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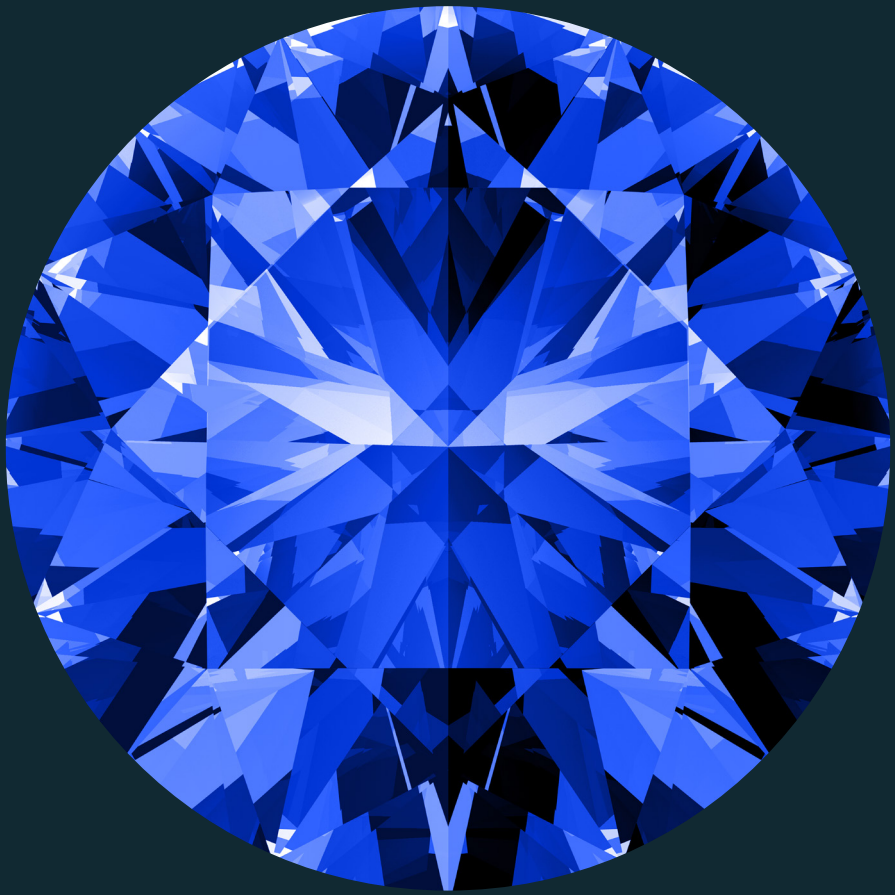
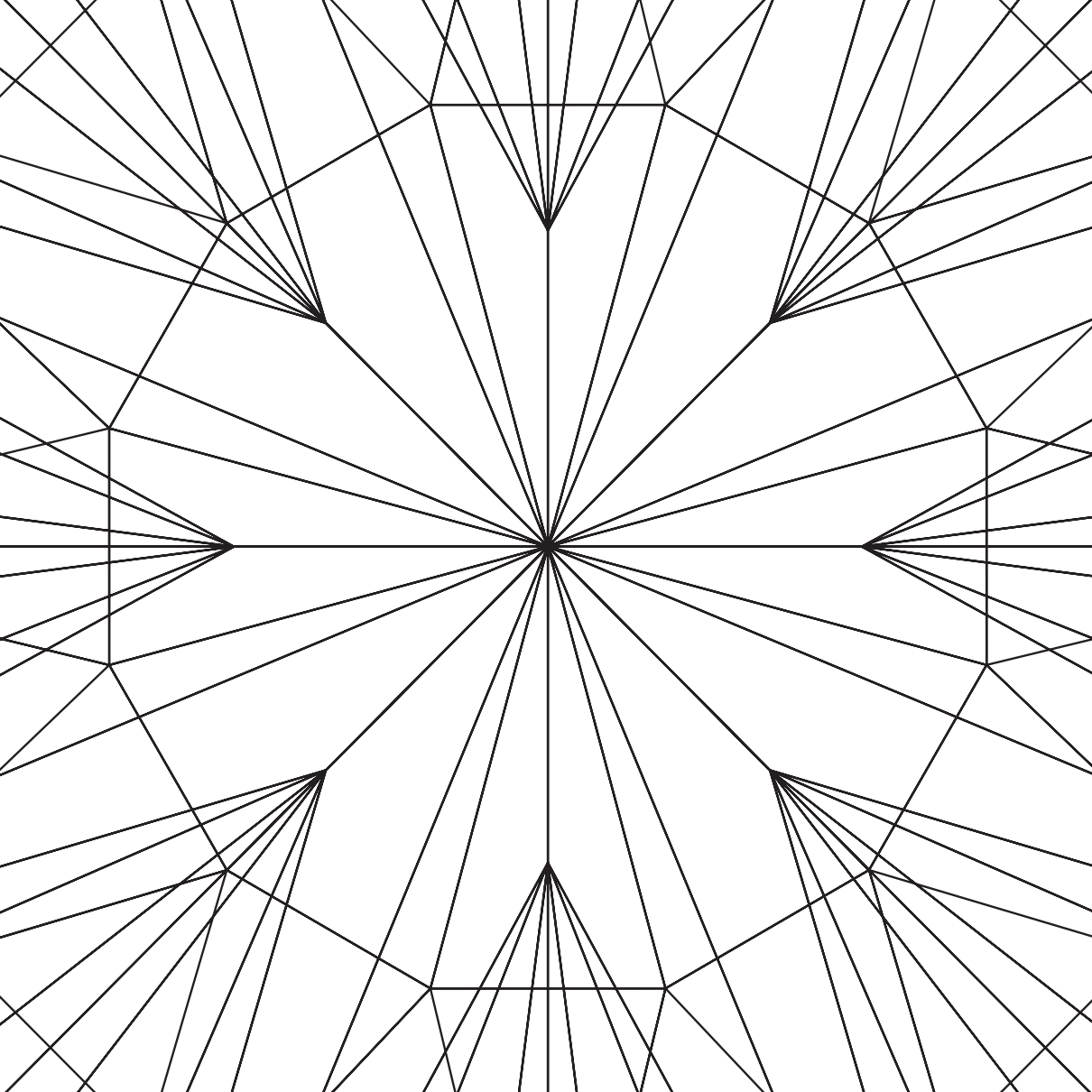
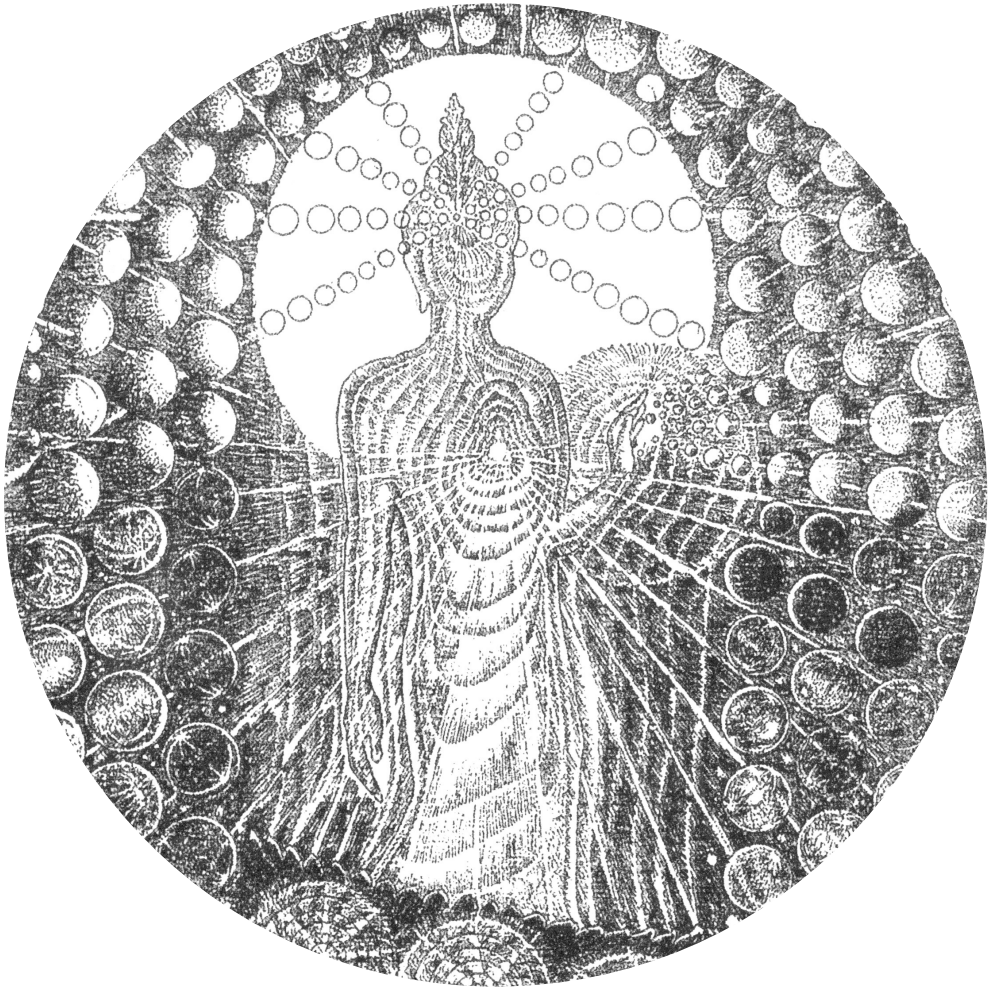




HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME FIVE Beyond

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



The Good, the Bad and the Unconditioned

This theme of 'The Good, the Bad and the Unconditioned' relates to a particular format that is found within the Buddha's teaching, an emphasis that is very helpful and significant in terms of our use of the Buddha's teachings, and which contrasts with a number of other religious traditions. For example, back in the 19th Century, Friedrich Nietzsche published a book called *Beyond Good and Evil* and that was a way of critiquing the moral limitations of the philosophies of his time, the Judaeo-Christian morals, or what had come down from Greek philosophy and earlier times. Friedrich Nietzsche was trying to point out that we can have a very limited view of what good and bad are, but if we are going to evolve, we have to look beyond that. I wouldn't suggest Friedrich Nietzsche was an Arahant but his effort was, at least conceptually, to look beyond the narrow confines of the ordinary ways that we think of good and bad, or good and evil, and the way that we as a society have of thinking that, 'If we could just wipe out evil all that would be left would be good, and that would be good.' I would suggest that it is not quite as simple as that.

With respect to these ideas of getting beyond good and evil, and letting go of standard moral forms, Nietzsche was perhaps the first person in modern

times to put that into words, but it became a popular philosophy through the 20th century, particularly the ’60s and ’70s. There was a sense in society of people breaking free from the limitations of materialistic thinking and the moral judgements of religious traditions, of Christian or Jewish thinking, as well as the idea of, ‘Why are we limited to that? Why do we have to follow those rules? Who said that’s what “good” is? Who said that’s what “bad” is? Who’s to say? It’s up to us as free individuals to decide.’ In that era, the counterculture, hippie era of the ’60s and ’70s there was a lot of throwing off of these kinds of limitations and the discarding of standard ideas of good and bad, right and wrong. There was an eagerness to reject conformity to the standards of society because, ‘That’s what your parents did.’ There was also a breaking out from materialistic viewpoints, and I feel there was a very good spirit in that.

During that period – having been influenced by ideas like those of Nietzsche, and also by what is found within some of the Advaita Vedanta, non-dualist Vedic teachings, and also within the Zen, the Tibetan and the Theravāda traditions – a number of spiritual teachers appeared who were directly critiquing the narrow views of good and bad, right and wrong, and society’s forms, talking about throwing out all the old conventions and assumptions and being completely free, unfettered beings. That was very popular in that era. With a lot of the drug-taking, and rejection of limits of the ’50s, there

was an upsurge of interest in teachings drawn from different traditions. I would say that probably most of the Advaita Vedanta, Vajrayāna and Zen masters, who were being so freely quoted, would have shaken their heads at some of the things being done, supposedly in the spirit of those non-dual teachings. Iconoclastic teachings like, 'If you meet the Buddha on the road kill him' were intended to help people break through narrow modes of thinking in very specific historic contexts. But the historical and social frameworks of these statements were ignored, in the '60s and '70s. Instead young people in the West took these decontextualized religious teachings at face value, calling them 'Crazy Wisdom'.

A few of us were there. I was born in 1956 so I was a late flower-child. I was just coming into my teens in the late '60s. That kind of Crazy Wisdom idea often entailed defying conventions, doing whatever you felt like as long as there was a sense of being aware and awake. Then, whatever impulse you felt, whether it was indulgent and following a desire, or destructive and following an angry feeling, or a jealous feeling, whatever you did, as long as you were fully awake and aware of it, then that was considered a pure act. If someone complained, 'You're behaving in a very threatening and angry way! You're a spiritual practitioner and shouldn't behave that way!' you could reply, 'I'm not angry, this is just Angry Buddha manifesting.' If someone said, 'You're being really greedy, why are you taking more than

your share?' you could retort, 'I'm not being greedy, this is just Greedy Buddha being manifested.'

There was a lot of this kind of talk in that era. Many people loved these attitudes and we rule-keeping monastics would often be on the receiving end of remarks about this. At gatherings where different Buddhist traditions were represented, people delighted in telling the famous Zen story of the two monks who arrived at the edge of a river, aiming to cross the ford through it. The river was flooded and they saw a young woman standing on the bank looking anxious and perplexed. She was scared she would be swept away if she attempted to cross. One of the monks picked up the girl, waded across the river and put her down on the other bank. The other monk waded along behind them. The girl thanked them and left. The two monks continued down the road together but the monk who didn't carry the girl, finally burst out with, 'How could you do that!? That was outrageous. That was completely against our rules. You know you're not supposed to touch a woman, let alone pick a girl up and carry her like that. That's disgraceful, improper, totally inappropriate!' The first monk turned around and spoke these famous words: 'I put the girl down by the river, but it seems that you are still carrying her.' I don't know how many times I have heard this story being told. Often there is a sideways glance, or a grin or a pointed glare towards us as well: 'Did you get that, Ajahn?'

It is helpful to consider the number of scandals that have occurred within the Buddhist world in recent years, concerning some of these 'Crazy Wisdom' masters who explicitly claimed that they are behaving from the viewpoint of the 'transcendent'. Often their behaviour, purporting to be the enlightened actions of a spiritual master, has been outrageous, sexually exploitative, destructive, and has ended up in court cases and worse.

I was at a conference of Buddhist teachers with His Holiness the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala back in the mid-nineties. There had been a recent batch of scandals in the Buddhist teaching community. The conduct of one famous teacher was brought into question, as he had been an extremely heavy drinker and had had numerous sexual partners, which his wife had tolerated. He died of alcoholism before the age of 50, and so his case was brought into question.

One of the teachers at the meeting asked His Holiness about Crazy Wisdom. What was his view about trying to teach from 'the transcendent position', discarding all the conventional forms of correct moral and appropriate behaviour? When this term 'Crazy Wisdom' was put to His Holiness he was utterly puzzled and turning to his translator, Thubten Jinpa, he asked, '"Crazy Wisdom"? What does that mean?' And then they went into a little huddle to try and clarify it. When they came out of the huddle His Holiness

said to us, 'I think such behaviour is just crazy, there is no wisdom in it. There is no such thing as "crazy wisdom"!'

In Tibetan Buddhism, he said, that didn't exist. There were certain heroes of the Himalayan Buddhist world, like Drukpa Kunley, whose behaviour was quite extreme in various ways, as was the behaviour of some of the Mahāsiddhas of India. But these figures and their actions were always carefully contextualized, they demonstrated their genuine spiritual mastery via visible yogic achievements.

At that same conference, a Zen teacher from America spoke up on the same issue. He had just separated himself from his own teacher. Even though he had just received Dharma transmission from this teacher, he was extremely critical of this teacher's behaviour. The words he used to describe his teacher were, 'He is a ******* narcissistic psychopath who believes his **** is his Dharma.' Very surprisingly, he added, 'I have no doubt about his enlightenment, there's no question about that, but his behaviour is atrocious.' His Holiness's English is quite good, so he understood this statement, and again he went into a huddle with Thubten Jinpa.

When His Holiness came out of the huddle he said, 'I think we have a different understanding about what "enlightenment" means.' This led to a very interesting discussion which made it crystal clear that His Holiness's point of view was in very close accord with that of the Theravāda perspective,

which we, as its representatives, were asked to describe. Namely that if a person is genuinely and fully enlightened, then their behaviour is scrupulously careful, thoughtful and always harmless to others. Enlightened persons might sometimes be eccentric, but they never act self-indulgently or harmfully. Their behaviour is thus the diametrical opposite of the behaviours of the so-called 'enlightened' – but actually uncontrolled and libidinous – teachers, whom we and His Holiness had been discussing.

Unfortunately, this unskilful behaviour of some religious teachers persists even today. I feel that many of the distressing situations that have occurred within the Buddhist field have come about due to a radical misunderstanding, both on the part of the students and the teachers, of how the conditioned realm and the Unconditioned relate to each other. We need to understand how the ultimate reality relates to our everyday behaviour and the social sphere, and our concepts of good and bad. Enlightened behaviour does not mean defying the standards of noble, moral behaviour in society, rather it means the opposite.

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From a Theravāda perspective, and also from the perspective of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, if someone has realized the Unconditioned, is awakened and embodies that transcendent reality, then their behaviour will naturally be noble and harmless and respectful of the lives of other beings. In the Pali

Canon there is an interesting pair of teachings of the Buddha (A 9.7 & A 9.8) where he talks to two different wanderers, Sutavā and Sajjha, about the conduct of enlightened beings. In these *suttas* the Buddha says an Arahant is incapable of deliberately taking the life of another being. They might tread on an ant because their attention was focused somewhere else, and they might not know that, but they are incapable of deliberately taking life. They are incapable of stealing, of taking what is not given. They are naturally celibate, they have no interest in engaging with others sexually, or with themselves in any sexual way. And they are incapable of telling a lie, their voice cannot form the words of an untruth. The first four of the Eight Precepts, against killing, stealing, sexual activity and lying, are absolutely intrinsic to the nature of an enlightened being.

With regard to the Fifth Precept, the reader might be wondering, 'Are all Arahants teetotallers?' In those two *suttas*, the fifth principle an Arahant keeps is, interestingly, not related to intoxicants but is related to possessions and material security. It says an Arahant 'cannot lay up a store of things', they won't keep something they get given today for tomorrow. They won't keep a bit extra just in case. One who is enlightened does not deliberately stash things away for the next day but lives with a natural sense of trust and faith. Our monastic rule reflects that same principle. Of food that is offered on any given morning, we eat what we need and we give up what is

left over, and we have no control over what happens tomorrow. Our Vinaya rule reflects what is the natural behaviour of an enlightened being – we let what we are offered today be enough, and what happens tomorrow nobody knows... we will see.

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There is a would-be 'life-affirming' idea, in Western Buddhist and other spiritual circles, that if you're totally enlightened you can do whatever you feel like. Even if not inclined towards indulgent behaviours, 'Why bother being a renunciant? Why bother being a nun or a monk? Krishnamurti says why bother dressing up in robes and have all these rules? Just be aware!' Naturally it is a point that is frequently made by people who are not in robes or by those who are thinking of leaving them. Oftentimes we are good friends with the people who say these things and we have interesting discussions together on a regular basis.

In a way, it is a fair point to make. Why would one use these ancient and traditional forms, why have so many rules, if the point is to be free and to transcend all limitations?

I feel, however, that this point of view is based on a fundamental misunderstanding, a misinterpretation of the relationship between the conditioned and the Unconditioned. If we take the Buddha as our archetype and exemplar, if he was completely enlightened and totally incapable of

suffering, why did he choose to live as a penniless monk? Why did he choose to live on alms-food, travelling around on foot through North-East India for 45 years? This is a very significant point and one that doesn't usually get considered or mentioned by the more free-wheeling 'enlightened' types.

There is a teaching that relates to this issue that is found in a dialogue between the Buddha and a man called Māgandiya (M 75). Māgandiya is apparently a life-affirming, sensualist type, so he can't figure out why anyone interested in freedom and happiness would not want to enjoy everything in the sensory world: 'It's all there for the taking, just feast yourself. It's all there to be enjoyed, come on, join the party.' He thinks the Buddha is a life-negator, 'a destroyer of growth' *(bhūnahuno)*, and asks the Buddha what's the point of renunciation because it seems like such a loss, 'Why give up so many good things, which are so beautiful, interesting, delightful and enjoyable?' The Buddha then says to Māgandiya, 'Māgandiya, imagine if there was a man who was wealthy and who lived a luxurious life, indulging in many sensual pleasures. Then, when his life came to an end, on account of his good conduct, he reappeared as a *deva* prince in the Nandana Grove, up in the Tavatiṃsa Heaven, the Heaven of the Thirty-three Deities. There this *deva* prince has 500 beautiful celestial nymphs as his retinue. All that being the case do you think that he would be interested, would he pine for his life as a human being, with its human sensual pleasures?' Māgandiya

said, 'Well no, of course not, there's no comparison. If he was a *deva* prince up in the Nandana grove, life in the human realm would be of no interest to him – heavenly sensual pleasures, divine bliss such as that is more excellent and sublime than human sensual pleasure.'

Then the Buddha says, 'So too, Māgandiya, the kind of happiness I enjoy, with a heart freed from greed, hatred and delusion, is a more extreme kind of happiness and delight. It is a delight apart from sensual pleasures, apart from unwholesome states, which surpasses divine bliss. Since I take delight in that, I do not envy what is inferior.' This is to say that the Buddha's happiness, the bliss of the awakened, liberated mind, is far more delightful than any happiness that can be found through sensual experiences. It's as if the Buddha was saying, 'It is more delightful and complete a happiness than any that you can find here in the world through food and music, or your fashionable clothes and decorations. It's not because I dismiss or criticize that kind of happiness. It's just that I'm not interested by it, because the kind of happiness that I know is far beyond that. There is no comparison.'

The Buddha is pointing out that the joyfulness of the awakened mind, the free mind, is such that there's no need to seek after particular kinds of sensual experience to find happiness, because the awake mind, the free mind in itself is intrinsically joyful, peaceful, content, fulfilled, and filled with delight. Therefore, the more simple one's life is on the material plane,

the easier it is to appreciate that inner happiness, that inner freedom. This reality is what lies behind many of the principles he established in his teachings over the years, including his advice for skilful living.

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On the subject of going beyond good and evil Ajahn Chah has said:

> If there is no long there is no short, if there is no right, there can be no wrong. People these days study away, looking for good and evil, and that which is beyond good and evil they know nothing of. All they know is the right and wrong. 'I'm going to take what is right, I don't want to know about the wrong. Why should I?' If you try to take only what is right, in a short time it will go wrong again, right leads to wrong. People keep searching among the right and wrong and don't try to find what is neither right nor wrong. They study about good and evil, they search for virtue, but they know nothing of that which is beyond good and evil. They study the long and short but that which is neither long nor short they know nothing of. ... They didn't study that which is beyond good and evil, this is what you should study.
>
> ('Still Flowing Water', *Collected Teachings*, p 373)

In this way we can dwell in a natural state, which is peace and tranquillity, if we are criticized, we remain undisturbed. If we are praised, we're

undisturbed. Let things be in this way, don't be influenced by others. This is freedom. Knowing the two extremes for what they are and not stopping at either side, we can experience well-being. This is genuine happiness and peace, transcending all things of the world. We transcend all good and evil and are above cause and effect, beyond birth and death.

('Nibbāna Paccayo Hotu', *Being Dharma,* p 193)

The original mind is beyond good and bad. This is the original nature of the mind. If you feel happy over experiencing a pleasant mind object, that's delusion. If you feel unhappy over experiencing any unpleasant mind object, that is delusion. Unpleasant mind-objects make you suffer, pleasant ones make you happy, this is the world. Mind-objects come with the world, they are the world. They give rise to happiness, and suffering, good and evil, and everything that is subject to impermanence and uncertainty. When you separate from the original mind everything becomes uncertain – there is just unending birth and death, uncertainty and apprehensiveness, suffering and hardship, without any way of halting it, or bringing it to cessation.

('The Path to Peace', *Collected Teachings*, p 713)

The teaching of Buddhism is about giving up evil and practising good, and then when evil is given up and goodness is established, you must let go of both good and evil. We have already heard enough about wholesome

> and unwholesome conditions to understand something about them, so I'd like to talk about the Middle Way, that is, the path to transcend both those things.
>
> ('The Middle Way Within', *Collected Teachings*, p 1)

The basic structure within the Buddha's teachings is that encouragement to let go of unwholesome impulses. If they are heedlessly followed, if there is an angry, a greedy, a selfish or a lustful impulse, if those are followed and acted upon, then there's necessarily going to be a painful result coming from that. If those impulses are recognized and understood, the training is to not think of those as absolutely evil or that they make you a bad person in an absolute way, but rather to see it in terms of impersonal natural law: if this impulse is followed, pain will surely come afterward. This angry feeling was acted upon so here is the painful result. We train ourselves to recognize those unwholesome and unskilful impulses – these are called *akusala*, 'unwholesome' actions.

Those qualities that are wholesome, that lead to peace of mind, to harmony between ourselves and others, to a brightness of heart, to kindness, generosity, unselfishness, and restraint with regard to destructive or greedy or selfish impulses, if those are followed and developed, this is not regarded as an absolute good but rather as simply *kusala*, 'wholesome' behaviour. It is realized that when the mind inclines towards generosity and unselfishness, and towards concentration, the result is pleasant for the

person concerned and is also pleasant for other people connected with this person. Everybody gains.

Delusion is the way in which the mind tries to make the impermanent permanent. It tries to make the unsatisfactory satisfactory, and it tries to make what is not-self into self. That's a classic description of delusion. It is when we look for certainty in that which is uncertain and when we look for satisfaction in that which can't satisfy. It doesn't mean we can't have pleasant experiences, like Māgandiya: 'How do you say no to all this stuff? If you eat a sweet mango, isn't it delicious?' Māgandiya doesn't use this example in that *sutta*, but I imagine that the Buddha would say, 'Yes, it's delicious' – but how many mangoes can you eat? If you are hungry and you are given a mango, and you are not diabetic, the sweetness is very pleasant to you, you say 'It's delicious.' However, if you think eating a mango is happiness then two mangoes, three, four, five mangoes, fifteen mangoes... will that automatically make you happier?

Ajahn Chah, being the kind of Dhammic extremist that he was, had a way of investigating this question. He would on occasion give his mind what it wanted. If the reader is acquainted with Ajahn Chah's teachings, they will have noticed that a number of his Dhamma talks involve food of various kinds. One year, when he was still a young monk, the mango season came around. On the morning alms-round he could see himself getting excited as

he and the line of monks walked through the village. While very properly looking at the ground and walking along, he couldn't help but notice that the mango trees were laden and the golden fruits were plentiful this year. One after another the villagers made their offerings and the bowls were filled by the end of the round. Eager to get back to the monastery, he saw his mind getting overexcited by the prospect of the sweet fruits. So he said to himself, 'Mangoes? You want mangoes? That will make you happy? I'll give you mangoes.' He ate thirty-seven of them, as I recall. He kept going until he physically couldn't eat any more. 'You want mangoes, you'll get mangoes. Let's see if that does bring you lasting happiness!'

There was another occasion he spoke of when he followed a similar practice. This was a festival day when local people offered many little pyramidal sweets. These are made of the sticky gluten paste you get from rice, wrapped in a banana leaf. They are chewy and gluey, with sweet stuff in the middle. They are called *kanom sai*. The time of this festival was approaching. He could hear his mind thinking, 'It's coming, festival day is coming!' He could see his mind creating around these *kanom sai*, and so, again, he did the same thing; he ate eighty-four of them, I believe. 'You want them? You really want them? Fine, I'll give you them.' He had a big alms-bowl filled with these things.

He was a very hands-on kind of teacher, he would use object lessons such as these to get the message through in non-conceptual, non-verbal, visceral ways: 'This will make you happy – you believe that lasting happiness is in the *kanom sai* – so more will make you happier, right? OK let's test it out!' By the time he got to number eighty-four, the lesson was not quite done as the second part was living with the results! He would do this kind of exercise for himself and, if it seemed useful, encourage that for others: 'Once in a while, give your mind what it's asking for, as long as it's not breaking any Precepts. Why? Because if you keep saying "No, no, I shouldn't, I shouldn't," then you make it powerful, you give the craving strength.'

The delusion is that the happiness is in the *kanom sai*, or in the mango or whatever, but it's not, the happiness is in the mind. These lessons were about breaking the delusion that happiness is in the sweet, and that therefore more sweets equals more happiness. He would do it deliberately. When he was getting full and part of him was begging to stop, he would say, 'No, you have to keep going, you wanted this, so here it is. Keep going.' He would, until he was literally incapable of eating any more. Then he would mindfully watch. 'You got what you wanted, now how is it?'

During the day, he would watch his mind, while his guts were churning away: 'You got what you wanted, how does it feel? Where's the happiness?' It was a reflective process. He was using that, examining it, 'You followed

that, you believed the promise that that was where happiness was, that it was in that taste, but now where is it? What's the result?' That kind of careful observation needs to be carried out free of self-view. It's not to create self-hatred: 'I'm a bad monk, I've got so many food obsessions, I'm awful!' Rather it is saying, 'Here's the cause, here's the effect. Now, how does it feel? What's the result of it?' And then you let the result speak for itself, again in a non-conceptual, visceral, somatic way. In this manner he became extremely wise around desire and obsessions.

I should add: Please follow this advice with great care! This is a '**health warning**', so please use this kind of practice with great caution! As they say, 'Don't try this at home!' That said, I would not belittle the fact that these were very skilful ways of breaking those delusions. What the mind is saying is, 'This makes me happy, hearing this beautiful sound makes me happy,' or 'That's a delicious taste,' or 'That's a beautiful object,' but it's not – from its own side it is just what it is, neither good nor bad, beautiful or ugly. When we hear music and think, 'It's so beautiful, I love that music.' We don't love the music, we love what happens in our heart and mind when the music is heard. What we love is our own mind. It's the music which triggers that effect but we don't love the music, we love the place the music takes us to.

The more that we recognize that mind is the thing which really matters, the more we then recognize that happiness is not dependent on the object, instead our happiness is dependent on our mind and our attitude. The more we work in that way on the mind, the heart, developing skilful attitudes, the more our happiness becomes independent of circumstances, whether people approve of us or disapprove of us. If we have a cold, rainy weekend, not many people in England are happy about that. But if there have just been six weeks of baking hot weather, with everything parched under cloudless skies, then cold and rainy is great. 'At last!' All perception is conditioned.

The more we recognize that 'The mind is the forerunner of all things' (Dhp 1), the more our happiness becomes independent of circumstances, whether we are healthy or sick. It doesn't mean that we're numb or insensitive, but our happiness is independent of the ups and downs of life.

In terms of Dhamma practice, what we can use effectively on a day to day basis is simply to be aware that this particular set of perceptions at this moment has come from certain causes. We don't have to name exactly how. It's sufficient to be able to say, 'The pattern of perceptions and feelings in this moment has come together through a huge variety of causes and conditions and, right now, it feels this way. In this moment, it's like this.' Just as if we are listening to an orchestra: there are maybe sixty or seventy instruments present, we don't have to know what

each instrument is playing, or know how each instrument works, how the strings vibrate, or how the air oscillates inside the flutes, drums or trombones, but we know the piece of music sounds like *this*.

When the mind knows 'This is the way it is', that which knows this is not identified with the object known. The greater the degree of *sati-paññā*, mindfulness and wisdom, the greater the degree of insight into the way things are and the more our mind will know the qualities of this present reality without it being clouded by greed, hatred, delusion or fear.

Then that wise appreciation of the conditioned, the experiential field of this moment, can help the mind to let go, to be awake and to realize the Unconditioned. The Unconditioned never disappears, but because of our attention to what we see, hear, touch, taste, smell and think, we miss it. We don't notice the space in the room, because our attention goes to the objects. We don't notice the spaces between the words, because our attention is going to the words. If you hold up your hand and ask yourself, 'What do I see?' you are most likely to say, 'A hand with five fingers.' We don't say, 'I see the space around my hand and between my fingers.'

For the most part we don't notice space, we don't notice the silence behind and between sounds. We don't notice stillness because our attention gets caught by movement. Ajahn Sumedho often emphasizes this, drawing our attention to the 'sound of silence'. By noticing space, the *citta* is aided in

recognizing the suchness of things, the way things are, rather than being caught up in their content. 'In this moment it's this way.' This which knows the present is attuned to it, but there is also a liberation *from* the present; there's a transcendence of it.

Just because the mind is awake to the Unconditioned doesn't mean it's disconnected from the conditioned. It's a participatory reality. I don't like to use words like 'non-attachment' all the time, or being 'the watcher', or 'the observer', I like the phrase 'unentangled participation'. It's a bit of a cumbersome term but it can be shrunk down to 'hands-on letting go' if you like.

Just because the mind is detached it doesn't mean to say it's passive or abstracted, dissociated. Sometimes what we detach from is our hesitancy to act. Therefore, letting go can lead to more activity and more engagement. If it was impossible to realize the Unconditioned and simultaneously engage with the conditioned, how could the Buddha have ever taught? How could he ever have established the Sangha, the Fourfold Assembly of lay-people and monastics?

The Buddha was an incredibly creative thinker, highly observant and imaginative. His lists of similes, the completely unique ways in which he described things, arose spontaneously when talking to people. He'd be talking to a farmer, and he would say that there are eleven things to take

care of in terms of looking after cows, in cow husbandry (at M 33), and then he would match that list with exactly with what you need to do to look after the mind. With a brahmin who believed in ritual bathing for purification, the Buddha would use similes relating to water (S 46.35). When talking with fire worshippers he would use similes related to fire (S 35.28). And so forth.

Out of the awakening of the mind to the Dhamma, to the fundamental reality, the Buddha's attunement to the conditioned world became more pronounced and resulted in an ongoing harmonious engagement with all things. There was mindfulness and wisdom, kindness and compassion, and the mind's imaginative and verbal capacity to put things together and explain was unobstructed. That's why he was 'the unexcelled teacher of gods and humans'. Because he could notice a situation and his mind would spontaneously come up with a teaching – forms and images that were meaningful to that person at that time.

In some of the commentarial literature there is the sense that an Arahant is almost like a zombie – they can't look after themselves, can't make their own decisions. This is ridiculous. It's a big mistake to think that if the mind is awake to the Unconditioned and realizes Nibbāna it is therefore disconnected from the everyday sense world and it can't do anything practical. The life of the Buddha completely belies that. He was marvellously active, thoughtful and attentive to everything around him, he was very observant, and he was doing all that while being totally awake

to the transcendent reality. The one does not occlude or shut out the other, but rather they are two aspects of the same nature.

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The teaching about *sīla*, virtue and conduct, is to do with recognizing the unwholesome and letting go of it, and recognizing the wholesome and cultivating, sustaining it. This is what the Buddha also spoke of as Right Effort. That's the structure in terms of conduct. Then, as the various quotations from Ajahn Chah pointed out, the challenge is to let go, to not attach even to goodness. On a basic level we might say, 'This is bad and wrong, we need to wipe it out; this is good and helpful, so we should hang on to this.' That has been a familiar theme in Western society hasn't it? To try and destroy what is labelled as 'evil'. But how often has the effort to destroy 'evil', to wipe out what we don't like or approve of, led to more harm and destruction? There are many painful instances: the Christian Church persecuting heretics, burning witches; Nazi Germany wiping out Jews, gay people and the Roma... the list could go on, and include many many countries across the world. 'Get rid of what we see as evil, and what will remain will be our version of good.' However, in those very efforts, some of which might have started out with a good intention, the very effort of judging others as good and bad, and trying to wipe out the bad and leave only the good, can end up doing far more harm.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn wrote, in *The Gulag Archipelago*:

> If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. Unfortunately, the battle line between good and evil runs through the heart of every person.

Yes, if only we could isolate the bad and destroy it, then all that would be left would be the good. But life doesn't work that way. As Solzhenitsyn insightfully points out, the heart is capable of the wholesome and the noble and the beautiful and it is capable of the harmful and destructive and everything in between.

When Ajahn Chah speaks about letting go of dualistic ways of thinking, it's about letting go of the Dhamma as a conditioned structure. Letting go of the ideas, letting go of the forms. In this respect, the teachings of wisdom, and particularly the teachings about not-self, are very important. The teaching the Buddha gave, that we have to let go of the unwholesome and cultivate the wholesome, maximises the conditions for helping the mind to awaken. In a way, evil is not absolutely evil, good is not absolutely good, but the reason we do cultivate goodness is that it helps things to be simple. It uncomplicates our heart and mind, it clarifies – goodness clarifies. On the other hand, if I act in ways which are deceitful, destructive, selfish, unkind, cruel, that all complicates, that makes the heart confused and tense. One

can say, ultimately, there is no good and evil, as it is put in *Hamlet*, 'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so' (Act 2 Sc. 2). There is nothing that is either intrinsically good or intrinsically bad, but our thinking makes it so – this is the way it is.

The Buddha points out that what we call 'wholesome', *kusala*, is that which helps to clarify the mind and is what helps to lead us to simplicity and ease of heart. The 'unwholesome', *akusala*, meanwhile, leads our minds to confusion, to alienation, insecurity and stress and therefore it makes things harder to see and understand. If you have told someone a lie, during the day, or if you have cheated in some respect during the day, or you've killed something during the day, when you sit down to meditate, what is right there? You remember the lie, you remember those unkind words, you remember that deceitful, destructive act. It's right here. That's what you feel. If instead you've acted in a way that is harmless and kind, and you've been honest, then when you sit down to meditate in the evening, there is an easeful brightness in the heart. The whole system is settled, relaxed, alert and open. That is why goodness is 'good'; because it helps to clarify the mind. That's why badness is 'bad'; because it confuses the mind. This is a non-personal process of cause and effect and the essence of it, in terms of the Buddha's approach, is that good and bad are not absolutes but

rather to be known and worked with according to the effects they have on the human level. When the *citta* is suffused with peacefulness and the clarity that comes as a result of skilful action, then wisdom helps the mind to awaken to the Unconditioned, the ultimate reality of things.

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Good and bad are familiar to us, but the Unconditioned is mysterious; in the West we didn't grow up with this idea, so we might not understand it. The Unconditioned, *asaṅkhata*, is a term referring to the fundamental nature of reality, to the transcendent nature of Dhamma. There are several passages where the Buddha speaks about this directly, particularly in the collection of teachings called the *Udāna* or 'The Inspired Utterances'. The eighth chapter of the *Udāna*, has two important *suttas* on this theme:

> There is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unconditioned.
>
> If there was not the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unconditioned, then liberation from the born, the originated, the created, the conditioned, would not be possible.
>
> But because there is the Unborn, the Unoriginated, the Uncreated, the Unconditioned, therefore liberation from the born, the originated, the created, the conditioned, is possible.
>
> (Ud 8.3, Iti 43)

This is one of Ajahn Sumedho's favourite teachings. It is reminding us that beyond our habitual ways of seeing the world in terms of sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought, emotion and imagination, beyond our habits of seeing things in terms of self and other, there is a fundamental reality – timeless, selfless, unlocated, 'outside of cause and above effect' as Ajahn Chah would put it.

If the spiritual path is being developed wisely – 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma' (*dhammānudhammāpaṭipatti*) – along the way to that full clarity and security, the inclination towards virtue and simplicity will naturally get stronger (as in A 9.7 & A 9.8, above). In the *Jātaka* stories, the stories of the Buddha's previous births, an interesting point is made (in Jāt 431). It is said that during the course of his incalculable number of lives, the Bodhisatta broke most of the Precepts, he took life, he engaged in sexual misconduct, he stole things, he indulged in intoxicants, all of which is woven into many of the *Jātaka* stories. However, it says the one Precept he never broke after he made the Bodhisatta Vow was the Fourth Precept. This is because truthfulness is intrinsic to the vow to become a Buddha – the adherence of the heart to Dhamma means it is incapable of deceit. So, through all those lifetimes, where he seduced people's wives, got drunk on various different things, or was a warrior who killed many people, he never told a lie. I understand this is mythology, but I feel it's an important and powerful myth. During that entire course of time, he was

not capable of any kind of deceit. In a way this puts the Fourth Precept in a very unique position – the quality that is most naturally intrinsic to the awake mind is truthfulness.

It might be a bit intimidating to hear this, intimidating to our egos and our bad habits, but it's also refreshing to the heart. It's something which makes sense. If Dhamma is fully awakened to, it expresses itself in truthful words.

Sometimes we find we can heartily rejoice in being on retreat or sitting in meditation. We love to meditate, the mind is peaceful and quiet. You can forget about your body, forget about other people, forget about your job, your possessions, your list of urgent things to do, your unanswered emails. It's all gone! The mind can just focus on the ultimate reality of the present moment. We love to be on retreats, in a retreat centre, other people doing the cooking, everyone is silent, we don't have to perform socially, we don't have to be anybody. We can revere the Unconditioned, the mind in a free state is enjoying that quality of blessed simplicity. However, in that enjoyment, and investing in that formless and uncomplicated quality we can unconsciously be rejecting having to be a person, having a job, having emails that need to be answered urgently, having to talk to people, having to deal with the body and our illnesses. This is quite common in the Buddhist meditation world; a relishing of the Unconditioned and a dismissiveness towards the conditioned: 'I don't want to bother with that

grubby reality, that's just the conditioned world. I'm only interested in the Unconditioned, that's all. Enlightenment! That's all that matters.' I've had those attitudes myself.

However, this is a very limited, distorted and destructive view. By trying to grasp the Unconditioned, we're actually creating more birth. We're being born into attachment to simplicity, a disconnection from the sense world, from personality, relationships and so forth. This is destructive because we're thereby creating the fear that '*the world*' is going to intrude and bother '*me*'. This *vibhavataṇhā*, the attempted rejection of the world, ironically, only serves to reify the world, tying our mind more firmly to ignorance, delusion and the painful wheel of birth and death.

The story of the Buddha's enlightenment speaks to this issue of the relationship between the conditioned and Unconditioned. The Bodhisatta sat down under the Bodhi Tree and made his resolve to not move from the spot until full and complete enlightenment had been realized. He knew that the *pāramitās*, the spiritual perfections, were very close to being fulfilled.

The armies of Māra show up, representing the forces of fear, of desire and lastly of responsibility. To all of these the Buddha responds in the same way; he doesn't oppose Māra, he doesn't attack Māra, he just says, 'I know you Māra.' In this respect Māra is the force of death, Māra actually means 'death'. Rather than trying to destroy evil and wipe it out, the gesture of the

Buddha is to know it. That's the way both good and bad are transcended, both the harmful and the beneficial: 'I know this. I know what you are. I know what this is.' At that moment, Māra is defeated, but he won't retreat. He won't admit defeat. Even though none of his attacks have worked, he still tries to intimidate the Buddha: 'Who do you think you are? You walked out on your wife and child – you're a failed husband. You walked out on your five ascetic companions and you started eating ordinary food – you're a failed yogi and now you are trying to pretend to everyone that you are fully enlightened. You're a failure! You are nothing, you have no right to claim any kind of leadership. It's I, I'm the only one that can claim rightful leadership of the universe. I am the one who is foremost in the Great Trichiliocosm. Isn't that right?' His vast army roars, 'Yes indeed Your Majesty, you are truly the foremost in the universe.' Māra then says to the Buddha, 'See, these are my witnesses, whom do you have to bear witness to what you say you are?'

This is where we find the perfect representation of the connection between the conditioned and the Unconditioned: the Buddha reaches down and touches the earth and calls on the Earth Goddess, Dharaṇī, to be his witness. She rises up and declares to Māra, 'This is my true son, and he has done everything necessary to claim full and complete enlightenment and you, Māra, are defeated.' At this point she unwraps her hair and a huge flood

appears from her unbound tresses. Mara's armies are washed away, to come back later on their knees with flowers and apologies.

This Earth Witness gesture is highly significant. At first, in the heart of the Buddha, while the internal experience of enlightenment was there, the *citta* was completely liberated but as long as this was just an internal experience of the Unconditioned, the liberation wasn't complete – Māra wouldn't concede defeat. It was only when the Buddha reached down and touched the earth and called on the Earth Goddess to witness to his Awakening, only when her declaration and her avowal of kinship with the Buddha were pronounced, that Māra was entirely overcome.

The Buddha's touching of the earth, and the Earth Goddess's response, are a recognition that there is the Unconditioned but there is also the conditioned – there's this body that needs to breathe, which needs to eat, which has a biological, evolutionary source, which experiences gravity and is connected to the lives of other beings. Yes, there is this, and in that gesture of acknowledging the conditioned, total and complete enlightenment is fulfilled. The embracing, the acceptance, of the world leads to freedom from its boundaries. What's more, the result of that full acceptance and attunement is that the world rings out in joy – the *devas* celebrate, the earth quakes, and, as Joseph Campbell described the response of the forces of nature:

> Sitting at the world navel, pressing back through the welling creative force that was surging into and through his own being, the Buddha actually broke back into the void beyond, and – ironically – the universe immediately burst into bloom.
>
> (*The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, Ch. 1, Pt. 3)

The process of enlightenment, at least according to this mythic scenario, was thus not fulfilled until the conditioned had been fully accepted, symbolized by the touching of the earth. From that time forth the Buddha travelled and taught for 45 years, living as a wandering monk in North-East India, sharing his understanding. This engagement with the world, and offering of the teaching, was not an imposition on his freedom but rather an expression of it.

The Buddha's life is an archetype for us. It demonstrates how the Middle Way is this perfect, mysterious integration of the conditioned and the Unconditioned. It encourages the understanding that 'Each something is a celebration of the nothing that supports it,' as John Cage put it. If the good and bad, the conditioned, are grasped and identified with, they lead to limited, worldly goals; if the Unconditioned alone is conceptually grasped, it leads to fear and alienation; if they are recognized and integrated in the Middle Way then the conditioned is a natural expression of the

heart's awakening. There is both a total liberation from the limits of the conditioned, but also a complete attunement to the conditioned. As in the life of the Buddha himself, the Unconditioned is embodied.

‘We Need to Talk About Nibbāna’

‘We Need to Talk about Nibbāna’ was a statement made by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, in his book, *Nibbāna for Everyone*. It is an excellent resource for wise reflections on this often misunderstood area of the teachings. One of the themes that he emphasises is that we have some strange ideas about Nibbāna in the Buddhist tradition, in Thailand, in the West and other places. Therefore it’s good to begin by clarifying – what do we mean by this word, Nibbāna (in Pali) or Nirvāṇa, (in Sanskrit). What possible use could this word have for us? What kind of meaning might it have in our lives?

Ajahn Buddhadāsa felt the subject was so important that he said, ‘If we don’t talk about Nibbāna, Buddhism is as good as dead.’ Ajahn Buddhadāsa is one who doesn’t hold back, he’s very straightforward, so that’s a significant statement to contemplate, to reflect on, ‘If we don’t talk about Nibbāna, Buddhism is as good as dead.’ That’s a declaration to get our attention, so why did he make it?

Ajahn Pasanno and I also wrote a book about Nibbāna, entitled *The Island,* with a similar intention. We spent about ten years putting it together. We also felt that Nibbāna was a much neglected subject, something that was curiously little talked about in Buddhist circles in the West. Hence we put

forth a steady effort to bring this book into being in order to provide as clear a picture of the territory as we could.

Chapter One, line one, begins with a statement about the meaning of the word:

> Nibbāna, or Nirvāṇa, in Sanskrit, is a word that is used to describe an experience. When the heart is free of all obscurations, and is utterly in accord with nature, ultimate reality, Dhamma, it experiences perfect peace, joy and contentment.
>
> This set of qualities is what Nibbāna describes. The purpose of this book is to outline particular teachings of the Buddha that point to and illuminate ultimate reality, and ways this can be realized. From the Buddhist point of view, the realization of Nibbāna is the fulfilment of the highest human potential, a potential that exists in all of us, regardless of nationality or creed.
>
> (*The Island*, p 1)

When we consider Nibbāna, it needs to be appreciated that the way the word is used in different Buddhist cultures can vary a lot. One way that it's commonly talked about is that at the end of the life of an Arahant, they then realize Nibbāna, or it is said they 'go to Nibbāna'. This way of speaking represents Nibbāna as some kind of super-heaven, like a kind of special prize, a place where the Arahants stay forever and never get born

again into any other realm. I'm kind of joking, but also kind of not joking. This is the sort of language that gets used very often in common speech. In Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teachings he makes it very clear that Nibbāna has got nothing to do with death. But rather, the word Nibbāna is speaking about the potential, the quality of the heart when it awakens to reality, to its own reality, which is the reality of all things. When the heart awakens to Dhamma, then the word Nibbāna refers to the experience of that; what is felt in the heart when it knows the truth, when the heart awakens to the Dhamma, what it experiences is Nibbāna – the great peace.

The word Nibbāna, where does that come from? Again, to borrow from Ajahn Buddhadāsa's description, he makes it clear that the word Nibbāna is an ordinary household word in Indian languages. The example he gives is, 'If you've cooked a pot of rice, it's too hot to eat, so you put it on the side to cool down a bit. You let the rice Nibbāna before it's the right temperature to eat.' It just means 'cooled down'. It's not a very refined term; it's not a deeply philosophical or unusual word. It just means 'cool, cooled down, chilled out'.

The Buddha, just like Ajahn Buddhadāsa, liked to make statements that get the attention. The Buddha liked to speak in ways that people would notice. In his time, spiritual seekers thought in terms of generating *tapas*. It's a Sanskrit word, also a Pali word, meaning 'heat'. If you have a lot of spiritual

power, it's considered that you have a lot of such 'heat', a lot of *tapas*. The more austerity, the more painful practices that you undertake, the more *tapas*, power, you generate. Lord Shiva was considered the ultimate *tapasin*, the supreme spiritually powerful being. That quality of 'heat' was considered the ultimate strength or goodness. The Buddha, startlingly, uses the opposite, 'coolness', not 'heat', 'Let's go for coolness, Nibbāna: not heating up, not more heat, less heat, lower it down, turn it down to coolness.' It was a skilful means that he used, in my understanding, to get people's attention. People would thereby be caused to consider, 'He is not talking about what we're familiar with, he's talking about something else altogether. He's talking about "cooling down". What is it that's cooling down?' It's the fires of greed, hatred and delusion: *lobha*, *dosa* and *moha*.

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Another of the reasons why we need to talk about Nibbāna, along with dismissing the idea of it being kind of a super-heaven where Arahants and Buddhas go when they pass away, is that many people are put off by the concept of Nibbāna as a goal for themselves. On account of the conditioning of the mind to see everything in personal terms, based upon self-view, people tend to think, 'I don't want to go to Nibbāna because you can't take your family with you. If I'm not going to be reborn, what about my grandchildren. What about my dog? Will I ever see her again? I

don't want to go to Nibbāna – something like the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven would be much better!'

Many Dhamma teachers like Ajahn Chah, or Ajahn Mun, or Ajahn Buddhadāsa, the great teachers of our time, have commented that their students would say, 'I don't want to go to Nibbāna, it's a really off-putting prospect. There's no feeling of warmth or happiness there.' When these teachers would talk about Nibbāna, people would say, 'No thank you. I want to go to heaven for a bit, then come back. I plan to make a lot of merit, go to heaven, then come back to earth when Sri Ariya Maitreya, the next Buddha, comes along. It'll be really easy to become an Arahant when there's a Buddha in the world and maybe I'll feel ready for Nibbāna then.'

If people said this kind of thing to Luang Por Chah, which they sometimes would in all seriousness, he would respond with something like, 'Not very smart.' It's also a bit of a gamble. People would also say, 'I don't want to develop insight now, because if I do that, I might become a stream-enterer, and that means only seven more lifetimes but those lives might involve a lot of suffering! If instead, I make enough merit I'll go to heaven and come back when Sri Ariya Maitreya is here, then I can hop off the wheel.' 'You must be a gambler. Those are bad odds. That's really a long shot. Don't think that way.' Luang Por Chah would try to change people's view and ask, 'Why do you think Nibbāna is a bad idea? Why do you not want to realize

that? Why do you think it's something that is unpleasant? The Buddha said, "Nibbāna is the supreme happiness" if he gives it such praise, why are you not interested? Do you think the Buddha was wrong?!' Sometimes the great Ajahns would be able to get their message across but sometimes not.

What's the cause of this hesitancy, this reticence? This is interesting to consider. Why the prospect of Nibbāna or the ending of rebirth makes us uncomfortable is because of our attachment, it is because of *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*. Attachment to our body, to our personality, our family, our things, our life, our home, our pets. In England, oftentimes people are more attached to the dog and the cat than they are to the family. This represents *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, the attachment to the body and the personality. That feeling of, 'Ooh, I don't like that idea,' The Pali word *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*, literally means, 'the view of the real body, the view of the real person'. Thus, I can believe: 'I am the body, I am the personality, I am a man, I am 67 years old, I am English, I am a Theravāda monk.' These kinds of statements, which are conventionally true, we take to be ultimately true. Instead of being a *sammuti sacca*, a conventional truth, we take it to be a *paramattha sacca*, an absolute truth. Because of that mistake, we believe, 'I am the body, I am the personality'.

The process of *vipassanā*, insight meditation, helps us to examine that belief. When I breathe in, I take the oxygen in, that which was the air of Hertfordshire before is now Ajahn Amaro. The oxygen gets joined to my

blood, to my haemoglobin; so that oxygen, it went from being English countryside oxygen to being Ajahn Amaro's body's oxygen. Did it? Or is it just oxygen? At what point did it change from being countryside to being human? Then when that oxygen gets bound to carbon and becomes carbon dioxide, and gets breathed out, then it stops being human, and becomes Hertfordshire countryside, it's human here while, out there, it's not... This is *sammuti sacca*. We can say, 'On my passport, it says: male. My chromosomes are X and Y.' Technically male, but what makes male-ness is compounded, is conditioned. It's a conventional truth.

Through the development of the basis of insight, *vipassanā-kammaṭṭhāna*, we investigate the conditioned, contingent, dependent nature of those designations. When the *citta* is able to see through them, when those feelings of 'I' and 'me' and 'mine' are illuminated and seen as empty, transparent, then some perspective on those causes for hesitancy comes into being.

When we look at the teachings and we consider the nature of reality, and we take into account that the Buddha said, 'Nibbāna is the highest happiness,' (M 75.19) and 'Nibbāna is the supreme Noble Truth,' (M 140.26) it should not be off-putting at all but those habits of I-making and mine-making are deeply rooted and tenacious, aren't they? At the beginning of Chapter Eight of the *Udāna*, there is another particularly significant *sutta*, the Buddha says:

> There is that sphere, that domain of being, that *āyatana*, where there is no earth, no water, no fire, no wind; no sphere of infinity of space, of infinity of consciousness, of nothingness, or even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there, there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere of being, this *āyatana* I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution, and no support: this, just this, is the end of *dukkha*.
>
> (Ud 8.1)

'No sun, no moon... no coming, no going, no standing still? What is that? How is that? How can that be?'

This is one of the few places where the Buddha talks about the fundamental nature of Dhamma itself. To the mind that is attached to the body, the personality, to time, to identity and to place, to the mind that says, 'I am a person and I was born, I'm 67 years old and this is my address,' it's all very threatening. We can feel very intimidated, 'This is dangerous. I'm going to lose everything. Everything that I am is gone. How could that be the end of suffering? Everything is wiped out? No moon, no stars, no sun, is everything just annihilated?' It might look that way on first encounter but since the Buddha is saying that this is the end of suffering, this implies that there is more here than meets the eye. Some other considerations must be in play, otherwise it would not make sense.

That said, when the Buddha spoke in such ways he was regularly challenged. A number of people said, 'So you're talking about annihilation. You mean that with Nibbāna, at enlightenment, everything is wiped out? This being is destroyed?' In response to such assumptions he once said:

> I have been baselessly, vainly, falsely misrepresented as saying that I describe the annihilation, the destruction, the extermination of an existent being. But that's not what I teach, and those people who say that, they misrepresent me.
>
> (M 22.37)

What he's saying is that the appearance, that we seem to be an independent, self-existent being, that's the mistake. We think that, 'I was born, therefore I will die, I exist in time.' But he's saying in this teaching that that sense of being an individual, being born, the sense of time passing, these are mere appearances. It's important to understand why, to our ordinary thinking mind 'I am! I'm sitting here! And time is passing. It's now 7:30. I'm reading this and I'm a person.' To the six senses – eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and the thinking mind – time, identity and place all seem to be absolutely real. What the Buddha is saying is that, if the mind sees clearly and recognizes, 'No! That's not the whole story. Time is an appearance. Identity is an appearance, it's the way things look. And location, where we are. That's also just an appearance.' To our thinking mind and to our senses, this is mind-blowing, because our normal way of thinking doesn't apply: there

is no 'destruction... of an existent being' because no permanent separate being *actually* exists.

Luang Por Chah liked to challenge people, to make them think and question their attachments to self, time, location, causality and conventions. Drawing upon the same principle that Ud 8.1 expresses, he would ask, 'If you can't go forwards, you can't go backwards and you can't stand still – where can you go?'

The only way that the mind can solve this puzzle is to let go. Let go of the body, let go of time, let go of place. He also said, 'The Buddha-Dhamma is not to be found in moving forwards, nor in moving backwards, nor in standing still. This is the place of non-abiding.' There's no abiding place, no place to land.

Luang Por Chah offered many good examples. He said, 'If you look at this building, you have the ground floor with the concrete base, that's a place of birth. Then the upper storey where there's a floor in the room of the *kuṭī*, that's also a place of birth. In between, between the floor up there and the floor down here, in this place, there's nowhere to stand. This is Nibbāna. Where there's no place to stand.'

What he's pointing to is that the mind is habituated to having 'places to stand', we're looking for something to 'be', some place to abide, something to identify with. 'I am a man', 'I am a woman', 'I am a monk', 'I am

English', 'I'm American. That's what I am!' And he'd say, 'Let go! Let go of all those abidings.'

When we develop *sati-paññā*, mindfulness and wisdom, the mind looks at its own nature. There's the realization that the Dhamma is *sandiṭṭhiko*, apparent here and now, *akāliko*, timeless, time doesn't apply, *ehipassiko*, encouraging investigation, *opanayiko*, leading inwards, *paccataṃ veditabbo viññūhi*, to be seen by each wise person for themselves.

If you think about it, place, the physical location of something, only applies to *rūpa-khandha*. For the *nāma-khandhas*: feeling, perception, *saṅkhāra*, *viññāṇa*, the mind does not exist any place; the mind *is*, but place does not apply. Where does my mind stop and yours, the reader's, begin? This far? Or that far? 'Where-ness', location, doesn't apply; even if you are reading this on a tablet up in the International Space-Station, is your mind separate in space from mine? The mind doesn't have a location. When we practise *vipassanā* meditation, when the mind is watching its activities and experiences, then there can be that recognition. I say, 'I'm experiencing sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought arising and passing away *here*,' but when the mind looks closely, 'here' doesn't really apply, mind is non-local, it doesn't exist in a place.

Luang Por Chah's question is a trick question, because *you* can't go anywhere, but the mind can let go of you-ness. When the mind is fully awake

and knows clearly, when it has let go of any kind of grasping, it realizes it doesn't exist any*where*, it doesn't have an identity. The mind knows those feelings of the body, the memories and the thoughts, it sees those aspects of the person, arising and passing, but, and this might be difficult to understand, the mind which knows the person is not a person.

There's grasping on a social level, grasping on a physical level and grasping on a psychological level. You can let go of some coarse things – like giving up going to boxing matches or gambling, coarse destructive things that give you a thrill – but even though you have given up those coarse attachments, other more subtle kinds of attachment are hard to see, we're not aware of their presence. For example, there's the feeling of 'I think', 'I remember', 'It's my life', 'I'm happy', 'I'm unhappy', 'I'm sad'. All those 'I am's, 'This is mine's, seem completely reasonable and ordinary. But then the more the *vipassanā-kammaṭṭhāna* is developed, the more it's recognized that, 'That "I" feeling is also just another attachment; just as are that "I am" feeling, the "I am-ness" or the "mine-ness" of "This is mine, my body, my feeling, my memories, my Dhamma book, my computer screen, my responsibility."'

There's a really interesting teaching in the *suttas* that I like to quote on this subject. It's called the *Khemaka Sutta* (S 22.89). Khemaka was an old monk. He was very sick, and was approaching his death. His friends, the other monks in the monastery, sent a message to him saying, 'We hear that you're

dying. Have you completed your practice, have you arrived at Arahantship yet?' He's lying on his deathbed. He's very ill, so he tells the messenger, 'Go and tell them that I haven't finished my work yet. I still haven't reached Arahantship.' The messenger goes back to his friends, then he comes back again and says, 'They ask, in what way have you not finished your work?' He's dying, but his friends are still pressing him about it, although probably they were well-intentioned. The messenger monk, Dāsaka, goes back and forth three or four times, the Elders asking further questions, about his attachment to the five *khandhas* and feelings of 'I am', until finally he says, 'Enough, friend Dāsaka! Why keep running back and forth?'

Khemaka rises from his deathbed and goes over to see these friends of his. A very interesting dialogue then ensues. He says, 'Let's put it this way. It's like a flower. You can smell the fragrance of the flower, but you can't tell where the fragrance comes from. Is it in the petals? Is it from the stalk? Is it from the pollen? Is it from the stamens? From the little fine pistils? The nectar? Where's it coming from? You can smell it, but you can't tell where the fragrance is located. In the same way, there's no attachment to any of the five *khandhas*, to the body, to feeling, to perception, to mental formations, even to consciousness, however, this "I am" feeling is still around. But it's not attached to any "thing", like the fragrance of the flower. So that's where my mind has sustained its attachment.'

As he was giving that description to his friends, he realized enlightenment and became an Arahant. He's probably the only person who ever became enlightened hearing his own Dhamma talk. And also, 60 of his friends became Arahants too. It was a very useful exchange; it was good that he got off his deathbed to have that dialogue.

The heart, the *citta*, is Dhamma, it's not a person. It knows the attributes of the person, the body and feelings, perceptions, arising and passing, but it's not personal. This which knows female and male has no gender; it's not female or male. It's not tall or short. It doesn't have an age or colour. This which knows doesn't have a location.

Sometimes, when people came to see him, the Buddha was asked about the nature of the Arahant. On one occasion a young brahmin student called Upasīva enquired about what happens to an Arahant when the body dies. 'Do they go to some kind of immortal place where they're happy forever in some kind of super-heaven? Or do they disappear altogether forever? What happens?' Although the Buddha often responded to such questions by saying something like, 'This is the wrong question,' on this occasion he said:

> One who has reached the end has no criterion
> by which they can be measured.
> That which can be spoken of is no more.

You cannot say they do not exist,
but when all modes of being,
all phenomena have been removed,
all means of speaking have gone too.

(SN 1075-76)

Across that border, ordinary concepts and language don't apply. How can you describe a being when there's no individuality, no time, no place, no causality, no language and no number? Because language is all about perception, *saññā*. it's all about seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. We have an animal body, it's located in this spot, so all of our language and our thoughts are based on the perceptions, on *saññā* arising from the body. So, how do you describe a universe beyond *saññā*? The words run out. Ajahn Buddhadāsa described it as, 'The thinking mind falls flat.' When the conceptual mind meets the Dhamma, it collapses, it lacks the dimensions to accommodate it.

Arahantship is the fulfilment of human potential, the highest spiritual achievement, so it was understandable that people (like young Upasīva) asked the Buddha about what happens when an Arahant passes away – assuming that they must 'go somewhere', probably really, really pleasant, after all they have achieved 'sainthood', perfection... Throughout his life, notwithstanding these comments to Upasīva, the Buddha hardly spoke

about this domain. He repeatedly described the path to ending *dukkha* and rebirth, to realizing Arahantship, but when people said, 'What happens when an enlightened being dies, where do they go?' he would dismantle the question: '"Where" does not apply. "They" does not apply. "Go" does not apply. "Time", and therefore the future, does not apply. No words or concepts at all can apply.' As the Buddha put it in one teaching: 'Whatever you conceive it to be, the truth is necessarily other than that' – *'Yena yena hi maññanti tato taṃ hoti aññathā'ti'* (M 113.28).

The words and concepts run out, so nothing can be spoken of. Like he said to Upasīva, 'One who has reached the end has no criterion by which they can be measured.' There's no way you can measure that. How can you describe something without time or causality, without space, without identity, without number or language? Words can't apply, because the words are crafted from and for the world of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, for time and three-dimensional space, they borrow their substance from that.

Ancient India was a land of accomplished philosophers, experts with sophisticated vocabularies, so one might think that maybe the Buddha could have come up with some apposite, perfectly crafted philosophical terms to describe what life is like on the other side of that border. However, he was resolute and clear on this: even to talk about 'a border' is giving the

wrong signals. The mind conditioned by birth wants to create a person, to create a place and a time, and he realized, even though he would be misunderstood, it was better to speak in terms of the reality of knowable experience here and now, to focus on describing the Path to the End of Suffering, and leave that other aspect undeclared. So that's what he did, the whole of his teaching career. The most he ever said, when he was talking about Dabba Mallaputta, was:

> There is no pointing to the bourn
> Of those perfectly released,
> Who have crossed the flood
> Of bondage to sense desires
> And attained unshakeable bliss.
>
> (Ud 8.10, John D. Ireland trans.)

That's all you get. There is no more than that.

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I feel that's one of the reasons why we need to talk about Nibbāna – because we think of it as something 'I' will be experiencing, or 'I' can experience here and now, or 'I' will be experiencing in the future, and it will be some special place, for 'me'. But the teachings are pointing to a very different dimension, and as long as we squeeze that into the form of 'my life', 'my mind' 'me passing through time', there's always going to be a distortion.

We won't be seeing the teachings clearly or understanding what is being said. In Luang Por Chah's and Ajahn Buddhadāsa's teachings, they would talk about Nibbāna not as just some sort of remote distant goal, off in the future, but as something much closer to home.

In Ajahn Buddhadāsa's book, he has in bold print, strong black print, 'Nibbāna has got nothing to do with death.' Again people often say 'Entered Nibbāna', as when an Arahant dies, but actually in the teachings, Nibbāna is when the mind is enlightened. When it reaches enlightenment, right there is the experience of Nibbāna. It's not when the body dies but when the heart is free of greed, hatred and delusion; then, that felt sense of the mind is peacefulness, Nibbāna. When Ajahn Chah was asked to define Nibbāna, he described it in a very simple way. He said, 'The reality of non-grasping is Nibbāna.' Very simple. Not anything to do with heaven or death – Nibbāna is non-grasping.

We all know the experience of grasping. We know that feeling: 'I like', 'This is mine', 'I hate this', 'This is good', 'This is awful', 'This is my space'. We know the feeling of grasping, right? The reality of non-grasping, what that means is, right now, when the mind lets go of anything that's being grasped, letting that go, that's the cooling down, that's letting go. It's letting the heart cool down. Grasping is the state of heat and tension, and letting go, when the heart lets go of grasping, right here is Nibbāna. It's not

a loud explosion. You don't get rainbows and *devas* with trumpets saying, 'Hurray, well done!' It's completely ordinary, a quiet simplicity. You can say it's being perfectly normal at last.

The English word 'normal' is not exciting, right? It's normal. 'It's just a normal Tuesday evening,' it means it's nothing special, there's no need to pay any attention, it doesn't have much value. In the Thai language, if you look at the word *tammadah*, meaning 'normal', 'ordinary' it's got the syllable *dhamm-* in it, that's the clue. The word *tammadah* comes from the Pali word *dhammatā* meaning 'of the nature of Dhamma'.

Hidden in the ordinary is the Dhamma itself. Hidden in the ordinary is the utterly *extra*ordinary. Hidden in the normal, is 'the Norm', which is a word TW Rhys Davids used to render 'the Dhamma', in some translations.

We overlook peace. When the peace of mind is here, we often don't notice it. When the heart relaxes and we stop grasping, we look for the next interesting thing. The next thing to worry about, the next thing to get excited about, the next thing to have an opinion about. As Ajahn Sumedho would often say, 'Peace is boring.' He'd point out, 'If you printed a newspaper with, "Ajahn Sumedho breathed in and then he breathed out," if they put that on the cover of the Daily Mirror, you wouldn't sell very many copies. But if it read, "Ajahn Sumedho Runs Away With Sixteen-Year-Old Girl", you'd sell a lot of copies.' That's exciting news.

'Terrible! Let me see!' But, 'Ajahn Sumedho breathes...' big deal, so what? Peace is boring, it's not exciting. Therefore the attention overlooks it, ignores it.

If we pick up something and we grasp it, there's a tension, our arm starts shaking. There's a vibration, a tightness. Then to stop grasping, we don't have to throw it away, we just relax the grip. We're still holding it, but we're not grasping it, there's no tension, there's no *dukkha*. We can explore that: 'Now there's tension; and now, I relax.' After the tensing has stopped, for about two or three seconds, three or four seconds, there is a conscious appreciation of ease, 'Ahh! Thank goodness that's over.' How long does that 'Ahh' last? Three seconds? Maybe four, maximum? Then, the mind starts to seek: 'OK, what else is going on?' Does this sound familiar?

That's how we are, because peace is boring. When it's a contrast to stress it's noticeable and consciously appreciated 'Ahh! Thank goodness that's over!' Like if you've been working around your home, and you've been tidying things up, you've been doing the dishes, finishing up some correspondence, and you get everything done and you put it away, you sit down on a chair, 'Ahh, phew!' You've finally got all those letters written or you've got the dishes done, so you sit down and 'Ahh' and one... two... three... 'So, what else is there to do? I'm sure I'm supposed to be doing something... Oh yes!'

Weirdly we can feel relieved when we remember the other duties that we have. We remember something we're supposed to be worrying about. It's another problem, but you're glad to have the problem, because we feel more unsettled with that empty space than we do with having a thing to exist in relation to. That's like the space between the two floors that Luang Por Chah was talking about. That empty space, non-abiding, the ego doesn't know what to do with that, we can't stand there, there isn't anything to take hold of, so we think that that 'nothing' must somehow be bad or worthless.

That space, right there, is Nibbāna. Right there, the Dhamma is apparent. But we overlook it because it's not a thing, it doesn't grab our attention, it's not interesting. A lot of the training, of the practice, and why we need to talk about Nibbāna, is that although Nibbāna is accessible, here and now, we don't see it. The Dhamma is available, here and now, but we keep missing it, because we get interested in other things. 'What's that over there?' or, 'I should be doing this instead.' Our attention is taken up by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, remembering, planning, social media, checking our phone, 'How many messages have I got, any more followers on Instagram? Any less followers on Instagram? What's happening on TikTok?' The practice then becomes how to realize Nibbāna. How to bring the mind to notice the peace that's there when the grasping stops, and not to follow that impulse towards distraction, away from silence and space.

Certainly, just relaxing the hand from its grasping, for a moment, is not Arahantship, the irreversible ending of suffering. But it is what they call *tadaṅga*-Nibbāna, or momentary Nibbāna. Again, Ajahn Buddhadāsa spoke about this quite often. In that moment, to some degree, there is the flavour of Nibbāna, the taste of Nibbāna. There's a quality of purity, simplicity, a quiet normality. Then the trick, or the skill, that needs to be developed in order to sustain and extend that realization of Nibbāna, is to keep the attention on that space. When the mind goes, 'What about...?' That, right there, that's the urge for birth, that's the mind looking for a rebirth. If you want to understand rebirth, it's right there! 'I should be doing something, I should be worrying about something, I must...!' That's the seed of rebirth. If that is recognized and known as just another mental formation, another *saṅkhāra*, then we let it go, and allow the attention stay with the silence, space, that peacefulness that remains; and allowing that agitation end, the mind can open up, can realize that quality of peacefulness.

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When the Buddha spoke about the development of the Four Noble Truths, the First Noble Truth is *dukkha*, suffering, it needs to be apprehended that there is *dukkha*. The Second Noble Truth is *dukkha-samudaya*, craving, it needs to be let go of. The Third Noble Truth is *dukkha-nirodha*, the cessation of suffering, it needs to be realized. When the *dukkha* stops, we need to realize that. As has

been said here, what happens when the *dukkha* stops is that we notice it for two or three seconds, and then it's gone, we don't 'realize' it, we just move onto the next thing to be interested in or to be worried or irritated about.

Saying 'it needs to be realized', is bringing the attention to the absence of *dukkha*, the absence of stress. Let the heart really know that. Readers who are familiar with Ajahn Sumedho's books, or who have listened to his teachings, will know he talks about this a lot. This is in a way the most important of the Four Noble Truths, the third one, because the others are much more visible, tangible, you can see them, you can touch them, you can feel them. But recognizing space, noticing space, noticing silence, noticing peace, that actually takes a lot of effort, all the time. It's a continuous practice.

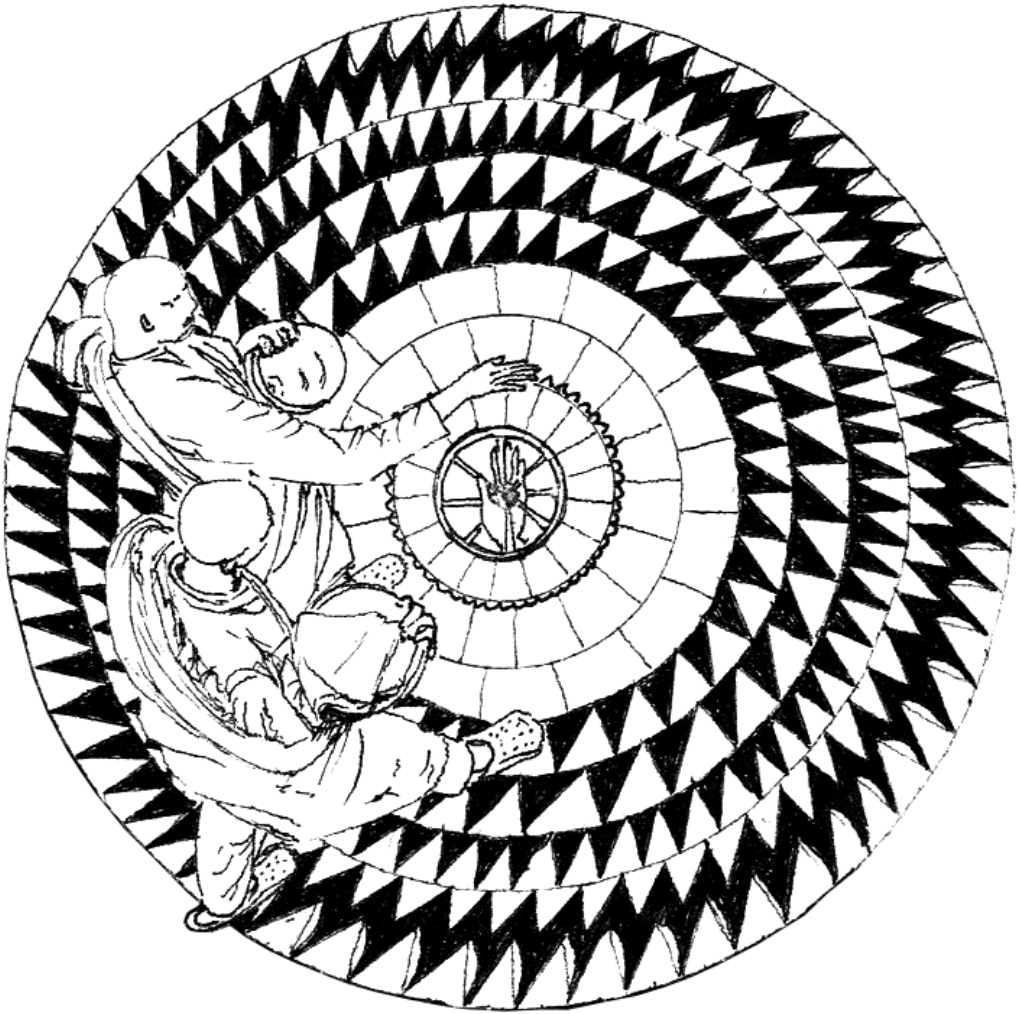
We've got to go against our habits – the habits of the senses, of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. Because the senses are all geared towards interesting things; what's exciting, what's dangerous, what's frightening, what's a problem. It takes a special kind of effort to notice space, to notice silence, and stillness, peacefulness. If the mind is trained to do that, then that space, that silence, that peace – which initially seemed to be normal, nothing, nothing very much – there's a kind of flowering, it comes alive. It takes on a quality of liveliness. The heart awakens to, 'Oh! There's no *thing* here! It's no thing, and yet *very* much!'

If you're looking for somebody and you go into a room and see, 'They are not here, OK, carry on looking in the next room.' That space in the room is blank, an absence of the person you're looking for. If, instead of that, you come into the room, 'They are not here, OK, stop. Pay attention.' Let yourself be still. Listen to the silence. Feel the space. Notice the stillness, the peacefulness, 'Oh, This is really nice.' You had been seeing it as a mere absence of the thing you were looking for, but actually, the presence, the fullness of the Dhamma was ever-present. What's there in the room is the Dhamma itself, that we overlook. There is the quality of peace, of purity, of stillness. It's always here but we miss it, we overlook it. If we take these moments to stop, to be still and notice the space, it blossoms like a flower opening. The space comes alive with presence.

To develop the realization of Nibbāna, to help your heart to incline towards Nibbāna, take the opportunity to notice space, stillness, silence. It's always here, even in the midst of noise and activity. It can't go anywhere else, it's always here. Then we find that Nibbāna is everywhere.

Nibbāna is not just some sort of special heaven that Arahants go to, but rather, it's the peace of our own mind. It's the peace that is here when the grasping and the identification stop. The peace that is here when the mind is not distracted by the superficial, but opens to the presence of the reality of this moment. It is the experience of the Unconditioned that is

always available, just behind appearances, the stillness which is behind all movement, the silence that is within all sound, the space that surrounds and permeates all forms. The heart is able to realize and awaken to Nibbāna right here and right now. Not just when you've finished this chapter, or when you switch off the iPad and close your eyes, or when you go to sit in a quiet place. It's ever present. It's *sandiṭṭhiko*, apparent here and now.



Suchness and the Square Root of Minus One

A few years back, in the USA, a laywoman friend of Abhayagiri Monastery became seriously ill. She'd been sick for a while, and when her health seemed to be worsening, I decided to travel cross-country to see her. I wanted to lend moral support and help her and her family. She was in hospital in a very grave condition, with tubes inserted into her arms and down her throat. She was lying in bed and could move only her hands a bit. She couldn't speak. Hers was a dire and delicate condition, her body in a state of extreme sickness. Around the hospital I saw many other people also experiencing various extremes of physical stress and disease of one kind or another.

After a couple of days, I flew back to California in time for a planned visit to the local Waldorf School. I went from the hospital and the realm of sickness and ageing to a school and the realm of youth and vital activity. Kids were bouncing around with high-octane energy, enthusiasm and exuberance while their teachers worked to contain, protect, and guide their pupils' young minds and bodies to develop.

Noticing this juxtaposition, I reflected on the different qualities it takes to support and hold together a human life. Whether we're old and sick or youthful and energetic – or even temporarily able-bodied and seemingly independent as a competent adult – a staggering, hypercomplex array of different forces and supports are required to keep us healthy and alive. When you consider it, we are an amazingly intricate and fragile system. An incredible number of conditions have to be lined up in order for our life to be sustained.

It's hardly surprising then that things don't work perfectly all the time – that our emotions go awry, or that the pancreas starts to cave in, or that a parent loses their grip, or that the white blood cell count starts ramping up. From before birth, all the way to the last breath, and even as the dead body is decomposing, life is a well-ordered process of growth and decay, but that ordering might be quite unpredictable and unwanted by us, at the conscious human level.

Opening our mind to this fact changes our view of things. We see that it's a kind of hubris to look on our life with the idea that we've got the right to be comfortable and happy and healthy, and wealthy enough to be free to do whatever we choose for all of our days. That's an absurdity; it's impossible. From the time of our birth through our childhood and adolescence, we're not in any kind of state of full control. There's the little bit of adult life

when most of us have a degree of competence and independence, but that doesn't last too long before things start waning. The eyes and ears begin to go, the thinking declines, bodily vitality lessens. The body goes its natural way, degenerating, because its functions can't all stay coordinated for long. When we look at it closely, we realize, 'Of course, how could it be otherwise?' If we don't reflect on this, we find ourselves being startled or shocked when something goes 'wrong': when we injure a limb, get a headache or a cold, or someone has a gripe against us. 'Oh, how can this be?! This isn't fair. This isn't right! It shouldn't be this way!' It's crazy, really, that we should ever think like this.

This is why the Buddha encouraged the reflections on old age, sickness, and death. After our meditation period at the monastery, we often recite the 'Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection':

> I am of the nature to age;
> I am of the nature to sicken;
> I am of the nature to die;
> All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me;
> I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma, related to my kamma, 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)

Sometimes when people hear this chant, they think, 'Wow, that's really depressing. These Buddhists must really like to be miserable. Life is bad enough already. Why make ourselves even more glum?' But as long as we are influenced by a negative view of sickness, ageing, and death – as long as we buy into that way of thinking – then we're continually in a state of stress and difficulty.

What we're really doing with these reflections is waking the mind up to get with the program. Ageing, sickness, death: this is the deal we sign up for when we're born. It's the natural order of things. Rather than getting depressed, when we see that this is the way it is, this is how things are supposed to be in the natural order of life, then we slowly gain a feeling of greater independence.

We're encouraging ourselves to recognize, 'Well, life has always been this way. We've got to interact with all sorts of people, we've got to live in varieties of climates and weather, we've got a body that feels both pleasure and pain. Of course there are going to be obstructions and difficulties and things that we don't want or choose. How could it be otherwise?' Even just stopping and thinking about this for a moment, the true nature of life becomes extremely obvious.

My visit to the hospital reminded me that the body is an intricate and massively complex organic system, an integrated ecosystem. In fact, to

bacteria and microbes and viruses, we're a home and a food source. 'Oh, look,' they say. 'Let's distract the antibodies for a while and sneak in the back door, quick, before she takes some antibiotics. Make merry! Multiply!' The side effect for us, the host, may be illness or pain, but as far as the little critters are concerned, it's more likely to be the experience of, 'Hey, this place is great!' Within our bodies, whole microscopic civilisations hatch, grow, blossom, reach their peak, and then collapse, just like our human society-scale empires. We may call it having a cold or an infection, but on the bacterial level, an entire aeon is arising and passing away.

So these reflections – 'I am of the nature to age, I am of the nature to sicken, I am of the nature to die; all that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise' and so on – are all pointing us to this simple reality. What we think of as an individual being, 'me', is really just a sub-ecosystem in a larger complex of ecosystems that's in a constant state of change. Sometimes the consciousness at our human level is going to be comfortable, sometimes uncomfortable. How could it be otherwise?

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It's because of ignorance, because of 'wrong view' or seeing things incorrectly, that we get carried away by false impressions of independence and permanence and stability. It's because of delusion that we believe we have the right to be comfortable, or not to be opposed, or to be happy, to be

well-off or not to experience unlikeable objects. We take it all personally. It's ridiculous, really. Reflecting on this in a clear and systematic way serves to illuminate our habits of self-view or personality-view (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi* in Pali). The belief that 'I am the body, I am the personality, this is me, this is who I am' all derives from self-view.

But then we may ask, 'If I am not the body, then who is it that gets sick? Who is it that's separated from the loved? Who is the recipient of the results of good and bad action?' This is still self-view. If there's no self-view, then there's simply the experience of sickness in the body. We take some medicine, rest the body, do what's necessary, but it's not who and what we are. If someone says to us, 'This body is beautiful or ugly, this body is old or young, this body is heavy or light, this body is female or male,' so what? Taking pride in being attractive, being a certain age, or being a certain gender is totally based on self-view. When we let go of self-view, when the mind abandons the ignorant perception '*I* am the body, *I* am the personality, *I* am the mind' and that's seen through as the delusion that it is, then there's a tremendous relief. This sort of reflection helps to arouse brightness and clarity of the heart, which illuminates and reveals our ignorant views and deluded attitudes.

According to the ultimate truth, we're not the body, not the personality, not the mind. As the old TV lawyer Perry Mason would say, 'It's merely

circumstantial evidence.' Our body, our personality, our Social Security number and birth certificate are merely circumstantial evidence. There's no absolute proof of a 'self' whatsoever. There are just bits of evidence woven together based on false assumptions.

When we hear these kinds of Dhamma teachings, we may say, 'Yeah, right. Although I'm definitely a man. I'm definitely a monk.' But that's self-view. Ultimately, there aren't any men or women, no monastics or laypeople, nobody who's tall or short, nobody who's sick or healthy. This isn't just an assertion I am proclaiming. It's something for all of us to investigate for ourselves. I can ask, 'Which part of me is male?' Yes, I can study the level of the chromosomes to find the male chromosome, but are the adenine, guanine, cytosine and thymine, which are all woven together in the little spirals of DNA that make up that male chromosome... are they male? What about the carbon, nitrogen, hydrogen, phosphorus, sulphur, potassium or sodium atoms? Are they male? Is my body strictly made of masculine protons, neutrons, and electrons? That view is absurd, totally ridiculous. Male or female is a conventional designation for a body that begins somewhere along the line, but at the root, the body is all just subatomic particles buzzing around, woven together with the energy of the universe. That's all. There's no ultimate male or female, monastic or layperson, good or bad, beautiful or ugly. There is no substantial person there.

Applying these kinds of reflections helps to illuminate the very clear and definite feeling that arises in us: 'Wait! I *am* a person!' It's a very convincing feeling, but when we look closely, we can notice how it arises, does its thing, and ceases. It's a transient phenomenon. Next, the question may arise, 'What is it that knows this feeling?' Again, we use the power of investigation of our experience to look at our assumptions, our habitual ways of viewing things. We apply and develop insight meditation, or *vipassanā*, the practice of looking deeply and letting the wisdom faculty open everything up so that we can take a look inside.

The physical body is the coarsest level of identification, but we can get subtler and subtler, examining our perceptions and thoughts and assumptions and attitudes. We may think, 'OK, maybe I am not the body. Maybe that was just a foolish delusion I was labouring under. What I really am is pure awareness. I'm the one who knows, the clear awareness that illuminates all conditions. Yeah, that's what I am!' That thought may be an advance over believing 'I am a person' but it's still an 'I am'. The mind is taking hold of a concept and buying into it. It's 'taking birth', even though it's in a more expansive or non-personal way: '*I* am the energy of the universe, and *my* essential nature is an intricate, symmetrical, organic web stretching from the subatomic realms into 196,884 different dimensions.' Even when it's woven into a mind-boggling concept like this, it's still self-view. It still generates the illusion of individual existence.

This is why the Buddha encouraged us to examine the experience of 'reality' through the teaching on *anattā*. It is both a brilliant and a practical approach. Even when we use 'I am' language in a would-be transcendent or liberating way, it's so easy for ignorant forms of 'I am' to grab hold and take over. The transcendent 'I' can be co-opted in subtle, almost invisible forms. So the teaching on *anattā* continually points the heart towards relinquishing the view of 'self'. As the Buddha said, 'Whatever you conceive it to be, the reality is always other than that.' Whatever we conceive the self to be, even if we conceive our 'true self' to be an intricate matrix of 196,884 dimensions of universal energy, the reality is always other than that. Any kind of construct, any kind of concept, any kind of idea, the Buddha said, is not self. The Dhamma is always *asaṅkhata*, unconditioned: beyond form, beyond construction. Therefore, anything that's compounded or formed can't truly represent the ultimate truth, the transcendent reality, no matter how vast or all-encompassing it might seem to be.

The Buddha's teaching on *anattā* is not intended as a metaphysical statement. It's not a philosophy or belief of 'I don't exist' or 'there is no self'. What it's saying is meant to be taken on a practical level: all that we can conceive, all that we can perceive or name, that's not who or what we are. The teaching on *anattā* is always pointing us towards letting go, relinquishment, abandonment, and non-identification with any form or

any structure. It's a very simple process. If we take it to heart and cultivate non-identification with the body, feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness, then reality is revealed. When we let go of what we're not, what is real, the Dhamma, will become apparent. That's all it takes!

But as soon as we try to conceive of that truth, then we lose it. As soon as we try to conceptualize the Dhamma as some sort of mental image of Ultimate Reality, then we're born, alienated, and caught in a trap once again. Resting in the attitude of non-grasping, is really frustrating to the thinking mind. We like to define what we are: 'I am a man, a woman, a monk, a layperson, old, young, useless, better'. Or on a more subtle level, the desire mind, the grasping mind, wants to jump back to the thought, 'I am pure awareness, I am the one who knows, I am the wisdom mind, I'm the pure heart.' *I* am this, *I* am that. Then we're caught up, carried away, swept along on the wave of becoming once again. The desire mind likes those 'I am's even though they create alienation and insecurity, imbalance and discontent. They're the devil that we know, so that's where the mind likes to go.

It takes a lot of courage and resilience to train the mind to rest in the space of non-grasping, non-becoming, relinquishment. But if we allow it, then we find an ease, spaciousness and completeness that can never be found through the 'I am's. When we apply strength and resolution not to allow the heart to be swept into becoming, when we let the wave of grasping pass, there's a tremendous quality of relief.

So much of spiritual practice is training the heart to be at ease with undefinability and the unapprehendable. It's difficult to do, but if we don't train the heart to rest as that undefined quality, then we will fall into the habit of looking for another thing to become, another project to absorb into, another place to go to, another future to be born into, another thing to get rid of or to acquire. The mind can even make that into a cause for our spiritual practice: to become more concentrated, to write a new Dhamma book, to develop more insight. But when the mind grabs hold of those thoughts, it obscures the fact, that in the moment, we are simply caught in becoming and are thus totally missing the reality here, now.

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When the Buddha talked about his own nature, when he referred to himself, he used the word *tathāgata*, The One Who Is Thus Come, Thus Gone. This term can be broken up as either *tath-āgata* ('one who has arrived at suchness, thusness') or *tathā-gata* ('one who has gone to suchness, thusness') – the Pali word for 'suchness' being *tathatā*. Its meaning is ambiguous, unclear. Does *tathāgata* mean 'totally here', or is it 'totally gone'? And what do those words mean? It's a brilliant symbol, because thusness/suchness is a definite 'something', but it's more than a thing. And, as for the nature of the Tathāgata, is it come? Is it gone? Is it here? Is it there? There's an undefined-ness, an edgelessness, an unlocatedness to it – it is 'profound, immeasurable, unfathomable like the great ocean' (M 72.20).

In a couple of scriptural passages (S 22.86 & S 44.2), one of the Buddha's monks, Anurādha, is asked by some brahmins, 'What does your teacher say happens to an enlightened being at the death of the body? Do they exist? Do they not exist? Do they both exist and not exist? Do they neither exist nor not exist?' Anurādha replies that the Tathāgata describes the nature of an enlightened one after the death of the body as something other than those four possibilities. The brahmins think he must be either very stupid or newly ordained, because they regard that as no valid answer at all. Anurādha then returns to the Buddha and asks, 'Did I answer in the right way?'

The Buddha qualifies his response, saying, 'Anurādha, can you say that the Tathāgata is the five *khandhas*: form, feeling, perception, mental formations, consciousness?'

'No, venerable sir.'

'Can you say that the Tathāgata is not the five *khandhas*?'

'No, venerable sir.'

'Can you say that the Tathāgata is in the five *khandhas*?'

'No, venerable sir.'

'Can you say that the Tathāgata is apart from the five *khandhas*?'

'No, venerable sir.'

'Can you say that the Tathāgata has the five *khandhas*?'

'No, venerable sir.'

'Can you say that the Tathāgata does not have the five *khandhas*?'

'No, venerable sir, you cannot say that.'

Eventually the Buddha closes with, 'What I teach, both now and formerly, is *dukkha* and the ending of *dukkha*.'

This dialogue establishes that the nature of the Tathāgata is not definable according to any of those three categories – being/not-being, inside/outside, having/not-having. It is as if the Buddha is stating: 'So, Anurādha, even when standing right here before you, the Tathāgata is completely unapprehendable, how could anything valid be said of an enlightened being after the passing away of the body?' All words fall flat at that boundary. We can't name it, we can't say anything about it. It's literally mind-boggling!

We might think that the Buddha is resorting to sophistry, trying to be clever and outsmart everybody else. On the contrary, these are serious and useful questions to contemplate. What is the nature of our own being or the ultimate nature of reality? What is the meaning of *tathāgata*, that which is thus-come, thus-gone? How do we understand the Buddha's statement that, even though the Tathāgata may be right here before us, he can't be defined in terms of the conditioned, the formed, or the born? These questions are frustrating to the thinking mind, so we have to let the heart open up instead. That's a combination fundamental to the practice:

allowing the thinking mind to say, 'I'm out of my depth; I give up!' so that the heart can awaken and know the quality of suchness.

It's important to recognize that just because something is inconceivable, unimaginable or doesn't make sense to the thinking mind, doesn't mean it's not real. As Luang Por Paññavaḍḍho put it: 'The Dhamma is real but it doesn't exist; the five *khandhas* exist but they're not real.'

A while ago, I was contemplating something similar in the realm of mathematics: the square root of minus one. Those who can still remember their high school mathematics may recall that the square root of minus one does not exist in conceptual, ordinary, three-dimensional reality. There are no two numbers that can be multiplied together to get minus one. But a few hundred years ago, some mathematician (Rafael Bombellini, in 1572) asked the question, 'What if there *was* a square root of minus one? How would such a number behave if I ran a few equations with it, carrying out different operations?' Well, it turned out that even though the square root of minus one doesn't actually 'exist', various qualities in nature still depend on it.

For example, as I understand it, early on in their development the Hewlett-Packard company patented something called a 'phase-shift oscillator', which is used in certain types of circuits. The circuit design of the phase-shift oscillator depends on the presence of the square root of minus one – something that doesn't exist in ordinary reality – in order to function.

Hewlett-Packard's huge fortune was built in part on a quality that doesn't exist. It's pretty mysterious but also pretty tangible. This is not just a weird factoid. Anybody involved in electronic engineering can attest to its truth: there are certain circuits that depend upon the square root of minus one. Even though the square root of minus one can't truly exist in nature, it produces real effects.[1]

This example struck me as being quite similar to the unapprehendability of the Tathāgata. There or not there? Real or not real? If we imagine ourselves standing face to face with the Buddha, the Tathāgata is totally present but the Tathāgata is also untraceable, unfathomable, ungraspable, as mentioned here in the dialogue with Anurādha (as well as at M 22.36 and M 72.20). When we drop habitual patterns of thinking, let go of the need for rational definitions, stop casting the world into our preferred and unconscious biases, then the heart opens up and that quality of suchness can truly be known. The Tathāgata-nature can be apprehended, even though the thinking mind can't conceive it.

Even though these may sound like abstruse concepts, letting go of our habitual views is something that we can do. Whether they are views about ageing, sickness and death of the body, about being independent and in

1. See, for example, *An Imaginary Tale – The Story of the Square Root of Minus One*, §5.6 'A Famous Circuit that Works Because of √-1', by Paul J. Nahin, Princeton University Press, 1998 & 2007, pp 137-141.

control, or about the nature of our true 'self', we can let go of the conceptions of the thinking mind. The result will be an immense peacefulness, beauty, clarity and simplicity that we can come to know as the very nature of the heart. This knowing is possible for all of us. This opportunity for awakening is always here.

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Monster Lie Algebra

Excited dithyrambs in the halls of Mathematica, in the parlours of those who delve into the nature of it all: Sophus Lie, a Norwegian, gave some groups his name – symmetries that scintillated down the years until The Monster was discovered; an Exceptional Symmetry Object.[2]

One day Dr. McKay, a devotee of 'group theory', chancing upon a paper from the other world of 'number', found to his amazement the dimensions of The Monster – 196,884 to be precise – was but a single digit off from a number that was featured in the alien work right in his hand. How could this be? Same number (almost) but from a separate region – unrelated, unbeknownst to one another.

Conway called this connection between number theory and The Monster by the comely name of 'Moonshine'. 'The stuff we were getting was not

2. ESO 'Symmetry and the Monster,' p 1; '*Symmetry and the Monster: The Story of One of the Greatest Quests of Mathematics*' by Mark Ronan; Oxford University Press, 2007

supported by logical argument – and it seemed almost illicit ... Something shining by reflected light, like the Moon. There may be a more primary source of illumination yet to be discovered.'[3]

And lo – 'Borcherds used the crystalline structure of the 26-dimensional Lorentzian lattice in creating the Monster Lie algebra.' In his 'Monstrous Moonshine' he '... creates a structure by quantizing a string moving in space-time, showing that "... it turns out to be non-zero only if space-time is 26-dimensional." If string theory needs 26 dimensions, as opposed to ten, then The Monster may indeed be built into the structure of the Universe.'[4]

Which begs the question: 'Is The Monster, this gigantic snowflake of multitudinous dimensions, an authentic image of the Dhamma – a portrait of the Truth behind the world? Is this *mahā-ratana*, this sparkling device, the spoken name of that which is unnamable?'

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I walk the path. Early manzanita flowers hang in rosy bunches. I raise the question: 'Is The Monster a valid incarnation that represents the heart of living Dhamma? Is this *really* a model in the conceptual world of the ordering, integrative principle, the matrical patterning of all things?'

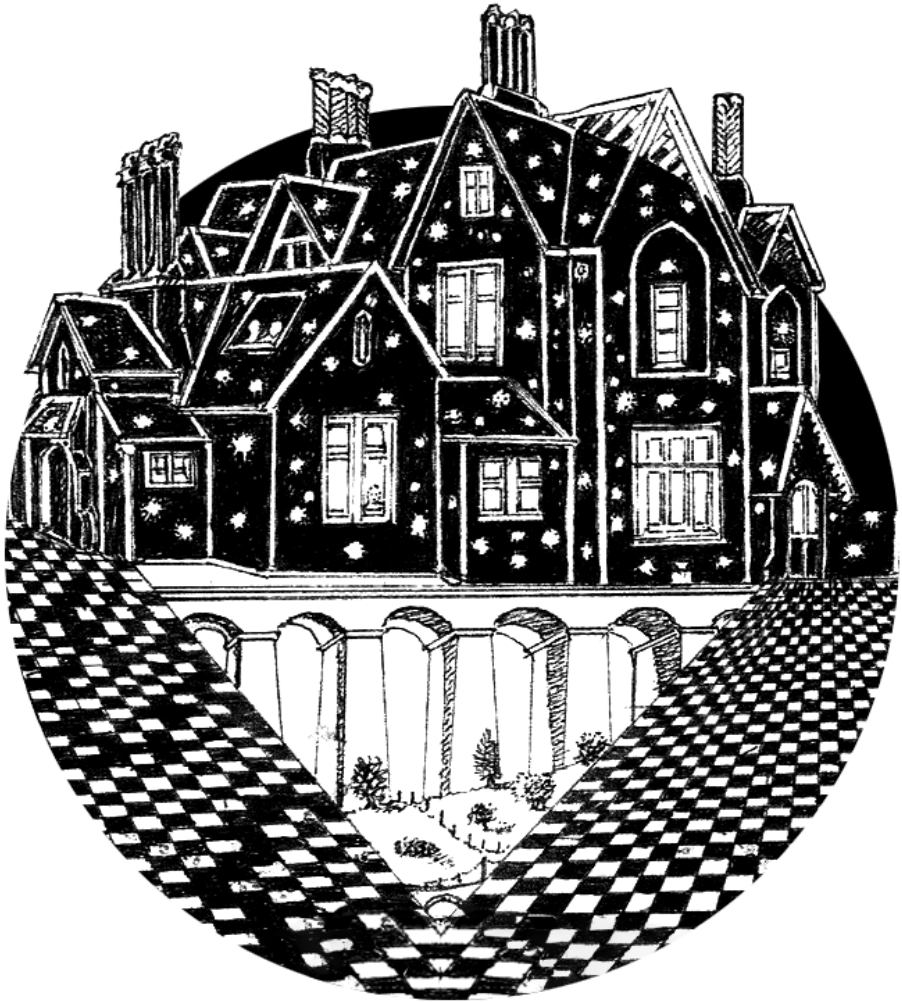
3. *ibid*, p 2
4. *ibid*, p 225

The image that springs forth in response is clear, relieving, disappointing and surprising: the egoist who would crack the secret of the Universe – break the code of the *siṃsapa* forest – he lost out.

For in that sacred moment, beyond all doubt, the heart knew: This ESO is but the finest little shaving of a fingernail of The Way Things Are. Reality, the Truth, is so far beyond even the most intricate, multi-dimensional of conceivings, there can be only stillness, a blessed hush in response.

To the claim, the monstrous lie, that this hyper-complex algebra might be the very key that unlocks The Secret, the fabled sage, Kai Lung, has said: 'When the earth-worm boasts of its elegant wings, the eagle can afford to be silent.'

Abhayagiri, January the 27th, 2008



Unshakeable Well-Being: Is the Buddhist Concept of Enlightenment a Meaningful Possibility in the Current Age?

I am delighted to be here today in Amsterdam, sharing this time with so many of you, meeting many people for the first time and reconnecting with old friends, continuing to enjoy the meeting of the worlds of academic psychology and Buddhist meditation, and all their attendant branches.

The theme for this session is 'Unshakeable Well-Being: Is the Buddhist Concept of Enlightenment a Meaningful Possibility in the Current Age?'

First of all, I should lodge the caveat that even though the theme of this session includes the word 'enlightenment', I make no claims to having realized enlightenment myself. Please don't consider that I am speaking from that kind of exalted spiritual position, but rather as a spiritual friend and companion in life with all of you.

In terms of rendering the idea of enlightenment in a language that we can understand, or is meaningful to us in this current age, I've picked the words 'Unshakeable Well-Being'. Also, like several other speakers, I am old-school

... so, no PowerPoint. Whether or not one employs advanced technology, anything that is meaningful to us arrives through our own consciousness, our own mind. The learning comes from our side. I can sit here, I can speak, I can use words to express various ideas, but whether anyone learns anything is really up to your own interest and engagement. It is dependent on the receptive awareness of your own hearts and minds.

* * *

I thought I'd start off with some of the definitions of what we are calling 'enlightenment' here. Some have called it a 'human flourishing' but the more classical Buddhist way of speaking about it is in *via negativa* terms – such as 'the ending of greed, hatred and delusion' and 'the ending of suffering'. That is the kind of language you come across in the Pali Buddhist scriptures of ancient India. They use more of a language of negation, speaking in terms of what things are *not* rather than what they *are*.

In Buddhist tradition, and in a more mythological expression, enlightenment is also called 'the ending of the cycle of birth and death' – this makes reference to rebirth as well as to the diminishing and ending of rebirth. I think it's helpful here to say that one of the things that attracted me and many other people towards the Buddha's teachings is its non-dogmatic nature. I am quite aware that many people don't like the

concepts of past lives, future lives and rebirth. That sort of terminology may send shudders through the system and that's fair enough. I feel that even though the texts talk in terms like 'ending the cycles of birth and death', it is completely valid to think of that in terms of 'psychological birth and death'.

What do I mean by that phrase? For example, you might be born into your current book project or your new experimental design. That is a birth. The mind takes hold of a particular venture, a possession, an identity, a personal relationship or a social role. We might say that we are born into the role of being a Dhamma teacher or into the role of being a professor, born into founding a particular project, and with that birth is also a delight. The delight comes from the sense that everything is going well, there is the aspiration that beautiful and useful things might come forth from it. But there is also the death element; perhaps things don't work so well, or you don't get funded the next time, or you present your thesis and you get slammed by your professors. There is a bitterness that comes when you have invested in something and then have to see your aspirations die. That is birth and death. Buddhist language does not just refer to physical birth and death, it also refers to psychological birth and death.

My own teacher Ajahn Chah would use these terms when he talked about birth and death. He would talk about being born into a hope, being born into a building project, being born into the role of being a monk or a nun. So I feel it's completely valid to think in terms of the freedom from birth and death as meaning freedom from being reborn into the entanglement and toxic identification that can come with taking hold of a project or a role or a position and so forth. 'Freedom from birth and death' therefore means a complete independence from addictive and compulsive attachments, as well as from self-centred attitudes.

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When I was an undergraduate student of psychology and physiology, many years ago, we studied Abraham Maslow's 'Hierarchy of Needs', from his 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation'. I remember the pyramid that Maslow drew. 'Physiological needs' are at the base, above them is the 'need for physical safety', the next one up is the need for 'love and belonging'. Then comes 'esteem' and at the top of his pyramid is 'self-actualization'. I remember being in the lecture theatre and thinking, 'That top part looks interesting. I can't wait to get up to that self-actualization bit.' But as you can probably guess, that turned out to be a very small part of the study. I found myself wondering why we were not spending much more time on the most interesting part of the picture.

Around about the same time I was introduced to Freud's statement, at the end of his and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), that, '... much will be gained if we succeed in transforming your hysterical misery into common human unhappiness.' On hearing this, the clear intuition arose in me, 'We can do better than that! There must be something better than "common human unhappiness" to look forward to!'

In a way, I've spent the last forty years on that top little triangle of Maslow's Hierarchy. When we talk about the concept of enlightenment and its various degrees, I would suggest that's all within that top triangle of self-actualization in Maslow's diagram. Again, I'm not an academic psychologist so maybe that's no longer considered a valid model, maybe it has been totally superseded over and over again, but that was what was in my mind forty years ago when I was a student. My desire to understand what self-actualization might consist of was one of the things that took me to Asia, so entering the forest monastic life was my way of working on my PhD. One of the reasons why I studied psychology was that I wanted to understand my own mind more completely, directly and effectively. I feel I'm still involved in this project, but from within the environment of the forest monastery instead of that of the Academy.

In the classical Buddhist teachings, there are four gradations or stages of enlightenment that are described over and over again.

The first level is called 'stream-entry'. This represents an irreversible breakthrough into a quality of psychological integration or self-actualization, or 'emotional intelligence' that will necessarily result, eventually, in the 'unshakeable well-being' of full enlightenment. This means that the mind can only be deluded to a limited degree a certain number of times; the mind can only get *so* lost. This quality of stream-entry is something that the Buddha praised as a realizable goal, not just for monastics but for lay people as well. The Buddha referred to those who had reached this level of realization as 'noble people', people who had seen the nature of ultimate reality, who had 'glimpsed the Deathless' to use another classical expression. Many thousands of lay people in the Buddha's own time, as well as monastics, reached this level of stream-entry, and many have realized the same level since then. Stream-entry is a very realistic and realizable goal, as well as being an attractive one.

The Buddha once reached down and scraped the ground in front of him and asked, 'Do you see the dirt under my fingernail? What do you think is greater, the amount of dirt under my fingernail or the size of the great earth, the planet itself?' One of those present answered, 'Venerable Sir, the quantity of earth under your fingernail is small but the great earth

is very large indeed.' The Buddha responded, 'Similarly, the amount of future suffering you can expect to experience if you reach stream-entry is comparable to the dirt under my fingernail; while the amount of suffering ahead for those who have not reached stream-entry is comparable to the great earth' (S 13.1). I think that one simile is enough to give you the idea of the appeal of realizing this level of psychological maturity.

The element of 'irreversibility' associated with stream-entry is hugely significant. It means that once that level of insight has been reached then – irrespective of health, IQ, wealth or social position, or whether you have got tenure or not – you're fine. A quality of profound ease, of deep psychological well-being manifests and it is independent of circumstances.

In addition, the Buddha declared that once stream-entry has been reached, full enlightenment is guaranteed within a minimum of seven lifetimes. For those of you who don't like the idea of past and future lives, you can validly read that, I feel, as saying you can really blow it, i.e. get totally distracted and lost, no more than seven times. You can get utterly wrapped up, confused and angry, compulsive and depressed, but you can't get totally lost more than seven times. Furthermore, each time, it is going to get harder to be so carried away. Although that may sound somewhat heretical with respect to some conservative approaches to Buddhist teachings I feel that it is a perfectly valid way of understanding the Buddha's guarantee here.

At the level of stream-entry, three psychological, largely attitudinal, qualities are let go of. These are categorized in terms of what are called the 'ten fetters' or *saṃyojana* in Pali – a fetter being like handcuffs or chains or shackles that tie your mind down. The three assumptions or attitudes that are let go of at stream-entry are:

1. Attachment to the body and to the personality. This attachment is called 'self-view' or 'personality view', (*sakkāya-diṭṭhi)*; it comprises the view, 'I am the body, I am the personality, this is all and everything of what I am.'

2. Doubt about the path to liberation, about the way to arrive at genuine, unshakeable well-being, and about the possibility of full psychological integration.

3. Attachment to one's social conditioning, namely the conventions and forms, rites and rituals that one is familiar with. This technically refers to religious forms like feeling that you have to bathe in the River Ganges to wash away your bad karma or being baptised in a Christian church in order to be one of the saved. However, my teacher, Ajahn Chah, would say that it also refers to conventions in general, including social ones, such as the value of money, fashions, nationality or supporting a particular sports team – saying that 'this one is good, that one is bad', 'this is right, that is wrong', with the implication that that value is an

intrinsic quality, rather than having been ascribed by social agreement. All of this is 'attachment to conventions'.

The level above stream-entry is that of the 'once-returner', *(sakadāgāmin)*. Such a person experiences a reduction of sense-desire (*kāma-rāga*) and a reduction of ill-will *(vyapāda)*. A 'once-returner' is reborn in the human realm only one more time before their complete enlightenment. The mind is far less drawn into sense-desire and ill-will. At this level of realization, well-being or psychological maturity, you can still feel anger or aversion, you can still feel craving or greed and lust, but these emotions can no longer dominate the heart. They can no longer overwhelm the mind.

The third level is that of the 'non-returner' *(anāgāmin)*. In terms of Buddhist cosmology, this means that such a person is never again reborn in the human realm. They would be reborn only in one of the higher heavenly realms, in what are called the 'The Pure Abodes' *(Sudhāvāsā)*. The basis of Pure Land Buddhism is the aim to be reborn in one of those higher realms. The realization of the level of *anāgāmin* brings with it the complete ending of craving for sense-pleasures and all ill-will.

With respect to the fourth level, even though the realization of the 'non-returner' represents an extremely advanced state, non-returners still have work to do if they are to arrive at complete enlightenment. In order for full enlightenment, Arahantship, to be realized, five more

fetters, shackles that tie the heart down must be broken. These last five fetters are:

1. Attachment to and identification with blissful mind-states based on form, *rūpa-rāga*.
2. Attachment to and identification with blissful mind-states based on formlessness, *arūpa-rāga.*
3. Identification with the subtle mind-states associated with feelings of 'I', 'me' and 'mine'. This is *asmi-māna* and it is different from attachment to self-view *(sakkāya-diṭṭhi)*. In the *Khemaka Sutta* (S 22.89), a monk said, 'There is no attachment to the body or the personality. It is really clear to me that body and personality are not who and what I am. But still, this "I" feeling persists. Just as one cannot really tell where the scent of a flower comes from – is it the petals or the pollen or the stalk? – but the scent is there. So too, even though there is no attachment to the body or personality, no attachment to feeling, perception or consciousness, still the 'I' feeling endures.' Arahantship, then, includes the letting go of *asmi-māna*, the conceit of identity.
4. The next fetter that is shed in the move from non-returner to Arahant is the letting go of *'uddhacca'*, which literally means 'restlessness'. This is not about fidgeting on your meditation cushion, but rather is about a

subtle kind of restlessness, the attitude that: '*That* looks more interesting than *this*'; or 'There is something over *there* in the future, in some other place that is more real, more rich, more satisfying, more interesting than *this*.' Letting go of *uddhacca* is letting go of any imputed 'otherness' based on the perceptions of time, location and subject-object duality.

5 The last fetter of all is *avijjā*, or 'ignorance' (also called 'nescience' or 'unawareness'). This describes the final remnants of unmindfulness and bias that prevent the mind from being attuned to the fundamental reality of experience. When this last fetter has fallen away, the mind or heart is said to be fully liberated *(vimutti)* or enlightened *(bodhi)*, and birth and death are said to have come to an end. The Buddha's own description of his enlightenment, to his first five pupils, states:

Ayam-antimā jāti natthi dāni punabbhavo'ti.

'This is the last birth. There will be no more renewal of being' (S 56.11).

There is no need to dwell too much on these broader details of the four stages at this time; they are spelled out here so that they are available as a general map.

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To come back to stream-entry, which is the main subject being explored here, I would like to emphasize that this should be considered to be a very realizable goal. My teachers and mentors would say such things as: 'If you

have enough faith and interest to come and live in a monastery, or show up at meditation retreats, to sit and deal with restlessness and physical pain, and to work hard at training your mind for a week or ten days, then you probably have all that you need in order to realize stream-entry.' If you have that amount of faith and commitment, and focus, if you really want to understand how your mind works, and are prepared to work and deal with difficulty in order to gain that understanding, then you have most of the requisite qualities to realize stream-entry.

When making a point to describe the necessary qualities for stream-entry, the Buddha once said:

> 'Even if these great *sal* trees, Mahānāma, could understand what is well spoken and what is badly spoken, then I would declare these great *sal* trees to be stream-enterers, no longer bound to the nether world, fixed in destiny, with enlightenment as their destination.'
>
> (S 55.24, Bhikkhu Bodhi trans.)

I don't make this point lightly. I feel that it's important to recognize that stream-entry is an achievable goal. That irreversible quality of well-being, that breakthrough to full psychological integration that cannot be completely fallen away from, is a reachable goal for most people *if* they

have the faith to engage in and practise meditation, and to really sit down and work on their mind, their life.

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Stream-entry, that degree of profound well-being, is thus an achievable goal but merely knowing of it as a meaningful possibility does not make it an actuality in one's life, does it? The shelves of the larder can be filled with the right ingredients but that doesn't make a meal. Knowing that the Dutch language exists and wanting to be able to speak it is not the same as being able to. So, what are the means whereby we can make that ideal of stream-entry a reality in our experience?

Meditation, as mentioned, is certainly a significant contributor to its actualization, however, it is not the only factor that supports it. In his teachings, the Buddha speaks of a number of other elements that facilitate that realization; they are called 'the factors that support stream-entry' (S 55.5).

1 The first one is 'association with good people' *(sappurisa-saṃseva)*. *Sappurisa* means a good person or a well-rounded person; *'sa-'* means 'good' or 'right' or 'true' or 'harmonious', *'-purisa'* means 'a person'; *saṃseva* means 'companionship' or 'association'. So, spending time with good people, drawing close to good-hearted people, drawing close to wise people, is the first factor supporting stream-entry.

2 Next is to 'attend to wise teachings' *(sadhammasavana)*; this means to take the time to listen to teachings, to ideas and explanations that guide the mind towards that quality of psychological integration and well-being, towards peacefulness and clarity, and away from ego-centred drives and destructive behaviours. In Buddhist terms this is 'listening to the good Dhamma' or 'the true Dhamma'.

3 Then there is 'wise reflection' *(yoniso manasikāra)*, which means, literally, 'attending to the root or to the origin of things'. We attend, we consider, we reflect upon our experience. This includes reflecting upon our feelings of liking and disliking, our feelings of being approved of or the feeling of being criticized, the feeling of success, the feeling of failure. When you launch a project or carry out a study and you don't get the results you were expecting, *yoniso manasikāra* is that part of intelligence that wonders, 'Hmmmm... what is the pattern here? How is this working?' It is the capacity to look into the way things operate and to recognize the patterning of experience, and how the natural order functions. This is 'wise reflection' or 'attending wisely'. In Buddhist practice a lot of wise reflection revolves around watching our moods and listening to our thoughts. It is the quality of being able to step back and say, 'This is the feeling of liking, this is the feeling of disliking. Here is the experience of me getting into the car and being annoyed by the traffic.'

4 The final way to strengthen stream-entry is 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma' *(dhammānudhammappaṭipatti)*, which means engaging in meditation and developing wholesome states in tune with reality. That is to say, working with the mind in a way that is free from self-view and self-centred attitudes. This is because we often practise meditation in tune with our egotistical drives ('Because I want to attain enlightenment and be the most impressive!') or with a sense of obligation, because we have been told to 'do it this way' by an expert or a teacher. We can engage in meditation driven by obligation, by obedience, by ambition, by aggression: 'I'm going to wipe out my defilements. I'm going to make my thinking mind shut up!' But this is practising Dhamma not in accordance with Dhamma, but in accordance with aggression, with self-view, and with aversion, ambition and greed and so forth. Instead, meditation and the other aspects of training need to be guided by mindfulness and wisdom *(sati-paññā)*. This will then be what informs all action and decision-making rather than habitual fears, desires and aversions. Here the Buddha is encouraging us to make effort and give direction to our lives based on the cultivation of means that are helpful and wholesome since those will lead to the most beneficial results. The means and the end are unified. The Buddha is therefore encouraging us to incline away from working in a way that is unhelpful and unwholesome as that can only lead to more alienation and disharmony, to more suffering in the end.

In summary those four factors supporting stream-entry are: associating with good people, listening to true teachings, reflecting wisely, and practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma.

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Another small but significant aspect to mention is that sometimes we mistake awareness or knowing, as understood from the Buddhist perspective, to mean a sort of mental agility. The quality of stream-entry is not dependent on being able to articulate or even to think clearly. This is an important principle. It is not dependent on clarity of thought. You don't have to remember your lines. True insight can be established without a dependence on memory, conceptual thought or language. True insight is rather a quality of vision, a quality of attitude, and attitude is not a concept. It is a way of seeing, a way of being. It is an awakened knowing, awareness itself, rather than knowing *about* things.

Ajahn Chah had a stroke when he was in his sixties. His brain function was quite heavily compromised. During the period of time when he could still speak, sometimes monks would come to visit and he might want to say, 'Come here Sumedho' but what emerged was 'Come here Ānando'; or he'd mean to say, 'It's good to see you' while what would come out would be something like, 'Blue dog happy Thursday.' And he would realize that was nonsense. He knew that the words of his choosing hadn't been spoken

and that a different set of words had appeared instead, but he found this amusing instead of distressing. He understood that his thinking functions were misfiring, but he didn't have any suffering about it. He was at ease with it even though it was not under his control. He described it by saying, 'The monkeys are playing about in the telephone exchange.'

This shows that unshakeable well-being, as discussed here, does not depend on a healthy body or even on a capacity for orderly thinking. Rather it is a matter of attitude. It is a steadiness of the inner vision, of apperception. It is the ability to appreciate the ever-changing field of experience, regardless of its contents, with openness, easefulness and impartiality. Our happiness then does not depend on any single 'thing' or object, rather it is grounded in a commodious awareness of *the process* of experiencing, rather than in *the contents* of those experiences.

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What has been presented here is a short summary of the principles relating to enlightenment, as understood in the Southern School of Buddhism, in response to the question of the title: 'Is the Buddhist concept of enlightenment a meaningful possibility in the current age?' It is a description of some of the relevant ingredients available in the psychological 'larder' as well as something of a recipe of how to put them together in order to create a nourishing meal resulting, ultimately, in an 'unshakeable well-being'.

Whether we as individuals make use of those ingredients in a skilful way to support that kind of well-being, or whether we ignore them or create an un-nutritious concoction, is up to each one of us.

Please also bear in mind that the points described here are not intended to be dogmatic assertions that are expected to be believed out of hand. Rather they should be regarded as reflections offered for consideration that, if they prove to be valid and meaningful through personal experience, can be used to aid individuals in the actualization of a quality of well-being that is liberating, enriching and indeed unshakeable.

I have outlined a few of the main themes of the subject here and I suspect that there are many questions that arise accordingly; if there are any aspects of all this that it would be useful to elaborate on, please ask whatever you like...

Questions & Responses

Q You said you trained under Ajahn Chah and his teaching. Was Ajahn Chah an Arahant or not? What are your views on it?

A If I have met an Arahant he definitely was one. But you can't really judge from the outside. If people asked Ajahn Chah if he was an Arahant, he would say, 'It takes one to know one,' or 'Why are you asking me that? Instead, you should ask yourself why you are not.' He certainly seemed like the happiest man in the world. That was one of the most striking things about him.

The scriptures state that one of the qualities of stream-entry is to be 'independent of others in the training, the practice'. That quality of independence doesn't mean being isolated or abstracted, or having an egotistical attitude of 'I don't care what anybody thinks.' Rather it is a profound self-reliance, self-confidence. Ajahn Chah didn't need anyone to like him or to approve of him. If you tried to flatter him, he'd make you look at why on earth you were doing that. You could never second-guess him. He had an extraordinary quality of ease coupled with a tremendous liveliness. He paid close attention to those he was with and what was going on, yet he simultaneously displayed an extraordinary relaxation at the same time.

He was fully attuned to what was happening, but he didn't need it to be a particular way in order for him to be happy.

Ajahn Chah was an extremely strict and orthodox monk – we practise in a rigorous and traditional religious order that is 2,500 years old – but despite that set of conventional limitations he had an astonishing quality of freedom. He was completely at ease with whatever happened, which doesn't mean to say that he had 'checked out', off in some distracted dream world; he was simply very flexible, responsive and adaptable with respect to how situations unfolded.

Having had a stroke, and become pretty much physically paralysed, he was still cracking jokes about his brain function collapsing. Not trying to put a brave face on it out of insecurity, but being genuinely OK with watching what was unfolding in his life. He had enjoyed having his faculties and had made good use of them. He had used them well to help himself and others. Now that those faculties were fading, he was quite OK with them as they disappeared. He did the best he could with them as they were going, but there was no sense of loss as they were fading. The last ever formal Dhamma talk that he gave, in 1981, published in English as 'Why Are We Here?', spells out this skilful attitude with great clarity. His stroke and the subsequent brain damage happened shortly thereafter.

Q Ajahn, how do the qualities leading to stream-entry align with the ways of working with each of the Four Noble Truths? Or, another way of putting it, how does 'self-actualization' relate to the Eightfold Path?

A Throughout my monastic life and training, I have related to the Four Noble Truths as a set of practices to apply, rather than as a set of doctrines to believe in. In application, these Truths are an embracing of the experience of living rather than a set of religious opinions. In his very first teaching, 'The Setting in Motion of the Wheel of Dhamma' (S 56.11), the Buddha outlined specific ways of working with each of the Four Noble Truths.

Noble Truth #1 There is the pleasant, the unpleasant and the neutral. There is the recognition of what is harmful or beneficial or neutral amongst those feelings, as well as any mental pain *(dukkha)* that arises from the way the mind is hanging on to these. The response to this, the way of working with it that the Buddha advises is, 'This mental pain is to be apprehended, embraced, fully received *(pariññeyan'ti)*'. This process is related to Right View.

Noble Truth #2: This is the recognition of where entanglements and grasping, where identification is happening, where the mental pain originates from *(dukkha-samudaya)*. The Buddha advises us to let go of whatever is being grasped at *(pahātabban'ti).* This process is related to Right Effort.

Noble Truth #3 Is the realization of the ending of suffering *(dukkha-nirodha)*. When things have been let go of, what remains is the quality of peace and stillness, the sense of wholeness. Peace is present when the grasping stops. The response to this, the way of working with it that the Buddha advises, is 'it is to be known, to be made real or realized' *(saccikātabban'ti)*. Again, this is related to Right View.

Noble Truth #4 Is the Eightfold Path that leads to that peace *(dukkha-nirodhagāminī paṭipadā)*. This Path needs to be developed, acted upon, cultivated *(bhāvetabban'ti).* And again, this is related to Right Effort. In addition, the ways of working with each of the Four Truths needs to be informed by Right Mindfulness – so Right View, Right Effort and Right Mindfulness have a special role in the process of liberation (see M 117).

A follow-up point on the Third Noble Truth and the way to work with it is that, as Ajahn Sumedho noticed for himself and for many Westerners, peace tends to be boring. We like to engage. We like to act. When we experience peace, it's usually interesting for about three or four seconds, then we think, 'OK, what's next?' We start looking for the next thing to become engrossed in, to be worried about, to be annoyed with. So true peace is important but elusive. It is like noticing space. In a room, we notice the other people because of faces and clothing, the histories between us and all the eyes looking at us. Our attention doesn't go to the space. The space is not interesting; the people are interesting. But if we don't notice the

space then our life gets *very* crowded. If we don't notice silence, if we don't notice stillness, then our life is a continual lurch from one engagement, one agitation, to another.

When that stressing stops, when there is peace, that is the ending of *dukkha* but it needs to be realized, made *real*, noticed. It is like coming into an empty room. Instead of just scooting through on the way to the next thing, you sit down for a moment and feel the space. The initial blankness turns into a kind of flowering: 'This is peaceful. This is quiet. This is still. This is beautiful.'

That might seem like a mere perceptual effect but it is really the essence of what the Third Truth is pointing to – we need to *realize* peace. We need to know it consciously because the conditioning of our senses is in the opposite direction, towards objects. Our seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching are geared towards survival – keeping away from predators, connecting with our group, looking for objects to eat or to mate with or to possess, protecting our territory, or our young. Our attention is geared towards objects, towards movement, that which is loud, bright and mobile. So if we don't consciously notice space, silence and stillness, if we don't learn how to relish solitude, the subtle and the indistinct, then the state of inner peace will always be seen as a state of lack, a state in which something is missing. It will not be recognized for what it is.

If we are able to stop and realize that quality of spaciousness, we realize that there is a mysterious wholeness, a fulfilment, a completeness, a fullness of heart. In Sanskrit it is called *pūrṇa*, in Pali *puṇṇa*. We do not notice this state of beatitude if we are busy running on towards the next thing.

One of the very useful practices directly geared for developing the supports for stream-entry, specifically related to 'wise reflection' *(yoniso manasikāra)*, navigating skilfully, is called 'developing the perception of impermanence, or uncertainty' *(anicca-saññā)*. This was one of Ajahn Chah's central teachings. The practice is to keep bringing the awareness, the recollection of uncertainty to mind at all times. This is in relation to our judgements, our perceptions, and to anything that we think we are in the middle of doing. For example:

I might think: 'I'm going to fly back to England tonight.'

To which the wise reflective response is: 'Is that so?'

It is not certain. It is not a sure thing. Nothing is.

Conscious reflection on uncertainty, the development of the *anicca-saññā*, is a way of attuning the heart to the awareness that every aspect of the material world, of the sensory, conditioned world, is intrinsically uncertain and in a state of change. We literally don't know what it is going to change into, we don't know what is going to happen next. This reflection helps us wake up into the spacious stillness that is always 'here', rather than being

entranced and enchanted by 'the thing that I'm doing' or 'the place that I think I'm going'. This reflection helps us to keep things in perspective.

It is a simple exercise. You can ask the question whenever you make a judgement:

'That's great!' – 'Is that so?'

'That's awful!' – 'Is that so?'

It is a very straightforward practice but, if we apply it, it is surprising how much space we find in our lives, both psychological space and social space. It is a simple way of correcting our perspective on things: 'This is a mental event that is part of a transient experiential field. That's what it has always been.' And what remains when that letting go happens? The awakened knowing. That letting go of the false sense of certainty, that expectation, and realizing the peace that comes from that, these two stages are the essence of Dhamma practice. The more that process can be embodied, the more we will find genuine peace.

This realization is also the resolution of doubt about what is the Path and what is not the Path; grasping is the cause of tension, of *dukkha*, of imbalance, of discord in the heart, and when the grasping stops that is Nibbāna, here and now.

The Buddha said that reflection on impermanence helps the mind to be free of the conceit of 'I am' *(asmi-māna)* – '*I* am doing something. *I* am going

somewhere. *I* am somebody' – 'And when the heart is free of the conceit "I am", that is Nibbāna, here and now' (A 9.3, Ud 4.1).

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Q For the last three or four days we were spending time, via classes, studying the science of mindfulness. How do you reconcile teachings that are as old as traditional Buddhism with science that keeps advancing and redefining concepts of mindfulness?

A As a monk in the Theravādan tradition, I confess that I am biased in my view, as you might expect! So, although I find a lot of the science very significant, I don't feel that Buddha-Dhamma needs modern science to validate it.

The language of the current age tends to be secular-materialist. In many respects, people worship the god of data – if you have a graph and verifiable statistics, that carries weight, 'Science has proved...'. In olden times, one mark of authority was a big hat. The bigger the hat you wore, the more impressive your spiritual status was, the more extensive and reliable your influence. Now it's not a hat. It's if you are an Oxford don, or a head of department at Brown University, or you've got a Nobel prize, those are the accoutrements of power, respect and authority: 'How many books have you published? How many papers? How many followers have you got on Facebook? What's your Erdős number?'

With the changing of language and cultural mores, even though Buddhist teachings and practices might be essentially as they were 2500 years ago, there is a need to translate things into a language that people respect and which has meaning for a modern audience. The Buddha himself was aware of this and accounted for it, both in what are called the *mahā-padesa* rules (for transmission of his teaching to other countries and for future ages), as well as in his own culturally inclusive pedagogical style.

The Buddha would regularly use long associative or adjectival strings of words when he spoke. For instance, in his first teaching he said, '*Cakkhuṃ udapādi, nāṇaṃ udapādi, paññā udapādi, vijjā udapādi, āloko udapādi.*' This means, 'Vision arose, knowledge arose, wisdom arose, awareness arose, light arose' (S 56.11). People often wonder why he used such long strings of words like that. An elder monk, Ven. Ānanda Maitreya, who was a very gifted scholar and meditator, once pointed out that, at any one time, the Buddha was very probably speaking to people from a number of different countries. So for example, when describing closely related qualities, maybe in Vaṃsa they say *'āloko'*, in Magadha they say *'paññā'*, while the folks up in Uttarakuru, they are always talking about *'vijjā'*. He would thus use different words so that people from Uttarakuru and Magadha and Vaṃsa would all know what he was talking about. He was a supremely skilled communicator so he talked to people in the languages they could understand.

Such translation is essential in order to apply the Buddha's teaching to the purpose for which it was intended. A lot of those antique terms need translation in order to be meaningful today – like calling enlightenment 'unshakeable well-being' for the purpose of this conference. You put it into different language so that the people who are present can feel, 'Oh right – "well-being". Yes. That's my field. I know what that's talking about.' Whereas if you talk about '*sammāsambodhi*' literally, 'perfect self-enlightenment' it's a bit more remote, harder to relate to.

The Buddha was a pragmatic teacher, not an idealistic one. He was often described as being a kind of doctor. His style was, rather than merely stating, 'I assure you well-being is possible,' he was the kind of doctor who asks, 'Where does it hurt?' He put things into a language that was meaningful to people, so that they would think, 'That's talking about my life, my ailment, my problems. I can relate to that. These are methods I can pick up and use. Marvellous. I can do this!'

Even though I just said, 'I don't really feel that the Buddha-Dhamma needs modern science to validate it,' I also feel it would be a ridiculous conceit to say that Buddhism has nothing to learn from science. If Buddhism is to be a useful presence in the world then it has to connect with the people who comprise that human world, and that connection is through language and meaning. If what carries meaning these days is scientific studies and

data, and all of the thousands of hours that you good people put into the laboratory and crunching your numbers, if that brings forth meaningful messages that help people, marvellous! Such science is a very helpful adjunct to what Buddhism has been doing for over two thousand years. It is helping the Dhamma message to be communicated in a language that people can understand and make use of.

I thus feel that the language of science is very helpful in encouraging people to pick up new methods, ways and means, that can genuinely benefit their lives. This language encourages people to use mindfulness practices such as MBCT, MBSR, Dot-be and all the other related disciplines, to bring benefit to their own lives and to the lives of the people around them.

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Q Can you speak freely on the Arahant versus the Bodhisattva pathway?

A Both of those pathways articulate very valuable and wonderfully admirable spiritual possibilities. I feel that what contention there has been, over the centuries, has been more to do with professional jealousy than any conflict or contradiction based in reality. There is a very human and natural tribalism: 'Our village is good, you people on the other side of the river are all idiots.' 'My department is way superior to yours.' And so forth... I'm sure that some of you in the academic world are familiar with this condition.

The Mahāyāna movement grew out of an apparent ossification that was happening within the Buddhist monastic order in the first few hundred years after the Buddha's time. Buddhism had become, it seems, a kind of priesthood locked into its own self-interest. The Mahāyāna movement arose, according to the histories, from the intention to open things up to a wider sphere of people, to speak about the benefits of the teachings, the blessings that arise for all beings from people engaging in the practice of the teachings. It wasn't all about just practising for your own liberation. This is a very brief thumbnail sketch of the situation and, as you might expect, there are numerous versions of this history. However, the differences of perspective can be superficially characterized as: a) Arahant – 'The best thing you can do with your life is to realize full and complete enlightenment'; and b) Bodhisattva – 'The welfare of others is more important than your own. Spiritual fulfilment can only come when the suffering of all beings, even "down to the last blade of grass ", has been fully alleviated.' These are over-simplifications, even caricatures, but they are representative of definitions that have been circulated and attached to over the centuries.

I would suggest that it is through a wrong grasp of the fundamental principle of the Four Noble Truths, as a teaching, that it can seem like the so-called 'Arahant path' is all about liberating oneself from suffering and everyone else can just go take care of themselves. Similarly, I feel it's a

wrong grasping of the Bodhisattva Vows, particularly through seeing them in terms of self-view, that makes the Bodhisattva path seem to be in conflict with the Arahant path. After all, if we vow to not reach full enlightenment until all other beings have been enlightened before us, if there is more than one Bodhisattva in the mix, who is going to go first? As the Buddhist joke goes, with two such Bodhisattvas at the Doors to the Deathless: 'After you.' 'No. I insist, after *you...*', *ad infinitum*.

I have spent a lot of time over the years in different Northern Buddhist monasteries and countries, with the Tibetan, the Chinese and the Japanese traditions. In most of such places there is a recitation of the Bodhisattva Vows as well as 'The Heart Sūtra' each day.

This is a very significant juxtaposition, because 'The Heart Sūtra' says:

> There is no suffering, there is no origin of suffering, there is no cessation of suffering, no Path, no understanding and no attaining for there is nothing to attain.

While the Bodhisattva Vows say:

1 Living beings are numberless, I vow to save them all;

2 Afflictions are limitless, I vow to cut them off;

3 The Buddha's Way is supreme, I vow to accomplish it;

4 Dharma doors are infinite, I vow to enter them all.

So you have 'The Heart Sūtra' which takes the Four Noble Truths and empties them out, saying: 'There is no suffering ... no origin ... no cessation ... there is no Path' – these are all empty. And you have the Bodhisattva Vows which are, apparently, a deliberate extension of the Four Noble Truths to spell out the principle that they relate not just to the individual but to all beings.

I came across an interesting *sūtra* in the Chinese tradition ('The Buddha Speaks the Brahma Net Sūtra') that spelled out the relationship between the Four Noble Truths and the Four Bodhisattva Vows. The latter, it seems, arose directly from the former.

1. In regard to the First Noble Truth, it says that the First Vow is based on the fact that not only is there *dukkha* here in our mind, but it arises in the minds of all beings. All are suffering. Thus is born the aspiration to help all beings to end their *dukkha*.
2. In regard to the Second Noble Truth, the vow is to cut off all afflictions (the cause of suffering) not just in our mind, but in the minds of numberless beings. The vow is to help every being to end all their afflictions, their cravings.
3. The Third Noble Truth gives rise to the aspiration towards Buddhahood: 'The Buddha's Path is supreme, I vow to accomplish it.' The Third Noble Truth is *dukkha-nirodha*. The ending of suffering is possible. In

this extension it is characterized by the possibility of the complete consummation of spiritual potential – i.e. not just with ending *dukkha*, which all Arahants do, but developing all the teaching powers and skills of a Buddha as well, as Bodhisattvas do.

4 The Fourth Noble Truth is that of 'The Eightfold Path that Leads to the Ending of *Dukkha*'. This expands to: 'Dharma doors are infinite' and there is the vow to enter them all. This refers to cultivating skilful social, psychological and spiritual means of every kind in order to help all beings to attain enlightenment, as well as fulfilling all the factors of the Eightfold Path.

These two, seemingly contradictory, teachings are being recited and reflected upon side by side on a daily basis. Thus in the Mahāyāna, or Northern Buddhist tradition, 'The Heart Sūtra', empties out the Four Noble Truths, while the Bodhisattva Vows indicate that the Four Noble Truths relate to all beings – I would suggest that this juxtaposition is no accident, rather it is intended to express both the emptiness and the universality of those Noble Truths. In addition I would say that the Buddha's original teaching of the Four Noble Truths, as found in the Theravāda, or Southern Buddhist tradition, was meant to imply both of those qualities – emptiness *and* universality – but those dimensions have sometimes been missed or lost over the ages.

This understanding is what you find within some of the contemplative lineages of the Southern school, as well as within those of a similar nature in the Northern school today. These Truths are 'noble' insofar as they are conventional truths which, if applied correctly, lead to the realization of the ultimate truth. They are not ultimate or absolute truths in and of themselves, like some kind of would-be incontrovertible concept. Furthermore, if they are applied free from self-view, it will be recognized that they do not apply just to 'this' being, instead they are necessarily relevant to all beings. The focus of attention doesn't go just to *this* being, it is appropriate to apply it universally.

The Buddha described this relationship between saving oneself and saving all beings very simply and clearly in the *Sedaka Sutta* ('The Bamboo Acrobats', S 47.19) with the following parable:

> Once upon a time a bamboo acrobat, setting up his bamboo pole, addressed his young assistant Medakathalika (whose name means 'Frying Pan'):
>
> 'Come, dear Medakathalika, climb up the bamboo pole and stand up on its top.'
>
> 'OK, master' Medakathalika replied to the bamboo acrobat; and climbing up the bamboo pole she stood at the very top.
>
> Then the bamboo acrobat said to her: 'You look after me, dear

Medakathalika, and I'll look after you. With us looking after each other, guarding one another, we'll show off our skills, receive good payment, and you'll be able to climb safely down from the pole.'

This being said, the assistant Medakathalika said to the bamboo acrobat: 'That's not right, master! You look after yourself, and I will look after myself. Thus with each of us looking after ourselves, guarding ourselves, we'll show off our skills, receive good payment, and I'll be able to climb safely down from the pole. That's the way to do it!'

Just like the assistant, Medakathalika, said to her master: 'I will look after myself,' this is the way you monks should practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness. But you should also practise the Four Foundations of Mindfulness by resolving, 'I will look after others' too. Looking after oneself, one looks after others. Looking after others, one looks after oneself.

And how does one look after others by looking after oneself? By practising mindfulness, by developing it, by using it over and over.

And how does one look after oneself by looking after others? By patience *(khanti)*, by non-harming *(avihiṃsa)*, by loving-kindness *(mettā-citta)*, by sympathy, and by caring for others *(anuddayatā)*. Thus by looking after oneself, one looks after others, and by looking after others, one looks after oneself.

… Happily Ever After

The COVID-19 pandemic has rendered these times extraordinary. Many restrictions have been put in place by the UK Government and all around the world: in Ireland all the pubs are closed; in France the cafes, restaurants, cinemas, theatres are closed; in Austria they don't allow gatherings of more than five people together. Borders are closed in many countries and people are encouraged or required to isolate themselves in their own homes. These are extraordinary measures, unprecedented in our times.

The level of alarm, concern and anxiety around this country and the world is understandably very high with the numbers of people infected being in the millions. Many people who have been infected by the virus have passed away already. These are issues of great concern, they impact everybody's lives. But I feel in terms of our lives, it's not just a matter of what we do to look after our own health and the health of those with whom we are in contact, but it's also important not to forget why we're here at Amaravati in the first place.

Why do people choose to live at a spiritual centre like Amaravati? Why do we come to a place and focus our attention on practising the Buddhist path and reflecting on the Buddha's teachings?

One of the essential things I would suggest we consider is that, with the pandemic, in a way nothing has changed. The presence of this illness and the process of it spreading all round the world, being extremely communicable, and the disruption to people's lives that it has brought, this is the kind of thing that the Buddha's teaching prepares us for. It's an object lesson in uncertainty and the fragile nature of our lives, our health, our well-being, and our very lifespan.

It's important to see that, in a profound sense, nothing has 'gone wrong'. This is actually 'situation normal'. The fragile nature of life has always been this way. We, as a human society, particularly in the comfortable West, have perhaps become oblivious, unaware, of that fragile nature. We've become complacent. We take things for granted. We assume that things are predictable, that we should be able to live a comfortable life, that there'll be medical resources when we need them, that we'll be able to go to the places that we like to go to and do the things we like to do and spend time with the people that we like. We like to think that life is predictable and that we can carry on in the way that we assume it's meant to be, and that we'll be able to live happily ever after with our families or with the people that we like in our community.

The presence of this disease, going rampant around the world, disrupts that kind of fairy tale imagination. It makes it very clear that those kinds

of assumptions are based upon seeing things in a shallow way. We are not seeing the whole picture. The Buddha's teachings point directly at this uncertain and fragile nature of our lives. A teaching I like to quote on this, from the Northern Buddhist tradition, is Section 38 of 'The Sūtra in Forty-two Sections'. The Buddha addresses an assembly and asks the question, 'How long is a human lifespan?'

And the first person says, 'Just a few days.'

The Buddha responds: 'You don't understand my teaching.'

The next one says, 'A single day and a single night.'

Again, the Buddha says, 'You don't understand my teaching.'

Then the next monk says, 'The time it takes to eat a meal.'

Once more the Buddha says, 'You don't understand my teaching.'

Finally, a monk says, 'We can only expect to live for the time it takes to go from the beginning to the end of an in-breath or from the beginning to the end of an out-breath.'

To this the Buddha responds, 'Excellent. You have understood my teaching.'

(A parallel teaching to this one is found in the Pali Canon at A 6.19)

If you time that, it's about three or four seconds. That's the lifespan we can

reasonably look forward to. To our egos and to our habitual perceptions that's shocking and frightening – we can only look forward to living another three or four seconds. Is the Buddha trying to scare us? Is he being depressive or threatening? No, he's being realistic. That's how nature works. If we have an aneurism, if a blood vessel bursts in our brain, then we have that amount of time before everything starts to go black and then out we go. Life can come to an end that quickly through natural circumstances, not through being hit by a car or falling off a cliff, but just through the body giving out. We have that amount of time to play with, that's all we can be sure of.

The rest is extra.

This is the reason why the Buddha points this fact out, he is encouraging us to be realistic and not to be complacent and deluded, not to take things for granted. Instead we need to bring urgent attention to the present reality, the present experience, and to focus on what the mind is doing at this moment, since this is the only place we can make a difference. So, in what way is our mind relating now to our present experience?

The presence of the pandemic has been giving us an opportunity to develop our 'perception of impermanence', the *anicca-saññā,* and to open our heart to the fragile nature of all people, all things. We are urged to turn towards the existential fact of our impermanence, *aniccatā*, fully acknowledging it,

accepting that it's not just an unfortunate mistake but is the reality of how it is and how it has always been. That acknowledgement, that recognition, enables the heart to be in tune with reality, with nature. There's a grounded realism in that, and in that realism there's a relaxation, an ease. On the other hand, when we take things for granted – expecting that we're going to live for many decades or that we're going to have a comfortable life, we're going to live happily ever after with the people that we like – then we are making foolish assumptions about life. At extraordinary and unfamiliar times, like this of the COVID pandemic, those foolish assumptions are revealed.

We've been looking for certainty where it can't be found. We've been depending on things that are not dependable. If we have not questioned or explored this, then, when it's revealed, we are surprised: 'No, you can't depend on it. You can't be sure of your own health; you can't be sure there are going to be medical supplies; you can't be sure there will be hospital beds available; you can't be sure there are going to be enough doctors and nurses. It's not a sure thing.' We're shocked. We feel something's gone wrong. We feel it *shouldn't* be this way, 'This is unfair, how can this happen?!' Our foolish assumptions are revealed to us. To recognize this is not being depressing, hard-hearted or malicious but appreciating how the 'heavenly messengers' of sickness and death can help us to see where

our suppositions, dependencies and expectations have formed, what our mind has become accustomed to and what it has taken for granted. Once we know what our deluded habituations are, we can do something about them.

Although no one in their right mind would ever wish for a pandemic like this to spread around the world, causing such immense damage to everybody's lives, I feel this offers us a good opportunity to bring the Buddhist truths home, to take them to heart, to see what we have actually taken refuge in. What have we taken as being reliable, dependable? What have we given value to in our lives? What are the life goals that we've created for ourselves as individuals and as a society? What are the things that we've come to rely on? What do we assume to be true and real and good, and are those things trustworthy? Are they *really* good? Are they really true? Are they even real? Are they anything substantial? Or were they always superficial and fragile, delusory, not of true value?

Another teaching that I like to refer to in this connection, concerns an elderly disciple of the Buddha, Nakulapitā (S 22.1). Nakulapitā and Nakulamātā were a very devoted older couple, long-term dedicated disciples of the Buddha who had a very close connection with him. They had apparently been his parents again and again, in hundreds of previous lifetimes, so he had a close association with them. They lived at a place called Suṃsumāragira, at the Bhesakaḷā Grove. They would visit the Buddha quite often and ask him questions.

One time Nakulapitā, when he was about a hundred years old, came to the Buddha and said, 'I'm really agèd, decrepit. The years have accumulated and they are a burden to me. My body is weak and wrinkled, and my health is not good, my eyes and ears are wearing out. What advice can you give, Venerable Sir, to someone in a condition like mine, being so agèd, so decrepit, so worn down by decades of living?'

The Buddha's response to Nakulapitā was, 'It's far better to be afflicted in the body and not afflicted in mind, than it is to be afflicted in mind and not afflicted in the body.' He was saying that having a healthy body but an unhealthy mind is a great disadvantage; this is to be avoided, abandoned. Rather, as long as the mind has a good and skilful attitude, whether or not the body is sick and agèd is secondary. He went on to ask: 'And how is one afflicted in body but not afflicted in mind?' He then recounts to Nakulapitā the whole of the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta*, 'The Discourse on Not-self' (S 22.59, MV 1.6), exploring the habits of dependency and attachment: how we look for certainty *(niccatā)*, happiness *(sukha)* and self *(attā)* in the unstable body and mind, in the five *khandhas*, in this physical form and in feelings, perceptions, mental formations and sense-consciousness. All of them have the characteristics of being *anicca*, impermanent, *dukkha*, unsatisfactory, and *anattā*, not-self. The Buddha walks Nakulapitā through all this and shows him that this is how, even with a decrepit body, that is very old, with

poor eyesight, poor hearing and so forth, in terms of attitude of mind, you can still be independent of these limitations and difficulties.

Our attitude towards experiences of sickness and ageing can be 'unafflicted in mind'. We can train ourselves to regard all the aspects of our body and our mind, *rūpa* and *nāma,* as being intrinsically *anicca*, uncertain, in a state of change; *dukkha*, unsatisfactory; and *anattā:* they are not-self, they are not who or what we are. The insight that arises from seeing things in this way leads to true well-being – we are thereby unafflicted in mind. Such well-being is far more precious than having a healthy body. To have a healthy body but a mind that's filled with greed, hatred and delusion, is a sorry state to be in.

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In this respect I feel that, as practitioners of Buddha-Dhamma, people who are committed to the Buddha's teachings, we should investigate what our life goals actually are. What do we really want in life? How much do we create a dependence on worldly factors: a healthy body; a nice place to live; a predictable family; a familiar community; a society that is cohesive; a health system that is reliable, supportive and accessible – how much do we take refuge in these things?

How much are our life goals focused on trying to have a comfortable, well-off life with a cozy retirement, making sure we're going to be looked after,

with good insurance and a good retirement plan, having a dependable support system in place so that we won't ever be lonely, decrepit, poor, in pain, sick or abandoned at the end. These are quite reasonable concerns.

In the UK, and many countries in the West, there's a lot of provision for such material supports. Society in a welfare state goes to great lengths to make sure that people don't suffer from hunger and isolation, that people are well looked-after into their old age and decrepitude. This is fine and admirable, it is a sign of a compassionate and thoughtful communal spirit. That said, if all we're looking forward to is a comfortable place to stay, caring people who will look after us, and a good supply of food, shelter, medicine and clothing, then I would suggest that we've made our lives very limited; the potential of our human existence has been made extremely narrow.

Consider the advice that the Buddha gave to Nakulapitā: to be afflicted in body but not afflicted in mind is much better and more important than being afflicted in mind and not afflicted in the body. Western society is very materialistic. Most people in the West have no kind of spiritual goal. How many people have liberation or sainthood as their life goal? Or, to use Abraham Maslow's terminology, 'self-actualization'? How many people say that they're aiming for enlightenment before they pass away?

Within a few spiritual groups we might consciously have such an aspiration, but even in many Buddhist communities in the West it's rare to think in

these terms. The spiritual potential that we have as human beings is hardly talked about. There isn't a language for it, other than in theistic circles where there is the prospect of possibly going to heaven when we die.

I feel that this is one of the things that Buddha-Dhamma can help bring into society in the West. It is far more helpful, in terms of genuine happiness and fulfillment, and it is far more liberating, to appreciate our spiritual potential, and to develop it, setting a life goal of enlightenment, or, at least, of stream-entry (in Buddhist terms), rather than thinking merely in materialistic terms of a comfortable retirement home and a good insurance plan, material coziness and Radio 4 to stave off the feelings of loneliness, despair and lack of fulfilment at the end of our life.

If we have used our life to fulfil our spiritual potential, if we have made this the focus of our attention, then, as we get older, whether there is physical comfort or not, the heart is fine, just as the Buddha advised Nakulapitā. Let's take this to heart! This is far more helpful in terms of a life plan and a *real* insurance policy. If you really want to be insured, *ensured*, *assured,* then realize stream-entry – that's the very best way of being sure of happiness, ease and contentment. If you want to live happily ever after, don't worry about the UK National Health Service or Social Services so much as about the state of your own heart, your own mind. What really brings the 'happily ever after' ideal to fulfillment is developing the spiritual potential that we

have, using our time, our energy, and the mental and spiritual resources that we have to realize enlightenment.

In this respect it's useful to reflect on what the Buddha laid out as 'the factors that support stream-entry' (S 55.5). These were addressed in the previous chapter but it will be useful to explore them a bit more here as well. The four factors in this list, apart from their role in stream-entry, are valuable human qualities on their own, they help us deal with the current pandemic and the social distress, difficulties and anxieties that have come with it; they each can play a part in helping us to process the intensity of emotions in the people around us and within ourselves. The four factors supportive of stream-entry can help us to deal with the community or family that we're in, the society that we're a part of and the difficulties and challenges of our current situation.

The first of the four factors of stream-entry is *sappurissasaṃseva* which means 'association with good people', 'drawing close to good people'. *'Sa'* means good, *'purisa'* means a person. *Saṃseva* is 'association with' or 'drawing close to'. So, 'drawing close to good people' means to be discerning about who we spend our time with. If there's a choice between being with someone who is 'peaceful and calm and wise and skilful', and someone who is reactive, self-centred, demanding, greedy or aggressive, then choose the 'peaceful and calm and wise and skilful' person. Drawing close to good people, also means

associating with those who encourage wisdom and compassion, kindness and equanimity. These are skilful qualities of the heart that, in others, will help us to similarly strengthen those qualities within ourselves. If we spend time with people who are anxious, fearful, agitated, aggressive, blaming and complaining, then it will strengthen these qualities within us. We get drawn into conversations with both kinds of people, and thereby their mindsets; we experience the results of the choices we make. If we associate with good-hearted, well-rounded people, *sappurisa* – and 'associate' includes the digital media we listen to, give our attention to, read and watch – then it will create a ground of ease and peace within us. Associating with good people brings out the best in us.

The Buddha was incredibly practical and observant. He realized that we are strongly affected by the people that we spend time with, just as we are affected by the places that we choose to go to. We are affected by the environment around us. If we want to cultivate wholesome qualities, if we want to cultivate that which is liberating and noble, then to the extent that one has a choice, draw close to people who embody those wholesome qualities and who strengthen those qualities within yourself.

As an adjunct to this consideration, when we are spending time with others, bear in mind that we ourselves can be a source of those *sappurisa* qualities for the people whom we are with. If we find ourselves getting anxious,

agitated, aggressive, blaming and complaining, then we can mindfully reflect, 'Do I need to fill somebody else's mind with my anxieties? Do I need to express my agitated opinions? Do I need to put my aggressive, blaming tendencies out into the world? Do I need to give those afflictive attitudes energy and strength? Do I need to fill somebody else's ears with my reactive patterns?' Lo and behold, we see that we have a choice. We can choose to not be having that effect on other people; if we make that choice and restrain any divisive, deceitful or selfish urges we will see the helpful effect that that has on the conversation and the relationship. Being thoughtful and discerning company for others, drawing upon the *sappurisa* dimensions of our own hearts, is part of the way we support stream-entry.

Saddhammasavana is the second one. 'Listening to the good Dhamma'. Particularly in times like this that can be distressing and difficult, what kind of Dhamma do we fill the mind with? What kind of information do we bring into our field of experience? What do we choose to give our attention and our time to? That *saddhamma,* that 'good Dhamma' or 'the true Dhamma', means making choices to listen to and be guided by that which is genuinely in tune with nature, in tune with reality.

Again, it's not just listening to or reading or watching things that are compelling or exciting, or someone vigorously asserting a particular point of view, whether they are a well-known spiritual teacher or a blogger

promising 'This is the way to cure coronavirus!' Be discerning. Where is this information coming from? What's the source of this? Is this reliable? Is it useful for me to be putting my attention onto this? Is this helpful, is this liberating, or is this just more noise? Is this just a distraction? Am I listening to this or reading this or putting my mind onto this, just to get away from anxious, agitated feelings of frustration or incompleteness?'

Reflect: '*Saddhammasavana* – is this good Dhamma? Is this a wise, beneficial collection of words and ideas and principles, that leads to freedom from complication? Do these teachings lead me to peacefulness? Do they lead me to ease and clarity? Or do they lead my mind to more confusion, more tension, more conflict? What's the result of listening, bringing my attention to these words?'

The third one is *Yoniso-manasikāra* – 'wise reflection', 'skilful attention'. This is looking at our body, looking at our mind, our thoughts, our feelings, our emotions, looking at the situation we are in, looking at the community that we're a part of, looking at our society, all with a circumspect, discerning eye. 'Wise reflection', means to consider the patterning of things and to look at things in their context, 'What's going on here? How does this work? What is a skilful choice to make with respect to this? What can be said that will be helpful? What can be done that will defuse this conflict? Is there something to be done?' Wise reflection is using the mind's ability

to recognize how things work, the patterns in which nature operates, and to be guided by this. It is to see how things relate to each other in terms of cause and effect, how things interact with each other and the world. Wise reflection is the power of the mind to look, to explore, to investigate and to see how things function.

It's not just a matter of applying thinking and memory; it is more a sense of freedom from presumptions, not just following the mind's biases or habits of thinking. It's not just having a clever mind, but it's broadening the attitude to set aside our preferences, our habits of thinking, our emotional reactions of likes and dislikes, approval and disapproval. It is to clearly look at the whole picture in the best, unbiased, most substantial way possible.

Sometimes, when wise reflection is applied to a situation, we ask ourselves, 'What's the best thing to do here?' and what arises is, 'I don't have a clue! What *is* going on?' 'Where does that come from? What's that about?' Wise reflection does not involve always having an answer for everything, or figuring everything out, but part of it is to recognize that sometimes what's going on, how it works is not knowable – like a foggy night, we can't see and no amount of blinking or lamplight will help. It's foggy! Wise reflection can mean that we know that we don't know. That can be a wise perspective, telling us that, 'Right now it's not clear where these feelings come from,' so let's not fill up the unknown with a fixed plan or a belief. Wisdom says, 'Leave this as unknown for now.'

Thus, part of wise reflection is letting the mysterious be mysterious. You don't have to fill up the unknown with an opinion or an explanation, but instead you say, 'Well, I don't know what that's about, but here it is.' There may be a situation where someone is very agitated or upset and they come to ask you for help. You may think, 'Well, I'd love to be able to help this person but I haven't got a clue what to say in order to be of real benefit. I don't know where they're coming from, I don't have an answer for the question that they're asking.' So wise reflection is also being ready to say, 'I don't know,' or, 'I can't help,' or, 'I don't know what this is about,' as well as the times where wise reflection does bring a clear answer or a clear interpretation, a recognition of how things are working together.

The fourth of the four factors supportive of stream-entry is *dhammā-nudhamma-paṭipatti* – 'practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma'. This is pointing to what we think of as practising Dhamma: keeping the Precepts, practising meditation, practising Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, 'doing Dhamma things' as it were, and how easy it is for such practices to unwittingly be based on an attitude fuelled by self-view, desire, fear, aversion or just habit. 'Practising Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma' means that the effort to practise Dhamma is free from self-view and conceit, free from the influences of greed, hatred and delusion.

This is not easy to do. We can put on our robes, shave our head, follow the routine or recite *Buddhaṃ saranaṃ gacchāmi*, we can follow the Dhamma forms, but we can do this solely out of habit. We can do it because, 'I'm a Buddhist monk so this is what I wear,' or 'These are the words that we chant. That's the custom, the form.' But as Luang Por Chah would say, it's like a fruit, like a mango or a banana. If you are only following the external form, it's just like the skin of the mango or the banana. The reason why these fruits are valuable or important is the actual flesh of the fruit that can be eaten, that can nourish us. The skin is there to help protect and contain it. If you eat mango skins or banana skins and ignore the flesh of these fruits, it gives you bad indigestion, they don't taste good and you receive no nourishment either.

It's this way if we are practising Dhamma not in accordance with Dhamma. We can be following the form, doing 'Dhamma things' like reciting the Precepts and keeping the Precepts, wearing the robes and following the routine, and doing the meditation forms, but if that's driven by, 'I'm doing this because I should do this, it's expected of me,' or 'If I do this then I'm going to be happy in the future. If I follow this formula then I'll realize stream-entry. I'm an unenlightened person now and if I do this, then I'm going to become enlightened in the future. There'll be an enlightened me rather than an unenlightened me, and that's highly desirable. That's what

I really want, to be an enlightened me.' If such self-view is embedded in the attitude, if our practice, our efforts, are driven by these elements of self-centredness or fear or habit or obligation, then it can't lead to genuine liberation. It's only if our actions, our speech and all our efforts are in tune with Dhamma – free from I-making and mine-making, free from *māna*, conceit, and self-view, and are instead motivated and guided by mindfulness and wisdom – that they will lead to liberation.

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If we reflect skilfully in relation to this current pandemic, then we will not think of it as something that disrupts our lives and which is an obstruction to the practice. If our attitude is skilful and we use the opportunity of the changes to our routines to recognize the fragility of our lives and of the lives of all those around us, we can use the situation to consciously develop *pāramitā*, spiritual qualities, and the supports for stream-entry. We can manifest the attributes of a *sappurisa*, a good-hearted, well-rounded person, to be more thoughtful about whom we keep company with and the kind of words that we put into the world; we can consider carefully, as well, what we attend to, what we listen to; we can cultivate wise reflection; and we can cultivate the practice of Dhamma in accordance with Dhamma. In this way, even though the current pandemic might be disruptive to our normal

routines, the situation itself can be turned to be of benefit, can be turned to great advantage.

It's a strange thing, but often in human society it's the times of greatest difficulty and distress, even being in a war, that bring out the most powerful positive human qualities in us; unselfishness, generosity and compassion come to the fore. I often listened to the stories that my mother and my father told about going through the Second World War in the British Army. They were in different places and they didn't meet until the War was over. My mother was an army driver in the Blitz in London and then, shortly after D-Day, she was over in France and Germany with the Allied Army progressing into the continent. Even though it was a war – with the incredible distress and massive quantities of unskilful behaviour that go with that, death being caused all around on a daily basis – the extraordinary acts of kindness, generosity and compassion between people were really striking. In such a tragic situation great *pāramitā*, spiritual virtues, are called forth in having to deal with these kinds of difficulties, dealing with the fragile nature of human life. You're sitting down with someone at supper in the mess hall and you don't know if either of you are going to be alive the next morning. Life and death, the heavenly messengers, are close and, because of that, the qualities of kindness, generosity, compassion, unselfishness, are strengthened, fortified and brought firmly to the fore. Not just my parents,

but oftentimes older people around me would reflect, 'We treated each other so much better when there was a war on. We've become selfish and greedy and lazy now that it's peacetime again.'

Again, I am not praising war in any way! And I'm not wishing the pandemic to continue or to cause more havoc. Rather this is a reflection that, during challenging times like this, when our usual values are shaken up, when the situation doesn't allow us to be so complacent, then this can be a situation where our noblest and most valuable spiritual qualities are brought to the fore. All around, during this pandemic, there have been examples of great and beautiful gestures being made: qualities of compassion, people looking out for ways to help each other; qualities of equanimity, people being calm and steady in the midst of agitation and turbulence; people being unselfish, sharing the things that they have, to support communal well-being. It has already been an extraordinary opportunity for those wholesome qualities to be developed.

I saw a news report about a couple who have a little shop, in Lothian in Scotland. People had been buying up gallons and gallons of hand sanitizer to sell at high prices, so this couple were giving away toilet paper and hand sanitizer for free to all the older people in their area. I thought, 'Good for you!' They're small shopkeepers, and they need to make a living like anybody else, but they're ready to give away these essential supplies for

free. How noble, how beautiful that is: rising up in a stressful situation with acts of kindness and thoughtfulness, recognizing that there are important values beyond one's personal gain, one's own benefit.

We don't know how long the pandemic will last. Whether it's long or short, right now we can use this opportunity to see what the mind is making of the situation. Is the mind going towards fear and aversion? Is it going towards imagining the future after it's all over? Is it focused upon personal concerns or irritations and opinions: 'We shouldn't do this! We should do that! This is right! That's wrong! I want this! I don't want that!' 'What's going to happen? How's it going to work? What's going to...?'

All of these projections and the emotional surges that so easily arise... use Dhamma practice to know them, to explore them, to wisely reflect upon them. We use exactly those kinds of reactive patterns to reflect on, 'What am I looking at? What am I taking refuge in? Am I taking refuge in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha or am I taking refuge in wished-for predictability, in hoped-for physical health? Am I taking refuge in the ideas of certainty, of comfort, of physical security? What's my mind taking refuge in?' Look at that, explore that, and see how the more that the mind tries to take refuge in the five *khandhas*, the more it creates the causes for disappointment and *dukkha*. The more that the mind takes refuge in awakened awareness,

in reality and in goodness, in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, the more it generates peace, ease and freedom as the result.

This is an excellent opportunity to see where the mind habitually takes refuge; if it is in worldly concerns then we train it instead to take refuge in Dhamma, in the reality of the way things are, in Buddha, the quality of wakeful awareness, in Sangha, the quality of rejoicing in goodness, choosing the wholesome – then we see what the result of our shift of focus is.

We are guided by instinct in the ways we protect the body; the way that we fit into society; the way that we exist within our immediate family or community, or the broader human family. These are powerful instinctual imperatives that work in the mind, with respect to food, shelter, safety and so forth. Look at these instincts. Look at how the mind tries to take refuge in shelter, in clothing, in food, in medicine, in predictability, in a caring and protective society – look at these habits. We are always looking for security in that which is not secure, we are looking for reliability in that which is not reliable. Look at this habit. Look at these tendencies, don't be afraid to turn towards them and enquire, 'Are they reliable? Are they dependable?'

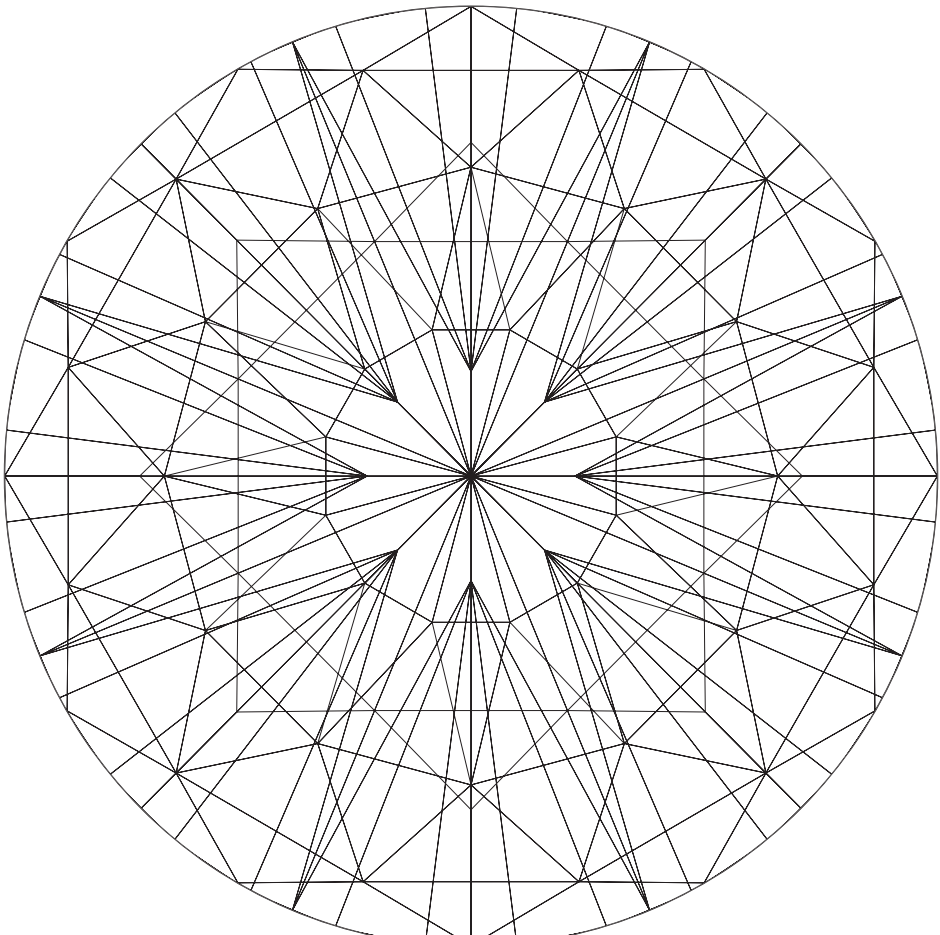
The mind is trying to take refuge in sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thinking. It's trying to take refuge in material forms, in feelings, perceptions, mental formations, sense-consciousness. They are not dependable. They're not reliable. They're not stable. If we try to take refuge in that which is not

a permanent refuge, look what happens. If we try to depend on that which is not dependable, look what happens.

This investigation then supports a change of view, the *gotrabhū*, the 'change of lineage'. That change constitutes stream-entry: we are no longer identifying with the body, the mind or the personality, but are instead allowing our mind to know its own nature as Dhamma.

The mind is Dhamma, it's not a person, it's not a thing. When that 'change of lineage', that change of view, is established then security, stability, 'freedom from reliance', the freedom not to depend on any conditioned thing, is known directly. That's why the Three Refuges are called 'Refuges'. They are a safe place. The mind stops looking for security where it can't be found. It looks instead for security in what is really reliable, in what is secure, in what is dependable, which is the Dhamma itself.

I have written these words to encourage this change of view. If each of us works to establish this realization, we will see that the 'happily ever after' dream, the aspiration to peace, ease and fulfilment, is only realizable through our own inner transformation. There is no other way. If we really want to live happily ever after, then the realization of Dhamma, this embodying of Dhamma, is the only way that this aspiration can be fulfilled, I would suggest.



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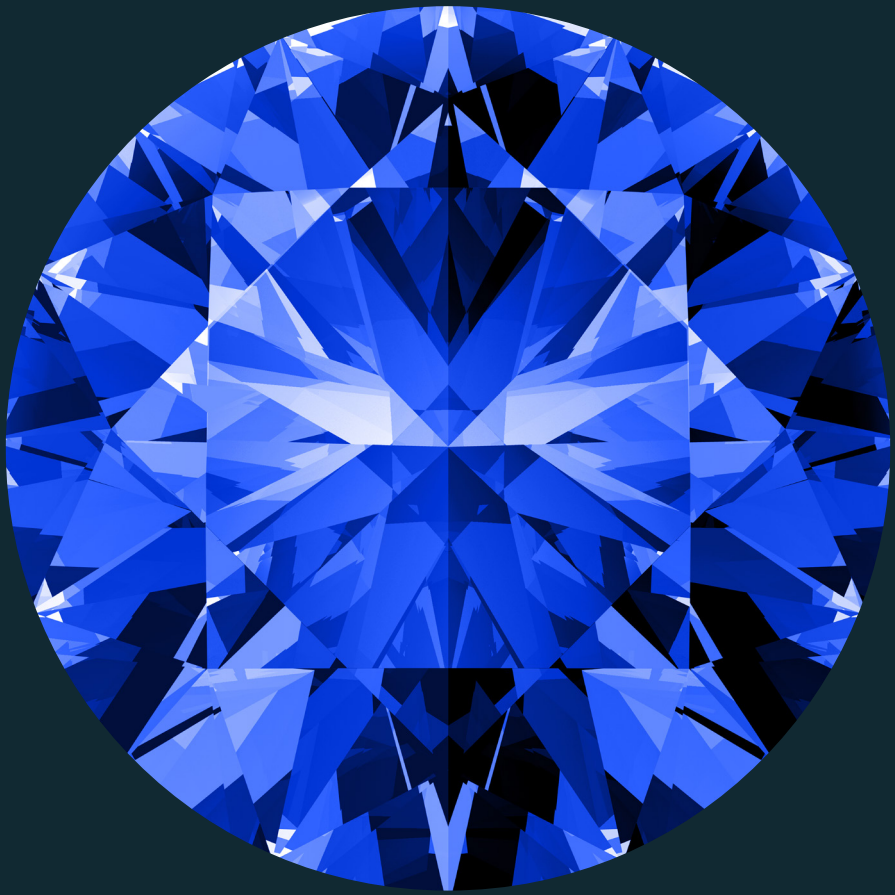

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