to race to the bathroom before I vomited profusely. The smell and the sight of this glorious and delicious food, that was offered with great sincerity and kindness, made me thoroughly sick. Monastics don't run; we process, we never run. But I had to run to the bathroom before I vomited all over the corridor. The deliciousness of the food or the beauty of the object or the delightfulness of the sound is dependent, whereas the kind of happiness that comes from taking the red pill – the happiness that comes from

waking up – is a whole different order. It's not dependent on the senses, it is not dependent on our conditioning.

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The means whereby we wake up, or how the Buddha encourages this, hinges around breaking free of the habits that we have of looking for security in, for example, what we look like – wanting to be young and attractive, needing to look appealing to others – wanting to always be comfortable, wanting to never be sick, never grow old, never to lose anybody that we love, never to lose anything that we feel we own. What he called 'The Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' is the most common and accessible way of recognizing those habits.

We try to take refuge in and depend upon things that are undependable. We try to find security in things which are insecure, and try to find satisfaction in things that cannot satisfy. For example, I'm not sure of these statistics, but I have heard that the cosmetic industry is a $700 billion a year industry worldwide – $700 billion! In addition, even though, obviously, we need to look after our bodies and take care of our health in sensible and practical ways, how many of us spend huge amounts of our day worrying about ailments that we have, ailments that we might have, ailments that we have had, worried they are going to come back again or whether we might have them in the future? I'm not saying that we shouldn't visit doctors or take

care of ourselves. All I'm saying is, just consider the amount of anxiety we experience, the amount of time, money and effort that is spent worrying about illness, trying to avoid it, fearing that it's going to happen and worrying what certain sensations might mean.

So, 'The Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' that the Buddha encourages us to pick up and explore every day are:

**1** I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond ageing.
**2** I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness.
**3** I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying.
**4** All that is mine, beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me.
**5** I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma, related to my karma, abide supported by my karma; whatever karma I shall do for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

(A 5.57)

Whenever this comes up, I find myself making a reassurance to people that the Buddha was very compassionate. He was not a sadist, he was not making fun of us or trying to make us feel bad or depressed from a self-centred perspective, 'You are ageing, you are going to get sick and you are going to die – ha ha ha.' It is not that kind of attitude at all! It is a waking up from the delusion, that little bubble of self-view, hoping that we are never

going to get old, hoping that we are never going to get sick, hoping that we are never going to die.

I frequently do this little exercise: consider for a moment that every single human being reading this is going to die one day. Every single one – one hundred percent, no exceptions. None of us gets off this boat alive, right? Regardless of how old we are or how young we are, that's a fact. Why is something in us surprised when we read that? When I say, 'Everybody is going to die,' something goes, 'Huh, wait a minute, that can't be quite right.' What is it that is saying that can't be right? What is it that is surprised when we get ill, get a cold, or have some kind of illness? What is surprised and feels it shouldn't be this way or that something has gone wrong or that life is being unfair? Isn't it weird that we feel something has gone wrong when the body gets sick? Why do we feel sad when we look in the mirror and there are a few more wrinkles and a few less hairs where we want them or more hairs in the wrong places? What feels wrong about that? Why is that saddening? Isn't that strange? Because the conditioning from self-view is, 'I have the right to never get old, never get sick and never die.' That is the delusion of self-view. That's like a childlike attitude, 'All the things that are mine, none of them should ever leave, unless I want to get rid of them and then they should be gone now. If things are mine, they should stay mine always and be exactly the way I like them. That's the way it should be.'

That's a five year-old child's vision of the world but yet it affects us, even as supposedly mature adults.

I would say that is the effect of the blue pill; the bubble of self-view that creates that and is desperately trying to make it so that, 'I never lose anything that I love. All the things that are mine I keep. I don't get old, I don't get sick, I don't die.' If we look at the advertisements, unless it is an advertisement for a retirement plan or a stair lift, everybody in the advert is 23 and cheerful and good looking. Even the advertisements for undertakers; the coffins look really smart. As Ajahn Sucitto has pointed out, even when you are in your coffin, you are dressed up as if you are going to a dance. They put you in a dress or a suit that you rarely would have worn while you were alive. People quite often look better in the coffin than they ever did in real life.

When we have people lying in the Chapel of Rest here – when people ask for their bodies to be kept in the Amaravati Temple after they have died – we have no refrigeration, just the windows we can open. The bodies change according to their nature so that if you die and your body is there in the Chapel of Rest for five days or a week, then it becomes a food source for the organisms of the decaying process, for mould and so forth. The organic

nature of change of a human body is going to be taking place. It is not preserved or frozen into an idealized form.

That said, one of the questions that often arises with respect to these 'Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' is that they are expressed in what seem to be very personal terms; how do statements like 'I am of the nature to age' or 'I am the owner of my karma' mesh with the teachings on not-self – *anattā*? Isn't there a contradiction between the Buddha encouraging us to reflect that '*maraṇa-dhammomhi* – I am of the nature to die' and also to consider that '*rūpaṃ anattā* – the body is not-self'? This can be confusing at first glance, however, the contrasting expressions are based on what is known as the two levels of truth: *sammuti sacca*, conventional or relative truth, and *paramattha sacca*, ultimate truth. For example, on the conventional level we say 'the sun rises' – in actuality it doesn't, it only appears to because the earth is turning. Thus there can be two accurate but apparently contradictory statements made about the same thing: 'the sun rises' and 'the sun doesn't rise' – both are true according to whether it's a conventional or an ultimate perspective.

The Buddha was a very pragmatic teacher so he tended to begin his instructions with where most people were at – that is to say, identifying with body and mind – this is the conventional truth and so this is what 'The Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' are aimed at. They are intended to help

the individual begin to loosen the habits of attachment and identification. Thus the reflections on 'I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma etc.' are assisting the mind to see things in terms of the natural law of cause and effect; they are not intended to compound the sense of a doer or an achiever. The teachings on *anattā*, not-self – 'the body is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self...' and so on – these are designed to help things to be seen from the ultimate perspective, where the sense of self has been let go of completely.

These reflections of 'The Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' help us to challenge the habits that imprison the heart, the mind, because it is really nobody but us who are keeping that bubble in place and we don't have to stay imprisoned in it. That said, we might recognize intellectually that, yes, it's good to wake up, and yes, it's good to break free from the bubble, but when we hear those words, 'I'm of the nature to age, I'm of the nature to sicken, I'm of the nature to die,' that is still challenging to the habits of self-view as they are more of an instinctual than an intellectual construct.

When I said that everyone reading this, all of these bodies, are going to die one day – it is that instinctual, self-centred aspect of mind which says, 'But, but, but... can we negotiate? Let's talk about that.' It is important to recognize that the habits of self-view are daunted by reality; 'Welcome to

the desert of the real.' It's a desert to the ego. It's not what the ego wants to hear. You are getting older and you are getting more wrinkles. Everything is heading south – in my experience – unless you are young and still growing. Eventually, even for those who are youthful now, everything will head south. When we are able to recognize that, it's painful to the ego, but simultaneously it is freeing to the heart.

As long as the mind's view is based on 'I' and 'me' and 'mine', then we are setting ourselves up for loss and depression and sadness when those changes occur, when things that we love go. If instead we take refuge in wisdom, in the Refuges, in Dhamma, in reality and in nature rather than in self-view, then as those changes occur we are ready for them. 'Oh, there goes another one. Yeah, I used to be able to remember people's names, and now, his name is... It'll come to me.' It's gone! We can't remember where we put our shoes. We can't remember people's addresses, things erode. If we are wise and we recognize, 'There goes another one,' it's not experienced as a sense of diminution, we are not diminished. As it says in a poem of Rumi's, 'When were you ever made any the less by dying?' Things come, things go. What has that got to do with anything fundamentally real? When the heart meets the experience of change and uncertainty, it experiences freedom. The experience is one of limitlessness and wonderment, rather than fear.

One of the Upanishads, the *Brihadaranyaka*, begins with a passage that, abbreviated, says something like, 'Originally there was the mind of the

absolute filling the infinite void. And in the mind of the absolute there arose the thought, "I am". With the thought, "I am", there arose fear. With fear there arose desire' (Bṛh IV 1.4.1-3). When the 'I am' arises in our mind, there is the other, there is that which is outside, and then there is a sense of me here, the world out there, and then there is a sense of threat. How we fend off that feeling of threat or danger or insecurity is we get stuff. The mind goes to desire, to protect ourselves, or to get things, or to be someone, and then the whole cycle begins. If we follow the Buddha's advice and we reflect, 'This is the way nature works; I am of the nature to age, the nature to sicken, to die; all that is mine, beloved and pleasing will become otherwise, will become separated from me; I'm the owner of my karma and so forth,' then the attitude changes in a radical way. Rather than it being experienced as 'Something that was mine is being lost,' it is recognized as, 'There wasn't anybody here to own anything, and nothing that could truly be owned in the first place.'

How could anything really be owned? Can you own a cloud or the moon, or even a tree, really? It's ridiculous. 'The moon is mine.' What? Sometimes people have done that kind of thing. I think the story goes that when Vasco Núñez de Balboa, the Spanish explorer, got to the Pacific Ocean he stood on the shore and said, 'I claim this sea and all that's in it for Spain.' This little human being standing on a beach saying, 'I claim the Pacific Ocean. This

is mine, for my country.' It's particularly ridiculous. It is one little human being saying, 'We are now the owners of the whole Pacific Ocean. This belongs to my country.'

A recent book of Ajahn Sumedho's teachings is titled *Don't Take Your Life Personally*. It is such a complete teaching that all you really need is the title. 'Don't take your life personally'. It's challenging, because we feel like, 'That's me in the mirror. These are my sensations and these are my aches and pains. These are my problems, my hopes, my achievements.' We can, however, use the reflections, 'I am of the nature to age. I am of the nature to sicken,' to shift the view, change the perspective and break out of that prison of habit.

We take our mind, our thoughts, memories, feelings and moods so personally. We feel, 'I'm angry, I'm jealous, I'm fearful, I'm sleepy, I'm in pain.' We do experience all of those 'I am's' but if the attitude is tweaked, the view is changed to make these experiences not so personal. They are not put into the framework of 'I've got this' or 'this is mine', but rather as a flow of experience. We can also use simple phrases such as, 'being the knowing', or, 'the mind is not a person', or, 'the mind is Dhamma', to help the realization of this. The more that the sense of self is understood as it is – a natural psychological structure but not something that has to be a limiting factor in this life or this experience of being – the more the heart can be free.

This changing of perspective is not only in reference to bad experiences, but to good ones as well. There can be a large amount of ego behind someone's success. Let's say you notice a need for healthy fruit juices in eco-friendly packaging, so you start a company. If the idea works and is successful, you can say, 'Well, this seems to be helpful. OK. And this looks like a good direction. Let's keep heading this way and see what happens,' rather than, 'I'm great. Look at what a brilliant idea I had and all the money I have made!' In the same way, if the business does not succeed and you lose a great deal of money, you can look at that as a way of learning and improving, rather than, 'I'm a failure. This is a disaster. What will people think of me?' This happens in the monastic life, too. You can make a choice and be praised for it, or make a choice and be criticized for it. No matter what the outcome of the situation is, or the judgement from those around you, you cannot turn the clock back. You can look at all this instead and say, 'This is good. I will learn from it.' Or, 'This is bad. I will learn from it.'

* * *

When we change the point of view, there is a desert and the 'desert of the real' is a challenge – 'I'm of the nature to age, I'm of the nature to sicken' – it threatens the habits of self-view. But it is important to notice that the point of that reflection is the freedom of the heart that comes from realizing,

'Of course. How could it be otherwise? That's how nature operates. How could something be born that doesn't die? How can something begin and not end? It can't be. That's not the way nature works.' That attunement to reality brings with it enormous relief. The fear that is there in our little pod of self-view disappears. There isn't that sense of needing to collect and protect and to own, and the subsequent feeling of threat, but rather there's an openness. There is an ease within us.

There is another saying – I believe it was from Suzuki Roshi, who was a Zen teacher living in the United States who founded the San Francisco Zen Center – about this kind of topic. He said, 'Be very careful before you get on this train because it doesn't stop.' Once you're out of your little pod, you can't go back in. You might try. Once we have taken the red pill we can't untake it. I think many of us, having had those kinds of moments of realization, have thought, 'This is all a bit pointless, really, this status and career and trying to be totally competent all of the time, it's all a bit silly,' but once we have seen it, even though we might want to, we can't really unsee it; it's like learning to ride a bicycle, the body remembers, you can't unlearn how to ride a bike. Once you have learned it, it's there in the system. Once we've seen that, even if we might try to avoid it, it's there within us. We might try to bury ourselves in getting busy or being absorbed in worldly activity but something in us is saying, 'You know this is all a bit of a waste of time really.'

There is something in us, those habits of self-view that say, 'Oh, shut up, don't say that, I'm busy here.' In a way it is important to recognize that effort to suppress, and to have compassion for that in us which wants to hide away, which wants to get back into the pod, that is looking for the blue pill to go back to sleep, that would prefer the delusion. This morning I was recollecting that in California they like to have bumper stickers, strips of text one puts on the back bumper of one's car. A popular one in the San Francisco Bay Area was, 'I've given up my search for truth and I'm now looking for a good fantasy'. This is a joke, but not a joke. Something in us does want to switch off, 'I wish I could just not feel. I wish I could just check out. If I could only just forget.' And part of us would like to, so as Suzuki Roshi said, 'I would think long and hard before you get on this train because you won't be able to get off.' Once you've taken the red pill, you can't un-take it.

I think many of us can recognize those feelings of regret or the urge to switch off, that part of us that would like to go back to sleep – like when you have woken up but you were having a really good dream and you are kind of awake but the dream hasn't quite finished yet. A part of you thinks, 'I was enjoying that. If I could just doze off again and go back to that dream.' Many of us have had that experience. I certainly have. 'Oh, I was enjoying that. Can I just go back and have a little bit more? Just a teensy bit more of that.'

It is important to listen to that, to respect that, but also to recognize that's not what you want to put in charge of your life, that we can do better than that. It's important to be able to recognize, 'What was that all about? Why was I getting so upset about that? So excited about that? Why did I make such a big thing of it?'

My father and my mother were bull terrier breeders, that's how they met; they were also farmers but they maintained a lifelong interest in dogs. My father eventually had a career writing in a dog magazine and judging dog shows around the world, and he became a big figure. He was known as 'The Pope of bull terriers'. Really, I'm not kidding you! He was a seriously big figure in the world of dog breeding and he was quite pleased with that. His calendar would be filled three or four years in advance with all the dog shows he was invited to judge around the planet and he was treated with great respect in that field. He was one of the board members of The Kennel Club, which is the main dog breeding organization for the UK. You have to retire from the board when you're 75, so when he reached that age and had stepped down from the board, he said, 'Everyone assumes I'm no longer judging, I'm no longer writing, I'm no longer in the field, so I've stopped getting all the invitations. People don't make contact with me any more.'

He thus had a period between when he was 75 and when he was 80 when he wasn't being called upon to travel around the world or be that figure

very much any more, so he had a lot more time on his hands and the opportunity to reflect. During those years, however, the dénouement of his life came about by his being invited to judge the Best in Show at Crufts, which in the dog breeding world is like arahantship. The consummation of potential in that domain is to judge the Best in Show at Crufts. Running up to that event, which took place less than a year before he died, he made an impressive and wonderful comment one day. He said, 'I'm a big fish, but it's a very small pond.' I thought, 'Wow, good for you Dad,' because ten years before I reckon there is no way he could ever have said that.

As his life was coming to an end – and also since many of his friends were dropping dead around him from cirrhosis of the liver, kidney disease, heart failure, lung cancer and so on – and since the system wasn't really drawing him into that world in such a strong way – he naturally got a bit of perspective and the wisdom of his years bore fruit. I was touched and impressed.

His last couple of years were quite peaceful and gracious in many ways. He wasn't hanging on, trying to be the Pope of bull terriers until his last breath. He was happy to let that all go. One day he also said, 'It's only dogs, really.' I forget who else in the family was in the room, but I think there was a collective turning of heads: 'Dad just said what!?' It's only dogs. It would be like me saying, 'It's only Buddhism.' It was very wonderful to see that kind of perspective, that sense of letting go.

The importance of waking up – taking the red pill and not being afraid, when you're ready to go into the desert experience – the point is not just the harshness of the desert experience, but that if one passes through that, if you let yourself feel that sense of loss or challenge to self-view, the result, on the other side of the desert is the freeing of the heart. The point is that sense of 'Ahh...' the sense of relaxation and ease, the safety of the other side of the desert, the security that one experiences on the other side of the wasteland, or at least when at an oasis, that is to say enjoying periods or even moments of non-attachment.

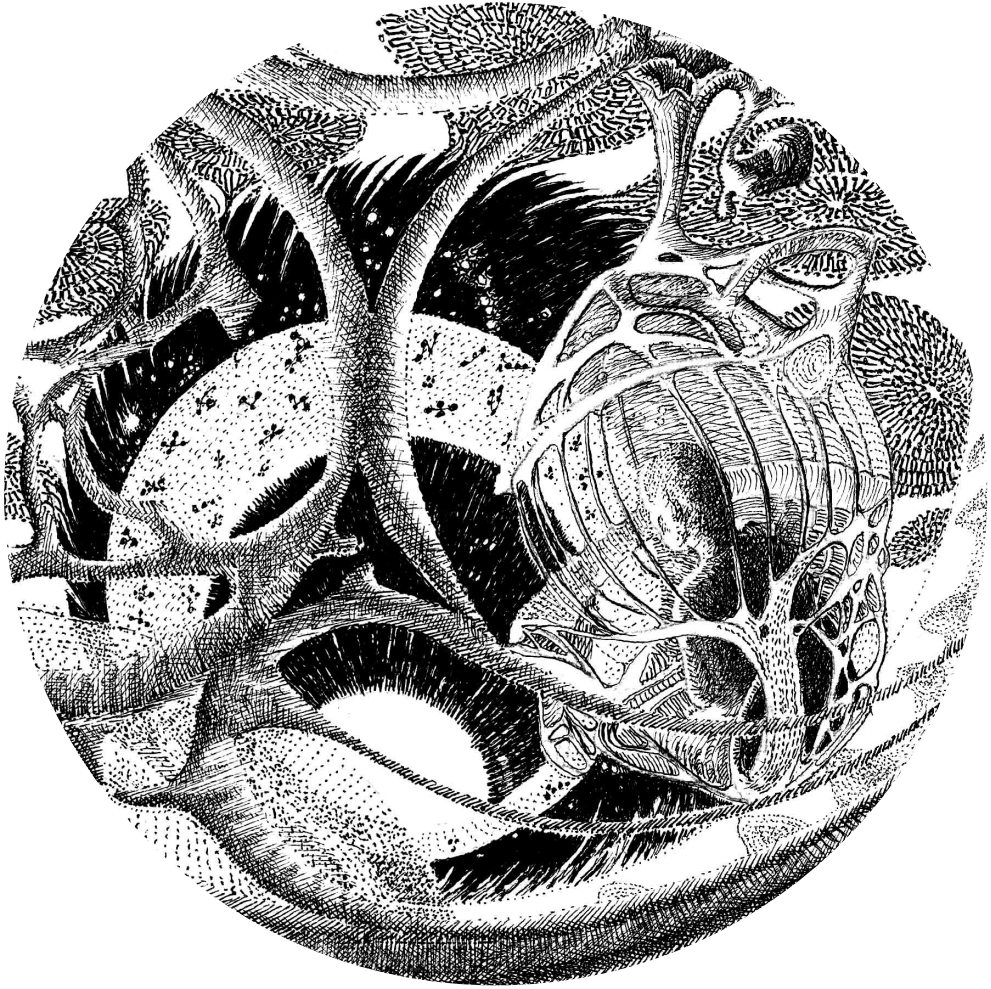
> Tall trees, a river, pools where swallows fly,
> Thickets of oleander where doves coo,
> Shades deep as midnight, greenness for tired eyes,
> Hark how the light winds in the palm-tops sigh.
> Oh this is rest. Oh this is paradise.
>
> Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *The Oasis of Sidi Khaled*

I was reminded when thinking of these themes how Luang Por Sumedho often used to quote from the Hermann Hesse novel, *The Journey to the East*, where the main protagonist of the story sets off with the League, a group of people on their spiritual journey to Asia. They go out on the pilgrimage together and their route takes them through a fearsome gorge called Morbio Inferiore, which symbolizes the Valley of Despair. And while

they are crossing Morbio Inferiore, the person who is telling the story loses heart and convinces himself these people are deluded, 'They don't know what they're doing, we're all going to die, this is all a stupid idea, it's much better for me to go back home.' He turns around, thinking that he has left the fools behind and returns to his familiar life, he carries on with his known world. By chance, many years later, he comes across Leo, the person who was leading the pilgrimage. He says something like, 'Oh, it's you. I last saw you in the gorge thirty, forty years ago. I thought you were all lost and that you were all wasting your time.' He said 'No, no. It wasn't us who were wasting our time, we were making the Journey. It was you who turned back. You're the one who got lost in the desert, we were fine. You decided to believe your own self-centred perspective and you turned back. It was you that lost out. We made it through to the East and found spiritual fulfilment.' It's an interesting story like *The Matrix,* I would recommend it. It has a lot of Dhammic, insightful messages in it.

When we are ready to meet that desert experience and pass through it, then if we have the faith, the commitment and also the *kalyāṇamitta*, if we are ready to be supported by our good spiritual friends, then at the other side of the desert we will find that quality of fulfilment and refreshment and true contentment, true ease, the happiness of not wanting anything, not lacking anything, the happiness of not craving, the happiness of the

heart that is independent of all circumstance. I would encourage us not to lose heart as we meet those desert experiences: being abandoned by your loved ones; more aching joints than you realized you had in the body; more wrinkles than you thought were possible; more urges to dye your hair a couple of times a week... Do not lose heart! Rather have the courage to draw upon the support of and offer support to your *kalyāṇamitta* and, once on the other side of the desert, or at least at an oasis, we will find that quality of freedom, contentment and fulfilment that is our potential.



# ‘Of Course, it is Happening Inside Your Head, Harry, but Why on Earth Should That Mean That it is Not Real?’

Again, the title of this chapter might seem a little esoteric for a Dhamma reflection but for those readers who are acquainted with the Harry Potter books, or who have watched the films, the quotation will probably be quite familiar. One of the reasons this topic was chosen is because two of my favourite subjects, to wit the Harry Potter stories and the Buddha’s phenomenological approach to Dhamma, seem to come together very neatly in this quotation.

This is a spoiler alert in case you are not familiar with the stories already, or if you intend to read them. Right at the end of the many years of conflict between Harry Potter, a young wizard, and the arch figure of discord and danger called Lord Voldemort – after they’ve had a duel and Harry has been zapped and is dead on the forest floor – it seems like Lord Voldemort has slain him. However, Harry then appears in some kind of bardo realm, formed in the shape of Kings Cross Station for reasons known to the author but also as it has a role in the story. Harry then meets his late mentor, Albus Dumbledore, who used to be the headmaster of Hogwarts School of

Witchcraft and Wizardry, who had died in a previous book. Harry is naturally surprised to meet Dumbledore there because he's supposed to be dead. Then, Harry having remembered that he got zapped by Lord Voldemort, deduces that he's now dead too. There ensues a dialogue between Harry and his late mentor.

Harry, while having this conversation with an apparently very much alive Albus Dumbledore, at a certain point asks, 'Is this real? Or has this been happening inside my head?' So he's trying to figure out what's going on, where he is and what the situation is. Dumbledore's response to him is: 'Of course, it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?'

When the book that this is in, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, first came out, I thought, 'That's a very neat way of expressing a very important principle.' It relates to a theme that is very common in Luang Por Sumedho's teachings, which is this observation that, 'The world is in your mind.' We think of ourselves as 'me moving around in the world' and that the world is outside us, but over and over again Luang Por would say, 'Actually, the world is in your mind.' This is not something that's difficult to recognize or to acknowledge, because right at this moment, everything that every single one of us knows about this present reality is through seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, imagining, memory, language.

Here is the experience of 'reading a book written by Ajahn Amaro'. That perception of the present reality is pieced together from what we feel, what we see, what we remember, what we think, our understanding of language – those are all mental events, are they not? Seeing: if you close your eyes, the text vanishes. If you are having a device read this to you, if you block your ears or take the earphones away, the book vanishes. Unblock the ears, open the eyes then it appears again.

Over and over, Luang Por Sumedho would emphasize this. The world is in the mind. We think that we are going places and doing things. But all along the centre of the world is your heart; the heart of the universe, the heart of the world, is your heart. Wherever we were born – whether we're Sri Lankan or English or Thai or American or French or German or Italian or Norwegian or Chinese or African or Australian, or from anywhere on the planet – for every single one of us throughout our entire lives, and wherever we were, it was always *here*, right? Whether you were a small child, whether you were an adult, on whatever continent your body happened to be parked, wherever you were, there was a feeling of *hereness*.

Life is experienced *here*, right? It doesn't take psychic powers to tell us that's how it is for all of us. Wherever we are – if we are seeing India or seeing Latvia, seeing Italy or seeing Kent, or seeing California or Oslo – that is 'seeing' arising in consciousness, 'hearing' arising in consciousness, feeling, smelling, tasting, touching. The world has only ever happened in

our minds. Everything that we've ever known about the world has been known through the agency of this mind.

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The first time I got to contemplate that principle in a serious way was in 1983. I was just about to set off on a long walk all the way through England, myself and a layman, Nick Scott, departing from Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex to walk on a winding route all the way through England up to the newly opened branch monastery at Harnham in Northumberland. I had been preparing for this walk for many months. One of the monks at Chithurst had been a shoemaker before he was ordained. We made a pair of sandals together for me to use. I was going out on training walks and figuring out what gear I was going to take, and contacting the various people that had made invitations. There had been a lot of preparing and, as I'd only been a monk for about four years at that time, and I was in my mid-twenties, there was a lot of restless youthful energy in the mix.

The morning we were aiming to leave, in early May of 1983, Luang Por Sumedho offered a Dhamma reflection. He would do this pretty much every day, for the whole community in the monastery, but this day he focused it particularly for us prospective walkers. Everyone knew that we were going to be setting off that day. One of the comments that he made really stuck

with me. What he said was, 'In actual fact there is nobody going anywhere. There are just conditions changing.'

When you were setting off on your epic journey, planning to be walking 800+ miles on a wiggly route all the way through England, a great adventure, that was a wonderfully appropriate reflection. There's nobody going anywhere, because even as the body is walking along, it's always *here*. Even if you're running, you're always *here*. Even if you're moving at speed on a high speed train, you're going at 125 miles an hour or you're in an aeroplane going 600 or 700 miles an hour, it always is felt as *here*. Life happens here and now.

What that realization does is that it puts that experience of movement and change into a context. It counteracts the attitude, the habit of thinking in terms of 'Me going somewhere', 'Me, this individual, passing through time, going from here to there, going from this event to that'. It puts that in a different context. In the *suttas*, there's a similar exchange. It's a well known dialogue between the Buddha and a *deva* called Rohitassa. It recounts how Rohitassa had been a yogi with great psychic powers in his previous lifetime. On this particular occasion this *deva* appeared before the Buddha and spoke to him, saying:

> 'In my last lifetime I was a yogi and I had considerable psychic powers, I was able to walk through the sky. I made a resolution that I would walk until I reached the end of the world. Even though I committed myself

> to this vow, and I walked and I walked and I walked, and I didn't stop to do anything apart from occasionally to rest, or answer the calls of nature, even though I walked my whole life, I never reached the end of the world and I died whilst still on the journey. So, please, Venerable Sir, can you offer your reflections on this? Is it possible to reach the end of the world?'

The Buddha said to Rohitassa:

> 'You cannot reach the end of the world by walking but I tell you that unless you reach the end of the world, you won't reach the end of suffering.'

That's a conundrum, isn't it? Then he makes this very interesting and powerful comment. He continued:

> 'It is, friend, in just this fathom-high carcass endowed with perception and mind, that I make known the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world.'
>
> (S 2.26)

It might well be recognized that that's a close copy of the format of the Four Noble Truths, but the word 'world' is put in place of the word *'dukkha'*, unsatisfactoriness, suffering. The Buddha is saying that unless you reach the end of 'the world', you won't reach the end of suffering. Now, those of us who have a life affirming habit might feel, 'But I love the world. I don't want

to look forward to the end of the world. This is "A wonderful world"! Are you promoting annihilation of the planet or wishing for the whole solar system to get swallowed up in a black hole? Why do you want the world to end?'

One of the aims here is to address what the Buddha means when he talks about 'the world', *loka,* and why should the end of the world be something that is attractive or appealing? The Buddha was very skilled at speaking in ways that could shock and would get your attention. Since Rohitassa thought that getting to the end of the world was something that was achievable on the material plane, the Buddha is saying, 'You need to modify your understanding of what "the world" is and how the spiritual process works. You're not seeing it in a wise way, in an accurate way.'

It's also interesting that in the notes to this passage in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, Ven. Bhikkhu Bodhi, the translator, makes a particularly significant comment. He is a discerning scholar, very skilled at Pali and English, and he also received a PhD in philosophy from an American university before he became a Buddhist monk. On the statement of the Buddha that, 'It is, friend, in just this fathom-high carcass endowed with perception and mind, that I make known the world, the origin of the world, the cessation of the world, and the way leading to the cessation of the world,' he makes the comment, 'This pithy utterance of the Buddha ... may well be the most profound proposition in the history of human thought' and he's not one who speaks

in extravagant or hyperbolic ways. He's very careful with the comments he makes so that's quite a statement from Bhikkhu Bodhi. Significantly, the value of it hinges around what we think of as 'the world'.

Our ordinary everyday understanding is that the world equals this planet Earth. This is how we generally use the word in English. In the Buddha's time, similarly, they talked about *loka* as the planet that everyone was standing, sitting, lying down on and experiencing. But then in a parallel discourse, closely connected to this dialogue with Rohitassa, he spells out a different approach (S 35.116). He says, 'The world, the world – what do we mean when, we say "the world"?' He goes on to say, 'That whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world, that is called "the world" in this Dhamma and discipline. And what is it whereby one is a perceiver and a conceiver of the world? The eye, the ear, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind – that is the means whereby one is a perceiver of the world and a conceiver of the world.'

The Pali word meaning to conceive of the world is *loka-māni,* a perceiver of the world is *loka-saññi*. What he's saying is that 'the world' is the world of our experience. That's the only world that we can meaningfully talk about: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, remembering, imagining. We can't meaningfully talk about a world that is beyond our experience, we can only talk about the world that we know. This is the

world that each of us has always perceived and has lived in, that comprises our life. The world is built up from the perceptions of our body, our personality, our life story, who we think we are, the name we call ourselves. This is all built up of these perceptions. The only world we can know and meaningfully talk about is our mind's version of the world.

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In ordinary everyday life, we talk about the world, and we assume that our version of the world is reality and other people's versions of 'the world', if they're different, they are perhaps good people, but they're deluded. Instead, when we consider things in this different way – that the world is in the mind and that the world that we know is fabricated from what we see, hear, smell, taste and touch, what we think, what we remember, our language, our imagination – then that makes the world a bit more dependent, subjective doesn't it? It is known that this can only be one of an infinite, fluid variety of versions of the world.

This is what in Western philosophy is called a phenomenological approach. The basic principle of phenomenology is that the only world you can meaningfully talk about is the world of your own experience. That's the phenomenon that is known. This field was developed by people such as Edmund Husserl, who was a German philosopher, whose most famous student was Martin Heidegger. Interestingly, if you consult Wikipedia's

entry on 'Buddhism in Western philosophy', there is an account of Husserl saying that when he was reading the German translations of the *suttas*, he 'couldn't put it down.' The Buddha's teaching was so closely in alignment with how he saw things that it was a huge confirmation for him, and something that was deeply illuminating.

Husserl was teaching and writing in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but there have been philosophers thinking about these issues way back into the Greek times – this idea that all that we experience is just in our minds, like Harry asking Dumbledore, 'Is this really happening? Or is this all just in my head?' That question has been asked in the West since ancient Greece at least. Sometimes people will come to the conclusion that, 'Yes, it is. It's all in our mind and the only real thing in the world is our own mind.' In Western philosophy this is called solipsism. It is the belief or view that our mind is the only real thing and other people don't really exist; nothing is real apart from our own experience and the mind is merely witnessing a huge illusion or dream.

This kind of idea can get us into very deep psychological water and it is easy to get lost in it. In offering Dhamma reflections I try to avoid creating more confusion because, of course, this is all about ending suffering rather than increasing it. However, I do feel it's useful to understand what other people have said and thought in this area. So, if it is all in my head, if things don't really exist apart from what I'm seeing and feeling, then what *is* going

on, what's real, what's happening? One of the philosophers that actively addressed this area was Bishop Berkeley, after whom Berkeley, California, is named. One of his propositions was that no item can be said to truly exist unless it is observed. If you have a shrine in the room where you are sitting reading this, you might say that the shrine behind you doesn't exist, because you are not observing it. Someone else, sitting in a different place in the room, might be observing it, so it exists for them but you can't say that it exists because you can't see it. So this is the philosophy that things don't exist unless someone is observing them. Bishop Berkeley apparently used the example of the oak tree standing in the quadrangle of his college as an example. Since the oak tree wouldn't exist if no one was watching it, the good bishop took this as a proof of the existence of God. The logic being that since God was always watching everything, therefore the existence of objects was sustained. I was pondering this theme today and I remembered a couple of limericks that a student wrote many years ago, describing Berkeley's philosophy:

> There was a young man who said, 'God
> must think it is exceedingly odd
> to find that this tree
> continues to be
> when there's no one about in the quad.'

The response to that is,

'Dear sir, your astonishment's odd.
I am always about in the quad
and that's why this tree
will continue to be,
signed yours faithfully, God.'

I don't know why my mind remembers these things, but it does. I didn't even have to look that one up.

* * *

Then: what is real? What can be trusted? What is meaningful? Such questions can make you crazy or at least riddled with doubt in this respect, if you are not careful. If you take the idea that you're the only real thing and everybody else doesn't exist, then you can get yourself into very deep water. Those of you who've ever read any Kurt Vonnegut books might be familiar with his *Breakfast of Champions*. A character in the novel called Dwayne Hoover reads a science fiction book. The book is written in the form of the author telling the reader, 'You are the only existent being in the world. Everyone else is a zombie or a robot, they don't really exist. You, however, do and this book has been written specially for you. This is your set of instructions.'

He's reading a novel but this character, Dwayne Hoover, is crazy enough to think, 'It's talking to me! I am the only real person in the world and

everyone else is just a robot or a zombie. They don't really exist. They don't really count.' Then he starts to act on that premise and, naturally, all kinds of chaos follow from that. Hi ho. So it goes.

If we take this principle in the wrong way – that my mind is the only real and important thing and nothing else matters – then we steer ourselves either towards being a sociopath or towards psychosis. I definitely do not encourage that! But rather, using this reflection that 'everything that we experience is our mind's version of reality', if it's seen in the correct context, if it's seen in a skilful way, rather than being something that makes us crazy, disconnected or disrespectful, it has the opposite effect. It helps us to be more accommodating and compassionate.

For example, when I open my eyes and look forward, I can see my finger pointing to the left ☜. For someone on the other side of the room looking at my hand, when they look at this same finger, they'd say it was pointing to the right ☞. My truth says 'left', their truth says 'right', and yet we're both 100% correct. Thus my version of reality can seemingly be completely different to somebody else's version of reality, but we can still relate respectfully and be in harmony with each other, if we appreciate the factor of points of view.

When we recognize what we are experiencing as simply our mind's version of the world, rather than some absolute truth, if that's held within a context

of Dhamma, we recognize that of course everybody else's version of reality is going to be slightly different. Why should my version be *the* version? Why should my version of the world be the defining version? What makes my version of reality more true, more real, more accurate than yours? That realization leads to a quality of respectfulness, humility and a capacity to live harmoniously with others because we're not taking our opinion, our experience, our feelings, our perceptions, our conditioning as being what defines the truth, reality.

To take a slightly different approach on this issue: as long as we're making the world some *thing* – where we are apparently an independent being existing in time and the world is a thing out there, and there's me going from one place to another – we're creating self, we're creating time and we're creating location. That is *dukkha.* As long as the mind is seeing things in terms of self-view and in terms of time, it's deeply attached to birth and death and the conditioned realm. That's why the Buddha said that he equates the *loka,* the world, with *dukkha,* with suffering, because as long as the mind makes the world solid and real, makes time real, makes identity real and makes location real, all that is necessarily conducive to *dukkha.*

If we attach to self-view, stating, say, 'I am Ajahn Amaro. I am 67 years old.' In terms of self-view that's an absolute fact, it is taken to be unquestionably true. However, that attaching to self-view necessarily brings *dukkha* with

it. For example, my sisters sometimes have to think twice before they call me Ajahn Amaro. Actually they never call me 'Ajahn' anything! For my dear sisters, to them I am their little brother and I will be remembered in that context. When they write me an email it's to 'Dear A' as, within themselves, I'm still that little brother rather than their Ajahn. If I insisted they always address me as 'Ajahn' *dukkha* would follow for sure.

The degree to which the mind creates the world as solid is the degree to which it creates suffering. The degree to which the mind can see the world as empty, as *suñña,* that it is void of intrinsic substance – that time, location and the feeling of identity are based on perceptions and conditioning, how they are not the whole story – that's the degree to which the heart will know non-suffering and will not be creating disharmony or *dukkha.*

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Luang Por Chah was very fond of using puzzles or questions, conundrums that he would put to people. Again, exactly like the Buddha, he could phrase things in a way that was quite startling and Ajahn Chah would be aiming for this. One conundrum Ajahn Chah would ask was, 'If you can't go forward and you can't go back and you can't stand still, where can you go?' I often repeat this and use it in Dhamma talks because I feel it's an incredibly nifty and skilful approach.

Someone trying to answer Luang Por's question might say, 'Can you go sideways?'

'No, you can't go sideways. You can't dig a hole and you can't climb a tree. You can't go forwards, can't go back, you can't go sideways, you can't go up, you can't go down. Where do you go? Where can you go?'

He would pin you down with this kind of question, knowing that it's a mind game, a puzzle, but one that's laden with wisdom. 'You can't go forward, you can't go back. You can't stand still, can't go to either side – where can you go?' If one reflects on that, the only way that the puzzle can be resolved is if the mind lets go of identification with place, with time and with self-view, with all those qualities. If we think of ourselves as an independent being that is this body, that is passing through time, that is in this place where we are reading these words then, if we take that as an absolute reality, we're creating *dukkha.* The only way that conundrum can be solved is for time, self and location to be let go of. This means the heart needs to awaken to that aspect of its nature that is unborn and unconditioned, uncreated, unformed – this is the solution to the puzzle.

In the *Udāna*, the collection of the Buddha's 'Inspired Utterances', he makes the same kind of statement. In this particular passage, the Buddha said:

> There is that *āyatana*, that sphere of being, where there is no earth, water, fire or wind ... no moon, no sun ... this sphere I call neither a coming nor

> a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance … And this, just this, is the end of *dukkha.*
>
> (Ud 8.1)

Within that *sutta* there is the phrase about coming, going and standing still, this points to the same issue that is explored by Luang Por Chah's conundrum; as long as the mind thinks in terms of self-view, time, identity and place, there's no solution to that puzzle. However, when the heart awakens to that dimension of its own reality which is unborn, undying, which is timeless, which is selfless, unlocated, then the solution to the puzzle is realized.

This is speaking about a level of insight that is quite profound. It's not even 'me' having an insight or 'you' having an insight, rather it's the mind awakening to that dimension of its own nature, which has always been unborn and undying, which is timeless. The very name of the monastery Amaravati, refers to this: 'The Deathless Realm'. This does not just mean Amaravati as a physical place, but rather it is a reminder about the transcendent Amaravati – Amaravati with a really big 'A' – that deathless reality, the unborn reality that is the foundation of this very heart, this very mind of ours.

Another conundrum that Ajahn Chah liked to use is the image of what he called 'still, flowing water'. When people came to visit, by way of opening up a Dhamma theme, he would ask, 'Have you ever seen still water?' And people would answer, 'Yes, of course.' He then would ask, 'Have you ever

seen flowing water?' And they would reply, 'Yes. I've seen the river and streams and... of course I've seen flowing water.' Then he would say, 'Have you ever seen still, flowing water?' And they would usually respond, 'Huh?' or be silent or say, 'I don't know what you mean, Luang Por!'

After he said, 'Have you ever seen still, flowing water?' he would let the person ponder and squirm for a bit, coming up with a few tries about what the words might mean. He would then explain that the mind is like still, flowing water. This is a description of the nature of mind. It 'flows', because there is a constant flow of perceptions and thoughts and feelings that arise, come into being and then fade – our memories, our ideas, our emotions. That which we see, hear, smell, taste and touch continually arises and flows, yet there is an abiding quality of 'stillness'. The mind can know that quality of change and flow and that knowing is perfectly present; it's not going anywhere. It is a transcendent stillness as it is not bound up with place or time. So, the mind is like still, flowing water. There's the quality of stillness, and there's the quality of flowing and they work together, they're mutually supportive. They don't interfere with each other, the flowing doesn't interfere with the stillness, the stillness doesn't interfere with the flow.

This analogy is another way of speaking about 'reaching the end of the world' because we are learning to recognize 'the world' as, specifically, the

world of our own experience. Then, rather than taking refuge in the world, wanting our experience to be a particular way we like – 'I want to hear these sounds and I want to have these flavours, I want to see these colours and shapes and not those ones' – we see it all in the context of Dhamma. We don't take refuge in our mind's version of the world or place an excessive value upon that. Instead, what we take as the refuge, the foundation of our life, of our perspective, is that quality of awareness, that awakened awareness, transcendent nowing or *vijjā*. This is where the world ends, in *vijjā*.

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Insight meditation, *vipassanā* meditation, is all about the clarifying of that quality of *vijjā* or one can call it mindfulness (*sati*) conjoined with wisdom (*paññā*), *sati-paññā*. The establishing of that quality in the heart and the training of the heart to be that very knowing, to embody that quality of awakened awareness, is to truly take refuge in the Buddha – representing awakened awareness. This element of knowing, *vijjā-dhātu*, is aware of the flow of liking, disliking, happiness, unhappiness, comfort, discomfort, praise, criticism, gain, loss, etc. but is itself unlimited, unburdened by them. The heart is taking refuge in that quality of knowing, which is an ever present, timeless attribute. When that is established, in the midst of activity there is an unshakeable stillness and peace, a spaciousness and a freedom from becoming. As Luang Por Sumedho said to me that day, 'There's nobody going anywhere; there are just conditions changing.' What he was

pointing to is that, if we take refuge in that quality of awareness, even as our feet are carrying us through the English countryside, all the way up to Northumberland, nobody's going anywhere. The mind is not creating a solid 'world' out there or a solid 'I' who's the experiencer of it. There is a quality of ease and stillness and spaciousness, even as the whole 10,000 things arise and pass through that sphere of awareness and experience.

Another image that Ajahn Chah used to describe this principle was that of oil and water together in a bottle. He would say that we often think of the mind and its objects being one thing. We say, 'I feel happy,' 'I feel unhappy,' 'I'm uncomfortable,' 'I'm comfortable,' 'I'm going to Bangkok' or 'I'm going to London,' in a very matter of fact way. We talk about what and who we are, and what we're doing, and how we feel; the ordinary everyday way we speak about such things is automatic for pretty much all of us. This is the quotidian habit of speech and thinking.

Luang Por Chah would point out that we speak and think and understand in this way because of ignorance, because of not seeing clearly, *avijjā*. In truth that quality of awareness is not inextricably tied to our emotions. It's not tied to our perceptions, what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch, but because of the habits of attachment and the agitation of our lives – the busy-ness of self-view, 'me' doing something, 'me' being this person, 'me' going somewhere – through that agitation, we mix up that quality of

knowing with the flow of perceptions and feelings, so identification and clinging happens and it seems like one thing – 'me'.

It's like having oil and water together in a bottle, or oil and vinegar in a salad dressing. If you keep shaking the bottle vigorously, the oil and the water seem like one liquid. It really seems like 'I'm going', 'I'm coming', 'I'm feeling happy', 'I'm feeling unhappy', 'I'm comfortable,' 'I'm uncomfortable', 'I'm sick', 'I'm healthy'. That seems automatic. Yet, if the bottle is put down the oil and water separate, quite on their own. You don't have to do anything to the oil and the water to make them part. They do it by themselves because they are immiscible, their natures are different.

It is exactly the same with the mind, if we just put it down, set the bottle of our life down, if we stop agitating it, then awareness and the objects of awareness naturally separate out from each other. We don't have to do anything special, we just stop creating the causes for self-view, grasping, identification, attachment and agitation. If we stop creating the causes for ignorance and self-view, feeding the 'I' and 'me' and 'mine' habits, and we set the bottle down, the oil and the water separate out, awareness and the objects of awareness separate out – and the heart embodies the quality of *loka-vidhū*, 'knower of the world'.

If we are in a public situation and a phone starts ringing, we can notice what we hear, plus the feeling of embarrassment if it's our phone that has

just gone off; the feeling of gratitude mixed with anxiety if it wasn't, 'I'm glad that wasn't me, phew! Oh, I'd better check my phone too!' That's a feeling, an emotion: the feeling of relief that it wasn't you; the feeling of embarrassment that it was you. In this moment, there's thinking, feeling, hearing, seeing, arising, passing away. In this very moment we can recognize that these are just patterns of consciousness arising and taking shape within the field of awareness, and that which knows the pattern of this moment, that which knows the world, is not limited by that world; that which knows the body, does not have a body; that which knows emotions, is not an emotion; that which knows thought, isn't a thought; that which knows the person, is not a person.

This might be a fairly challenging proposition, but we do habitually take the feeling of being a person to be absolutely real: 'I'm a person', 'I'm a woman', 'I'm a man', 'I'm a monk', 'I'm a lay person', 'I'm young', 'I'm old', 'I'm tall', 'I'm short' – all these 'I am's' that are habitually created. In that moment of putting the bottle down and looking, knowing, awakening the mind to the present experience, in that moment, there's the awareness of feeling, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, arising, passing away. In that moment, awareness is one thing and the objects of awareness are another. The process of *vipassanā* meditation and the development of reflective wisdom allows us to put the bottle down and let those qualities

separate out from each other, so that the awareness becomes unentangled from the objects of awareness and is realized to be free from them.

Another *sutta* that Luang Por Sumedho is very fond of is also from the text of the *Udāna*, close to the one quoted above. The Buddha said:

> There is the Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed. If there was not the Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unformed, then freedom from the world of the born, the originated, the created, the formed would not be possible. But since there is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unformed, therefore is freedom possible from the world of the born, the originated, the created and the formed.
>
> (Ud 8.3)

The quality of awakened awareness is that which is liberated from the formed, the created, the originated. What is liberated is the 'heart' that is awake, that is aware, and the realization of that is a possibility, a living seed within us.

* * *

Going back to Dwayne Hoover and his sociopathic misinterpretation of 'I'm the only real being in the universe, and everyone else is a zombie or a robot and doesn't really count,' we might worry that, 'If I take refuge in this awareness, does that mean I will get dissociated from everything that I feel? Is this trying to disconnect from the living world and not care about it? Am I

supposed to abstract the mind from the perceptual world and nullify other people? Am I to see my family as mere *saṅkhāras*, arising and passing away?' When it's your little son's birthday and he's waiting for his present, do you just say, 'All *saṅkhāras* arise and pass away, you arose, so, you'll pass away one day'? Sometimes, people think like that, misinterpreting the teachings about non-attachment and emptiness.

The Buddha does indeed encourage the understanding that the world is intrinsically empty and that recognizing that the world is empty is what frees the heart from the bonds of birth and death. That's what the Buddha said to the young student Mogharāja:

> See the world as empty, Mogharāja and the Lord of Death will not find you.
>
> (SN 1118-9)

People can, however, easily misinterpret these principles and practices to mean that we should abstract this awareness, in order to be awake, and that everything else doesn't really count. As if to say, 'I should dismiss the conditioned world as valueless, switch off, and make the aware mind fully dissociated and disconnected.' That is a kind of letting go but it's a deluded version of letting go, in terms of the Buddha's teaching.

If we follow the path of the Buddha and apply the teachings in a full way, integrated with the Dhamma, then along with that disentanglement,

letting go of self-view and self-centred conceit in relationship to the world, we find that, mysteriously, its partner is a profound attunement *to* the world. I like to use the term 'unentangled participating'. The awake mind is attuned to its objects and their changes, it participates, yet it remains utterly unentangled.

As the mind disentangles and puts the bottle down, and the oil and water separate out once again, they are still in the same bottle, they're still connected. As the heart disentangles itself from its identification with time and self and location and people and things, there is simultaneously an attunement. It's hard to describe how it works but in the classical attributes of the Buddha we have a very fine expression of this principle.

The Buddha was a Fully Self-awakened One, a *Sammāsambuddha*, fully enlightened, he was totally liberated and had let go of the world completely. He had transcended the realm of birth and death yet, for the 45 years after his enlightenment he walked barefoot around Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, the Ganges Valley and beyond, living on alms-food and serving the needs of the people. He created the four-fold assembly of monastics and lay-people, he brought the Dhamma teachings into the world with amazing diligence, skill, imagination, patience and resolution. So the partner to his complete liberation from the world was his incredible attunement to the world, in the form of a radical kindness, immense generosity and an unbounded

compassion. As we recite in the chanting, 'The Buddha, absolutely pure, with ocean-like compassion...'. There was absolute purity of wisdom in him – seeing that all *saṅkhāras* are empty and all *dhammas* are not-self – yet he used his life and his capacity to think and speak and act as the means by which to benefit all other living beings. He was untiring in his efforts to help other living beings to awaken from suffering to the joy of the Dhamma, by seeing the empty nature of the world.

Thus the insight that 'it is all happening inside my head', as per Harry Potter, i.e. that 'the world is the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind' doesn't create disassociation or numb our relationship to the sense world, indeed, mysteriously, it creates a far more acute attunement, because, as Dumbledore put it, 'Why on earth should that mean that it is not real?' Or, more formally, as the Buddha said in his famous teaching to Ven. Mahā-Kaccāna:

> 'All exists', Kaccayāna, this is one extreme, 'All does not exist', this is the other extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the Middle Way: With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be; with volitional formations as condition, (sense) consciousness comes to be; ... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.
>
> But with the remainderless fading away, cessation and non-arising of

> ignorance, there comes the cessation of volitional formations; with the cessation of volitional formations, there is the cessation of (sense) consciousness'; ... Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.
>
> (S 12.15, S 22.90)

The world is utterly empty, but those patterns that the conditioned world is shaped from function in relation to each other in an orderly manner, conditioning each other according to the laws of cause and effect, 'specific conditionality' – *idapaccayatā*. The Middle Way articulates this relationship exactly, the not veering towards either of the extremes of 'nothing matters' or 'everything matters absolutely'.

The example I often give is that of a conductor of an orchestra. The conductor is not playing any instrument but attends to the whole group. They are listening to everything going on in the orchestra and making adjustments to their leadership as the music is being played. Similarly, the faculty of mindfulness and wisdom is not only transcendent (in this simile not playing an instrument) but is also immanent, attuned to, and guiding and nurturing the progress of the whole orchestra.

One of the epithets of the Buddha is *vijjācaraṇa-sampanno* which translates as 'impeccable in conduct and understanding' or 'perfect in knowledge and conduct'. *Vijjā* is the quality of awakened awareness but its partner is *caraṇa* which is action, conduct. So if you have *vijjā*, without *caraṇa*, you have got

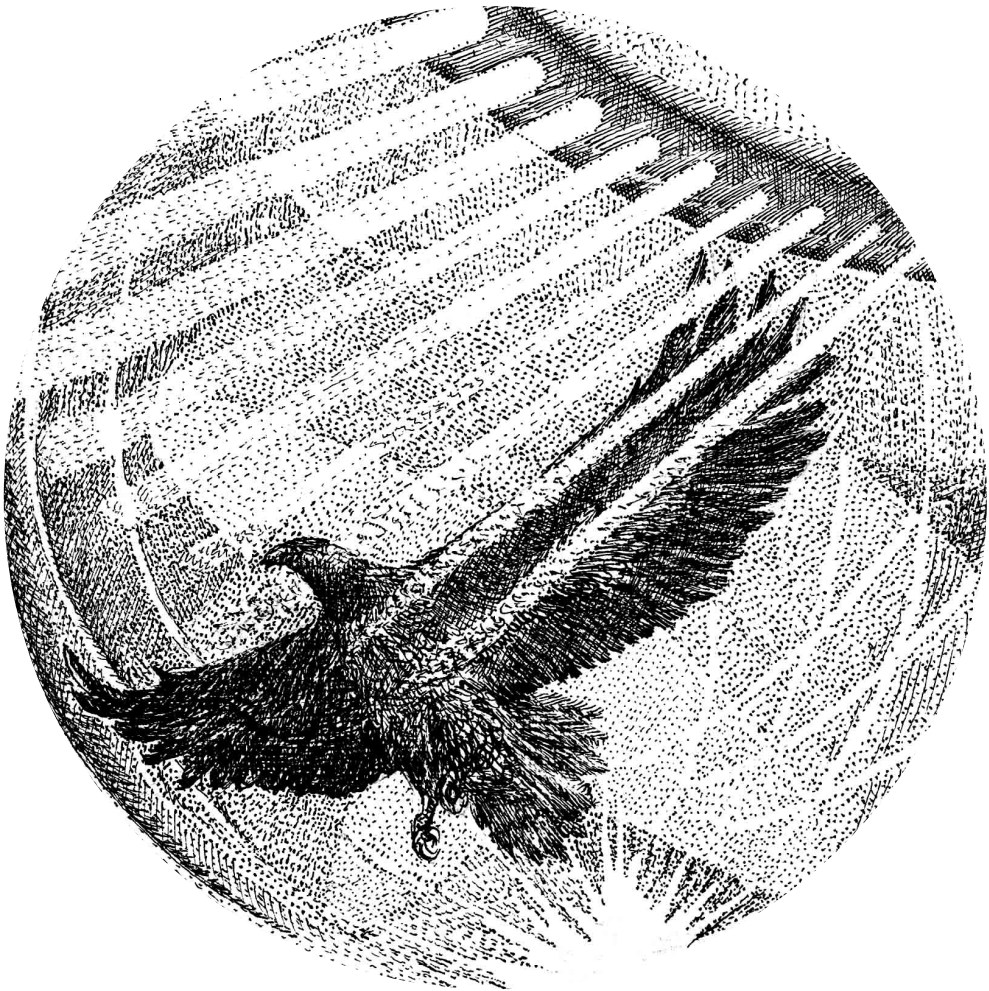
the oil without the water. If you have got *caraṇa* without the *vijjā*, then you've got the water without the oil.

When we let the world go, we can care about it completely but that caring is non-possessive; it doesn't bring any quality of stress or burden. The Buddha was teaching in a society that was antithetical to his perspective: he denounced the caste system; he talked about Nibbāna and the ending of rebirth, thus rejecting the dominant understanding of spiritual development; he rejected classical gender roles and established an order of renunciant women, apparently for the first time in India... So he had huge tasks on his hands! Yet, at no place in the *suttas* is there any hint that the Buddha was stressed or burdened by the enormous tasks he had taken on. He just did what was necessary and his heart remained peaceful.

This is a wonderful example for us in our daily lives. Whether we happen to be a schoolteacher or running a business, whether we are a child or retired, or a doctor or running Amaravati monastery – the Buddha's engagement with the world offers a good example for all of us. The more that we can embody the transcendent quality of awareness, the more the heart can relate to the world in a skilful way.

One way that this change of relationship manifests, is in a growing respect for the different perspectives of others. How could your version of the

world be the same as mine? Of course, how could that be? Thus there is humility, regard for other beings and we're able to harmonize much more easily.



# Let the Citta Paint a Picture – Poetry and Art in Dhamma Practice

The theme here is exploring artistic expression in terms of Dhamma practice, how it functions in our lives and in our religious study and inspiration. This is an area I've been involved in, to some degree in the past, and it seems a valuable and interesting subject to explore.

Most of us in the West think of practising the Dhamma as comprised of going on meditation retreats, listening to talks, studying the scriptures, engaging in compassionate charitable work or joining in *pūjās*, and we don't really think of artistic expression as being very closely involved with Dhamma – at least not in the Southern Buddhist tradition. But if you look at the Pali scriptures there is a lot of poetry there; even though one might think that Dhamma poetry might be something that is a product of the modern age, the truth is far from that.

First of all there was a monk called Vaṅgīsa, who lived in the time of the Buddha, and who had been a professional poet before he entered the Sangha. In his own verses, describing his life before meeting the Buddha and becoming a devotee, he described himself as, 'Drunk on poetry, I wandered around from village to village, from town to town' (S 8.12). He was absorbed in that world. In the scriptures there is a whole section of 'The Connected Discourses' about Vaṅgīsa. Very often in those discourses there are dialogues where Vaṅgīsa declares, 'An inspiration has occurred to me, Blessed One. An inspiration has occurred to me, Fortunate One,' when speaking to the Buddha. The Buddha notably doesn't say to Vaṅgīsa, 'Stop it with the poetry, Vaṅgīsa. Get on with your practice.' Rather he says, 'Give your inspiration expression, Vaṅgīsa.' That's what he says. 'Speak up. Let us all hear it. What is it that your mind has come up with?' Right there you have the Buddha actually encouraging one of his disciples to get poetic. That's the medium Vaṅgīsa was familiar with and the Buddha's style was to let him use that as a skilful means, an *upāya*, rather than to discourage him from that as if it was automatically an indulgence or a delusional act.

In one of those exchanges (in the *Vaṅgīsa Saṃyutta* in 'The Connected Discourses') the Buddha asks Vaṅgīsa, 'Did you think these verses through beforehand? Or did they occur to you spontaneously?' Vaṅgīsa replied, 'These occurred to me spontaneously, Venerable Sir.' And the Buddha said,

'In that case let some more verses come to you spontaneously' (S 8.8). So he comes up with some more.

I feel it's important to recognize that the Buddha encouraged versifying, he was supportive of it as a medium. Also, and even more importantly, there are a lot of the scriptures that are comprised of the Buddha's own spontaneously created poetry. The *Dhammapada* – which is probably the most widely quoted section of the scriptures that we have in the Theravāda, the Southern Buddhist tradition – is all poems written by the Buddha, similarly the *Sutta Nipāta*; these collections of the Buddha's teachings are in poetic form and seemingly they were all verses that were made up by the Buddha on the spot. He didn't sit in his *kuṭī* and think, 'How do I find a rhyme for that? How can I make this scan?' Rather, spontaneous versifying was an art form that existed in the Buddha's time that was apparently part of one's education, and the Buddha was particularly good at it.

The Buddha's poetry is very much a part of our lives today. When we recite passages in our daily *pūjās*, or for special ceremonies, for example the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta*, 'The Buddha's Words on Loving-Kindness', we should appreciate that that's a poem the Buddha composed more than 2500 years ago. We have translated that into English, and probably many readers are familiar with it, in both languages:

This is what should be done
By one who is skilled in goodness
And who knows the path of peace
Let them be able and upright,
Straightforward and gentle in speech,
Humble and not conceited,
Contented and easily satisfied,
Unburdened with duties and frugal in their ways.
Peaceful and calm and wise and skilful,
Not proud or demanding in nature.
Let them not do the slightest thing
That the wise would later reprove.
Wishing: In gladness and in safety,
May all beings be at ease.
Whatever living beings there may be;
Whether they are weak or strong, omitting none,
The great or the mighty, medium, short or small,
The seen and the unseen,
Those living near and far away,
Those born and to-be-born —
May all beings be at ease! (SN 143-47)

Poetry can thus be seen to be a form of expression that has come down to us as a way of skilfully encapsulating the essential teachings, as well as rendering them more easy to recollect and recite.

A substantial proportion of the core teachings are in verse form. The *Sutta Nipāta*, which is where the *Mettā Sutta* is found, is even more extensive in size than the *Dhammapada*. In addition, in many other collections of teachings such as 'The Long Discourses', 'The Middle Length Discourses' and 'The Connected Discourses', there are many verses included along the way.

When I was once speaking with Bhikkhu Bodhi, the eminent translator, with respect to Pali poetry, he said that it is *very* difficult to translate because of the way the words are put together. Just like within, say, English poetry, sometimes words are elided or abbreviated in strange ways, or you have archaic expressions or weird word orders to make the rhythm of the sounds work – it's just the same in Pali. Thus translating Pali poetry can be challenging. In fact, he said, when he was asked to translate the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, 'The Connected Discourses' he deliberately didn't start with the first two chapters, the *Devatā Saṃyutta* and the *Devaputta Saṃyutta* because it's almost all poetry. He said, 'If I had started with those two books, I would never have finished it, because it's such hard work. It's so difficult I would have given up.' If you look at his translation, the notes for the translations of the Pali poetry go over pages and pages, discussing exactly how he chose a particular formulation. He said he cunningly translated the roughly 1500

pages of prose material first. Once he had done so much of that, then he couldn't back out. By the time he got to the end, all that was left was to do the 75 pages of poetry. He said to himself, 'OK, I have to do it now, because I have done 98% of the rest of this whole massive collection. I can't back out.'

When we reflect on this area, on poetry and art in Dhamma practice, I thus think it's important to appreciate that it's there within the medium right from the very beginning; it is something that is a skilful means of conveying the teaching. In this respect, I feel that this form, even though it's not very common in the Western world and is perhaps seen as supplementary, is very much a part of our tradition and it informs our way of speaking, and not just in terms of poetry but also that of storytelling. We might not think of the Pali Canon as having a lot of compelling stories, ripping yarns, heart-breaking dramas or being a medium of much fabulating, but there are countless inspiring, illuminating or sobering, or hilarious vignettes scattered throughout.

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The collections like the *Jātaka*, the stories of the Buddha's previous births, and 'The Dhammapada Commentary', were composed apparently well after the Buddha's time, so they are not in such a repetitious form as you find the *suttas*. They have an easier narrative flow and the language is much more varied. An abundant wealth of stories is to be found there. I've learned a lot going through the *Jātaka* stories and 'The Dhammapada Commentary'.

Again, most people who are interested in meditation in the West, or in the essential teachings of the Buddha, if the subject comes up, they will say to me, 'You read the *Jātaka*s, really?' I often reply, 'Yes, and I've read all of them.' They'll say, 'What? Like *all* of them?' I say, 'From beginning to end, all 547 of them.' Similarly with 'The Dhammapada Commentary'. People ask, 'You can actually get through all of that stuff?' Even many of my fellow monastics are a bit incredulous! However, I find that there are abundant and meaningful archetypal motifs in these texts; there's a lot of value in these stories. Much of the material that appears in those particular collections is a compendium of the Indian folklore of the Buddha's time. Many of these ancient stories were adopted and then had characters from the Buddha's life story grafted into them as the *dramatis personæ*. These have now come down to us as part of the inheritance of the *Buddha-sāsana*.

Just as, in later years, in Æsop's Fables in Greece, or La Fontaine's Fables in Europe, they inherited stories from before, from earlier generations, taking the same stories but with different characters woven into them, and sometimes bearing different messages. I feel these are very useful and relevant to our lives. The reason why these stories get passed on – like the stories of Greek myths or Roman myths or Egyptian or Norse myths, and other fairy tales – is because they provide a pertinent map for our lives. They can be something that is very informative and valuable to us. They are things that we can relate to.

Returning to the Pali scriptures: along with Vaṅgīsa as a poet and with the Buddha's own poetry there are two other very significant collections: the *Therīgāthā*, the verses of the enlightened nuns and the *Theragāthā*, the verses of the enlightened monks, which are again all in verse form, with some prose commentary. These tales of the Great Elders, both female and male, are a particularly rich and potent lode. In these books the founders of our tradition tell their life stories in poetic form. The verses summarize their lives, their travails and triumphs, and the main lessons they have learnt, all in poetic form. It is put into that structure as a way of carrying the meaning and the flavour of those aspects of the Elders' lives; the poetic voice conveys an emotional tone that lifts the heart. Interestingly, Vaṅgīsa is accorded the honour of having his verses included as the final entry in the 264 poems of the *Theragāthā*, after such great Arahants as Sāriputta, Ānanda, Mahā-Kassapa and Mahā-Moggallāna.

There are many different resources where one can find these stories these days. In English you have a collection called *The Great Disciples of the Buddha* by Hellmuth Hecker and Ven. Nyanaponika Thera, which has a lot of the classical stories and some of the poetry in it. There is also *First Buddhist Women: Poems and Stories of Awakening* by Susan Murcott, this has translations and commentary on the *Therīgāthā*, the verses of the enlightened nuns.

As one example, here are the verses of Paṭacārā, who was one of the great enlightened nuns. As a lay person, her husband and her two children had all died in tragic circumstances on the same day and then she heard that her parents and her brother had all just died too. She had met the Buddha soon after this great loss of her family, in sudden and tragic ways. She was very distressed and distraught. She met the Buddha and went forth as a nun. In these verses she talks about her struggles, her effort to work with her mind, to train herself, and how liberating insight arose.

These are her verses:

> When they plough their fields
> and sow seeds in the earth,
> when they care for their wives and children,
> young brahmins find riches.
> But I've done everything right
> and followed the rule of my teacher.
> I am not lazy or proud.
> Why haven't I found peace?

She is comparing her own internal process to people who work the land, they make their efforts and they get their results. 'I have been working hard as a nun, I have been trying to train my mind, how come I haven't arrived at peacefulness yet?' Then she describes this incident:

Bathing my feet,
I watched the bathwater
spill down the slope.
I concentrated my mind
the way you train a good horse.
Then I took a lamp,
and went into my cell,
checked the bed,
and sat down on it.
I took a needle
and pushed the wick down.
When the lamp went out,
my mind was freed.

(Thig 112-16) Susan Murcott trans.

In this way she recollects how she thought during her early monastic training – her struggles and her frustration following her going forth: 'How come?! They do their work, they get their results. How come I am working really hard and I haven't got *my* results?' She evokes her own struggle and then the pivotal, central event of her life, the moment of full realization, that manifested from something as simple as coming back to her *kuṭī* and washing the mud off her feet with a jug of water. Then watching the water

flow down the slope, then going into her *kuṭī* and putting out the candle using a needle to douse the flame. Nothing much, in its own right – the flame of a candle going out – but her mind was ripe for liberation and the fruit fell from the tree, her mind was completely released from greed, hatred and delusion. Additionally, another meaning of Nibbāna is 'extinction' as in the going out of a flame.

If you are interested in Buddhist poetry, then these verses of the enlightened monks and nuns can be a rich source of inspiration. They tell a lot of the stories, the backgrounds of the different people, and this book by Susan Murcott is particularly good, it is very readable poetry. Sometimes the translations into English of Pali poetry endeavour to be very accurate but they can end up clunky and unreadable to the unpractised eye. They might stay true to the letter of the Pali but they don't make the heart sing. Sometimes the real meaning and flavour of the poetry is lost in the effort to be accurate, like a living plant or animal that has been dissected, then reassembled – one glance reveals that this is thoroughly dead. As Bhikkhu Bodhi said, translating Pali poetry is really tough because you need to carry the flavour, the spirit of it as well as being true to the meaning. Often the beauty, value and power of poetry lies in the non-logical allusions, the alliterations, the hints of association and familiar cultural features, puns and double meanings that are unconveyable in another language. For example, a verse in the Dhammapada runs:

The man who is without blind faith,
who knows the Uncreated,
who has severed all links, destroyed all causes
(for karma, good and evil),
and thrown out all desires –
he, truly, is the most excellent of men.

(Dhp 97) Buddharakkhita trans.

The Pali of this verse presents a series of puns, and if the 'underside' of each pun were to be translated, the verse would read thus:

The man who is faithless, ungrateful,
a burglar, who destroys opportunities
and eats vomit –
he, truly, is the most excellent of men.

Or it can be that a poem is intended to evoke a mood, or a tone, and does not aim to 'mean' any precise thing, as in many of the works of e. e. cummings, such as these lines from 'anyone lived in a pretty how town':

and only the snow can begin to explain
how children are apt to forget to remember

* * *

When Amaravati was first opened in 1984 the verse that Ajahn Sumedho would often quote, and which almost became a motto for Amaravati (the name of which means 'The Deathless Realm') was:

Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless,
heedlessness is the path to death.
The mindful never die,
the heedless are as if dead already.

(Dhp 21)

The commentary, the background story to that four line verse is extremely long. It tells the story of Queen Samāvatī who was the wife of King Udena, ruler of the Kingdom of Vaṃsa. The King was also married to another woman called Māgandiyā. Māgandiyā became very jealous of the prominence that Samāvatī had. To cut a very long story short, at a certain point Māgandiyā conspired to lock Queen Samāvatī and all of her court women in a palace building, to seal the doors and then set the whole place on fire. Since Samāvatī was a very dedicated disciple of the Buddha, she gave encouragement to her attendants and friends, as the place filled with smoke and flames began to leap all around them. She said, 'Be mindful, don't wobble. Whatever the reason is that we are in this situation, we can't now escape from it, all the doors and windows are sealed. So don't let yourselves get caught up in distress or anger or hatred but focus your attention mindfully on the present moment.' It is a very dramatic and colourful story but it seems to be based on historical fact.

This one little four line verse from the *Dhammapada*, thus has a long, long story, the whole story cycle of King Udena, to give the background to why the Buddha uttered those words on that occasion. It is something that really gets your attention, describing how dozens of people were being burnt alive yet they had the mindfulness and readiness of wisdom to focus their attention and be peaceful in the present, even in such a horrific and frightening circumstances. Queen Samāvatī and those good women showed that it is possible to focus the mind, and not to harbour hatred or aversion, or feelings of anger or revenge and suchlike. The Buddha uttered this spontaneous verse (Dhp 21), in response to the news about the fire and what he was aware of with respect to the mind states of all the people who were burnt: 'Heedlessness is the path to death. The mindful do not die.' The bodies might die but if the mind is focused on the Deathless, if the mind is awakened to the transcendent reality of Dhamma, then even though life is coming to an end, the heart can be liberated and the Deathless can be realized.

There is a lot in that story. It's a way of illustrating, in a very memorable and powerful fashion, the kind of tragedies and blessings that can appear in our lives, these then inform and illustrate the theme to bring it home and make it memorable. The four-line verse on its own could seem a bit abstract or something remote: 'Mindfulness is the path to the Deathless, heedlessness is the path to death...' it sounds a bit philosophical, and

perhaps mysterious or promising – '"The mindful never die..." What?' – but if you bring to mind this tragic story and the images of that event, the single-mindedness of the people being ready not to become caught up in panic or fear or aversion or anger, that shows serious mindfulness. That is seriously heedful and it is a living example of how death can be transcended. In this way the emotional and inspirational power of the story permeates those four lines and illuminates them from the inside.

* * *

In terms of Dhamma practice and artwork, there is a lot that could be said. It is not much spoken about in the Pali Canon, but in the general tradition the stories come down to us. The Buddha's second disciple, Mahā-Moggallāna, was extremely gifted in psychic powers. He could move between different realms of existence and he would often go off and visit different heavenly realms or ghost realms, sometimes the hell realms, many different realms of existence, and he would come back and tell stories to the Sangha of places he had been and different things he had seen in those dimensions.

Probably many of you reading this will have seen the classic pictures of the Six Realms of Existence (sometimes the Five Realms). There is a large circular form, divided up into five or six sections that is held up by the ogre-like Mahā-Kāla. *Kāla* is 'time' so Mahā-Kāla means 'Great Time'. It is this commanding entity who holds up the circular form which represents

a mirror. The symbology of it is that this mirror is reflecting the different aspects, and prospects, of whoever is looking into it.

The six divisions are: 1) the *deva* realms, the heavenly realms; 2) the realm of the *asuras*, the jealous gods; 3) the human realm; 4) the animal realm; 5) the realm of the hungry ghosts, the *petas*, and 6) the hell realms, the *niraya*. According to the story as it is told, the Buddha said to Mahā-Moggallāna, 'You should paint a picture of these realms and then this picture should be placed above the gate of every monastery. When people go to a monastery they will thus be able to reflect upon their existence and the way that the *bhāvacakka*, the wheel of birth and death, turns. In addition they will come to know the different realms of existence that living beings are subject to.' That story is found not just in the Southern Buddhist world but in the Northern Buddhist world too. Whether the Buddha actually said that to Mahā-Moggallāna or not, one doesn't know, but certainly in the Pali Canon we have the stories of Mahā-Moggallāna visiting a variety of different realms. The mirror/wheel image is ancient and one which is found in Thailand, Sri Lanka, Burma, China, Tibet, Japan, Korea, Bhutan, Nepal, India... there are slightly different forms, according to painting methods and cultural style, but the core image is remarkably consistent. It is thus another skilful means, an *upāya*, seemingly coming from the time of the Buddha, through which a central set of teachings was conveyed.

In temple paintings, carvings and bas reliefs throughout Buddhist Asia, and around the world now, the stories of the Buddha's life and previous lives, or the wheel of birth and death, are depicted on the walls of shrines and halls and suchlike. In pre- or non-literate societies, where people cannot read, such pictures vividly convey a story. You will often have a particular tale from the Buddha's previous lives, from the *Jātaka* stories: his birth in Lumbini as a Bodhisattva; being very skinny and starving as a yogi; the enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree; being attacked by the runaway and maddened elephant Nālāgiri; teaching Aṅgulimāla the murdering bandit who became a disciple and an Arahant; images of the *Parinibbāna*, the Buddha lying down under the *sāl* trees in Kusināra, and so forth. These temple paintings and carvings are a way of encapsulating important stories and helping them to be brought to mind. This type of artwork is very much part of our living Buddhist tradition.

In addition, in the Northern Buddhist world, in particular in Japan but also in China, Korea and Tibet, where the climate is generally not so hot and sticky and where paper lasts longer, there is more of a literary tradition and graphic artwork and texts that were created a few hundred years ago have survived. In countries like Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma, Laos and Cambodia it is very hot and steamy, so palm-leaf manuscripts or anything on paper easily gets destroyed by mould and termites – it doesn't last very long. In

the northern countries it was cooler and they have had paper printing for books for centuries, so artwork could be done on paper or be in a printed form to last. Accordingly, more of an artistic tradition has been passed down over the centuries in the Northern Buddhist world. I would say it is very much a part of that Buddhist life, putting particular experiences and symbols of the teaching and ways of practice that are useful to us into artistic form. It is something that is very fundamental to us as human beings and it is one way of transmitting an insight and understanding, a particular vision, across time.

As Joseph Campbell put it, in *The Power of Myth*:

> Behind all these manifestations is the one radiance which shines through all things. The function of art is to reveal this radiance through the created object. When you see the beautiful organization of a fortunately composed work of art, you just say 'Aha!' Somehow it speaks to the order in your own life and leads to the realization of the very things that religions are concerned to render.

When Ajahn Chah came to visit the UK for the first time in 1977, as part of that trip he went up to Scotland. He and and the other monks were staying with a student of Ajahn Sumedho up in Edinburgh. On the wall of her flat she had a large scroll painting of Bodhidharma, the First Patriarch of the Ch'an and Zen tradition, who, according to the stories, originally took

Buddhism from India to China. It was a very dramatic portrait. It was quite old and Ajahn Chah had never seen anything like this before. According to some of the monks who were there, Luang Por Chah did walking meditation in front of this painting of Bodhidharma. He would pace across the room, stand in front of it and look at this somewhat wild-eyed, bearded yogi in a swirling robe. He would gaze at it for a time and then turn round and walk back, and turn round and walk back and stand in front of the painting again. Quite plainly there was some kind of a communion going on across the centuries – Bodhidharma and the source of his being, the painter who made the strokes, the journey to Edinburgh, Ajahn Chah and the source of his being, (and now you, dear reader, imbibing these words). Bodhidharma was a very powerful, dynamic carrier of the lineage from India into China; according to the legends he was originally from Afghanistan but had trained in India, and then was moved to carry the lineage to China.

In this encounter there was a painting and there was Ajahn Chah, part of the Southern Buddhist tradition. There was a meeting of the two and a message without words that resonated through time and across distance, via a picture that had been created in Asia centuries beforehand. I remember Luang Por Sumedho telling us how Luang Por Chah said at the time, 'Who is this? Tell me. Tell me who this is supposed to be.'

✦ ✦ ✦

Before I came into the Sangha, before I was a monk, I used to draw and paint pictures, write poems, and I had the idea of one day becoming a writer. Since my ordination I have ended up producing a number of books over the years – e.g. you are reading one such right now. One of the early ones is called *Silent Rain*. There is a particular talk in there called 'The Source of Creation' with one of my pictures there at the front of it.

In that talk I tell a little story about how, when I was a layman, I had literary fantasies. I was a student at London University, doing a science degree, psychology and physiology. I didn't really like science that much; I felt more inclined to poetry, literature, theatre and art. But I had been shunted into doing sciences because I got good marks in it.

I had these ideas: I wanted to be a great writer like Kafka or James Joyce, or one of those inspiring poets starving in a garret like Chatterton, not starving so badly that you can't hold a pen, but starving enough to be romantic, still capable of producing great works but, like Rimbaud, never intoxicated with any fame or adulation, ready to walk away. Anyway, during that time, I was about 19 or 20 years old, I remember sitting down with a pad of paper intent on launching into a grand first effort, thinking, 'I have some time, so... what do I want to say? OK, I want to be a writer. If you are going to be a writer, you have to write something, it goes with the territory.' I remember sitting there and eventually realizing, 'I haven't got anything to say. I really

haven't got anything that needs to be expressed; besides, who am I talking to?' That was quite an insightful moment in its own peculiar way, 'I have the idea of being a writer, but what do I know about? What have I got to say that is worth hearing or reading?' There was a large blank. So I quite consciously let go of that idea; rather than wanting to be a writer for the sake of 'being a writer', or having a reputation as a journalist or a novelist, instead, I thought, 'I will wait until I have got something to say and then perhaps it will be worth saying.' That was a helpful turning point for me.

After having made that choice to leave the idea of 'becoming a writer' aside I came across what I call 'the Roy Jenkins effect'. Some readers might remember that Roy Jenkins was a British politician, he was one of the original founders of the Social Democrat party and he was the Home Secretary at a certain point. He was also quite a well-known academic. He was the Chancellor of Oxford University for some time. I believe he was being interviewed because he had written a biography of Churchill or some substantial book of his had been published. The interviewer asked him the question, 'Do you have any disappointments in your life? Is there anything that you would have liked to achieve that you didn't?' And he said, 'Well, anyone who goes into politics in this country has the idea that they would like to be the Prime Minister one day. Not mentioning any names, but that's normal. So of course I had the idea that I would like to be PM

eventually. But then I realized I didn't actually want to *be* Prime Minister. I wanted to *have been* Prime Minister.' I thought, 'Well done, Mr. Jenkins. That is very astute.'

I thought that because – in terms of poetry, art, literature, music and theatre, or even in the academic or the monastic world – sometimes the *idea* of having your name attached to an achievement is more important than the achievement itself. We want to have that feeling of being known as that PM, that poet, that Nobel Prize winner, that enlightened master; having the reputation, the kudos of being someone special becomes the *raison,* the driving force. I felt it was very insightful of Roy Jenkins to realize that. He was interested in having the reputation, having the achievement, but he didn't really want to lead the country. For myself this has been very applicable in the area of creativity. Instead of trying to *be* something, or known as somebody who writes or paints or is a poet, rather the attitude has been: 'If something needs to be said or created, say it or do the creating as needed – whether somebody likes it or not, or whether they make something out of it or not, that is their business. You don't have to make that the focus of what you do and why you do it, you simply do the best you can and let the world make of it what it will.'

When I came into the Sangha, I had no intention of writing poetry or drawing pictures, or even writing books, although I have got quite a few

with my name on by now. What I found was that as long as it is driven by the need for something to be said, or there is a cause for something to be produced, then there is a lot that can come forth. People might say, 'Can you do an article for the newsletter?' Or, 'You just did this trip with Luang Por Sumedho, can you write about it?' Or when I did a long walk through England in 1983, 'You are going on this long *tudong* walk from Chithurst Monastery up to Northumberland, you are going to keep a diary, aren't you?' 'Well, I wasn't thinking of it.' 'You must! You have got to keep a diary.'

That became the first book that I wrote. *Tudong – The Long Road North*. It was because someone said 'You have to keep a diary.' 'OK, I can do that.' A lot of the drawings that I have done in past years were pictures for articles. Somebody said, 'We haven't got any photos but we need something for this article in the *Newsletter*, can anyone help?' Or 'We're producing the *Rainbows* family magazine and we need some drawings. The nun who was going to do the pictures is away. We haven't got an artist, can you do something? We are printing next week.' 'OK. Give me the articles and I will see what I can do.' What I found was that, rather than staring at a blank page and finding, 'There is nothing to say,' the needs of the moment would call it all forth. Some appropriate picture would emerge or something that needed to be expressed would shape itself. The moment calls forth the work of art or the words.

Similarly, with respect to Dhamma talks, what makes a Dhamma talk a genuine Dhamma talk is that it is an expression of the Dhamma itself, not just words that talk about it. We use the term 'Dhamma *desanā*' in Pali for a talk. The word *desanā* is related to the Sanskrit word *darśana* meaning 'appearance' 'vision' or 'sight' from which comes the Hindi word *darshan*, used to refer to an audience with, and receiving teachings from a spiritual teacher. Thus a *desanā* is a manifestation, an embodiment of Dhamma. The words or silences that comprise it arise from the need of the moment, from who has gathered there for the occasion, from the interest of the people – that's what calls forth the particular words and tone of a Dhamma *desanā*. A Dhamma talk is thus also an art work. It is not exactly poetic, usually. It is not so unique in visual form but it is an expression, a demonstration, a showing.

I used to write poems quite often. Reflecting on this theme, 'Let the *Citta* Paint a Picture', I realized that the majority of the poems that I have written over the years were trying to clarify an insight, something I was seeing in my conscious life, putting this into words. Sometimes it would be to clarify or reflect on the meaning of a dream. If I had had some kind of very potent dream, often the poems that I wrote would be based on that, articulating events and messages from that. Often the poems would be seeded by a single phrase and the whole thing would evolve, usually rapidly, from that.

The process of publishing *The Long Road North*, the *tudong* book was, like a Dhamma *desanā*, similarly an unplanned and organic process that arose

from the people and circumstances gathered, as well as being a lot of fun to do. On the walk we didn't have a camera with us but a few people we encountered did and took pictures. I didn't do my own drawings for that book, but a woman called Nancy Sloane Stanley, who is an illustrator, did the artwork for it. I was a very junior monk at the time, I had only been a monk for five years before I produced *Tudong – The Long Road North*, in 1984. It was a year or two after Luang Por Sumedho produced his first book *Cittaviveka – Teachings from the Silent Mind*. Throughout my life I have tended to be a bit precocious, but at least I produced my first book after Luang Por Sumedho produced his.

I found myself quite glad to put the book together – not because it was an ego-trip for a young monk (I was 27-28 at the time) but on account of the way it was called forth, invited. It was also enjoyable because I could be involved in every aspect of crafting the book. There was a company called the Tyneside Free Press in Newcastle. I had walked from Chithurst Monastery to Harnham Monastery in Northumberland and it just so happened that one of the supporters of Harnham Monastery was the founder of this company, which had been created in order to help people put their own artwork, posters, poetry and books into print.

I had the diary of the walk in four scruffy notebooks, I had the photographs people had given us, and then this fellow, Eric Taylor, of the Tyneside Free


TVDONG
THE LONG ROAD
NORTH

Press, stepped up and said, 'Why don't you put it together as a book at the Free Press? You can use the facilities there. We will teach you how to make a book, how to draw up all the layout sheets and so forth, the photography people can help you with the colour pictures and the design people can help you with the layout.' The first Retreat Centre manager at Amaravati, David Babski, was also a typesetter so he helped with that aspect; Nick Scott, my walking companion, drew the maps; George Brown gave all the advice on design and layout; Sujātā Metcalf did all the calligraphy; and Chris Devine was the colour picture master; David Major carved a wooden cover for it; Vernon Oldfield bound this to make a single presentation copy.

I didn't paint any of the pictures but I ended up putting the whole of that book together over a three week period in the summer of 1984. I got very familiar with the smell of Cow Gum. The cutting and pasting was done with scalpels and what was called Cow Gum, a kind of adhesive used for fixing the (literal) pieces of text and pictures, maps and calligraphy, to the layout sheets. I also became accustomed to the sounds of the English cricket team being thrashed by the West Indies, over the Radio Three test cricket commentary, that some of the team in the huge open plan workspace at the Free Press were very fond of. It was a delightfully creative burst but, after it was done, I thought, 'I don't want to get too ahead of myself, since Luang Por Sumedho has only just done his first book.

I better hold fire on the literature for a while.' So it was about ten years between that book and the second one.

I started teaching in the USA in 1990 and then went to visit every year after that. People there said, 'You are going to be teaching here for a while, Ajahn. We want to have some printed words of yours, some teachings. Have you got any books?' To which I replied, 'There is the book of a *tudong* walk that I did.' One or two people had a look and said, 'Well this is very nice, but it is very English. Americans will want some Dhamma talks. Can you put some of your Dhamma talks together?' I said, 'OK.' At the time there were a few recordings of Dhamma talks I had given, particularly during the winter retreat of 1991 at Chithurst, with Ajahn Kittisāro, so I thought we could use some of those. Then somebody said, 'What about some of your pictures? You could include some of your pictures too.' So I said, 'OK.'

Along with doing some illustrations for the *Newsletter* or for *Rainbows*, I used to always draw birthday cards for my parents and for my sisters. And then Ajahn Sucitto said, 'Why don't you put some of your poems in as well, and those travelogues you do?' So I said, 'OK.'

In this way all these elements got put together as a compendium: travelogues – of *tudong* walks in England, visiting Switzerland (during which Chernobyl exploded), Northern Ireland in the Troubles, visiting the States for the

first time and suchlike – Dhamma talks, pictures and poems all gathered together as an anthology.

I should mention that, once in a while, I have been criticized for my poetry. Some of my poems are in a modern free verse style while some are in a more classical style, with rhymes and scansion. I therefore acknowledge that a few sneers and snickers at the rum-tee-tum style have been made – having poems that scan and rhyme is perhaps not very chic or appealing these days – but if things come out from that energetic inner void of the heart in a rhyme, what are you going to do? So, with apologies to those whose taste is only for the rhymeless, I thought I would share a few poems here, both rhyming and not.

I spent the Rains Retreat of 1981 living down in Devon before there was a Devon monastery. There was a couple, Margaret and Douglas Jones, who would invite Sangha members to stay at their place. They had a little caravan which I stayed in, in the farmyard. I was down there with one anagārika for the three months. I was learning to recite the monastic rules so I would go out for the daily alms-round, reciting long strings of the *pāṭimokkha* in Pali, up and down the hills through the Devon countryside. Then one day, on one of those walks, the first two lines of this poem just sprang into my mind and the rest followed rapidly after.

## *Self-Portrait*

DEVON, 1981

My father is a judge of dogs
My sister Katie dislikes frogs
My sister Jane is fond of horses
And mother dear, well she of course is
An angel who is past compare.
And then there's me... but do I dare
To claim that I am *that* or *this*
An 'I am' swimming in the 'IS'?

The question is beyond the reach
Of petty mind for on the beach
Of senses beat the endless tides
Of births and deaths, the carpet rides
Of cherished thoughts and memories
Of wives and lives and families.

Waves washing in and washing back
Create a past and future, a sack
Back-burdening, a being blind
And gripping too intense to find
The architect of all their pain,
The singer of the sad refrain
Who builds these realms of birth and death –
Inhaling and exhaling breath,
Inhaling birth, exhaling death.

Confused, incomprehensibly bizarre,
Clutching waves we think we are;
So lost that we forget the eye
Of wisdom, which does not belie
The truth of waves and sand and seas
Yet is transcendent over these.

A song of Suchness clear and bright,
The boundless inner peace of light
Whose unremitting presence roars
Oceanic at its shores.

So what awesome space is this
Wherein the wheel revolves,
And who the ocean into which
This universe dissolves?

A subtle thief, the question 'Who?'
It burgles with delight,
It pockets pain and happiness
Then slips into the night
Taking all identity
And leaving on the light.
Taking petty mind up to that watershed
Beyond which nothing can be said,
Where, if words were to apply,
They would create a 'you' and 'I',
A plotter and their plot,
Abiding at this spot,
Untouched by anything at all,
No dust, nowhere to fall.

It is an interesting process whereby something spontaneously hatches and a whole entity takes shape. Here is another rhyming one which is also quite old. I was sitting on a bench in front of Chithurst house – this was while we were still fixing up the house so it was very much a work site – there used to be a wooden bench outside the front of the house set to be looking out over the South Downs. This poem birthed itself even as part of me was trying to stop it.

It was early spring, I believe, and I was supposed to be on retreat and I was endeavouring to be not thinking. As you, dear reader, might be familiar with the process: you are trying to meditate, with the resolution, *'Don't think, don't think, meditate. Watch your breath, watch your breath.'* But then, despite all efforts at restraint, this thing popped its nose out of the void, like one of the Chithurst rabbits testing the air, and wouldn't stop until it had fully emerged.

## *The Arahant*

CHITHURST, 1983

The lone remaining wall
Of a long-since fallen house,
No more inside, no more outside,
No more trespass for the mouse;

Where a doorway and five windows
Allow the winds to pass
Unobstructed as they billow
Through the woods, across the grass;

Where sun and moon and starshine
Illuminate the scene
For all the folk that pass it by
When wandering in the green.

'I wonder who the person was
Who built this mighty house,
That's now a bramble garden
And a home for grub and louse?'

A broken ridge and rafters smashed
Lie strewn across the floor
And all that stands, quite ownerless,
Five windows and a door.

The imagery here draws upon the classical depiction of the wheel of birth and death. In this the Six Realms are circled by the twelve links of dependent origination in graphic form; the image for the Six Senses is a house with five windows and a door. It also refers to the first utterance of the Buddha after his Enlightenment:

> Seeking but not finding the house builder,
> I hurried through the round of many births:
> Painful is birth ever and again!
>
> O house builder, you have been seen;
> You shall not build the house again.
> Your rafters have been broken up,
> Your ridgepole is demolished too.
>
> My mind has now attained the unformed Nibbāna
> And reached the end of every sort of craving.
>
> (Dhp 153-4, Ven. Ñāṇamoli trans.)

Another area of creative activity that I have found myself exploring is that of the novel. When I was living at Amaravati from 1985-95, the Temple didn't exist. There was the old Dhamma Hall, some readers might remember, which sat where the Temple is now. Back when the property was a school it was the school gymnasium. Luang Por Sumedho used to live in two rooms at the end of that. One winter time he was due to be away,

travelling for three months and he said, 'Would you look after my rooms while I am away? I am going to be gone for three months. It is a nicer place for you to live and you can look after the rooms, keep them warm and dry.'

I was very happy to live in Luang Por's accommodation. It was much better than where I had been staying, one of the rooms in the *vihāra*, it even had its own bathroom! After a few weeks of having stayed there, one day when I was looking at his bookshelf, I noticed there was a book that I had never opened as I thought it was some kind of Thai chanting book, or some other foreign text, because of the script on the spine. Then I realized it was not Thai, it was some kind of Devanagari. 'Why would Luang Por have an Indian book? Is that Devanagari?' I thought. I picked it off the shelf and realized it was actually Roman script but crafted in an Indian style. It was an edition of a book called *The Pilgrim Kamanita* and it was both a Thai text and an English text, and it had pictures. I started reading and realized, 'This is a Buddhist novel. A Buddhist novel written in 1906 in German and then translated into English in 1911, then into Thai in the 1920s.'

I read it and found to my delight that it was a great story. It was based on the Buddhist scriptures, but the Danish writer, Karl Gjellerup, had put it all together as a tale from the Buddha's time and spanning many different lifetimes, as well as many different realms of existence. It was a very interesting, touching and beautiful story, very well written, and

surprisingly faithful to the spirit of the Buddha's teachings, especially with respect to some central principles of Buddha-Dhamma, such as attachment to sensuality, the principle of awakening, renunciation and enlightenment. I was amazed at how well the author seemed to understand the Dhamma. It also contained along the way, as a natural part of the narrative, a large proportion of the central teachings of Buddhism. It was a kind of covert Dhamma anthology of key principles.

It was in a type of faux-classical English, with long sentences of about ten or fifteen lines, so I spent about four years putting it into more readable English and making a section of notes and references so that the reader could know where the various elements of the story came from.

That new edition was published in 1999, to coincide with the opening of the Amaravati Temple. To cut a long story short, I really liked the way that Karl Gjellerup had put the Buddha's teachings and his own imagination together, but I also felt there were some loose ends in the story. Firstly, the hero had three children that didn't even get names in the original story. He was married to two different women who, again, didn't even get names. I thought that was a bit of an oversight, and whatever happened to the children?

At this time I was living in the USA, at Abhayagiri Monastery, which had opened in 1996. Once *The Pilgrim Kamanita* had been published, and we had

also done an audio book of it (mostly for my mother who was blind) I found myself pondering these absences. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be a good thing to do a follow-up story for *The Pilgrim Kamanita*, to involve the children and somehow bring in themes of life that are significant in America? It could talk about racism; it could introduce Buddhist cosmology to the American Dhamma audience; it could continue to present pithy themes of the Teachings and cast them into memorable stories to help them be retained. In addition, I felt that 'the serial novel' had become a lost medium that could do with reviving, that is to say, publishing a novel one chapter at a time, over a series of weeks or months, as Charles Dickens had done.

These thoughts were going on in the background of working with Ajahn Pasanno and the community to get Abhayagiri Monastery started – which was a full-time occupation – so there was not an urgency to these ideas, yet they steadily gathered over the 1999-2004 period. Those few themes would arise in the mind, so I thought, 'Maybe one day I will.'

In 2004-5 I was on sabbatical for one year in India, living for the Rains Retreat in the Korean Temple at Savatthi. I had a notebook with me and, without really planning it, over about a five-day span, the story of Kamanita's children hatched on its own. Just like the poem, 'Self-Portrait', it hatched unbidden and whole. The seed was the thought, 'Hmm... so, if we have got the three children – the two sisters and the brother, with different

mothers – then what else have you got?...?' The thread of the story spun itself from that raw flax, over a five day period, so I started writing it down.

The first five chapters were written in India, and then, once back at Abhayagiri, it took quite a long time to craft the whole thing into a polished form. We started to release it in 2009, at one chapter per month and then it was published in full on the Abhayagiri website when I left America in July 2010, to come and live at Amaravati.

After I got settled in on the other side of The Pond the thought occurred, 'This book needs illustrations, like there were in *The Pilgrim Kamanita*' – as Alice says in Alice in Wonderland, 'And what is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?' Frances Quail, who was an anagārikā at that time, was leaving the Sangha, mostly because of family difficulties. She wanted to start life as an illustrator, so I enquired, 'Frances, would you be interested in a small project?' I was not knowingly misrepresenting the task but it became apparent that 'small project' was not an accurate assessment. The creation of the illustrations, plus the design and typography of the book, took several years to come to completion but finally this got hatched too, after its long gestation. It is now on the website and in print and circulated, titled *Mara and the Mangala – The Killer*.

I have used these few examples from my own life here, not out of a wish for self-promotion, but since this is where I have seen the creative process

happening most directly. If you take the examples used here, hopefully it can be seen that this theme, 'Let the *Citta* Paint a Picture' can be a valuable principle to use in your own life, regardless of how you might rate your creative abilities.

Each of us can work out, clarify, our own insights in ways that are tangible and meaningful, and we can learn to put things into a form where the needs of the moment are being responded to with sensitivity and energy. We might be a person of few words but our medium is music, or fixing broken appliances; perhaps dog-training is the field in which we flourish; cooking with love and colour might be our thing; or building furniture that no human could ever use, but which fills the mind with wonder... As long as our expressions come from that bright, energetic, attentive void of the heart, irrespective of the medium, then people will be reached and will be able to be blessed by what has come forth from us. It might be pictures, poetry, stories, how a boat is sailed or how a customer is received – there is an infinite range of possible media for skilful expression, ripening in a sense of communion, true communication, connection with reality. Such a communion 'speaks to the order' in our hearts; this is the quality of *Dhamma-niyamatā* – 'the orderliness of reality'. The realization, appreciation, of this inner quality of order and integration in turn supports

the realization of Dhamma, the fundamental reality – 'the very things that religions are concerned to render'.

If we can relate to our own creative potential, and our Dhamma practice, in terms of the world calling something forth, then offering that up as drawn by people's interest – if it is a way of crystallizing something that is formative within us, to make sense of an insight – then those creations will have life, they will have value. If instead it is just 'me' trying to create something because 'I' want to be 'someone', or if I just like the idea of creating something to pass the time, it will never have any life to it; at least that has been my experience of how it works. It won't have that same kind of heartful message to communicate.

By way of closing this section, here are a few more poems – non-rhymers this time.

This following poem was written after a dream wherein a great and beautiful chestnut mare came and befriended me; at the time a voice said, 'Her name is Udissa, Light.' It was also named, spontaneously, after a touching Irish film I saw as a child.

## *Gold is where you find it*

AMARAVATI, 1986

Always alone –
*Udissa,*
'Light' –
never with the heard.
But
what is that crystal song
an earthly sound of –
silence?
Or is it the first sound
to fall on the Awakened:

the air of gentle rustlings
of bodhi-leaves a-quiver
as, with somersaulting ease,
a breeze
stirs a morning cool in Magadha?
Dawn light
rosy horizon
blue moon
May morning.

Certainty, serenity,
stillness on the razor's edge,
lends an ear
lets fall a tear
for the faithful Earth –
hear.

Now
around these breathing branches,
filamentiferous interface
of earth and sky
where time meets timeless;
the infinite and bounded kiss
in spherical embrace.

At
this
zenith
of green and cold,
is fluttering the pulse and bud
of toiling, teeming,
restless, emergent, collapsing
fever
but
the silent light
illuminates unceasingly.

'Who is it?'
hovers in stillness,
the Wonderful,
and
thumb touches thumb
tip to tip.

## *Sunlight on Water, XII*

CHITHURST FOREST, 1988

The turning earth obscures the sun,
night comes over England.
Vixens bark,
badgers trundle out,
mother calls the children in.

A breath of sleep and then
a skyful of stars as dawn comes.
Wake! Again!! Begin!!!

Hollow-legged, blinking;
emergence from oblivion
and the strange dream-logic
wherein vague feelings,
and half-remembered characters
balloon into huge reality
then fade
without a murmur.
Owl-calls echo through the woods;
dew drips,
clattering softly on chestnut leaves.
Pale violet, rose,
the sky fills with light,
amethystine.

Venus and the crescent moon
have given up their sparkle
to the dawn.
Colour and birdsong
wash through the hills,
the dark is over.

## *The Flowering of the Golden Secret*

AMARAVATI, 1990

WITH MANY THANKS TO
WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH,
JOSEPH CAMPBELL AND
TREVOR RAVENSCROFT

It has been so long –
the Master's body laid so low
like the wounded Anfortas,
guardian of the Holy Grail,
neither quite alive
nor yet quite dead.
The wasted flesh shocks the eye,
the straightest mind is turned;
too awed and stunned by raw impact
to ask the question, 'Why?'
'What is it ails thee?'

Stopping at the sense's gate
the seeker gets repelled –
so, guileless and innocent,
is left to wander wasted lands:
brave, brave, brave
but slowly wise.

The one of steadfast mind
trends towards the bright,
circling the holy place
the domain of the Lord of Light – but
'Who seeks it will not find it';
so near, yet always out of sight.
Five circles of the sun: despair
and hope pursue each other round –
a sorry pair.

Whomsoever seeks the Grail
must do so with a sword –
hating God, defying Truth
but determined to go on;
for there's no fixed law,
no formula of knowledge,
that ever could withstand
the power of revelation
of one faithful
to their own courageous truth.
*Straight through the middle.*
The test is to forget yourself,
and all your cherished goals,
to partake of the anguish
of another.

*Straight through the middle*
comes at last once more
to place himself
before the wounded one;
via painful passages,
far beyond the bounds
of space and time, causality,
to reach the realm of vision:
to reach the Master's hut,
the Grail Castle.
*‚Oeheim, was wirret dier?'*
'Luang Por, what ails you?'

The question now illuminates
presumptions we have made...
'Do not weep for ME!
It's *you* who are in trouble.
you think this body's all there is
to "Ajahn Chah"?'

The veil is pierced –
revelation
of the perfectly awake,
radiant reality
is here.

The wound is healed
transfiguration, peace – no one
whose beauty came from birth,
ever equalled Anfortas
emerging from his sickness
– *fleur* –
a golden lustre falls upon the scene.

No one ever reached the Grail
not named for it in heaven;
the steadfast one
who holds the middle
now comes to the throne –
thus
here and there
and you and i
at last dissolve,
are
gone.

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦ ✦

## *A Spring at the Peak, IX*

3RD DAY OF THE WANING MOON,
SEPTEMBER, 1995
BELL SPRINGS HERMITAGE

Walking by starlight –
you are
a world of greys –
the ultimate reality,
uncertainties beneath the feet,
your heart
the night
belongs to the infinite,
rings with life,
bind it to less,
relentlessly
it cries for more –

like the crazed moon dancing
on contorting amber tree-rims,

how could it
do otherwise?

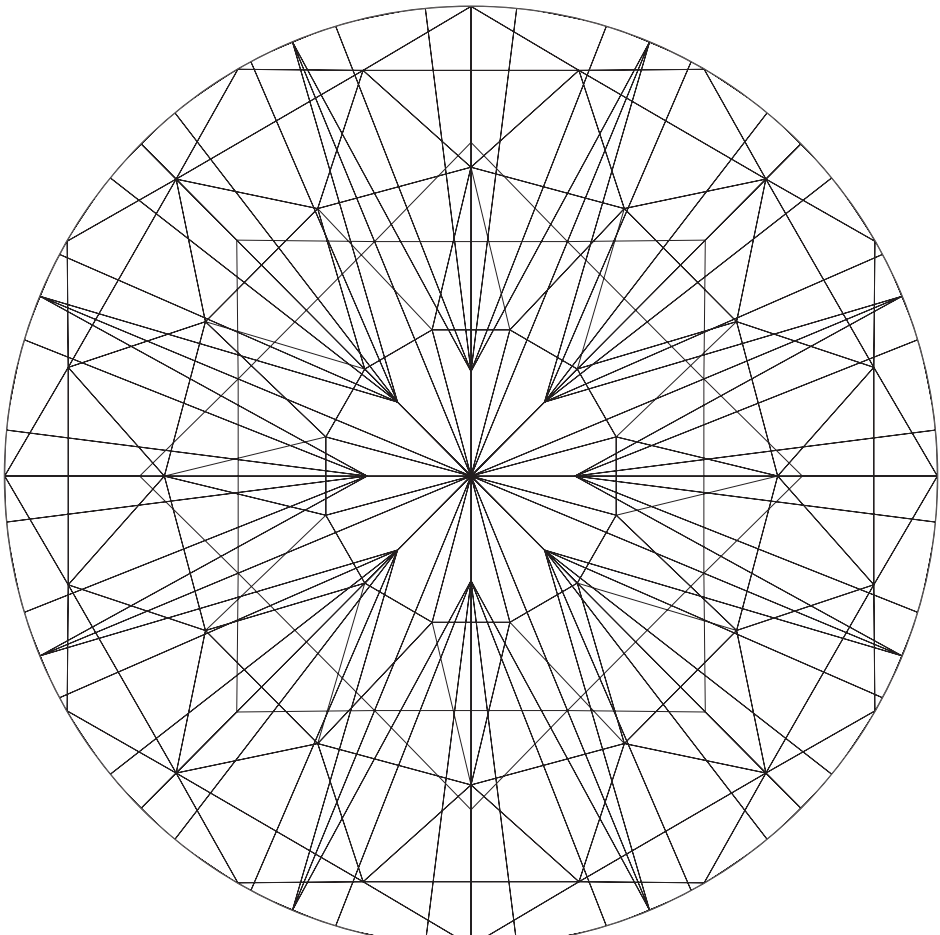
## *Rivasyllabalansings, I*

ABHAYAGIRI, JUNE 1ST, 1996
FIRST DAY OF THE
NEW MONASTERY

In the presence
of everything –
the wonderful
silence.

⋆ ⋆ ⋆

[*later, same day]*
In the wonderful
silence –
the presence
of everything.



# HAPPILY EVER AFTER
## VOLUME ONE • REALITY

AJAHN AMARO



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ST MARGARETS
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