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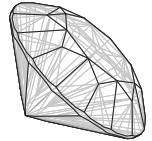
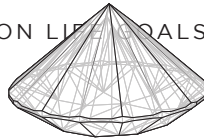
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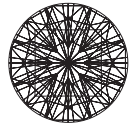
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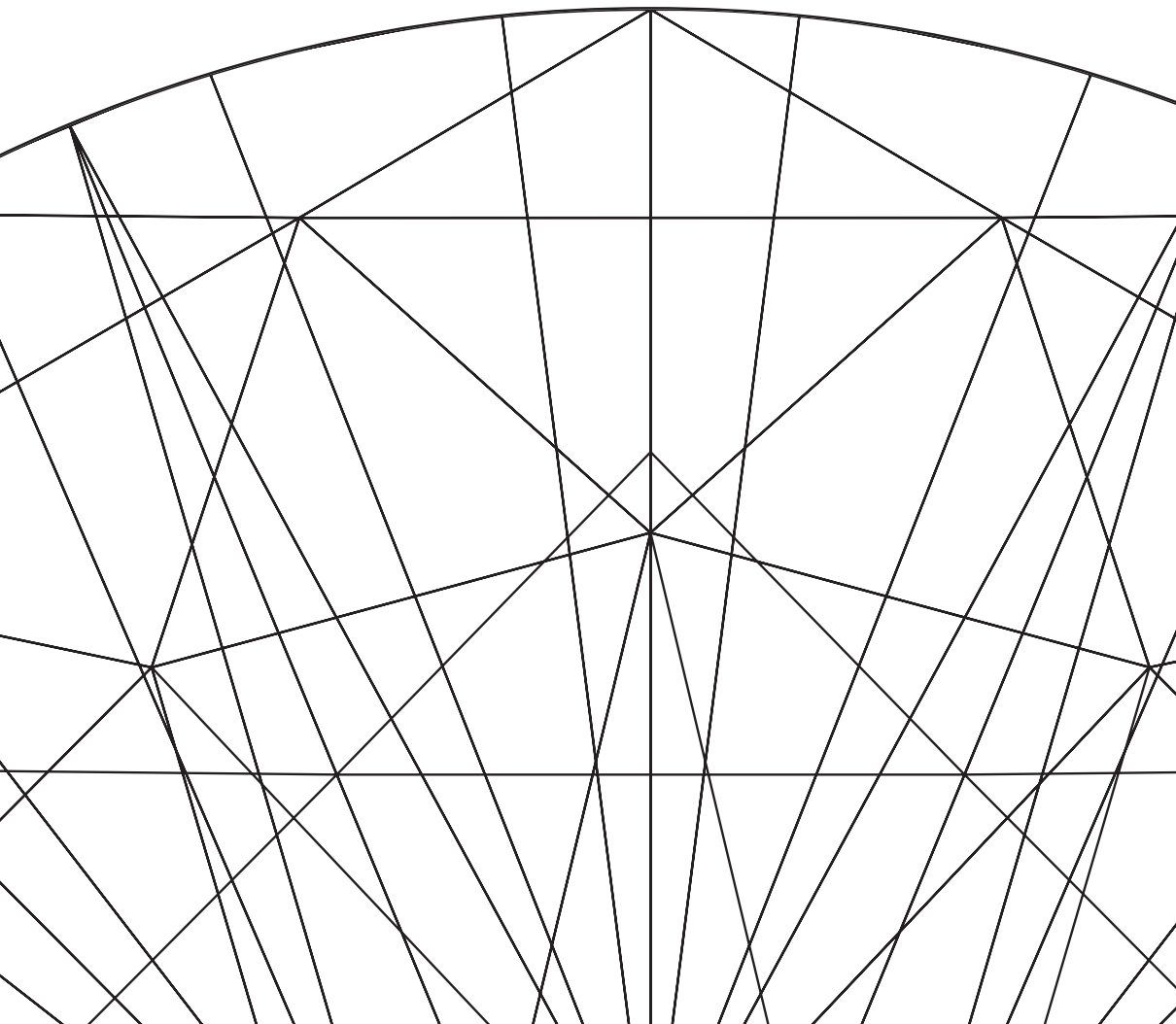
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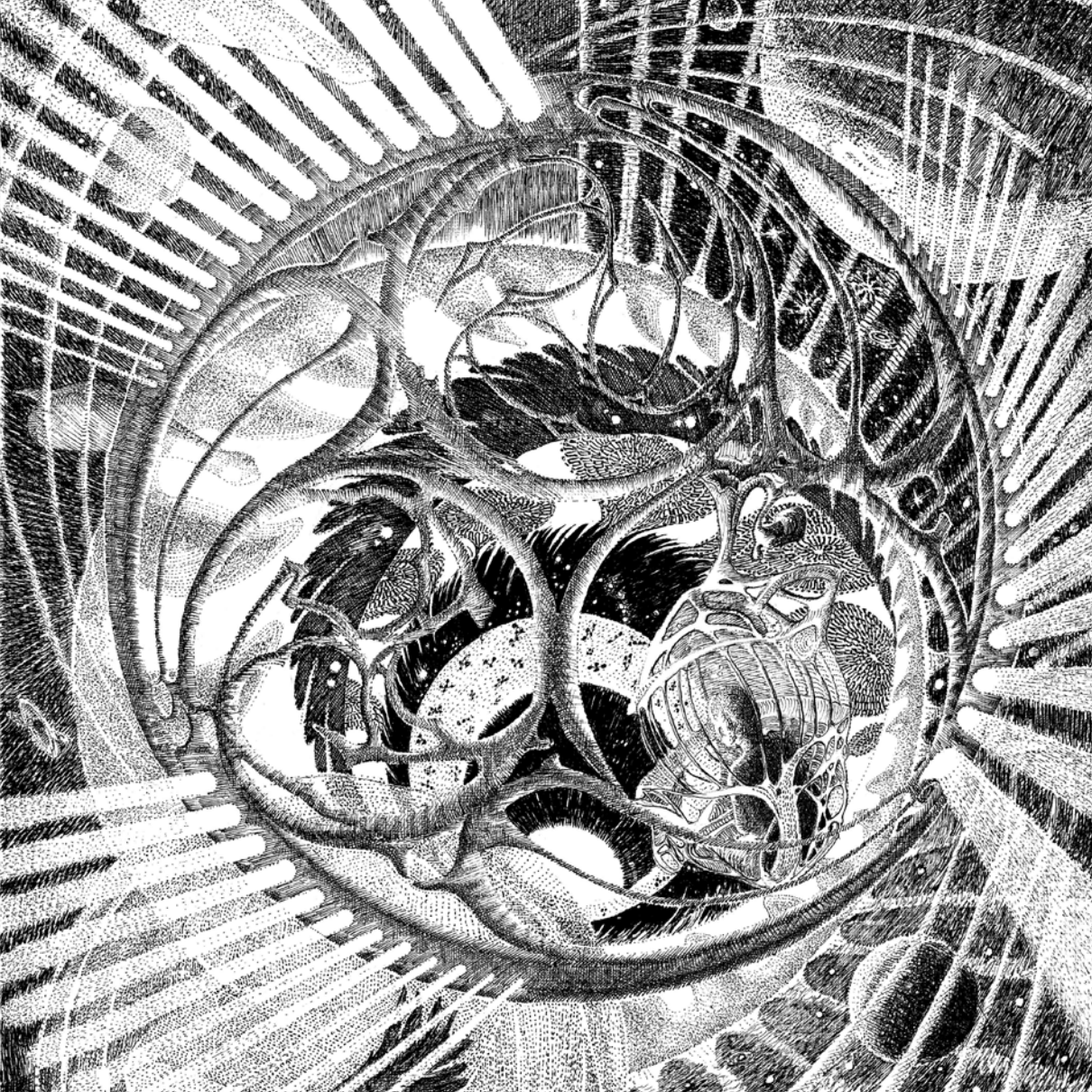




HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
ONE **Reality**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

♦ ♦ ♦

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

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

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

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

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

(A 5.57)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

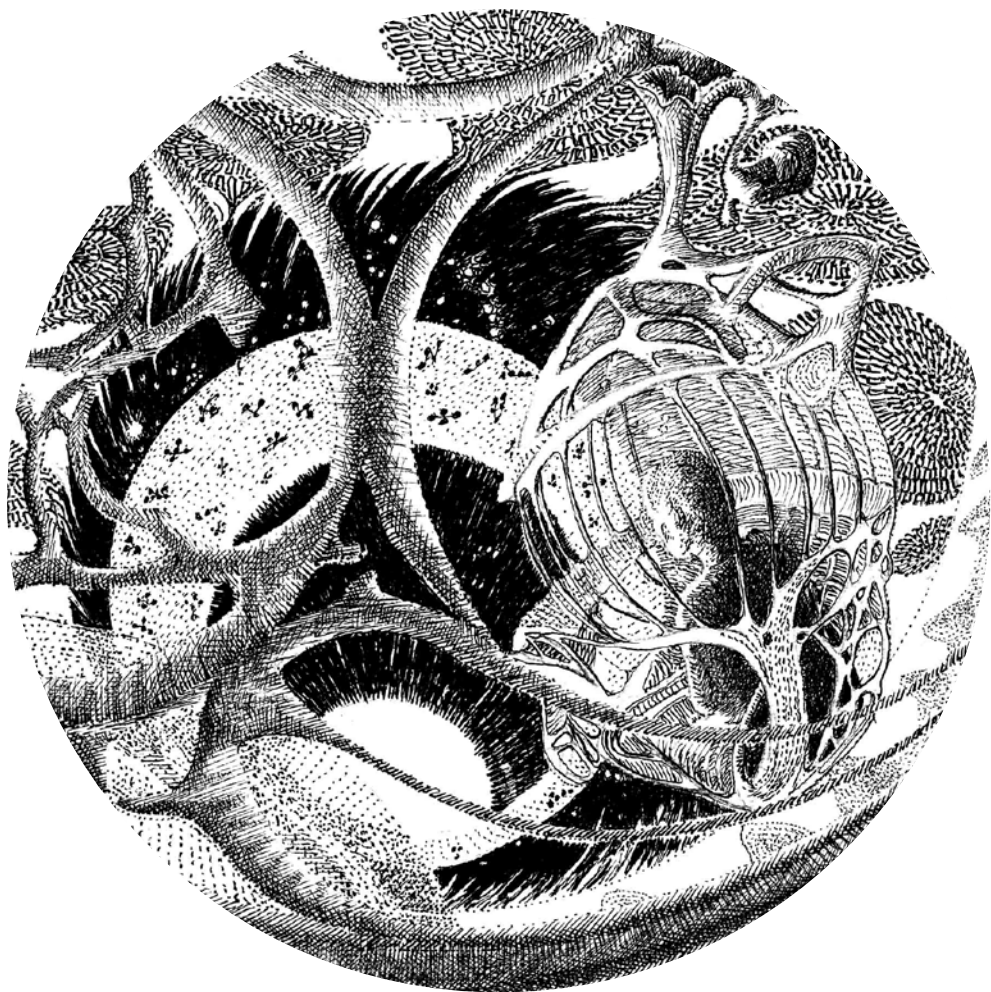
Wilfred Scawen Blunt, *The Oasis of Sidi Khaled*

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Buddha said to Rohitassa:

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

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

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

(S 2.26)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The response to that is,

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

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



* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Ud 8.3)

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

* * *

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

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

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

See the world as empty, Mogharāja and the Lord of Death will not find you.

(SN 1118-9)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘All exists’, Kaccayāna, this is one extreme, ‘All does not exist’, this is the other extreme. Without veering towards either of these extremes the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma by the Middle Way: With ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be; with volitional formations as condition, (sense) consciousness comes to be; ... Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.

But with the remainderless fading away, cessation and non-arising of

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

(S 12.15, S 22.90)

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

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

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

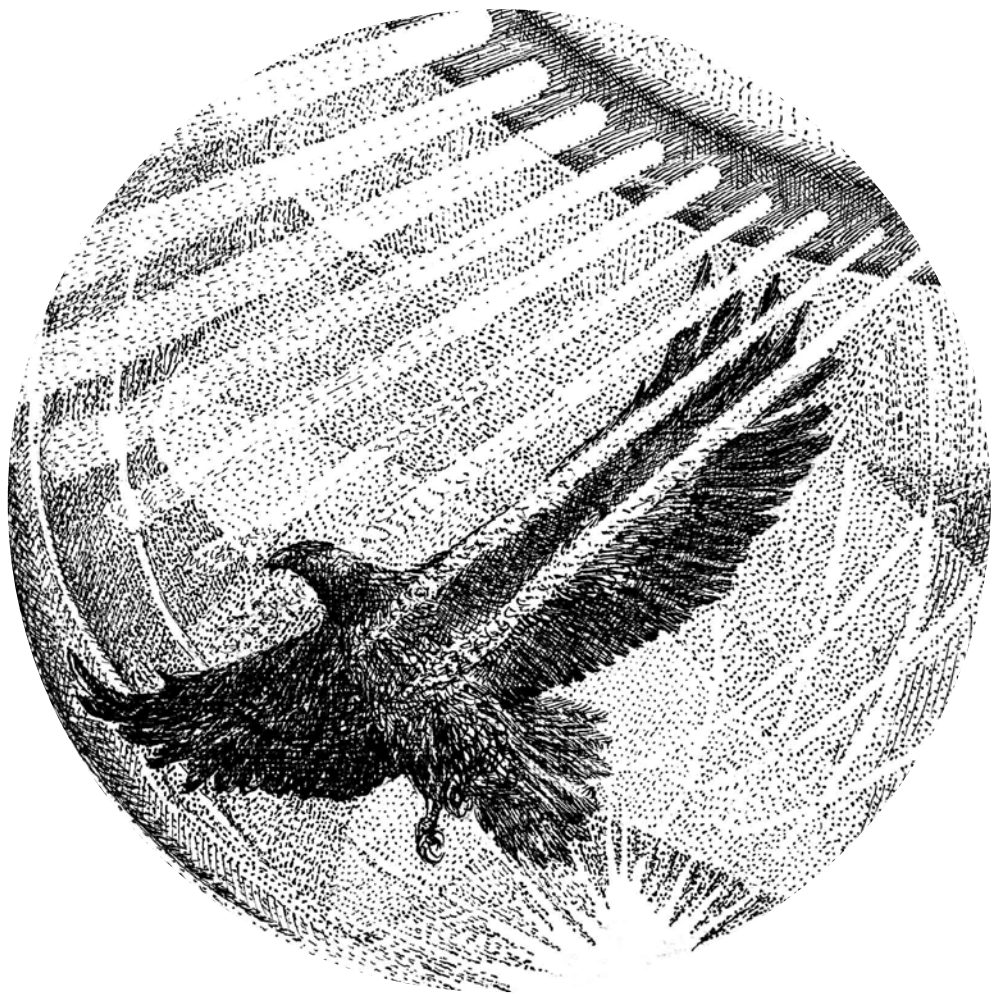
the oil without the water. If you have got *caraṇa* without the *vijjā*, then you've got the water without the oil.

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(SN 143-47)

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

These are her verses:

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

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

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

(Thig 112-16) Susan Murcott trans.

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

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

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

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

(Dhp 97) Buddharakkhita trans.

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

(Dhp 21)

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

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

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

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

♦ ♦ ♦

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Self-Portrait

DEVON, 1981

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Arahant

CHITHURST, 1983

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

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

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

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

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

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

Seeking but not finding the house builder,
I hurried through the round of many births:
Painful is birth ever and again!

O house builder, you have been seen;
You shall not build the house again.
Your rafters have been broken up,
Your ridgepole is demolished too.

My mind has now attained the unformed Nibbāna
And reached the end of every sort of craving.

(Dhp 153-4, Ven. Ñāṇamoli trans.)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gold is where you find it

AMARAVATI, 1986

Always alone –
Udissa,
'Light' –
never with the heard.

But
what is that crystal song
an earthly sound of –
silence?

Or is it the first sound
to fall on the Awakened:

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

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

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

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

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

Sunlight on Water, XII

CHITHURST FOREST, 1988

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

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

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

Venus and the crescent moon
have given up their sparkle
to the dawn.

Colour and birdsong
wash through the hills,
the dark is over.

*The Flowering of
the Golden Secret*

AMARAVATI, 1990

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

It has been so long –
the Master’s body laid so low
like the wounded Anfortas,
guardian of the Holy Grail,
neither quite alive
nor yet quite dead.

The wasted flesh shocks the eye,
the straightest mind is turned;
too awed and stunned by raw impact
to ask the question, ‘Why?’
‘What is it ails thee?’

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

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

Whomsoever seeks the Grail
 must do so with a sword –
 hating God, defying Truth
 but determined to go on;
 for there’s no fixed law,
 no formula of knowledge,
 that ever could withstand
 the power of revelation
 of one faithful
 to their own courageous truth.

Straight through the middle.

The test is to forget yourself,
 and all your cherished goals,
 to partake of the anguish
 of another.

Straight through the middle
 comes at last once more
 to place himself
 before the wounded one;
 via painful passages,
 far beyond the bounds
 of space and time, causality,
 to reach the realm of vision:
 to reach the Master’s hut,
 the Grail Castle.

,Oeheim, was wirret dier?’

‘Luang Por, what ails you?’

The question now illuminates
 presumptions we have made...

‘Do not weep for ME!

It’s you who are in trouble.

you think this body’s all there is
 to “Ajahn Chah”?’

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

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

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

A Spring at the Peak, IX

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

Walking by starlight –

you are

a world of greys –

the ultimate reality,

uncertainties beneath the feet,

your heart

the night

belongs to the infinite,

rings with life,

bind it to less,

relentlessly

it cries for more –

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

how could it
 do otherwise?

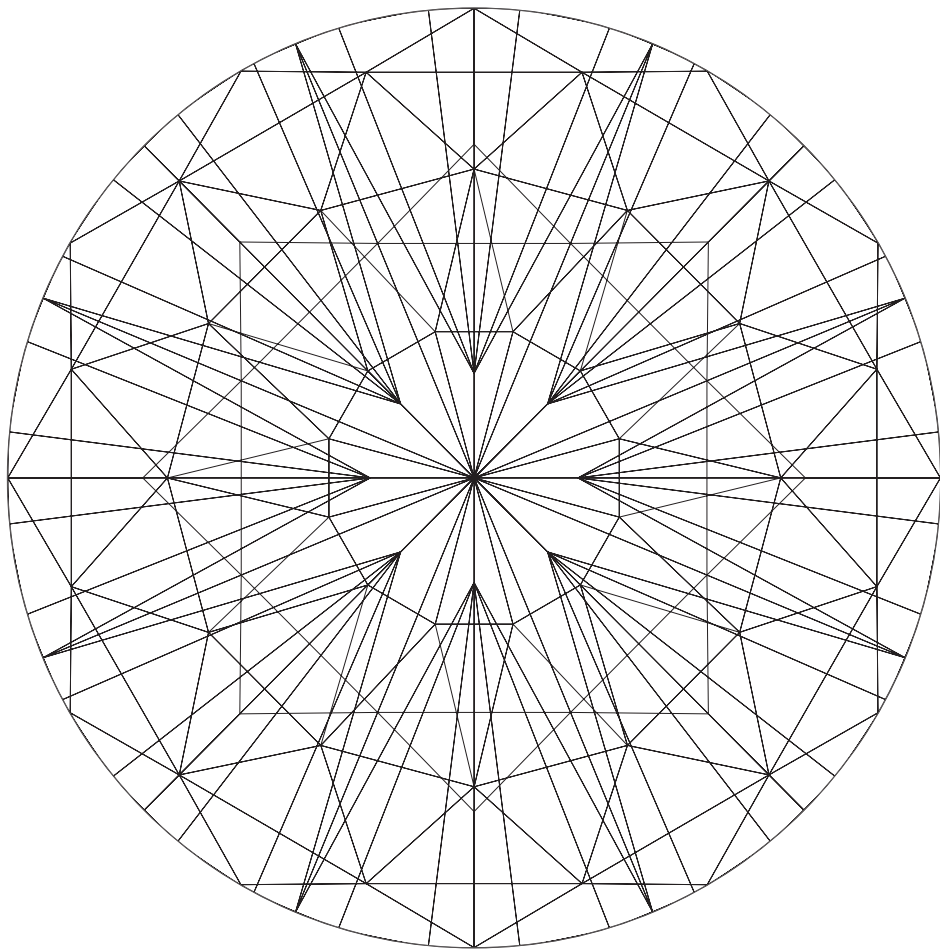
Rivasyllabalansings, I

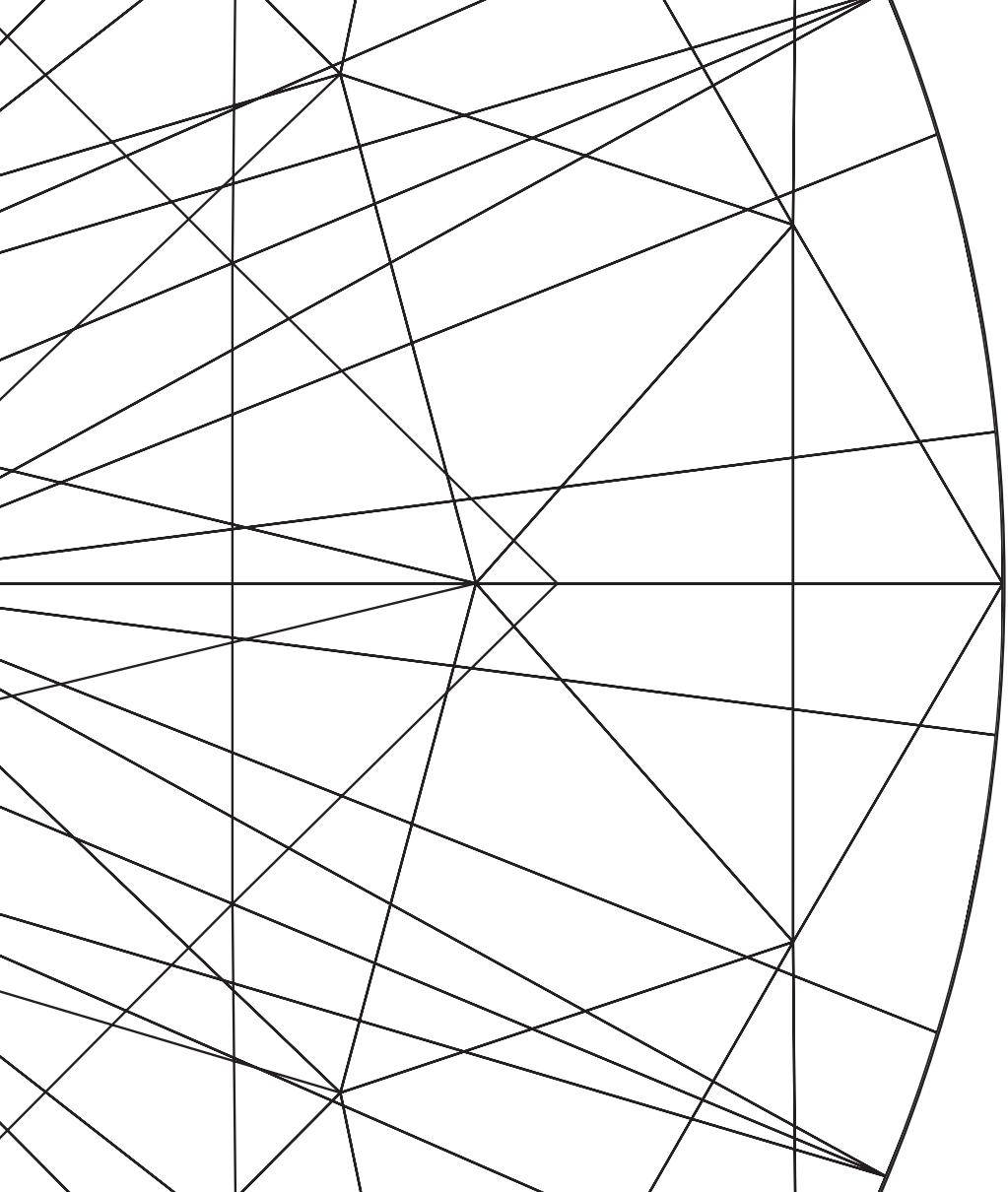
ABHAYAGIRI, JUNE 1ST, 1996
FIRST DAY OF THE
NEW MONASTERY

In the presence
of everything –
the wonderful
silence.

* * *

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





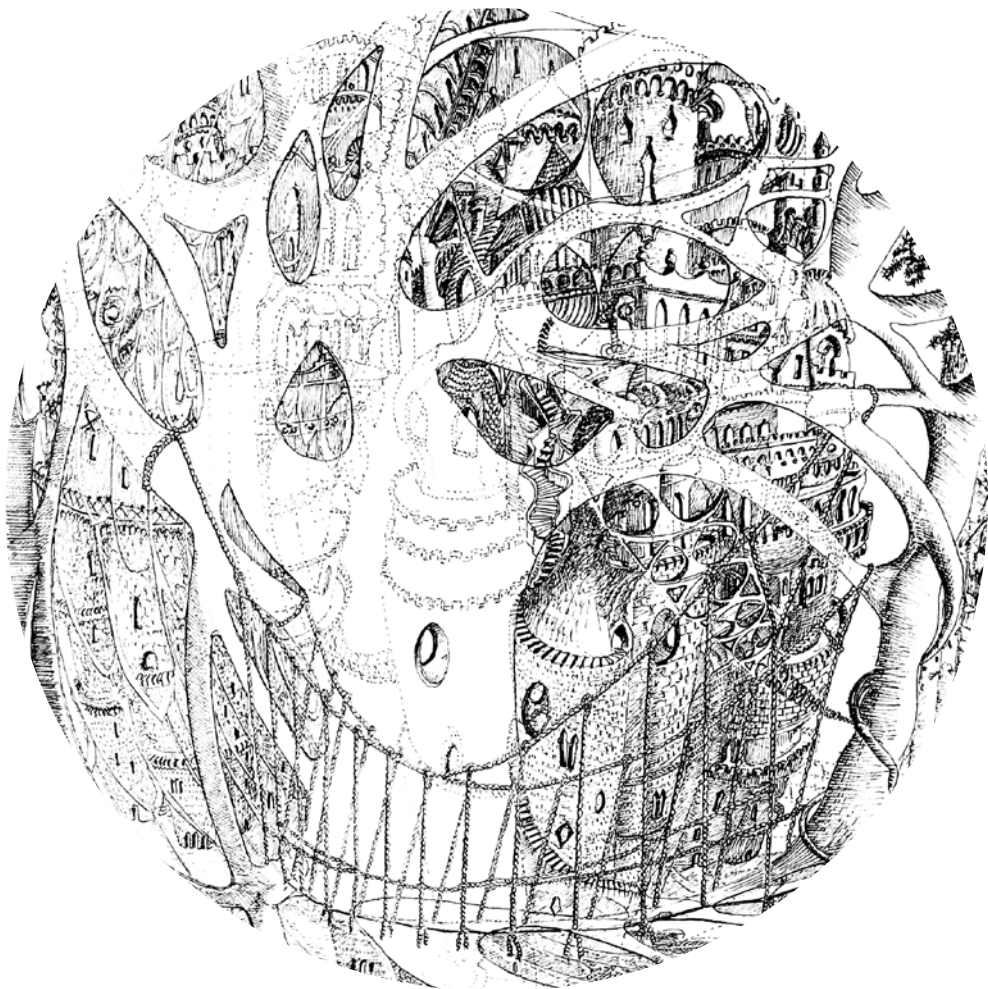
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
TWO **Emotion**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



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An evening Dhamma talk, given at Abhayagiri Monastery,
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‘Heroin or Chocolate Cake?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

♦ ♦ ♦

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Importance of Being Bored, Sad and Lonely

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jarā-dhammomhi, jaraṃ anatīto

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

byādhī-dhammomhi byādhiṃ anatīto

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

maraṇa-dhammomhi maraṇaṃ anatīto

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

Sabbehi me piyehi manāpehi nānābhāvo vinābhāvo

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

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

I am the owner of my karma, heir to my karma, born of my karma, related to my karma, abide supported by my karma, whatever karma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.

(A 5.57)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(D 16.2.25)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

(D 16.6.10)

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

(Holy Sonnet 10)



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

She replies, 'Oh yes, yes indeed.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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



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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

'Yes Luang Por.'

'You must find it very confusing.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Over and over again it says similar things, like:

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

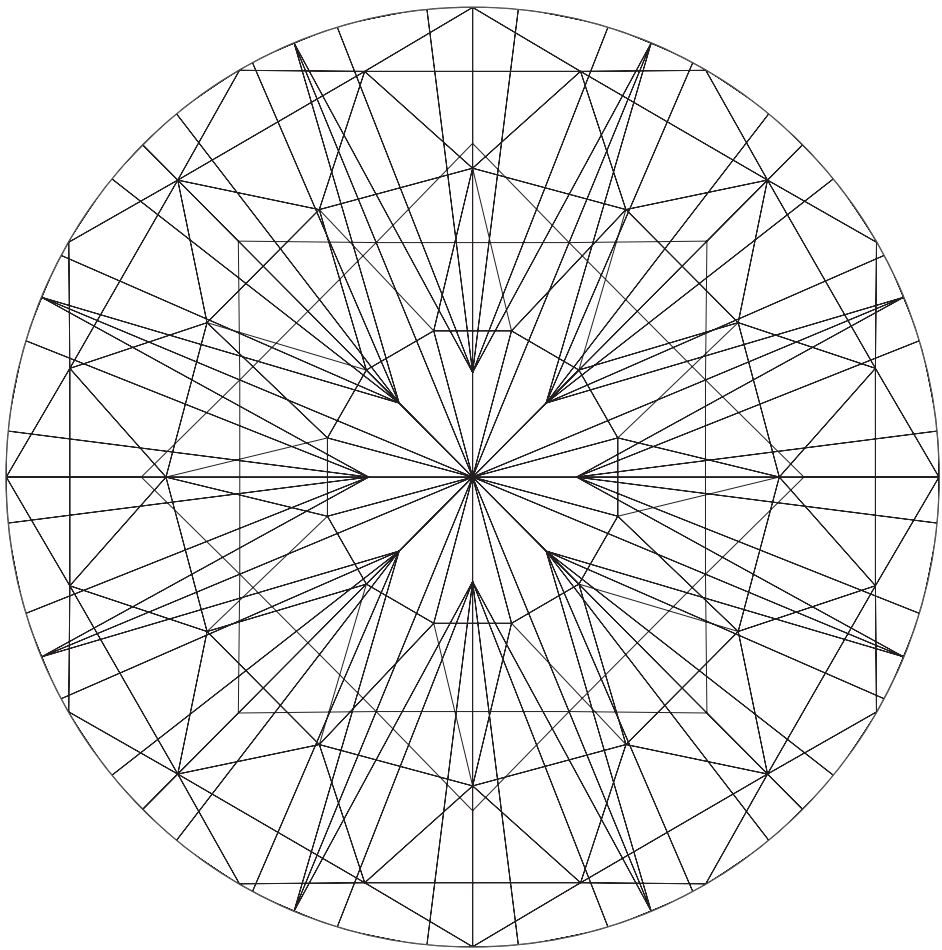
(Vajracchedikā Sūtra, Ch 21, DRBU trans.)

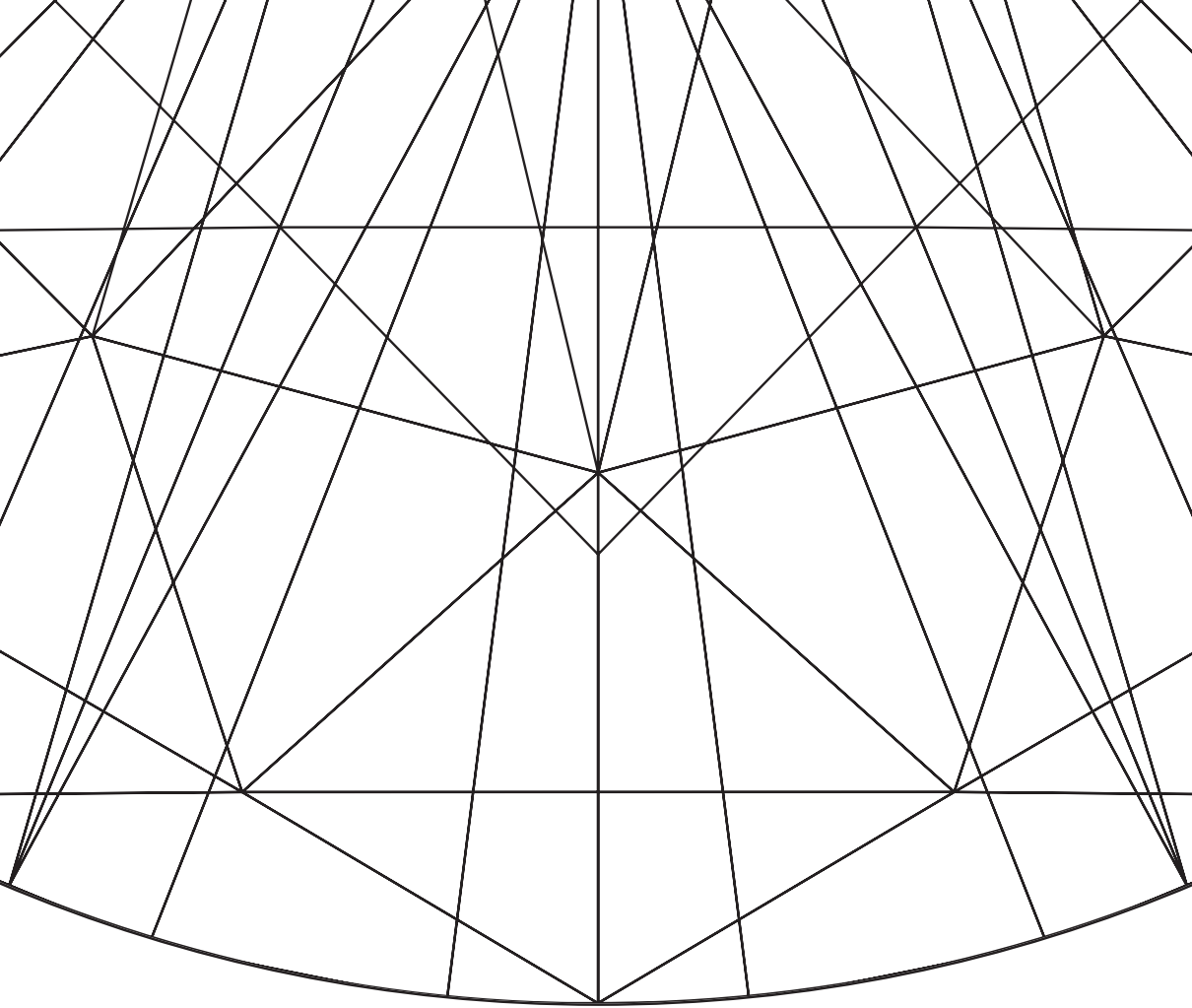
It’s deliberately ambiguous. It makes you think, ‘Huh? Either there is a living being or there isn’t. Either a living being is carried across to enlightenment or they are not... surely?’ The rational mind gets drawn to silence, is annoyed or illuminated, depending on the wisdom of the reader. These ambiguous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

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

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

The response to this is silence.





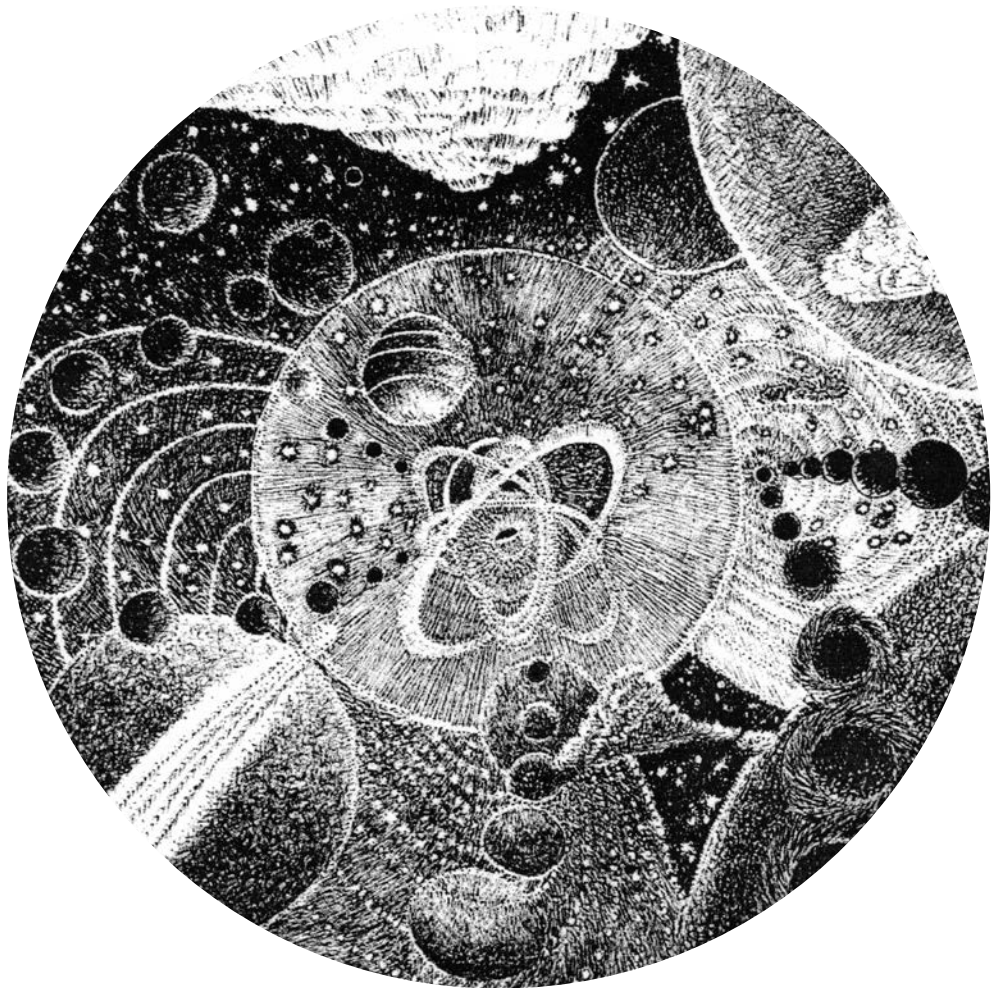
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
THREE **People**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



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‘What is the Best Religion?’

The question posed in the title here might hint that there could be some bias in the views about to be expounded. Nevertheless, I will endeavour to reflect about religious faith and commitment, and attachment to opinions, in a way that is useful for all of us, irrespective of our specific religious disposition, if we have one. I certainly do not presume that everybody reading this is a card-carrying, flag-waving Buddhist.

One of the aspects of Amaravati Monastery that Ajahn Sumedho was keen to establish, from its very foundation, was that it would be a meeting place and a spiritual resource for people of all faiths. Over the years many interfaith gatherings have been held here, so it would be a mistake to turn this exploration of faith and opinions into a carrying of the torch just for Theravāda Buddhism. Particularly in these times religious extremism is much in the news, with shocking and painful reports about the activities of some groups.

That said, ardent adherence to a religious tradition is not something that is confined just to this era or any one religion, and there are wholesome and unwholesome ways in which such ardour can be exercised. I used to live

in California, at Abhayagiri Monastery, next door to Holy Transfiguration Monastery, (a.k.a. Mount Tabor) a Christian community of Ukrainian Catholic monks. They are also a forest monastic community. Venerable Master Hsüan Hua, of The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, generously gave us the land, which happened to be right beside this Christian monastery. When we were introduced to the abbot there, a wonderful elderly Belgian forest monk called Archimandrite Boniface, just after the deeds to the land had been given to us, his first comment when we met was, 'I think there are enough monasteries in this valley already.' 'Very nice to meet you too, father!' I thought.

When it was pointed out that we had already accepted the gift of the land and we would be moving in next door, he adapted with impressive speed and we became quite good friends – even though he had pretty much assumed that we were worshippers of the devil. They even had their own handmade road sign beside the driveway into their monastery emblazoned with a pitchfork-bearing devil with a line through it – a road sign saying, 'Devils not allowed here.' I'm not joking. Somebody once made their own 30-mile-an-hour signs for St. Margaret's Lane, but there was a 'No Devils allowed' sign for Mount Tabor Monastery.

When I was travelling with Luang Por Sumedho in Egypt, in 2006, we went to visit a couple of Coptic monasteries. These ancient monasteries of the

Desert Fathers had been there for many centuries, some of them for 1500 or 1600 years. In a similar way to the Venerable Father Boniface, the Coptic brother who met us was very polite, very friendly, and showed us around as was his duty, but he made it clear that we were considered to be devil worshippers and definitely were infidels – but we were very welcome to visit! Ajahn Vimalo made the wisecrack, ‘You used to have these big walls to keep out the invading tribespeople, and now you have to open the doors and let us all in.’

‘Yes, yes, times change.’

To be an infidel, literally means to be one who is ‘not of your faith’ (from the Latin *in-* = ‘not’ + *fidēlis* = ‘faithful’). Despite the familiar usage of the term in the Middle East and Europe, the same kind of demonisation, mythic defamation, is found within Buddhist countries and within other religions too. It is not confined to Christianity and Islam, but can be found in India, Sri Lanka and Burma, Thailand and all around the world.

When we were visiting the Copts in the desert, we asked them for some details about their theology. This monk who was showing us around was very articulate. He said, ‘We are *miaphysites*. We are not *monophysites*.’ One could feel just how important that distinction was to him, ‘No, we wouldn’t make that mistake, we’d never think you were monophysites.’

He continued, ‘We believe that Christ possessed two natures, a divine and a human one, united in a single person – two natures perfectly united, *not* unified.’

I am not making fun of it, but what sounded like exact equivalents to an outsider was, for him, an insider, an extremely serious distinction; they were *not* monophysites, they were *miaphysites*. They did not have wrong views, like the other lot.

This is a tendency that we have throughout the world religious community, focusing with vehemence on our favoured perspective, out of faith and commitment, and defaming and dismissing ‘the other’. For example, in the Buddhist world: ‘We’re Theravādans. We’re *Thai forest tradition* Theravādans. We’re not Mahāyānists, you know, *that lot*. Or Vajrayānists, like some of those Tibetans. Perish the thought of those Zen people too. Ugh. We’re not like *them*. We’re bearers of the Banner of the Arahants, the true way.’ On reading this some of you might be thinking, ‘Well, aren’t we?’

This area is useful to look at and to contemplate because we can see all around us the degree of pain and misery such clinging to religious views has caused in the world, and in our own communities too. What happens when one group takes sides against another based on religious prejudice, just because somebody has a Muslim name or a Hindu name or a Buddhist name or a Christian name?

I used to visit Belfast in Northern Ireland in the '80s; I went there several times over a couple of years. It was a war zone. There were patrols of British soldiers on the streets, frequent checkpoints and the police stations had 30 foot high steel walls all around them, to ward off rocket attacks. As a Buddhist monk I was surprised to learn that I was totally safe when walking around Belfast. One day, as I was going with some people from the Buddhist group to a meal invitation at somebody's house that was right on the Falls Road, the main Catholic area, one of them said, 'Don't worry, Ajahn. There won't be anybody who is going to have a go at you. Dressed like that you're definitely neither a Protestant nor a Catholic. You're not on either side so they won't even see you.' It was true. I wasn't carrying the insignia of being either a Protestant or a Catholic, so it was one of the few places in the West where as a Buddhist monastic I was invisible – the Protestants and the Catholics were both hyper-alert to signs that defined 'the other,' but as a Buddhist I was outside the game.



This clinging to religious views is useful to look at because it causes stress within our communities. Clinging to views is one of the four different kinds of *upādāna*, grasping, attachment. The Buddha outlines four particular kinds of clinging. There is *kāmupādāna*, 'clinging to sense-desire'; *sīlabbatupādāna*, 'clinging to conventions and religious forms'; *attavādupādāna*, 'clinging to ideas about yourself'; and lastly 'clinging to views and opinions',

diṭṭhupādāna. Believing in a religious system, and attaching to it, this is in the domain of *diṭṭhupādāna*, ‘clinging to views and opinions’ as well as *sīlabbatupādāna*, ‘clinging to conventions’. It is something that the Buddha pointed to over and over again.

When the Buddha is talking about different religious adherents he points out that if anyone says, ‘Only this is true, everything else is wrong,’ that indicates that this person has missed their path. They are pursuing their faith in a way that is going to cause division and thereby suffering, difficulty and obstruction. The very thought, ‘We are the ones with the true faith, everyone else is an infidel,’ or ‘Everyone else has got Wrong View,’ demonstrates the extreme clinging that is there. The view might be coming from a sincere intention or an enthusiastic sense of, ‘I think this is great!’ Nevertheless, if we grasp it in this way, it will definitely cause us problems.

There is a wonderful phrase that Ajahn Chah used that typifies this stance: ‘You can be right in fact, but wrong in Dhamma.’ Which is to say, ‘What you say about your faith and the teachings might be true, but the way you relate to other people who don’t agree with you, is out of keeping with the Dhamma.’ It’s as if you have a club with *mettā* written on it that you are bludgeoning people with, in your effort to propagate Buddhist loving-kindness.

With respect to the attachment to views and opinions, *diṭṭhupādāna*, those who are familiar with the *Karaṇīya Mettā Sutta* might recognize a phrase in it that is relevant to this exploration: *diṭṭhiñca anupagamma*. It comes at the end of the *sutta*; the last verse begins with this:

*Diṭṭhiñca anupagamma
 Silavā dassanena sampanno
 Kāmesu vineyya gedhaṃ
 Na hi jātu gabbha-seyyaṃ punareti'ti*

Which is translated as:

By not holding to fixed views,
 the pure hearted one,
 having clarity of vision,
 being freed from all sense-desires,
 is not born again into this world.

Those ‘fixed views’ are an embodiment of clinging. If we look at the Buddha’s teaching, over and over again, he describes how it is clinging, attachment, *upādāna* that is the fuel of trouble, of *dukkha*. Over and over again the Buddha explains that even clinging to the good, to rightness, will bring *dukkha*. It will bring a sense of division, alienation and conflict within ourselves and between ourselves and others. As Ajahn Chah put it, ‘You can be right in fact but wrong in Dhamma.’



There is an interesting story on this theme that concerns the establishment, or more accurately *reestablishment*, of Buddhism in Indonesia. As I heard the story, it goes something like this: Indonesia used to be a Buddhist country up until about five hundred years ago. At a certain point the crown prince had been converted to Islam, and he came to the king, put his sword to the king's throat and said, 'I am now a Muslim and you are a Buddhist. This country should be guided by my new faith. I'm taking over.' His father in true Buddhist fashion said, 'Very well, please, have the throne, you are welcome to it. I'll go to the woods.' The father stepped down from the throne and handed it over to his son.

The former king and his chief minister, who was very well-known and well-respected as a meditator, both became yogis. They went off to live in the forest and became lay meditators. Before they left, the chief minister made a prophecy saying, 'Buddhism is now going to disappear from this nation, but in five hundred years' time it will arise again.' Lo and behold, Venerable Narada Thera, a famous Sri Lankan elder, for some reason had the opportunity and the idea, back in the late '50s, early '60s, that it would be good to visit Indonesia. He started going there and offering Dhamma teachings almost exactly 500 years after the prophecy was made, quite by chance.

Venerable Narada Thera was an eminent, brilliant teacher and writer, a genuine Buddhist Master. There were five Indonesian men who became his students and took up the monk's life under his guidance. This marked the reintroduction of Buddhism into Indonesia.

At a certain point, one of the five monks decided that he was of a higher calibre, that he understood the teaching better than the others and that they didn't really deserve to be wielding much influence. He decided to make some moves to establish his authority. During these years in Indonesia (after 1945) the government had established their own version of the Pañcasila, their own Five Precepts which were principles like the establishment of justice, democracy, and the unity of the nation. They weren't really related to the Buddhist Five Precepts, but they used the same name. The first one is 'Belief in the one true God'.

This bhikkhu who was angling for supremacy came up with the idea of a theistic Buddhism which would be fully in keeping, so he reckoned, with Article #1 of the new Pañcasila. Thus his brand of Buddhism would be in accord with what was now Indonesian law. While the other lot, he could condemn as illegal, going against Article #1 of the new Pañcasila, because they were teaching a kind of Buddhism that had no central God figure. He put his reworked theistic Buddhism forward, saying it was simply a different way of worshipping God, using slightly different language, and spoke out against the more conventional members of the group.

To their great credit, the Indonesian Government received this complaint and they decided, ‘We need to look into this.’ They gathered together a group of Islamic scholars, academic imams, and the four other monks, and said, ‘We have received these accusations that your religion contravenes Article #1 of the Pañcasila. This is a serious matter. Religious philosophy is not the terrain of politicians and lawyers so please explain to these imams what your teaching is about. Please lead them through your scriptures, then we’ll decide whether these teachings are in accord with Article #1 of the Pañcasila or not.’

They went into a huddle over the texts and, a few weeks later, the imams came out and said something like, ‘These classical Theravāda teachings are perfectly in accordance with Islam. There is nothing in the Pali Canon that these monks revere that goes against our faith. However, we have to inform the authorities that, after reviewing these classical texts we also reviewed the texts being referred to by the complainant and – to be frank – his kind of Buddhism doesn’t have any basis. It’s a weak philosophy that he has largely invented himself. It doesn’t have any credibility.’ So *he* was the one that got banned, hoisted by his own petard, whereas the other four got the go-ahead and were allowed to function freely by the Indonesian Government. This was a story told to me by the Sangharāja of Indonesia, the head of the Buddhist Sangha there. So, not only clinging to your views but also trying to put other people down has its negative karmic results.



Another event that illustrates these issues is the source of the title of this chapter. It comes from an incident that happened in the '80s at The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, a large monastery of the Northern Buddhist tradition in California established by Master Hsüan Hua, who was the one who gave the land that formed the original property of Abhayagiri Monastery. Like Luang Por Sumedho, Master Hua had a very ecumenical spirit, he was committed to the principles of interfaith understanding and mutual respect between religions – he was good friends with Cardinal Yu Bin, of the Catholic Church. The very fact that he was a Mahāyāna Buddhist teacher who gave 120 acres of land to us as a free gift to start a Theravāda monastery shows how very broad-minded and big-hearted he was.

He organized an interfaith conference at The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas where different Buddhist traditions, different Christian, Hindu and Muslim traditions, all gathered together for a four or five day event. Ajahn Sumedho was invited to be part of that.

As soon as the conference began, some local fundamentalist Christians started picketing it. They made placards and they were obstructing the entrance of the monastery. It's a big place, the Monastery used to be the State Psychiatric Hospital for Northern California, so it was a big institution with a full-sized roadway into it. This fundamentalist Christian group was

standing with their placards defending their faith and trying their best to keep all these various ‘devil worshippers’ from corrupting the spiritual life of the local people. As this started happening, some of the monks came to the Abbot and said, ‘Venerable Master! There’s all these Christians, they’re making a big fuss, they’re blocking the road and harassing all the people coming to the conference! What are we going to do?’ They were in a bit of a dither, stressed and upset.

Master Hua, being the kind of person he was, said, ‘Invite them in, of course. Please welcome them into the conference.’ I suspect there was a moment of pause in the disciples’ thought stream; then ‘OK, the Master says invite them in, so let’s invite them in.’ They came into the hall and joined the rest of the group, at first the new arrivals were very suspicious and uptight. In many of the discussions they would leap in and say, ‘In the gospel of St. John, chapter fourteen, verse number two, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life!”’ and so on. After a while, what with the general aura of friendliness, welcoming tolerance and listening, things settled down. After three or four days, a friendly, easy atmosphere had formed between everyone.

Just before the conference finished it was time for Master Hua to give his own talk. He hadn’t got up onto the stage for any kind of presentation up to that point, he had been hosting things, but he had not given any talks. Now

he was on the schedule to give the final discourse for the event. He stepped to the podium and the first thing he said was, ‘I’d like to ask everybody a question. I’d like to ask “Whose religion is the best religion?”’

When Luang Por Sumedho came back to Amaravati and told us about this, he said, ‘When Master Hua said that, I thought “Oh no! It was all going so well!” I could feel a sort of shrivelling, shrinking inside. “Oh dear. This is going to be painful.” But Master Hua is quite a performer, “Whose religion is the best religion?” He slowly looked around the hall. I thought, “We’re going to get a real Buddhist diatribe now; here it comes.” He let a pregnant pause develop. But what he then surprised us all with was, “Whose religion is best? Why, *yours* is, of course, because if your religion wasn’t the best then you’d change to another one.”’ Luang Por Sumedho described how Master Hua then gave his talk about how we all start from where faith arises within us; what is the cause of faith, what is meaningful to us. We each have a completely unique and individual experience. We all see this place from a slightly different angle, or a very different angle. We all have different personalities, different ages, different bodies, different conditionings and languages, different family stories. Each of us has our own completely unique perspective. It is this that leads to our attachment to views and opinions, to taking sides. It was an inspired and spiritually brilliant exposition.

Each one of us starts from where our faith arises and that faith is going to be conditioned by the way we articulate it and act on it; it is going to be coloured by the family we are born into, the language we speak, the mental imagery that arises in our mind. Also, it is shaped by the kind of experiences that we have. You have a moment of great peace and then an image of Krishna comes into your mind because you're a Hindu, or the Virgin Mary appears in your mind because you're a Catholic, or Guan Yin Bodhisattva arises in your mind because you're a Chinese Buddhist. The way that we articulate things, and the way that we form our faith, is from experiences rooted in our own lives. That is where we start from, so we can't validly say, 'My vision of Krishna is real and your vision of the Virgin Mary is not.' Or we can, but this is necessarily a partial view. It is like saying to someone across the room, 'Is my finger pointing to the left or to the right?' They would say, 'It's pointing to the right. I would say, 'No, you're wrong it's pointing to the left.' Same finger, but we're each looking at it from a different side.

This is one of the essential principles to consider when thinking about questions like 'Whose religion is the best religion?' It is important for us to respect the conditioning, the experiences and the perceptions of others. Sometimes, in conversation, people have recounted the basis of their faith to me. One fellow I remember, I think he was a reporter from the Daily Mail,

said he grew up in Malaysia. When he was a teenager he was out at the beach one day. He wore glasses, and his glasses fell off into the sea. He was up to his waist in the water, the water was cloudy and there were waves, and he couldn't possibly see the bottom. He was very worried he had lost his glasses. He said, 'I had this feeling, and there was a voice in my head that said, "Move your foot to the right." And I knew that if I moved my right foot a little bit to the right, that's where I'd find my glasses. I moved my foot and there were my glasses. So I believed in God from then on.' And why not? He's a teenager, supposed to be looking after his things and, 'Oh damn, my glasses! Where have they gone?' Then this voice says, 'Move your foot to the right' and then 'There are my glasses!' Those kinds of events naturally get our attention.

That finding of his glasses had obviously been a very good influence in his life. He said, 'It's difficult trying to grow up as a faithful Christian when you're a teenager, but it has really served me well.' In response to his account I would say, with all due respect, 'The fact that you had an intuition that your glasses were a foot away from your right foot, doesn't necessarily prove that there's a Creator God who conjured the Universe into being and that Jesus was his only begotten son.' Those claims are extrapolations. But, in his own view, his Christian faith had served him very well. There are other similar incidents that people recount. If it was a Buddhist person

who'd lost their glasses, they might say, 'It was Guan Yin who came to help me, so I've had faith in Guan Yin ever since.' 'Lord Krishna told me my glasses were just there on the seafloor so I am a dedicated devotee.'



This principle is something that I have contemplated for a long time. When I was eleven years old I decided to see if I could figure out the nature of God. What I was getting from the Religious Education lessons at school and in the daily chapel services didn't make much sense to me. No disrespect intended, but Church of England Christianity didn't make a lot of sense, even though I was confirmed by Archbishop Dr. Ramsey around the same time. Amidst it all, considering the Old Testament and the New Testament, it seemed like God was the most important thing, so I decided, 'I'm going to sit down and try to figure out what God is; what is this about?' Part of what I wrote at that time was: 'We create God in our own image' rather than the other way around, as per Genesis Ch. 1, Verse 27. It seemed to me, from the little I knew of the world at that young age, that we use our own experiences to create what we call God, or the ultimate reality. I didn't have the phrase 'ultimate reality' in my lexicon at that time, but effectively that's what I thought at eleven years old. I've held this view ever since.

This principle is very beautifully put by Joseph Campbell in his book and filmed interviews called *The Power of Myth*. He said:

[T]hat to which the metaphorical image of your God refers is the ultimate mystery of your own being, which is the mystery of the being of the world as well. And so this is it.

(The Power of Myth, p 263, Anchor Books, 1991)

We create a metaphorical image, we can say, ‘God is an old man with a long white beard up in the sky.’ Or we say, ‘I’m a Buddhist. I don’t believe in God but I believe in Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha...’. Whether it is a Hindu theology, a Christian theology, Buddhist or atheist, or you are a staunch ‘Dawkins-ite’ and Richard Dawkins is your god, or you are a rational materialist without affiliations... however we might form it, we tend to create an image out of our own conditioning and say, ‘This is the truth.’ We create the metaphorical image of our god, our ultimate reality, out of our own conditioning. If you are born into a Sikh family in New York it’s going to be one way; if you are born into a Buddhist family in Japan it’s going to be another way; if you are born into a Buddhist family in Thailand it’s going to be another way; if you are born into an Aboriginal family in Australia it’s going to be another way; if you are born into a tribal family of the Sami in Lapland, or in the Kalahari Desert it’s going to be yet another way; and if you are born into a Church of England family in Chalfont St. Giles it’s going to be a different way too... Everywhere around the world we have our own conditioning. Our faith is going to be crafted and conditioned by our language, our education and all our experiences.

To go back to the question, ‘What’s the best religion?’ You, dear reader, could say, ‘This is all very well Ajahn, but what *is* the best religion?’ The word ‘religion’ in English comes from the Latin *religio*. To go into the etymology of it, it can be taken to mean ‘to *re-ligio*’, to reconnect or to re-link, and it was St. Augustine, a Christian theologian, who made much of that reconnecting with the divine, reconnecting with God. The writer and poet Robert Graves thought that the origin of the word ‘religion’ came from the Latin *rem legere*, which has a different meaning. It can be translated as ‘the rule of the thing’ or ‘the way in which we choose the right thing to do’, ‘what helps us to choose the right thing’. So, ‘the best religion’, if we apply the etymology in these two ways, is: ‘that which helps us to reconnect with the divine, transcendent reality’, and ‘that which helps us to do the right thing’.

It is interesting to consider the Buddhist take on this. Before going to the Buddha’s words on it, consider how it is our attachment to a view that causes our problems, our troubles. This doesn’t mean that we don’t use views, but rather that our problems come from clinging to the ideas or the customs and identity of a religion, rather than acting on what it is encouraging us to do. A religion helps us to choose the right thing or to know what is the best thing to do, it gives us guidance on how to act. The huge mistake that we make is that we tend to cling to the ideas and forms of a religion, rather than following its instructions on how to live a good life in the service of others.

When I was a child at school we studied *The Sheldon Book of Verse, Book Three*, (edited by PG Smith and JF Wilkins). There was a poem in there that had a very strong effect on me, Leigh Hunt's famous poem, *Abou Ben Adhem*.

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
An angel writing in a book of gold:—
Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
And to the presence in the room he said,
'What writest thou?' —
The vision raised its head,
And with a look made of all sweet accord,
Answered, 'The names of those who love the Lord.'
'And is mine one?' said Abou. 'Nay, not so,'
Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
But cheerly still; and said, 'I pray thee, then,
Write me as one that loves his fellow men.'
The angel wrote, and vanished. The next night
It came again with a great wakening light,
And showed the names whom love of God had blest,
And lo! Ben Adhem's name led all the rest.

In this metaphorical image, it is more important to God that people actually love each other than that they spend their time loving the idea of the religion. This had a big effect on me as a twelve-year-old. I can remember feeling, ‘Yes! That’s it, that’s what this is about.’ We so easily cling to the forms and customs, and to our idea of a religion, but we don’t follow what it asks us to do.



Within the Pali Canon, even though the Buddha talks a lot about not clinging, this does not mean that he took a stance of passivity, far from it. He was very creative and proactive in establishing his teaching and the communities of his disciples, lay and monastic, and dealing adroitly with many challenging situations. On occasion he made his points with great vigour and emphasis – he roared what is called ‘the lion’s roar’, the *sīhanāda*, which is to say, ‘Get this!’ One of the instances where he speaks in this voice is in the *Majjhima Nikāya*’s, ‘The Lesser Discourse on the Lion’s Roar’ (M 11), where the Buddha says:

Bhikkhus, only here (in this dispensation) is there a contemplative (a *samaṇa*), only here is there a second contemplative, only here a third contemplative, only here a fourth contemplative. The doctrines of others are devoid of contemplatives: that is how you should rightly roar your lion’s roar.

(M 11.2)

This seems to be saying that only in this particular tradition, only in the *Buddha-sāsana*, are there any real contemplatives, *samaṇas*. There is no *samaṇa*, there is no real religious seeker, no contemplative, of any authentic accomplishment in *any* other tradition. So it would be easy to interpret this as saying, ‘Only we are right, everybody else is wrong,’ which would seem to contradict what I wrote earlier. However, the Buddha qualifies this somewhat because when he says ‘a contemplative ... a second ... a third ... and a fourth...’ he is actually referring to the four stages of enlightenment: stream entry, once returner, non-returner, and Arahant.

What he says in another discourse clarifies this. In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, the Buddha has this dialogue with Subhadda, just before he passes away:

‘Enough Subhadda, I’ll teach you the Dhamma. Listen and pay close attention, I will speak.’ And the Blessed One said, ‘In any doctrine and discipline where the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, no contemplative of the first, second, third or fourth order (as in, stream enterer, once returner, non-returner or Arahant) is found. But in any doctrine and discipline where the Noble Eightfold Path is found, then contemplatives of the first, second, third or fourth order are found there.’

(D 16.5.26-7)

What he is saying is that as long as a teaching has the Eightfold Path as part of it, then that path can lead to liberation even if it’s not spelled out

in those same terms. If it doesn't have the factors of the Eightfold Path, regardless of how it presents itself, then it can't lead to liberation.

He is definitely saying that, from *his* perspective, this is the best of paths, but it's not the only path, otherwise he would have expressed himself differently. He is presenting things in the best way that he can but he is also saying – which I feel is highly significant – that if another teaching has the same qualities, then those teachings can liberate.

That is 'the lion's roar' and its qualification. Some people might interpret this *sīhanāda* as the Buddha declaring, 'I'm right, everybody else is wrong!' But I feel it is far more nuanced than that. He knew exactly what he had said on other occasions. Therefore it is useful to reflect, 'Yes, he is saying, "This is the best," as far as he is concerned, but he is also saying that, "Other expressions of the same principle work too."' Particularly in that dialogue with Subhadda, he is saying that liberation is not exclusive to his teachings; other teachings, other religious forms, as long as they have these liberating qualities, can be beneficial too.

Of course it's possible to take hold of these words and use them in a sectarian, triumphalist way, like a club to attack other expressions: '*Cūḷasīhanāda Sutta*, Ajahn! *Majjhima Nikāya sutta* number eleven, paragraph two, it says "Only in *this* teaching"! or 'In the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, Ajahn, it clearly states, "This is the only way to deliverance"! People have indeed

translated *ekāyano maggo*, from that latter text, in that way. There is even a book that's entitled *The Only Way to Deliverance*. So, with the same self-righteous energy, one can take it up as a Buddhist version of, 'I am the way, the truth and the life,' then put it on a banner and go charging forward, like soldiers. But this, I would say, is to completely misunderstand what the Buddha was trying to do.

He does indeed make that kind of declaration, 'the lion's roar', but if we cling to that lion's roar saying, 'We're right, you're wrong. We have Right View, you have wrong view. We're destined for Nibbāna, you are lost in *saṃsāra*,' this is a completely non-Buddhist view. 'It is right in fact but wrong in Dhamma'; we are picking it up in an incorrect way. The Pali in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* does indeed say '*ekāyano maggo*', but this can also mean, 'a path which goes in one direction only'. It doesn't necessarily mean this expression is the *only* way. If Buddhists take it as a way of counteracting Christian fundamentalists, saying, 'You quote St. John's Gospel to us, "I am the way, the truth and the life" but the Buddha says...' and have a fight, they are not following the Buddha's Way. They are grasping the form, the idea of the religion but not following its guidance or embodying its spirit.

♦ ♦ ♦

I was once at a Western Buddhist teachers conference with HH the Dalai Lama in Dharamsala. During the course of discussions it was decided that it

would be a good idea to make up a list of principles that Buddhist teachers around the world, particularly in the West, should adhere to, standards that we all agreed on. This was hammered out, about ten or twelve points, over the course of the days we were together. Number one on the list was something like, ‘Our first duty as Buddhist teachers is to promote the teachings of the Buddha and to spread the understanding of Buddhism around the world.’

When it was ready we had a session to discuss this with His Holiness. The teacher who was presenting it got halfway through the first sentence, ‘Our first duty as Buddhist teachers is to spread the teachings of the Buddha...’ and to everyone’s surprise the Dalai Lama said, ‘Stop! Stop! That’s totally wrong! Our job as Buddhist teachers is not to spread Buddhism, it’s not to convert people to our religion. That would be awful!’ The room went quiet. A few of us were thinking, ‘Er... isn’t that what we are doing?’ He carried on, ‘Our job, *our duty*, is to promote human kindness, human goodness. If people choose to be Muslims or Hindus or Christians or Buddhists, that’s up to them. We should not go up to someone and say, “You should change your religion to be Buddhist.” That would be wrong, the Buddha would never agree to that. If we promote human goodness, human understanding and kindness, then we will develop respect for each other, respect for each other’s good hearts.

What religion we choose to follow doesn't matter. That choice is for each person to make.'

I felt that this approach was very wise and wholesome, very noble and practical. Like Abou ben Adhem, His Holiness was advocating putting the kind and respectful, on-the-ground human relationships above the idea or the form of the religion. Amaravati is definitely a Buddhist monastery but it is a spiritual centre as well. All those who live in this monastery are committed Buddhist practitioners but it was also set up by Luang Por Sumedho as a spiritual sanctuary for people of all faiths. Over the years we have had many interfaith gatherings, and I feel it's important to hold things in that spirit of fundamental respect and kindness on a human level as a priority. To not cling to judgements about our own faith or other people's faiths is a good way of following the path of the Buddha.



To close these reflections, here are some extracts from a wonderful little booklet by Ajahn Buddhadāsa, entitled *No Religion*. At Ajahn Chah's *kuṭī* in Wat Pah Pong he had a little wicker bench that he used to sit on to receive people. There was only one picture on the wall behind him and it was a picture of Ajahn Buddhadāsa, it sat right above his head. When you were looking at Ajahn Chah, you were looking at Ajahn Buddhadāsa over his head. This is Ajahn Buddhadāsa speaking:

Ordinary, ignorant worldly people are under the impression that there is this religion and that religion, and that these religions are different, so different that they're opposed to each other. Such people speak of 'Christianity', 'Islam', 'Buddhism', 'Hinduism', 'Sikhism', and so on, and consider these religions to be different, separate and incompatible. These people think and speak according to their personal feelings and thus turn the religions into enemies. Because of this mentality, there come to exist different religions which are hostilely opposed to each other.

Those who have penetrated to the essential nature of religion will regard all religions as being the same. Although they may say there is Buddhism, Judaism, Taoism, Islam, or whatever, they will also say that all religions are inwardly the same. However, those who have penetrated to the highest understanding of Dhamma will feel that the thing called 'religion' doesn't exist after all. There is no Buddhism; there is no Christianity; there is no Islam. How can they be the same or in conflict when they don't even exist? It just isn't possible. Thus the phrase 'no religion' is actually Dhamma language of the highest level. Whether it will be understood or not is something else, depending upon the listener, and has nothing to do with the truth or with religion. ...

[O]ne who has attained to the ultimate truth sees that there's no such thing as 'religion'. There is only a certain nature which can be called whatever we like. We can call it 'Dhamma', we can call it 'Truth', we can call it 'God', 'Tao', or whatever we like, but we shouldn't particularize that Dhamma or that Truth as Buddhism, Christianity, Taoism, Judaism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, or Islam, for we can neither capture nor confine it with labels or concepts. Still, such divisions occur because people haven't yet realized this nameless truth for themselves.

The Buddha intended for us to understand and be able to see that there is no 'person', that there is no separate individual, and that there are only *dhammas* or natural phenomena. Therefore, we shouldn't cling to the belief that there is this religion and that religion. We added the labels 'Buddhism', 'Islam', and 'Christianity' ourselves, long after the founders lived. None of the great religious teachers ever gave a personal name to their teachings, like we do today. They just went about teaching us how we should live.

Please try to understand this correctly. When the final level is reached, when the ultimate is known, not even humanity exists. There is only nature, only Dhamma. This reality can't be considered to be any particular thing; it can't be anything other than Dhamma. It can't be Thai, Chinese, Indian, Arab or European. It can't be black or brown or yellow or white or red. It can't be Eastern or Western, Southern or

Northern. Nor can it be Buddhist, Christian, Islamic or anything else. So please try to reach this Dhamma, for then you will have reached the heart of all religions and of all things, and finally come to this complete cessation of suffering.

Although we call ourselves ‘Buddhists’ and profess Buddhism, we haven’t yet realized the truth of Buddhism, for we are acquainted with only a tiny aspect of our own Buddhism. Although we are monks, nuns, novices, lay devotees, or whatever, we are aware of only the bark, the outer covering, which makes us think our religion is different from the other religions. Because we fail to understand and haven’t yet realized our own truth, we look down upon other religions and praise only our own. We think of ourselves as a special group and of others as outsiders or foreigners. We believe that they are wrong and only we are right, that we are special and have a special calling, and that only we have the truth and the way to salvation. We have many of these blind beliefs. ...

This must be spoken about very often in order to acquaint everyone with the heart of Buddhism: non-attachment. Buddhism is about not trying to seize or grasp anything, to not cling or attach to anything, not even to the religion itself, until finally realizing that there is no Buddhism after all. That means, if we speak directly, that there is no Buddha, no Dhamma, and no Sangha!

However, if we speak in this way, nobody will understand; they will

be shocked and frightened, as the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha are the beloved Triple Gem which most Buddhists cherish as the basis of their faith.

Those who understand, see that the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are the same thing, that is, just Dhamma or Nature itself. The compulsion to seize and hang onto things as persons and individuals, as this and that, doesn't exist in them. Everything is non-personal, that is, is Dhamma or Nature in its pure state or whatever we wish to call it. But we do not dare to think like this. We are afraid to think that there is no religion, that there is no Buddha, Dhamma or Sangha. Even if people were taught or forced to think in this way, they still wouldn't be able to understand. In fact, they would have a totally distorted understanding of what they thought and would react in the opposite way to what was intended. (*No Religion*, pp 3-8, Buddhadāsa Foundation, 2020)

As Ajahn Buddhadāsa predicted, sure enough, people complained, 'Ajahn Buddhadāsa is anti-Buddhist, this is wrong view! He shouldn't be talking like that. He can't say there's no Buddhism, we're *Buddhists!* Who does he think he is? He's wrong!' I'm not sure what the Thai for *quod erat demonstrandum* (literally 'which was to be demonstrated', meaning, roughly 'I told you so') is, but Ajahn Buddhadāsa probably had a good way of expressing that, as the critiques came in.

I feel this is a very significant teaching and very helpful indeed in the domain

of attachment to religious views. It is also ironic that Ajahn Buddhādāsa was vilified for publishing this teaching, because it is quite in accord with a famous teaching by the Buddha in the *suttas*. In these passages Ajahn Buddhādāsa elucidated brilliantly what the Buddha wished us to do, in his ‘simile of the raft’. This is what the Buddha said:

‘I shall show you, monks, the teaching’s similitude to a raft: as having the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of being clung to. Listen, monks, and heed well.’

‘Yes, Venerable Sir.’

‘Suppose, monks, there is a man journeying on a road and he sees a vast expanse of water of which this shore is perilous and fearful, dangerous, while the other shore is safe and free from danger. But there is no boat for crossing nor is there a bridge going over from this side to the other. So the person thinks, “This is a vast expanse of water; this shore is dangerous and fearful, but the other shore is safe and free from danger. There is no boat here for crossing nor a bridge. Suppose I gather reeds and sticks, branches and leaves, and bind them together into a raft.” That man collects reeds and sticks and branches, binds them together into a raft, and carried by that raft, working with his hands and feet paddling away, he safely crosses over to the other shore. Having crossed and arrived at the other shore, he thinks, “This raft has been very helpful

to me. Carried by it, working with my hands and feet paddling across, I got safely over to this other shore. Now I will lift this raft up on my head, carry it around on my shoulders, and go wherever I want to.”

‘What do you think, monks, will this man, by acting thus, do what should be done with the raft?’

‘No, Venerable Sir.’

‘How then, monks, would he be doing what ought to be done with the raft? Here, having got across and safely arrived at the other shore, the man thinks, “This raft indeed has been very helpful to me. Carried by it, working with my hands and feet paddling across, I came safely to this other shore. Why don’t I now pull it up onto the bank or let it float away in the water, and then go about as I please?”

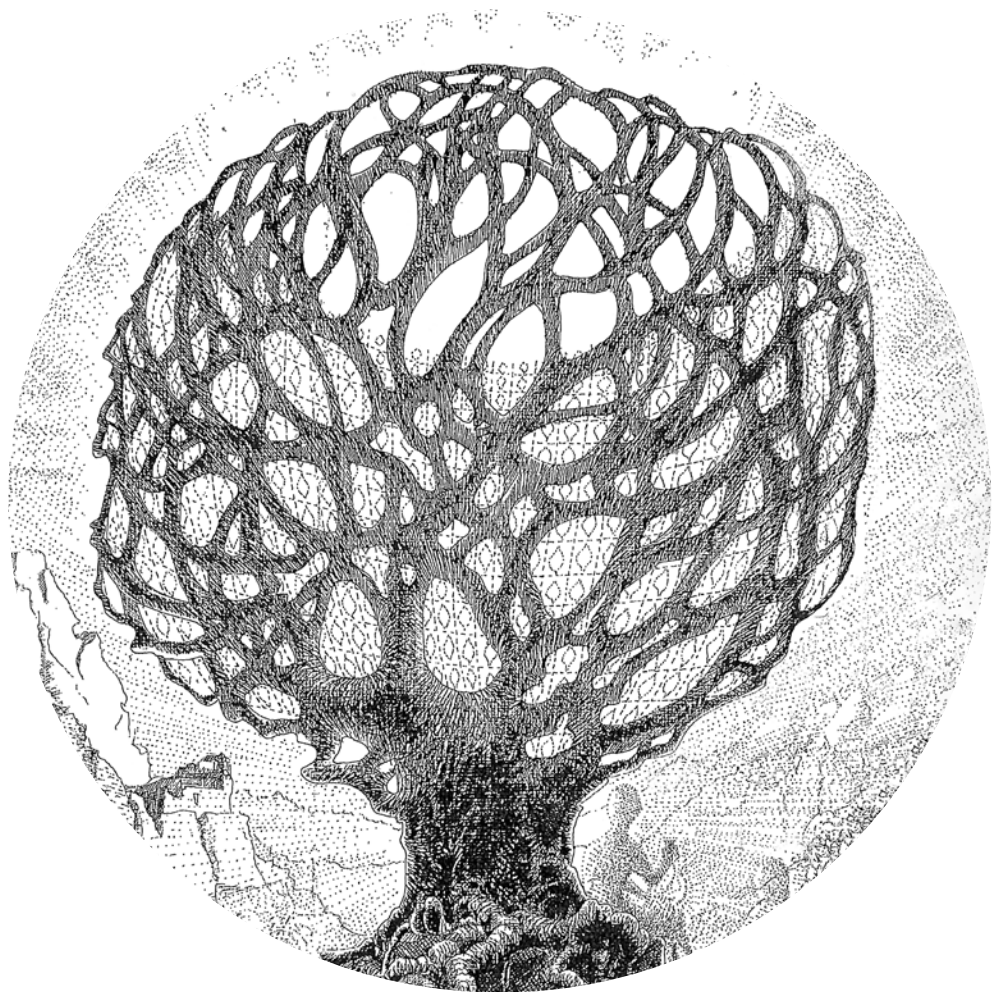
‘By acting thus, monks, that man would be doing what should be done with the raft. In the same way, monks, have I shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft: being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of being clung to.

‘Monks, when you know the Dhamma to be similar to a raft, you should abandon even wholesome states, how much more so unwholesome states.’

(M 22.13-4)

In short, ‘the best religion’ is ‘the raft’ that helps us get across to that safe shore, whether we happen to use the forms of a Christian, a Muslim or a

Buddhist, or a scientific materialist, or an agnostic Buddhist. Whatever your faith is, this is what you use. If it is related to in a skilful way, free of attachment to views, *diṭṭhupādāna*, it will get us to that safe further shore. Once we have got to the safe shore, we don't need to carry our raft around any more. It has served its purpose. On this safe shore it's a pointless burden. Let go of the raft, as the Buddha wisely advised.



‘Not my Circus, Not my Monkeys’

There is an old Polish saying, ‘Not my circus, not my monkeys’. This is a proverb that I learned a while ago when I was leading a retreat at Amaravati. I was quoting a teaching of Ajahn Chah, and also referring to a painting that hangs in the shrine room of the Retreat Centre.

This is a passage from one of Luang Por Chah’s talks, it’s called ‘Still, Flowing Water’:

The so-called hindrances are the things we must study. Whenever we sit, the mind immediately goes running off. We follow it and try to bring it back and observe it once more. Then it goes off again. This is what you’re supposed to be studying! Most people refuse to learn their lessons from nature – like a naughty schoolboy who refuses to do his homework. They don’t want to see the mind changing. But then how are you going to develop wisdom? We have to live with change like this. When we know that the mind is just this way, constantly changing, when we know that this is its nature, we will understand it. Suppose you have a pet monkey. Monkeys don’t stay still for long. They like to jump around and grab things. That’s how monkeys are. Now you

come to the monastery and you see a monkey here. This monkey doesn't stay still either, it jumps around just like your pet monkey at home. But it doesn't bother you, does it? You've raised a monkey before, so you know what they're like. If you know just one monkey, no matter where you go, no matter how many monkeys you see, you won't be bothered by them, will you? That's because you are one who understands monkeys. If we understand monkeys then we won't become a monkey. If you don't understand monkeys, you may become a monkey yourself! Do you understand? If you see it reaching for this and that and you shout, 'Hey, stop!' and you get angry – 'That damned monkey!' – then you're one who doesn't know monkeys. One who knows monkeys sees that the monkey at home and the monkey in the monastery are just the same. Why should you get annoyed by them? When you see what monkeys are like, that's enough; you can be at peace.

What Ajahn Chah is talking about is how, when we want to meditate, we might think, 'If I'm meditating well my mind will be completely peaceful and calm, filled with wholesome and noble qualities, it won't get restless or distracted.' The point he's making is that it is the mind's nature to be distracted, to chase after things that we remember, things that we see, things that we smell and taste and touch, things that we hear. That's its nature. If you want the mind to be different from that, then you've got

the wrong kind of mind. You're in the wrong universe. That's what minds are like. That's their nature. So rather than meditating with the expectation that the mind will be calm and quiet, Ajahn Chah talks about acknowledging that it's a monkey, so it behaves like a monkey. If you don't expect your mind to be different from 'monkey-mind', then you won't suffer. If you accept 'that's what monkeys are like', then your mind will be easier for you to work with and learn from, and ironically it's just that kind of acceptance and attunement to nature that is most helpful in enabling the mind to be peaceful.

In the shrine room at the Amaravati Retreat Centre there's a very fine painting of a Khmer-style Buddha image, and sitting in the lap of the Buddha is a langur monkey – one of the largest monkeys you find in India and Sri Lanka. They have a very dignified nature. They're not like the rhesus macaque *bandar*, which are the bandits and hooligans of the monkey world. Langurs are far more dignified, they have an upright posture and an exceptionally long tail. I was using the example of Ajahn Chah's teaching and also this monkey in relation to the Buddha image – how in the presence of wisdom the mind is still a monkey, but it's a monkey that is far more composed than usual.

One of the people on the retreat came from a Polish background. After hearing my talk he said, 'Did you know, Ajahn, there's an old Polish proverb

about monkeys?’ and I said, ‘No, I’ve never heard of it.’ He said, ‘It says: “Not my circus, not my monkeys”.’ I was immediately struck by this: ‘What a profound, insightful saying!’ Because this proverb is not just talking about the character of monkeys in the same way that Ajahn Chah talked about our mind states, but is also talking about the world, the way we relate to the different aspects of our lives and how we get caught up in things.

I don’t know if your mind is anything like mine, but I find that my character is one where, when I hear a piece of news or am in a conversation with someone, I immediately get absorbed in the issue discussed. I get concerned with the people involved. When watching a film or a TV programme do you get wrapped up in the lives of the characters? Even though there isn’t an Albert Square in London, the most popular TV programme every week remains *EastEnders*. Those people don’t exist – they are actors following scripts. But their imaginary lives in Albert Square are more important to many people than their own lives.

This is how we are. We very easily get wrapped up in other people’s lives, in other people’s concerns. Many years ago I was lighting a fire in a wood-burning stove and had some newspaper to start it with. As can happen when you are living in a place where there’s not much reading matter, you start to notice the news stories in the old newspapers. This newspaper was three or four years old, there was an article in it about a goalkeeper in a football

game who had made a stupid mistake, had let in a goal and the team had lost on account of that. This was a real disaster for them.

Now I didn't really care about football at all – I was a Buddhist monk lighting a fire to warm up a cold room – and yet there I was completely absorbed in this goalkeeper's life, 'Oh no, what a tragedy! How terrible, how awful!' and I was suffering on account of this dreadful mistake that the goalkeeper had made. He had probably forgotten it by then – three or four years later I suspect it was no longer an issue for him. But there was *I*, a Buddhist monk just using a piece of newspaper to start a fire with, and there was this deep worry overwhelming me. My mind identified with the story. This is making the monkeys ours: 'It's *my* circus, and *my* monkeys. I'm wrapped up in this, I'm completely identified with this.' Even though, on the one hand, you might say, 'I don't really care about football. I don't even know the teams or who won or who lost.' Yet there is this ingrained habit of identification, this eagerness to get absorbed into something, 'Oh dear, what a terrible disaster! What an awful thing!'

If we don't understand this process we find ourselves being caught up in, and suffering from, every story we come across: in the family and in the workplace; in the news, or in the realms of fiction. The fictional worlds of Anthony Trollope, or the Marvel Cinematic Universe, or Albert Square, Emmerdale Farm and Coronation Street – these places exist in the minds of

their creators – and the millions of people who watch the TV programs and films or who read the books. When we are not familiar with how our mind works, we continually identify with, grasp and own the many different aspects of our experience.

Now that we are in what they call ‘the information age’, it’s not just hearing a story over the counter of the local shop, chatting with your cousin, reading an occasional novel or watching ten minutes of news once a day. Most of us are now inundated and overwhelmed with information. We have an extraordinary amount of news about every country on the planet coming to us all day and all night, relentlessly. I have often quoted a statistic I read about a couple of years ago. The well known novelist Neil Gaiman gave a talk in London in 2013 to encourage child literacy. He said that he had been talking with one of the seniormost people from Google. And he reported that this person, one of Google’s vice-presidents had said, ‘Between the dawn of civilization, when we first began to create images to depict events and the written word, about ten thousand years ago, up to 2003, humanity created roughly five exabytes of information. That’s five billion gigabytes of information. That is every cuneiform scroll, every scripture, every newspaper, every novel, every poem, every letter, every play that was composed in every country around the world. So about five billion gigabytes of information were created between 10,000 BCE and 2003,

when the information age really kicked off. But now we create the same amount of information *every two days*.’

Neil Gaiman’s talk was given in 2013, so it’s probably that much in about an hour by now, in 2024, because of the speed at which digital information is increasing. Back in 1984, Bill Gates had said, ‘I can’t conceive of a time when any personal computer would ever need more than 32 kilobytes of memory.’ Those of you who are familiar with computers will know that 32 kilobytes is less than three blank Word documents, while a digital photograph is three or four megabytes as a matter of course these days. We are inundated with information, overwhelmed with news. This has a profound impact on us.

We find ourselves in a place where it is very much our circus and these are all our monkeys, and they are behaving as monkeys do. Their world jumps around and it is chaotic and confusing, and therefore stressful because of the sense of entanglement and possessiveness that we have. We don’t just hear the information but it becomes ours, it becomes who we are, and through this identification we create stress, pressure and fragmentation in our lives.

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A lot of this revolves around the way the mind works with any kind of perception or thought. One very important aspect of Dhamma practice is in relation to what the Buddha called *papañca*, or ‘conceptual proliferation’.

The mind has not just a single thought, but one thought leading on to a second thought, a third, fourth, fifth, sixth – a whole chain of associative thinking – we easily get lost in our thoughts. The most comprehensive teaching that the Buddha gave about *papañca* is in the ‘Middle Length Discourses’ (M 18). It is called the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta* – ‘The Discourse on the Sweet Morsel’ or ‘The Honeyball’.

The *sutta* begins with the Buddha sitting by himself in the forest under a tree. And as he is sitting in the forest, a brahmin comes wandering through it. This brahmin was a professional debater called Daṇḍapāṇi who was quite proud of himself – he thought he was really something pretty hot, very skilled and accomplished. He had heard of the Buddha’s reputation, and there he was sitting under a tree. Daṇḍapāṇi thought, ‘Aha! There’s that monk Gotama. He’s supposed to be very wise. I’ll ask him a question and hear what he has to say. Then I’ll find fault with his philosophy, take it to pieces and show him what a real spiritual teacher is like.’ So he came up to the Buddha and introduced himself and said, ‘What kind of practice do you do? What kind of philosophy do you teach? What views do you adhere to?’

Not only did the Buddha have psychic powers, but he was also an accomplished judge of character. He sussed out where this brahmin was coming from, right at the very beginning. So the Buddha said, ‘I follow a teaching that encourages non-contention with anybody in the world.’ So

the brahmin Daṇḍapāṇi realized he had nothing to say, no way of following that. He had been looking for an argument but the Buddha was saying, ‘I follow the path of non-contention. You’re looking for an argument but I’m not going to argue with you.’ So Daṇḍapāṇi clicked his tongue three times, his brow formed into three furrows and he went off shaking his head, leaving the Buddha alone.

The Buddha went back to the monastery and recounted this incident to his community. He said, ‘It is through attachment to thinking that we create the causes for every kind of argument, every kind of struggle and conflict. This is the reason why people pick up weapons and attack each other. It is due to attachment to perceptions and thoughts that the world does this.’ And then the Buddha left them. He had not said very much, so the bhikkhus thought, ‘It would be good to learn more about what he meant there and how this works, let’s go and find Mahā Kaccāna because he’s the best at explaining things that the Buddha has said very briefly.’ So they tracked down Mahā Kaccāna and said, ‘The Master had an encounter with a brahmin in the woods, and he made this very brief statement about how it is our attachment to perceptions and thoughts that causes all the arguments and struggles in the world. Then he left us and went into his *kuṭī*. Can you please explain what he meant? Can you fill that out for us?’

It was thus that Mahā Kaccāna came to be the one to explain in detail the process of conceptual proliferation. He said, ‘It works like this: the eye contacts a visual form. We see something. There is the eye, there is a visual object and eye-consciousness arises. The three coming together is ‘sense contact’. Then that sense contact gives rise to a feeling: a pleasant feeling, a painful feeling or a neutral feeling. Then that feeling, *vedanā*, conditions and causes a perception, *saññā*, so that the mind receives that sense impression. Following immediately on that sense impression, the thinking mind steps in and names it.’

If you are sitting in a room, look at the wall across from you, if you are outside, look at the sky. The eye receives light from that object, the neural impulse hits the visual cortex of the brain, the brain perceives a particular patterning it labels a certain colour, and then the thinking mind, *vitakka*, comes in and says ‘red’ or ‘white’ or whatever. That’s a ‘red’ colour. The sense perception, *saññā*, is the actual perception and then the thought, *vitakka*, is the naming of it. Following immediately from thought, *vitakka*, there is conceptual proliferation. Along with that thought of ‘red’, I might think, ‘There’s actually three kinds of red there on that wall...’.

If I ponder the west wall of the old *sālā* at Amaravati, it might go like this: ‘Red... There’s actually three kinds of red there... I remember when they first did the redecoration... it was in 1991. It was during the winter retreat

in '91, that's right... Ajahn Sumedho did the redecoration of the *sālā* and I was down at Chithurst. I was leading that retreat with Kittisāro, he was a monk then. That was a really great retreat...'. This is *papañca*, conceptual proliferation, one thought leading on to another.

The mind takes a particular impression or thought, and this starts off a whole story. Suddenly, just from seeing a red wall, the mind picks up, 'When that wall was painted, it was 1991. That is over 30 years ago already – when that wall was painted I was down at Chithurst...'. So the story of a different time and a different place from thirty years ago, pops into my mind and off it goes. *Papañca* then leads to what is called *papañca-saññā-saṅkhā* – this translates as 'the multiplicity, the diversity, of perceptions and feelings that pressurise the heart'. In simple terms this means that the more the mind gets lost in its own thinking, the more there is a *me* here and *the world* out there': 'Me here and that future that's awaiting me, and that I don't know what's going to happen in.' The further down the track the mind goes, the more there is a sense of 'me here, the world out there' and the pressure, the tension between the two. Mahā Kaccāna goes on to say how it is on account of this capacity of the mind to get lost in its own thoughts, its own creations and proliferations, that we end up in a sense of struggle and conflict between ourselves and others, taking up weapons and getting into 'quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice and false speech.'

One of the reasons for such clashing is that the world that I get lost in is not the same as the world that you get lost in. We have a great deal of conflict and division in the world these days, and that conflict is coming largely because one person's belief system doesn't match another person's belief system. One person's left is another person's right, depending on the viewpoint; that red wall is 'Great!' to one person and 'Ghastly!' to another – different world views, different perceptions, different senses of what's right, what's wrong, what's true, what's not true. If my truth doesn't match your truth, then it's very easy for us to have a conflict.

Mahā Kaccāna had explained all of this and, when the Buddha reappeared some time later, they repeated his elucidation back to him, 'This is what Venerable Mahā Kaccāna said when he was explaining your brief statement.' The Buddha said, 'Mahā Kaccāna is wise, has explained it exactly as I would have done, that's precisely what I meant.' Then Ānanda said, 'This is a wonderful teaching! Just as if someone exhausted by hunger and weakness came across a ball of honey (*madhupiṇḍa*) and it would be sweet and delectable, revitalizing them; so too anyone reflecting on this teaching would be revitalized with satisfaction and confidence of mind. What should we call this discourse?' The Buddha replied, 'You can call it "The Honeyball Discourse".' So from that time to the present day it has been known as 'The Sweet Morsel' or 'The Honeyball'.

This might come across as a bit theoretical, but I suspect that everyone reading this knows from direct experience this process whereby the mind gets taken up with a thought. You see somebody sitting across the aisle in the bus, you hear a snatch of music, or you get a message from someone, or you see a comment in a newspaper, or see the bend of the hills in a landscape... and off the mind goes. We see an image and it triggers feelings in the heart, and because of the mind getting lost in its own creations, getting caught up in the streams of conceptual proliferation (*papañca*), we find ourselves in a stressed and anxious state. We have assumed ownership of both the circus and the monkeys and are caught up in the intense, agitated, out of control feeling that goes with this sense of identity.

But when we challenge ourselves and try to deal with *papañca*, this principle of ‘not my circus, not my monkeys’ comes into play. If we watch our mind and look to see what it is actually doing, we realize, ‘Hang on a minute, I’m just seeing a person on the other side of the bus. I don’t know who they are. I don’t know what their life story is. And yet I was thinking, “That person could become my life partner, that’s the one, my one true love, at last!” or “That person looks dangerous!” or “That person disapproves of me.”’ Instead of buying into our conditioned judgements and incessantly creating stories, we can reflect, ‘Why do I think this? It’s just somebody sitting on the bus. Maybe they’re looking at me thinking, “I don’t like that

person. He's dangerous. He doesn't like me." We can bring into play our capacity to reflect and watch our proliferating mind.



There are different ways of handling conceptual proliferation. One is to just clarify what it is that you are afraid of, or irritated by, or excited about, or conjuring into being and believing in.

There is a story about Ajahn Lee, who became one of the great meditation masters of Thailand, sitting and meditating in his *kuṭī* one day when he was a young monk. As I recall, it went something like this: he hears the sound of the rain on his roof, then he thinks, 'The Rains Retreat will be over soon,' then, 'I've done my five Rains as a monk now, it will be in accordance with custom for me to disrobe,' then, 'That girl from my village said she'd wait... maybe she's ready to get married.' He imagines getting married, and then they have a couple of children, and then he's on the farm and she's working in a local match factory close to the village. Then he thinks, 'Those places are pretty dangerous, what if there is a fire in the factory and she's injured... Oh no, if she's hurt and I can't afford the medical bills... And who's going to take care of the children?' He has worked himself into quite an anxious state about all this terrible stuff that has just happened to his wife, and about who is going to look after his kids, but then he realizes, 'Wait,

wait, wait, wait! I'm in my *kuṭī*, I'm still a monk. None of this has happened!' It is a great relief and a smile comes to his face.

That recognition of, 'Wait a minute, none of this has happened, that world has not come into being – it's all a fiction – I'm still here in my regular life,' is a reflection we can all use to our benefit. Just as, if you are getting completely absorbed in the fictional events of *Hamlet* or *EastEnders* or *Game of Thrones* we can reflect, 'Those people don't really exist, these are actors. What I'm seeing on the screen is because a group of people sat down and wrote a script together. This is invented. These are not real people. I don't have to be losing sleep over what's going to happen to Laertes or Phil Mitchell or Sansa Stark.'

Another way that we can recognize the fabricated, false nature of what we are thinking is to inflate the content of the thought stream. This is a method Ajahn Sumedho has often advocated over the years. Say, for example, that the mind comes up with a thought such as, 'She's a really interesting person,' or 'He is a monster,' or 'Who'll look after the monastery when the Ajahn dies?' When these kinds of judgements or questions are noticed, we can consciously, mindfully, pick them up and follow them through, and inflate them by saying, 'Maybe it's not just him that dies, maybe all the senior monks will die, and all the senior nuns too. I'm only an anagārika, but maybe all the monks and nuns will die and I'll be left in charge of Amaravati, and then... what?' Again, a smile of relief will come

to our face, because this wise reflection has shown us the absurdity of our habitual conceptual proliferations.

When we find our mind getting lost in thoughts about the conflicts and tensions we have with others, we can consider, ‘If all the people who don’t like me died, then only people who like me would be alive. And that would be good, wouldn’t it?’ When we do that, and if we follow it through to its logical conclusion, we will find we can’t even get to the end of the sentence. It becomes ridiculous, meaningless and falls apart on its own. ‘I think only people who like me deserve to live. Anybody who doesn’t like me should just drop dead. I only want people who like me to be alive, because people shouldn’t dislike me – that’s bad of them!’ This is ridiculous, what a crazy mind!

It takes a bit of mindfulness to do this exercise, though. There needs to be a deliberate effort to catch the mind as it wildly proliferates, but if you do it, you will begin to see things in a different way. Say you are sitting meditating and then you’re getting annoyed with the traffic in the street. You think, ‘Bloody traffic... I can’t meditate because of all that noise!’ We need to mindfully catch that thought and then follow it through to its logical conclusion, ‘If that noise wasn’t there, I would be perfectly enlightened.’ Er, unlikely. ‘If that noise was not there, then I would be totally happy,’ again, not likely. ‘That noise is there because the world is populated by

malicious people who are spending their time deliberately interrupting my meditation.’ No. Often it only takes a small effort to catch our thought and follow it through – it’s a small effort but it’s a specific effort, like putting the right key into a lock – and then its own absurdity makes the habitual thought-pattern fall apart. If our thought-habits are not clearly seen, they are like things off at the edges of our vision – you don’t know what they are, so they have power and influence. If you get them front and centre, and say, ‘Talk to me,’ then they lose their power.

Another useful method, when you find yourself completely lost in thoughts, is to follow the train of thought back to its source. Say you are, in your imagination, busy divorcing your current spouse and getting married to this person on the bus, or you are in a monastery and you are imagining getting out of the monastery, or you are outside the monastery imagining getting into the monastery: ‘How would I look with a shaved head? I don’t know about losing my eyebrows, but the rest is really appealing...’. So that lost-in-thought-ness is noticed and you say to yourself, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute... Where did this begin? Well, it began with me seeing the back of that monk’s head and then there was a thought, “I’m very attached to my hair but it’s falling out. Monks shave their heads all the time. If I shaved my head regularly, I wouldn’t have to worry about my hair loss problem.” That’s how I got into this idea of “Maybe I should go into the monastery.”’

If you follow your thinking back to its initial perception, like me thinking, ‘There’s red paint on the western wall of the *sālā*,’ you realize it is just a red colour, but it drew the mind back to that memory of 1991. Or it is just that you saw the back of that monk’s head. It was *just seeing*. It was *just a sound*. It was *just a feeling*. If you trace it back to where it came from, the mind recognizes, ‘It was *just seeing* somebody on the bus. It was just the colour of a wall. It was just a sound I heard in the kitchen. It was just an aroma that I smelled. *That was all* – just a brief wave of feeling. Nothing more happened.’ Very simple.

What we find is that the further we go back to the source, to the initial perception, the simpler it gets. The further you get into the story, the more there is ‘*me here*’, ‘*the world there*’, and the tension between the two. If you follow it back to its origin, there is just hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, that is all. It is extraordinarily simple and there is no sense of self involved either.

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When we find ourselves getting lost in alienated thoughts: ‘Why don’t people like me? Why do people give me a hard time? Life would be so much better if everyone liked me and was nice to me...’ we can reflect that we are creating unrealistic expectations. This is rather like Ajahn Chah pointing out that the nature of monkeys is to jump around and play. That’s what they do. The nature of people is that some people like you,

some don't like you, and a lot are completely indifferent to you. Many people don't even notice you. This observation might not be pleasing to the childish, self-centred habits of our mind but the intuitive wisdom of the *citta* will realize, 'Of course.'

I was struck by this statement, 'Not my circus, not my monkeys' because of that old habit of mine, of identifying with things and taking them personally. It was much stronger in years gone by and, thankfully, it's a lot weaker now. As I explored this saying and reflected on it, I realized that it's a very profound expression of the principle of *anattā* – not-self. This is how the world is. The world is a circus – it is comprised of a lot of activity and colour, movement and sound – but it's not *my* circus. I don't have to own it or identify with it. I don't have to be possessive about it. I don't have to create a sense of false responsibility in relation to it. And what people feel, about me or anything, is not under my control. I might want everyone to be happy. I might want everyone to like me. I might want nobody to ever, ever suffer in any way, but I can't control that. That is not under my control. We are not the owners of the world. We often don't realize that we are creating a tremendous amount of tension and suffering in ourselves because we relate to other people as if we owned them, as if they belonged to us and we were in control of them.

When it is spelled out like this it is blatantly farcical, yet it's a farce that we mysteriously buy into and take to be real.



Another aspect of our thoughts and proliferations is that, even though we might think, 'Not my circus, not my monkeys; this particular issue is not my problem,' the world often demands that we have an opinion. I lived in the USA for a long time. Having opinions is quite a strong thing here in the UK but it is even stronger in America where it's almost socially unacceptable not to have an opinion about things. People would ask, 'What do you think about George Bush, Ajahn?' I would reply, 'I don't think about George Bush, at least very little.' 'But you must have an opinion, Ajahn! What's your opinion?' People would be quite shocked or feel almost insulted if you said, 'I don't have an opinion.' 'How can you not have an opinion?!' Culturally it's almost an obligation. Over here in the UK too, how many conversations start in the workplace or in the home, while watching something on television, or talking about something in the office with your colleagues, and they ask, 'So, what do you think about Boris Johnson?' You *can* say, 'I don't think about Boris Johnson,' if that's true, of course.

This readiness, this mindfulness, to stop, to not buy into the coaxing of the moment, is valuable in terms of developing insight into not-self (*anattā*), and using this principle as a way of helping us to be more peaceful and

spacious. When someone asks, ‘What’s your opinion?’ or ‘What do you feel about...?’ Be honest. If you don’t have an opinion, don’t feel like you have to come up with one just to make conversation. Sometimes people will say something or ask you about this or that and they don’t really care – it’s just to make conversation. They say, ‘What do you think about such and such?’ They don’t care what you think about such and such. They just want to interact with you.

Over and over again, in the past, I found that someone would ask me a question, ‘What do you think about such and such?’ Then I would say something, just to be polite, and then they would immediately counter with, ‘I don’t really think that is true, I think you have got to look at both sides of it.’ Five minutes into it you realize, ‘Hang on a moment, I didn’t really have any interest in this in the first place and now I’m finding myself in opposition to this other person. How did we get here?’ You might also have noticed another interesting phenomenon, whereby somebody is so keen to engage that, even if you agree with them, ‘Actually, I think you are right,’ they keep arguing with you, and then they change round to the opposite side, contradicting what they said half an hour before. The impetus is solely to feel like someone, through engaging with another, and that sense of selfhood is fed by pushing against someone else; the content of the discussion is largely irrelevant.

Oftentimes we are simply keen to be with each other and we need an excuse, a way of speaking with each other, just to be able to spend time together – silence is not easy for most people. But we can find ourselves getting caught up in opinions, taking positions and getting fully involved with the circus and the monkeys when we really don't need to. So, I would encourage, when people ask you for an opinion or to speak about something, to consider 'Do I *really* care about this? Do I think about this very much? Do I have something that is useful to say or not?' I would encourage you to consider that it is completely acceptable to say, 'I don't have an opinion,' or, 'I don't think about Boris Johnson.' It's not as though one is disconnected from society. We are still living as part of the human family, but if things are not particularly your concern or your interest, or you are not particularly involved, it's quite OK to say, 'I haven't thought about it very much,' or, 'I don't have an opinion.' And that in itself can start an interesting conversation.

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On the subject of control, we suffer a lot because we somehow feel that we are supposed to be in control. Particularly if you're a parent and you're supposed to be in control of your children. Or you're a school teacher and you're supposed to be in control of your class. Or you're in a hospital or you're running a department and you're supposed to be in charge of these people. Or you're an abbot and you're supposed to be in charge of Amaravati

monastery. Even when we are not in a formal position of leadership, somehow we seem to feel that we are supposed to understand everybody and are supposed to know everything that is going on; that, somehow, we have mastered everything and we're in control here. 'I've got this covered. I know what's going on.' But often we don't really. We don't really know what is going on. We don't fully know how things will work out. We are, most certainly, not in control.

On account of this simple attribute of the natural order – *anicca vata saṅkhārā*, 'all things are uncertain and transient' – we create stress and distress in our hearts. How? Because, although we don't really understand how things work, we feel that we should. Or we think that 'they' assume that we know everything, so we need to keep up the pretence to impress the mysterious and ubiquitous 'them'. But we don't know where things are going to go. We don't know what all of the people are feeling and thinking – and the unnecessary, absurd belief that we should, is what creates the *dukkha*.

In the past I saw myself doing this very often. I was a compulsive explainer. I always wanted to have everything sorted and clarified, with lists of how everything was working. It has taken a lot of effort in my Dhamma practice to not always try to explain everything, to not have everything perfectly organized and predictable, or not to be feeling like I understand where people are at, but rather just to leave things alone and acknowledge, 'I don't

know what's going on here. I don't know how this works. I don't know what people are feeling.'

Whenever I brought this reflection, with its resultant change of view to mind, I'd notice an immediate sense of relief. It is a false sense of control that we try to bring into being. Because we are never really in charge. We don't really understand everything, but because we feel that we are supposed to do so, we feel a sense of lack, inability or anxiety. If, instead, we reflect on *aniccatā*, uncertainty, then we realize, 'Of course it's uncertain, of course there's the unknown. It has always been this way.' When we acknowledge uncertainty and that things are not under our control – because these are monkeys, and no one knows what the monkeys are going to do next – then we are not creating that false sense of, 'I'm in charge here. I know what's going on. I know how this works. I know the right way to go.' As Ajahn Chah said, we are much more at ease if we let the monkeys be the way they are. 'If you understand monkeys, you won't become a monkey!'

Many years ago, I was looking at this issue very directly because I was such a worrier. I was always worrying about life and about what was going to happen next and about how things were and what people were feeling. So I made a specific practice of watching that worried feeling, that sense of identifying with the circus, of making it mine, and instead of identifying with my deep-seated anxiety, I consciously looked at the feeling of tension whenever it came up within me.

I was living here at Amaravati from '85 to '95. For about two or three years during that period I would begin each day, at the morning meditation, by saying to myself, 'Whenever I have a feeling of anxiety or worry about anything – whether it has a real basis or whether it is just my imagination – a worry about what someone is thinking or feeling, or a worry about what is going to happen next – whatever the object of my worry is, I now set the intention to notice that feeling of worry, to turn my attention around and recognize that worry, that sense of tightness in the body.' This worry would often feel like a knot of tension in the stomach, the belly. Then, whenever I noticed that tightening in the body, I consciously relaxed there, relaxed the muscles of the body, relaxed the stomach and let the body be at ease. When my body was at ease, I was able to fully appreciate what it was like for the body to be free of tension, free of that stress.

The next part of this exercise was very interesting: 'At that moment when the body is completely relaxed, I should ask, "What was it that I was worrying about?"' Repeatedly I would find that, for two or three seconds, there would be a hiatus, a gap, a silence. 'It was... What was it?' I couldn't find what the source of the worry was. Then, 'Oh yes, that was it!' I could reconstitute it, but for a moment there was nothing there, nothing to be worried about. There was no object. This supported the insight, the realization, that the anxious feeling was nothing to do with the world being wrong; it was to

do with how my mind related to the world – that is where the ‘wrongness’ was coming from. I followed that practice for two or three years; I made that the main focus of my spiritual life and it had a big effect on me. A very beneficial effect.

During this period, there was a little reflection I would use, ‘Just do what you do and let the world make of it what it will.’ In other words, don’t be afraid or don’t try to find happiness through getting approval from everybody about what you do. Because I found that my mind was dominated by wanting to please everybody all the time and being afraid of being disliked or disapproved of, it was a challenge to drop this habit. First, when I said that phrase to myself, I could feel this little voice in me going ‘But they might not like it! They might be unhappy!’ That made me realize, ‘You’re right on the mark here. This is exactly what needs to be looked at.’ After doing that for two or three years, I found a tremendous ease. I was just letting the monkeys be monkeys, letting the world be the way it is. This is not a matter of being careless or indifferent or numb, but having a relaxed attitude – a way of letting go of that false sense of control. Letting go of the fear that the world needs you to be worrying about it in order for it to hold together.

During this time I was becoming a lot more relaxed in my attitude with respect to the way that I did things and related to life at Amaravati. One day,

Ajahn Saṃvaro, another monk who was living here, made the comment, ‘You’re a lot easier to live with since you stopped trying to be perfect.’ I wasn’t sure whether to be insulted or feel complimented and encouraged! But it was a helpful remark because it came from a kind and sincere place. So all my trying to get it right and to please everybody had actually been creating a cloud of tension. Once I was a bit more relaxed, that was a much more helpful thing to offer to the world.



One of the interesting things about fear is that when we are afraid of something, our attention goes to the thing that we’re afraid of, we don’t pay attention to the experience of fear itself. I began to use fear as a meditation object because the more frightening something is, the more our attention fixates on the thing we are afraid of, so we don’t notice the feeling of fear itself as an experience. We’re attending to *that thing*, the object – whether it is a memory or a possible future or someone’s attitude or a world event – and we don’t notice what is happening on this side, with us, the subject.

We spend a lot of energy and time getting away from the feeling of fear, getting to a place where we can feel comfortable and secure. So you’d think fear must be a terrible, awful, painful thing for us to spend so much time and effort trying to get away from it. What was very interesting to notice, when I first started to use this practice of exploring what the sensation of

fear was like in my body, was the realization, ‘Yes, it’s painful but it’s not that bad; it’s not even as uncomfortable as a toothache or a stone in my shoe. It is just mildly unpleasant, like a bit of a headache when there’s a thunderstorm brewing. That’s it.’ I was almost disappointed; it was like, ‘Why did I spend so much time trying to get away from this feeling, when it’s really not that much of a problem? It’s not *that* painful or uncomfortable.’ I was quite surprised.

‘This is *it*? What?!’

One of the Upanishads describes how, as soon as there is the ‘I’, there is a ‘self’ and ‘another’ – and because there’s ‘I’ here and ‘the other’ there, then ‘this’ can feel threatened by ‘that’. It is a very simple dynamic. When the ‘I’ is let go of, then, rather than the unknown being threatening, it is still the unknown, but our experience is one of wonderment, of mystery, rather than fearful threat.

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When we use a phrase like ‘not my circus, not my monkeys’ one can interpret this as saying ‘I’m alright, Jack, I’ve got mine. I don’t care about the rest of you, you can just get lost.’ But it’s not that kind of attitude. It’s not about being dismissive or being a sociopath, cutting yourself off from everyone. If we take the Buddhist teaching on the Middle Way to heart, we realize that this is talking about having a balanced attitude, whereby

we are attuned to the people around us but we are not creating a stance of possessiveness or judgementalism towards them.

Most readers are likely to be familiar with the word *dāna* – meaning ‘generosity’. There is another important Pali word, *anādāna*. This means ‘non-possessiveness’ or ‘non-ownership’. *Dāna* is a very important word, but *anādāna*, in terms of wisdom, is even more important, because it expresses the quality of non-ownership, non-identification, non-attachment. ‘This isn’t mine. This circus does not belong to me. This world is not mine. This body is not mine. This monastery is not mine – it doesn’t have an owner.’ So, *anādāna* means non-ownership, non-possessiveness. These are not ‘your’ children. These are not ‘your’ parents. This is not ‘your’ money. This is not ‘your’ property. This is not ‘your’ life. Part of us can be threatened by this concept, because we feel we own ‘my family’, ‘my children’, ‘my reputation’, ‘my money’, ‘my monastery’. It can feel like something that is ours is being taken away, but what *anādāna* is pointing to, in terms of the teaching of the Buddha, is that nothing has ever belonged to us. How could anything *really* have an owner? ‘Ownership’ is just a conventional agreement. I can say ‘This is my copy of *Food for the Heart*. It’s got my name in it, so it’s *mine*. It’s got my notes in it. But one day it might go missing or I might put it down and somebody might pick it up and then it is not mine anymore. It was printed by Wisdom Publications in Boston so before

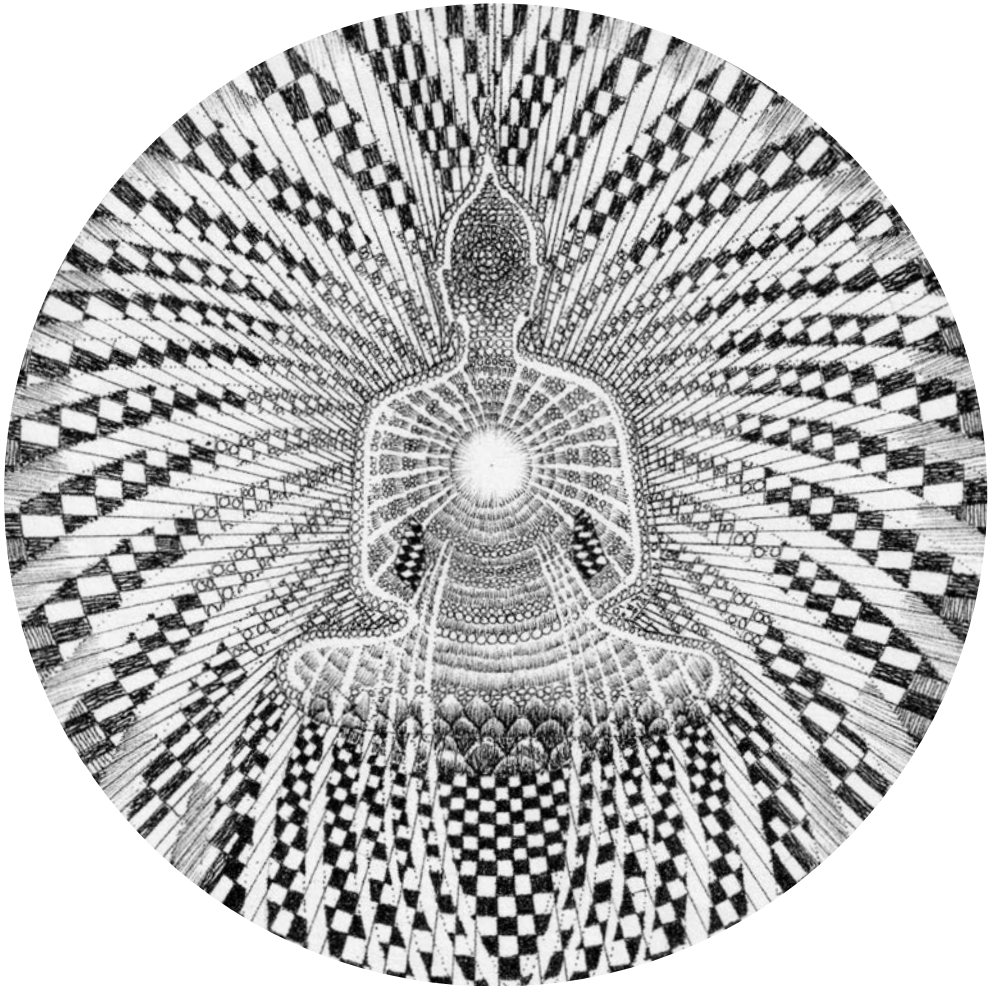
it arrived here in a box it wasn't mine, it belonged to Wisdom Publications; I took this copy out of a box and suddenly 'mine-ness' arose. This 'mine-ness' is always temporary, contingent, it can never be absolute or permanent.

When we reflect wisely on this aspect of our lives, we experience a relaxation of the heart. The world is like this. When we let go of our sense of ownership or our false sense of responsibility for the world, we can take responsible action more effectively. When we are not trying to be in charge or be the owner who is supposed to be looking after everything, when that feeling of possessiveness and identification is let go of, then we find that we are 'much easier to live with, since we stopped trying to be perfect'. We find that we can engage with the world in a far more effective and helpful fashion. This is the embodiment of the Middle Way.

The Middle Way is a mysterious integration of attributes. The Buddha manifested these qualities in *vijjācaraṇa-sampanno* – being 'perfect in knowledge and conduct'. The *vijjā* (knowledge) is the quality of awareness, wisdom, that is based on non-attachment, non-possessiveness. It's the insight, the realization that there is no owner of things and that they have no substance. Things are *suñña*, empty. They are ownerless, *anādāna*. So *vijjā* – wisdom, awareness – has a completely transcendent quality. Yet in that same expression *vijjā* is twinned with *caraṇa*, 'conduct'. The Buddha is not just perfect in wisdom but also perfect in conduct. Using the Christian

theological terminology, wisdom and conduct represent transcendence and immanence. This is the mysterious balance of the Middle Way, there is both apperception of, attunement to, the way things are and a complete non-attachment, non-identification with the way things are. These are two aspects of the same reality – the reality of pure wisdom-awareness.

Thus when we apply this reflection ‘not my circus, not my monkeys’, it is not creating a false separation, dismissal or a numbing of the heart. It is not encouraging us to be sociopaths or uncaring. Rather it is enabling us to let go of our habits of anxiety and ownership so that we can respond more skilfully to life. Ajahn Candasiri offered a coinage to express this: ‘response-ability’, our ability to respond. When we think about the word ‘responsibility’, we might immediately feel tense, ‘It’s *my* responsibility. I’ve got to make all these people happy,’ then this is *my* circus and these are *my* monkeys and we’ve got trouble! But if it is ‘response-ability’ instead, then the heart intuitively responds to the time, the place and the situation with the best that it can offer each moment.



‘Who was Ajahn Chah?’

On the 17th of June, 2018, it was a hundred years after Ajahn Chah’s birth in Bahn Gor, a little village in Ubon Province in North-East Thailand. So who was the Ajahn Chah whose hundredth anniversary was being celebrated on that day? There are a variety of ways one can respond to that question.

The most obvious place to begin is with the story of his life from the most ordinary, historical perspective. This is the first way of describing a person. The village where Luang Por Chah was born was in Warin District, near the city of Ubon Ratchathani. He was one of a large number of children in his family. He was unusual insofar as he chose to go into the monastery on his own initiative at the age of nine. He wasn’t sent there by his parents but they agreed to his move. He left the home life and signed up as a *dek wat*, a temple boy. He stayed in the monastery of his own village for a few years and then received novice ordination, I believe, when he was about eleven or twelve. He trained as a novice until he was sixteen; during that time his teacher in the monastery, Ajahn Lang, was his guide and mentor. The young novice Chah – Nehn Eung was his nickname, *eung* as in ‘bullfrog’, so, Novice Bullfrog was how he was known – Nehn Eung was very impressed that Ajahn Lang would take him regularly to visit the Chuangchots, Nehn

Eung's family, and spend a lot of time teaching his mother and father. He then found out that Ajahn Lang was actually interested in Ajahn Chah's elder sister. To his great surprise, Ajahn Lang disrobed and then proposed to his elder sister. With his Ajahn disrobing and leaving the Sangha, and also being at the restless age of sixteen, he ended up leaving the robes at that time as well.

He took on the lay life for a few years, from when he was sixteen to the age of twenty. During that time he also fell in love with a local girl from the village. Those readers who are familiar with Luang Por Chah's biography will know that that was a difficult situation for him. His best friend was a young lad called Pūht. Pūht had a half-sister called Jai, and it was Jai that the young Chah Chuangchot was in love with. They were assuming that they would get married and live together, and they were beginning to plan a future. Then one day his friend Pūht said, 'I'm sorry, but they're marrying me to the girl.' So Pūht had an arranged marriage to Jai. His best friend and his girlfriend got married together. So that was, as they say, tough! That was hard to take. What better thing to do then than to go back into the monastery? That was the motivation, or the impulse, for him to go back into robes, the suffering of the heartbreak that he had had.

He lived in the village temple. He was very bright so he learned the Buddhist scriptures and some Pali, and became a responsible and respected member

of the local community. But then, after he had been a bhikkhu for about six or seven years, his father fell very ill. It was the slow fading and death of his father that was the impulse for him to take up meditation.

In many of the village and city temples, Sangha members often don't do a lot of meditation. They perform many ceremonies, they study Pali and the Buddhist scriptures, they carry out a lot of pastoral roles, helping people, giving advice, but they don't do a lot of *bhāvanā*, meditation. But with his father fading and dying, the young bhikkhu Chah Subhaddo thought along the lines of, 'I don't know what to do with my mind. I'm feeling sad. I'm upset. I feel powerless. My mind is all over the place even though I'm a monk. We have all these stories about the Buddha and the wise enlightened beings. I'm not wise. My mind is not focused. I have no *samādhi*. I'm all over the place. I need to do something about my mind...'. The death of his father was thus the impulse for him to take up meditation. There was an important dialogue between him and his father, when he was on his deathbed. His father said, 'Please don't disrobe. Promise me that you will stay as a monk.' The young Bhikkhu Chah said, 'Yes, I promise I will not disrobe.' It was about 1945 by this time.

He then took up the life of a wandering forest monk, travelling by foot on *tudong*, and he sought out meditation teachers. He was living in forests as he travelled through the region and he met with a number of different

teachers. There was Luang Pu Kinaree and also Luang Pu Tongrat; these were *Mahānikai* forest monks who had trained with Venerable Ajahn Mun and who were local to the Ubon area. They were the first forest Ajahns that the young Bhikkhu Chah sought out and practised with.

As time went by and he got more and more serious with his practice, a great deal of faith and commitment arose. He made a resolution during this time, because he was so pressured by the feeling of *dukkha*, of suffering. He saw that the teaching of the Buddha, and the way of life of the forest monastics, was a most precious opportunity to understand the mind and to bring suffering to an end. He resolved, 'I'm going to use this life to arrive at the end of suffering. Whatever it takes, I'll do it.' He made this firm *adhiṭṭhāna*, resolution, when he was just a young monk.

That he made that strong commitment to do whatever it takes – 'Whatever I have to do, I'll do it!' – is a well-known part of his history. When he was a child he was always the one who would try hardest, climb the tree the highest, work hardest in the field. He would always, if he was going to do anything, do it 110%. So, if he was going to be a monk, he was going to do that 110% as well.

He committed himself firmly, ardently, to the practice. Then having trained with Luang Pu Tongrat and Luang Pu Kinaree, who were both disciples of Luang Pu Mun, the most well known forest Ajahn – the young

Bhikkhu Chah went to see if he could find Luang Pu Mun. This was in the last years of Luang Pu Mun's life. Ajahn Chah met him at his monastery in Nong Phue in Sakhon Nakhon Province; he only spent three days with Luang Pu Mun. Luang Pu Mun was a *Dhammayut* monk, while Luang Por Chah was from the *Mahānikai*; these are the two different lineages in Thailand. Part of our history as a forest monastic community is the dialogue between these two groups.

As the young Bhikkhu Chah stayed with Luang Pu Mun for those few days, great faith and confidence in Luang Pu Mun's teachings arose in him. He thought, 'This monk is truly enlightened, he definitely knows what he is talking about and I would like to follow his teachings.' He asked Luang Pu Mun, 'Should I let go of my precepts as a *Mahānikai* monk and reordain in the *Dhammayut* lineage?' Luang Pu Mun replied, 'No, you don't need to change lineage. They need good monks in the *Mahānikai* community as well. Please stay where you are.' So that's what he did.

Every evening Luang Pu Mun would give a Dhamma talk and on the third evening he gave a teaching that was to inspire Ajahn Chah's practice ever after. In this final teaching Luang Pu Mun made it very clear that the mind that is aware and the objects of awareness are utterly separate. There is a transcendent (*lokuttara*) quality to that awareness. That which knows the five *khandhas* – the body, the feelings, the perceptions, thoughts and

emotions and sense consciousness – is not part of the five *khandhas*. It is not tied to them. That is why liberation is possible. If all awareness was intrinsically part of the five *khandhas*, liberation would be impossible. Because there is awareness, the *poo roo* or *vijjā*, the quality of knowing, and it is transcendent and separate from the five *khandhas*, therefore liberation is possible. This teaching had a very powerful effect on the young Bhikkhu Chah. He took these teachings to heart as he carried on along his way as a forest monk.

To cut a long story short, four or five years later, in 1953, he began to teach. He initially took on a few students and they had a Rains Retreat together. He instituted a famously vigorous routine. They had all night meditation every night. Every monk and novice had to sit up in meditation all night, every night, for the whole three months. Then for the last month, just to crank it up even more, everyone had to sit up all night and not move. So it was a twelve hour sitting with no moving, every night for a month – this was extraordinarily rigorous! At the end of this retreat a couple of the monks who were with him continued on as his first long-term disciples.

The people from Bahn Gor village, including his mother, heard that he had come back into the area and that he was teaching. His reputation as a good, committed monk had spread and a delegation from Bahn Gor came to find him. They requested, ‘Please, Venerable Sir, we have a forest near

the village, as you know. We would like to invite you to come and live in the Bahn Gor forest. We will support you to start a monastery there.’ Ajahn Chah accepted and that’s how Wat Nong Pah Pong began, in 1954.

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Ajahn Chah had a lot of different meditation techniques that he practised and taught. He was kind of a magician; he could keep pulling rabbits out of his hat. As foundational practices he most often taught mindfulness of breathing, frequently encouraging using the mantra *Buddho*; *bud-* on the inbreath and *-dho* on the outbreath. For walking meditation he advised walking at an ordinary natural pace back and forth on a path about 20-25 metres long. He taught contemplation using reflections on uncertainty. One very simple method was: every time your mind forms a judgement of liking or disliking, ask yourself, ‘Is that so? Is that a sure thing?’

He was a constant innovator of practices. He would suggest things like, as I myself saw him demonstrate, a pocket version of walking meditation. You take something like a glass, you put it down in one spot, time it for a minute, and then move it a foot to another spot. Leave it there for a minute and then move it back. Leave it there for a minute and then move it back to where it first was. Do that for an hour – simply picking up a glass moving it a foot, then putting down and every minute. Along the way, see what your mind does with that process.

With a monk who had a tendency towards anger, he gave him a dish of cold water, ‘Put that in the corner of your *kuṭī* and use it as a meditation object, contemplate water and cooling.’ Sometimes he would describe a meditation method and a person would ask, ‘Luang Por, are you sure that will work for me?’ And he would say, ‘It’s not a sure thing, but try it and see what happens.’ He was like a magician. There was no end to the kind of practices that he could come up with. An interesting one, to work with anger, was, ‘Put aside mindfulness of breathing and make anger your meditation object. Think of something that makes you angry and then keep your attention on that angry feeling. When the anger slips away, bring it back – get angry again! Just like if you were doing mindfulness of breathing. As soon as your attention wanders from the breath you bring it back – in the same way, see if you can stay angry for an hour.’ This is really hard to do (I tried it) because anger only works in short flashes. He pointed out that, by the time you get to the end of the hour, the anger will have disappeared, at least for a substantial time. He was amazingly creative. If you counted the different practices he taught people, you would probably come up with a hundred or so.

Wat Pah Pong began in March 1954. Ajahn Chah stayed there and taught continually. People gathered around, from Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and from abroad as the community was established. Ajahn Sumedho was the first Westerner to arrive, in 1967.

Ajahn Chah was always available to give teachings. By the time I arrived at the beginning of 1978, most of every day Luang Por Chah would sit under his *kuṭī* and receive people from after the meal time at about nine o'clock in the morning through until maybe nine o'clock in the evening, maybe ten, maybe midnight. After the lay people had gone, he would stay up until one or two, maybe three o'clock in the morning talking to the monks and novices. Often you would hear the morning bell going at 3 a.m. and he would say, 'Uhh, time to take a rest,' and he would go off and recline for a couple of hours, and then be up and about, in time for *pindapat*, the alms-round, at five or five-thirty in the morning.

He was an incredibly generous teacher, but that endless giving had a significant effect on his body. By the time he was about 63 years old, in 1981, his health started to degenerate significantly. That year he had a stroke or brain lesion, no one is quite sure what happened, while he was spending the Rains Retreat at Wat Tam Saeng Pet, near the town of Amnaht Charoen. Over a period of seven or eight months his health worsened steadily. When he reached the Rains of 1982, at the age of 64, his health had eroded to the point where he couldn't speak, he couldn't walk, he couldn't move, and he was totally paralysed except for some slight movement in one hand. For the last ten years of his life – he lived until 1992 – he was looked after by his disciples and nursed with assiduous care. It was a testimony to the monks

and novices who looked after him that, though bedridden for ten years, he never got a bedsore. He was very well looked after and with great respect and affection. He passed away finally on the 16th January 1992.

That is the story of Luang Por Chah's life. At the time he passed away there were about 50 or 60 branch monasteries, now there are over 340. His teaching has spread greatly since he passed away. We are very grateful that he set things up in a way that was so skilful that, after the great Master died, the influence of his teaching didn't fade but, rather, has steadily increased.



When we consider the question, 'Who was Ajahn Chah?' a biography is one way of approaching it. Another is the story of our own personal experiences.

My first encounter with Ajahn Chah was in January 1978. I was 21 years old. I was a hippy, straight off the beach in Phuket. I had sand in my hair and a spiral seashell hanging from my earring. I didn't like rules, I didn't like any limits. But I was an unhappy hippy and I was looking for some way of working with my mind in a direct way.

I had the idea of myself as being a spiritual person. You know, 'I'm beyond worldly concerns.' I was only 21 but I felt I was more spiritually advanced than the people I was hanging out with at university or in the village where I grew up. I had a high opinion of myself. When I met Ajahn Chah for the

first time, he was building a toilet. I had read a lot of myths and legends, as well as some Carlos Castaneda, so my head was filled with inflated ideas such as, 'Oh, this is very significant. He's building a toilet. The Great Guru, the Holy Master is very down to earth. This is definitely symbolic, laden with all kinds of meaning.' He had a cement trowel in his hand and he was smoothing the surround of this new toilet block. Because I'd read those spiritual books and ancient tales (although no Buddhist ones) I thought, 'He'll see me and say something like, "Oh, you've come at last. I have been waiting for you!"' There was a story I heard later: when the young Bhikkhu Chah arrived at Luang Pu Tongrat's monastery, when Luang Pu Tongrat saw him walking through the gate he said, 'Ah, Chah. You've arrived.' And that was the first time they had ever met. There was no way that Ajahn Tongrat could have known Ajahn Chah's name through ordinary means, but as soon as he walked in the gate, Ajahn Tongrat said, 'Ah, Chah. You've arrived.' The 21-year-old me thought I was going to get one of these welcomes, but I didn't.

Ajahn Pabhakaro was the abbot of Wat Nanachat at that time – he was an American bhikkhu who had been a helicopter pilot in the Vietnam war. He introduced me to Ajahn Chah and said, 'This young man has been living in London. He lived near Hampstead where you stayed last year,' (my last digs having been in Primrose Hill). Ajahn Chah looked at me and, with no smile

at all, in a completely level voice, said a few words in Thai. Ajahn Pabhakaro had a wry smile as he translated, ‘The Ajahn said, “There are lots of pretty girls in Hampstead.”’

I’m not usually lost for words, I’m a wordy kind of a person, but at that moment, I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know what to think either, because he was supposed to be a great spiritual master. I was confused: ‘How come he was noticing whether the women were pretty or not? And why did he say that to *me*? He is definitely not joking... or smiling... Is this some kind of secret special message? Or is he putting me down? I’m a spiritual person... beyond all of that kind of thing. I’ve grown out of that, let go of that kind of worldly interest... that’s all far behind me... or maybe it isn’t?...’. I didn’t know what to think but it had a powerful impact, because he was not joking, he was very serious in demeanour.

On later reflection I realized how that was a very helpful teaching because my thinking, my self-view had been, ‘I’m beyond all of that. I’ve seen through sexual desire and romance.’ But my hormones were busy doing something else. There were still the defilements. The heart was very much affected by sexual desire, so though the brain produced the lofty thought, ‘I’m beyond that,’ the heart needed far more training.

Ajahn Chah liked to test people. He would put something out there and see what you did with it. Maybe he was testing me to see whether I would

get angry, ‘What do you mean? I’m beyond that!’ Or perhaps he just said that to me since it was what arose in his mind in association with that moment. He may have been surprised when, six months later, I asked for *sāmaṇera* ordination but he never said, ‘Oh, you’re still here. You have endured and stayed around.’ He had seen many aspirants come and go, so he knew that, when it came to commitment to the monastic life, everything was ‘*my naer*’ – ‘uncertain!’

The second interaction we had also had a very powerful effect on me. I had become a *pakao*, an *anagārika*, an Eight Precept trainee, and Luang Por Chah was staying over at Wat Pah Nanachat; he would visit there for a few days from time to time. I was the attendant for Ajahn Pabhakaro in this period. It was my job to get his robes ready and to have his bowl clean and organized to go on alms-round in the morning. When Luang Por Chah was staying there it was my job to prepare Luang Por Chah’s robes and his bowl, as well as Ajahn Pabhakaro’s.

Normally I was quite good at this duty, but on this particular day when I woke up I thought, ‘I’ve woken up before my alarm, that’s good.’ The *kuṭṭis* that we had in those days were very basic and there were cracks between the planks of the walls. My next thought was, ‘The moon is very bright tonight.’ But my next thought was the horrified realization, ‘That’s not the moon. That’s sunlight! Eeeeek! I’m late for the Ajahns!’ I looked at my clock.

It had stopped at something like one-twenty in the morning. I didn't have my own watch, just the clock, so I didn't know what time it really was.

I threw my robes on and rushed through the forest as fast as I could. When I got to the *sālā*, I saw that the time was six-twenty-five. They would go on the *pindapat* to Bung Wai village at six-thirty. I thought, 'Phew. Five minutes, I've got five minutes. It's OK. I can do it. I'm in the clear.' Again, not being terribly honest with myself or with the Ajahns, I thought I would try to fake it and pretend that I had been around all the time – '... just maybe you didn't notice me.' I got the robes and arranged them on the Dhamma seat and organized the bowls. I was just doing up the tags at the bottom of Luang Por Chah's robe when he said a few words in Thai which I didn't understand. Ajahn Pabhakaro translated: 'What Luang Por said was:

"Sleep is delicious, huh?"

This time Ajahn Chah had a big smile, the foot wide grin that would appear from time to time; a heartfelt, totally warm smile. Once more, I didn't know what to think because here was the Ajahn, and I had done something wrong. I was the lazy novice, as in that old French song, 'Frère Jacques' – the monk who was supposed to be the bell ringer but was fast asleep and failed to ring the bell – '... *dormez vous?*' I was like Brother Jacques, who was still asleep. And yet there was this incredibly warm smile. There was no punishment, and no sense of 'You bad monk!'

It was an empathetic natural gesture of parental affection, ‘Yes, sleep is delicious.’ He wasn’t being cruel or sarcastic. He was just telling it straight. Sleep is delicious. It was like, ‘Yes, I’ve been there. I know.’ I already had a lot of faith in the *Buddha-sāsana* and in the forest monastic life at that point, but at that moment there was a deepening. I realized, ‘This is a different kind of institution. This is something I have never met before, where the boss, the big guy, sees you have messed up, it is totally public, but it is absolutely not a problem.’

I realized, ‘This person has complete authority in this community but he doesn’t seem to punish wrongdoers.’ Instead he empathized. Many times, when people said, ‘Oh, Luang Por, I’ve got a terrible problem. I am so jealous,’ Luang Por would say, ‘Yes, I was that way too.’ ‘I have so much anger. I blow up all the time!’ ‘Yes, I was that way too.’ ‘I’m filled with sexual desire. I can’t switch it off.’ ‘I was that way too.’ That was almost always his response – and he meant it. He would give people hilarious examples of his getting lost and caught up in anger, doubt, lust and fear – he had a lot of good stories. When people said, ‘You’re so wise, Luang Por. You understand things so well and you help so many people! You must have read many *suttas* and studied the *Abhidhamma!*’ He would reply, ‘No, not at all. If I have any wisdom it’s because I had a lot of *kilesa*, a lot of defilements. I’ve developed wisdom because of having a heart that would get really confused, angry, heated, and lost. The defilements have been my teachers.’



I could never guess what Ajahn Chah was going to say. When people came to visit, someone would be very polite, and would ask a good question. I'd think, 'That's interesting, I'm glad they got to ask that,' but Luang Por would completely ignore them; or look through them. I would think, 'That's strange. That person had quite a good question, how come he's ignoring them?' Later I'd realize it was probably because that person wanted to be noticed, it was more about, 'Look at me, how wise and important my questions are.' Which caused Luang Por to look right through them.

Then, with somebody else I'd think, 'This local politician is inflated and full of himself, overweight and wearing big gold rings. Luang Por's really going to let him have it.' And instead Luang Por would be very kind, humble and friendly with him. I'd think, 'Eh?' But Luang Por Chah would read the person rather than the appearance. He would read the situation. I could therefore never guess how he would react. It was great fun. Even though I couldn't understand Thai, Western monks or novices would usually be there to translate. That was a really helpful thing.

My very last interaction with Luang Por Chah occurred at the end of the Rains Retreat in 1979. I had received a telegram from my family in England, saying that my father had had a heart attack: 'Dad very ill, can you come?' I

therefore came down as fast as I could from the little branch monastery in Roi-Et where I had been staying, and made my way to Wat Pah Nanachat. Ajahn Jagaro, who was the abbot then, took me to see Luang Por Chah.

Luang Por spoke to me for about twenty minutes. Again, Ajahn Jagaro translated for me. He said, ‘Well, essentially Luang Por has said four things. He said, “Firstly – go to England. Take care of your business with your family. Pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho and come straight back here. Secondly – go to England, take care of business with your family, go and pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho and then stay with him for a year. Then, after a year, come back here. Thirdly, go to England, take care of your business with your family. When that’s done, pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho, stay with him and do your best to train with him and support him. But if you can’t stand it you can come back here if you have to. Fourthly – go to England, take care of your business with your family, then go and pay respects to Ajahn Sumedho. Live with him and don’t come back.” All of these four instructions had been delivered by Luang Por Chah in exactly the same tone of voice: ‘These are your instructions, follow them to the letter. They are what you should do!’ – but they were four completely different scenarios. This meant that the real instruction was, ‘You figure it out!’ This was how Luang Por Chah would be; you could never predict what he would say and you could never pin him down.



This leads to the third way we can speak about ‘Who was Ajahn Chah?’ Once when I was living at Wat Pah Pong I was doing something in the *sālā*. Luang Por Chah’s *kuṭī* was about 100 or 150 metres away from there. A group of visitors arrived and Ajahn Boonchu, the guest monk, said to me, ‘Could you go and let Luang Por know a large group of visitors have arrived and would like to see him.’ I scooted over to Luang Por’s *kuṭī*.

It was an unusual day since, at that moment, he was sitting completely by himself. No one else was around. He had his eyes closed, meditating. As I approached I saw this and I wondered, ‘What on earth should I do? Luang Por is meditating.’ I went up in front of him, and thought maybe he would notice me. Nothing happened. ‘Maybe I should go back and tell Ajahn Chu... but he will just send me back again...’ I hesitated. Finally I knelt by Ajahn Chah’s feet and said, ‘Luang Por?’ He opened his eyes and – there was absolutely nobody there. There was *no person* there. He was looking at me, but when I looked back I looked into a bottomless well. It’s hard to describe, but there was nobody there, and then, *whoop!* the ‘person’ arrived. Ajahn Chah came back into being, if you can understand what I mean by that. Initially there was just a vast empty space and then, *whoop!* – as if to say, ‘Alright, I’ve got to do “the Ajahn Chah thing”; here we are.’ He engaged with me, asking, ‘*Arai?* What is it?’ I said, ‘Tan Ajahn Boonchu

asked me to let you know a tour bus of visitors are in the *sālā*, they would like to pay respects to you.’ He cracked a joke in the Isan dialect that I didn’t understand, got up and went over.

What impacted me so profoundly that day was seeing the process of a being manifesting. Initially there had been no person there at all and then, suddenly, *whoop!* The Ajahn Chah persona was ‘put on’, like putting on his robe – Ajahn Chah literally put on his personality.

The word ‘person’ in English is very interesting because it comes from the Latin *persōna* which means a mask. When we say a ‘person’ – that’s a mask. He was literally putting on his social mask, yet there was no lack of sincerity there either. Ajahn Chah performed many roles, he had many personas and he wore them all wholeheartedly. He could be super strict, he could be cheerful, he could be incredibly funny, he could be extremely cold and distant. He could do the whole theatre; there was a perfect adaptability, and he did whatever was appropriate to the occasion.

This third approach to ‘who’ Ajahn Chah was is well represented by the little book called *No Ajahn Chah*, a collection of his teachings in very brief quotations. It begins with a pair of conversations. One day a visitor came to Wat Pah Pong, he met Ajahn Chah and he asked, ‘Who is Ajahn Chah?’ And, pointing to his chest, Ajahn Chah said, ‘This one, this is Ajahn Chah,’ because that was the level of that person’s understanding. But another time

somebody else came to Wat Pah Pong to pay respects to him and asked the same question, ‘Who is Ajahn Chah?’ To this man Ajahn Chah replied, ‘There is no Ajahn Chah.’ There he was, sitting, looking at the person, and he said, ‘There is no Ajahn Chah.’

On another occasion, when somebody asked him, ‘How old are you? Do you live here year round?’ Luang Por’s response was, ‘I have no age and I don’t live anywhere...’. Now, as monks, we are not supposed to tell lies; we have to speak the truth. So how can you reconcile that? When he says, ‘I have no age. I don’t live anywhere,’ from a worldly perspective we can retort, ‘You have a birthday and therefore an age; and you live at Wat Pah Pong.’ But is this true? He was an Arahant and therefore incapable of speaking an untruth.

He was indeed speaking the truth when he said, ‘I have no age’ because the ‘Ajahn Chah’ whom I encountered that day under his *kuṭī*, was the timeless reality that is aware. That which knows ‘the person’ is not a person. That which knows this body, this personality, is not a body, a personality. That awakened awareness is the heart of our reality, that knowing, the *poo roo*. That awareness knows ‘the person’, but it is not a ‘person’. It knows birth, but it is not born. It knows death, but it does not die. It is *akālika*, timeless; it is *ajāta*, unborn, it is *amara*, deathless. As my name, ‘Amaro’, means ‘deathless’, I have a clue to that quality as a daily reminder. I also live at

Amaravati, ‘The Deathless Realm’. I thus have a lot of prompts to help keep this quality in my mind.

This transcendent awareness is not just an attribute of this remarkable being, who was born in Bahn Gor a hundred years ago, it is at the very core of our own existence. The heart of our knowing, moment to moment, is this quality of awakened awareness, the *poo roo*. Luang Por Chah would say, ‘This is the real Refuge,’ the *poo roo*, or *daht roo*, ‘the element of knowing’. Awareness is our Refuge. We say *Buddham saraṇaṃ gacchāmi*, but we are not taking refuge merely in the idea of a great being, the masterful, magnificent teacher who lived around 2560 years ago. Rather the *poo roo* which is our Refuge is the awareness that is our own *citta*, our heart. This heart-awareness is our safe ‘place’, our true Refuge.

When we recognize Ajahn Chah in this way, it changes our perspective. When he says, ‘I have no age, I don’t live anywhere,’ that ‘I’, refers to the Dhamma itself. The Dhamma doesn’t have an age, right? The Dhamma doesn’t live anywhere; it is everywhere and nowhere – essentially, ‘location’ does not apply. The Dhamma is, selfless, timeless, unbounded by time and place, unbounded by identity and causality.

This is the most profound and therefore the truest way to understand who Ajahn Chah was. If we think Ajahn Chah was that personality, who was born in Bahn Gor a hundred years ago, we are missing the essence

of Ajahn Chah. Of course the conventional ‘Ajahn Chah’ is important, without his birth we wouldn’t have met that boundless wisdom that explained the true teachings and guided us to the true path; there would not be the wisdom-awareness manifested for us if that little boy had not been born. This profound mystery is part of Luang Por Chah’s teaching – that, through the limited and time-bound window of our earthly life, bounded by our birth and our death, we are able to know the Deathless, the Unborn, the Unconditioned.

The Buddha himself, the Bodhisatta Siddhattha Gotama, was born in Lumbini and grew up in Kapilavatthu. A body was born, a life began – but through the window of the Buddha’s life, awareness was able to know the timeless, the unborn, undying Dhamma, and to awaken to its nature. That is the reality of the Dhamma; the reality of this body, this mind, this world. Nature is Dhamma itself, they are not two.

This was also a principle that Luang Por Chah spoke about in terms of spiritual training. The *suttas* describe how the followers of the Buddha first come to *listen* to Dhamma, then they *comprehend* the Dhamma, then they *practise* the Dhamma and finally *realize* the Dhamma. That succession is found in quite a number of the teachings. Luang Por Chah added a fifth one, which he termed ‘*being* Dhamma’. Thus: hearing Dhamma, understanding Dhamma, practising Dhamma, realizing Dhamma and then finally being Dhamma.

If the progress of realization is reflected upon in this way it is understood that it is not as though you were not the Dhamma and then you became it. Rather it is realizing that, ‘Every aspect of this body, this mind, the world, has always been a part of nature. How could it not be?’ Even the paper of a book, a wooden table, that was a tree. Even an iPad or a computer screen – the metal, the plastic, the glass all came out of the ground, the waters and the air. The plastic was made from oil, pumped out of the ground. Every aspect of the material world, including our body, every aspect of our mind, our noble thoughts, our *mettā*, *karuṇā*, *muditā*, *upekkhā*, our *paññā*; but also our anger, fear, desire and worry, all are aspects of nature. All are aspects of Dhamma. They are part of the natural order.

This realization, ‘being Dhamma’, changes our view of ‘what we are’, our view of what everything is; it is the seeing of all things in terms of Dhamma. ‘Being Dhamma’ was thus one of the most profound and beautiful ways that Luang Por Chah spoke about the practice.

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Another of the things that was really amazing to me, and a suitable point to finish with, was that, even though Ajahn Chah was very strict and orthodox as a monk, and was rigorous and exacting with the Vinaya discipline, when you were with him you realized, ‘This is the happiest man in the world. This is a man who has no limits. He has no boundary. Yet he follows all these

rules and he has no time to himself; he has people visiting all day every day. He has so many disciples, so many branch monasteries. How is it that this person with so many obligations, so many rules, such full days, such tight discipline – how come he is totally free?’

What arose in my heart, when I was around him as a novice was, ‘Whatever I have to do to get to be like that, I’ll do it. No problem! He has a body, he has a personality, he has a lot of responsibilities – but he is totally free. Whatever it takes to be that way, I will do it.’

For us to actualize that aspiration we have to respect both the conventional truth and the ultimate truth. If we focus just on the conventional, then we’re paying attention just to the rules and the routines and the words of the teaching. We have no feeling for that which is beyond, that which is unborn, undying, which is unlimited, that which is free. You can be a very good, obedient nun or monk, or a very good lay person who does everything ‘properly’, but there is no freedom in the heart. You have learnt how to be obedient, to obey the rules of the system, but you’ve only learned how to be obedient. The heart is not free.

Similarly, if we focus solely on the ultimate truth, liberation and the transcendent, then we might start to go without bathing and failing to do our laundry. We stop paying attention to the people around us, and our behaviour may get unconsciously driven by conceit, desire, fear and

aversion. We may become selfish and insensitive. Basically we can become a real headache to others. By trying to not care for ‘the things of the world’ we may be creating a lot of negative karma.

In the West it has been popular to claim, ‘You don’t need any Precepts – those are for children. Ultimate Reality, that’s the only thing that matters. Ignore the Precepts. Everything is Dharma.’ This distortion of view has happened in many spiritual circles in the West, particularly in the ’60s and ’70s, but also today. Westerners like to think, ‘I’ll just take the ultimate path, no need to bother with the rest’ and they dismiss conventional concerns.

This unbalanced approach creates a lot of bad karma, because it comes from a self-centred and deluded egoism. The painful results of unskilful actions come home to roost, because even if we want to ignore conventional rules, the police will not. The person who has to pay for your dinner at the restaurant will not ignore it. Or the person who has to do all the dishes, because you can’t be bothered, will not ignore this.

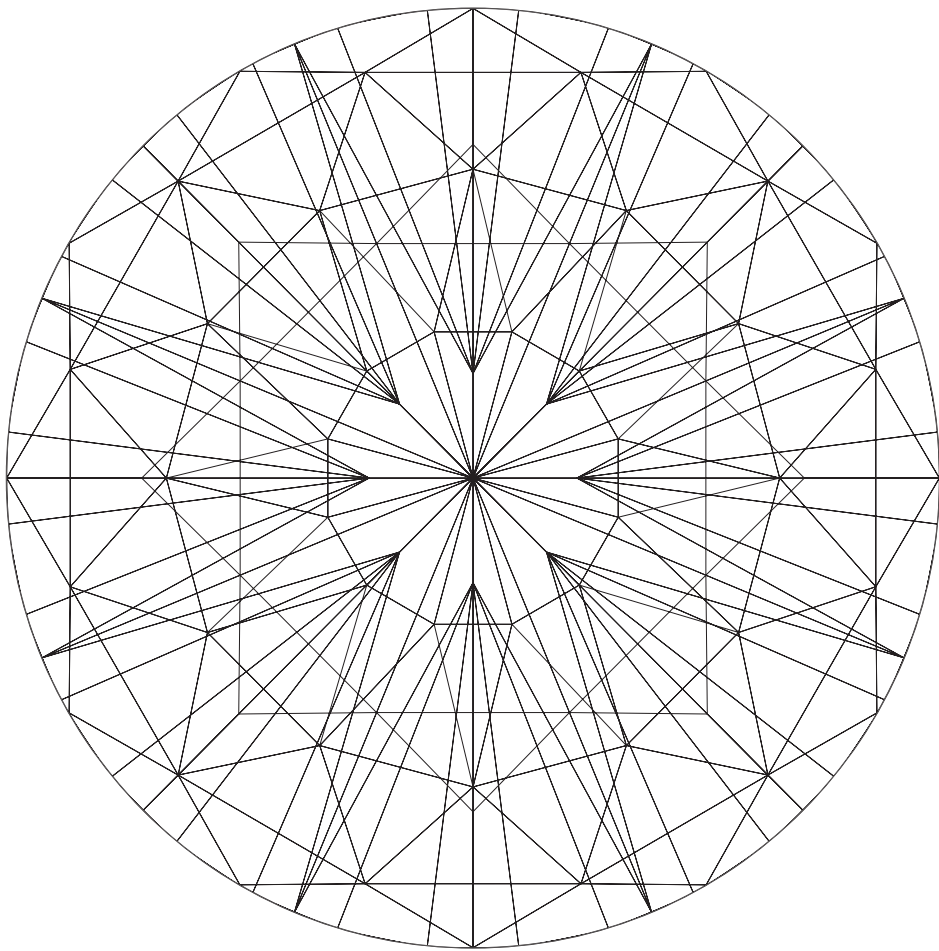
Luang Por Chah therefore explained many times that we have to respect both the conventional and the ultimate. If we do, then we will find that the precepts and conventions we follow do not limit us. They are the means whereby the supportive environments can be created, in which the ultimate truth can be recognized. We follow the Precepts and live as well-integrated human beings, as good people, because this creates the most harmonious

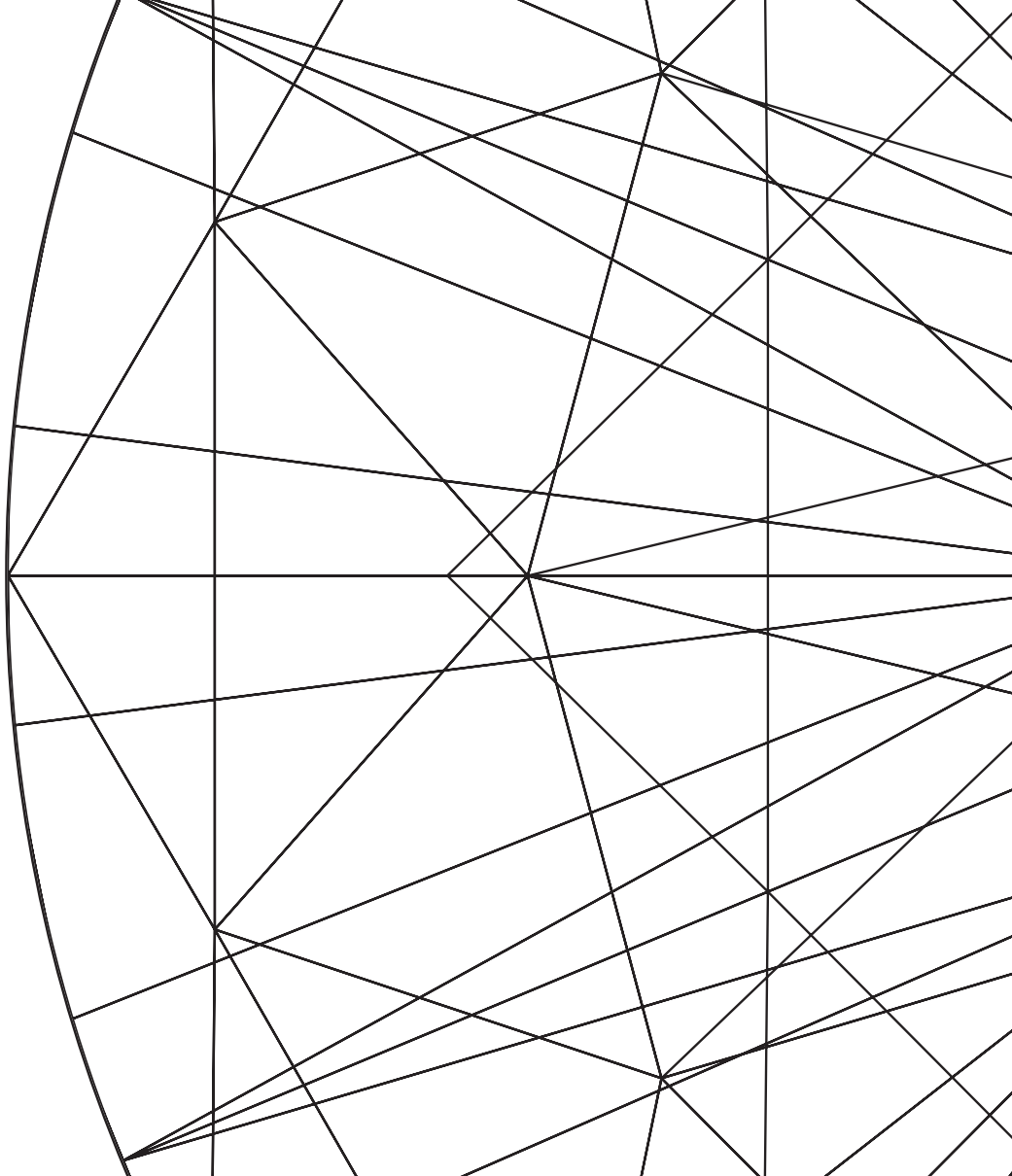
modes of life, that help us to realize that ultimate reality of the Unborn, the Unconditioned, the Deathless.

In honour of Luang Por Chah's 100th birth anniversary, Ajahn Jayasāro published his biography, entitled *Stillness Flowing*. This title comes from one of the last teaching similes that Luang Por used before he had the stroke that stopped him from being able to speak. When people came to visit him, he would say, sometimes, 'Have you ever seen flowing water?' They would say, 'Yes, of course.' He would then say, 'Have you ever seen still water?' They would say something like, 'Yes, there's some in your glass.' 'So you've seen still water, and you've seen flowing water. Have you ever seen "still, flowing water"?' Do you know what that is?' Usually people would be a bit flummoxed by this and not know what to say. Once he had let the question hover for long enough, he would then explain, 'The mind is like still, flowing water.'

It flows. Perceptions and thoughts, they flow. There is a conventional world of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. Our moods, they come and go and change, they flow all the time. But then, along with that flow, there is stillness. There is the timeless quality of awareness, that quality of knowing; that which knows the flow is not flowing. It is always absolutely here, now. It is the very centre of our world, and being unconnected to or limited by time and space, it's perfectly, absolutely still – at peace.

It is not a moving thing that has stopped but it is a reality that is free from time and space. That perfect spacious stillness of the heart is that which knows the movement of the perceptions, thoughts and moods. The mind is therefore like still, flowing water; there is stillness and there is flowing. The flow doesn't disturb the stillness; the stillness doesn't obstruct the flow; they are both present together. There is the conventional and the ultimate, the worldly (*lokiya*) and that which is above the world (*lokuttara*), and they work together.





HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
FOUR **Money**

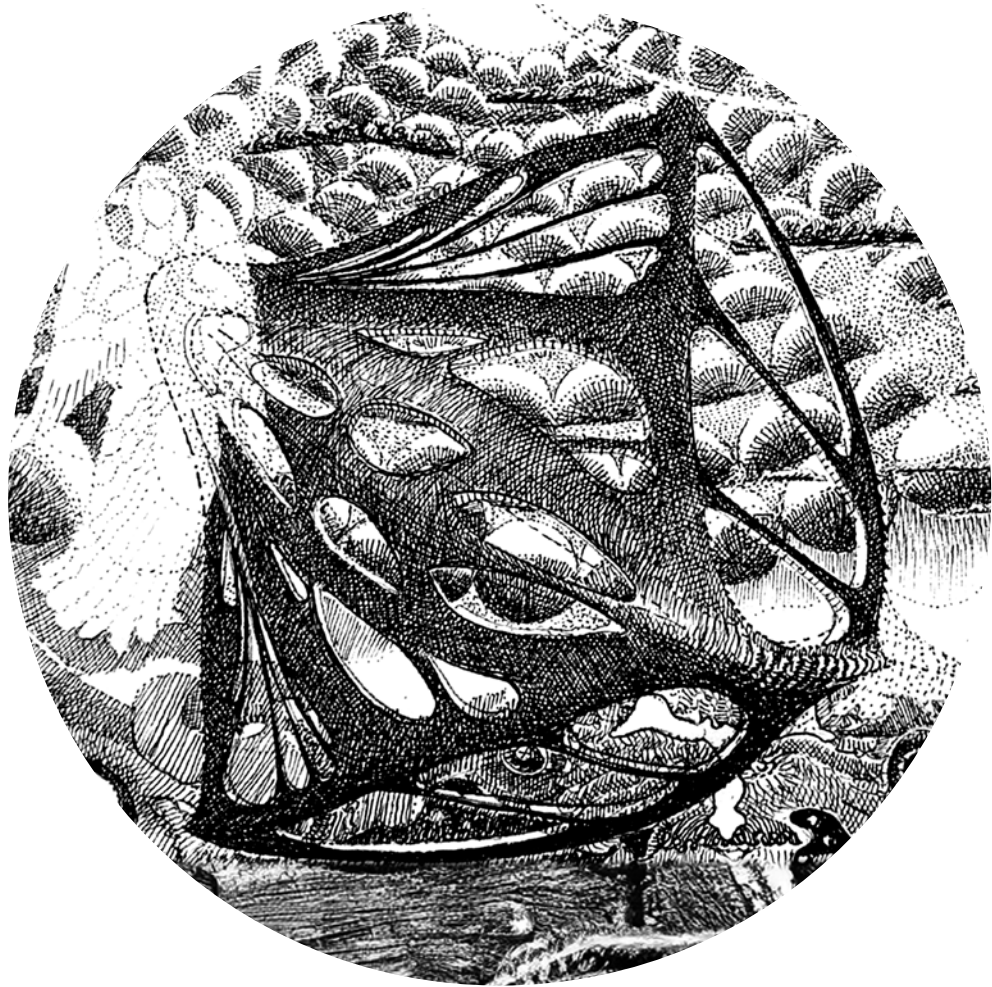
REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



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Buddhism and the Pursuit of Wealth

One of the things that is often asked about when people come to visit a monastery are questions concerning money: ‘How do you run this place? How do you pay the bills? I thought Buddhists didn’t believe in money.’ The usual response is something along the lines of, ‘Well, that’s not quite the way it works.’ As Buddhist monks and nuns we don’t use or accept money, that’s true, we don’t own money – I haven’t used money since 1978 – but only a very small proportion of Buddhists are monastics, most Buddhists are ordinary householders. Also, oftentimes people, particularly westerners, have the impression that the Buddha was completely against people owning any kind of material wealth and, again, ‘It’s not quite that way.’ This is thus an interesting field to look into, to explore what the Dhamma teachings say about it.

As a first example, the *suttas* (at M 82) describe how a famous Arahant, Ven. Raṭṭhapala, began his life in a rich family. But when he went back as a monk to visit his hometown and his parents saw him coming to the door, as a bhikkhu in robes with alms-bowl, they didn’t recognize him and shooed him away. His father said, ‘This is one of those horrible shavelings, those

bald-pated recluses, that took away our dear son, deluded him into Going Forth. Get out of here, go away!’ They didn’t realize it was their own son at the door. He then went round to the back of the house and received some stale porridge one of the servant women was throwing away. He said to her, ‘If you’re going to throw that porridge away, please could you throw it into my bowl. It will be my food for the day.’ He was quite content with that humble kind of food.

But as she was giving him the porridge, she recognized him from his voice and his physical features, and she alerted the family. They duly invited him round for a meal the next day. He accepted the invitation but, before they offered him any food, they tried to persuade him to leave his monastic commitment and go back to the household life. Before he arrived they had piled up a whole mass of gold coins and bullion in the middle of the floor and, once he was there, they uncovered it, saying, ‘Take this, this is your wealth, all this belongs to you.’ But he replied, ‘If you are wise, what you’ll do is put all this gold and bullion onto carts, take it to the River Ganges and dump it there. Otherwise, on account of this money, suffering, pain and sorrow will arise for you.’ So, agreed, that *does* sound like a very anti-materialistic, anti-money kind of attitude!

There is a section of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, containing 43 *suttas*, called the *Lābhasakkāra Samyutta*, ‘The Connected Discourses on Gains and Honour’.

These are all teachings about wealth, praise and fame. Throughout this section of the *Samyutta*, the Buddha is severely critical of the greedy pursuit of gain, wealth, fame, honour and renown. He uses quite stern language to address this, saying, 'Gain, honour and praise are bitter, vile and an obstruction to freedom' (S 17.1). He also uses quite punchy imagery. In one teaching he says one whose mind is obsessed with gain, honour and praise is like a dung beetle, 'a dung-eater, stuffed with dung' (S 17.5), that collects dung to make it into a big ball. He describes how people who are obsessed with gain, honour and praise (particularly monastics) are like the dung beetle which has collected a big ball of dung and then looks down on the other beetles, 'I've got the biggest dung ball! I'm full of dung, stuffed with dung, look at me, look how great I am!' To label someone who is obsessed with gain and reputation as being like a dung beetle is to use pretty blunt language. Out of compassion the Buddha used such uncompromising language from time to time, to make his point.

These are strong messages to give: telling your parents that, if they really want to do the right thing, they should take your inheritance and dump it in the River Ganges; comparing the relishing of prosperity and status to being stuffed with dung. From such messages it is easy to get the impression that the Buddha was completely against any kind of conventional ownership, and any kind of wealth or property, but that is not the case. What he points

to, rather, is the importance of a wholesome understanding of wealth, the way that the mind relates to wealth, and the skilful use of it. So the problem is not so much whether somebody is wealthy, or has high status in society, the issue is rather their attitude towards their wealth and status. What matters is intention and attitude – that is to say, why the mind turns towards accumulating wealth and what it does in relation to it.



Years ago I heard an interesting story about John D Rockefeller, from the 1920s. He was the richest person in the world, as the owner of Standard Oil, and he was being interviewed by a reporter from *The New York Times*. The reporter asked, ‘Mr. Rockefeller, you are the richest man in the world. Can I ask you, how much money is enough?’ Apparently John D Rockefeller thought for a moment and said, ‘Just a little bit more.’ This showed that he did have a bit of insight. He knew that, even though he was the richest person in the world, there was still that sense of, ‘It’s not quite enough, a bit more would be good,’ but also he could hear himself say that, so to some degree he could understand that ‘it’s never enough’. Some aspect of his mind knew that hunger objectively.

What the Buddha points to, in his Teachings, is exactly that feeling of ‘it’s never enough’; this is one of the key elements to consider when looking at the acquisition of wealth and influence, and whether it is skilful or unskilful.

In Buddhist psychology there are two different words for desire. The first kind of desire is *taṇhā*. Most readers will be familiar with the Four Noble Truths; the First Noble Truth is the truth of dissatisfaction, of suffering, of *dukkha*; we are not totally happy all of the time, we experience *dukkha*, we experience discontent, imbalance. The Second Noble Truth is that *dukkha* has a cause; this cause is named as *taṇhā*, desire, craving. This craving kind of desire is specifically labelled as the cause of suffering. The word *taṇhā* literally means ‘thirst’, and it always implies self-centredness, a sense of ‘I’, self-interest. There is always a quality of agitation, restlessness, there.

The other kind of desire is called *chanda*. Rather than this being necessarily a cause of suffering, the Buddha highlights *chanda* as being a requisite condition for anything that we aim to do in life. One of the most important things to understand here is the distinction between *taṇhā* and *chanda*. To know how to make this distinction is to recognize what is a skilful desire, a wholesome desire, and what is an unskilful one, a self-centered craving. These can appear to us to be very similar, like the left hand and the right hand, but they are also exact opposites.

The Buddha was a great list maker, and one of his lists is what is called the ‘Four Bases of Success’, the *iddhipāda*. These are four qualities that are needed in order to carry out any activity in life, whether it’s cooking a meal, coming to Amaravati to listen to a Sunday afternoon talk, training your

mind in meditation, or robbing a bank. These are the four things that need to be part of the mix in order for any kind of task to be carried out well. In themselves these four qualities are morally neutral (hence the inclusion of robbing a bank as an example!) – they are merely the ingredients necessary for a job to be completed as intended.

The first one is *chanda*. *Chanda* means ‘desire’ but it also means ‘interest’ or ‘enthusiasm’, ‘zeal’. Examples would be: ‘I want to come to Amaravati. I’m interested in Buddhism,’ ‘I’m hungry, I need to cook some food,’ ‘I want some more money and I know how to hack a bank’s computers,’ or, ‘I want my mind to be more peaceful. I’d like to learn to meditate.’ Interest needs to be there to initiate anything. The second one is *viriyā*. This is energy; you might have that interest to come to Amaravati, but then you have to apply energy. If you want to come to listen to a Sunday afternoon talk, you need to get up off your chair and travel to Amaravati. So there needs to be interest and there needs to be energy, a sense of application, acting on an interest.

The third one is *citta*, and here *citta* means ‘thinking things through’, ‘to consider’, such as, ‘If I want to go and listen to a talk, how should I go about doing it? I haven’t got a car at the moment, who might give me a lift?’ These first three, *chanda*, *viriyā* and *citta* work together as a unit. You need to be interested, you need to apply energy and you need to think

through what it is you wish to accomplish, whether it's running a business, coming to Amaravati, robbing a bank, cooking a meal, training your mind in meditation, or realizing full and complete enlightenment. All these activities require these qualities functioning together in an integrated way.

The fourth one, which is on its own, is *vīmaṃsā* and means 'reviewing' or 'looking at the result of what we've done'. Thus: 'Did we get to Amaravati? Did the meal get cooked? Did the bank get successfully robbed? Did my mind become peaceful? Was full and complete enlightenment realized?' *Vīmaṃsā*, in a way, is the most important aspect because we need to consider the effects of what we do, such as, 'The effort that I was putting into that job, what did it result in? Yes, I started a business and made a lot of money, but I've driven my family nuts with my obsession with work. I made some money but everyone around me is frightened of the sight of me, and I've alienated and upset all the people that I live with. I achieved a certain amount of good results but there are also these negative things that came with it.' Or, 'I put a lot of effort into meditation and my mind has become peaceful, this tells me therefore that this particular approach to meditation was helpful, it hit the mark.' So *vīmaṃsā* is looking at the results. It's the essential element for receiving and using feedback, and it informs us about what looks useful to do in the future. If you start a business and make a lot of money, but alienate your family and friends in the process,

then *vīmaṃsā* is telling you, ‘If I want to get back together with my family, if I want to re-establish those friendships, I need to change the way I relate to this job, the way that I’ve been operating, because this is making life too difficult.’ If we reflect on the results in this way they can show us whether our intentions, efforts and methods were skilful or not. That knowledge can guide a successful outcome in the future. This is how we use ‘desire’ in a skilful way.

The Buddha points out that to achieve anything in life we need a desire to do it, we need *chanda*. It’s a common misunderstanding that ‘all desires are bad’ and that ‘Buddhists shouldn’t have desires.’ Probably a few readers have run into this with your family or at work. If you go into work one day and are given first choice of a new set of offices, and you say, ‘I’d like the one with the view over the park,’ one of your coworkers might say, ‘What do you mean? I thought you were a Buddhist! You’re not supposed to have desires or preferences – *I’m* having that office!’ It’s a common misunderstanding, a common misperception, that if you’re calling yourself a Buddhist then you should never desire anything – as if any kind of choosing was anathema to the spiritual life. It would be very impractical and awkward to try and live this way, moreover, this is not the path that the Buddha taught.

The ‘letting go of desire’ that is talked about in Buddhist practice is to do with *taṇhā*, craving, that is the desire that needs to be let go of. The other

kind of desire, *chanda*, is that which can make wise choices, that kind of desire is necessary, we have to use it.

In the *suttas* there's a very helpful exchange on this theme between Ānanda and a brahmin called Uṇṇābha (S 51.15). Uṇṇābha asks Ānanda, 'For what purpose is the holy life lived under the Buddha's guidance?' and Ānanda replies, 'It's for the letting go of desire that this holy life is lived.' Uṇṇābha follows this with, 'How do you do that? Is there a way, a path for the abandoning of this desire?' Ānanda explains that there is and goes on to describe the path as consisting of using the four Bases of Success, *chanda*, *virīya*, *citta* and *vīmaṃsā* (desire, energy, consideration and reviewing).

Uṇṇābha is confused by this. He says, 'But isn't that circular? How can you use desire to get to the end of desire? It doesn't work.'

Ānanda explains, 'Uṇṇābha, here we are in Kosambi, in Ghosita's Park. Now, did you earlier today *want* to come to Ghosita's Park?'

He says, 'Yes I did.'

'So then, you had to apply *energy*, and you had *to think about* how to get here. Then, having applied all those, with concentration on what you were doing and striving to walk here with intention, having arrived at Ghosita's Park, what happened to that desire and those other factors?'

'They have all fallen away because I have arrived.'

'There you are: you desired to come to the park and you have arrived at

the park, so that desire has been fulfilled. You wanted that, and then you achieved the thing that you wanted so the desire has gone away.’

Ānanda has pointed out here that there is no contradiction in using *chanda* in the process of abandoning *taṇhā*. This is a very helpful instance of the distinction between the two.



With respect to our working lives and our relationship to money, again, I am a Buddhist monk, I have been since I was in my early twenties: I became a novice when I was 21, and bhikkhu when I was 22, so I haven’t used money my entire adult life. That said, I have been around Buddhist practice and lay practitioners for many years, so I have some experience of how this all works.

It is quite reasonable and appropriate to think, ‘I would like to send my children to a good school; I would like to have a house with a roof that doesn’t leak; I would like to be able to drive a car that doesn’t break down.’ If we apply *chanda* imbued with virtue and wisdom to our actions and our choices, then we can work hard at our jobs to achieve those results without negative consequences. We are able to give direction to our lives, to make choices, to relate to our work, and to succeed in acquiring resources for our own benefit and for the people around us, without creating stressful tension or difficulty within us.

The Buddha gave advice to lay people with respect to many dimensions of life. On the matter of the use of material resources there is a *sutta* called the *Sigālaka Sutta* (D 31). In this teaching the Buddha gives many reflections on how to live skilfully as a lay-person.

The Buddha never pressured anyone to take up the renunciant life. He doesn't say to Sigālaka, 'If you were really wise, you would give up your money and shave your head and become a bhikkhu.' He lets people make such choices on their own. Sigālaka hasn't said, 'I want to become a monk' so the Buddha doesn't make that presumption. Similarly with the Buddha's interactions with extremely powerful or wealthy people like Visākḥā (who donated the Eastern Park Monastery) or Anāthapiṇḍika, (who donated the land for Jeta's Grove) or others like King Bimbisāra or King Pasenadi. There's no place in the *suttas* where the Buddha says to them, 'If you were wise you would give away all your money,' or to King Pasenadi, 'You should renounce your throne, disband your army, give all your money away and become a monk.' He is extremely respectful of the choices that people make.

Sigālaka's made a choice to be a lay-person so the Buddha gives him advice on how to live skilfully in that mode. In terms of his money, the advice the Buddha gives him is to divide it into four parts: 'Take one quarter and use it to enjoy yourself; two quarters of it, put that into your work, or use it to support your parents, your family, people who work for you, your friends,

use it for charities and donations and suchlike; the last quarter of your funds, put that away as savings.’

Significantly, nowhere in this *sutta* does the Buddha say, or hint, that if you were wise you would give everything away, or that you shouldn’t have any money at all. Rather he is respectful of the choices of this individual, saying, effectively, ‘You have chosen the life of a householder, that being the case, here is some advice about the best way to use your resources.’

In reflecting on this area of life, I feel it is important to understand that money is a kind of energy. It represents a capacity to make changes in the world. It represents a set of agreements between one person and another. I believe it still says on Bank of England money, ‘I promise to pay the bearer on demand the sum of ten pounds, or twenty pounds.’ Money is an agreement, we agree to give this piece of paper, this Bitcoin or this cheque its value. It’s an agreement between people and it’s an agreement that is referring to resources of energy. If you have 100 UK pounds, then you have the resources to change the world to a certain degree, to that 100 UK pounds amount. Just like using physical energy, for walking or working, or the energy of electricity that goes into the lights, it is just a form of energy. If it’s guided in a particular way, or we have a lot of energy available, why should that be something that is intrinsically harmful? Again, it is all about the attitude that the mind has towards it and the ways that that attitude

is acted upon. The Buddha's advice to Sigālaka is a good example of this, it was simple guidance about the skilful use of available energy resources.

With respect both to pursuing wealth and the way that it's used, I would say that there are two particular areas that are significant in terms of Buddhist practice: one is *sīla*, the Precepts and virtue; and the other is that of contentment. If we use unscrupulous, illegal ways to acquire wealth, then no matter how much we've got, that's going to conduce to discomfort and insecurity, fear of being caught by the authorities, and suchlike. But, even if you've worked hard and you've acquired your resources in an honest way the aspect of contentment is still crucial. Mr. Rockefeller felt a lack of contentment, instead he felt that if he had *just that little bit more*, it might be enough. If you're the richest man in the world and it's still not enough for you, then what's it all worth really?

On the subject of extremely rich people: just before he died, Steve Jobs (a founder of Apple Corporation, an inventor of the iPhone and iPad, etc.) was being interviewed by reporters about his life. They asked, as his life was now wrapping up, what was most significant to him? He made a very telling comment about money, he said, 'What's the point in being the richest corpse in the graveyard?' This was a very insightful way of looking at it.

'What was it all worth? You die with a big pile of money, but the money stays and you go.' On this I would say that Mr. Jobs had a bit more wisdom than Mr. Rockefeller.



In terms of *sīla* and the pursuit of wealth, this is something very important, because we can go crazy around money. Again I'm speaking as a monastic, I don't have any money, and I don't control money, but Amaravati costs about £1700 a day to run at present, (that's just the overheads), so even though I don't own it, I'm involved in how money is used in terms of decision-making at the monastery. It takes money to run places, it takes money to buy things, in everybody's life, whether you're a lay-person or a monastic.

It's very hard to make judgments in relation to money with non-attachment. In most Buddhist countries, in Thailand like everywhere else, even though Buddhist monastics are not supposed to own money or control money at all, it's uncommon to really have no money of one's own. A monk once came to Wat Pah Pong, Ajahn Chah's monastery, and he was carrying money. He said he wanted to study with Ajahn Chah. The Ajahn told him, 'If you stay here, you have to relinquish your money, otherwise you can't stay,' and this monk said, 'I don't need to relinquish my money, I'm a *mahāthera*, I've been a monk for more than twenty years. I'm not attached to my money. I use it for the temple, for Dhamma activities.' But Ajahn Chah was unimpressed and said, 'If I put a kilogram of salt in a bag in front of you, and if you eat all that salt and tell me it isn't salty, then I'll believe that you can use money without attachment.' He then said, 'If you can do it with a kilo I'll give you 100 kilos.' Ajahn Chah knew that we all go a bit crazy around money, and so having a very clear ethical standard around the acquisition

of wealth, and the use of money, is really crucial to our peace of mind, because Buddhist practice is about living skilfully and ending suffering.

I lived in California for about fifteen years, and our monastery was in a remote country region two or three hours drive north of San Francisco. I would come down once a month to give a talk in the City area and stay overnight, and then go back the next day. There was a particular Thai restaurant where they would offer a meal the next morning before I went back to the monastery. One day at this restaurant, a Thai woman came and said, 'Can I talk with you a little bit? I have a problem I want to discuss with you,' and I said, 'Certainly.'

She carried on, 'I'm a single mother, I have a nine-year-old son, and we live in a small apartment, and we haven't got very much money. I work in a real estate agency. A few weeks ago a person came into the office and said, 'I've got this property and I need to sell it really fast, I don't care how much money you get for it, but it's worth a few hundred thousand. I gotta leave the country within a couple of weeks, and I need the money now, so whatever price you post it at, I'm happy with that. It's probably worth \$400,000 or \$500,000 but if you get a quarter of a million for it that's OK, that's fine, just let me know.' So this person left the details with her and took off. A few minutes later, somebody else came in, and said, 'I want to buy a property, a commercial property, and I need a place in such-and-such part of town.'

I have plenty of resources, I can certainly go up to a half a million, that's no problem. If you've got something with these particular specs let me know.' She said that, at that moment, she realized, 'The previous customer gave me this property, that they are happy to get a quarter of a million for. But I can give it to this new customer for half a million and keep the difference! Nothing's been written down yet, I'm the only one who's seen the paperwork. I'm the only one who knows about this – I could sell it for half a million but tell the seller that we only sold it for a quarter of a million. I'd get a quarter of a million in my pocket.'

She said this had been a big temptation, but, to cut a long story short, she said, 'Even though I could have hidden it easily, and kept the quarter of a million dollars, I decided not to. That money would have made a big difference to me. We could have found a different place to live. I could've got better schooling for my son, and better things for him, but I decided not to, so I wanted to know what you thought about this – did I do the right thing?'

My answer was, 'Absolutely! You did the right thing, well done! It must've been a difficult choice to make, but you definitely did the right thing, and so I'd say *sādhu*, *sādhu* for you!'

She said, 'Well I'm glad you said that, because I felt it was the right thing, but I wasn't sure. My son is quite good at maths, so as a kind of game and

to help him with schoolwork, we go through some of the bookkeeping I do for the office. I actually told him what happened, and I walked him through how I would've arranged it, how I would've fixed the books, and I also told him why I hadn't done it.'

I was impressed that she was skilful and honest enough to tell her son that she'd been tempted, and also to show him how she had been tempted, and how she could have done the trick and stolen the money. Then I asked, 'So what did he think?'

She said, 'Well, he took a moment to answer me, but then he said, "Well, I *would* have liked a new bicycle, and we *are* kind of squashed into this apartment, but I get it mom, I get it."

I felt this was an example of very good parenting – that young boy would remember this for the rest of his life. He understood that, if she had taken the money, she would have been in a state of stress, worried that the authorities would catch her. He saw that it was an act of great kindness to her customer that she didn't cheat him, but also that she had ensured that she herself had peace of mind as well.

If she had asked me, 'Do you think I should tell my boss what happened?' I would probably have said, 'It's entirely up to you. I don't ever make decisions for people, but it's possible that, by telling your boss, she might be impressed with your honesty, acknowledge that she's got a really good

employee, and give you a raise.’

The quality of *sīla* and its resulting peace of mind are essential to enjoy wealth. When we have the short ceremony for lay-people to take the Five Precepts, there’s a verse that is chanted:

*Imāni pañca sikkhāpadāni
Sīlena sugatiṃ yanti
Sīlena bhogasampadā
Sīlena nibbutiṃ yanti
Tasmā sīlaṃ visodhaye*

It means:

These are the Five Precepts.

Precepts are the source of happiness, *sugati*.

They lead to true wealth, *bhogasampadā*. (*Bhoga* is ‘wealth’ or riches, *sampadā* means ‘abundance’ or ‘fullness’ or ‘completeness’.)

Sīlena nibbutiṃ yanti: Precepts lead towards peacefulness

Tasmā sīlaṃ visodhaye: Therefore *sīla* should be purified.

Bhogasampadā doesn’t mean that if you keep the Five Precepts then you’re going to win the lottery. *Bhogasampadā*, ‘they lead to true wealth’, means they lead to contentment, to ease of heart, which is a foundation of well-being. That’s more precious than any amount of money.



It is interesting when you talk to people who are extremely rich. I once met Mitch Kapor, who created a significant piece of software called 'Lotus 1-2-3', way back in the mists of time. He sold the rights to it for five billion dollars, so that was quite a profit. I met him at a Buddhist conference in India some years ago. The subject of his wealth came up, as he had brought a few of the Buddhist teachers to the conference on his private jet. He described how one of the effects of having such resources was that he would get dozens of begging letters every day. So he had to deal with people asking for money from him: 'You are a good-hearted person, so here is my good cause, please, please, you've got to help me...'. So being the owner of abundant wealth does not necessarily bring peace and a tranquil life.

People often fantasize about being extremely wealthy – wishing to win the lottery or some such – but how will the rest of your family react to that? There are many stories, sadly, of how, when for many years you've been getting on very well with all your sisters and brothers, cousins and children, and it was all fairly even and easy, then suddenly you're worth £200 million and everything goes sour: 'You helped her, why don't you help me? Come on, it's only a couple of million, that wouldn't even make a dent in what you've got!'

The opposite of contentment is craving: 'When I get this, then I will be happy,' that's a state of *dukkha*, because it is placing the possibility of

fulfilment over there. ‘I can only be happy when I get this result, when my kids have passed their exams and got to the right college,’ or ‘When I get this promotion,’ ‘When my product has been sold,’ or ‘When we’ve got the mortgage paid off, then I can be happy.’

When the mind is caught up in hoping for something to happen, the Dhamma is not apparent here and now, only the hoping is. But the Dhamma is *akālika*, it’s timeless, *actually* here and now. That total fulfilment, peace, and contentment is here, now. It’s not over there, it’s always here, but our worldly conditioning is always setting up that dynamic of over there, just over the horizon, ‘When I retire,’ ‘When the weekend comes,’ ‘When I go to the retreat,’ ‘When I have paid off the debt,’ ‘When my kids are in Uni,’ ‘When I win the lottery, then...’. By setting up that dynamic we devalue what’s here and now, and we never know the Dhamma in its full glory and magnificence.

The worldly mind continually devalues the present and inflates the future or the past. The advice of the Buddha, in the *Bhaddekaratta Sutta* (M 131.3), is to not dwell upon the past or the future, or create ideas about the self in the present since these all obscure the realization of the Dhamma, which is only here and now, it is the present reality. *This* is the only moment when true contentment can be found.

Amaravati is just a couple of miles away from Ashridge Executive Education college, across the other side of Golden Valley. Ashridge is a high finance teaching centre, at which I have helped to lead a couple of events over the years. In the early days of Amaravati there was a couple who were having a wedding blessing here, and one of them, the husband, was a portrait painter. He had done the portrait for a man who worked at Ashridge. When they had the blessing, they invited a few Ashridge people to come here. I was a junior monk then, but also being chatty and English, I was given the job of talking to the wedding guests, to introduce them to Buddhism and give them a bit of an explanation about the Monastery. So, before we had the wedding blessing, I sat down with about twenty of the guests and talked about Buddhism, particularly *sīla*, because the couple wanted to have the Five Precepts as part of the wedding blessing.

After it was all over the man who had had his portrait done came and introduced himself to me, he was a teacher at Ashridge. He said, ‘This is all very interesting because, even though you work for God, and we work for Mammon, the principles you talked about, and particularly your attitude towards morality, that’s exactly what we teach in the business world. It’s precisely the same.’ He explained what he meant, ‘If you are in business, the most powerful asset you have is people’s trust; it doesn’t matter how

valuable your shares are, if people don't trust you, your business will go down. If people know they can trust you, you'll do fine. If someone makes a deal with you, they know you'll follow through with it if you can; if you say, "I'm sorry we can't do it," you genuinely mean you can't do it; people know it's not because you're favouring somebody else.' He said, 'That is what we try to impress upon people in the college, if you fudge things or you are deceptive for the sake of a quick profit, you might get a big yield quickly but you'll lose trust, and your business won't thrive.'

When I was in America I heard another story: a woman who was a member of a New York Buddhist group had also been a Wall Street corporate lawyer. She went to have lunch in New York City with her boss and a client who was thinking about making some big investments with them. They were eating outside at a restaurant. During the conversation it looked like this client was ready to put some \$500 million into the company, that's a big investment. This woman, if the deal went through, as the lawyer drawing up the papers, would get a cut of half a percent. Half a percent of \$500 million is \$2.5 million dollars, thank you very much! So she stood to gain quite a lot from the deal. At the end of the lunch, the client left and her boss turned to her and said, 'So what do you think? Pretty interesting, huh?' And she said, 'No, we shouldn't do business with that kind of person.' He said, 'What do you mean? It looks pretty good to me.' And she said, 'Did you see

what he did with his glass?’ Her boss looked a bit non-plussed, not knowing what she was referring to.

She continued, ‘A fly landed on the rim of his almost empty glass of fruit juice. Did you see how he took his straw, knocked the fly down into the dregs and then held the fly down with the straw and drowned it, as he was talking to us... Did you notice that?’ He said, ‘Yeah... That was kind of weird.’ So she said, ‘We shouldn’t do business with someone who acts like that.’ She gave up the prospect of \$2.5 million dollars on the life of a fly. Her boss realized, (as I suspect he had done before), ‘This woman can really be trusted; for this person moral values are more important than cash in the bank, so her judgement is highly reliable.’ This is a beautiful example of the value of both *sila* and contentment.

A final story about contentment concerns Ajahn Vimalo. Ajahn Vimalo has now been a monk for more than twenty years. He is a very gifted artist and, before he entered monastic life, he worked in a studio for a photographic company in London. He was a photo retoucher before Photoshop existed. He worked touching up photos for advertisements and he was very skilled at his job, he has an incredibly fine eye. Someone in his company, whom he had originally hired, had climbed up the ladder and was now his boss. Ajahn Vimalo knew he wanted to become a monk when his kids had grown up and he was quite happy for this fellow to take on the senior role.

A couple of years before he left the company, the two of them had a conversation. (Ajahn Vimalo's name was Paul Hendrick at that time). His boss said, 'Paul, I can't understand you; you know, you're really good at your job, but you only work three days a week. I mean, if you put your mind to it, you could make a lot of money. Why don't you? Why do you choose to work so little?' Ajahn Vimalo replied, 'Well, I live in a little cottage in Suffolk, I've been restoring a windmill there the last fifteen years, and my windmill is now complete. I can sit in my garden, enjoy the flowers, look at my windmill and can climb up and look over the Suffolk countryside. I sit out, read the newspaper and enjoy the English sunshine, and I can do that four days a week. I haven't got any debts, my kids are at school or at college. I have plenty of time at home, I walk the dogs, and I have everything that I need. So why on earth would I work more than three days a week? With three days a week, I live the life of royalty, and take my ease. But what about you, how many days a week do you work?' Ajahn Vimalo's friend said, 'Well, six, no six and a half. Sometimes it's actually all day on Sunday as well.'

'So, you work six or seven days a week, how many houses do you have?'

His boss said, 'There is the flat in London, there's my cottage, and a house in France, so I have two houses and a flat, and then there's the place by the beach. So actually I have three houses and a flat.'

'So how many mortgages have you got?'

‘Well, three.’

‘So, you’ve got three houses and a flat, three mortgages, how many cars have you got?’

He said, ‘This one I keep in London, then there’s the one parked up on the coast, and there’s one in France as well.’

Ajahn Vimalo said, ‘And you’re paying taxes for all those cars. Do you have any debt? Along with the mortgages?’

‘Of course I’ve got debt, you know, it stands to reason.’

‘So you have three mortgages, you work six and a half, seven days a week, you’re paying all that tax and you have debts, and you’re thinking that *my* lifestyle is weird? Don’t you see that I’m actually enjoying my life? I have the time to appreciate it! You’ve got all this money but you don’t give yourself the opportunity to appreciate it.’

Ajahn Vimalo said to me, ‘Me and my boss looked at each other and we both thought, “I don’t understand this bloke!” This was an example of very wise contentment.

As a final word on contentment, here is a little story about Ajahn Sucitto. He was the abbot of Chithurst Monastery, Cittaviveka, for over twenty years, and has been a good friend of mine for over forty years. In his early days as a monk, he was super-ascetic. He relished hardship, he was a zealous ascetic and had very few possessions. Anything he had was rather rugged

and minimal. He was once staying in the countryside in Devon. The couple whose place he was staying at found out it was his birthday, so they gave him a present, a little box, wrapped up prettily. He looked at the card they had attached to it, which said, 'For the monk who's got everything.' That kind of phrase generally means it's some kind of a trinket that is completely useless. He thought, 'Oh dear, they've given me some pointless gift, but they have these big smiles on their faces. I'll play along and be polite.' So, he opened the box, and inside the box there was just a little badge and on the badge it said, 'I've got everything.' He was so happy! It was the perfect gift.



‘How to Lead a Dhamma Life in the Capitalist World of Today?’

In 2013 I was invited to give talks at a pair of venues in Bangkok, the Buddhādāsa Indapañño Archive (BIA), and the Phatra Securities Dhamma Group, with the two events linked up. I wondered why they were connected. Then I found out the head of BIA is the brother of the head of Phatra Securities. I thought, how appropriate, that one brother looks after the material side, and the other brother looks after the spiritual side. They can support each other and help take care of things in a complete way. Phatra, it also turns out, housed BIA’s activities for quite a few years whilst the BIA centre was under construction in Chatuchak.

In this world, we have to take care of both the spiritual and the material. The Buddha didn’t just teach the Dhamma, he also taught the Vinaya; the proper name for our religion is Dhamma-Vinaya. We think of the Vinaya as being the rules for the monastic community, but these are the rules for how every person can live a spiritual life in the midst of a very materialistic world. The interface of those two, the Dhamma and the Vinaya, is really,

the question: How do we lead a daily Dhamma life in the ultra-capitalist world of today?



I remember visiting Tan Ajahn Buddhādāsa many years ago, back in 1988. I spent two weeks at Wat Suan Mokkh after I finished my tenth *vassa* as a monk. One of the things that Ajahn Buddhādāsa said was, ‘A few years ago, I used to say you could summarize the whole of the Buddha’s teachings into four words, “Don’t cling to anything”. Now I’ve got it down to three!’ He was pleased with this simplification. Those three words were, ‘Don’t be selfish’. I’m not sure how you would say that in Thai, but he said it in English when we were there. ‘Don’t be selfish.’

When you are in the midst of your job, maybe in a busy and active meeting with lots of dialogue going on, intense discussions, and you’re having feelings of excitement, that, ‘Oh yes, we’re about to close the deal, and I think that it’s going to go well!’ Or, we think, ‘Oh no, it’s going badly and I’m going to get the blame!’ And we have the feeling of worry and dread. The mind easily gets caught up in those kinds of emotions – these can be intense experiences. Sometimes when you see pictures or films of trading on the Stock Exchange, in the photographs of people working on the floors, you see very intense emotions. When we are caught up in emotional states like fear, hope, excitement, anger, desperation, then what the mind is drawn to is that thing that we’re afraid of, the thing that we are angry about, the

thing that we are excited about; that's where the mind goes. Because of the way that our minds work, it's very easy to get drawn into emotion. We get lost in emotional states.

One way to learn how to handle those kinds of intense emotions is to develop body awareness. When you feel yourself getting very excited, you're in a meeting, and the clients are about to agree to the deal, and you're about to get what you want, you reflect, 'This is the feeling of excitement, this is anticipation,' the client's reaching for their pen to sign and you consider, 'This is the feeling of excitement.' At that moment bring the attention into the body to notice the sensation, be aware of that simply as a feeling in the body. You're still conscious of the happy feeling, but you're not getting lost in that.

Similarly, when we've had a wonderful day at work, we closed the deal, and made a huge profit, then we get home and our husband is saying, 'Where have you been all day? It's 11:00 at night, you were supposed to be here for dinner!' 'Oh, right...'. Then you have the feeling of regret and shame. Along with giving your spouse your full attention, you can also notice, 'This is the feeling of regret, this is the feeling of sadness, of *hiri-ottappa*, the sense of wise shame on account of a lack of mindfulness, "Whoops! I made a mistake there.'" We see we've done something that is harmful, unkind. Then, in your body, how does that feel? 'Where is it felt? Is the pain in my heart?...?'

Across my shoulders... Oh, my stomach is tight as a drum, that's where I feel it strongest.'

This is a very simple practice that we can use throughout the day, not just with intense emotions, but with ordinary moods of a mild nature, to keep track of the flow of our life, the patterns of our day, and to pay attention to the present moment. So often the best way of letting go of self-centred thinking is to be mindful of it, to catch it, make it clear and then it fades on its own.



The emphasis in the Buddha's teaching, and especially in meditation, is on how to bring awareness to the here and now, to the present reality, because this is where life actually happens. So, the Buddha's teaching on meditation has a strong emphasis on learning how to not get caught up in ideas of past and future, fantasies of other possibilities, but to pay attention to the present reality.

Our body is always exactly in the present moment. It never wanders off to the past or future, it's always here. Even when we get really distracted, we're caught up in some computer program, Bitcoin is exploding or collapsing – I think we've all been there – whenever you realize that the mind has been carried away and absorbed, when you pull away from the screen, your body has been here all along. The body was always here, we just weren't paying attention to it.

When we are endeavouring to support this quality of being aware, attentive to the present moment, it's important to use the presence of the body as an anchor, a reference point. Simply walking along the corridor through a building, standing in the lift, sitting in your car, notice: this is the feeling in the body – the feeling of heat, or the feeling of coolness, the feeling of walking, then the moods of like or dislike, being in a rush or being at ease – the more we notice the sensations in the body and the flow of moods, the more we are able to sustain our attention with the present reality.



Another way people put these kinds of questions – how to live a Dhamma life, how to maintain mindfulness and live in a wholesome and skilful way during a busy working life – is based on the perception of not having enough time. They say, 'I'm so busy! You can't believe my schedule, Ajahn. All day, from beginning to end, it's filled with stuff I have to do.' Well, it might not be encouraging to you, but at the time of writing, I am on over twenty different committees. I go to a lot of meetings and my field of perception is filled with agendas and minutes. That might be surprising, but Amaravati Monastery is a big place, there are very many different activities that go on there. It has a significant presence in the UK and around the world too, so my day has got a lot of things scheduled from beginning to end as well.

We might think, 'I've got no time to meditate, my calendar is so full!' In an ideal world we would arrange our life to, say, have at least a period of a half an hour meditation in the morning and half an hour in the evening. We would make at least those periods a fixed feature of our routine, to sit down in our home and be quiet. But if we think, 'That's the only possibility that I have for any kind of peace,' then we're missing the other twenty-three hours of the day. Venerable Ajahn Chah would recount how people would say, 'Luang Por, I've got no time to meditate, I'm so busy with the farm, with the school, with the kids, with my patients.' He'd say, 'If you have time to breathe, you have time to meditate.' Are you ever so busy that you stop breathing? No. Well there you are. He would often talk about the kind of thing I've been saying, to be aware of emotions arising and passing away, the different moods we have during the day, being mindful of the sensations of the body during the day.

One thing we all can do is we can take very short periods just to be still and to be quiet. When we are in the flow of the day we often find ourselves caught up in the busyness, right? There's one thing after another after another, busy busy busy, and we're always leaning into the next thing, next thing, next thing, so we feel that there's no space, 'Too much to do, so little time!' Right? Is this familiar? But what we are not realizing is that the time is always here, we just have to make use of it.

I encourage people to take periods of meditation of just five seconds. When you come into a room – maybe you come into a room and you’re the first person there – you don’t have to open up your briefcase or your iPad and start checking messages straight away. Instead take a moment to sit down and give yourself five seconds. Just five seconds, you’ll find it can make a big difference.

We have a lot of groups of five seconds during the course of a day, right!? But we miss them. We miss the spaciousness, the openness that’s present right here, each day, because we fill it with the habits of multitasking. However, we get so caught up in the many tasks that we do, that we’re not able to multi-task with any kind of balance.

What I like to recommend is finding times during the day to stop. When you get into your car, rather than immediately turning the key or pushing the button, sit in the driving seat, be still for five seconds, just sit there and don’t *do* anything... 1, 2, 3, 4, 5... OK. Then, off you go. During the course of a day, when you finish a meeting, everyone else is gone from the boardroom, you don’t have to pick up your things and surge out with the rest, chatting away. You can take a moment, be in the space where all of the noise was happening, to be still for just five seconds. It can be surprising how long that five seconds lasts.

When I first lived at Amaravati, from 1985-95, I was very much involved in helping to run the monastery. I’m an organizer type, so I ended up looking

after an amount of administration as well as community projects and we had a lot of work to do. The structures were mostly old wooden buildings with no insulation. We took the wooden cladding off the walls, made them two inches thicker, filled them with insulation, then planed off all the old wood cladding to make it smooth, then put it back on again, then painted everything. This was with 5,000 square metres of external walls. The roofs were rolls of felt on tar paper, which would break up and blow away in wind storms, so we had to replace the felt roofs of many buildings too.

When we were in the middle of the big insulation project, for example, sometimes I would go to the work site right after the morning meditation, before the work program began, and I would just sit there, on a big bale of insulation, and simply be there, not doing anything, not even meditating. There would be the workbenches and the saws and the piles of insulation, Stanley knives, hammers, but completely quiet and still. I would sit there for a few minutes, take it all in, and appreciate the silence, the stillness, the space.

During the day when there was all the activity – there were twenty monks and lay people all busy with their staple guns and saws and the planer, all working away – something in the back of the mind would remember, ‘Actually, behind all this noise and activity, there’s stillness, there’s silence, there’s spaciousness.’ Then, at the end of the day, sometimes after the

evening *pūjjā*, I would go back to the same work site. There'd be all this stuff, tools and materials, the drifting dust in the summer evening light... you'd see the work that we had done during the day, how much had been changed. I'd reflect, 'This is where it was all happening, and now, again, stillness, silence and space.'

If such opportunities are developed and used widely, one can look upon these micro-meditations as a way of taking care of the welfare of a workforce, a team. These micro-meditations are the kind of thing that is of great benefit to our spiritual and physical well-being, I would suggest. When you're stuck as part of some stationary traffic, you can sit there listening to the radio or to a podcast on Spotify, or sit there feeling irritated, or you can sit there and say to yourself, 'This is just like my Wednesday meditation group, sitting still, not going anywhere.' So you can change the attitude by mindfully relabelling what's happening and so take advantage of being in that situation, making use of it as a welcome feature rather than thinking of it as an obstruction.



Another practice Luang Por Sumedho would teach is to use the mindfulness of going through doors. How many times a day do we pass through a door? What helps is, at the beginning of each day, to establish the intention to use this as a practice, 'During the course of today, every time I go through

a door, I'll bring my attention to what I'm thinking, what I'm feeling,' not even necessarily to slow down, but to use that everyday act as a way to punctuate your day, to notice what you're feeling. It's a very simple practice, but if you take that on and you actually do it, it's amazing how it helps the mind to keep track of the flow of moods and feelings, and any sense of busyness.

Of course, sometimes we get distracted and realize late in the day, 'I've been to three meetings and I didn't even notice one door!' But at least you now notice that you have been distracted. When that distraction is over, recognize, 'I have been distracted for so many hours.' There, right there, mindfulness is re-established. Just that awareness of, 'I've been lost, completely gone for three hours,' is of great benefit. In a sense that amount of unmindful time is not wasted, because in that moment you recognize, 'I have the capacity to be lost for three hours. I should bear that in mind and be more careful in the future.'

With such micro-meditations their purpose is not only to help the mind notice what the mood is but also to help a sense of relaxation to arise. Awareness itself, if it is allowed to blossom, is the easing agent. It is an organic way of freeing the system from being in a tense or agitated state. We let awareness trigger an easing and an attitude of non-stress, not creating suffering or tension in the present moment.



Another factor in 'living a Dhamma life in a capitalistic world' is our attitude towards our thoughts. We tend to believe that all our thoughts are true. If we think something, we assume it to be true, and if somebody else thinks differently, they're wrong. They might be a good person, but they're wrong. We take it for granted that if we think something, if we believe something, it's true, a genuine fact. We take our thoughts to be ultimate realities: 'This is good, that's bad, that's right, this is wrong, this is beautiful, that's ugly...' these are taken as inarguable truths. Without any consideration we take it for granted that our thoughts and judgments are correct at all times.

Thought can be very useful, but when we attach to it, it can become a big burden; it can be a cause of great stress, the mind going on and on, creating problems. One of the most helpful things, in terms of living a Dhamma life in a world of commercial concerns is (and this might seem a bit heretical or radical) to learn not to trust our thoughts, to learn not to believe our own thoughts. If we think something, we can, instead of blindly believing it, look upon it as 'a working hypothesis' or 'a convenient fiction'. When we say, 'That's beautiful!' remember, 'That's only *my* opinion. Other people might say, "Ugh."' Or, with food, we think, 'Oh that's delicious!' and they say, 'Ugh, how can you eat that?' You might have lunch at a very posh restaurant, serving spectacularly good Italian food and you feel, 'Wow, my Thai friends must be so impressed with this, this is really delicious!' But then you see

that your Thai friends are looking at each other a bit disappointed. You ask, 'Is the food OK?' They look a bit sheepish, not wanting to be impolite... Finally one says, 'There's no flavour. It hasn't got any chilli in it!' Different tastes, different worlds. What is delicious or good-tasting to one person, to another may not be. So when we say, 'That's right, that's wrong, that's good, that's bad, that's beautiful, that's ugly,' it will always be beneficial to remember, 'That's a working hypothesis, that's just my opinion, that's one way of looking at it. That's not an absolute fact, it's a convenient fiction.'

This reflective attitude is an important tool. Luang Por Chah was very gifted at giving simple teachings that were extremely effective. He would say, 'Whenever your mind comes up with a judgment, "This is good, that's bad, this is right, that's wrong," just say to it, "It's not a sure thing." This is not a sure thing. It's just your judgment.' Or when you were hoping for something or you were planning something, he would say, 'You should never say, "I'm going to Bangkok tomorrow."' He'd say, 'That's not the right way to talk about it. If we're going to speak in terms of Dhamma, then we should say, "I have a plan to go to Bangkok tomorrow," that is Dhamma language.' If people ask me, 'When are you going visit Thailand again?' I try to say something like, 'I have a plan to travel in June this year' – but will I go? It's not a sure thing. This is not to be pedantic, but to realistically speak in Dhamma language because nothing is certain. Everything is insecure and

not sure. Yes, when we park the car, we lock it. When we are making a business deal, we make sure everything is signed and agreed, and that the passwords are hidden. We take those steps for conventional security in the material world, but it's also important that we remember, 'It's not a sure thing.' You might make all of the moves for everything to be secure, but if the bottom falls out of the economy, then suddenly the paper currency notes that indicate that they are worth £10 or £50 might suddenly only be useful to light a fire with.

You might think, 'How can it be useful to think like this? Won't that make me feel more insecure and anxious than before?' This way of thinking is useful because it helps us to keep our actions and our work in the context of Dhamma, that is, with an understanding of how life actually works. When the Buddha made that simple statement, '*Sabbe saṅkhārā aniccā*,' 'All conditioned things are impermanent,' he was pointing to a universal quality of all things: everything changes, all the time.

When Luang Por Chah talked about *anicca*, which means impermanent or not lasting, he most often used the translation 'uncertain'. When we say something is 'impermanent' or 'changing', it's an external quality, an attribute of the material world, it's 'out there'. But the word 'uncertainty' describes a feeling in our *citta*. What the *citta* feels when it meets with change is uncertainty. Why? Because none of us knows what is going to happen next.

You might think, ‘Well, this perspective is just going to make me more worried and insecure. I will lose my job, especially in a “securities” company if I say to people, “None of us knows what’s going to happen next.” So you might think this is bad advice. But I disagree, because Ajahn Chah would respond, ‘When you look for security in that which is intrinsically insecure, you will inevitably be disappointed.’

Instead we can recognize, ‘I’m making this company as secure as possible, but I cannot guarantee this. This company will do the best job possible. To the degree to which we can protect it, we will do that, but we must always remember *anicca*.’ What happens when we recollect the fact of uncertainty, is that it actually brings the heart to peacefulness, because we’re not trying to fill up the unknown with hope or fear. We’re respecting the unknown; we are more in accord with reality.

Ajahn Chah would say, ‘When we recognize *anicca*, uncertainty, we develop true wisdom.’ This brings our heart into alignment with Dhamma itself because that’s its reality. The reality is that everything is uncertain. When we see that, our life is more in line with the actuality, so there’s a greater peacefulness, clarity, and flexibility. If we’re not filling the unknown up with hope or fear or worry, then we’re much more able to respond in the present moment in an effective way. We’re more capable of fully attuning to the present if we’re not worrying about the future. Like playing a piece

of music, if we are trying to follow a piece of music and play with the rest of the orchestra, if we're worried and we start to think about that difficult passage on page two that is about to come up, then even on the easy bit our fingers go to the wrong place. We find ourselves out of tune with the other people, because we're thinking about what's going to happen next.

So, what we have to do is to recognize, 'I don't know what's going to happen when we get to that difficult bit on page two of the score, but I know how to be mindful so, right now, I will give myself to attending, to working with this, and I will trust in mindfulness to guide me when page two comes along.' To have *saddhā* is to trust that if we're mindful, if we pay attention to the present, then we will be able to adapt in the most effective way to the things that present themselves when any difficult bit comes along.

You can see for yourself, when you are caught up with a worry: 'Is it going to be OK? Is it not going to be OK? How's it going to go?' Just remember, *anicca*, then see what happens in your *citta*. For me, when I recollect that, there's a relaxation, 'Of course! It's uncertain. How could I ever know for sure? How could it be a sure thing?'



We are creating space, not just in the way we are functioning during our day, but we're creating space in our own mind, space around our thoughts.

We're not taking our thoughts too seriously. We're not believing in our thoughts. We're not filling up the future, but we're allowing there to be more space in our mind, more adaptability, more flexibility. When we are looking at an active life, a busy life in the commercial world, and we feel that the days are clogged up, many of the changes that we can make are to do with our attitude, how we hold our thoughts, how we hold the activities of the day. For example, I was referring to traffic, how many of us have ever thought of ourselves as 'being traffic'? How many of us have ever thought, 'Oh dear, there are all these good people trying to get to places on the M25, and here's me being traffic, getting in their way...'? How many people have ever had that thought? It's pretty rare!

It's usually, 'I'm stuck here in traffic.' 'The traffic is terrible.' People tend to say, 'We should be there in fifteen minutes but here we are stuck in the traffic again!' We never say, 'I'm unfortunately contributing to the traffic here. I'm sorry, I'm getting in the way of all these other good people who've got important places to go to.' Almost none of us think that way.

There are a lot of ways that we can shift our attitude, change the ways that we see things, and create more space in our day and more effectiveness in our work. When we are hoping for success and fearing failure, we feel we've got to get somewhere business-wise and we're afraid we're not going to get there, we are holding the same attitude, 'I've got to get somewhere and all these people, and all this traffic, are in my way,' we don't notice that we

are creating these attitudes and turning them into solid realities. We are making them apparently solid by the way we hold them in our thoughts, in our attitudes.

One of the great blessings of Buddhist meditation, of the Buddha's teaching, is to point to the attitudes that we create and that we hold, and to enquire, 'Look! What am I bringing to this?' I gave this very easy example of traffic. So now, hopefully, I've helped change your habits of looking at the other cars on the M25 (and all other famously cloggable roads) in the usual way. The deluded view is, '*They* are traffic. *I* am on my way somewhere to do something really important and this traffic is getting in my way!' If we notice the way we're doing this and we switch it around, we say, 'Oh, it's very unfortunate that we're getting in each other's way, but I can take this opportunity of sitting in my car on the road to spread *mettā*, loving-kindness, to all these good people.'

Perhaps we sit in the morning and recite *Sabbe sattā sukhī hontu*, 'May all beings be happy,' but then we forget that the same beings are also on the roads with us. They are not the *sabbe sattā* that are the recipients of your *mettā*. It's, 'Them! The traffic is getting in my way, because I've got to get to London and we said we'd be there at twelve o'clock, and...'. We can make much more space in life and find great peace in our days by seeing the attitudes that we create, and letting them change. It's not always easy to change our attitude but at least we can see it and laugh at ourselves: 'Oh,

look at that! Why am I the only person that is not “traffic”? How come these are not real people, they’re just things in my way. But when I get my Dhamma book out and I’m doing my chanting, then I love all beings without exception! All of them!’

Similarly, if you are competing against another company, the mind creates ‘the other lot’ that you’re competing against; you can think, ‘May all beings be happy, except that lot, those others! I wish for all beings: “May they not be parted from the good fortune that they have attained,” but actually, I would like that company to be parted from their good fortune, and for it to come to me instead.’ When another company has a big success, they get the big deal and make a huge profit, how many of us will see an opportunity to radiate *muditā*, to celebrate the success of the other company? Does that happen? By bringing mindfulness and attention to the way that we hold things, the attitudes that we have, we can make a huge difference in our practice and our lives.



It might be that you’re thinking, ‘Dhamma life is the most important thing for me, I really should bail out of the securities industry. I should go over the fence and join a monastery. I’ve had it with all this. Dhamma makes so much sense, it’s so useful, and there’s so much stress and difficulty in the finance sector, I should give it up and go to the monastery or at least go off

to a cottage and bring up my kids out in the country, and forget the whole capitalist world.’ A number of years ago I had an interesting conversation on this subject with Bill Ford, who is a great-grandson of Henry Ford and was the head of the Ford Motor Company; he lives in Michigan. There’s a little Dhamma group in Detroit, Michigan, that I would go to visit. One of the people who organizes it was in the advertising industry for many years, so he knew Bill Ford and the company. Bill Ford, at that time, was a younger member of the Ford family, and a bit too liberal, a bit too Green for them. The powers that be in Ford didn’t really trust him that much in the boardroom, so he was given the job of looking after the charitable wing of the company in those days. He wasn’t allowed near the steering wheel at that point, as it were; he didn’t get to sit in the driving seat of the company. Nonetheless he was a significant member of the family, he had the Ford name, and was very wealthy.

He was interested to meet me, and this mutual friend had given him some of Ajahn Chah’s Dhamma books. I went over to his house in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where he was living. The flow of the conversation was along the lines of, ‘Well, I know I am a Ford and I’m part of the company; I’m married, I have four kids, and I love my family and want to do the best for them, but I’d really like to just give the whole thing up and go off and live in Vermont and have a little farm, so I can take my kids for hikes in the woods and go camping, and have a peaceful life out in the country. I

think that would be much better than being a part of the Ford empire.'

I had the feeling that he was expecting me, as a Buddhist monk, to say, 'Yes, very good, give up the capitalist life and get out of the whole business. It's far more sensible for you to go off to the woods, be a country boy, grow carrots and plant apple trees, and watch your kids out playing in the fields getting grass stains on their knees.' But, to his surprise, and to my surprise also actually, what I found myself saying was, (because I was very impressed by his attitude and his spiritual qualities), 'You'll probably hate me for saying this, but you should consider that you've got a lot of value that you can bring to the Company that other people are unable to bring. You're in a very powerful position. You're a Ford, and you're on the Board of Directors. You're the head of their charities, people listen to you. Even though this might not be what you wanted to hear, I would encourage you to consider staying in the company, and rather than rejecting it and getting out of the whole thing, seeing how you can change it for the better, from the inside.'

Not surprisingly he didn't much like that, as I recall! It wasn't what he was expecting to hear, but we had a very good conversation regardless. I'm not making any claims that I caused him to stay in the business, but the fact is, he did stay, and he has, over time, slowly and steadily, tried to bring more wholesome qualities into the kind of vehicles they produce, the ethos of Ford Motor Company and to their work situation and in many other ways.

My encouragement to him was to say, (using ‘bodhisattva’ with a small ‘b’), ‘You could be a bodhisattva of the auto industry, bringing good qualities; you’re actively involved in that field, you’re in the marketplace, but because you have some power, because you have influence and position, you can use this power in skilful ways for beneficial ends.’

Before the Buddha’s enlightenment he had met King Bimbisāra in Rājagaha. King Bimbisāra had been very impressed with him and had offered him half of his kingdom. He said, ‘Please, come and rule with me. You’re an extraordinary and notable person, a great being! Please come and share my kingdom.’ But the Buddha, who was a *samaṇa*, a wanderer, said, ‘No, I am committed to the life of a yogi, of a sannyasin, a *samaṇa*, dedicated to realize enlightenment, so I will not take up your offer of half the kingdom.’ Bimbisāra then said, ‘Well, what about, if you do reach full enlightenment, can you please come back and teach me?’ The Buddha-to-be agreed, ‘Yes, I will do that.’

So, shortly after the Buddha’s enlightenment, he went back to Rājagaha and became a spiritual guide for King Bimbisāra. He was a renunciant in terms of his own conduct but the Buddha did not think, ‘I’ve become a monk. I’ve had it with worldly things. I’m not going to have anything to do with society,’ dismissing all the kings and royals, power holders and rich people. No, instead he went right back to the King and helped him to use his position and influence to develop wholesome qualities. He helped the King to live in a

skilful way, and then the King, in turn, influenced his subjects. The values of Dhamma then permeated the entire society by flowing from the top down.

Shortly after that encounter he met with King Pasenadi, the king of Kosala, and Pasenadi also became his disciple. By becoming the Buddha's disciple and being in a powerful position, as an absolute monarch, he could instil those wholesome qualities into the society around him. Also, in the life story of the Emperor Asoka, similarly, we see that there were many significant beneficial influences that he had on all of Indian society, because of his great faith in Buddha-Dhamma.

I have kept part of an eye on Bill Ford since we met. Later I heard that when he came to Thailand to discuss with the Prime Minister about setting up some Ford motor plants, to the annoyance of both Bill Ford's advisors and those of the Prime Minister, they spent most of their meeting talking about Ajahn Chah and his teachings. With a smile Bill Ford's secretary told me, 'The advisors were really upset.' But Bill and the PM had a grand time, they spent about ten minutes on the manufacturing plants and about forty minutes on Luang Por Chah.

Many meditation teachings and wisdom teachings, on *samādhi* and *paññā*, have been mentioned here. The last element of the training is that of *sīla*, of virtue, the keeping of the Precepts, living an impeccable, honest life. Whether or not one is involved in the business world, when people know

that you're trustworthy and that you are reliable in your dealings, you will draw good people to you, people will be more inclined to help you when you are in difficulties, you will be respected by worthy people in society and you will live free of the anxieties that beset those who engage in deception. What's more, your business will tend to succeed, since trust and respect are recognized as the most precious of all assets. In terms of finding peace and clarity in our lives, one of the easiest and most helpful ways to do it is to always be honest. If you are biased, if you practice favouritism, if you are prone to bending things to get them to go your way, if you secretly take advantage of others, twisting the truth to make a profit, none of that can possibly conduce to well-being. It will only cause stress and difficulty and it will clog up your life.

A final word on 'wealth', the abundance of which one might take as the sign of a successful business. The Buddha said:

There are these five kinds of wealth. What five? The wealth of faith, the wealth of virtuous behaviour, the wealth of learning, the wealth of generosity and the wealth of wisdom.

(A 5.47)

Notably, gold and silver, or any kind of money, are not mentioned here!



A Currency of Well-being

An article written for FaithInvest,
'Helping twelve faiths make long term plans to protect the planet.'

♦ ♦ ♦

**'THE NEED TO HAVE A CORRECTIVE TO THE BROAD ASSUMPTIONS
(USUALLY UNEXAMINED) OF HOW AN ECONOMY WORKS,
HAS BECOME A REAL ISSUE FOR US.'**

*Martin Palmer, founder of the Alliance for Religion and Conservation
(patron The Late HRH Prince Philip), and, more recently, FaithInvest.*

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**‘If You Make Good Soup..’ –
Buddhist Traditions of Mendicancy**

‘I haven’t used money since 1978’ is the usual response I make when asked about the Buddhist monastic lifestyle. It invariably brings a moment’s pause in the conversation, if not a wide-eyed dropping of jaws. It’s a very different way to live, never owning or even handling money of any kind, and describing it usually brings forth such questions as: ‘How can one possibly live that way, especially in the modern world?’ And ‘How could such a lifestyle be of relevance to the global population and the well-being of the world?’

At the very start of the Buddha’s teaching career, about 2,600 years ago, he established the practice of mendicancy for himself and his monastic disciples, the Sangha. This means that the small proportion of his followers who wished to commit to a celibate renunciant life-style, in order to focus fully on meditation and spiritual disciplines, made a commitment to rely completely on the generosity of the much larger community of householder-disciples for all their material needs – food, clothing, shelter and medicines. The members of the Sangha, then and now, are prohibited from ever owning or using money. It is a deliberate assumption of material dependency; one that is formed in order to create a symbiotic relationship

whereby both parts of the community, monastic and lay, and consequently the whole society, are enriched.

In countries like Thailand the daily morning alms-round is the archetypal interaction between the Buddhist monastic and lay communities. The monastics walk barefoot, quietly in a line with their empty alms-bowls, and those of the lay community who are inclined to offer some food that day wait by the side of the road. Some food is placed in the bowl, and the line moves on. In this exchange, even at the most superficial level, the layperson is reminded of spiritual values and is uplifted by the joy that comes from offering assistance freely, while the physical needs of the monastic community are provided for that day.

The monks and nuns walk with downcast eyes and can never ask for anything; they do not intrude into anyone's personal space but are available for offerings. Interestingly enough the discipline laid down by the Buddha all those centuries ago, requiring a non-intrusive quiet presence, was described by one British barrister as 'Driving a line straight through the 1824 Vagrancy Act...'. The alms-round is thus not a form of begging but rather a conscious participation in what has been called 'the economy of gifts'.

The custom of going on alms-round, as well as making long-distance walks through the country (a practice known as *tudong*), not only occurs in Asia but is followed in Western countries as well. Groups of nuns or monks have

walked many hundreds of miles in the UK, Ireland, in the USA, New Zealand and on the continent of Europe. During these times the monastics are usually provided for by random strangers, rather than by regular monastery supporters, whether it's on a morning walk to the nearest village or on a long-distance hike. Often the first thing a passer-by will do is to offer some cash. The conversation then goes something like this: 'Sorry, we can't accept money.'

'Is there anything I *can* give you?'

'If you have some food, you could offer some of that if you'd like...'

It might be surprising to hear that wandering Buddhist monastics can travel hundreds of miles in Western countries and be sustained by those who have never met them before – often by those who know little or nothing of Buddhism. One might think that a more systematized network of provision would be needed. Back in the early 1970s Ajahn Chah, the abbot of our main monastery in Thailand, asked his most senior Western student, Ajahn Sumedho, 'Do you think you will ever go back to the West and start a monastery there?'

Ajahn Sumedho was surprised by the question. He replied, 'How could I do that? How could one live as a Buddhist monk in a non-Buddhist country?'

Ajahn Chah immediately responded, 'Do you mean to say that there are no kind people in America?'

It was at that point that Ajahn Sumedho realized that he would indeed be going back to the West one day, and, in 1977, that's exactly what occurred, seeding the foundation of more than 30 monasteries of this community outside of Thailand.

The wise perspective that Ajahn Chah articulated here is significant, especially when considering our place in society as a whole. He is saying that kindness is a universal human quality and transcends religious boundaries; we are all 'sisters and brothers in birth, ageing, sickness and death' and thus we participate in a relatedness that comes from our common humanity, physical, mental and spiritual. For example, monks from our community on long *tudong* walks in India have often found that the most heartfelt support and appreciation for their presence has been found when going for alms in Muslim villages.

In a similar vein, once Ajahn Sumedho had arrived in London and was getting acquainted with life in the West in 1977, he asked Ajahn Chah if they should advertise the monastery, put up notices about their talks and events in Hampstead Public Library or even on the Underground. Ajahn Chah smiled, shook his head and said, 'If you make good soup, people will get to hear about it.' That is to say, if what you embody and offer to the world is of benefit, then people will show up.

2

Rugged Interdependency

The driving force for this process is how the monastic community lives and what values it exemplifies – ‘Is the soup good?’ in other words. If the most noble human qualities are being practised and expounded – such as unselfishness, simplicity, harmlessness, honesty, sense-restraint, generosity, mindfulness and wisdom – that is the fuel for this economy of gifts, and its currency is the well-being of all. People draw close to help, and not only does the helping bring joy but it provides access for those individuals to practical advice for mental and physical well-being; in turn, for the monastic community, there is joy in being able to help others with their mental and social struggles, and an appreciation of the kindness that provides physical sustenance to them each day. The main value of adherence to the monastic Rule (Vinaya) is to sustain the well-being of the Buddhist ‘ecosystem’. It keeps the symbiotic relationship between the two parts of the Buddhist community alive (like the balance of clownfish and anemones in a coral reef), and therefore sustains the vitality of the system.

This kind of economy is not confined to a daily alms-round, it also informs the way that monasteries are run as a whole. For example, our group of

monasteries has a ‘no fundraising’ policy. The lay stewards (who are responsible for tending the funds offered to maintain monastery buildings and to cover medical, travel and construction expenses etc.) never ask anyone for financial or other donations. If there is a project underway, such as the construction of a meditation hall, or the replacement of inefficient and hard-to-maintain buildings, the stewards will let it be known that the project is mooted but no one will be approached for a donation. Like the quiet robed figure on the roadside, with eyes downcast, the monastery is available for offerings but is not hassling anyone.

The running costs of Amaravati Monastery, which are approximately £1700 per day at present, are all covered by such free-will donations, mostly from a large pool of small contributors. The long-term plan that we have to replace the 80-year-old wooden huts that currently form most of the monastery – some 8000 square metres of buildings – has an estimated cost of £30,000,000. Accordingly, we plan for all of that to come from freely offered funds, rather than from any asks.

This kind of conscious, deliberate social dependency reminds us that, as human beings, we all live in a relational state, that we need each other, and that our so-called ‘independence’ is largely an illusion; if our oxygen supply is cut off for five minutes, for example, we are dead. This mutual dependency might seem to fly in the face of concepts such as ‘the Protestant

work ethic' and 'rugged individualism' but it might be most helpful to see this economy of gifts as representing, instead, a 'rugged interdependency'.

Instead of resenting the need to rely on others and taking it as a weakness, one can regard it as a way of respecting and rejoicing in the relatedness of all beings and the ecosystem. It requires and seeks to generate a radical unselfishness on both sides.

The economy of gifts is thus a win/win arrangement. In its healthiest manifestations it is a symbiotic relationship of mutuality, a reciprocal altruism, a long-term relationship between partners where both groups and the whole ecosystem benefit.

3

'What Is Money For?' –

Well-Being as a Virtual Currency

The religious and spiritual traditions alive in the world today are many and various. The Buddhist customs and practices of monasticism and mendicancy are only one model amongst many of how a community can live and work to bring forth its most worthy qualities, to use an economy of gifts to generate and support well-being. The dynamic found in this

Buddhist tradition is only one way of sustaining such a fertile chemistry and it has been described here in order to serve as a single example. Such economies of giving can be cultivated equally fruitfully in a great variety of human relations and institutions, for example between teachers and students, parents and children, individuals and communities... It is a principle independent of religion and culture.

In the classical Buddhist expression of the lay/monastic relationship it is said that 'the lay community provides material support for the monastics and the monastics, in turn, provide spiritual support for the lay community'. In this expression it seems as though the lay community's offerings are tangible, and have an economic value, whilst the monastic offerings are intangible and have no economic value; they are 'non-bankable, social returns', as they have been described. However, there are other ways that the issue can be regarded which make the picture more nuanced, particularly if we consider well-being as a virtual currency, one that flows in both directions. The blessings flow both ways between the polar partners in the symbiosis. Well-being – material and non-material – is supported on both sides, just as with parents helping their children and children, in turn, helping their parents, as occurs in most societies around the world.

As a counterpoint to the spiritual support that the monastic community provides for the laity, the monastic community also receives spiritual

benefit from its interactions with the laity. To use Ajahn Chah as an example once again, he once commented that, ‘I developed far more wisdom sitting and receiving people non-stop for 25 years, and helping them deal with their problems, than I ever did sitting meditating in the wilds of the forest on my youthful travels.’

Although it was said that the monastics provide spiritual support to the public, it can also be said that there are material, ‘bankable’ returns that come to the lay community from their interaction with monastics as well, particularly, at the current time, through the provision of guidance in mindfulness meditation. Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), stated in a keynote speech at a conference entitled ‘*Mindfulness and the Dharma*’, at Sapienza University in Rome, 2013, that depression was the cause of approximately double the number of lost work days, worldwide, than any other illness or injury. It is a public health issue with a huge economic impact. Poor mental health at work costs the UK economy between £74 billion and £99 billion per year, according to a government-commissioned review published recently. Jon Kabat-Zinn then went on to speak about the use of mindfulness meditation in order to counteract depression.

He described how, up until 2007, if a person had experienced recurrent periods of depression (i.e. more than an isolated episode) there was a

90%-95% chance that it would recur regularly. No treatment over the previous century had provided more than a 10% chance of recovery – not counselling, medication, psychoanalysis, surgery... Only one in ten had a hope of a complete remission of the disease. Then in 2002 a study was carried out in the UK by Mark Williams (Oxford University), John Teasdale (Cambridge University) and Zindel Segal (University of Toronto), using a technique they called ‘Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy for Depression’ (MBCT). This was a method requiring the patients to work with their thoughts with two key principles in mind:

Your thoughts are not completely true.

Your thoughts are not who and what you are in any fundamental way.

Coincidentally, it was hearing these points being made in a talk by Ajahn Sumedho that caused John Teasdale to establish these principles as the basis for MBCT.

The group discovered that they had a 50% cure rate, using this method. There was initially some disbelief concerning this figure in the scientific community; a result that claimed to be 500% more effective than any other treatment was deemed highly unlikely. But the same study was carried out on a completely different sample group, in the USA this time, and achieved

the same results. The impact of this 2002 study, and its follow-ups, was that it caused interest in mindfulness to skyrocket around the world.¹

At the present time mental health issues have reached epidemic proportions in the West, particularly amongst young people. For example, an article in *The Daily Telegraph* (1-12-2017) stated:

The number of young children seeing psychiatrists has risen by a third amid an ‘epidemic of anxiety’ official figures show.

A new report shows soaring numbers of children receiving psychiatric treatment – with a 31 per cent rise in one year among those aged nine and under.

Experts said children were struggling to cope with mounting levels of anxiety, bullying and depression, fuelled by social media.

The analysis by the Children’s Commissioner comes as the Government prepares to publish a green paper on children’s mental health. Ministers are expected to say therapists should be sent into schools, to deal with a rising tide of anxiety. Every school will be told to have a designated teacher in charge of mental health, with new targets to cut NHS waiting times.

1. [Segal ZV, Williams JMG, & Teasdale JD (2002). *Mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression: A new approach to preventing relapse*. New York: Guilford.]

Earlier this year a study by University College London found one in four teenage girls reported symptoms of depression. The research which tracked more than 10,000 children found widespread evidence of emotional problems, with misery, loneliness and self-hate rife.

This is just a snapshot of one sector of one country's mental well-being. Most readers will be well-aware that this issue extrapolates across many populations, old and young, over many countries of the world, if not the majority of them. This stark reality then leads to the questions:

'What is our material wealth really worth, if this degree of mental instability and lack of well-being is so rife?'

'What is money for, if individuals are in such states of misery?'

'Material security is one dimension of our lives but what is it worth if the mind is locked in despair?'

Money really cannot buy us love.

4

Gross National Happiness and Value-based Education

If we took the step to refocus our priorities, making the cultivation of well-being our prime objective, rather than the size of the Gross National

Product, it could bring a substantial balm to the system. If we took well-being as our virtual currency – in schools, in the workplace, in the home and in our spiritual institutions, irrespective of our faith or political allegiance – it could radically revise the way we live and how we relate to the world and its resources.

In 2008 the government of Bhutan instituted ‘Gross National Happiness’ as the goal of the country in its Constitution. In 2011, The UN General Assembly urged member nations to follow the example of Bhutan and measure happiness and well-being, and designated happiness as a ‘Fundamental human goal’. In 2012, Bhutan’s Prime Minister, Jigme Thinley, and the Secretary General of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, convened a high level meeting: ‘*Well-being and Happiness: Defining a New Economic Paradigm*’ to encourage the spread of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness philosophy.

Bhutan is a small kingdom, with a population of less than a million people, however the example that it gives in prioritizing well-being is a very timely one for the world. It is notable that the United Nations have given the principle of GNH some prominence and support. G8 countries such as Canada and France have participated in past international conferences on GNH. Of the 2012 UN conference, *The Guardian* (2-4-2012) remarked:

A UN meeting today is discussing happiness, which doesn’t come in dollar bills but – says a report – from strong social networks, employment,

health, political freedom and the absence of corruption. And one of the world's tiniest nations is setting an example.

It is not possible to simply pass laws to change people's attitudes and value systems, there has to be a transformation of perspective in each individual. To bring about such a refocusing of priorities the most fruitful place to start is with the young. Therefore, when considering a shift to an economy of gifts and a currency of well-being, the best place to start is probably within the domain of education.

One of the biggest strains upon the young is the push for academic achievement, yet there is a visceral emotional stress that comes with success being measured only by exam scores. There is an arms-race of achievement between schools, continually fuelled by the promise of prestigious placement at the next educational stratum. Meanwhile the incidence of self-harming, panic attacks, suicide attempts and the need for psychiatric treatment, even for the under-nines, continues to escalate.

In contrast, some schools now focus more on 'emotional intelligence', arising from a value-based education, rather than making academic excellence the one and only measure of success in the educational process. Yodphet Sudsawad, one of the head teachers at Panyaden International School, Chiang Mai, Thailand, gave a significant talk on this subject at an educational conference, (the International and Private Schools Education Forum, Middle

East 2017 Conference, in Dubai), entitled: ‘*Academic Excellence as a By-product of Values-Based Education*’. In it she began by stating (partially edited):

Conventional education that focuses on academic excellence is like the fossil-fuelled car. There is still a commercial market for it but in terms of scientific content and answering the consumer’s needs it is outdated. The expiry date is clearly visible.

She then proceeded to itemize the ‘Twelve Wise Habits’ that form the basis of their curriculum.

Using the senses wisely (*Indriyasamvāra*)

Knowing the right amount (*Mattaññutā*)

Not harming (*Avihimsa*)

Being patient and tolerant (*Khanti*)

Being enthusiastic (*Chanda*)

Being truthful (*Sacca*)

Persevering (*Viriya*)

Being generous (*Cāga*)

Being kind and compassionate (*Mettā Karunā*)

Being mindful and alert (*Sati*)

Being calm and focused (*Samādhi*)

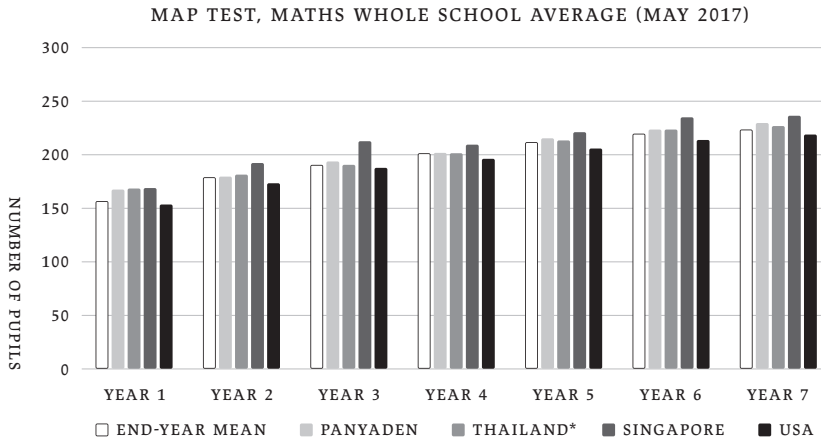
Applying the mind skilfully (*Yonisomanasikāra*)

On the viability of this approach she said:

For example, we have a program called ‘my project’ where kids set up their own projects, something they want to do. So they are enthusiastic about it. At some point in the process difficulties will arise, but they need to stick to it without asking adults to ‘fix it’ for them.

There will be times when they get lazy and want to give up. These are the important moments. For us these are the opportunities for real personal development.

And we can show that our theory of ‘wise habits resulting in academic achievement’ actually works in practice.



*THE ‘THAILAND’ DATA IN THE GRAPH REFERS TO INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS IN THAILAND

... [T]he MAP test [Measure of Academic Progress] reading results that show that if you let children develop at their own speed they will imbibe the knowledge, if the environment is stimulating and they feel no pressure.

So in the beginning our curve looks a bit slower than the others as we are working on the right foundations. But then you can see already in year 5 and 6 we are above most of the others. And now you can imagine what the curve will be in year 12 and 13, we don't have those data yet because we are not open to that age, but the continuation of the curve is obvious.

Her school has a small number of pupils (221 in 2018), and was therefore something of a minor player amongst the large and prestigious schools and educational corporations gathered at the event. She was consequently surprised that, after her talk, she was inundated with requests for more information, invitations to speak at other events and requests to help establish similar programs at other schools around the world. There was a hunger for this approach, centred around the well-being of the pupil, completely irrespective of whether those other schools were from Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or secular backgrounds. The heartfelt engagement from both sides, the pupils and the teachers, supports the whole system's well-being.

In a similar vein, ever since Amaravati Monastery was founded in 1984 it has incorporated a variety of programs for families, as well as providing almost daily pastoral counselling with parents and children relating to a wide variety of issues. These programs include events such as a 10-day Family Summer Camp, weekends dedicated to creativity and to the support of Buddhist teenagers, and a ‘Young Persons’ Retreat. The principles of the above-mentioned Wise Habits, as well as the broader range of Buddhist teachings and practices, form the basis of these events and interactions.

The understanding behind all these offerings of the Monastery is that the imparting of Buddhist principles should not be confined to describing stories from the life of the Buddha, or in imparting only intellectual knowledge of the scriptures. Rather it is in the life lessons that can be learned – how the well-being of the children and indeed the whole family can be enhanced – that the real value of the instructional contact between the lay and monastic community is measured.

In 1994, ten years after Amaravati was founded, a number of families, that had been deeply involved in the Summer Camp and other children’s programs, took the initiative to start a small school in Brighton, UK, called the Dharma Primary School. This has been steadily developing over the years as an institution based on principles very similar to Panyaden International School, offering ‘an education based on Buddhist values’.

It is noteworthy that, in 2017, the Dharma Primary School was the winner of the Independent Schools Association (ISA) award for ‘Excellence and innovation in pupils’ mental health & wellbeing’. This was a significant recognition, as the ISA has several hundred member schools, both senior and junior. Furthermore, it underscores the fact that, like the influence of Bhutan in the UN in the realm of well-being, a small junior school has been held up as an example for other bigger, more prestigious and longer-established institutions to pay attention to.²

5

Well-being as a Universal Possibility –
the ‘Gift of Fearlessness’ and Resilience Brokerages

Even though we have drawn in this essay chiefly upon examples from the Buddhist sphere, hopefully it can be seen that the currency of well-being is exchangeable and valid in all countries and in the hands of those of all faiths, or no faith. Similarly, it is likely that those Twelve Wise Habits are equally vaunted as noble human qualities in virtually every society around the globe. These principles apply outside the Buddhist sphere and can inform all faiths, in a skilful and beneficial way.

2. Regrettably, largely owing to the financial impact of the COVID pandemic, the Dhamma Primary School was forced to close in 2021.

The word ‘economy’ comes from the Greek *oikos* = house + *némō* = distribute/allocate; it therefore literally means ‘management of a household’. All people can participate in this ‘economy’, this ‘caring for the house’, which is a caring for the ecosystem of the living world, beyond our religious and national boundaries.

Each faith has its own conventions, for instance regarding food, the sanctity of life, the appropriate management of money and so forth. The specific protocols we each follow dictate the exact way in which we choose to ‘care for the house’ – it will vary if we are a Catholic or a Lutheran; a Northern or a Southern Buddhist; an Orthodox or a Reform Jew; a Sunni or a Shiite Muslim; a Shaivite or a Vaishnavite Hindu; a sceptical materialist or a logical positivist... Nevertheless, if we focus on the root principles of wholesomeness and make the cultivation of well-being our priority, we can care for the house of our world whilst respecting and cooperating with the values of our fellow housekeepers.

We are all in this life together; birth, old age, sickness and death are our common experience. These are human, trans-religious experiences. One of the great blessings of using the economy of gifts, reciprocal altruism, as a framework for functioning in the world, is that such participation leads to being nourished and supported by a field of benevolence and cooperation. By generating wholesomeness, we experience the well-wishing and

appreciation of others that naturally comes from that – like a fertile field, this is a source of psychological nourishment and contentment for us. In Buddhist tradition this is called a ‘field of blessings’, *puññakhetta*.

The Twelve Wise Habits are all qualities conducive to the boosting of this economy. In addition the Buddha highlighted the fact that the habits relating to our behaviour are particularly significant. When we are respectful, honest and well-restrained, it is a gift both for others and ourselves:

‘Now, there are these five gifts, five great gifts – original, long-standing, traditional, ancient, unadulterated from the beginning – that are not open to suspicion and are unfaulted by knowledgeable wise people. What five?

‘If one abstains from (1) taking life, in so doing one gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In so doing one in turn enjoys limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity and freedom from oppression oneself. This is the first great gift.

‘If one abstains from (2) stealing ... (3) sexual misconduct ... (4) lying ... (5) using intoxicants, in so doing one gives freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, freedom from oppression to limitless numbers of beings. In so doing, one in turn enjoys limitless freedom from danger, freedom from animosity, and freedom from oppression oneself. These

are the second, third, fourth and fifth great gifts.

‘These great gifts are the reward of creating blessings, the reward of skilfulness; they are the nourishment of happiness, resulting in happiness; they lead to heavenly states, to what is desirable, pleasurable and appealing; they lead to welfare and to happiness.’

(A 8.39)

In addition to skilful behaviour being a contributing factor to a healthy economy of gifts and its resultant well-being, as mentioned above in relation to MBCT and depression, the practices of meditation and mindfulness are a highly significant influence as well.

Today specialization in teaching meditation, mindfulness and related sources of mental well-being is not confined to Buddhist monasteries, far from it. In the West these Buddhist monasteries are a small minority when compared to the great many retreat centres and mindfulness training programs available outside a monastic environment. There are Buddhist meditation retreat centres such as Gaia House, in Devon, or Insight Meditation Society, in Massachusetts, and a long list of others. The resources are manifold, both for face-to-face instruction as well as online courses and apps for smart-phones. In addition, within just the UK and the USA, there are numerous degree courses that provide meditation training and academic study of the field; for example at Bangor University, Exeter University, Oxford Mindfulness Centre, University of California Berkeley

‘Greater Good Science Center’, University of California Los Angeles ‘Mindful Awareness Research Center’, Center for Mindfulness at the University of Massachusetts Medical School and others.



The Ecological Sequestration Trust is an organization dedicated to global sustainable development; Prof. Peter Head is its founder and Chief Executive Officer. In September 2017, this Trust organized a gathering under the heading of: ‘*Resilience Brokers – Approaching Programme Implementation*’. This event brought together leading experts from partner organizations who completed detailed development plans and agreed to a ‘Declaration of Commitment’ to go forward together as ‘Resilience Brokers’.

The aim of this Commitment is to initiate ‘new ways of thinking and co-creating driven by the power of collaboration and the networked strengths of an outstanding group of individuals and organizations, working towards a common goal: the rapid transition to resilient development paths in all regions of the world...’ to set them on track to achieving the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Paris Agreement targets. The SDGs are:

- GOAL 1: No Poverty
- GOAL 2: Zero Hunger
- GOAL 3: Good Health and Well-being
- GOAL 4: Quality Education
- GOAL 5: Gender Equality
- GOAL 6: Clean Water and Sanitation
- GOAL 7: Affordable and Clean Energy
- GOAL 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth
- GOAL 9: Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure
- GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality
- GOAL 11: Sustainable Cities and Communities
- GOAL 12: Responsible Consumption and Production
- GOAL 13: Climate Action
- GOAL 14: Life Below Water
- GOAL 15: Life on Land
- GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
- GOAL 17: Partnerships to achieve the Goal

The Paris Agreement's central aim is to strengthen the global response to the threat of climate change by keeping global temperature rise in the 21st Century to below two degrees Celsius (and ideally less than 1.5°C) above pre-industrial levels.

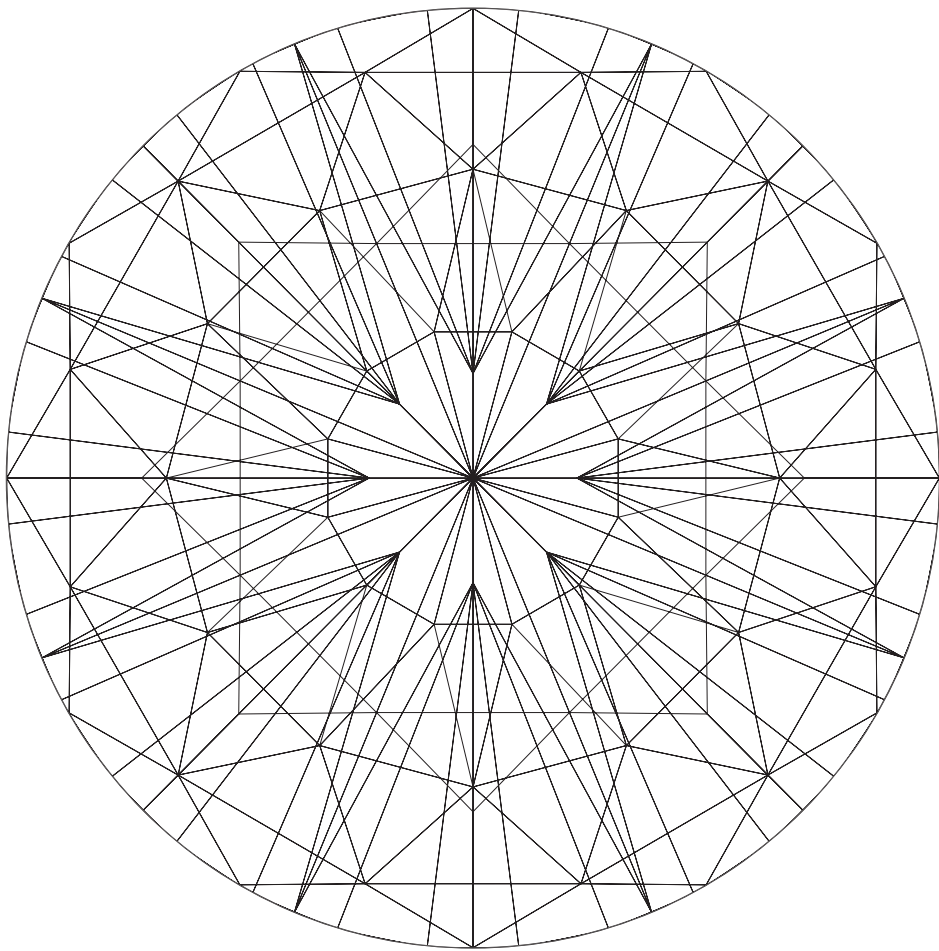
Such Resilience Brokers would be able to ‘provide communities with the tools and support they need to become resilient and able to withstand all emerging global challenges, and a chance to look forward to a better future: a future built on equality, justice, dignity, respect and shared prosperity for all.’

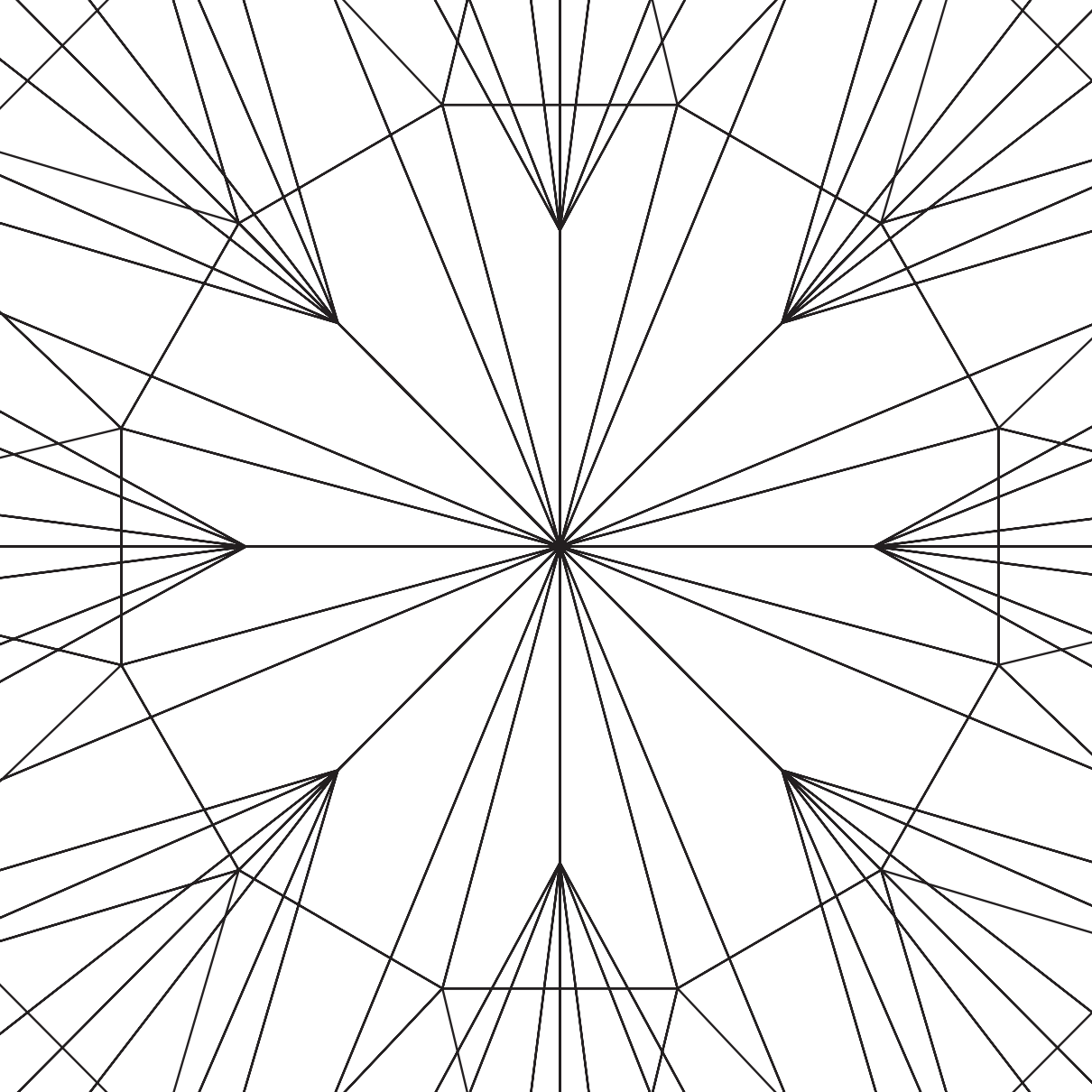
Although the term ‘Resilience Brokers’ has been coined and used by the Ecological Sequestration Trust to refer to a specific group of organizations, committed to realizing sustainable development goals on a material level, I would suggest that the mindfulness-based university and online courses, meditation centres and monasteries mentioned above can be considered equally as ‘resilience brokerages’. Their purpose is to provide the means whereby the well-being of each individual can be maximized and, therefore, to say that the goal of a meditation centre, a mindfulness training course or a monastery is to: ‘provide communities with the tools and support they need to become resilient and able to withstand all emerging global challenges, and a chance to look forward to a better future...’ would be very close to the mark as a mission statement for most such bodies.

Such resources, of guidance in meditation and mindfulness practices, are available to the broader community and are not faith-specific in their availability or applicability – just as the meditation classes and retreats at Amaravati are designed to cater for all faiths and do not presume either

that the participants are Buddhists or wish to become Buddhists. As such these meditation and mindfulness practices aim to provide the resources that help all those who are interested to be effective and cooperative housekeepers in caring for this house – this, our unique and precious planet. Our preoccupation with money-based economies is outmoded; like the fossil-fuelled vehicle and conventional education – ‘There is still a commercial market for it but ... it is outdated. The expiry date is clearly visible.’

What is money for if not to support the well-being of the planet as a whole? When we endeavour to work with others it is easy to clash or compete, to become disheartened, frustrated or just exhausted... this is natural. If, however, the mind has been fortified with some of the spiritual strengths mentioned here there will be a resilience, a robust adaptability. That in turn will nourish the various types of reciprocal altruism wherein we all benefit by helping each other, resulting in an abundance of the riches of well-being. That abundance of well-being is a more powerful source of benefit than any amount of financial aid, for it enables us to find a place of cooperation and respect that is the mother-lode of goodness. And that is what will enable this planet not just to survive but to fully thrive.





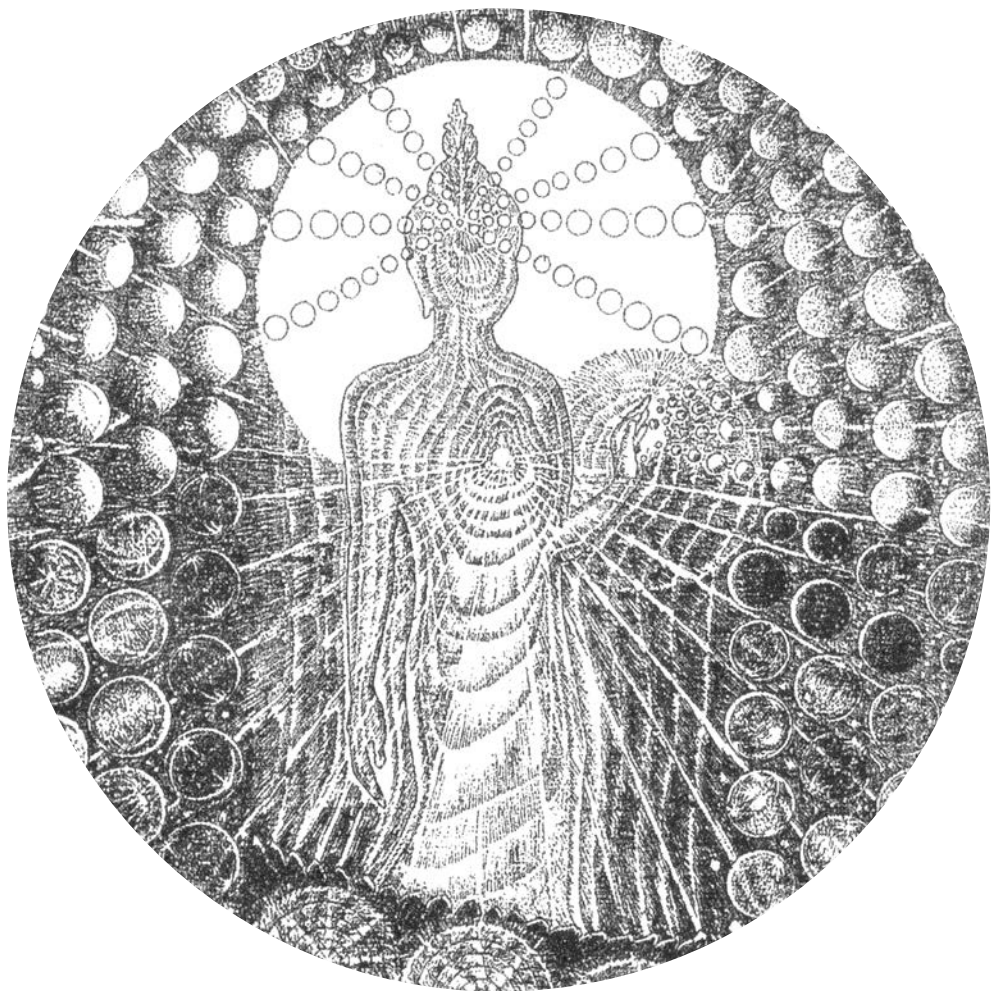
HAPPILY EVER AFTER

VOLUME
FIVE **Beyond**

REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES



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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 Mahā-siddhas 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.



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.



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 Tavatīṃsa 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.



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 unskillful 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.



The teaching about *sila*, 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.



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 Buddhadasa, 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 Buddhadasa felt the subject was so important that he said, ‘If we don’t talk about Nibbāna, Buddhism is as good as dead.’ Ajahn Buddhadasa 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 Buddhādāsa'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 Buddhādāsa'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 Buddhādāsa, 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*.



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 Buddhadasa, 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 *sanditṭhiko*, apparent here and now, *akāliko*, timeless, time doesn’t apply, *ehi-passiko*, 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*, *viññāna*, 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 *anywhere*, 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.



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 Buddhādāsa'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 Buddhādāsa'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 *extraordinary*. 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 Buddhādāsa 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.



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.

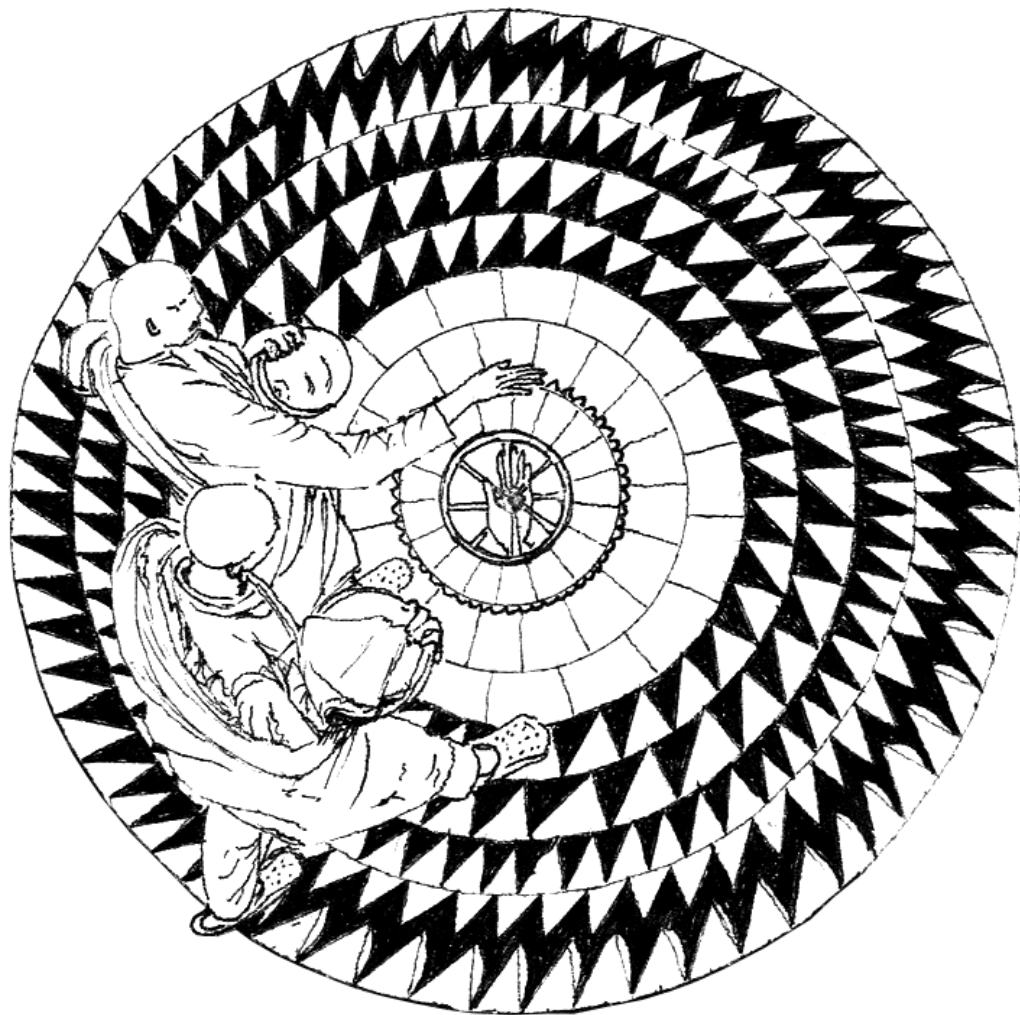
We've got to go against our habits – the habits of the senses, of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind. Because the senses are all geared towards interesting things; what's exciting, what's dangerous, what's frightening, what's a problem. It takes a special kind of effort to notice space, to notice 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?



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-ditṭhi* 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.



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 unapprehensible, 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 Pañṇavaḍḍho 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 $\sqrt{-1}$ ', 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.



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?’



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

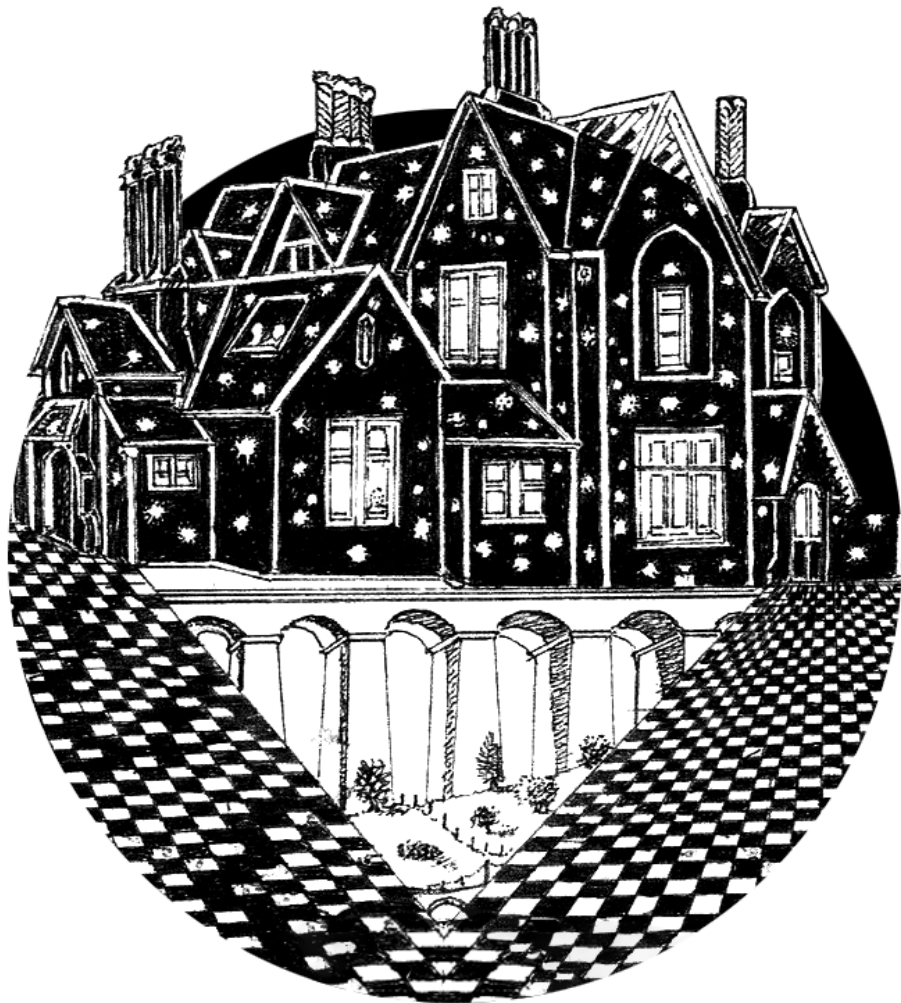
4. *ibid*, p 225

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.



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 *samyojana* 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-ditṭhi*); 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.



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.



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, ‘Hmmm... 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.



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.



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-nirodhaḡāminī 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).



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.



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.



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 *sappurissasamseva* which means 'association with good people', 'drawing close to good people'. 'Sa' means good, '*purisa*' means a person. *Samseva* 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 *dharmā-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 *Buddham saramam gacchami*, 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.



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?'

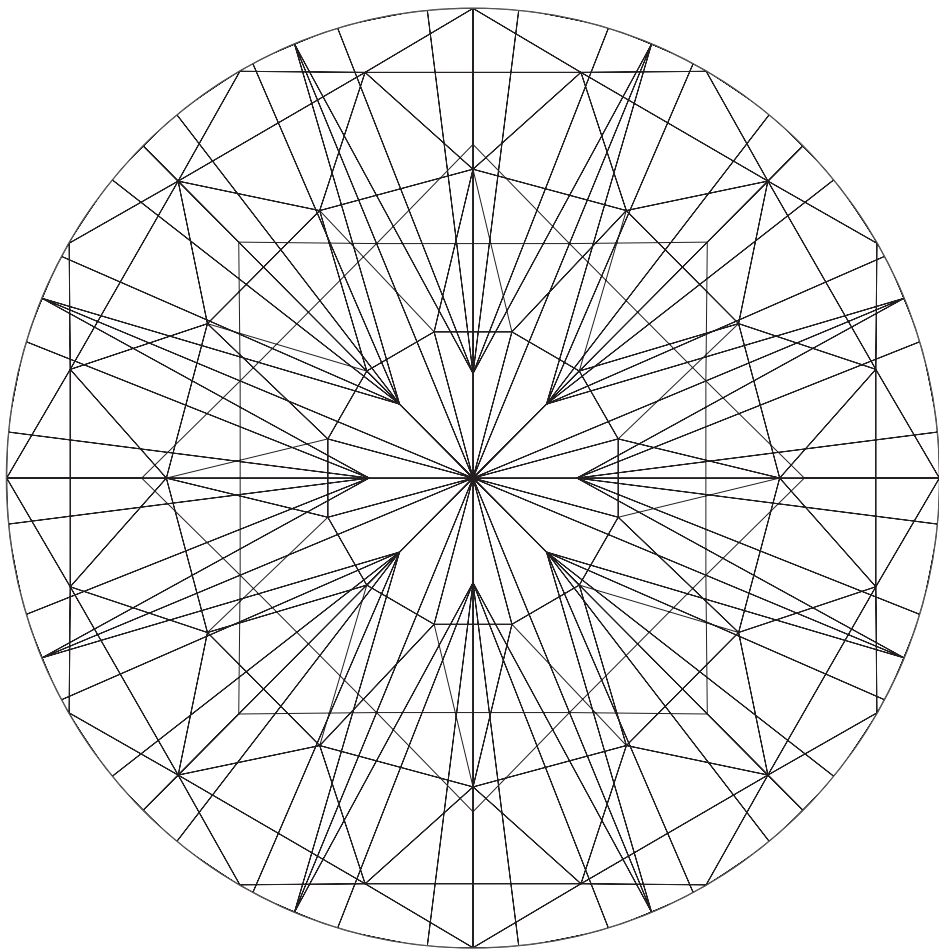
The mind is trying to take refuge in sight, sound, smell, taste, touch and thinking. It's trying to take refuge in material forms, in feelings, perceptions, mental formations, sense-consciousness. They are not dependable. They're not reliable. They're not stable. If we try to take refuge in that which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



Glossary

<i>adhiṭṭhāna</i>	Resolution, determination; one of the ten <i>pāramitās</i> (q.v.).
<i>akāliko</i>	Literally, ‘timeless’; one of the attributes of the Dhamma.
<i>akusala</i>	Unwholesome.
alms-round	The daily morning walk by monastics through a village or town to receive alms-food. This is the classical way in which Buddhist monastics, particularly in the Southern Buddhist countries, receive material support.
anagārikā /a	Literally, ‘a homeless one’; a postulant living according to the standard of the Eight Precepts.
<i>anattā</i>	Literally, ‘not-self’, i.e. impersonal, without individual essence, neither a person nor belonging to a person. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>anicca</i>	Transient, impermanent, unstable, having the nature to arise and pass away. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>anicca saññā</i>	Literally, ‘the perception of impermanence and uncertainty’; a method of reflection to enhance wisdom.
<i>arai</i> (THAI)	Literally, ‘what?’
<i>asaṅkhata</i>	Unconditioned.
<i>aṣṭāvadhāna</i> (SKT.)	The ability or power of listening to and grasping eight things at a time. A skill of an accomplished yogi or teacher.
<i>avijjā</i>	Literally, ‘not knowing’, ignorance, nescience, unawareness. In Buddhist usage it is distinguished from the usual English meaning of ‘not having the facts’.

<i>bandar</i> (HINDI)	A type of rhesus monkey common in India.
<i>bardo</i> (TIBETAN)	A plane of existence or an interstitial state between such planes; notably this includes the human plane as well.
<i>bhāvanā</i>	Development, cultivation; also, in common usage, a synonym for meditation.
<i>bhava-taṅhā</i>	Literally, ‘the craving to become, to be, to exist’; this is named as one of the three causes of <i>dukkha</i> (q.v.) in the Buddha’s first discourse.
<i>bhikkhu</i>	A fully ordained Buddhist monk.
Bodhisatta (PALI)	Literally, ‘A being who is intent on Buddhahood’; one who has made the vow to realize ‘Unsurpassed Full and Complete Enlightenment’ in this or a future life. The Pali ‘Bodhisatta’ most often refers to the previous lives, or the early part of the last life, of the Buddha Gotama – the Buddha of this current age.
Bodhisattva (SKT.)	
Brahmā	A celestial being; a god in one of the higher spiritual realms.
<i>Buddho</i>	The quality of awakened awareness; often used as a mantra word for meditation.
Ch’an (CHINESE)	Both words are related to the Pali <i>jhāna</i> (q.v.) meaning ‘one-pointed concentration’, ‘absorption’. A form of meditation practice and the name of Buddhist lineages based on such meditation and related practices.
Zen (JAPANESE)	
<i>chanda</i>	Interest, zeal, enthusiasm, desire.
<i>daht roo</i> (THAI)	Literally, ‘the element of knowing, awareness’. (See <i>vijjā-dhātu</i> q.v.).

<i>deva</i>	A heavenly being, an angel; a being that abides in any one of the seven lower heavens in classical Buddhist cosmology.
Dhamma (PALI)	The Teaching of the Buddha as contained in the scriptures;
Dharma (SKT.)	not dogmatic in character, but more like a raft or vehicle to convey the disciple to deliverance. Also, the Truth towards which that Teaching points; that which is beyond words, concepts or intellectual understanding.
<i>dhamma</i>	When written as ‘ <i>dhamma</i> ’ (small ‘ <i>d</i> ’) this refers to a mental object, an ‘item’ or a ‘thing’.
Dhammayut (THAI)	Literally, ‘adhering to Dhamma’; the name of one of the two main lineages, or ‘ <i>nikāya</i> ’, of Buddhist monastic practice in Thailand. The other is the Mahānikai (q.v.).
Dharma transmission	The acknowledgement by a teacher of insight having been well-established in their pupil. This kind of ‘transmission’ is ritually formalised in some Buddhist lineages.
<i>Diṭṭhiñca anupagamma</i>	Literally, ‘By not holding to fixed views...’; these words are included in the <i>Karanīyametta Sutta</i> .
<i>diṭṭhupādāna</i>	Clinging to views and opinions.
<i>dosa</i>	Aversion, hatred. One of the three roots of unwholesomeness; the other two are greed, <i>lobha</i> , and delusion, <i>moha</i> .
<i>dukkha</i>	Literally, ‘hard to bear’ – dis-ease, restlessness of mind, anguish, conflict, unsatisfactoriness, discontent, suffering. One of the three characteristics of conditioned phenomena.
<i>dukkha-nirodha</i>	The cessation of <i>dukkha</i> ; the third of the Four Noble Truths.

<i>ehipassiko</i>	Literally, ‘inviting one to come and see’; one of the attributes of the Dhamma.
four-fold assembly	The community of the Buddha’s disciples, comprised of monks, nuns, laywomen and laymen.
Four Noble Truths	The core teaching of the Buddha. The Truth of Unsatisfactoriness; the Truth of the Origin of Unsatisfactoriness; the Truth of the Cessation of Unsatisfactoriness; the Truth of the Path Leading to the Cessation of Unsatisfactoriness.
<i>gohok yai</i> (THAI)	Literally, ‘a big lie’.
<i>gotrabhū</i>	Literally, ‘change of lineage’; the radical and liberating change of perspective and attitude that comes with Stream Entry (q.v.).
Guan Yin Bodhisattva (CHINESE + SKT.)	The name of the Bodhisattva of Compassion; in Skt. the name is Avalokiteśvara; in Tibetan it is Chenrezig.
heavenly messengers	Generally, the presence of ageing, sickness and death in the world, seen as the means to encourage spiritual urgency. The Fourth Messenger is often taken to be the presence of renunciants in the world, acting as a spiritual example. A fifth Messenger is sometimes mentioned as well (e.g. in M 130), this being the painful consequences of unskillful actions.
<i>hiri-ottappa</i>	The first element of this means ‘conscience’ or ‘a sense of honour’; the latter means ‘a wise fear of consequences’ or ‘inclination away from unwholesomeness when encountered’.
<i>idapaccayatā</i>	Literally, ‘conditioned by this’; the principle of specific conditionality whereby one facet of the natural order affects another.

- Isan The provinces of North-East Thailand, adjacent to Laos and Cambodia.
- jhāna* Mental absorption. A state of strong, one-pointed concentration, usually focused on a single physical sensation or mental image.
- kalyāṇamitta* Spiritual friend.
- kāma-taṇhā* Craving for sense pleasure.
- karma (SKT. + ENG.) In popular usage its meaning includes action, habitual impulses, volitions and intentions together with the results or effects of the action. The Pali word '*kamma*' simply means 'action' or a cause which is created by habitual impulses, volitions, intentions. In Pali the proper term for the result of such action is *vipāka*, hence *kamma-vipāka* means the combination of an intentional act and the results that come from it.
- kāmuṇḍāna* Clinging to sense pleasure.
- kanom sai* (THAI) A traditional Thai sweet, wrapped in a banana leaf.
- karuṇā* Compassion; one of the four Sublime Abidings.
- khandha* Literally, 'group', 'aggregate', 'heap' or 'lump' – the term the Buddha used to refer to each of the five components of psycho-physical existence (material form, feelings, perceptions, mental formations, consciousness).
- kilesa* Defilement.
- kuṭī* A hut; a secluded and simple dwelling for a monk or a nun.

- Library of Babel An invented term, being a blend of the Library of Alexandria (where the knowledge of the Middle Eastern and Mediterranean worlds was once stored) and the Tower of Babel (where, in Biblical mythology, the diversity of languages arose, causing confusion and division).
- lobha* Greed; one of the three roots of unwholesomeness.
- loka* The world; meaning the planet, the cosmos or the realm of experience, according to context.
- loka-vidū* Literally, ‘knower of the world’; one of the attributes of the Buddha.
- lokiya* Worldly, as contrasted to supramundane, *lokuttara*, (q.v.).
- lokuttara* Supramundane, transcendent.
- Luang Por (THAI) Literally, ‘venerable father’, a title of respect and affection for an elder monk and teacher.
- Luang Pu (THAI) Literally, ‘venerable grandfather’, a title of respect and affection for a very aged monk and teacher.
- M25 The 117 mile-long motorway that circles London; it is well-known for its traffic jams.
- Mahānikai The name of one of the two main lineages, or ‘*nikāya*’, of Buddhist monastic practice in Thailand. The other is the Dhammayut (q.v.).
- Mahā-siddha Literally, ‘one of great power’; the informal title of a group of spiritual adepts who have appeared over the centuries, mostly based in India and the Himalayas.

<i>mahāthera</i>	Literally, ‘great elder’; the honorific used for a monk who has been ordained for twenty years or more.
<i>māna</i>	Conceit; in contrast to the English usage of the word, which means the overestimation of one’s own qualities, personal vanity or pride, in the Buddhist sense ‘conceit’ involves the root conceiving of an independent identity or any judgement of one’s own qualities, regardless of whether that be positive, negative or neutral.
<i>mettā</i>	Loving-kindness, radical acceptance; one of the four Sublime Abidings.
<i>mettā bhāvanā</i>	A meditation practice based on the generating of <i>mettā</i> .
<i>moha</i>	Delusion; one of the three roots of unwholesomeness.
<i>muditā</i>	Altruistic, sympathetic joy; delight at the good fortune of others; one of the four Sublime Abidings.
<i>nāma-khandhas</i>	The four mental factors of the five <i>khandhas</i> (q.v.).
<i>Nibbāna</i> (PALI) (SKT. NIRVĀṆA)	Literally, ‘coolness’ – the state of liberation from all suffering and defilements, the goal of the Buddhist path.
Observance Day	The days of the four quarters of the moon (the full, new and two half moons) that mark the week, according to the classical Buddhist calendar. These are held as days to stop the usual routine of physical work, to spend time in meditation, study and perhaps to visit a monastery, all to strengthen spiritual practice of both the lay community and monastics.
<i>opanayiko</i>	Literally, ‘leading inwards’; one of the attributes of the Dhamma.

<i>paccataṃ veditabbo viññūhi</i>	Literally, ‘to be realized by each wise person for themselves’; one of the attributes of the Dhamma.
<i>pahātabban’ti paññā</i>	Literally, ‘it is to be let go of’. Wisdom.
<i>pansah</i>	The three month long Rains Retreat, held annually in monasteries of the Southern Buddhist world; it runs from the full moon of July to the full moon of October. Monastic ‘age’ for nuns and monks is measured in how many Rains one has been in robes.
<i>papañca</i>	Conceptual proliferation.
<i>papañca-sañña-saṅkhā</i>	Literally, ‘perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation that beset the heart and mind; the feeling of separation between a ‘me’ and ‘the world’, coupled with the tension between the two, based on wanting, fearing, hating or opinionating.
<i>paramattha sacca</i>	Ultimate or transcendent truth, as contrasted with conventional truth, <i>samutti sacca</i> (q.v.).
<i>pāramitā</i>	Literally, ‘means of going across’, perfection. The Ten Perfections in Theravāda Buddhism, essential for realizing Buddhahood, are: giving, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patience, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness and equanimity.
<i>parideva</i>	Lamentation, tearful sadness.
Parinibbāna	Complete or final Nibbāna; it is a term always applied to the cessation of the five <i>khandhas</i> (q.v.) at the passing away of an <i>Arahant</i> .

<i>paṭipatti</i>	The practice of Dhamma.
<i>pariyatti</i>	The study of Dhamma.
<i>pāṭimokkha</i>	The Buddhist monastic Rule; it is recited every fortnight, on the full and new moon days.
<i>pindapat</i>	(See alms-round, q.v.).
<i>piyatā</i>	Dearness.
<i>poo roo</i> (THAI)	Literally, ‘the one who knows’; depending on context, it is close in meaning to <i>daht roo</i> (q.v.).
<i>pūjā</i>	A devotional offering, chanting, bowing, etc.
<i>quod erat demonstrandum</i> (LATIN)	Short for ‘ <i>ipso facto quod erat demonstrandum</i> ’, meaning ‘the same fact which was to be demonstrated’.
<i>rāga</i>	Passion.
Rains Retreat	(See <i>pansah</i> , q.v.).
<i>raison</i> (FRENCH)	Reason; used as a shorthand for ‘ <i>raison d’être</i> ’, meaning ‘a reason to be’.
Right View	The first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path.
rishi (HINDI + ENG.)	An ascetic sage, in India, usually living in the forest or the wilderness of the mountains.
<i>rūpa-khandha</i>	Form or matter. The physical elements that make up the body, i.e. earth, water, fire and wind (representing solidity, cohesion, temperature and vibration).
<i>sacca</i>	Truth.

<i>saccikātabbanti</i>	Literally, ‘it is to be realized’.
<i>saddhā</i>	Faith.
<i>sakkāya diṭṭhi</i>	Self-view; identification with the body and personality. It is the first of the Ten Fetters, or obstacles to enlightenment.
<i>sālā</i>	A monastery hall, usually where the monastics eat and other ceremonies are held. In the tropics it is often a large, open-sided building.
<i>sāl tree</i>	A tropical tree, <i>Shorea robusta</i> .
<i>samādhi</i>	Meditative concentration, mental collectedness.
<i>samaṇa</i>	A renunciant, a religious wanderer; one who embraces simplicity, fewness of needs, harmlessness and a contemplative lifestyle.
<i>sāmaṇera</i>	A novice monk.
<i>sammuti sacca</i>	Conventional, designated truth, as contrasted with ultimate truth, <i>paramattha sacca</i> (q.v.).
<i>saṃyojanā</i>	The Ten Fetters, or obstacles to enlightenment.
<i>sandīṭṭhiko</i>	Literally, ‘apparent here and now’; one of the attributes of the Dhamma.
<i>saṅkhārā</i>	Mental formations, especially volitional impulses; all mental states such as thoughts, emotions, memories, fantasies, desires, aversions and fears, as well as states of concentration. It can also mean conditioned phenomena in general.

<i>sañkhāra dukkha</i>	The inherent unsatisfactoriness of all conditioned, compounded things.
<i>saññā</i>	Perception, the mental function of recognition.
<i>sāsana</i>	Religion.
<i>sati-paññā</i>	Mindfulness conjoined with wisdom.
self-view	(See <i>sakkāya diṭṭhi</i> , q.v.).
Shr Fu (CHINESE)	Literally, ‘venerable father’, a title of respect and affection for an elder monk and teacher.
<i>sīhanāda</i>	Literally, ‘a lion’s roar’; the forthright declaration of a principle of Dhamma.
<i>sīla</i>	Virtue, morality; this can refer to either the formal structure of skilful behaviours, as codified into various numbers and types of Precepts, according to an individual’s spiritual commitment or formal adoption of monastic training, or it can refer to virtue and the goodness-loving quality of the heart itself. This latter is also referred to as <i>guṇadhamma</i> .
<i>siṃsapa</i>	A tropical tree, <i>Dalbergia sisu</i> .
Sri Ariya Maitreya	Literally, ‘the holy, noble Maitreya’; this is the customary way Thai people speak of the predicted next Buddha. The Bodhisattva Maitreya is understood to be abiding in the Tusita Heaven at present and, when the conditions are right in the future, he will take his last birth and become the next Fully Self-enlightened Buddha.
stream-entry stream-enterer	One whose realization has transcended the first three Fetters or <i>saṃyojanā</i> (q.v.) or mental structures that block awakening.

These are: identification with one's body and personality; attachment to customs and systems; and wavering uncertainty as to what is the path to the realization of Dhamma. Having transcended these, a 'stream-enterer' is said to inevitably realize complete awakening within a maximum of seven lifetimes. The other three of the four stages of enlightenment are *sakadāgāmi*, *anāgāmi*, *Arahant* (once returner, non-returner, fully enlightened person).

sukha Happiness, contented ease.

suñña Empty.

Sutta (PALI) Literally, 'a thread'; a discourse given by the Buddha or one of his disciples.
sūtra (SKT.)

taṇhā Craving; self-centred desire.

tapas Literally, 'heat'; in common usage it means the austerities that are practised in the hope that they will bring spiritual power.

Tāvatiṃsa Heaven Literally, 'The Heaven of the Thirty-Three'; one of the lower sensual heavens in Buddhist cosmology.

The Pond A colloquialism for the Atlantic Ocean.

The Three Refuges The Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha; also known as the Triple Gem.

Trichiliocosm A grandiloquent term used in Northern Buddhist scriptures to describe the vastness of the cosmos as a whole. In this Buddhist cosmology the universe is said to be comprised of three thousand clusters of world-systems each of which consists of a thousand worlds.

- tudong* (THAI) From the Pali *dhutaṅga*; it refers the practice of walking for weeks or months in remote places with no guarantee of food or lodging.
- upādāna* Grasping, clinging, attachment.
- upāsikā* A female lay Buddhist.
- upāya* A skilful means; the use of an ingenious and effective method of dealing with a situation.
- upekkhā* Serenity, equanimity; one of the four Sublime Abidings.
- vassa* (See *pansah*, q.v.).
- vibhava-taṅhā* Literally, ‘the craving to not exist’; the desire to get rid of, to not feel or for non-being; this is named as one of the three causes of *dukkha* in the Buddha’s first discourse.
- vijjā* Awakened awareness, transcendent knowing, insight knowledge, genuine understanding.
- Vijjācaraṇa-sampanno* Literally, ‘perfect in knowledge and conduct’, ‘impeccable in conduct and understanding’; one of the attributes of the Buddha.
- vijjā-dhātu* (See *daht roo*, q.v.).
- vīmaṃsā* Reviewing. Consideration of the results of an action that has been taken. One of the four *iddhipāda*, the ‘bases of success’ or ‘roads to power’.
- Vinaya* The Buddhist monastic discipline, or the scriptural collection of its rules and commentaries on them.

- viññāṇa* Usually means ‘sense-consciousness’ or ‘discriminative consciousness’, the process whereby there is seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking; rare uses of the word, contrastingly, have it mean ‘transcendent, awakened awareness’.
- vipassanā* Insight; this can refer to either the type of meditation that leads to the development of wisdom or the quality of wisdom that arises from it.
- vipassanā-kammaṭṭhāna* Literally, ‘the basis of the practice of insight’; often used, in the Thai forest tradition, as a way of referring to the work of meditation.
- vitakka* Discursive, conceptual thought.
- Wat Nong Pah Pong The monastery in North-East Thailand founded by Ajahn Chah and where he did most of his teaching.
- Wat Suan Gluoy A small and, in its early days, notably austere branch monastery, established by Ajahn Chah in North-East Thailand.
- yogi A meditator; a spiritual practitioner.
- yoniso manasikāra* Wise reflection.

ABBREVIATIONS

- D** DĪGHA NIKĀYA
THE LONG DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA
- M** MAJJHIMA NIKĀYA
THE MIDDLE LENGTH DISCOURSES OF THE BUDDHA
- S** SAṂYUTTA NIKĀYA
THE DISCOURSES RELATED BY SUBJECT
- A** AṄGUTTARA NIKĀYA
THE DISCOURSES RELATED BY NUMBERS
- UD** UDĀNA
THE INSPIRED UTTERANCES
- SN** SUTTA NIPĀTA
A COLLECTION OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS, IN VERSE FORM
- DHP** DHAMMAPADA
A COLLECTION OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS, IN VERSE FORM

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'GO NOT KNOWING WHERE, TAKE NOT KNOWING WHAT, STAY-THE WAY UNKNOWN'
BY AJAHN THITADHAMMO

HAPPILY EVER AFTER
REFLECTIONS ON LIFE GOALS AND PRIORITIES
THE ANTHOLOGY
AJAHN AMARO

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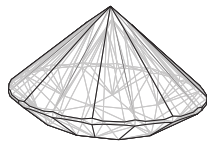
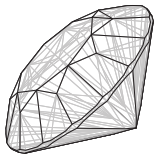
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