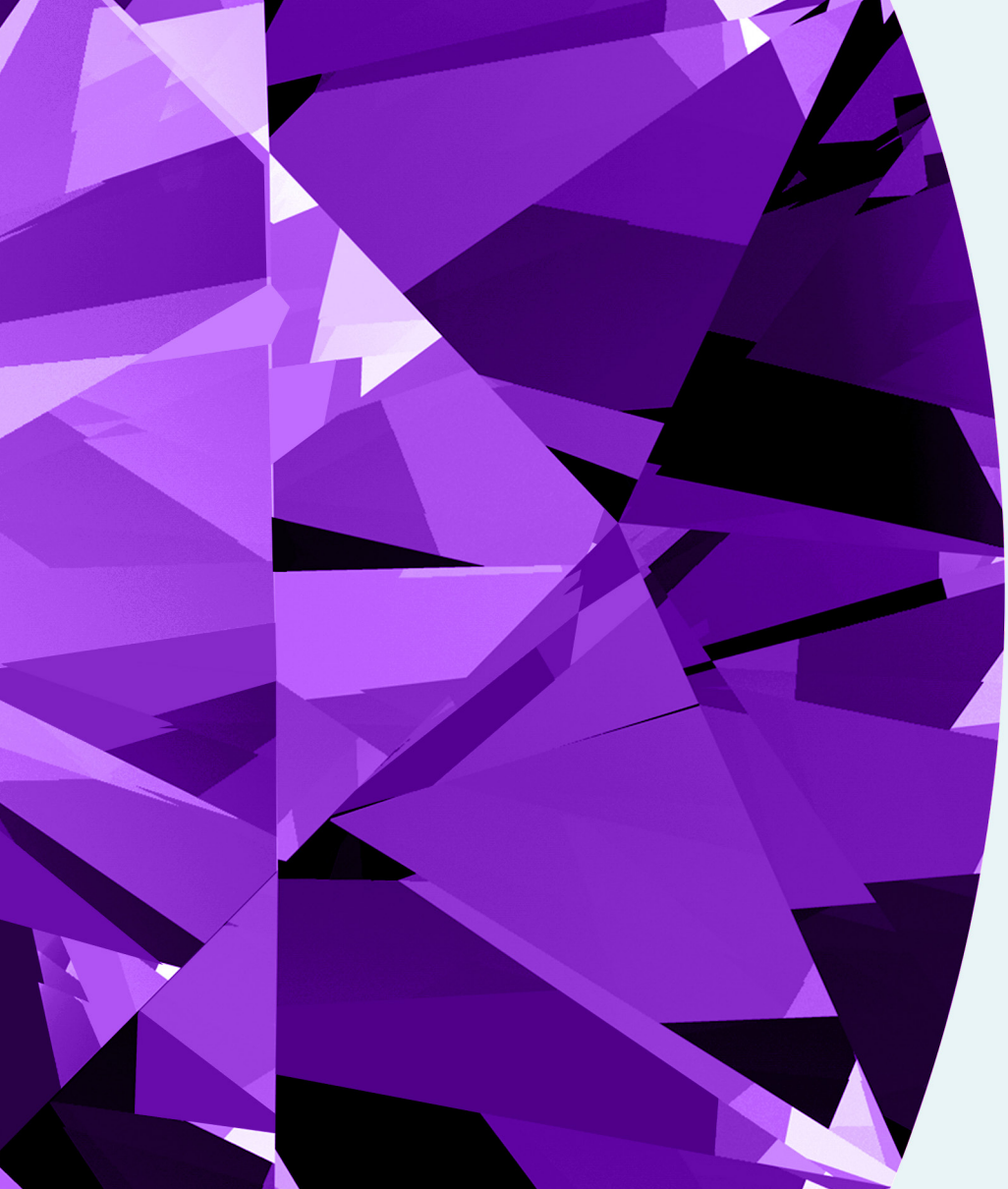
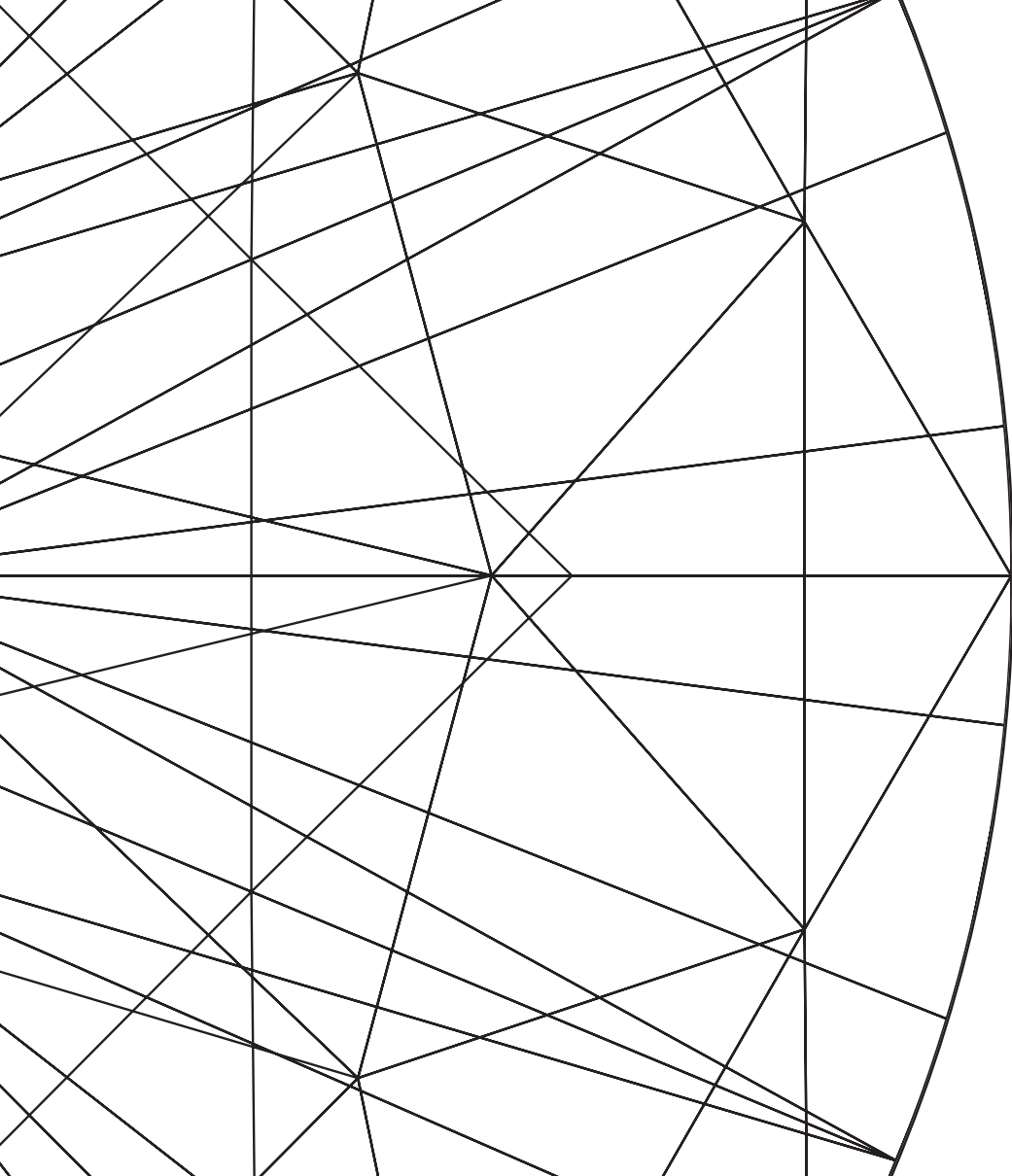


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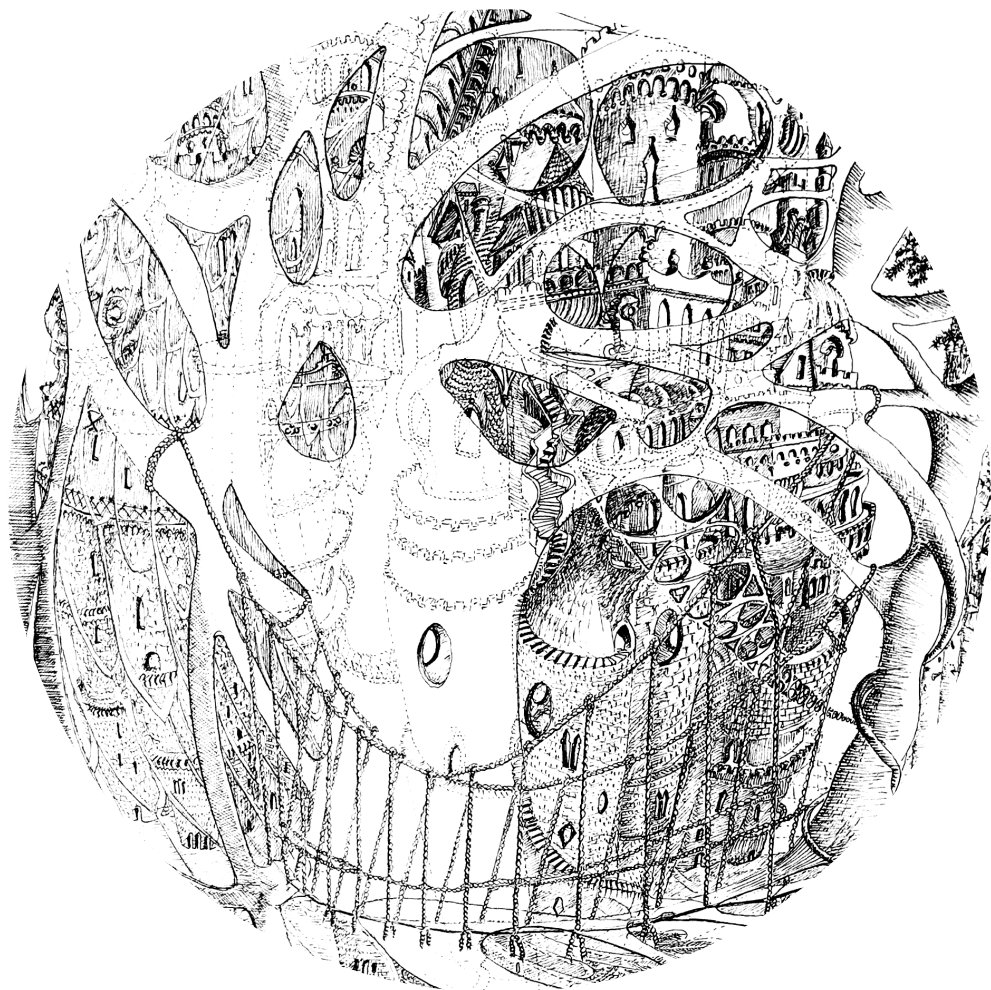
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
TWO **Emotion**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



PAGE	1	'HEROIN OR CHOCOLATE CAKE?'
7		An evening Dhamma talk, given at Abhayagiri Monastery, California, summer 2007
PAGE	2	'I AM A BUDDHIST, WHY AM I SO ANGRY?'
33		A Sunday Afternoon Talk, given at Amaravati, summer 2011
PAGE	3	THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING BORED, SAD AND LONELY
71		An evening Dhamma talk, given at Amaravati on Christmas Day, 2019
PAGE	4	'IF YOU TRULY LOVE ME, DON'T CREATE ME IN YOUR MIND'
93		A Sunday Afternoon Talk, given at Amaravati, summer 2014



‘Heroin or Chocolate Cake?’

The Buddha said that the reason why he, and you, and I, and all other beings, have travelled and trudged endlessly through the rounds of birth and death, the rounds of existence, is because of not understanding four things: not understanding the truth of *dukkha*, of unsatisfactoriness, discontent, dis-ease; not understanding the cause of *dukkha*; not understanding the cessation of *dukkha*, and not understanding the way leading to the cessation of *dukkha* (D 16.4). These are the Four Noble Truths, these simple, straightforward insights: through not understanding, not truly knowing these four principles, you and I, and he, and all beings have had to travel and trudge around and around and around and around, birth to death; birth, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, ageing, death, birth to death, death to birth. Over and over and over, through all the different realms of being. We don't even need to think about it in terms of lifetime to lifetime on a physical level; we can see it happening just in the course of a day, one individual day, travelling and trudging through all our different identities: the enthusiast, the depressive, the great yogi, the failed slob, the kindly generous Bodhisattva, the eating demon, the mediocre, the unremarkable.

All these changing states of mind are different births and deaths – we are constantly being born into positive mind states, negative mind states, positive actions, neutral actions, negative actions.

Even though the Four Noble Truths are often presented as ‘basic Buddhism’, as ‘chapter one, page one Buddhism’, and can seem so simple, I find it extremely helpful and important to look at this modest statement of the Buddha: ‘It’s through not understanding these four things that you and I, and all beings, are being continually reborn...’ are continually following cycles of aversion, cycles of attraction, cycles of fear, cycles of identification, around and around and around, locked into the prison of becoming.

In the *Dhammacakka Sutta* (S 56.11), the Buddha’s first discourse, he outlines this in almost the exact same words, ‘As long as I had not fully understood these Four Noble Truths in their three aspects, then I did not claim full and complete enlightenment. But it was only when I had fully understood these Four Noble Truths in their three aspects – then indeed, I claimed full and complete enlightenment.’ They seem simple and conceptually easy to understand, nothing demanding on the intellectual front, but when the Buddha uses the term ‘fully understood’, it doesn’t mean comprehending the language. It doesn’t mean being able to grasp the concept in terms of basic meaning. Rather it means the fact of it really sinking into the bones, into the marrow, and seeing not just the conceptual meaning of the Truths

and subscribing to them, but also intuiting the implications: ‘If this is true, what does it say about what I fear, what I like, what I dislike, what I think I am, what I think others are? What does this say about that?’

This is, in a way, what *pāramitā* is, the development of the spiritual virtues. *Pāramitā* is what enables the heart to recognize the implications of an insight, or an understanding. If we have little *pāramitā*, then we might see that logically ‘everything is impermanent’. If we have a lot of *pāramitā*, if that’s been developed, if there’s great spiritual virtue, then when we hear a phrase like ‘everything is impermanent’, it goes right into the bones, into the marrow, and the heart feels out the implications of that. It’s realized, ‘Oh, this changes everything. What’s the worth of this thing that I’m pursuing? What’s the worth, what’s the danger in the thing that I’m running away from? What’s the reality of the thing that I’m opinionated about? How solid is the thing that I think I am? What is that thing that seems to be the owner of my experience, of my life? Oh!’ The greater the *pāramitā*, the more that insight resonates through all the realms of attitude and presumption. All the realms of perception and memory, ideation, every corner of our being. ‘Look at that! If that’s true, then it changes the picture completely.’ This is something to contemplate and consider.

Accordingly, a great measure of spiritual practice is about developing *pāramitā*, developing spiritual virtues, developing that ripeness of the heart

whereby those implications of a simple insight totally change the way that we see the world, the way we relate to the world. Just as in the story of the Buddha's life, when he was a prince in the palace and he first opened his mind to the presence of sickness and ageing and death. The association that he makes is that, 'If others are affected by these aspects of life, then I must be too. And if this is where life is going – towards sickness, ageing and death, then what is the point of attaching to, identifying with, that which is also subject to ageing, sickness and death?' As he recounted this thought process he said, 'In realizing that then all pride in youth left me; all pride in health left me; all pride in life left me' (M 26.13). Most of us wouldn't make that connection so immediately, so quickly, but the Buddha was spiritually very ripe indeed. On recognizing the truth of ageing, the truth of the vulnerability, fragility of the body and sickness, he saw, 'If that's the case, what's the point of pursuing, trying to take refuge in youth? Because it's changing, it is not going to be – and it cannot be – here forever. Sickness, one can't avoid sickness, and death is going to bring the last breath one day. It has to, it can't be any other way. So, if that's the case, look at what that says about my worldly concerns, my preoccupations, my family, my body, my hopes and fears. This changes everything!'

What we're trying to do in these monasteries and what Luang Por Chah would always emphasize is, rather than trying to 'achieve enlightenment'

or ‘to get somewhere in our practice’, or to think and speak in such grandiloquent terms, instead, to think in terms of simply building *pāramitā*. We learn to be a little more patient, we learn to be more honest, we learn to arouse energy, to employ wise reflection. We learn what to develop, how to develop it and we put forth the energy to develop it.

Moment by moment, minute by minute, day by day, week by week, month by month, we cultivate those simple everyday strengths and insights; we reflect over and over on them: that no experience can be totally, permanently satisfying; that no thing in the universe, mental or physical, can be in a state of total stability and predictability; that there is no owner for any kind of object or experience. These simple, easily understood concepts are enough to transform us: *anicca, dukkha, anattā*, and the Four Noble Truths – suffering, origin, cessation and path – we patiently train the mind and heart to see the entire field of our experience according to this framework.

It’s through such gentle and steady building of *pāramitā*, namely, the building of spiritual virtues, that the clouds in the system are cleared, we sensitize the system whereby those genuine insights, the liberating insights, can be actualized. Even if we feel we haven’t got that much *pāramitā*, or we haven’t yet developed sufficient spiritual virtue, we can still actively contemplate the Four Noble Truths. Merely cultivating an interest, an exploratory attitude with respect to them, can help us enormously. In this way we are

not manufacturing an insight, rather, we are gathering the ingredients whereby those insights can be nourished, nurtured and brought into being. We *re-mind* ourselves over and over – this is the key learning process, above everything else that we do – we remind ourselves how *dukkha* gets created and how it is brought to an end. We see the chemistry of how we come to feel alienated, lost, restless, oppressed, irritated, incomplete, unsatisfied. That’s what we’re intending to learn about, the engine of that discontent: ‘How does that engine work? What drives it? What’s its fuel? How can it be so convincing, so compelling, so pervasive?’ So we apply our hearts to the task of exploring this, investigating this, getting interested in this: ‘What is this? How does this work?’

Essentially, it’s all to do with desire, isn’t it? Craving. The mechanism of craving, this is the cause of *dukkha*. The whole thing begins at Noble Truth number two, the cause of *dukkha*. Then the effect of that cause is Noble Truth number one: the presence of the feeling of discontent, incompleteness and unsatisfactoriness, alienation, stress, dis-ease, imbalance, out of order-ness – however we want to translate that all-encompassing word, *dukkha*. That feeling of the universe being out of balance, out of order, not-quite-rightness, or *very* not-rightness.

Taṇhā, craving or thirst, that’s the root, that’s the infection. That’s the cause of the spiritual malaise. The bug is *taṇhā*, craving. So then it behoves us to

get interested in that: ‘How is that? How does it work? What is that feeling? Where does it come from? What drives it? What shape does it have? How do I feel it?’ Much of the practice of Dhamma in our life is bringing the lens of investigation to our craving, our attachment, getting to know its different attributes, its different dimensions and why we find it so convincing.

* * *

A teaching that both Luang Por Sumedho and Luang Por Chah would give repeatedly, has been to point out that desire, attachment, is a liar. The message of craving is always *gohok yai*, a great lie. When the mind attaches to the feeling of *taṇhā*, our attention gets locked onto an object. It may be a subtle object, as in the realms of *bhava-taṇhā* and *vibhava-taṇhā*, our desire to become and our desire to get rid of. *Vibhava taṇhā* can manifest as nebulous feelings of pointlessness or negativity, nihilism, or the subtle wish to get rid of irritating thoughts, or impatience with a pain in the body – this is ‘the desire to get rid of’. *Bhava-taṇhā* comprises all the subtle feelings of becoming: the desire to *be* something or someone, *me* trying to become more peaceful, *me* trying to become clear, *me* trying to become a better person. My desire to become more wise, more accomplished – all this might sound reasonable and convincing but since there is so much ‘*me*’ in it, these attitudes will inevitably bring on more *dukkha*.

As most readers will be aware there is also something much more rampant and florid than our desires to get rid of things and our desires to become something – and this is *kāma-taṇhā*, sense desire. This is: wanting to eat something, or smoke something, or the desire to latch on to some alluring sexual object. It is the sensual urge to get close to something that’s exciting, stimulating, something to smell, something to touch, something to taste, something to hear and see, something to carry the senses away. It is the urge to absorb into something shocking, frightening, interesting, alluring, something to fill the mind.

We easily believe in these different pulls, whichever variety they are of the three types of *taṇhā*, whether the most subtle murmurings of identification with formless *jhāna*, to insatiable cravings for a hit of some drug of choice, alcohol, tobacco or some stronger narcotic, or some obsession of sight, sound, smell, taste or physical contact. The fascinating thing is that, having been looking at this for many years, every time desire lies it tends to be believed, as when it says, ‘If I just had this, if I could just get rid of that, if I could just hang on to this, if I could just shift away from that, if I could just get away from this painful feeling, if I could just activate this potential, if I could just get close to that object, just devour that fruit, that cake, be with that person... I could become a success. If I could just get approval, if I could just get away from this ailment, if I could just, if I could just... then I would be happy. I’d be complete.’

We see this pattern over and over again: ‘I want, I’ve got to have, I need to be, I need to get, I have to get away from, I don’t need, I don’t want this. How can I get away from this?’ That’s the equation that we’re making, isn’t it? ‘If only this wasn’t here, then I’d be happy. If only I had some of that I’d be happy. If only I was somebody else, then I would be fine. If I was just... different...’. It’s a lie. But that’s the lie that the heart believes in time after time. *Taṇhā*, craving, is insidious, treacherous. That’s why it causes so much suffering, because it doesn’t match reality. It’s presenting something that doesn’t exist. Therefore, we become disappointed and frustrated, and ultimately let down even by the objects of our craving that we acquire. Whether it’s an object that we’re trying to get rid of, or that we are trying to get hold of, the object has to disappoint us. It can’t do anything else because all things change. All things are insubstantial. They can’t satisfy us, this fact is based on the nature of *saṅkhāra-dukkha*, the Noble Truth that all conditioned phenomena are intrinsically unsatisfactory. Full stop. That’s it. This is the law of nature. But the heart is profoundly deluded, and it insists, ‘But this *isn’t* unsatisfactory. If I could just have it, if I could just take hold of this, if I could just acquire this object, if I could just be with this person, if I could just get away from that heat, if I could just get close to the heat, I’d be happy.’ As they say, it’s a liar.

However, if we take the time and trouble to spell out these passions and murmurings, it spoils the illusion, it ruins the trick. The way craving works

is mostly non-conceptual. *Tañhā* operates most effectively in a nonverbal realm so to verbalize our craving – to spell it out clearly, systematically and completely – is like turning up the brightness and slowing down the film of the conjuror so that it becomes obvious how the tricks are done. We become aware that we are being deluded.

Much of the practice of Dhamma is remembering that we're feeling the burning of craving, attachment, as the Buddha described so aptly in 'The Fire Sermon' (S 35.28): '*Sabbaṃ bhikkhave ādittaṃ*,' 'All is burning, bhikkhus. Everything is burning. Burning with the fires of *rāga*, *dosa* and *moha*, the fires of passion, of aversion, of delusion.' The first step is knowing that this is the feeling of desire, craving, passion. Out of habit the attention tends to go to the object, doesn't it? It goes to the story that's being told about the thing that's irritating, the thing that's painful: This illness is in the way, or this person is annoying me, or that practice, the meditation isn't quite right, or the community isn't doing quite what I wish it would, or the partner that I'm hooked up with... or the partner I want to be hooked up with... The weather, the food, the mind, the body, the personality... Interest latches on to the content, the object of the experiential field and we pursue that. We take hold of the story and we race after it, especially if it's a good story. But we miss the *process* because of our absorption in the *content*, the object of our attachment.

The first step in working with this process skilfully is, as in the Buddha's own description of the Four Noble Truths, recognizing that: 'This is *dukkha*. This is a feeling of incompleteness and discontent. Here it is. It feels like this.' Then listening to the voice of the desire, the craving, and seeing that the *dukkha* is caused by what? 'Where's this coming from? It's coming from craving, from attachment. *Tañhā* is burning.' So there's some attachment going on here somewhere, there's some clinging. What's being clung to? 'The clinging to wanting to get away from this knee pain, wanting to go to the bathroom, wanting to be more enlightened, wanting to be more peaceful, wanting to get out of this community, wanting to get into this community, wanting to be older, wanting to be younger, wanting to be the centre of attention, wanting to get away from being the centre of attention...' – wanting any one of the 10,000 things. So it's a question of recognizing what's being clung to. Is it clinging to an aspect of the past or the future? Is it to a material object, to a relationship? Is it to a thought, a feeling, a mood? Where is it? And sure enough, every time we look, we see, if there's *dukkha*, suffering, it's because there's some clinging, attachment, going on. So then we look, explore, see where the clinging is happening.

One of the things that's most important is, as soon as we see that we're attached to some idea about the past or the future – such as a way we want to be seen, a way we're afraid of being seen, or wanting to get hold of a

material object, or to get rid of a material object – we immediately want to *do* something about that. We want to get rid of that and get away from it, or destroy it, or fix it. But one of the most useful aspects of the practice is just to notice that feeling of craving for what it is. Take your attention off the *object*, off the *content*, and instead feel the *process* of craving itself. Let yourself know what it's like to crave.

Whether it's craving a cigarette, or craving for approval, or craving to travel, or craving to stay, craving to be different, craving to belong, it doesn't matter, bring the attention into the body, into the physical sensations when the mind is saying, "This is *the feeling of craving*. This is the heart really wanting. This is the "gotta have" feeling, it's like this; this is the "can't stand" feeling. Here it is, *it's like this.*'

It takes a bit of effort, sometimes it takes an incredible amount of effort, to extract our attention from the object and to instead look at that feeling, the process of craving, whether it's a subtle, gentle murmur, or there is an outright dragon roar; just know it: 'This is how craving feels.' When we do this we can listen more clearly to the voice of craving and consider what it's craving for. We can develop more objectivity for the content by listening to the heart, grumbling and complaining, trying to get away from, getting rid of, dispelling something that's negative, opinionating about something neutral, or longing for something desirable, attractive or appealing. We

learn to listen to these voices. When we listen, we can begin to recognize their lying, deceitful quality. When we listen carefully and we attend to the voices of the heart saying, 'If I just had such-and-such, then I'd be happy. If I could just get away from this place, then I'd be happy. If I could just...' it clarifies the conjuror's trick, the deception. It is as if the lie is spelled out clearly and consciously, in large plain letters, so it's much easier to recognize that it's a lie.

Another thing to recognize is that the feeling of craving is usually quite uncomfortable. It's a nasty feeling. It's an unpleasant, oppressive feeling. It's not deadly, but for the mind to be in that state is painful. We're not opinionating about that, or blaming it, just letting ourselves know that: 'This is an unpleasant state of body and mind. Why would I want to move towards situations where this state is multiplied and increased? Why would I want to do anything that would aggravate or amplify this feeling of craving?'

We might realize that, in questioning like this, we're going counter to our culture and to human conditioning generally, where deliberately arousing desire, craving and agitation is a large part of life. We try to get excited, to get interested, to get active, to get moving and to keep the whole thing spinning. Incredible amounts of income and human energy are spent cranking it up, 'Keeping it going so damn fast that we don't have

to think about anything...' and looking upon the absence of that spinning as a living death.

If we develop the spiritual skill and strength to lay aside these cultural assumptions and this conditioning, and, instead, to look at the feeling of the heart in the state of craving – the longing to get hold of, the longing to get rid of, the longing to have sense pleasure – feeling it as it is, we will see, 'This is really quite painful.' The feeling itself is off-putting – just as we might ask ourselves, 'Why would I seek out having a toothache? Why would I do something to make my life pressured, stressed and miserable?' It would be crazy, although admittedly it happens. So, not from a judgmental, self-centred or idealistic position, but rather from raw common sense, consider, 'Why would I want to do this to myself?' And then, as this sinks in, it is much easier to drop things, they often fall away on their own.

When we listen to the stories that desire is telling us, in a clear and unbiased way, and when the painfulness of being caught in a state of desiring is recognized, the heart will say to the lie, 'That's not very convincing,' as if hearing the words of a lying politician. Something has a sweet taste and perhaps that's appealing, or it has a bitter taste and maybe we prefer that, but the heart imbued with the strength of mindfulness and wisdom will know, without a doubt, 'No way is that going to make me happy forever.' The heart knows this with clear intuitive wisdom. It is only when the heart is

distracted by the confusions of habit that it doesn't realize the obviousness of the lie. It is swept along by the lie. The more there is familiarity with how craving works, the more easily it's realized that craving is a delusion, its promise is simply not true.

Ironically, and tragi-comically, desire objects are often highly transferable. It's merely desire looking for something consumable, fire seeking some fuel and anything 'combustible' will do – it's quite shamelessly fickle sometimes. The mind can go berserk wanting to get some specific thing, for hours and hours, and when finally it can't get that, then it's a case of, 'Well, OK, I'll have one of those instead then.'

* * *

There's a story I once heard about Peter Cook and Dudley Moore: this was way back in the late '50s, or maybe the early '60s, when Peter Cook was at Cambridge University and he was running Cambridge Footlights, the undergraduate comedy club. Peter had the brilliant idea of inviting Lenny Bruce to come over from New York as a suitably shocking and outrageous guest performer. They rattled their piggy banks to gather the funds for this and got Lenny Bruce to fly over from New York to England for this session at Cambridge. This was a big deal, to have such a famous and outrageous American comedian coming over.

Peter Cook, a tall, gangly Englishman, is nervous to get everything right. He goes to pick up Lenny Bruce at the airport, welcoming him, introducing himself, organizing things, he carries his bags and gets him sorted into a taxi, doing his best to look after everything. He says, 'Mr. Bruce, this is a great honour for us to have you come to Cambridge, is there anything that we can do for you to make your stay more comfortable? Anything you might need? Anything that we can provide for you while you're here?' To which Lenny Bruce responded, 'You got any heroin?'

'Heroin? Heroin... what?' says Peter, somewhat thrown off balance, 'that's some kind of a drug, isn't it? Well, actually, um, well, not really. But I'm sure we could get some for you if you really need it.' Lenny replied, 'Yeah, that'd be great.' Peter, feeling somewhat out of his depth, gets Lenny Bruce back to Cambridge and gets him settled. Then he starts really fretting, 'Where am I going to find any heroin in Cambridge?' He knows where the good pubs are, but this is 1958...

As he said when recounting the story, 'I hadn't even heard of marijuana in those days.'

So he got on the phone to his friend Dudley Moore because he thought, 'Dud, he's a musician. They're all drug takers, aren't they?' The fact that Dudley Moore was a classical musician, and had been doing a scholarship at Oxford in playing the organ, although he occasionally played some jazz,

escaped Peter Cook's notice at that moment. But he thought, 'Dud, he's a musician, he'll know.' So he called up Dud, and said, 'Dud, we've got Lenny Bruce the comedian over for the Footlights Review and he is... he's from New York and he wants some heroin. Do you know any people, any of your musician friends who are heroin users?' Dud says, 'What's heroin? Isn't that the kind of woman in the films who does all the daring deeds? Isn't she? What does he want with a heroine?'

'No, you fool, it's a kind of drug. It comes from opium.'

'Oh, really, well, drugs, hmmm... I've got some Junior Disprin.'

They flap and fluster around for a bit, try ringing various friends, all to no avail. So they go to the hotel in Cambridge, it is already late in the evening by this time, and knock on Lenny's door. Very apologetically Peter says, 'I'm terribly terribly sorry Mr. Bruce, but you know, we've... we've tried ever so hard, we've searched around for your heroin but, you know, this is really not something that we're very well acquainted with. We didn't really know who to talk to or where to go. And it is kind of sort of... as you know, illegal. But if it's really that important, I'm sure that, you know, we can keep trying if need be.' To which Lenny replies, 'Oh, don't worry about it. How about some chocolate cake instead?'

Sometimes it's like that, isn't it? You're trying ever so hard to get hold of one particular desire object and yet, if object 'A' is regrettably unavailable,

then OK, no heroin, never mind, chocolate cake will do. That's the way it is, the desire mind is totally fickle. If the door to object 'A' is shut and locked, OK, just switch the program and go to object 'B'. It can be shocking to see how easily desire objects can be substituted.

I have vivid memories of an occasion when I was in the forest at Chithurst, in 1988, on a three month solitary retreat. I would take a little sitting mat and meditate in different parts of the forest. I remember parking myself down by the lake one day, sitting there for four or five hours. From almost the moment I sat down the mind rabidly pursued sexual desires. One memory after another after another, of every kind of erotic encounter of my not particularly long life. I was 31 years old at the time and I had been in the monastery since I was 21.

Every imaginable encounter of my youth seemed to be replayed in glorious Technicolor, one after another; an event would be remembered and then the mind would go racing off to where the situation might have gone, what might have happened... 'if only she'd been like this, or I hadn't been like that, if he hadn't shown up. If I had more of this, less of that.'

I sat there for all that time, for four or five hours, just saying, 'No, no, no, no, no... No! No, no...'. It was almost comical after a time. It was like going through a card index looking for a library book, one card after another, each one very dramatic, colourful and pungent – but steadily I did my best

not to follow the images, to let them all go. It was a relentless succession of desires. Finally, after many hours of this, suddenly things changed. It felt almost as if the hungry mind decided, 'Well that one's not working, let's try this instead.' All sense desire for alluring objects stopped, like a light being switched off, and then it changed to aversion. Immediately. There was nothing for four or five hours but one alluring object after another, and then the mind started coming up with all the irritating things about the people I live with, and what was wrong with the other monks. It was so blatant it was absurd. There was nothing but craving for sense pleasure for four or five hours and suddenly 'boof', gone completely, no interest in that. Then it became about what's wrong with all the people that I live with.

It was almost comical. No, it was *actually* comical. It was absurd. It was obviously a farce. I think I started chuckling to myself. It was so ridiculous, so obvious; this was simply fire 'seeking' some fuel, an organic, non-personal process despite the fact that the players in these many scenarios were 'people' from 'my life'. Just like a forest fire doesn't have a mind, it doesn't have a consciousness, but it seems like it does, because it 'seeks' whatever is burnable. It'll take whatever fuel is in its path, and it'll pursue any path where there's combustible fuel. Exactly the same way, it's just the burning mind. That incident in the Chithurst forest showed me that the *tanhā*-influenced mind was looking for something burnable and, as it

wasn't getting much to ignite in the desire part, in the *lobha*, the greed section – that was all a bit soggy and non-flammable – it was a matter of the flames inching into the *dosa* department, aversion and negativity, for the mindless, non-conscious chemistry of the fire to 'see if it could cause' ignition over there.

It was a good lesson because the contrast was so extreme. For the first few hours it had been doing its level best to try and get the mind to buy into something: 'This is so interesting, this is so attractive, so beautiful, so great, wow, so amazing.' The lie was being presented over and over, with all kinds of different evidence and value and imagination and thought and memory to back it up; but it was just a lie that was saying, 'You're incomplete unless you get close to this, unless you have this.' And then that sudden switch from one object to another, like the heroin to the chocolate cake, it's a lie. It's saying, 'You have to have this to be happy.' No, it's a lie. Any object, any old fuel will do. It's just trying to get a bite, trying to get a nibble. Trying to get an, 'Oh yeah! I *do* need to get some of that. I have got to get away from this. I can't stand that. He shouldn't do that. That is wrong.' You can almost hear the hook going in: 'Got 'er!' Luang Por Chah said it's not like a fish swallowing a hook, getting it through its cheek, it's like a frog which takes it right down into the stomach. It swallows the hook right down. Down it goes, 'Got 'im!' The hook is in, it got a bite.

The challenge is to remember it's a lie. If we put our interest in some particular desire system and buy into it, believe in it and inflate it, it becomes true, at least relatively. 'That is something that's now valuable, good, and wonderful in my eyes – I have got to have it.' 'That is something that's bad and wrong and it shouldn't be that way and I have got to get rid of it.' It becomes so because we create it so. We believe in it. We buy it. We swallow the hook. And then the craving turns to clinging, the clinging turns to becoming, the becoming turns to birth. We're born into getting rid of that thing, opinionating about that thing, getting away from that thing, getting hold of that thing – and in the moment of becoming, we feel vindicated: 'Yes, this *IS* good. This is great.' 'Oh, I can't stand it. I've got to get away from this guy. It is wrong.' The moment of becoming is that moment of conviction, of vindication, of fulfilment.

In one of the Buddha's descriptions of anger, it is stated that it's pleasing in the short term and then regrettable in the long term. There is a great pleasure involved in expressing anger. It feels great to really let somebody have it when you're righteously indignant, or unrighteously indignant. But after the 'becoming' there comes 'birth', and then after birth, there's no turning back. We get the bill. Then we have a tense relationship: *soka*, *parideva*, *dukkha*, *domanassa*, *upayasa* – 'sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair'. Along with the birth, inevitably there comes the karmic result of

that. The thrill fades away, the excitement of getting angry, then another pain comes back in its place.

This is not a diatribe against the human world, the living world, rather this is pointing out how experience works. If we buy into a *saṅkhāra*, a formation, and believe it to be something real and solid and permanent, and try to make it so, we have to be disappointed. When we try to seek satisfaction in that which cannot satisfy, we have to be disappointed. It can't be any other way. That's not a sour point of view, it's physics. It's the mathematics of experience. It can't be any other way. It's totally impersonal.

* * *

When we think about the Four Noble Truths, it can seem like a bland, abstract, impersonal framework, but when we really look at what these Truths are pointing to, this is the very nub of our existence. The very essence of our feeling of being in the world is described by this pattern.

Of the Four Noble Truths, the Third is perhaps the most subtle and indistinct, ephemeral. The Second, the origin of *dukkha*, craving, is much more visible, tangible. The appropriate relationship to the Second Noble Truth is, *pahātabban'ti*, 'It is to be relinquished'. When we let go of that craving, when we recognize, 'This is a feeling of craving: this is the heart really wanting to get hold of; this is wanting to get rid of; wanting to be

somewhere else, to get something else, to have this. This is craving. This is the liar. This is a lie.’ Then, seeing it’s a lie, we choose not to go along with it and the heart is released from the pull of that.

Then there’s *dukkha-nirodha* – that’s the good news. This is the beauty of the Dhamma, it’s right here. When the heart lets go of trying to make a *saṅkhāra* into *asaṅkhata*, making the conditioned into the Unconditioned – trying to get the born to be the Unborn, the time-bound to be the timeless – when we stop trying to do that, then the heart opens to the timeless, to the Unborn, to the Dhamma itself. It opens to and embodies the reality of the fundamental wholeness, orderliness, completeness of the Dhamma. It’s always here. Nothing is missing. Nothing is extra, there is nothing we have to get rid of, nothing we have to find to make this reality of what we are complete. The Dhamma is complete. It’s always here. It’s never anywhere else. It’s never lacking anything, never burdened with anything. There is nothing we have to get rid of, nothing we have to acquire for the Dhamma to be completed. It’s always perfect, whole.

This Third Noble Truth, of *dukkha-nirodha*, ‘needs to be realized’ *saccikātabban’ti*. Peace needs to be actively appreciated because attention does not latch onto it automatically. When it is fully realized, however, it frees the heart from stress, from alienation and from any feeling of wrongness. That’s the purpose, the goal of all of our efforts. It is to allow

the heart to awaken to that perfection of the Dhamma, to realize its own nature. The Eightfold Path, the three trainings of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* – virtue, concentration and wisdom – these are the ways that we cultivate the transition from the Second Truth to the Third Truth.

The First Noble Truth, *dukkha*, suffering, represents the symptom of our spiritual malaise; the Second Truth represents its cause – craving, where the illness has come from; the Third Truth states the possibility of a cure – the quality of perfect spiritual health, freedom from *dukkha*; while the Fourth Truth spells out the nature of the treatment, the medicine that can bring about that wonderful cure.

It's through taking the medicine of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*, as the Buddha has prescribed, that we recognize craving and let go of it. Also it is how we recognize the presence of peace and appreciate, fully realize it. That's how the bridge from the Second Truth to the Third Truth is crossed, how that transition, transformation, is brought about.

What more worthy thing is there to do with our lives? What else is there to do? Where can you go? What can you fill your mind with? And what activity can we put our attention on that's going to make this not true, that's going to provide some sort of alternative reality that can hold together?

I would suggest that it's nothing that geography can supply, or a different social group can supply. This is the ordering of the universe, mental and physical. This is how it works. The people that you're with, or the country that you're in, or even the system of thinking and language around you doesn't make any difference, the Four Noble Truths pertain. This is the quintessential description of the spiritual malaise and its cure. It's this way everywhere. It's an all-encompassing, non-sectarian, nationality-free, patterning of the universe. This is how it works.

It is amazing, incredible how the Buddha sifted through the vast range of things that he knew and understood, then he crystallized it into this one extraordinarily simple and clear, insightful, expression of the Four Noble Truths. So soon after the enlightenment he had boiled it down and defined it as this; and now, all these years later, it is still such a perfect and precious instrument with which to examine our lives and to guide them towards fulfillment.



'I Am a Buddhist, Why Am I so Angry?'

This is a great theme to consider – how we might have a clear set of ideals of how we want to be, yet find ourselves diverging from these ideals again and again. Many of us can relate to this experience and it can be puzzling, can't it? We have a principle, an ideal, and yet the actual experience of our life, of the way our mind works, can be far from that. When I was pondering this theme, a couple of images immediately came to mind; the first one was the lines from the TS Eliot poem 'The Hollow Men'. It goes:

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow

Between the idea and the reality there falls the Shadow, Shadow with a capital 'S'. I feel what TS Eliot meant by 'the Shadow' is the big gap, the gulf of meaning. There's a huge difference between the idea of something, like 'I am a Buddhist', and the reality of life as we experience it, our mind, our body, our world as a present reality.

The second image that came to mind was from a number of years ago when I was on a plane and saw a film of the life of Richard Nixon. It was

the one starring Anthony Hopkins in the title role. As some of you might know, Richard Nixon was extraordinarily foul-mouthed. As the tapes from the White House showed, he used bad language a lot of the time. When the tapes were made public they had to delete all of those foul-mouthed passages from the tapes; this led to the phrase ‘expletive deleted’ entering common usage.

A certain moment in the film struck me very deeply. This was where Richard Nixon was having recounted back to him some of the things that he’d said, that had been recorded on the tapes. A look of complete bewilderment comes over his face, and he says, ‘But Nixon doesn’t talk like that!’ He’s hearing his own voice, and that voice is using foul and abusive language, but his presidential persona, ‘Me, Richard Nixon’, the public persona, is not the same as that other character, ‘Nixon doesn’t talk like that!’ It pointed to the gulf between our preferred self-image and the actuality of what we experience within ourselves. How we’d like to be and to be seen, our ideal of how we ‘should be’ as a person, and then the flow of feelings, of habits – mental, physical and verbal – attractions, aversions, desires, opinions and insecurities that we experience during the course of a day.

This can be difficult for us to understand, difficult to digest, because in the West we tend to have very idealistic cultures. We put the ideal at the centre while the actuality is left to hover around the edges. We put the ‘how I should be’ or ‘the way things should be’ right at the centre.

From June 1996 up until July 2010 I was living in America, and teaching over there for another six years before that. America is a hyper-idealistic culture. The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, the Gettysburg Address, these are placed right at the centre of people's lives. American schoolchildren have to learn to recite these statements, such as, 'All men are created equal'. The ideal is thus placed right at the very centre but the actuality is that, from an outsider's point of view at least, America is probably the most deeply stratified society in the West. The gulf between the haves and the have-nots is in all likelihood greater there than in any other developed country, any other so-called First World nation. The ideal is 'All people are equal' but in actuality, between the idea and the reality there's the Shadow.

We experience the results of that kind of idealism, that habit of idealistic thinking in many areas. If we give strength to that we can judge ourselves very harshly, thinking and feeling such as, 'I'm a Buddhist, I'm not supposed to be angry; I'm not supposed to feel jealous; I'm not supposed to feel greedy or selfish; I'm not supposed to be anxious. I'm supposed to be kind and loving, "peaceful and calm, wise and skilful, not proud and demanding in nature". It says it in the *sutta*, that's how I'm supposed to be.' Then we feel self-critical and insecure and negative, because we don't feel peaceful or calm, or wise or skilful, and we don't have the same love as a mother

does for her only child, for all beings. Instead we get really annoyed at that person who took my favourite seat at the Sunday afternoon talk. ‘How dare she, that’s always where I sit! I’ve come to listen to this talk about anger, and you’ve taken my chair!’

When we take hold of the ideal and say to ourselves, ‘But I *shouldn’t* feel that – I *shouldn’t* feel jealous, I shouldn’t feel angry, I shouldn’t feel narrow-minded and spiteful. I should be kind and generous and loving,’ what we can easily do is bury those negative or painful feelings, push them away, suppress them, and try to inhabit the ideal. Of course, that’s better than impulsively following the negative, destructive feelings, but what can easily happen when we push away those unskilful states and suppress them, is that we then unconsciously empower them, we make them stronger.

As long as we are able to control our speech and our behaviour, and the mind is strong and focused, then we can hold those feelings at bay, we can suppress them. But as soon as they get a bit too strong, or our resistance is a little weaker because we’re having a bad day or there’s a lot of pressure upon us in terms of demands for our attention, or we’re tired or we’re a bit unwell, then, *boom*, we go from being, ‘Hello, can I help you?’ to, ‘What do you want?!’ We find ourselves grinding our teeth in a state of great negativity, expressing and feeling far more destructive emotions towards others than we would normally do – this is a result of suppression.

That's the unskilful way of restraining unwholesome states. It's well-intentioned, as I said, it's better than punching somebody if you feel upset, or voicing every negative impulse, but by trying to be the perfect person, trying to be the 'good Buddhist', trying to be the perfect nun, the perfect monk, the perfect Buddhist *upāsikā*, we can create a tremendous tension within ourselves. Then when that tension breaks, *boom*, we can find ourselves falling apart and becoming much more selfish and destructive, living and acting far more unskilfully than we would have done before we were obsessively trying to do things right.

Another story that comes to mind is a comment that was made by somebody who worked in a care home. They had a number of elderly Catholic nuns in the home and their minds had entered advanced states of dementia. These Catholic nuns had entered into monastic life in the '30s and '40s – which was very much in that era of 'Never express your feelings. Anything that's negative or harmful is evil, the work of the devil, you must always be nice and kind, a good nun.' This care worker was telling me that those elderly Catholic nuns, who were in states of dementia, had the most incredibly foul language, and tended to be very bad tempered and destructive – they were far more dangerous to be around than other patients with dementia. If she was on the ward where they stayed, she was far more anxious about these somewhat out of control, nonagenarian nuns than the other residents.

Seemingly, in their orderly monastic lives, they had been holding down all negativity, any kind of feeling of aversion, bottling it up until, when the control system broke down and they couldn't hold it in check any more – *boom!* – it all got expressed. I should add that I have no doubt that it would be exactly the same for Buddhist monastics, if we handled our afflictive emotions in this way! This story is just an example of the experience of one care worker looking after elderly monastics who no longer had the capacity of containment.

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Thus, it's important to look at idealism; how do we hold an ideal of 'I want to be a good Buddhist, I want to practise well. It's all there in the *suttas* and the Ajahns' teachings, describing how we should be, all those beautiful noble qualities.' It's important to look at how we pick those principles up and how we hold them, and how we deal with the opposite, how we deal with the negative, the selfish, the states of mind that are guided by greed, hatred and delusion. How do we handle them, and how do we steer our lives towards what is skilful?

As TS Eliot pointed out: Between the idea/ And the reality/ Between the motion/ And the act/ Falls the Shadow. What that's pointing to is how, when we have an idea of 'I want to be good', or, 'being good is wholesome and beautiful', that's the conceptual, academic side of it, that's the knowledge side of the teaching, in Pali this is called the *pariyatti*. But then there's

putting that into practice, the *paṭipatti*. We need to have that knowledge, we need to have those principles, those ideals are useful but they're not enough on their own, there has to be the embodiment of those qualities.

First of all, we have to learn how to step down from thinking that the words or the ideas are enough, merely thinking that, 'I believe in being peaceful, I believe in being kind, I believe in not being angry.' It's not a matter of just believing in it, it's a matter of training our hearts.

I think one of the earliest times I ran into this principle was during the first couple of years after I came back from Thailand. I was ordained as a monk in April of 1979 and after that first Rains Retreat, my father fell ill, had a heart attack, and I came back to England and joined the newly founded community at Chithurst Monastery.

During those first couple of years I would occasionally go and visit my family. The monastery was in West Sussex and my family were in Kent so it wasn't very far to go. My grandmother lived in Itchenor, a little village quite close to the monastery as well. When I would go and visit my family I found that I would be eagerly trying to explain Buddhism to them whenever the subject came up. I was in my early twenties, I was very enthusiastic, zealous, a super-keen young monk. I was full of the life and it was clearly obvious to me that Buddhism was the best thing in the universe, and monastic life made perfect sense, and they might think that I was wasting my time as

a monk, but they just needed to be straightened out and shown the error of their ways, then they would soon understand. But every time we were having a conversation, and I was jumping in trying to explain Buddhism and to show them how wonderful Buddhism and meditation and the teachings were, I could feel a door closing. The whole system was shutting down.

The English are unsurpassed in being able to avoid or change the subject – I don't think that's too much of an exaggeration. If something gets uncomfortable you divert the attention, you talk about an everyday topic such as the weather. 'Wonderful weather we're having, isn't it glorious, it's fantastic! But they say we'll have rain tomorrow.' That's what would happen – they'd talk about the weather or talk about plans for home improvements, or the next holidays, anything except Buddhism. I realized after a couple of years (it took me a little while to get the point) that I wasn't getting through. The more I tried to explain Buddhism, the more it brought out resistance and irritation and aversion. They weren't interested in having Buddhism explained, because the general feeling was, 'This is the thing that stole my son; this is the thing that made my brother into an idiot, therefore it must be bad and wrong.' This was not a rational feeling, it was more of an instinctual reactive protection. 'This is the thing that took my child away and so it must be bad and wrong.'

After a couple of years I had an insight; I stopped trying to *explain* Buddhism and instead just *practised* Buddhism. That is to say I endeavoured to manifest

Buddhist practice rather than trying to explain it. From that time, after those first couple of years, whenever I was with them and they asked about Buddhism or meditation, I would play it down, saying, ‘You wouldn’t really be interested in that, don’t worry about it... It’s interesting to me, but, you know, it would probably be really boring to you.’ I wouldn’t, as I had before, seize every opportunity to try and introduce them to it.

Even though I’m a monk and I wear my robes when in the family home I only eat what I’ve received and take my daily meal in my alms-bowl sitting on the floor before midday, the English are extremely gifted in being able to not notice the elephant in the living room – or in this case the Buddhist monk sitting on the carpet in the living room. The robes get screened out – so if I didn’t make a big thing out of the ideas of Buddhism in our conversations, I could fit into the flow of family life quite easily.

In addition, I always made sure that I did all the washing up after my mother had made the meal for me, and I would do the washing up for them after their meals; I would do the washing up for them during their supper. My mother was a particularly generous, kind and unselfish person so my sisters and I never did the washing up throughout our entire childhoods (this is exceptional, I realize!) – our mother both cooked and washed up every day – so me doing the dishes for them, when I hadn’t even had any of the food... this was the sort of thing that got noticed. Then, whenever there was some kind of disagreement in the family, or hot debates about whether

we should go off to this or that park, or go to do the shopping, I would never get into an argument with the others. I wouldn't opionate or make a fuss, which, as a Buddhist monastic, one doesn't do. I made the effort to be easy to get on with, easy to look after, not demanding.

I'd also keep my room tidy which was not the case when I was growing up. Now my room would always be neat and tidy and clean. When your mother opens the door of your bedroom and sees, 'Oh! Look at that. Everything's in its place, and even the bed's made. That's extraordinary. He brought the linen down to the washing machine as well.'

These kinds of things slowly but surely got a different message through, 'Well, this Buddhism thing can't be *that* bad. I mean, he cleans his room now, he does the washing up and he doesn't argue.' Even though (of course) this wasn't actually said out loud, I could see that there was a fresh attitude slowly creeping in, 'Maybe this Buddhism's got something to it after all.' On a very simple, tangible, non-conceptual level, I found that this was the kind of thing that actually helped create a greater sense of empathy.

The point of this story is not just to give you, dear reader, a snapshot of my family life but rather an example of how it is not just the *ideas of* Buddhism that makes the difference but more *being* Buddhist, practising the way of the Buddha, living in that manner, that is the way to cross the Shadow and go from the idea to the reality.



To return to the subject of anger, perhaps in some instances we think, ‘I *should* get angry, it’s completely justified. I mean what these people are doing, it’s outrageous.’ In America there was a slogan you would often see on bumper stickers, or posters for various movements and appeals: ‘If you’re not angry, you’re not paying attention.’ It’s a statement somebody made, back in the the ’60s or the ’70s, and has been doing the rounds ever since, ‘If you’re not angry, you’re not paying attention,’ talking about political change, agitating for progress in society.

If we look at the people around us in our workplace, or in the family, or in the monastery, and people are not doing what they should be doing, if they are behaving inappropriately, being deceitful, if they’re being lazy or greedy or wasteful, then we might easily feel justified in thinking, ‘We *should* get upset! This is wrong. What they’re doing is wrong. It shouldn’t be this way.’ This can be a bit of a problem in monasteries, because there’s an awful lot of ‘shoulds’. The Buddhist monastic rules, for both nuns and monks, have hundreds and hundreds of precepts and observances of etiquette. That’s a lot of ‘shoulds’, so it’s very easy to get picky about how people should be – how the nuns should be, how the monks should be – also how the perfect layperson should be, ‘It should be like this! We’re supposed to be a forest monastery! We’re supposed to be a strict Vinaya monastery! You should! He shouldn’t! She should!’

We don't even notice that we're getting angry – we're just setting the world to rights: 'Because they shouldn't do that, they shouldn't be that way, they shouldn't act like that. They should be different,' so we don't even register our anger as anything negative. We see it as protecting goodness, protecting virtue and protecting the tradition. It all seems absolutely appropriate. This can be an issue. Obviously not just in monasteries, I am sure it's happened once in a while in people's workplaces, in the family, in schools, in hospitals. It's a very common human condition. This is one of the downsides of perfectionism: 'This darn world, it's just not perfect.' We know how it *should* be, but it keeps falling short of that. We can unconsciously develop this type of negativity in ourselves when we think we are protecting goodness.

This theme brings to mind how, many years ago in this community, there was a certain anagārika. He was very highly principled and very sincere, but he would suffer so much about how wrong everybody else was, and how badly things were being done. His principles were indeed noble but they caused him grief repeatedly. It was all about not being wasteful, about being respectful, being punctual, being attentive to other people's roles. It was all good stuff, relevant and worthwhile, but he would get incensed, carried away with the feeling of wrongness. Whenever he would come and complain to Luang Por Sumedho or myself, or other senior people, you'd sit there agreeing, 'Yes, yes, they should do that, and no they shouldn't do that

either... Absolutely right, no, they shouldn't do that.' Even though, on one level, he was absolutely correct, there was a tragic quality of turmoil and stress there on account of that.

I remember in the *sālā* at Amaravati one day when Luang Por Sumedho gave a wonderful morning reflection, I think the words just came to him as he spoke them. He said, 'Righteous views are not the same as Right View.' Which means to say that self-righteousness, such as, 'It shouldn't be this way, that's not how I would do it, this isn't fair, that's not right, it's wasteful!' is not Right View, an aspect of the Path that Leads to the End of Suffering. Luang Por Chah once used a very apt phrase to describe this kind of righteous blaming and fault-finding, he called it, 'Being right in fact but wrong in Dhamma.' We can fall into that very easily, can't we? We can be absolutely right according to the facts, we can be correct, 'It shouldn't be done that way, people should show up on time, people shouldn't speak to each other disrespectfully, people should be aware of who's responsible for which job and not intrude upon each other's areas of authority. They shouldn't do that!' But how are we picking that up? How are we holding that? Are we using our rightness as a weapon? As a club with *sacca* written on it? That is not in accord with Dhamma.

If we take that rightness and grasp it, then it becomes righteous views. We're not seeing what we're doing. We're not seeing that even though, yes,

we've got our facts correct and, yes, it is really appreciated if everybody shows up on time, that the morning meditation begins at five o'clock, not five-o-one, or five eleven, it's five o'clock. It is appreciated if people are on time, but if I grasp that, it then creates stress and tension in myself. I can sit there through the entire hour of the morning meditation seething about, 'They're late! They're late! There's another one! There's another one! I can't believe how much noise they make! There's another one!' Then, what am I generating in the world? I am not spreading loving-kindness 'over the entire world, abundant, exalted, immeasurable.' I'm feeling abandoned, exhausted and miserable: 'Nobody understands, nobody respects me or ever listens to me, how could they be so insensitive and ungrateful!'

Perfectionism is another word for *dukkha*, and the grasping of rightness in that way can be a trigger for anger, that being the way that *dukkha* manifests. As it turned out with that particular person, it was very sad, but he couldn't get a perspective on that fault-finding judgementalism, so he ended up leaving the community. It just wasn't good enough and he couldn't live with the feeling of everything being so badly done and so wrong, so often. It's not as though everything is flawless at Amaravati – not then, not now – but you could see that what created the unbearable quality was the way in which the mind picked up the perception of imperfection and held the sense of How It Should Be.



On considering this theme of ‘I’m a Buddhist, why am I so angry?’ one can reflect that those very words themselves contain the seed of a solution, or at least of how to work with anger and idealism. The very fact of asking the question, or just noticing, ‘Here’s my ideal: I’m a Buddhist. I love and revere these principles, I wish to bring my life into accord with them. So, why am I so angry?’ That which is asking the question, ‘Why?’ is noticing, ‘Something’s out of balance here, something is not in order, something is not being held wisely.’

So, what’s going on here? Just the very fact of asking ‘Why?’, that demonstrates the quality of wise reflection, *yoniso manasikāra*, that process of exploring, investigating, ‘What’s going on here? I love these principles. I don’t want to be angry, I don’t want to be selfish and jealous, but yet here it is. So why is that happening?’ That very inquisitiveness, that curiosity, of opening up the box and looking at what’s inside, that’s the first step.

If we also use that reflective wisdom to investigate our perfectionism and our idealism, if we look at them, then we see that, in the way we judge ourselves and judge the world, we can be setting the standard a bit high. If we get upset every time we see other people behaving badly, or when we see jealousy or acquisitiveness or greed in ourselves, if we see that every criminal act is utterly wrong and believe that people should never

ever behave like that, in a way we're expecting the whole of the human population to act like Arahants.

We're looking at the world as if every single person on the planet should be free of greed, hatred, and delusion. They should never do anything dishonest, they should never do anything selfish, they should always be 'peaceful and calm and wise and skilful, not proud and demanding...' that's the way everybody *should* be. In a sense we're expecting everybody to be an Arahant and then feeling disappointed or shocked when they're not. Maybe this is a bit of a sweeping statement, but if you look at it closely, isn't that the way it is? That we expect an extraordinarily high standard of conduct from ourselves and the rest of the human population.

In Buddhist psychology the standard for sanity is Arahantship; so you're not truly sane until you're an Arahant. If you follow the logic of that, that means everybody who's not an Arahant is not sane. So, this is life in the psych ward. 'Welcome to the psychiatric unit.' Consider a small thought experiment for a moment: if we were all on a psychiatric ward, if we shared the ward together as patients, and our behaviour was a bit unpredictable, if we were reactive, or a bit shy, or possessive – we would likely be fairly forgiving toward each other. 'Oh well, of course he's like that, that's his focus, feeling he has to negotiate the pattern of the carpet like that.' I suspect we'd give each other a bit more wiggle room, a bit more leeway,

because of course we're all on the psych ward, so why should we expect each other to be so flawless and perfect, and wise and unselfish and kind all the time? We'd give each other more latitude, we'd allow each other a bit more space.

In this respect, when you look at the world as being mainly populated by not completely sane people, then you realize – and I've pointed this out many times over the years – 'I think we do really well, as a human population, considering our lack of sanity!' I'm not speaking lightly, I feel we do really well, acting in such kind and respectful and unselfish ways as we do. Just being part of the traffic on the motorway, or making our way around London, there's an extraordinary degree of mindfulness and skill that's involved in not colliding with all the other vehicles, in making way for each other in the Underground and respecting everyone else's space. It's quite extraordinary considering we're all insane.

Again, I'm not using the terms flippantly. If you think in this way, then what you realize is, 'If I was an Arahant and I had these feelings of anger, or these feelings of fear or greed or jealousy, then there would be cause to get upset or to be surprised.' But instead we recognize, 'I'm *not* totally sane. This is a human life, there's a body, there's a mind. It's capable of experiencing anger. It's capable of experiencing jealousy and fear and possessiveness. That comes with the package. That's part of the human condition.'

Also, sometimes we can be so critical of ourselves for being angry, or being greedy or judgmental, or jealous, or fearful, we can act as though, bizarrely, we actually invented anger. It is held as if we brought anger into the universe, that it didn't really exist until we came along, that we have created it from nothing – 'I'm such an angry person, it's so terrible, I'm so awful' – rather than that it's an emotion that is part of the human condition. Weirdly we relate to it as if it was our personal creation, generated from nothing.

If instead we recognize, 'Here's a body, here's a mammalian mind. Part of our inheritance with this body, with this mind, is that we are capable of experiencing some afflictive, negative emotions. Just as we are capable of experiencing kindness, compassion, sympathetic joy, gladness at the good fortune of others, extraordinary radiance of mind, of wisdom and of unselfishness. We're capable of all of that. But also we're capable of greed, of fear, jealousy, negativity, violence, it's part of the package. That's what we're born with.' That quality of realism, wise reflection, enables the recognition, 'Of course I'm going to experience anger some of the time, that's there in the small print. How could I not? How could it be otherwise?'

The development of the practice of working with these states is then to do with learning how to recognize those feelings, those impulses, to know them, feel them and to learn how to let go of them. The Buddha's definition of Right Effort, *samma vāyāmo*, comes in four parts. The first one, *saṃvara*,

means restraining any unwholesome states from arising; or, if unwholesome states have already arisen, there is the second factor, *pahāna*; to let go: *saṃvara* and *pahāna*, these two are to do with unwholesome states. *Bhāvanā* comes next, the third one, this is to cultivate wholesome states, like loving-kindness, generosity, compassion, concentration and wisdom. Number four is *anurakkhana* to protect, to cherish, to look after the wholesome states that have arisen. *Saṃvara*, *pahāna*, *bhāvanā*, and *anurakkhana*.

What these qualities are indicating is, ‘Guided by mindfulness and wisdom, do what is needed to restrain the unwholesome from arising.’ But if it’s arisen, if it’s already there, then what you do is learn to let go, train the heart to recognize it and to let go. Then, as the counterpoint, cultivate the wholesome, consciously bring the wholesome into being, cultivate loving-kindness, compassion, mindfulness and wisdom and so forth, and then, when such wholesome qualities have arisen, sustain them, protect them, cherish them.

It comes down to recognizing the feelings of aversion, negativity, anger, self-righteousness, the judgmentalism that arise, especially when you feel very justified. That’s the most dangerous, as one doesn’t even see it as being angry, it is seen as ‘They should be punished!’ That righteous indignation, to recognize that, to know what it is, and to see, ‘Oh this is the unwholesome. And what we do with the unwholesome is to let go of it.’

One of the practices that Luang Por Sumedho would often talk about, particularly in terms of working with angry states of mind – this was something that he had experienced a lot himself so he would often address this, and also because, as a very idealistic person, he saw this contrast in himself – is this: Because of feeling, ‘I’m supposed to be a good monk, I’m trying hard to be a good Buddhist, yet I’m having all these angry feelings,’ and seeing how he would tend to suppress and push away those angry feelings, he realized, ‘I need to understand this, I need to know these feelings for what they are, and not take them personally, not identify with them. I need to know the feeling of anger simply as a natural emotion that arises in the mind.’

The practice he would describe, which I also found extremely helpful, is that when you have an angry or a critical feeling towards somebody or something, rather than pushing it away or thinking, ‘I *shouldn’t* have a negative thought about that person’ or ‘I *shouldn’t* feel bad about myself or my parents,’ or about the boss, or about such-and-such a person, instead you go in the opposite direction – you invite it in. When you had a negative thought he encouraged you to pick it up and investigate it.

For example, if you were feeling critical about the monk who was sitting next to you, and you noticed that negative feeling, then you would pick it up and spell it out spaciouly, in clear and distinct words, not out loud (naturally!) but internally: ‘I hate you. You’re a bad monk. If you weren’t

here, I would be happy.’ You can either do that in the situation itself or later in the day when you’re remembering some particular clash, where your mind is reiterating some kind of uncomfortable exchange and it is starting to churn away about that particular person. You notice that impulse, pick it up, then spell it out: ‘I ... hate ... you.’ Even just those three words; it doesn’t have to be a far-reaching statement.

By saying something like that to yourself clearly and distinctly, already before you get to the end of the sentence, something goes, ‘That does *not* feel right... “He should be different. If he was different, I would be happy.” ... That’s ridiculous!’ Before you can get to the end of the sentence, more often than not, the whole thing collapses because, in a non-conceptual intuitive way, the *citta* knows it’s not true. It knows with 100% certainty that you would find something else to get upset about, or that the judgment that is being made is way too harsh, or it’s not taking into account all the other dimensions of that person’s life.

As a monk in our community once said, ‘Living in a monastery you can develop the conviction that the monk sitting next to you is personally responsible for at least half the suffering in the world.’ These kinds of critical judgements are not rational.

Luang Por Sumedho would often talk about how, when he was in the US Navy, he had a particularly difficult relationship with the Chief Petty Officer on his ship. If he wanted to use this as an exercise, even 40 or 50

years later, Luang Por could think of this person's name, or just think, 'The CPO' and then feel the anger and resentment that would arise. He would then spell out the feelings, 'You deserve to suffer! You caused me pain,' and watch it collapse.

It is important to see how an angry impulse, even something arising out of what we remember from 40 or 50 years ago, way back when, can easily be believed in, 'He *did* make me suffer! He *should* be punished!' These impulses and feelings have power because they're not really conscious, they're hovering in the wings, murmuring away, so when we pick up the impulse and make it fully conscious, it doesn't work anymore. Just as a magic trick works best if you can't see it clearly. If all the lights are on and you are watching close up, front and centre, the trick doesn't work so well. The trick depends upon us being distracted and not seeing clearly.

This is a very useful practice to do in formal meditation. In the flow of your day, when you see the mind getting caught up with angry feelings, destructive negativity, blaming, righteous indignation towards other people or institutions, ranting away, make a note of it. Then later, in your evening meditation, take a particular judgement that the mind has been coming up with and slowly and clearly spell it out like this – see what happens. You can hardly get to the end of the sentence before it loses its power and you start chuckling.

One time there was a lot of tension and conflict between two monks who lived in different monasteries; this had been going on for a number of years. One of these monks was very critical of the other, very blaming and negative, and speaking badly about this monk to other people. Naturally this brought up a defensive irritated feeling in the monk who was being criticized. On one particular occasion, when he heard that this person was going to come and visit his monastery, he thought, 'Oh no, not him!' He could see his mind going into, 'How can I get away from this? I'm sure there's some excuse I can make to be somewhere else.' He quickly realized, 'No, that's not skilful. This is a state of mind to be looked at. It's not something to avoid or to evade. Let's work with this.' So he got out a notepad and a pen and said to himself, 'OK, if I feel so negatively towards this person, and they have this painful effect on my mind, let's write down all the things that I feel are wrong with him. I will make a list.' This was a deliberate process to give voice to those negative states, and to make them clear, not to compile a catalogue he was going to publish, but to clarify the attitudes that his mind was holding. This was a skilful means to be able to see them and know them and let them go, because he could see how the long-standing conflict had had a strong effect on him. He wanted to be able to understand and let go of it.

He began writing. His pen was flying across the pages – all the different things that were wrong with this person and how he shouldn't be the way

that he was – then, after three or four pages, his hand started to slow down and came to a stop. He thought, ‘That can’t be it, there must be some more, that can’t be everything! What do I *really* feel about him?’ His mind went quiet, and then the words that came to his mind, which totally astonished him, were: ‘I love you.’ ‘What? “I love you”?’ Then he realized, ‘That’s why I feel so upset, it’s because I actually care for this person very much; that’s why it’s so difficult to be receiving such negativity and criticism. I love this person. I care for him. Ha!’ That insight led to a major turning point in the relationship, it helped to turn things around. You might try this method also. That said, if you get to page 25 and you need to find another notebook, then maybe a different method would be appropriate.

The process of clarifying those attitudes, those negative urges, enables their sheer deluded destructiveness to be revealed. Through that simple clarification of what’s present, you tap into a deeper and more reliable intuition, then the mindfulness and wisdom of the *citta* actualizes the letting go.

It’s not a logical, conceptual process, like, ‘I’m going to stop feeling this because I shouldn’t feel it; I’m going to be a good Buddhist instead.’ It’s more the wisdom of your own heart that says, ‘This is not real. This isn’t something to believe in, this isn’t something to be guided by. This is a state of derangement, therefore, not to be trusted.’ That truth is seen from

within and known in a non-verbal, non-conceptual way, like knowing that your shoe has a stone in it – it’s a direct apprehension of reality.

* * *

There’s something important to say on that point of ‘I love you’. One of the most common teachings of Luang Por Sumedho on this theme is that he’d always encourage us not to try and climb over our anger to get to the idealized other side, where you imagine you will be able to have a feeling of loving-kindness towards a person that has done you wrong, because that never works. He would talk more about having loving-kindness *for the anger*, having an acceptance of the negativity, rather than trying to destroy the unwholesome emotion and get to an ideal wholesome one beyond it.

He would also point out that ‘liking’ is not the same as ‘loving’, and that when we are trying to develop that heart of *mettā* – ‘Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings’ – that feeling of *mettā*, rather than being a ‘liking’ for all beings, or a liking for all states, has more to do with recognizing that all beings and states are a part of nature, all beings are part of the natural order. We can’t like the unlikeable – for instance someone who has hurt us or injured us or done us serious harm in various ways, or who is doing serious harm in the world. We are not trying to force ourselves to like the unlikeable, or pretend that we do, but we can find that place in

the heart that does not contend against those things. We can accept the things we do not like.

This is a radical acceptance, what Luang Por Sumedho would call, ‘Not dwelling in aversion.’ This is the important thing to get a sense for. When we have an angry feeling, having this sense of radical acceptance means reflecting, ‘Here is the feeling of anger.’ There is no trying to climb over it, to get to an imagined loving place on the other side; there is no trying to suppress it or force it away; the heart is open to it, ‘Here is the feeling of anger, here is resentment.’ It is known and accepted and that’s the way that it is let go of because ‘acceptance’ does not mean ‘approval’ or acting on the angry impulse. ‘Loving-kindness’ towards the negative feeling means an acceptance of that negative feeling as part of nature, rather than trying to suppress the negative feeling to get it to be loving instead.

♦ ♦ ♦

The more that we reflect on anger and look at it, the more we see that it has an intrinsically hurtful quality to it. There’s a sense of wanting to injure the other, mentally or physically. Anger has always got a vicious force to it, which the Buddha spoke about in numerous teachings. ‘*Kodha*’ is the Pali for wrath, it is a punitive, hurtful emotion that always has a negative result when it’s acted upon.

That said, people often ask, ‘What about justifiable anger? What about reasonable anger? What about the statements, “If you’re not angry you’re not paying attention?” or “Don’t just sit there, get angry!”’ These are taken as an indication that you’re involved, that you care, and that you’re wanting to make positive changes.

I would suggest that anger, *kodha*, this kind of destructive *dosa*, is always going to have a negative result. But this doesn’t mean that anything that’s expressed in a strong way is necessarily out of accord with Dhamma. A dialogue between Ram Dass and his teacher Neem Karoli Baba comes to mind. Ram Dass, who was very prone to angry states, asked, ‘Maharaji, is it always the case that anger is inappropriate, unwholesome?’ The guru replied, ‘Yes, absolutely. In every single case anger will have a negative, destructive result and should never ever be followed. However, some teachings are best given with a raised voice and with considerable force behind them.’

There’s a book called *Letters from Westerbork* by a woman named Etty Hillesum. She was a Jewish woman from the Netherlands. The book was recommended to me by a nun who used to live here, Ayya Medhanandī, whose parents were Auschwitz survivors so it has a particular poignancy. The letters are from Etty Hillesum, mostly from Westerbork transit camp where she was forced to live, to various family members and friends, and

were collected after she died. She was killed in a concentration camp but during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands, a time of increasing oppression, she refused to hate the Germans. That was her way of not only sustaining her own spirit, but also of not sinking to the same level. She made it her spiritual imperative to not hate and I would say she succeeded in doing this. She was a young woman, only 28, 29 years old. The very last message from her was on a postcard that was thrown out of the cattle car she was locked in, on the way to Auschwitz. It was found by a farmer beside the railway line.

It's a really extraordinary book, a testimony to the human heart. She saw, 'This is what I can contribute. I'm one individual, a powerless person in some respects. I'm a Jew in a Nazi-occupied country. But what I can do is that I can refuse to join in with the mind-set the oppressors are trying to create. I can refuse to hate, I can refuse to be a victim.' Eventually she was sent to the camp and she died there, but along the way, during this time of great cruelty, her heart was unswayed – it is a remarkable testimony. There are stories about her, not from her own writing but from other people who were sent to the camps with her and who survived, that she continued in the same vein in the concentration camp, where she refused to express hatred and anger towards her oppressors. Like Etty, even when everything seems to be against us and our hatred and our anger seem fully justified, we

have the same capacity to refuse to hate, to refuse to create more suffering, and to be a blessing in the world.

The example that the Buddha uses in his own teachings, in ‘the simile of the saw’, in a *sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, is that:

Even if bandits were to sever you, savagely, limb from limb with a two-handed saw, one who gave rise to a mind of hate towards them would not be following my teaching. (M 21.20)

This is, admittedly, Olympic class Dhamma practice, but the Buddha was extremely gifted at creating memorable images that get our attention.

You’d think, OK, you’ve been kidnapped, bad enough, but not only have you been kidnapped, you’re being killed. That’s awful. Not only are you being killed, but you’re being killed by having your arms and legs sawn off. You’re supposed to lie there and think, ‘May you be happy!’ Indeed the Buddha goes on to say:

Herein you should train thus: ‘Our minds will remain unaffected and we shall utter no evil words; we shall abide compassionate for their welfare, with a mind of loving-kindness, without inner hate. We shall abide pervading them with a heart imbued with loving-kindness; and, starting with them, we shall abide pervading the all-encompassing world with a heart imbued with loving-kindness. Abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.’

‘I’m terribly sorry about my sinews being so thick. You must be getting exhausted sawing away. If you need to have a break, do please stop, you must be awfully hot...’.

The Buddha was a genius at creating signal, compelling images like this. Even in such a situation, where you’d think a *little* bit of hatred would be reasonable, a smidgen of hatred or anger would be appropriate; however, even in a completely appalling and extreme situation like this, if your mind is attached to hatred, it necessarily goes against Dhamma. It’s intrinsically going against Dhamma. This clearly points to the fact that any kind of divisive negativity, any kind of hating, anger, that blames and wishes harm upon others is intrinsically out of harmony with Dhamma. It’s necessarily so. So, even though a situation is very demanding, and you cannot like what’s happening to you, you can, however, be at peace with it – you can choose to not create resistance against it. That’s the great power of mindfully surrendering to the way things are. Such surrender is not caving in, or becoming numb, or switching off, there is no sense of self in it. The mind is engaged with the way things are, but it’s not contending against them. This is the extraordinary skill and balance of the Middle Way.

There is another story from India on this subject that is worthy of consideration, I think it’s from the *Pañcatantra*, teaching stories from ancient times. It’s about a cobra. This cobra lived in the forest and had a

regular hunting route. She'd travel through the forest on a circuit, hunting for her food every day, catching little animals and eating them. On her route through the forest there was a glade, and into this glade there moved a rishi, a yogi. As she passed through this clearing in the forest each day, she noticed there was a really nice feeling, a pleasant, delightful, sweet feeling, there.

As she went on her hunting rounds each day, she found she was pausing for longer and longer in this little glade, the grove where the rishi was. As she paused, she began to hear that the rishi was talking to his disciples, animal and human, so she began to listen. She realized, 'Some of the things this two-legged says are interesting. That makes sense, yes, yes...'. Before long it became the high point of the day, when she would pause in her hunting, lie there and listen to the rishi giving teachings on spiritual practice.

Eventually she became so inspired she went up to the rishi and, making *añjali* with her hood, she said 'Esteemed rishi, I've been coming through here every day.' To which he said, 'Yes, I've noticed you, and I see you've been pausing for longer and longer each day.' She carried on, 'I would like to become your disciple. Is that possible?' The rishi responded, 'Yes, you can be my disciple. However I require all my disciples to be vegetarian. You have to give up violence, killing things, altogether. If you can do that then you are absolutely welcome to be my disciple.' The cobra thinks, 'Hmmm,'

and if she had had eyebrows she would have raised them, ‘Well, I’m not sure about that but OK, I’ll give it a try.’

She diligently takes up the principle of being a vegetarian and forswearing all violence. The change of going onto a diet of roots and berries and fruit from the forest doesn’t quite go with her digestive system but she manages. She’s also finding herself a bit more sleepy, as her system adjusts, so she stops for a pause by the forest path more and more often. All in all she feels she is doing pretty well considering she had an all-meat diet before. Then one day, as she’s snoozing by the path, some kids from the village come by. They see the cobra coiled up by the path, ‘Ooh, it’s a big cobra!’ Then, as little boys can do, one of them says to another, ‘I bet you wouldn’t dare poke it with a stick!’ ‘Bet you I would!’ ‘Bet you wouldn’t!’ ‘Bet you I would!’ Finally one of them goes up and pokes her with a stick and they go racing off. When they look back and notice that she hasn’t moved, one of the boys says, ‘That’s a pretty stupid cobra, it didn’t try to chase after us.’

A few days later they come back and they see that she’s having a snooze near the same place, so one of them tweaks her tail and again they run off. This time they see she lifted her head up and looked at them but didn’t give chase. ‘Wow, that’s a pretty weird cobra! Doesn’t even try to chase us, let alone attack or bite us. What a wimpy cobra.’

The next time she chooses a different place to take a snooze, but by now the kids feel a challenge and start looking for her, to see if they can find the wimpy cobra, to tease it and give it a bad time. This third time around, one of the boys picks the cobra up by her tail, whirls her around and throws her up into the branches of a tree.

Then, fang broken, scales all rumped, the cobra makes her way to the rishi and says, ‘Guru-ji, I think we’ve got a problem. I really want to be your disciple. I sincerely care about spiritual practice and the teachings, but look, I’ve got half a fang missing and my scales are all rumped. These kids are giving me a bad time. I’m really doing my best to forswear violence and be patient. And I have faithfully undertaken the vegetarian thing, I respect it greatly in principle, but I’m being sorely tested, Guru-ji. I’m not sure how much longer I can last because if those kids try it on with me again, I’ve got a feeling there’s going to be trouble.’

The rishi said, ‘I greatly respect your sincerity, and it’s truly admirable that you have been trying so hard to be a vegetarian and to practice patience. And it’s absolutely true that I require that you forswear all violence – yes, you have to give up killing – *but* I didn’t say that you couldn’t hiss!’

This is a useful teaching; being fierce is not the same as being angry. This is the principle – that sometimes we need to hiss appropriately. Those reading this who have been around Buddhist teachers, particularly some

of the great masters in Thailand, will know that some are famous for being extremely fierce. Ajahn Mahā Boowa in particular is famous for speaking in a blunt, forthright fashion, but also for being an Arahant.

Just as Neem Karoli Baba said, ‘There’s no excuse for anger, anger’s always destructive, but sometimes the teachings are best delivered at high volume and with considerable power behind them.’ Sometimes we might see a teacher being very ferocious or fierce, or speaking loudly, but we shouldn’t assume that there’s anything negative or destructive going on inside.

In this area it’s always important to bring in the quality of wise reflection, either if we are about to speak ‘with a raised voice and with considerable force’ imbuing our words, or if we have just spoken in a fierce way, to look at that and consider, ‘Where am I coming from? What was my intention?’ Honesty is very significant in this regard. It is not a matter of letting the mind justify itself, for the sake of always wanting to be right, but to look at the attitude in an unbiased way. If we have acted in a way that was very forceful, if that was coming from a place of reactivity, fearfulness or negativity, we need to acknowledge that. If in contrast it was coming from a place of kindness and attunement, recognize that and do not create any kind of self-blame around it.

There are many stories that could be used to illustrate these principles, here are a couple of short ones, from the forest monastery life of North-east Thailand.

On the subject of Ajahn Mahā Boowa. Many years ago in the early '70s, George Sharp (who was the Chairman of the English Sangha Trust, which was the group that eventually invited Luang Por Sumedho to start the monasteries here in Britain) went to Thailand to visit Ajahn Mahā Boowa and his senior Western disciple, Ajahn Paññavaḍḍho, who'd been in London at the Hampstead Vihara with the English Sangha Trust for five years in the late '50s and early '60s. George wanted to invite Ajahn Mahā Boowa and Ajahn Paññavaḍḍho to come to England with the idea of Ajahn Paññavaḍḍho coming back to live at the Hampstead Vihara and Ajahn Mahā Boowa to at least come and teach.

George took a flight to Thailand and made the long trek all the way to the North-east, the Esan. It was very difficult to get there, a very arduous journey. He went with the idea of inviting the teacher to come to England and, to his surprise, he found Ajahn Mahā Boowa extremely rude. He was very dismissive of him, he didn't want to spend time with him, he was blunt, abrupt, unfriendly and off-putting. George being the character he is, a very forthright person too, after a little while he enquired, through Ajahn Paññavaḍḍho as translator, 'Excuse me, Tan Ajahn, but I've come all the way from England to Asia, all the way to this monastery in this remote part of North-east Thailand in order to invite you to come and spread the Dhamma in England. I feel I've been respectful and done everything appropriately, but you've been extremely rude to me. You seem short-tempered,

unfriendly and dismissive. I'm just wondering what the reason for this is?' Ajahn Mahā Boowa burst out laughing. He said, 'Ha ha! Oh, you shouldn't be fooled by that, that's just my personality. I'm a very coarse, rough country boy. That's just the outside. I'm really glad you've come. I'm trying to be appreciative and friendly, it just comes out as me being rough and blunt. I was a boxer. I'm a coarse boy from the sticks, so, please, you shouldn't take it personally.' After that things were fine between them. This is a useful teaching to bear in mind.

Similarly, in the early '70s, in Ajahn Chah's monastery, one of the western monks had fallen into a very serious offence. He was the first monk in Ajahn Chah's group of monasteries to have broken such a serious rule. Accordingly he had been put on to an extremely demanding disciplinary regime – as is part of the Vinaya Rule – involving temporarily losing his seniority as a monk and other observances. On this particular occasion, one of the junior monks was giving Ajahn Chah a foot massage. They were sitting under Ajahn Chah's *kuṭī* chatting and having an interesting Dhamma discussion, the mood was easeful and friendly. The muscles of Ajahn Chah's feet and legs were very relaxed. At this point the monk who had misbehaved came along to ask Ajahn Chah something and the Ajahn barked at him, telling him very roughly, 'Do this, don't do that, get out of my sight!' seeming to be harsh, aggressive and critical. This monk quickly took care of what he needed to do, then he went scurrying off.

Once the monk had gone Ajahn Chah carried on the conversation with the junior monk who was giving him the foot massage. The reason why this is relevant here is that the junior monk working on Ajahn Chah's lower legs and feet said later that, at no point during that entire time when the Ajahn was very pointedly blasting the misbehaving monk, was there any tension in his body, his muscles didn't tighten at all, there was no stress or any sign of mood change whatsoever. Inside, he was absolutely level and even. Outside, there was a dragon blasting a wrathful reprimand to the monk. But inside Ajahn Chah remained relaxed and at ease.

When we are able to truly let go of anger, then we become a master of it. When we need to speak in a strong or intense way then we can. But when we do, there's no desire to hurt, there's no vicious, harmful or destructive quality in that. That said, I should point out that both Ajahn Chah and Ajahn Mahā Boowa were known to be Arahants. So, as they say, 'Don't try this at home.' It's always best to defer to the practice of self-restraint. One steers towards restraining those impulses or choosing not to act on them. It's not a matter of never speaking strongly or pointedly, it's not a matter of never using strength and force in the way that we communicate, but that forcefulness needs to come from a profound and clear kindness rather than self-centred reactivity, otherwise more *dukkha* will certainly ensue.



The Importance of Being Bored, Sad and Lonely

Today was a very still and bright day. It was a beautiful opportunity to enjoy the winter sun at the time of the year with the shortest days and to be reflecting on the Christmas, Yuletide, season. As it becomes twilight, and when the dark has set in, lights around people's houses, over their doors or on the hedges, lighting up the trees, these sparkle and shine out of the dimness. The image of evergreen fir trees and the lights illuminating the dark, these are very ancient symbols. These are used nowadays mostly for the celebration of Christmas and the birth of Jesus, but these symbols were around long before Jesus was born. Throughout this region of Northern Europe, from the remote past, such archetypal forms have been used to mark the winter solstice, the shortest days, the longest nights of the year. I feel these are very important, significant symbols; the light in the dark, the spark of light and life that carries on even through the bitter cold dark of winter, buried under the snow.

It is quite common nowadays, both in the West and the East, for Buddhist practitioners and others to ask for retreats or talks on the theme of ageing and dying. In a way it's surprising that we need to have a retreat solely focused on this theme; it shouldn't be a special subject because, in terms of the natural order, it is something that is right in the forefront of our daily lives. For some reason we keep failing to notice.

As a Buddhist practitioner, ageing, dying and death are things that the Buddha encouraged us to bring our attention to. None of us have to look very far to see that ageing, dying and sickness, death and loss are everywhere around us. The reason why we need to be reminded, or why we have to create occasions to reflect on that, to investigate and meditate deeply on these themes, is because along with having a memory, we also have a forgettery, a way that we screen out things that we don't like, things that are uncomfortable, threatening and painful to us.

Sometimes, when we are faced with death, loss and painful aspects of our life, then the kind of 'light in the dark' that is attractive and accessible, that will cheer us up and we hang on to, is the wishful thinking of, 'It will get better' or 'Don't worry, it will soon be over.' We take a superficial comfort in reassurances like this. We try to distract ourselves or just give ourselves some kind of solace, some alternative to put our attention on to: 'Don't worry you'll get over it soon and be back home...'. If someone is dying or

has died, people will often say, ‘They are going to a better place,’ or ‘They’ve been gathered into the arms of the Lord,’ ‘They’ve gone up to the *deva-loka*,’ or ‘Don’t worry, they have gone back to Nature.’

This is both a familiar and a natural way for us to react to these kinds of threat and loss. It is a hanging on to those optimistic thoughts that are encouraging, comforting, that bring a balm to the heart. Almost every day at Amaravati (in non-pandemic times!) people come to ask questions about this kind of thing in their lives, people who have lost their loved ones, ‘Can we be sure that our child has gone to a better place?’ The genuine answer is, ‘You can’t be sure of anything.’ Which is not very comforting. People want to know, ‘Please tell me that my mum has gone to heaven’ or ‘Please tell me that I am going to recover from this illness, that this is going to get better.’ So this kind of “‘wishful thinking” light in the dark’ is understandable. When we were children, many of us liked to have a night light, a light burning in the room so we wouldn’t be too worried about all the spooks living under the bed, or hiding in the wardrobe, that might attack us. This is an instinctual and ordinary, natural kind of refuge that we like to have, but I feel that it’s missing the point – it is not going to help in a substantial way.

* * *

In the records of the Buddha's teachings there are often occasions when he was extraordinarily gentle and accommodating, but he could also be very blunt and challenging. The 'Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection' are one such teaching. This is a set of reflections the Buddha encouraged both the monastic and the lay community to consider every day:

Jarā-dhammomhi, jaraṃ anatīto

I am of the nature to age, I have not gone beyond ageing;

byādhī-dhammomhi byādhiṃ anatīto

I am of the nature to sicken, I have not gone beyond sickness;

maraṇa-dhammomhi maraṇaṃ anatīto

I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying;

Sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo

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

*kammassakomhi kammadāyādo kammayoni kammabandhu kammaṭṭisaraṇo
yaṃ kammaṃ karissāmi, kalyāṇaṃ vā pāpakaṃ vā, tassadāyādo bhavissāmi'ti*

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)

In terms of comfort, this is not very cuddly, is it? It's not a matter of, 'Don't worry, dear, everything will be alright.' It is more along the lines of, 'No!

It won't be "alright", you are going to get sick, you are going to get old and you are going to die. Meanwhile, along the way, all that you love is going to be separated from you, you are going to lose everything that you love.' To our ego, to the habits of self-view, that's a disaster, that's a really depressing thought: 'All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.' To the habits of self-view, the ego that likes to take refuge in our friends, our possessions, our reputation, our homes, our status in society, that takes refuge in having a body which is comfortable and healthy, which has functioning eyes, ears and is mobile... it's frightening. It's a cause of anxiety, fear. So, sometimes, people hear those words and react, 'Don't say that, it's depressing! Why are we supposed to be thinking of that? It's really upsetting.'

In encouraging these five reflections the Buddha was not being hurtful or unkind. The Buddha was a realistic teacher; he was encouraging us to be realistic, because we unconsciously feed our fears through pushing death and loss away. In ordinary society we don't say, 'When I die,' we say, 'If something should ever happen to me.' On one level it is very strange that we should talk in that way, because every single person who reads these words is going to die one day; that's not a secret, that isn't news, right? But when we come into a room, our first thought is not, 'Everyone here is going to die one day.' Instead, we think 'It's Christmas night, there's a big crowd

of people here, beautiful candles, shrines and flowers, the Sangha gathered together with the faithful lay community – what a lovely way to spend Christmas.’ Our habits of perception don’t incline towards the closure of death, we have that forgettery that is steering our attention away from that. That is natural enough but not everything that is natural is helpful. The forgettery serves a purpose, with respect to worldly concerns – it makes it easier to get through your day, provide food and shelter, feed your children, pay your taxes – but it makes life worse, with respect to a more profound dimension, as it blocks the wisdom that appreciates the natural order of all things.

With the ‘Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection’, the Buddha is helping us to look at how much tension and stress we create in our lives by being afraid of that which is inevitable. We create painful emotional states by trying to escape that which cannot be escaped, that which is an absolutely normal and ordinary part of life. We don’t realize that we are making ourselves afraid by creating those kinds of buffers, by saying, ‘If something should ever happen to me.’ If we look closely, that’s five layers of padding, buffering right there: 1) IF, 2) SOMETHING, 3) SHOULD 4) EVER, 5) HAPPEN – every hint of the way that nature works and what is inevitable is getting muffled. It’s not ‘if’, it ‘will’ come; the ‘something’ is the death of this body; it’s not ‘should’, a conditional does not apply there; it’s not ‘ever’, there’s

a date, a day of the week that our last breath will come. Of course, it's not fixed what precise day that will be, but one day will certainly be our last; it's not 'happens,' as if there was a chance that death might never come, because death is an inexorable law of nature.

We don't realize that what we are creating is a sense of fear and trepidation, by the very act of pushing it away, shutting it off. All those conditionals, layers of padding, protection – 'If something should ever happen to me', the many layers of insulation around that idea – what we are doing in taking refuge in denial and avoidance is that we are feeding the habits of fear and the feeling that sickness, ageing and death, and the loss of the things that we love, are somehow intrinsically wrong and bad and that it shouldn't be this way.

Recently someone rang me to say that a close friend of theirs was dying from a brain tumour. They were calling from the house where the person was dying. They told me how, during the process of the tumour taking root and having its effects, the biggest difficulty for their friend was the thought, 'Why is this happening? It shouldn't be this way. This isn't fair, it isn't right. I don't deserve this.'

Though one can understand those feelings, the teachings on ageing and dying insist that we be realistic about this body and our lives: we need to get our mind around the fact that absolutely anything can happen to our bodies at any time. It's amazing that they hold together as well as they do.

The fact that they get sick, that they have injuries or things fall apart, or that our bodies don't work in a completely well-integrated and efficient way as they get older, that's normal. There'll never be a day when they shut the hospitals because nobody is getting sick. Even with all the advances in medicine, surgery and different kinds of treatment, still the hospitals are full, all the time, all around the world, that's the nature of things.

To our ego, to our habits of self-view, that fact can be really depressing, sad or unfortunate but the Buddha's encouragement to us is to be realistic, to attune our hearts to the way nature is, rather than to be looking at the world in terms of how we think things *should* be. We make unconscious assumptions that every one of us has the right to have a healthy body, to be comfortable, and to be able to keep all the things that we like and to never be bothered by things that we don't like. But reflect: if we just read those words out loud: 'I have *the right* to have a healthy body', 'I should *never* be bothered by things that I don't like' we begin to get an intuitive sense of, 'Well, that is ridiculous, how could that be?' But sadly, this is what we tend to do much of the time.

When we have an illness or an injury, or there's some kind of conflict or difficulty, we feel that something has gone wrong, 'It shouldn't be this way. When is this going to be over? Oh no, this is awful, I don't deserve this.' This is all implying that somehow nature is out of order. These 'Five

Subjects for Frequent Recollection' are precisely designed to help us attune the heart to the way nature is, to help the heart to be realistic. They enable the heart to let go of those childlike habits of thinking, the assumptions that: we can always have a healthy functional body – the ears will work, the eyes will work, the brain will work and we'll be able to move around at will; that everybody will like us and nobody will ever complain about us; all our traffic lights will be green and there'll always be a parking space when we need one; when we sit down to meditate everything will go quiet around us and the body will be completely comfortable. It's ridiculous, patently absurd; the world does not work that way. The Buddha's teaching is helping us to turn towards those aspects of nature that we might not like, to appreciate instead that 'this is the way it is', and we are able to see things with a different eye, from a different viewpoint.

I like to remind people that, in the Buddha's old age, he had chronic back pain. In the *Mahā-parinibbana Sutta*, 'The Discourse on the Buddha's Last Days', he says:

Ānanda... Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with strapping, so the Tathāgata's body is kept going by being strapped up. It is only when the Tathāgata withdraws his attention from thoughts and outward perceptions, and, by the cessation of certain feelings, enters into the signless concentration of mind, that his body knows comfort.

(D 16.2.25)

This means that when the Buddha was paying attention to the world of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, the ordinary sense world, when talking to people and engaging with life in a commonplace way, he was in physical pain, he had chronic back pain. This is the Buddha, a fully enlightened being! He also described how, in those last years, he needed to work with that back pain. Sometimes, when giving a Dhamma talk he would say:

‘Sāriputta (or Ānanda or Moggallāna...), the assembly is still awake, let a Dhamma talk occur to you to. My back is paining me, I am going to go stretch it (*piṭṭhi me ... āyamissāmi*).’

(A 10.67, D 33.1.4, M 53.5, S 35.243)

So even the Buddha himself had to work with pain, *but* he also knew how not to make a problem out of it. He would adjust his behaviour to work with those limitations, but he did not make a problem out of it, he did not make his painful feelings into a cause of mental *dukkha*. He wasn’t afraid of the pain, he didn’t resent it, he saw it as a part of the condition of the human body, ‘Here it is, it’s just like this.’

If we can change our attitude in this way, we can live fearlessly. The heart is free of fear. By denying death, ageing, loss and degeneration, we make it something real and solid; by pushing away and resenting what causes fear we thereby empower it. It’s like running away from something that you

feel is following you, some dark shade behind you. You are running and running, trying to get away from the threatening, dark presence. Finally, you stop and turn around and, 'Oh! It's just my shadow. I was running away from my own shadow.' It's crazy, ridiculous – there was never any real threat, it was all a mistaken impression.

The Buddha is encouraging us to do just that, to turn around and see, 'Oh, it's only my shadow, no need to run away from it. It's not dangerous, it's only a product of life as it is, life with a body, with a mind in this human condition.' The effect of wisely turning towards these difficult aspects of life – ageing, sickness, death, loss, the laws of cause and effect – and acknowledging them, is a liberating one, rather than one that is threatening or depressing. Thus an open-hearted acceptance of conditions ironically has the opposite effect: 'I am of the nature to age, of the nature to sicken, of the nature to die, and all that is mine, beloved and pleasing will become otherwise. Of course, duh!' There is a feeling of relief, we begin to see that there is no point in trying to hang on to anything because nothing can really be owned.

When you look at that face in the mirror in the morning, you might think, 'Woah! What happened to him, or her?' but you don't feel like anything has gone wrong. It's just that there are a few more grey hairs, a few more wrinkles, everything is sagging, it's all heading south, that's what happens

over time. It's ordinary; it's normal. Nothing is going wrong, nothing is out of order. It doesn't mean that you don't go to the doctor when it's needed, that you don't look after your health or you don't take medicines when they're useful. As with the example of the Buddha, he changed his own behaviour, he would go and rest and stretch his back when he needed to. So, we take care of the body and we look after our possessions as well as we can, but we know these things are leaving sooner or later, 'One day this will no longer be mine.'

There is no longer that sense of owning the body, or the faculties, or material possessions in the old, self-centred, worldly way – the mind holds it all differently so there isn't that tension, worry. The mind is not creating fears or that feeling of trying to hang on to something that doesn't exist and can't be owned. We are able to live fearlessly and fully at ease. The mind isn't trying to possess that which is not possessable, you can't own things that are not ownable, like trying to own moonlight, or the air, or a cloud; it's ridiculous, these can't be owned, ownership doesn't apply.

Our society is conditioned to try to push away these facts of the natural order, calling them really depressing, in order for us to always feel comfortable and to have everything going on as we would like. But if we don't develop the skill of turning towards these difficulties, opening the heart to these painful and unlikeable aspects of life, then we fuel and amplify the causes of suffering and fear within ourselves.



Sometimes I feel that one of the purposes of practising Buddhism, and meditation in particular, although it might sound extremely unattractive, is to learn how to be sad, how to be lonely and how to be bored. You probably wouldn't sell many tickets if you put that on a poster: 'Would you like to be sad, lonely and bored? Book here!' However I feel that it's owing to our reflexively and repeatedly running away from those things that we create so much fear and suffering in our lives.

Nowadays, with the complexity and colourful nature of the media, we have an incredible variety of ways that our mind can be distracted. It seems everyone who has been able to gather the necessary resources has got a phone in their pocket; and it's not just a phone, it's a film studio and a universal encyclopedia, a Library of Babel, a Pandora's Box of entertainment, creation and distraction so you never have to be lonely. You have got all your friends right there, you can talk to and see them, have a video of several of them at the same time; you can communicate with anybody. You've got a vast variety of things to entertain yourself with, so you never have to be alone, you never have to be bored and you never have to be sad. You can find things to cheer you up – a million and one cat videos available on YouTube, probably more, come to think of it. So again, it may sound like a really weird idea, but I feel it's important to learn how to be lonely, how

to be sad and how to be bored so that we can learn how to be with those feelings and not create *dukkha* around them.

The English word ‘melancholy’ means to be in a dark mood, it literally means that we have an excess of black bile in our body. I would say it is perfectly fine for such a melancholy feeling to be present. It’s quite alright to be sad, to feel grief. We don’t have to get rid of it, we don’t have to distract ourselves from it, it’s simply a sad, heavy feeling. It’s not poisonous, it’s not dangerous – sometimes we feel sad, heavy with grief – if someone close to us has died such grief is entirely natural but we don’t have to identify with it, cling to it and make perpetual anguish out of it. It is a painful emotion, that’s all; it’s a visitor who has come to call, it’s not who and what we are.

For example, in the English wintertime it’s often soggy and grey. We specialize in overcast skies. I remember one winter here at Amaravati, back in the ’80s, we didn’t see the sun for about six weeks. It was a solid blanket of grey, day after day after day after day – the weather can be like that. Sometimes it’s that way with our mood, there’s a sad, melancholy, sombre feeling. Do we have to get away from it? Is that somehow wrong or bad or unbearable? No, it’s just a sad feeling.

To be bored – to have nothing to do, or to be by yourself when there isn’t anything to do – we can fully know that bored feeling. Do we have to get away from it? Do we have to fill our mind with some kind of colourful

activity? Can we fully know that bored feeling as an event in consciousness? To be lonely, to be by yourself, to have a sense that, 'All my friends are elsewhere. They are doing interesting things while I am alone, by myself.' Can you have that lonely feeling and not feel like you've got to run away from it, or assume that somehow your life is incomplete or that you are less of a person because you have that lonely feeling?

I remember a couple of years ago hearing an interview with an American man. He was quite a wealthy person. The standard for most of the peer group of his children was that everyone had a smartphone. In the interview, he was explaining why he didn't allow his children to have smartphones. He told the story of how, when he was driving along by himself one day, a song came on the radio, a song that had been popular when he was seventeen years old. The sound of it took him back to the absolute misery, the trauma of his time in high school.

He described how it was like a hammer-blow, a wallop to his heart of sadness and grief. The visceral pain arose of how horrible it had been to be a seventeen-year-old in an American high school. He said he was suddenly so overwhelmed by tears that he had to pull up and park by the side of the road while he leant on his steering wheel and wept. Interestingly, he then went on to say, 'I want my kids to experience that kind of sadness. When those things hit home, when there is real grief or difficulty, I want

my children to be able to experience and know those things, rather than to get away from them through distraction. Learning that those sad feelings are a part of life is precious.'

Again, it is not to be masochistic, or to try to make ourselves miserable or depressed, but rather that we learn that we can bear to be with a sad, melancholy feeling, or that we can bear to be bored or lonely or have feelings of regret... I could recount a long list of these sorts of negative feelings: regret, rejection, disappointment and so on, but, essentially, they can all be worked with in the same way. When we are able to turn our attention to those qualities and know them as they are, and then to say, 'This is how it feels, this is the feeling of regret, this is just the sad feeling, this is loneliness, it's like this.' Then, in that knowing of it, we understand that, 'This is part of what we as human beings can feel. This is ordinary, this is normal, there is nothing wrong or bad about this.'

We bring those qualities into the heart and know them fully because that which knows sadness isn't sad, that which knows boredom isn't bored, that which knows loneliness isn't lonely, that which knows regret isn't regretting, that which knows disappointment isn't disappointed. It's through turning the attention towards the experience and receiving it, accepting it completely that we realize, 'Oh, that's not who or what I am, that's not me and mine.' There's a disentangling, a letting go, a freeing. The

heart embodies the quality of awakened awareness that is attuned to those states but is not afraid of or tied to those states, it is not identified with those states. The mind is not limited by any particular mood or feeling as it takes shape.

* * *

There is a reflection on impermanence that we chant, most often at funerals:

*Aniccā vata saṅkhārā
 uppāda-vaya-dhammino
 uppajjitvā nirujjhanti
 tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho*

All conditioned things are impermanent,
 having arisen, then they pass away,
 having integrated then they disintegrate
 and in their passing is peace.

(D 16.6.10)

If we can recognize that this is the true nature of all conditioned things, we can enjoy this surpassing peace. Then, when a condition comes to an end, whether it's a breath or the end of your walking path, the end of a day or a life, when that ending comes there is peacefulness, ease, nothing is lost. The mind is not distracted by the changes in that particular condition and

what remains when that condition dissolves is *sukha*, peace, contentment, happiness. This was a frequent theme of Luang Por Chah's teaching.

When things pass away, rather than having the attitude, 'I've lost this. This is gone,' the feeling of something missing, that we are diminished or made less, it's rather the opposite. The clarity of the heart is more obvious. The sense of the awake mind and its attributes of being pure, radiant and peaceful, these are more obvious when a condition comes to an end. So when we are able to cultivate this quality of awareness, watching those different states, whether they are pleasant and delightful states, like a still, sunny day in winter in the English countryside, or whether they are feelings of loneliness, boredom, sadness or the death of a loved one, rather than dwelling upon these conditions, the mind is able to embody a wakeful awareness that knows these conditions but is not limited by them. When the mind takes refuge in being that awareness, knowing, awake, aware of the present, then, when a condition comes to an end, what remains is *sukha*, peace, not despair or frustration.

The other side of these reflections on darkness, impermanence, the ending of a life, is that we can recognize a different kind of 'light in the darkness' that is a profound and effective cause for comfort and joy. This 'light' is not wishful thinking, but the light of Dhamma itself, *Dhammapadīpa*, which is another term for awakened awareness. This light of awareness is not about

denying death, or denying endings or denying loss but rather knowing them and seeing their unreality. That is the real light in the dark, the quality of awakened awareness, what we call the Buddha Refuge, that aware quality of the heart. This is the life source; this is the light of the heart, the light of the mind that is liberating. It is the genuine alternative to our painful attachment to birth and death and our habit of trying to seek security in that which is insecure. The light that is truly comforting, truly a source of joy and safety, is that awake, aware quality of the heart – *vijjadhātu* – the profound knowing that is the Buddha Refuge. Freedom from fear thus comes not from rejecting the reality of death, endings and losses, but from heartfully accepting them.

This is one of the key tasks we have in Buddhist practice, learning how to cultivate that wisdom of the heart, that quality of awakened awareness that is free from the limitations of birth and death. Because that which knows beginnings and endings, does not begin or end. That which knows the breath as it comes and goes, is ever-present. That which knows, pure awareness, is ever-present. It is, in Luang Por Sumedho's words, the 'escape hatch', the door to real freedom. When the heart embodies that wakeful, aware quality, it knows the beginning and ending of things; it knows the five *khandhas* – the body, the feelings, the perceptions, thoughts and emotions, the sense consciousness – it knows their coming and going but is

not limited by them. Awakened awareness is freed from the cycles of birth and death.

This is the good news, the potential that we all have to turn our attention towards our feelings of loss and rejection and, by turning towards them, to transcend them. Instead of trying to shut them down, or distracting the mind from them, the light of awakened awareness reveals our grief and despair to be ephemeral and transient and therefore powerless. Those states no longer have the power to shake us, for we have reached the best of all deliverances ‘the unshakeable deliverance of the heart’ (M 43.37). Also, as John Donne put it in one of his poems:

Death, be not proud, though some have callèd thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so.

(Holy Sonnet 10)



‘If You Truly Love Me, Don’t Create Me in Your Mind’

When we think of loving or being loved by someone the customary way we think is such as, ‘Please don’t forget me, never let me go.’ If you think somebody loves you, you hope they won’t forget you, that they’ll hang on to you. They’ll always be there. That’s the worldly habit of thinking in this culture, but does this always bring happiness? How does true love manifest? And is there more than one kind of love? There are a lot of different dimensions to this theme.

Probably most of us have had the experience wherein, when we love someone or we care for them, when we’re trying to do the best we can to help them, there can be a strange dynamic to the quality of contact between us and the other. It’s sad and hard to fathom but sometimes, no matter how hard we try, there’s a barrier between us.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? Where you are trying so hard to get it right, yet things always seem to go slightly wrong or to be slightly out of tune. You can’t quite establish a full sense of trust and ease. It seems

that the harder you try the more there is a division between you and the other, whether it's parents with children, or between partners, spouses, or students to teachers, or teachers to students. We experience a sense of separation. We then try all kinds of different ways to be more helpful or get closer, to have a more complete connection as a teacher, as a parent, as a friend, a partner. Yet there can be that lingering sense of alienation, a separateness there. This can be very confusing and frustrating because we can feel that, 'I'm trying, I'm doing the best that I can. I'm trying so hard yet still I feel at a distance. I can't quite get through. I can't quite connect. There's some membrane, some barrier between us, blocking the kind of closeness, oneness I'm looking for.' The more that we try, the harder we push, the more we experience that kind of separation.

Does that seem familiar to anybody? I remember, years ago when I was a teenager, seeing a painting by Rene Magritte, the Belgian surrealist. It's called 'The Lovers'. Probably a few readers would recognize it. In this painting there are two lovers, a woman and a man, kissing mouth to mouth, but each one has a bag completely covering their head. The two separate grey bags mean that, although the faces are pressed up against each other, they are each inside their own bag. I remember seeing the picture back then and thinking, 'Yes, that's what it's like. I think I know what he is trying to say.'

It can be very difficult and confusing, can't it? How no matter how hard we try to get the bag off and really connect with others, to be free of any kind of division – whether it's between parents and children, or brothers and sisters, or lovers, or teachers and students – still we keep meeting that barrier, that disconnect.

Many years ago, back in the early days of Chithurst Monastery, one of the nuns was about to go and visit her family. She had been experiencing a tense and difficult relationship with her parents, who were extremely unhappy about her being a Buddhist nun, having shaved her head and wearing robes. They were a staunch traditionalist Christian family distressed about their daughter becoming a Buddhist, going over into this weird religion. They had been a close family, so this nun was very concerned and eager to try and get things right between her and her parents. She had tried to communicate with them, to explain Buddhism, explain her interest, her faith and her commitment but things had not been easy.

As she was due to visit them soon the subject came up at the community teatime one day at Chithurst. As usual Ajahn Sumedho was answering questions. She asked, 'What's the best thing, the kindest thing you can do for your parents? How can you help your parents in the best way if they don't have any interest in Dhamma and they're not so supportive of you?'

He responded with a comment that I had never heard him say before. What he said was, ‘The kindest thing you can do for your parents is not to create them.’

That little exchange exemplifies the many-layered richness of this area of consideration – love, selfhood and relationship. It was one of those comments that arose out of the silent mind, absolutely on the mark. You immediately felt it was true. There was an instant sense of, ‘Yes, that’s right.’ It was a bit startling for most of us when Ajahn Sumedho said this, because I thought that he would come up with a list of different kinds of Buddhist teachings that you could talk about or ways you could help around the house, that kind of thing. But that was his comment, simply and succinctly, ‘The kindest thing you can do for your parents is not to create them.’



The word ‘love’ tends to imply a connection between one person and another. And even though we use the English word ‘love’ very often, it is useful to reflect that this word covers quite a range of different ways of relating. In the Buddhist understanding of things there are principally two kinds of love – this is what will be explored here.

The first kind of love is what we would normally think of as an affectionate relationship between one person and another. It’s a kind of dearness, in the Pali language it’s called *piyatā*. *Piyatā* means dearness, fondness,

belovedness and cherishing another person. That kind of normal everyday human affection or friendship is *piyatā*. We feel that's a natural and good thing, good to have in our lives, but the Buddha pointed out that even though we might think all kinds of love are fine and wonderful (as The Beatles put it in 1967, 'All You Need is Love'), *piyatā*, dearness, fondness or cherishing, has its shadow as well.

There are a couple of stories in the scriptures where the Buddha outlines this shadow quite emphatically. The first one is in the *Piyajātika Sutta*, which means, 'The Discourse on "Born from Those Who Are Dear"' (M 87). It starts off with the Buddha being approached by a man whose son has just died. He's very distraught, upset, unhappy. He comes to the Buddha, in floods of tears, crying. After the Buddha asks him why he is in this state, he says to the Buddha, 'I'm so miserable because my child has died.' The Buddha responds, 'That's the way it is. Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are born from those who are dear.'

The distraught man takes exception to this, 'No, that's completely wrong. The ones we love are the cause of happiness and joy. You don't know what you're talking about.' Even though he had been in tears, he doesn't quite see the connection and he stomps off, disagreeing with the Buddha.

A little distance away he finds a few men drinking and gambling, and to them he says, 'I just met this stupid monk Gotama, and he said that the

ones that are dear to us are the cause of suffering and pain. This sounded completely wrong to me so I just got up and left.’ The gamblers reply, ‘Yes, you’re right. Those words of his are totally stupid, everyone knows that the ones who are dear to us are a source of joy and happiness.’ The gamblers agreed with the man and the man agreed with the gamblers.

In the way that these things go, stories of these exchanges rattled around the great city of Sāvattthī and ended up reaching Queen Mallikā and King Pasenadi at the palace.

King Pasenadi says, ‘Well, in this case, I think the Master has got it wrong because everybody knows that those who are dear to us, those for whom we have fondness, are the source of happiness and joy in our lives.’

To which Queen Mallikā replies, ‘Well, if the Master said they they are the source of our suffering and pain then it must be true.’

This leads to a small domestic dispute, with King Pasenadi eventually taking umbrage, ‘Be off with you, Mallikā, whatever the Master says you agree with him! Regardless of what he says, you always say the Master must be right. Away with you, get out of here!’

Queen Mallikā wants to follow things up, so she asks a court brahmin, called Nāḷijangha, to go to the Buddha and ask him about this directly. The brahmin visits the Buddha, who duly explains to him his logic on this issue; this is then reported back verbatim to the Queen. She then goes to the King

and, wishing to convey the explanation that the Buddha had made to the brahmin, poses a question:

‘What do you think sire, is your daughter, the Princess Vajīrī, dear to you? Do you have fondness for her?’

‘Yes, of course. I’m very fond of her. She’s very dear to me. Dearest thing in the world. I love her very much.’

‘If something painful happened to her, sire, if she got a horrible disease, if she was attacked, if she was injured, if she died, then how would you feel?’

‘Well, I would be very upset. I would be most distressed. It would be very painful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair would be sure to arise in me.’

Perhaps controlling the urge to smirk, she says, ‘It was with reference to this, sire, that the Master stated, “Sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair are born from those who are dear to us.”’

Then she asks, ‘Then what about Prince Viḍūḍabha? ... And am I dear to you? ... What about the Kingdom of Kosala?’ She goes through an extensive list of items. For each of them she asks how he would feel if something happened to them, meaning if they were injured or destroyed. By the end the King is persuaded that the Buddha (and Queen Mallikā) were right and that he had been wrong.

The scene closes with the King pouring lustral waters in honour of the Buddha's wisdom, making *añjali* in his direction, and reciting '*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa!*' three times.

Another significant exchange also took place in Sāvattī, this time with the great female disciple Visākhā (at Ud 8.8).

She comes to the Buddha in the middle of the day with her hair and her clothes all wet, suggesting that she's just been at a funeral ceremony.

The Buddha says to her, 'What are you doing here in the middle of the day, Visākhā? Your hair and your clothes are all wet and you seem very upset.'

'How could I not be upset, Venerable Sir, I've just come from the funeral of my dearest granddaughter, she was only young and she has just passed away. I was so upset, so disturbed that I wanted to come to the Monastery, to find solace and sanctuary.'

The Buddha then asks her, knowing that she's spiritually a very mature person, 'So, Visākhā, would you like to have as many children and grandchildren as there are people in the city of Sāvattī?'

She replies, 'Oh yes, yes indeed.'

At this time, according to legend, she already had ten sons and ten daughters and each of them had ten sons and ten daughters, so by this reckoning she had 400 grandchildren.

She says, 'Yes I would like to have as many as there are people in Sāvattī.'

The Buddha continues, ‘How many people, Visākhā, do you think die during a single day in the city of Sāvattthī?’

‘Venerable Sir, at least ten people die every day; if not ten then nine; if not nine then eight ... seven ... six ... five ... four ... three ... two ... or one, at least one person dies every day in Sāvattthī. Never a day passes in the city of Sāvattthī on which nobody dies.’

‘So, Visākhā, if you had as many children and grandchildren as there are people in Sāvattthī would there ever be a day when your hair and clothes were not wet from the funeral rites?’

Visakha was much quicker on the uptake than King Pasenadi, so she immediately said, ‘Enough of having so many children and grandchildren!’ She got the point very quickly.

This kind of love, this kind of fondness, *piyatā*, is what I refer to as ‘possessive love’. It’s what you can also call ‘a relationship of separateness’. There’s a ‘me’ here and a ‘you’ there, and there’s a distinct gap between us. That is a relationship based on self-view, *sakkāya diṭṭhi*, on a fixed idea of a ‘me’ here and a ‘you’ there: ‘I’m a separate independent individual. I’m apart from the rest of the world.’ As long as that relationship is based on self-view, it cannot possibly be in tune with reality because the Buddha pointed out that self-view, with its attachment to feelings of ‘me’ and ‘mine’, is the

first obstruction to enlightenment. That's the very first fetter, the first of the ten *saṃyojanā*. If the mind can't break that fetter, there's no possibility of enlightenment.

As long as our view of the world is based on 'me here and you there', as fixed and separate realities, then the result is always going to be painful. There's always sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair; there will be that apparent film, that barrier, the grey bags, between the 'me' and 'you'. That's what the Buddha is pointing to here. That's why I refer to it as 'a relationship of separateness'.

This 'self' that we think is permanent, real and solid, if we look a little closer we realize that it came together and thus has to fall apart. It's not substantial, it's not permanent. But we take the impermanent (*anicca*) to be permanent, we take that which is not-self (*anattā*) to be self and we take the unsatisfactory (*dukkha*) to be satisfactory. That is a snapshot of our ignorance. When the mind is not awake, that's what we do, we make those three basic mistakes. That is why the Buddha established his wisdom teachings around *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*, saying that what we take to be reliable cannot be so, what we take it to be satisfying, if we dig a little deeper, can't satisfy us, this thing that we think is ours, if we dig a little deeper, we realize that real ownership is impossible for us.

* * *

The other kind of love, the Buddhist tradition calls *mettā*, ‘loving-kindness’. This kind of love is very different from *piyatā*, even if it is translated using the same English word, ‘love’. *Mettā*, loving-kindness is intrinsically non-possessive. It’s a love that is not dependent upon self-view. It’s not dependent on a fixed idea of a ‘me’ here and a ‘you’ there but is what we can call ‘a liberative love’. It’s the kind of love that lets go and it acts on the principle: ‘If you truly love me, you’ll not create me in your mind.’

There’s a Buddhist saying that describes the enlightened ones: ‘They so love the world that they have let go of it completely.’ To truly love the world, in this view, doesn’t mean to hang on to it or to try to possess it or own it, but to let go of it completely.

A verse of the Buddha in the *Sutta Nipāta* runs thus:

See how letting go of the world is peacefulness.
 There’s nothing that you need to hold on to,
 there’s nothing that you need to push away. (SN 1098)

It is important to get a feeling for the difference between *mettā* and *piyatā*. *Mettā*, loving-kindness: when the heart is free of obscurations, *mettā* is the natural disposition of the heart towards other beings, towards all things inner and outer. The ground emotional disposition of the *citta*, when free from defilements, is loving-kindness, non-contention, benevolence and acceptance.

One of the best ways to think of loving-kindness is that it is a kind of loving, but it's a love that's not dependent on getting anything back, not dependent on a feeling of self and other. It's the kind of love that involves a quality of non-clinging, letting go: If you truly love the world you let go of it completely; if you truly love your parents you won't create them in your mind. Mysteriously, ironically, that letting go leads directly to the sense of communion, oneness, wholeness.

When we think of other people we tend to come up with names. I think of the nuns and monks in this monastery, the lay residents, the hundreds of lay friends and supporters, people in my family, the good folk of the world I know or hear about... When we think of a name, then we think of the different exchanges that we have had, the history that we have together, personality traits attached to the name, the things that were pleasant or the things that were unpleasant. If there is sufficient mindfulness and wisdom all such designations are recognized as merely that – convenient forms of description that are used for recognition and communication only, without ascribing any permanent essence or independent existence (D 9.53, S 1.25). When the mind resolves upon those characteristics and events and it fixes on them, reifies and takes them to be absolute facts, that is what we call 'creating somebody in our mind'.

When I create you in my mind I think of the memories that I have, the exchanges that we've had, the various judgements that have formed around

those contacts. Then, if those perceptions, memories and judgements are attached to and taken as reliable, when we meet I don't really meet you I meet *my projection about you*. I meet my memories. I meet my judgements and ideas. In this way, when we speak, I am only speaking to my projection about you. I create a mask, a *persona*, for you and then I talk to the mask I have created.

Meanwhile you are doing the same thing in relation to me. You've created your projection of me and then you're talking to your projection. You address your projection of me and I address mine of you, so, rather than an actual dialogue there's two monologues being projected past each other – like two-way traffic on a motorway with a solid barrier between them. I'm just relating to my projections about you, you're relating to your projections about me. There isn't any genuine communication, let alone communion. When we have a relationship of separateness there's non-communication (sometimes violent non-communication), there's a gap or a barrier between us.

In contrast, when there's true loving-kindness there's a letting go of self-view. There's a letting go of fixed ideas about 'who I am' and 'who you are'. In a way it's the beginning of insight into *anattā*, not-self. We are recognizing that my memories of you are just mental formations. My ideas about you are empty, like a bubble or a mirage, an illusion.

In the classical practice of *mettā bhāvanā* we use the recitation of words such as: ‘May I be happy; may all beings be happy; may my mother, my father, my brothers, my sisters be happy. May all the other people in the monastery be happy. May all the rabbits and worms and blackbirds be happy. The fish in the pond, may they all be happy.’ And we go through a long list of beings. ‘May all the people in Hemel Hempstead be happy. May all the people in Berkhamsted be happy.’ Even though we’re calling it *mettā* it can still be very much based on self-view and attachment to time and location: a ‘me’ generating *mettā* and sending it ‘out there’ to a ‘you’. I would suggest that this is a superficial kind of *mettā bhāvanā*.

When *mettā* is established in Dhamma and imbued with wisdom, it’s not based on self-view. True *mettā*, true love, is based on letting go of the fixations, the biases of the mind. Ajahn Sumedho would often say, ‘You can teach a parrot to say, “May I be happy, may all beings be well and happy,” so it’s important that we’re not just parroting the words.’ If all we are doing is repeating the words and not taking it any deeper, then it is somewhat useless as a beneficial and liberating practice. If, however, we use the words as an entry point, as a way of exploring what the actuality of loving-kindness is, it’s a different matter. We might consider, ‘I remember that talk that Ajahn Amaro once gave about loving-kindness and its relationship to wisdom, about loving-kindness being non-possessive or

non-personal – so, how does that work? If I am saying, “May I be happy, may all beings be happy,” if all *dhammas* are not-self, then who is sending the message, the *mettā*, and who is there to receive it?’ It opens up a lot of questions, ones that bring great wisdom if they are reflected upon, investigated with mindfulness.

When we see a person across the room, we get a set of impressions or ideas or memories about them, but if the mind is aware, ‘Those are just my memories. These are just my impressions, these are just my ideas about that person, about what she should be or shouldn’t be, of how he is or how he isn’t.’

If one recognizes that these are just thoughts, just mental fabrications, one sees that it’s solely a convenient fiction to call people Lakshmi or Sue, Nick or Saccapīti. This is just a handy way of working harmoniously with social conventions and the needs of the moment. If the barista just wrote ‘person’ on every cup, orders would get confused at the coffee shop.

In this way I ‘let go’ of you; there is not a fixed solid ‘I’ creating a similar ‘you’. Then when we meet together and a conversation ensues, I’m not talking to my projection. Additionally, when I don’t create projections about you, this helps you to not create projections about me. That’s the way it works. There is actual communication, communion, a true connection, or what I refer to as ‘a relationship of wholeness’. This way of connecting,

of relating to others based on *mettā*, is founded on wisdom and is free from self-view and conceit.

Such a relationship of wholeness is based on recognizing that everything here as part of the subject, and everything there as part of the object, is all Dhamma. It is all built of the same stuff, we're all of the same fabric. Rather than thinking of a separate 'me' over here and a separate 'you' over there, we recognize that there is only *this*. Everything is Dhamma. As Ajahn Chah put it: 'Inside is Dhamma, outside is Dhamma, everything is Dhamma.'

* * *

Through awakening to the reality of our own nature in this way, the *citta* is attuned to the nature of everything. In a sense there is not even 'a connection' here, because there are not two separate things that need to be connected. This is an awakening to the realization, 'There is just this. There is just reality, Dhamma. There is the immanent quality of this present moment and it includes the particular attributes called 'me', the writer, and 'you', the reader. We recognize that these are just convenient fictions, handy ways of referring to the present experience.

We give names to each other. We give names to the days of the week, 'Today is Sunday.' We keep an eye on the phases of the moon, the spherical satellite that loops around this particular planet, 'Today is the full moon.'

If we were on Jupiter, which has a lot more moons, we would have a lot more Observance Days to calculate and keep track of. We tend to name things and then take those designations to be absolutes. We forget they are just convenient fictions. Did days of the week exist before humans evolved? When is it the New Moon on Jupiter? The conventions, the designations, burst like bubbles when they are seen with wisdom – there is no *thing* really, anywhere.

When we see the way we create each other with our judgements, such as, ‘I approve of this person, I don’t like that person. This person is inspiring. That person is really difficult...’ then we see it’s just memory, it’s just the mind’s creation. Particularly with family relations – with our parents, our children and grandchildren, our other relatives, our partners or our ex-partners – there can be a lot of density and difficulty. We can easily carry stories around in our minds and unwittingly give them life, nurse them into actuality.

When we’re doing *mettā* practice, where we’re encouraged to have loving-kindness for all beings, we can be faithfully going through our list and then, *crunch*, ‘May all beings be happy *except him!*’ Someone who has done you a wrong. The mere name triggers the story and then, in a blink, there’s ‘me’ and ‘that person’ whose name we detest and refuse to utter!



When we see that the stories we tell, the memories, the designations we create, are all convenient fictions, we recognize, ‘They can be seen through.’ If they have been established we can un-establish them. We can free the heart from them. We don’t have to be defined or confined by such definitions.

This is seeing how we create each other. In the course of a day how often do we create our children, our parents, our siblings, our partners, the people we live with, the people for whom we are responsible?

The first step is to recognize how we create them and the second step is to see if we can learn how not to create them. When we manage to let go of creating them we see that our judgements of others were always only convenient fictions. This is relating to others on the basis of a heart that has let go, it is a relationship of wholeness. This is when we experience the genuine quality of *mettā*, a real and liberative love. A love that does not need anything, a love that does not hold on to anything. A love that doesn’t depend on anything or any particular return or result, anything being received from that connection – it’s the natural way of the *citta*, free of confusions and obscurations, relating to the world.

Another way of describing this kind of liberative love, relationships of wholeness, is something I learned when participating in a wedding blessing many years ago. The senior monk who was leading the ceremony gave the

couple this advice. He said, ‘If there’s the two of you, and if you spend all your time looking at each other, then *he’s* going to think that it’s his job to make *her* happy, and *she* in turn is going to think it’s her job to make *him* happy. Also, if *she’s* not happy then *he’s* going to think, “I’m not doing my job well. If she’s not happy then it’s my fault, I’m failing, so I’ve got to try harder to make her happy.” And if *he’s* not happy then she thinks, “Oh dear, he’s not happy and it’s my fault. I’ve got to try harder to make him happy.” Or it might be that he feels, “I’m not happy, and it’s *her* fault. It’s her job to make me happy and I’m not happy, so she’s failing.” She might be thinking exactly the same thing, “I’m not happy and it’s *his* fault. He should be making me happy and it’s not working. He’s failing me.”

‘If you spend all your time looking at each other, then you’re only going to end up suffering and in conflict in these various ways, or in various combinations of them. It’s going to be difficult because you can never find true completion, a true contentment, by looking at each other, expecting and asking so much of yourselves and each other all the time.’ To demonstrate this he pointed his two index fingers at each other . ‘Instead, rather than making your marriage about looking at each other all the time, if you sit side by side, looking at that which is beyond both of you, then your relationship can really work.’ Again, to demonstrate this he pointed his two index fingers parallel to each other .

That's exactly what I mean by a relationship of wholeness. You use your connection with each other to support the looking beyond what you are as personalities. This is also how the Sangha works as a spiritual community.

* * *

To highlight this principle, there is an interesting and meaningful point with respect to the words 'person' and 'personality'. The word 'person' comes from the Latin word *persona*, which means 'a mask'. *Per* means 'through', *sona* means 'sound'. Actors in the Greek and Roman theatre wore masks, so the actors spoke through masks. The *persona* is that through which the sound goes, so the *persona* is a mask. That's a big clue.



This way of developing love for each other or love for the world is looking beneath the mask, getting beyond the personality. On letting go of our self-view and our self-obsession we find a connectedness, a quality of communion that is incomparable.

It's not only in family relationships or marriages or partnerships that this issue arises but also in the monastery. It's possible to have a relationship of separateness in a monastery. Looking up to the teacher, thinking the teacher is so wonderful, so special, or looking at other people, and thinking, 'She's so inspiring,' or 'He's so awful.' The teacher looking down and saying, 'These are my students. I'm a useless teacher because the students are not behaving right. They don't really like me very much.' Or, 'I'm a wonderful teacher because they are always praising me. I've got gazillions of people who've friended me on Facebook.'

Somebody once sent me a link to the Goodreads website, 'Have you seen this Ajahn? People have been rating your books on Goodreads.' How many stars have I got on Goodreads? I don't know! However, even if we are supposedly renunciants and spiritual people we can still easily get stuck in these kinds of materialistic, separative ways.

* * *

It was very interesting living with Luang Por Chah because he was an extremely magnetic character. He had a very powerful presence, he was greatly revered but he never fed this adulation and he certainly didn't seek it. If you got too gushy or too devotional, he would send you off to some branch monastery that would be challenging for you. You'd be exiled to Wat Suan Gluoy for six months to a year to cool off. He wasn't looking for

people to adore him or to look at him as the one and only super-guru. He was happy to be the teacher and to guide and to be the central figure, but he wouldn't allow it to get personal. If people were trying to establish a close personal relationship with him, or to be seen as special, like, 'I'm your most dedicated disciple, aren't I, Luang Por? I'm sure that pleases you!' – not put in so many words but communicated in roundabout ways – 'You know, I'm special, don't you, Luang Por?' If you tried that, you'd be off to Suan Gluoy for about three years.

He wouldn't feed that. He didn't need that himself at all. He didn't need to be loved. He didn't need to have that kind social stroking. He saw the connection between the teacher and the student as very fertile ground – people want to learn and there are people who can teach them, who have abilities – but you can use that dynamic of a teacher and a student and yet not make it personal, not have it built on self-view. No 'Look at me I'm a great teacher,' or 'I am the perfect disciple.' He had an extraordinary ability not to feed that, which was one of the things that made him a uniquely gifted teacher. By working in this way, free of self-view and conceit, he brought out the very best in his students, who were similarly encouraged to come from a self-free place.

If you drop your projection of others then others find it easier to drop their projection about you. Similarly once you knew that Ajahn Chah

wasn't projecting anything onto you, you understood that he didn't need anything from you. He wasn't looking for any particular way of you loving him, adoring him, expressing your gratitude or obedience or whatever. Then you were able to let go of those compulsions in yourself. You were able to relax and to not feel you had to be some specific *thing* in order to please the Ajahn. You could be yourself, let conditions of the moment be as they were, and then, when you were completely yourself at that particular time – relaxed, natural and straightforward – then you could see that he would light up. 'Oh good, you're getting over that compulsion of trying to be someone or to be special.'

The best method we can use to support this practice is an ongoing watchfulness, looking at how our mind works. Moment by moment, day by day, we need to see how we create others. 'OK, I've just created my brother; my sister; I've just created my boss; that person at the traffic lights... I've just created them as being like *that*.' Such watchfulness recognizes that the mind is judging, is fixing somebody in that way. Reflect, 'Let's see if I can avoid doing that. Can I let go of that person? Can I let go of "that" as being a fixed and definite reality?' We realize we are able to apply it in that moment when judging someone who's just snuck ahead of us at the traffic lights, snarling, 'Who does that idiot think he is? How dare he? Wait a minute. Maybe they just saw a gap in the traffic and they innocently

moved into it. Maybe they're not a total idiot. Maybe they're not trying to be impolite and selfish. Maybe I'm just leaping to conclusions here or maybe they're in a hurry, maybe they have got some important event to get to; a daughter's wedding or they've got to go and perform surgery on somebody, and is that something that I myself have never done...?' We see our judgments, we learn to look at them, reflect on them, tweak them. In seeing them we recognize what it's like when we don't depend on that kind of judgement. When we drop that habit of creating others, when we let go of our preconceptions, we notice what it feels like inside, 'Oh! The world is a much bigger, better place than I realized.' Suddenly the world got a bit more spacious, a bit more peaceful. There's a bit more space in the day. The more we are able to see that that's what happens when we let go of 'others', the more we are encouraged to do that. It's a positive feedback loop.

* * *

Another mysterious thing is that letting go of self-view and self-centred thinking, no longer creating others, rather than it making us less caring, less effective at helping, less attentive or useful in the world, the result is the opposite. It might sound like cutting ourselves off from the family – 'You're merely a set of *saṅkhārās* arising and passing away, Mum, I'm letting you go. I'm not creating you any more.' But if we practise with this wisely, if there is genuine *mettā*, based on wisdom, then we will find that we can

help in a much more effective way. We are able to lend a hand when it's really needed and we're able to keep quiet when that's needed. We are not a compulsive helper. When it's better to leave things alone, we can leave them alone. When it's better to jump in and say something, we can step in and do that. We will also know that our not doing something is not because we don't care, but because nothing can be done. Then maybe ten seconds later, 'OK, now. Now is the moment to step in.'

The more that we let go of self-view, the more we are able to be tuned in to the time, the place and the situation, and the more we can respond in a mindful way.

When we hear these teachings it can be a bit confusing, because we can read them the wrong way: 'Am I supposed to let go and be totally detached? Or am I supposed to be totally attentive and involved with everything?' In this respect there is another helpful teaching that Luang Por Chah gave when Ajahn Sumedho was a young monk, after he had been at Ajahn Chah's monastery for two or three years. One day Ajahn Chah said to him, 'Sumedho!'

'Yes Luang Por.'

'You must find it very confusing.'

Ajahn Sumedho said, 'Why is that?' and he thought, 'what exactly is he talking about?'

‘You must find it very confusing because the Dhamma teaching is all about letting go. Right? “Don’t attach to anything. Don’t cling to anything. Everything is empty. Let go. Let go. Let go.” And yet the Vinaya teaching, the teaching of the monastic discipline, is to pay attention to every single detail. “Don’t do anything wrong.” We’ve got thousands of rules that we’ve got to keep and be very precise about – everything matters. The Vinaya is telling you, “Hold on, hold on. Keep a firm grip on everything. Pay attention to every facet of the day’s activities.” You must find that confusing, right?’

Ajahn Sumedho said, ‘Yes, actually, now you come to mention it, I do.’ At that moment he thought, ‘Now Luang Por is going to explain to me how it can be that the Dhamma is all about letting go and the Vinaya is all about holding on.’ He was unconsciously expecting a full exposition but all Luang Por Chah said to him was, ‘When you figure out how they work together you will be fine.’ Which was not much consolation, but it was a helpful teaching in its own right, because you can’t really write a formula for that Middle Way. Like riding a bicycle, you just have to get a feel for it.

In the scriptures the Buddha always talks of his own teaching as the ‘Dhamma-Vinaya’, meaning the Dhamma teachings and then the Discipline (Vinaya). Not just wisdom but also *sīla* (virtue). The wisdom teaching is that everything is empty and nothing belongs to us. All *dharmas* are not-self.

Yet we must also pay careful attention to our every action, our every word, every moment.

This blending of Dhamma and Vinaya is the Buddha's Way. The Dhamma is not just Dhamma alone, it's Dhamma-Vinaya. The two go together. Our task, and the way to develop relationships of wholeness as a way of connecting with the world, is finding that balance – the Middle Way where, simultaneously, everything matters and nothing matters.

Being around Ajahn Chah, even though I couldn't understand Thai at all, seeing the way he related to people, I could tell, 'Here is somebody who is not hanging on to anything.' He was someone who had completely let go of everything and yet he wasn't eccentrically out of control, acting in crazy ways. His conduct was extremely precise, he kept the rules very strictly. Here was someone who didn't need anything, who was not hanging on to anything. He didn't need to prove anything. Yet he instructed with great thoroughness: when you put your shoulder bag down, you put it down in a very particular way; when you got up and you walked across the room you walked in a very quiet and careful way.

Ajahn Chah had false teeth. When he changed his false teeth he was very careful about where he put down the used set of teeth and how he picked up the new ones. There was a particular set of procedures that he used every time. He was very mindful and careful of every detail, and yet there was nobody there, there was nobody hanging on to anything.

I remember thinking, ‘If I can get to be like that, even if it takes forty years, I don’t care, whatever it takes to get to where he is, I’ll do it.’ His manner demonstrated how we can perfect a human life. It’s not a matter of looking for freedom through defying convention or just following our impulses and desires. It’s not a matter of behaving in a hyper-controlled or precise way, having everything perfectly ordered and predictable. It’s a balance between complete non-attachment and complete involvement. And that is something rare and wonderful.

* * *

The word that the Buddha used to refer to himself, ‘Tathāgata’, seems to be a deliberately ambiguous term. It’s a very interesting word to reflect on because it’s made of two parts. The first part, *Tath-* means ‘thus’ or ‘such’; the second part is the word, *-gata* means ‘gone’. However, the way you make a negative in Pali is to have an *a-* on the front, therefore *-agata* means ‘to come’. So the debate for the last two and a half thousand years has been: is ‘Tathāgata’ meant to mean ‘Tath-āgata’ ‘One who has *come to* Suchness’ or is it ‘Tathā-gata’, ‘One who’s *gone to* Suchness’. Is the Buddha totally ‘here’ or is he totally ‘gone’? Is he completely transcendent? Or is he totally immanent, utterly here, present and attuned to the here and now?

The Buddha really liked word plays. There are a lot of puns and witticisms throughout the Pali teachings. My suspicion is that he coined this word

deliberately to have the two meanings, so that it means *both* completely here and completely gone – because this perfectly describes the nature of the Buddha. Yes, when the Buddha was alive he had a physical body, he ate food, breathed air, walked on the ground but he was totally ‘gone’, in the sense that he was not attached to or clinging to any thing. He did not identify with his body or his personality (M 72.20), the people he was with or the landscape he was in. There was never any entanglement.

Every word he spoke from the time of his enlightenment to the Parinibbāna was perfectly attuned to every situation, to the needs of the individuals he was with, whether they could appreciate his words or not. Every action was careful and appropriate to time and place. Throughout the Buddha’s life this state of being both fully present and attentive to every detail, but also fully detached, was actualized.

This is described by one of the qualities of the Buddha, *vijjācaraṇa sampanno*, which means ‘perfectly accomplished in knowledge and conduct’. *Vijjā* means ‘knowing’, ‘knowledge’ or ‘awareness’. The Buddha, perfect in knowledge, completely awake and transcendent – and also perfect in conduct. *Caraṇa*, means behaviour – there was also perfect refinement of conduct. The two are a pair, you can’t have the conduct without the wisdom. You can’t have the wisdom without the conduct. The two are perfectly fused, they work together.

The Middle Way is a simple term but I would say that it describes exactly that mysterious and compelling state of being both fully present and fully transcendent. Both completely attuned and unidentified; there is loving-kindness for all beings while knowing that there are no beings.

There is a *sūtra* in the Northern Buddhist tradition called the *Vajracchedikā Sūtra*, ‘The Diamond Cutter Discourse’. It’s full of cryptic but illuminating passages. Some people find them irritating but I find them very helpful. This passage is a dialogue between a famous monk called Subhūti and the Buddha. Those who are familiar with the Northern tradition will be acquainted with this *sūtra*.

‘Subhūti, what do you think? You should not maintain that the Tathāgata has this thought: “I shall take living beings across to enlightenment.” Subhūti, do not have that thought. And why? There are actually no living beings taken across to enlightenment by the Tathāgata. If there were living beings taken across by the Tathāgata then the Tathāgata would have the existence of a self, of others, of living beings and a life. Subhūti, the existence of a self, spoken of by the Tathāgata, is no existence of a self, but common people take it as an existence of a self. Subhūti, common people are spoken of by the Tathāgata as no common people, therefore they are called common people.’

(*Vajracchedikā Sūtra*, Ch 25, Dharma Realm Buddhist University trans.)

Over and over again it says similar things, like:

The Buddha said, ‘Subhūti, they are neither living beings nor not living beings. And why? Subhūti, living beings are spoken of by the Tathāgata as not living beings, therefore they are called living beings.’

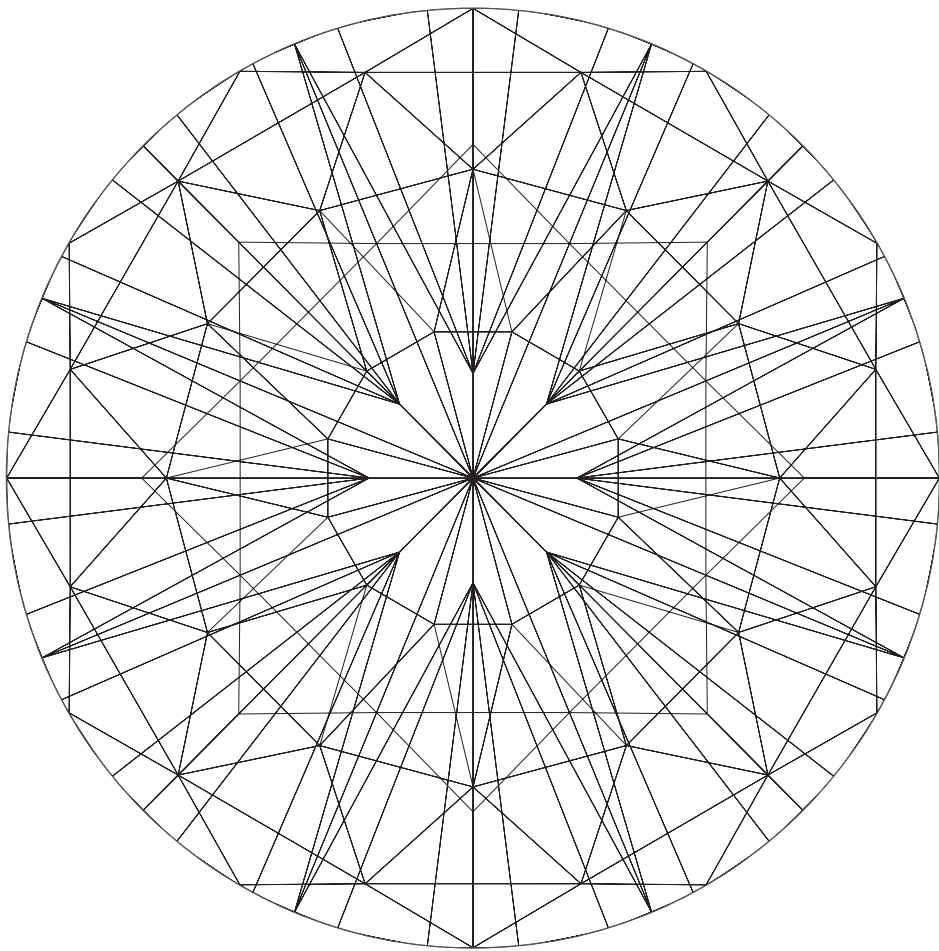
(Vajracchedikā Sūtra, Ch 21, DRBU trans.)

It’s deliberately ambiguous. It makes you think, ‘Huh? Either there is a living being or there isn’t. Either a living being is carried across to enlightenment or they are not... surely?’ The rational mind gets drawn to silence, is annoyed or illuminated, depending on the wisdom of the reader. These ambiguous statements express things very well, I feel, in the same manner that Ajahn Chah talked about Dhamma and Vinaya.

The last story I want to share with you took place at a Buddhist conference in Germany a number of years ago. A Tibetan Lama was teaching at the conference. Along with the main discussions there were side activities. A group of students of the Lama had the opportunity to receive teachings from him while the conference was going on. During the course of this one of the students said, ‘Rinpoche I’m very devoted to your teachings. I’m very happy to commit myself to the path but we do practices like the ‘Visualization of the 21 Taras’ – and Tara is supposed to be a female Buddha, the incarnation of active wisdom – but I’ve got a stumbling block because I

don't know whether Tara really exists. If she really exists, then I can devote myself to the practice fully and completely. But if she doesn't exist then I can't take it seriously because she's not there; we're just talking to empty space. So please Rinpoche, tell me definitively, does Tara exist or does she not?' The Rinpoche closed his eyes and thought for a moment, then opened them and said, 'She knows that she's not real.'

The response to this is silence.



HAPPILY EVER AFTER
VOLUME TWO * EMOTION

AJAHN AMARO

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