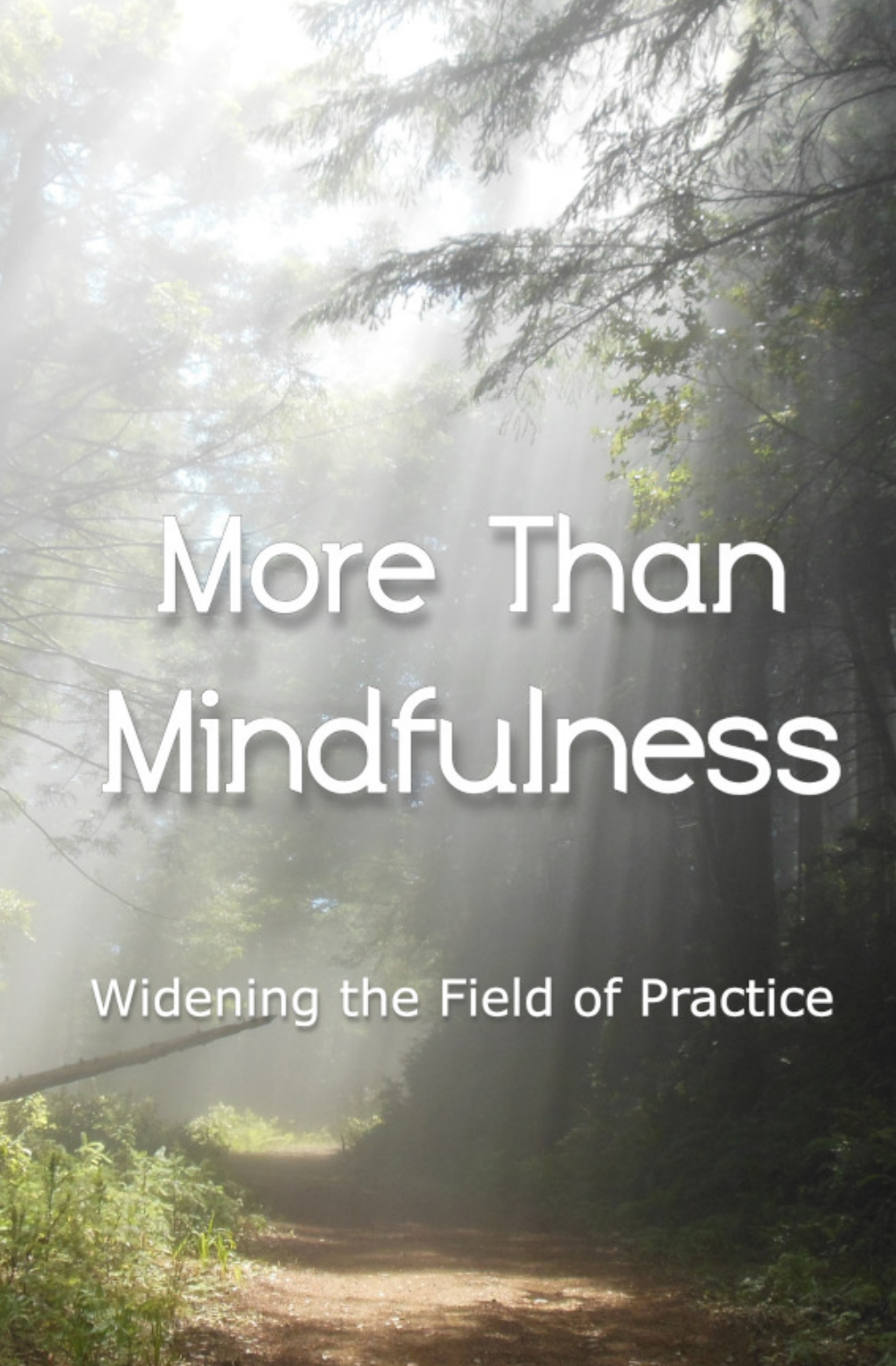
More Than
Mindfulness
Widening the Field of Practice

More Than Mindfulness

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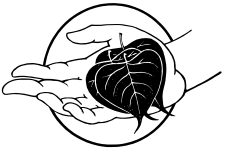

Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery

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This book is dedicated to Luang Por Pasanno
with respect and gratitude, and to honour
his 50 years of monastic life.

Paṭinissaggo is relinquishment, is letting go, and oftentimes that relinquishment, when it is expressed or explained, is not just the relinquishment of goods, of material things, or even of moods and feelings and defilements, but a letting go of the sense of self. A letting go of the glue that holds the clinging together, a relinquishment of the I identification.

Of course, on a practice level, the way to do that, is the relinquishment of the expressions of that sense of I, the desires, the moods, the views, and the opinions. Those are the expressions, the tail end of the infatuation with the I. To get to the root of it you need to practice relinquishment on those expressions, on those manifestations of the I delusion. The heart really needs to leap forward at that letting go. It needs to recognise the opportunity one has of fulfilling the path by being willing to relinquish and let go. We're usually so hopelessly enmeshed in our moods and identifications with our own suffering or our righteousness or our hopes of gratification, that to try to conceive of relinquishment doesn't even flicker through the mind and then we wonder why we suffer.

If we really want to experience a cessation of suffering that quality of *paṭinissaggo*, of relinquishment, has to be there.

Luang Por Pasanno

From the talk 'What's the Point'
given at Abhayagiri Monastery
July 17, 2008.

Contents

Foreword

Ajahn Chah was a teacher who had a unique ability to teach and train people from all different sorts of backgrounds and even cultures. One of the ways that he emphasized for conveying the teachings of the Buddha, and the practices of mindfulness and meditation, was to incorporate them into the lifestyle in the monastery and encourage people to be reflecting throughout all their activities as to the quality of their minds and intentions. When we carry the practice into our daily life like this, in the context of living with others, we inevitably learn about our habits, conditioning, views and preferences, in a way that is both humbling and freeing. Mindfulness is not seen as just a technique of meditation training but as a way to learn how to train in being a better human being.

Beth Steff has been practising at the monasteries associated with the traditions of Ajahn Chah in the West now for many years. She spent six years with us at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in California, USA. After returning to her home country of New Zealand, Beth was feeling inspired by the examples of living a life of mindfulness that she experienced in the monasteries and wanted to share that with others.

She then started compiling talks by some of the different teachers in the western branches of the Ajahn Chah monasteries. The result is this book, which hopes to convey the techniques and benefits of different perspectives of applying Buddhist practice in our day-to-day life. Hopefully, it will expand the reader's focus to further understand and integrate the way of practice that the Buddha laid down and give people the opportunity to appreciate how this

path of integrity, clarity and discernment works to free the human heart from its entanglements.

May the sincere intention behind this book bring forth the fruits of well-being and peace.

Ajahn Pasanno

Preface

My introduction to the Dhamma began formally with a temple stay in Bodhgaya in 1979. However, through my childhood I had deliberately sought out quiet places in Nature, often in the forest, and would settle down to sit there, absorbing the serenity they offered. After India, I attended different Meditation Retreats and found them very beneficial. I would go on retreat and feel really good. But after a week back home that 'good' feeling diminished. I hadn't assimilated any teachings sufficiently to apply them in a grounded, consistent, and practical way. I hadn't realized the path was a whole lot more than wanting to feel 'good'. A whole lot more than being about 'me'.

In my residence and training at Abhayagiri Monastery in California, I developed more proficiency integrating the Noble Eight-Fold path into daily life. The path of Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness and Right Concentration. In monastery life, I valued a place where Dhamma practice was seamlessly woven through the days; informing, guiding, and teaching me. There was a strong emphasis on using investigation to understand my suffering, stress, and dissatisfaction. Community life gives one a lot of material to work with! The duty within the First Noble Truth is to understand suffering. Then by paying attention to its causes, the work of relinquishing those causes becomes clearer. To become better at identifying and then changing, personal patterns, ingrained habits, tendencies, distorted perceptions, and unskilful interactions. To become better at understanding where the expressions of greed, anger and delusion

are at work. To become more skilful using a toolbox of practices for the relinquishment of those expressions.

One can experience encouraging results from that approach. Through the application of Right Effort: seeing that wholesome states are increasing, and unwholesome states are decreasing. There could be less frustration, confusion, conflict, judgement, and doubt. There could be more kindness, clarity, perseverance, patience, simplicity, generosity, and trust. The witnessing awareness developed with mindfulness highlighted more and more of the attitudes and behaviours that caused stress. Through diligently allowing this awareness to be the guide, one can see and start to let go of obstructions to a calm and clear mind. In that way the Third Noble Truth, the cessation of suffering, may become more evident. The core teaching is to know and let go.

I lived in a community of devoted practitioners, Buddhist monks in the Western Ajahn Chah lineage. I lived and worked alongside Debbie Stamp, who helped to start the monastery and has been in service to it for many years. Luang Por Pasanno, who was the Abbot through my residence, is a gifted teacher and an impeccable role model. I found his teachings to be succinct, accessible, and immediately applicable. They were offered with humour, compassion, and humility, drawing on experiential wisdom from his fifty years of monastic training.

After weeks, months and years as a monastery resident I acknowledged how much the ethical guidelines, renunciation and lifestyle eroded personal preferences and tendencies. There is very little that one gets a lot of choice about. Commitment to the daily and weekly schedule means what you do, where, when and how you do it, are decisions made by, and in service to, the whole community. Protocols and processes respecting the monastic code of conduct also become internalised guidelines. As time passes it all becomes less about me and more about 'us'. That perspective means that the more self-oriented inclinations become easier to notice and, over time, relinquish. Daily practice and teachings support developing an inner refuge offering stability and discernment, regardless of the ups and downs inevitably encountered in meditation or community.

Many helpful contemplations, anecdotes and practices are shared that support navigating the journey. This collection of teachings is simply a sample of what is on offer.

Mindfulness has made its way into many aspects of Western life. Many people benefit from bringing more presence and focus to their lives. Many of the Buddha's wise teachings show us that there is more than mindfulness. The Buddha taught that mindfulness is one factor within groups of factors. One group of factors constitutes the profound Noble Eightfold path; the path that needs to be developed to liberate the heart. The factors work together as a team and do not stand alone.

There are other groups as well; the Factors of Awakening are mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquillity, concentration, and equanimity. Mindfulness has very essential foundation practices, such as ethical conduct, generosity, loving kindness, faith, and integrity. Like the ground floor of a high-rise building, all foundations need to be firmly embedded and sturdy before another storey is added.

This small collection of teachings may serve as an introduction to the breadth and depth of mindfulness and Dhamma practice. The wise teachers are some of those who are residents or who visited Abhayagiri Monastery over the years I lived there. My hope is that a topic, a teacher, or a paragraph, may touch you, may encourage you, may arouse a curiosity to explore further. I offer it with a heart imbued with gratitude for all I have been fortunate to receive in the Ajahn Chah lineage, and for the kindness and support of many friends.

Beth Steff

Acknowledgements

I would imagine anyone who undertakes a project like this may experience overwhelm along the way, I certainly did! It is one thing to imagine that a collection of talks would be beneficial, and a totally other thing, to make it happen. Below I will mention people who were engaged in specific ways, but so many more have offered thoughts, suggestions, and encouragement. They really helped to maintain momentum when the task felt very daunting! Thank you to friends who supported my Buddhist studies, which were the seed for this project.

Thank you to the people who gave their precious time and effort in various ways. The wise teachers who gave permission for the talks to be part of this collection, some had their students do the transcriptions. Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro who were supportive mentors along the way. Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Asoko recorded four reflections, and Ajahn Asoko edited those chapters. Thank you to the transcribers of these talks, particularly Kristin Ohlson, who did the bulk of that work; then volunteered to proofread the draft of the book. My friend, Tom Beran, a retired editor, who worked with the entire manuscript. Jenny Elliott, in New Zealand, who did the final edit and then proofread the draft of the book. Ajahn Sudhiro at Abhayagiri Monastery who read through the draft copy. Nina Piyashevi, in New Zealand, who designed the cover. Nick Halliday's guidance was really valuable. Ajahn Suhajjo checked over the Pali, then offered to create the online PDF book. He also played a key role in getting printing of the book in place. Many thanks to Abhayagiri Monastery for choosing to print this book.

The Need for Balance

Ajahn Pasanno

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on September 13th, 2019.

This afternoon, one of the laymen who attended the meal offering, offered to give me a massage. He's a really good masseur. While sitting meditating, I noticed how good I felt. The body was relaxed, comfortable and at ease. I was thinking, the body feeling at ease is one thing, but our Dhamma practice is for making the mind feel at ease. It is for having the mind, having the heart releasing, relaxing and settling. That is the purpose of the practice. In the same way that having a good massage relaxes all the areas of the body, similarly, training the mind can bring a real sense of ease. The training works with a whole range of different aspects and qualities for the heart to really settle. That's why many of the teachings of the Buddha are not just to do one thing – just be mindful or just be wise or just be patient. There are all these different qualities that we need to be attending to and bringing into balance.

A common set of teachings the Buddha gives are the five spiritual faculties: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom: *saddhā*, *viriya*, *sati*, *samādhi*, *paññā*. These are things to be working on and cultivating. One can be looking at them as qualities to be working on in a linear way. First you lay a foundation for a sense of faith, confidence, trust and when one does that there is some energy, so effort arises. As we put forth that energy and effort, mindfulness arises, and attention needs to be cared for. As these qualities start to gain momentum in the mind, then the heart will settle. The heart will become more composed, it will become

more still. With that as a foundation, then wisdom, discernment and understanding arise. That's looking at it from a linear perspective. There is a certain validity to it, but I don't think that's the whole picture because there are also the qualities of balancing that need to be attended to. A sense of faith and wisdom informing each other, the first quality and the last quality. We have to learn how to have those qualities inform each other, to have those qualities nourish and support each other. Because faith needs to be informed by wisdom and discernment, otherwise it is just blindly believing something. Or there is excitement and enthusiasm with faith, but it is not being tempered by reflection, investigation and discernment. Similarly, the wisdom faculty needs to be tempered with faith and confidence and trust, because you can't just be analyzing and logically pounding out a system of practice through the intellect. It just doesn't work. It is not satisfying. As intelligent as one can be, if one is just relying on the intellect and rationality, then it doesn't go very deep. It is pretty superficial.

The aspects of energy and effort need to be balanced to bring a certain stillness and composure, because energy can be agitating, or even on a certain level it can be addictive. 'I've got to do more, I've got to push myself, I've got to really keep pushing, I've got to put more energy in. The more I do, the more I will achieve.' Well, not really. That isn't necessarily true, because sometimes the more effort we put in, the more frantic and agitated the mind becomes. So, it needs to have the qualities of settling and stilling. It needs that composure element, it needs *samādhi*. That firm establishment of the mind, as a balance and as a support. They need to feed each other. And if we are constantly just trying to still the mind, trying to compose and settle the mind, without applying some effort and energy with it, then it often tends towards dullness. It tends towards a kind of turgid quality in the mind, which can be like sludge. 'I'll keep focusing the mind and one pointing the mind and making the mind more and more still,' and then it just sinks into this puddle of quicksand. It isn't bright. There needs to be some energy in the system, but it needs to be balanced.

You need to be attuning to these different qualities. That's what mindfulness is for. Mindfulness, awareness, attention that's checking in on, what am I experiencing? Is it useful? Is it beneficial? Is it in line with the Dhamma? Mindfulness isn't just some global awareness; it isn't a non-discriminating attention. Mindfulness has got work to do and it needs to be alert. It needs to be attentive. With these different qualities of faith, confidence, wisdom, discernment, effort, energy, stillness, composure, and mindfulness working together, then there can be a felt sense of release from *dukkha*. When they are functioning together, there's a release from that sense of stress, discontent, dissatisfaction and dis-ease. In the way I was reflecting on my experience of the massage – after having a massage, the body was feeling really light. There was a felt sense of ease. Similarly, in the mind, in the heart, there is this sense of ease and freedom from *dukkha*.

The Buddha says over and over again, 'I teach only two things: suffering and the cessation of suffering.' Suffering has the whole spectrum of dis-ease, of discontent, along with the ending of it. One needs to take an interest. It is not so much, how do I get that but what do I do in order to support the experience of ease and well-being? To support the freedom from suffering? The spiritual faculties are good parameters and reminders, but that is just one set of teachings that the Buddha gave. It's a good start. It is a good boundary, but there's many different ways to nurture and support that sense of well-being and growth in the Dhamma. That is something that we need to be considering, not just what do I do in meditation to feel better? It's also what do I do in my daily life so that I feel a sense of ease and well-being? How do I integrate this into my life? Whether it's in a monastery or whether it's in society with a job and a family, what qualities are helpful?

Of course, there's an endless number of things to point to, but I think there's some recurrent themes that consistently come up when teachers advise people who are interested in the Dhamma. Certainly, the precepts lay a really firm foundation for how we guide our daily life. Viewing the precepts, not just as restrictive guidelines which force me to give up certain behaviors, but looking

at what really makes me feel good. And what makes others feel good? So having a commitment to non-harming, not taking the life of any living creature, not threatening some other life form.

When we steep ourselves in that, we feel good. It is the same with not taking what isn't given. Steeping ourselves in the commitment to honesty, the commitment to respecting the belongings of others. Especially when we think of trust. I use trust often with the word faith. Faith, confidence and trust. Those words have similar qualities. For ourselves, how do we trust ourselves? How do we have faith in ourselves? Well, it's that commitment to honesty, it's a commitment to respect. Again, that gives a certain strength within the heart that is very supportive in our practice. To be reflecting on the precepts in this way: there is the precept around sexual relationships, 'I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct'. But it is also how we relate to each other in a respectful way so that there is trust in our relationships with each other. It lays a foundation for us to experience a sense of trust and self-confidence.

That's something the Buddha points to as a benefit of having kept the precepts and forming a basis of integrity with our actions of body and speech. There is confidence when we go into different assemblies of people, when we interact with people. Whether it is a small or large number, whether it's people with authority or not, there is a sense of confidence that is underlying our relationships and interactions with other people. Again, there is a sense of ease when we engage with others. I think of Ajahn Chah as one of the foremost examples of that. He was at ease whether he was with farmers, merchants, military, or foreigners. There's just this ease and straightforwardness that comes from the precepts, that comes from that foundation. It is something that the Buddha points to as a benefit that arises.

And certainly, that is the case with the fourth precept around speech. When we are committed to truth, when we are committed to non-harming, it's not that there needs to be some super wise application as to how we relate. We are committed to right speech, to not gossiping, not telling tales, and not wasting our energy in

frivolous speech. In the scriptural language, the word that is translated as frivolous speech is very illustrative of what the Buddha is pointing to. It is *samphappalāpa*, it is onomatopoeic. You can just hear someone blathering along about nothing. So much of speech is not necessary, is not useful. Rather than distracting ourselves and distracting others with frivolous speech, we have a settled quality inside. Again, there is an ease that comes from that.

There is a commitment to the precepts not because we are afraid of some punishment or that there is some sort of punitive aspect to transgressing the precepts, but because it feels much better to be within the bounds of the precepts. It is for our cessation of suffering; it is for experiencing that sense of ease and well-being.

The last precept of refraining from intoxicants of various kinds is for keeping the mind as clear as possible. We already have the intoxicating habits of greed, hatred and delusion, and all of their ramifications. So, we refrain from the various kinds of substances that can intoxicate the mind and create more dullness and confusion. It is a commitment to clarity. And as we continue with that, we understand that the Buddha's teachings help us to refine that commitment to clarity, to truth, to well-being.

There are other aspects, other qualities of heart and qualities of being that are helpful in our spiritual quest. The quality of respect. The first person to be respectful towards is yourself. What is it that would really prevent me from doing something unskilful or harmful? I really don't want to create suffering. I do not want to do something which is hurtful or harmful. It's not what I would want to experience. Not wanting to bring that into one's heart, not wanting to bring that into one's being. It's because one respects oneself that one is committed to not nurturing anger and ill-will. Not nurturing the kind of greed that ends up being selfish and self-centered. That isn't respecting myself. I deserve better than that. Considering that simple reflection, that simple respect.

What are the things that are worthy of respect? What can I give my respect to? One respects oneself, but then what else is worthy of respect? Certainly, for a Buddhist, there are the refuges of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. They are worthy of respect

because they embody or exemplify those qualities that we aspire to. The Buddha is the prime example of an awakened being, an enlightened being. An example of one who has completely freed the heart. That is really worthy of respect. The Dhamma, the teachings, lay out a path of practice and training that give us the possibility of understanding and liberating ourselves. That is worthy of respect. The Sangha are those who practise well. When we do the chanting, we chant the qualities of the Sangha: one who practises well, one who practises directly, one who practises insightfully, one who practises with integrity. Those are the qualities of the Sangha and are worthy of respect. It is not just having robes and taking a formal ordination, because when we ordain our defilements ordain with us. It's about practice. It's about training. And that includes whoever takes on the practice fully and experiences the fruits of practice.

The traditional chant that we do goes back to the time of the Buddha. The Buddha spoke of the qualities of the Sangha. He spoke of the Sangha as a refuge, of the Sangha as an object of veneration. These are the qualities of the Sangha: '*Supaṭipanno bhagavato sāvakasaṅgho*' and it goes all the way through. These are the Blessed One's disciples. The four pairs, the eight kinds of noble beings: those who experience the path and the fruit of the practice. The four pairs are the path and fruit. They are the path of practice and the fruit of the practice: stream enterer, once returner, non-returner and arahant. This is the Sangha of the Buddha's noble disciples, whether an ordained person or a layperson. Just knowing that there are these fruits of practice, and that they are worthy of respect. Respect is a quality that nurtures and supports our practice.

Ajahn Chah would repeatedly emphasize another quality that is very essential for our practice – patience. Just willing to be patient. We want to experience the fruits of practice immediately. We want to gain knowledge and understanding immediately. We want to get it quickly. That's understandable but again it's a process that we have to trust, we have to get a feeling for. We need to develop confidence in this process of training. This is where Ajahn Chah uses that simile of being patient and diligent with putting in the causes and conditions. It's like planting a tree. You must dig a hole for a

tree to be planted. You get the right mixture of earth and dirt. You have fertilizer that you put in. You water it regularly and depending on the kind of tree it is, it's going to give fruit in a different way. It doesn't take very long for chilli peppers or tomatoes. Within just a few months there are already tomatoes available. Whereas, when you plant an apple tree or a coconut tree, it takes ages before the coconuts actually show up. You have to be patient with the process.

It's the same with ourselves. We don't really know what kind of person we are. Some people experience the fruits of the practice slowly. Some people experience those fruits quickly. But the process of cultivation, the process of developing and balancing all these different faculties, it is very, very similar and the fruits of the practice do come. It's the nature of this Dhamma. The Buddha was extremely confident in the efficacy of this path to the point where you don't have to believe in him. Here are the tools, here is the path, here is the practice. Do it and the fruits will appear. The Buddha was immensely confident and assured in his teaching. This is the way it works. This is the human condition. There is this suffering. There is this possibility of freedom from this suffering. This is the way to do it. The Buddha is not going to do it for us. It doesn't matter to him whether anybody else does it. He is already freed from suffering. It is the same with the other great teachers. They know for themselves what the path of practice is. They've experienced the fruits of it. They encourage, they teach, and they set examples. If people don't follow the path, if people don't practise, it's not a source of suffering for them. It is an opportunity that the person themselves is missing out on.

So, that sense of being patient with the practice. Being patient with the conditions of our life. Often patience is seen as just putting up with something unpleasant until it is over. But patience is about being willing to be present with, whatever conditions we are experiencing. Being patient with happiness or ease. When we start to feel a sense of ease and happiness, it can be easy to start to drift, 'Oh, I am getting somewhere now.' But you need to be patient even with that feeling of happiness and peace. Because it's important to let that settle and let it unfold into a deeper understanding, a deeper

drawing close to truth, a drawing close to a freedom of heart. It's so easy sometimes to start to feel peaceful or happy and say, 'Oh, now I have got somewhere, now I'll go do something else.' That is not being patient with it. Have the patience to let it really unfold.

So, developing qualities of respect and patience. Developing a commitment to integrity and commitment to the process of the path. Recognizing that there are many different factors that need to come together: faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom. These need to work together, they need to be balanced. Learning how to implement and live this path in our daily life. To live this path in the circumstances that we are in, whether it's on the cushion or on our walking meditation path, or when we attend to our responsibilities and duties. These are the qualities that give us an opportunity to experience a freedom from suffering – to experience the peace and well-being that the Dhamma can give us.

Mindfulness with Wisdom

Ajahn Sumedho

This recording was made for this project by Luang Por Sumedho, kindly supported by Ajahn Asoko at Amaravati Monastery in July 2021.

QUESTION. When I ask you how one cultivates mindfulness, you are quite adamant that one does not cultivate mindfulness. You say that one cultivates right understanding or wisdom. Can you elaborate on that?

AJAHN SUMEDHO. You don't cultivate it because you are mindful. The Buddha was often pointing out that consciousness without wisdom tends to be the cause of suffering. The first step on the Noble Eightfold path is *sammā-diṭṭhi*, which is right understanding or wisdom. You don't cultivate mindfulness, but it supports a transformation from seeking distraction through the senses to being the witness to the mental states. It supports being witness to the Four Foundations of Mindfulness which are the body, the feelings, the states of mind, and dhamma or phenomena. Then there is mindfulness with wisdom, with conscious awareness. If you try to get mindfulness as a kind of personal endeavour, you don't know who you are at all. It indicates that you are operating from an assumption that mindfulness is something you've got to get, rather than something that is naturally present, here and now.

Unless they are drunk or drugged, most people are aware whenever they are crossing the street or driving a car. Their very existence depends on being aware of dangers, and the instinctual intelligence operates. That intelligence is mindful of potential

dangers and problems that arise in the world, that arise in the conditioned realm. But when there is a lack of wisdom, there is always this sense of going out, of sending conscious awareness out through the senses to the sense objects. One is continually identified with the sensory experiences that one has: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. That identity with the senses results from a lack of wisdom. There's no wisdom in that, it's just habit patterns that you develop from early childhood through to old age. Without wisdom, even at 100 years old, you are still operating as being a physical body. You are operating as a personality according to the conditioning you have had through the three fetters: personality view, *sakkāya-diṭṭhi*; attachment to cultural and social conditioning, *sīlabbata-parāmāsa*; and doubt that is born of thinking, *vicikicchā.*

The suffering is always the result of a lack of wisdom. When there is wisdom and right understanding, then the rest follows from that. So right mindfulness comes from wisdom. It's not that you cultivate it. It's the result of wisdom being the foundation, of wisdom being the very foundation of reality, here and now. When there is wisdom one sees the senses, the eyes, the ears, the nose, the tongue, the body, the mind and their objects as conditioned phenomena that are constantly changing. Grasping and identifying with those conditioned phenomena is the cause of suffering.

You can cultivate mindfulness with concentration practices focusing on objects and grasping the object to absorption. You are still sending consciousness out through the senses and refining it. But with right understanding there is wisdom that recognizes the sense world, recognizes the senses themselves, and recognizes the sense objects as objects. Through wisdom, you begin to see that the sense of being a person, of being a personality with desire to get rid of defilements, to get rid of personal problems, or to get what you don't have, results from a limited self-view. You operate from the limited view that you are a physical body, a person, a personality. If that is never recognized, even if you always operate from best intentions, you end up suffering as a result. The whole point of *anattā*, the characteristic of not-self, is to see through this

personality view that we hold out of habit, not out of choice. We're conditioned through cultural and social conditioning to operate from this sense of I am this body, I am this person, I am a separate person from you. As you grow up, that whole perception is never challenged, until you begin to investigate suffering. Why do I suffer as a person? Conditioned phenomena are about differences, they are not about perfection.

Some people are born beautiful, and others are born ugly or disabled or blind or mentally retarded. They're born according to the kamma of the parents. They receive the hereditary genes from their parents and the rest is conditioned. The body is a condition. It is what you inherit as a physical state, and then you identify with it. The Buddha was pointing to ultimate reality. The physical body is not a person. All the perceptions that you hold through identification as a physical body are based on that basic delusion. That's why this realm of *saṃsāra*, the endless cycle of birth and death, is a realm of suffering because it always ends in death. The body is going to die eventually. Even if you live to 100 years, that's nothing compared to the age of the universe. And if you don't develop wisdom, at the end of 100 years, you will be still operating from delusions about yourself and the world. In his first sermon, the Buddha says very clearly, that the Noble Truth of suffering is to be understood. We start with something that is realizable here and now. This attachment we have, this identity with conditioned phenomena, is the cause of suffering.

With wisdom, you are investigating. You are not just believing Buddhist doctrines anymore, but you are engaging in investigation. Am I really a physical body? Is that all I am? Am I just this physical form and these habitual mental states of ego? These habitual states with their cultural biases and conditioning. No matter how many conditions you accumulate, no matter how beautiful or excellent they might be, they are still impermanent. They are going to fail us. There is no refuge in phenomena because its very nature is change. It is wisdom that is aware of the change.

We can recognize change in some ways, like the changing of the seasons. But what doesn't change? What is it that doesn't change

when all the changingness is going on? Does mindfulness change? If it's always going out to objects, then it changes from one object to the next because you can see the desultory movement of mental states. For example, you hear something and then you see something and then you are distracted into feeling some unpleasant physical sensation, such as an itch or an irritation. Then a mosquito bites you and you feel annoyed. You know how the mental states change according to the conditions. You are caught in that incessant movement, caught in that desultory movement. We begin to see this as just the habits of being identified with the senses and their objects. And with that identification we suffer accordingly. The ego is where we operate from when there is ignorance. But when we see that our true nature is awareness, there is conscious awareness of the senses and their objects. Then the personality, the ego becomes an object rather than a subject.

If you disagree with me because you don't feel the same way, or you have a totally different view of what I am saying, then we get into arguments. And you're not aware of what you are doing. You are just operating from your intellect or your personal feelings in the moment. You are operating out of habit, from conditioning, from biases and prejudices, which are all objects that arise and cease. There is no wisdom in that, there is just habit.

The Dhamma is a refuge in Theravada Buddhism. We can take refuge in the Dhamma, and still be totally ignorant. We may not even know what Dhamma is. We just believe in something called the Dhamma, but we are not aware. And that's a belief. Is taking refuge in the Dhamma something you believe in? Or is the Dhamma as a refuge something that is reality, that is recognized through wisdom and awareness? With wisdom and awareness, you can let go of the desires that we tend to blindly hold to and act upon all the time. You can let go of the causes of suffering.

Feeling Creates the Person

Ajahn Sucitto

This reflection was offered on May 31st, 2021 at Cittaviveka Monastery, UK, as part of the 6-day online retreat 'Clearing the Floods – Dealing with Internal and External Overload'.

Summary: The effect of feeling, agreeable or disagreeable, touches the *citta*. The practice is not to contract around the resonance, don't grab the feeling. It's the clinging reflex that creates the person. Maintain open stable presence – go bigger and wider than the activations – and the grasping lessens.

Wherever you are, however it is, be aware of feeling – agreeable or disagreeable – and the effect, the shimmering, the resonance when feeling touches the *citta*, the heart. Our practice is to not contract around the resonance, to not grasp feeling. Pleasant feeling – let it roll through; unpleasant feeling – let it roll through, aim to return to a stable, open presence. There's a strengthening and a cooling effect that comes from that.

Feeling is one of what we call the five *khandhas*, the five aggregates affected by clinging. It's not that somebody clings, but just that this is what can occur around feeling. Clinging is a reflex, and it's where kamma arises. That is, when feeling arises, we get activated and then the mind starts moving, wanting more or wanting less or forming various scenarios, particularly around unpleasant feeling: 'This shouldn't happen!' 'What's wrong?' 'Why me?' This is the action of the heart and mind, and it is often the grit of daily life. There's much activation around impressions and feelings –

and the consequent interpretations that the mind creates in terms of self and other people. We may arrive at the sense that one has done wrong or that wrong has been done to oneself. Whether that is correct or not, but right now, before we can have a measured response to that, we have to tackle the feeling and any reaction and where all that leaves us.

Feeling is not personal, but it's subjective. It begins the process that creates a person. Unpleasant feeling in terms of how we act can bring up the sense of being a person who has done wrong or has been wronged or left out and so on. People in general carry a huge amount of this; things happen in terms of action, kamma, and the felt results of that creates this 'person'. Then we become the confused one, or the one who's talked down to, or the one who's clumsy, insensitive, guilty, fearful or doomed. 'Why is it that this kind of experience always happens to me?' Then we carry around a doomed sense about things that we have no final control over, such as succeeding or missing the mark, pleasing or offending or confusing others. Then we become that flawed person again.

Certainly, it's good to work on how we behave and are responded to, but the success rate is not that high. Even in the case of the Buddha – people tried to kill him! So, instead of trying to be the person who gets everything right, who everybody likes and is always feeling bright and never makes a mistake, we look at how things turn out and consider, 'Something could be strengthened here; something could be learned here.' But what's *really* powerful and transformative is to not make a person out of feeling.

So, if you review your day, notice the places where something seemed to have gone right or gone wrong and who you feel you have become by the end of that day, or in fact in any particular moment in time. Who's that? How is that? Perception means you have an impression, and impression generates the feeling: they come together. So, perception is just another aggregate and the normal response is the fourth aggregate, *saṅkhāra*. This is the aggregate of activations, the mental agitations, the flurry and worry, the ill-will, the sadness that occurs. We must be very alert around these activations. They can be quelled. It's not possible to not experience

unpleasant feeling, but it's possible to not get the activations; or to contemplate the activations and to get bigger, wider and steadier than them.

This is practice and it gives rise to quiet strength and clarity. The grasping of feeling lessens, and a coolness and steadiness arises. From that place, you contemplate the tides of the world, the so-called 'worldly winds' – happiness and unhappiness, gain and loss, success and failure, being respected and included or being ignored and excluded. This is what we have to meet and know as they are. But in so doing, our full aware presence can stand in a place of steadiness. This is something that a 'person' can't do. This full aware presence is the result of Dhamma cultivation.

As you are coming to the end of a period of Dhamma cultivation, take the opportunity to congratulate yourself. This is not egotistical, but based on the recognition that to cultivate true Dhamma is really tough sometimes. Living Dhamma is penetrative and meets lots of sensitive points. So, to maintain presence, perspective and keep the precepts is an impressive practice. As you cultivate, you get more capable of discharging the intensities, the floods and the overwhelms. You acknowledge them, you meet them and discharge them, and you can linger in the effect of that release. Take that in, appreciate that.

Whenever there is truth and an acknowledgement of it, *citta* manifests a radiant quality. This feeds the faith that sustains the practice. So let a sense of gladness arise about having avoided unskilful reactions and responses, having checked them, or at least having understood them. Allow for some appreciative gladness to be felt in order to sustain right view of the Path. Because even though the Path can be rocky at times, it goes one way – towards unbinding, dispassion, and release. These are the rare and powerful results of Dhamma practice.

Mindfulness, Vitality and Inquiry

Ajahn Vīradhammo

This talk was given in Ottawa on January 23rd, 2008.

I would like to reflect on the seven factors of enlightenment.

The teachings of the Buddha are vast. The Buddha taught for 45 years, and he gathered a lot of disciples. There is a vast body of knowledge that has been passed down to us and it is very rich. The Buddha seems to have taught very much from time and place; he pitched teachings to the audience or person that he was talking to. He didn't sit down and write it all out. It was very much time and place. It was focused on the person, where the person was at, what was going to serve their needs. Maybe it would be silence, maybe it would be a challenging question, maybe it would be a discourse. He taught in many different situations. Whatever teaching we take, it is always good to bear in mind that it is in the context of a much larger body of teachings.

I tend to focus on the training of the mind. Sometimes I don't talk enough about morality, precepts, ethics, and things like that. I live a very disciplined lifestyle and sometimes I am not terribly interested in that aspect. And yet it is terribly important, isn't it? To live a good life, to live an ethical life, to practise goodness, to practise altruism, and to be sensitive to each other. There are so many things which are very fundamental to an authentic spiritual life. Sometimes the teachings around the mind can sound selfish if they are taken out of that context. 'I am just going to work on

myself and not take care of my family and my society.' There is a huge emphasis in Buddhism on good old-time religion: being grateful, being content, being frugal, being moral, being responsible and not killing, not hurting, and so on. All religious teachings have that. Sometimes when they are taught one can think, 'I have to be grateful, I have to be content.' It becomes an egotistical imperative: 'I must be this and I must be that.' One can feel guilty for not being grateful. But if you contemplate gratitude, what does that do for you? And then contemplate whingeing. What does that do for you? How does it feel? Isn't gratitude more aligned to the spiritual life than whingeing? There is an appropriateness if one inclines towards gratitude rather than whingeing. Sometimes one isn't grateful and that can be alright too.

The seven factors of awakening are part of the teachings of the Theravadans. The Theravadans like lists, so the teaching can be very heavy on intellect. I know in my own evolution with this work, I needed to figure all that out first. Where does this all fit in? I did a lot of intellectual work first, as well as getting my act together when I was learning how to be a monk. There was a lot of confusion around the conceptual part of Buddhism. Now I find I am not so interested in that. I would rather weave or simply observe a pine tree. I have that kind of basis within my consciousness, within my experience.

How much intellectual structure one wants to take on depends on your personality. Some monks and nuns whom I know love analysis. Some aren't so interested. It depends to some extent on personality. In the texts the right-hand disciple of the Buddha was Venerable Sāriputta. He was most profound in analysis next to the Buddha. He could analyse all kinds of mind states and other things in incredible detail. And yet there's another monk who finds all the rules and analysis very complicated. The Buddha says to him, 'Just contemplate a white piece of cloth, just contemplate purity.' That was sufficient for him. So, there is this vast difference in personality types.

The seven factors of enlightenment come within the lists of Buddhism. As long as you don't get hung up trying to figure them

out exactly, lists can be very helpful because they give you reference points. They give you structures within which you can observe how your own consciousness works. The factors we work with in Venerable Ṭhānissaro's book *Wings to Awakening* are threefold: *sati*, *dhamma-vicaya* and *viriya*. *Sati* is awareness, mindfulness. *Dhamma-vicaya* is the capacity to investigate phenomena. And *viriya* is vitality. These three are what we are trying to train in, to employ and use all the time. I see them as one piece of a mind which is present. So, mindfulness isn't control. Mindfulness is awakeness, it is knowing the way things are. It is not judgement. It is not being happy. It is not being kind. It is not being together. You can be falling apart and know that you are falling apart. You can be confused, and you know this is feeling confused. You can feel bloody-minded, and you know this is feeling bloody-minded. One can feel very loving and together, and one can know that. There is this ability we have as human beings to know. To know the way things are. And this is very special, it is very profound. If we didn't have this capacity, we would just be stuck with the phenomena that come and go, such as the emotions, the bodily feelings or the memories. We would be stuck on them. But there is this capacity to know. Not only can I feel pain in my back, but I can also know that feeling. I can know my reactions to that feeling. I can know the worry around that. We have this capacity to know.

We say in our teachings, 'Mindfulness is the path to the deathless. Heedlessness, those who are heedless, are already dead.' The Buddha's enlightenment is about this deep and profound possibility in human consciousness. He said that as human beings the possibility of enlightenment is ours as well; if we can know, if we can reflect, if we can be aware. It is a very optimistic teaching. Also, it is a spiritual teaching in the sense that it is not just about reorganizing the furniture in your consciousness. It is about the deep possibility which his enlightenment is a part of; a possibility which is realized through awareness. Mindfulness is the path to the deathless. The deathless is the way the Buddha couched the deepest spiritual realization for human beings. It is not couched in a theological way. It is not couched in a dualistic way, that it's something outside of you.

It is couched in this particular way: mindfulness is the path to the deathless. That is a very important line in my tradition, and I have pondered that a lot.

Mindfulness is about being awake. When I began this sitting session I said, 'Just listen.' That is a common way that one is encouraged to remember mindfulness; just listen. That listening quality is not just about sound, but about that attentiveness, that wakefulness, that presence. This is actually very simple, but we tend to forget. We tend to get lost in our projections, lost in our problems and lost in the complexity of thought – the past and the future. When we talk about mindfulness, we also talk about the ability to remember, to be mindful. Not in terms of some memory I had or some experience in the past but remembering the present moment.

There's a story about one of my peers doing practise in his hut in Thailand. He would set his clock for an hour, then started meditating and he would find himself cutting his toenails. He didn't know how he got there. He's better now. You can make a determination to watch the breath and the mind is just gone. It is off thinking about whatever one thinks about, in the past and in the future.

It is a training that needs to be encouraged. How do you become more continuously mindful? One can make suggestions to oneself, such as, 'I am going to try to be here now.' That might not sound like much, but that suggestion is a lot. Because by making that suggestion to oneself, 'I'll try to be here', when I am not here, I will certainly notice it. What happens to yogis and meditators is that they become very self-critical. 'Oh, I am not aware,' and they are not aware of their criticism. There can be a kind of negativity, self-criticism, judgement, a heaviness about it, and one begins to not like the practice. Not like it because it is coming from a place of, 'I can't do it. I am inadequate, I am not getting there, I am not mindful.' These are all very negative suggestions to the mind. If I make a lot of negative suggestions to the practice, I am not going to want to do it.

It is very important when we are awake, to feel grateful. It is important to notice and to open the mind. Not to try to get anything because there is nothing you really need to get. This might not

sound like much, but for me it was a big thing because I would just lose it. I would do walking meditation and half an hour would go by and I would be singing Bob Dylan songs. Where are you? The tendency was to be very diligent and hardworking, but to be very critical. That was a very unhappy way to go about it. I had to come to a very sober realization; I haven't trained my mind and I am not going to be present for much of the time. But when I do wake up, when something awakens me like a sound or pain, when that's there, I need to really appreciate that. What does it feel like to be present? What is it like to be here now? That suggestion to be here now is what makes mindfulness more continuous in consciousness. The remembering of what it means to be present. The feeling of being present and the sense of gratitude for being present. To really begin to know what presence is, then that factor becomes more powerful.

The opposite to that is heedlessness. Those who are heedless are already dead. When I am not aware all kinds of ego states can come up. Let's say, I am resentful about something. I am not aware of it; it comes into the mind and that resentment takes over in thought. I become a resentful person. I start to think resentful thoughts and that is a kind of birth. That is suffering. And yet if I am attentive, I can see a feeling of resentment, but I don't grab it; I don't think that way and don't attach to it. That is the freedom from the cycle of birth and death. The amount of memory we have and the number of experiences we've had as human beings is endless. Mindfulness is what really cuts through it all. It doesn't repress it, because you still feel your kamma, the experiences of your life, but you don't indulge in it. Mindfulness just knows it. If I can train in that, it is the factor of awakening, the factor of enlightenment. It is a way to get off the wheel of ego suffering that we can get into.

When we speak of mindfulness, people sometimes think that means you have to move very slowly. I don't know why. Or they think it means controlling everything or never feeling emotions like grief. Sometimes people think if you are mindful, you are not going to feel grief. Why? Or you are not going to feel anger. Why? But there can be the knowing of anger, what anger feels like as

opposed to believing in anger. There is a huge difference between knowing anger and believing in anger. There's an enormous difference between believing in your irritation with someone and knowing you are irritated; and that difference is freedom.

We can find some things very difficult to be aware of. We are so habituated to distracting ourselves away from childhood traumas, from pains or from loneliness. They can be very hard; we have this resistance to looking at them. Part of unravelling our kamma is slowly entering into areas that we find difficult. I have certainly seen that in myself. The things that I am aware of are much more subtle than 20 or 30 years ago and yet they still come out. There is a progression in the practice from grossness to more and more continuity, and more and more subtlety. But the awareness is the same.

The second factor is called *dhamma-vicaya*. *Vicaya* means investigation. Dhamma means the teaching or phenomena. Sometimes Buddhism is called a phenomenological practice. That means that in understanding the mind, we try to observe mind, body, emotions and moods as phenomena in nature rather than as personal problems. We reinforce this again and again. There is a difference between knowing resentment as a particular kind of phenomena in consciousness and thinking I've got a resentment problem. Or believing in my resentment or thinking I shouldn't feel resentful. All of that is different than knowing resentment as a phenomenon. It is a mental, emotional phenomenon. It arises because of causes, it stays for a while, and then it leaves. It is a mood of the mind, and it affects the body.

If I can investigate the phenomenon of resentment as something that is a part of my consciousness, I can observe it. I can observe how I can get caught up in thoughts about it, how I feel guilty about it. I can observe how it affects my breathing, how it affects my guts and how it affects my memory. If I am willing to be aware of resentment and contemplate it, then the understanding of resentment is the freedom from resentment. It might still come up because of causes and conditions. But I don't have to become a victim of it. I don't have to feel guilty about it, I don't have to

believe in it. I don't have to project it out, or carry it in my mind, or reject it. I just know this is the arising of resentment and I know this is the ceasing of resentment. So, there is the knowing of one's own consciousness, the knowing of the phenomena of one's experience. The teaching sounds very complicated at times, but it actually simplifies things. It is a lot simpler to understand resentment as a phenomenon in consciousness than to be lost in the endless scenarios of resentment, to be lost in the endless storylines, the ways we resent, and all those different memories. Thoughts are very complicated.

The particular phenomenon that the Buddha asks us to understand is the body. To really understand the body. That doesn't sound like much but how aware are we of the body? How much of our time is spent in thought? How much do we understand pain and discomfort? Because these are phenomena in nature. If we don't understand them, then we are the victims of them. Pain is a very important thing to understand. How do you understand pain? By being aware of it. We have many attitudes about the body. We have fear about it, we have self-consciousness, we have vanity. We also have ideas around old age or body size. We put all kinds of different stuff upon the body. What is body? What is it before we conceptualize it?

Much of the teaching around awareness is to try to have direct contact with certain frameworks. The body is an area that conscious experience functions in. Being conscious, we must understand the body and learn to come to a peaceful coexistence with the body. That is different to just using the body for physical pleasure, or just using it for work. It is different to using the body as some inert thing to put food or chemicals into or push athletically. All those are cultural and social things that we do with the body, they are not about really understanding the body. In an unenlightened way, we either use the body or we abuse the body, or we don't pay attention to the body. What does the body like? What does it mean to be compassionate towards the body?

The body is a tremendous place to understand the mind. The mind and body are very much co-linked. When I feel resentment,

my body feels it. I have moods and emotions, and thoughts and memories. All of them register in the body. My breath channel gets clogged when I feel anxiety. If I can understand when the kamma of anxiety comes up or when the kamma of anger or irritation come up, one interesting way to understand it is through the body. That is quite marvellous. That simplifies it too. Mindfulness of the body and knowing the way the mind works around the body is much simpler than always analysing it. It is much simpler than thinking it is a problem or trying to get rid of that irritation. You are not trying to do anything about it. You are simply understanding that this is the way it feels.

Quite often we make negative experiences a problem, and then we try to fix them. We can get terribly complicated with that. This very simple opening and receptivity to something unpleasant like anxiety is a wonderful freedom. A freedom that is actually within anxiety. It is quite marvellous. I can directly contact something like anxiety or anger and really know it. I can touch it, like I can touch this carpet and not conceptualize the carpet. Or I can hear sound and not conceptualize sound. I can get rid of the whole storyline that this is a problem which I must do something about. When I can really touch it directly, that's mindfulness.

And in the touching of that, there is often a deep resistance. There is a deep resistance to contacting loneliness, to contacting physical pain or boredom or discomfort. Resistance to contacting all these negative things. If we cannot contact those things directly, we are always pushed by them. We are pushed away from them. And we seek alternatives and consolation and distractions and objects. If that's going on, then we can never touch the deathless. Because we are caught in movement, we are caught in time, we are caught in restlessness, we are caught in becoming. And the stillness of the mind is denied us.

There is a tremendous amount of freedom when we can touch something like anxiety very directly and not believe in that resistance. And it's curious because our patterns are to get away from that. Our patterns are to distract from that, to get a compensation,

to seek objects. Now the deathless, where that is a spiritual possibility, is not an object per se. It's not like sunshine, it's not like a sunny spring day. You might think it's nibbana today, but it's a qualitative difference. Because that which knows sunshine, also knows a sleety, rainy day.

We have this flow of consciousness. We have this flow of emotions, of bodily feelings and memories. It comes and goes because of causes and conditions. Because of our cultural conditioning, our gender conditioning, our age conditioning, and all that. There is this flow of life. We are trying to be very aware and receptive to that and not be victimized by it. When within that flow in life there is something I can't be with, that I resist or am confused by, that is a sign that I have to practise *dhamma-vicaya*. I must investigate it. It is something I need to know. It is something I need to understand. We say in Buddhism, your biggest problem is your biggest teacher. Your biggest hindrance is where your biggest freedom lies. It has to be, doesn't it? If there is some huge aspect of my own consciousness, of my own psyche, which really bothers me in some social, emotional, or interpersonal way, then that is where the freedom must lie. Where else could it lie?

If I always feel competitive, then it's in competitiveness where I find my freedom. Not by being competitive, but by understanding it. If I feel intimidated by others, then it is in that very feeling of intimidation where I will find freedom from it. It must be that way. This is the counter to what we have been conditioned to do. If I feel I always must be competitive to feel secure or whatever, to actually go towards that very feeling. What underlies that? Is it fear? That's what mindfulness training and investigation must do. That's not just intellectual. It is not like me sitting around thinking, 'Oh I have this competitiveness problem. I wonder what that is really like?' That is just thought. When I am with my brother or whoever, and I am competitive, 'Yeah, there it is, there is that guy, there is that feeling.' What is that really like? Going towards it, touching it directly. Then there is freedom because one is no longer avoiding it, one is no longer being driven by it. It is not a problem. It just is as it is.

So that is the sense of investigation. In religious terms we use the word 'wonder'. But you don't usually use that word around anxiety; they don't go together. We usually use that word when we see an eagle or the Niagara Falls, 'Ah, wonder'. But we must apply that same sense of wonder to those dark sides of our lives. Because it is only in wonder that we understand, it is not in judgement that we understand.

I like this language of receptivity, of really receiving something. Let it come to me. I have spent so much of my practice trying to control, trying to get rid of things. So much time being diligent and annihilating things and becoming something. All that energy never witnesses the way things are. It is just a kind of warfare, a battle zone. That's why we talk about compassion so much. Not in some dualistic sense, but in being friendly towards something like competitiveness. What does that feel like? And there is liberation. There is freedom because with that direct contact, there is understanding. Competitiveness and anxiety are not a problem. They are just weather.

The third factor is energy or vitality, *viriya*. You need juice to do this. This practice doesn't happen by watching the Senators lose to whomever they lose to. This is not a couch-potato practice. It requires vitality, but it is a subtle vitality. It is not the vitality to try to become. It is the vitality of really awakening to the way things are again and again. Where does that come from? It comes from simple things like yoga, Tai Chi, Chi Gong, pranayama, running and walking, that we can engage with in our lives. But it is more than that. It is more than just aerobics, or another ten-part routine that I have to do, another ten stages of enlightenment. Deeper than that is interest.

What is vitality? I am interested in certain experiences that I have had as a contemplative. I am interested in what my teachers have displayed for me in their being. I am very curious about the Buddha's enlightenment. I am very interested in saints. (I am not terribly interested in sinners.) I am very curious about what these beings have experienced. Curiosity and interest, that's vitality.

In Buddhism one must be interested in one's own suffering. You have to be interested in your own problems. But the interest is not in a kind of self-obsessed, analytical way because that just leads into more thought. But one has to be interested in the phenomenon of suffering, in the contraction, and in the phenomenon of alienation. What is that? Why do we get caught up in that? How does it work? Where does it come from? How does it endure? How does it affect my body? What is the result when I witness it? What kind of distractions do I go towards? That is all in thought. But it's deeper than thought, isn't it? There must be an interest and determination to go beyond thought to understand the teaching and to realize the spiritual goal. How do you get that fire in the practice? The fire in the practice is not self-hatred because that really puts out the fire. It is not greed. I've tried being greedy to get enlightened. That doesn't work. It is not control. It is not ego. It is not about me getting something. It is about a mind which is willing to awaken, willing to look and willing to observe. A mind that is willing to wait and to watch until insight arises.

In religious language we talk about revelation. We talk about vipassana insight, about seeing the way things really are. How does that insight arise? It doesn't arise from an ego state. It arises more from humility. How often have you struggled with something, then you give up and say, 'Alright, what is it about?' You are finally mindful. What is it really about? What does this really feel like now? Then there is a kind of humility and awareness, 'Ah, I see, that's how that works.' Some of the neatest insights I have had, have come about from really struggling in my hut. They have come from putting fierce disciplines on myself. Then from getting fed up with it all and oversleeping, or losing myself in a novel, struggling and fighting it. Then giving up and saying, 'I wonder what it really feels like now?' Then the mind is awake.

That is one of the curious processes you go through in the spiritual life. You try and try, and then you give up and you notice the way things are. Trying is quite subtle. It is very profound. When I first entered the path, the only way I knew how to try was through ego. I had good intentions, I tried to get rid of my anger. I tried to

do lots of loving kindness practices. I tried to be grateful, I tried to be content. I took up the whole storyline of being a monk. I tried to be a monk. (That's what I am paid for, sort of). But I was trying to do it out of ego. I was trying to be a nice monk. But it was still me trying to do something, me trying to become something; it was still based on ego. And of course, after a while, that fails. Then I wanted to get out of there. Then I started to be a monk.

Because there is a process you go through where you try to be a religious person; where you try to be a Buddhist and do all the right things. It's better than not doing it. But coming to the place of awakening rather than becoming is different. Awakening to some very negative feeling and saying, 'Okay I am willing to allow this to become conscious and I am going to investigate it.' That is different than trying to be a person that doesn't have negativity. There's a whole lot of difference. And quite often it is difficult because of the resistance.

So those are the three factors: *sati* which is awareness, *dhamma-vicaya* which is this investigation of the phenomena of consciousness or dhamma, and *viriya* which is vitality or interest. These three are really one piece, one type of mind which is awake, which is wondering and seeing. You don't have to wait to suffer to do that, do you? It is better to do it when you are happy. When I was walking across the experimental farm I felt a sense of joy, of presence, of being with that, and sustaining that, rather than thinking, 'Oh, it's springtime, great, winter is over,' being lost in thought, not even noticing that it is springtime. You can take the beauty of life as a way of being present, a way of cultivating the sense of presence. In doing that you move away from thought to the present moment.

Awareness, investigation, and vitality lead to the other four factors: *pīti*, which is gladness; *passaddhi*, which is tranquility or composure; *samādhi*, a sustained mind which has all those qualities; and *upekkhā*, equanimity, the peace of the heart. Those other four fall into place as you practise in this way. Whatever conceptual structures you have, can you get the feeling of just being awake? How does one awaken? How can one just sustain that awakeness?

How does one fall asleep? Why? Where does that happen? Where does the mind go? Then it is a very lovely kind of practice. It is not a coercion. There is a lot of love and compassion in this practice. It doesn't come from egotistical judgments. If you find that mindfulness practice becomes contrived and controlled and you can't enjoy an ice cream cone because you are being a Buddhist, I say, 'take up something else'. The difficulties of most religions arise when you get into this idea that you somehow have to control and suppress, and not enjoy, life. You can't sustain that.

When there is joy, beauty, stillness, be grateful for that. Really use that and say, 'Okay, now the heart is balanced. This is what it feels like to be balanced, to be at ease.' Not just as a thought but with a real sense of that gratitude. There are times when your mind goes off balance and you start to complain. Or when there is some fear and your heart starts to shake, there can be the knowing of that, 'Ah, there is the arising of the shaking of the heart.' Or you start to be annoyed at someone, 'Oh there is the arising of annoyance.' As mindfulness gets stronger, you see the arising of conditions. You usually see the cessation of conditions first. One good thing to notice is the cessation of thought. You may think you are thinking all the time, but there are times when you stop thinking. When you stop thinking, that is the death of the ego. When you are out in the garden and you notice that first crocus, your mind stops. That presence is a very valuable moment.

We may be caught in our self-views and self-judgements, and then we awaken. For example, if I was in the monastery feeling tired and irritated, and I say to a monk, 'You're a turkey.' I have said something dismissive to the monk, and then I go back to my hut, 'Oh, I blew it, wrong speech, thirty years as a monk, I'm no good.' That's not being mindful. Maybe I hear the sound of a crow and I wake up. When I awaken to that sound, that is the end of self. That is the space of awareness, of awakeness, of enlightenment. It is very important to notice the end of that thought because that is the end of self. If you can really notice that, taste that moment of the end of self, you enter the silence of the mind. Most people don't notice that. They think they shouldn't be thinking, or they

try to control themselves not to think. But actually, you've already stopped thinking. That is a very valuable moment.

When you have been thinking about yourself, or the future, or time, and then you awaken, you notice the end of time. That is an important moment. The end of time, the end of the future, the end of the past, the end of self, the end of becoming. That's where the deathless lies. Mindfulness is the path to the deathless. It's like a crack or a space. In our monasteries, we say, 'Go for the gap.' There is a gap there between thoughts, between self, between time. It's always there. Because the deathless or the spiritual possibility must be something that is here and now all the time. It is something we are missing. It can't be something that you get in the future, because that's still me, getting something in the future. It is always timeless; it is always here and now.

Try to notice that moment. So often we are just thinking about ourselves or the future or the past. And then there are gaps. Observe that tendency. We think, 'Oh no, I am thinking too much again.' Don't believe in that because that creates another self. Say, 'Oh, thank you.' What does that feel like? The end of thought, the end of self, the end of time. And then the thought again, 'What am I going to do?' If you can notice the gaps, then you begin to see that that is your real home, that mindfulness is the path to the deathless. When I am heedless, I am already dead. It doesn't mean I've got rigor-mortis or something. It means the whole sense of ego is birth and death, and a sense of time. That is the problem.

Focused Attention, Panoramic Awareness

Ajahn Soṇa

This talk was offered as part of the Virtual Mindfulness Retreat on YouTube.

Our first focus is mindfulness. If you read about this sutta, the *Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, you will find various schools and approaches to it. If you've been trained in the sort of formal monastic type of approach, perhaps Sri Lankan, you'll get a very scholarly presentation about this entire sutta. The *Mahā-Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, from the Long Discourses of the Buddha (Dīgha Nikāya 22) will be treated as a kind of holy text which is complete and came whole from the mouth of the Buddha at a certain point in history. Then other versions will just be partial or very casual approaches to this. I would suggest that this is not a piece of music; it is not a cantata by Bach or anything like that. This is a collection which was given over the years in many different situations. Certainly, it wouldn't be appropriate for the Buddha to give in a single instance the entire full version of this: *mahā* meaning 'great', *satipaṭṭhāna* meaning 'focuses of mindfulness' or 'foundations of mindfulness.' The thing that one should keep in mind is that this is something offered for you, and you will use parts of it at different times of your life. If you stay at this long enough, and you're interested enough, you will eventually start to have an overview of the whole thing. It's not like a single masterpiece that must be experienced from first word to last.

So, we are starting in the body. The body is very good because it's the most obvious. It's tangible. It's material. At Wat Pah

Nanachat, I remember hearing one of the teachings that the body as a foundation of mindfulness is like the gate of the monastery. Before you go into the monastery, you must pass through the gate. So, the body is the gateway to these other dimensions which you direct your mindfulness to, which you direct *sati* to. *Sati* is the sentry overlooking the gate, the entrance, which you can regard as the body. I will discuss further this relationship between the entrance, the gate, the body and the walled city, and the sentry. You will be hearing a lot about this simile. This is how you retain it; you get a coherent sense of it by looking at and remembering the similes that the Buddha gives. These are brilliant. The Pali Canon is probably the largest collection of similes and metaphors in religious literature, all given by one person, and each one is not just casual. Each element of the simile is very important as a support to the entire understanding.

Mindfulness as the sentry and mindfulness also as memory. The original meaning of the word is memory. This is another area you will come across if you study Buddhism. You will find that there's a whole school of people that are interested in etymology, the sources of the words: what the Sanskrit roots are and all that. I often think that it has very limited real relevance. The Buddha re-formed and re-used words in the way he wished to. The original meaning of *sati* is just purely 'memory' in Sanskrit, but the way the Buddha is using it is remembering the instructions heard from early in your life. You have instructions that your parents gave you, that your teachers gave you. You got these instructions when learning crafts and skills, and the general attitudes to life. The problem is some people do not seem to be able to remember them. This is what comes out of the mouths of mothers talking to their children, 'How many times have I told you not to do that?', and then the kid looks up, having a sudden moment of remembrance: 'Right. Yes, you did tell me that, every single day for the last three years.' It is amazing how we can forget that. It's not forgetting a name or how to do maths. It's that we should do maths.

How do you forget that? It's very easy. When you're a teenager, you're suddenly sent out into the world, attempting to become

an adult, and you may not have any idea how to manage money. You keep coming up short at the end of every month and you're mystified as to why. It's because you don't pay attention to the numbers. You have basic mathematical skills and if you record every cup of coffee that you buy, you will find out why you don't have any money at the end of the month. Somehow, we have amnesia, we blank out, we don't pay attention.

This is what the Buddha is talking about as that aspect of *sati*. We don't remember things that were told to us many times exquisitely and precisely, with many a simile and many a helpful way of remembering. He even gives you five this, seven that, eight this. Just basically what you can count on your hands. Remember the ten commandments? Two tablets, five commandments on each tablet. Does that make any sense? Yeah, two hands, just a handful. When we say you lack mindfulness, it is not necessarily the fact that you can't pay attention. There are all kinds of things that you can pay attention to. Whatever grabs your interest, you can pay attention to. But you may be paying attention to something and forget you have an appointment. You don't have a sense of the appropriate attention. A big part of mindfulness is appropriate attention.

There's something else that goes along with *sati*, is hyphenated as an important part of it, and it's *sampajañña*, so *sati-sampajañña*. *Sampajañña* is sometimes called 'clear comprehension', but what it really is, is a sense of the appropriate. How are you to behave with a sense of the environment around you? This would be particularly for monks; it's given in the rules of conduct. It is something to also explore. The monks are asked to change their behavior and speech in public. This is because the act of simply walking through a village, walking through a town, walking anywhere that's inhabited, is a teaching. The Buddha insists that the monks walk in a collected way, that they are not to laugh loudly, stare here and there, or walk in an eccentric fashion. They're also to have their robes neatly and evenly wrapped around them, so they don't look disheveled because this has an influence on all kinds of people that may see their serenity, collectedness, and focus.

Remember, this is the fourth of the heavenly signs: illness, aging, death, and then a renunciant, which caught the attention of the Bodhisattva. This last sign is a very important one. As a monk, one is a sign. You're a walking signboard. This is why you must wear your robes in public. You can't conceal them. You can't take off your robes. When the monks go out in some of the Catholic monastic orders, they put on regular clothes. But for Theravada Buddhist monks, one is never to go in public without the robes, including the head uncovered, to show this shorn hair as a sign. You're a sign and how you conduct yourself is a sign as well. This is *sampajañña*, appropriate awareness of the whole situation. Do you remember that you're not in the monastery? Do you remember that you're walking in public? Do you remember that people watch you as a sign? This is the form of *sati*, this is mindfulness and clear comprehension; they go together.

In modern times it's very interesting that we have this awareness of the brain as a kind of center of consciousness, and it has two hemispheres. It seems that in modern brain science they're understanding more and more that the left hemisphere takes care of the specific applications of mindfulness to details and the right hemisphere looks at the larger picture, as it processes and interprets the whole thing. You might think of this as *sati-sampajañña*. We can't isolate *sati* from *sampajañña*. You have a practice at home as laypeople. In the morning you may sit for half an hour, or even an hour, watching the breath, focusing, concentrating, and then you will tackle the day. You have to go to work; you have to deal with relationships and lots of other things. That is the time when your *sampajañña* is still required. How do you conduct yourself? What is appropriate? What is inspiring to other people? What helps change the atmosphere of a room? When you walk in, how do you walk in? How do you hold yourself? How do you speak? This is part of the *Satipaṭṭhāna*. Although we're focusing on the word *sati*, we can't leave off this *sampajañña*.

Another simile for this is that a bird also has a hemisphere cleavage in the brain. The bird must use a great deal of attention to pick out seeds from amongst grains of sand. How does the bird

not eat the sand and just get the seed? By very close attention. But while that bird is doing that, they also need not to be surprised by a predator, so you'll see them looking around. They have appropriate awareness of the environment because something wants to eat them while they want to eat the seeds. The deer are the same. They're constantly having to browse but, at the same time, having to be hypervigilant and aware of their entire surroundings. Our mind does two things and needs to do two things: it needs to pay attention to the small details, but it also needs to pay attention to the overarching sense of the world around us.

Sampajañña is a kind of wisdom as well. It has to have information and wisdom. When you do the four foundations of mindfulness, it's always in a context and only wisdom knows the reason. Why are you doing these exercises? Sometimes when we start this practice, we don't really know why we're doing this exercise except maybe out of desperation. You finally decided you've got to do something, and you've heard meditation might help. So you go to a monastery, you go to a retreat, or you even dial up a YouTube channel and you start meditating, and you're not sure why. It's only when you are integrating this information into the Eightfold Path that you are truly understanding why you're doing it. *Sampajañña* and *sati* are performing their roles in the context of the Eightfold Path. *Sati* is not simply mindfulness, but *sammā-sati*. It's right mindfulness and that means that it's the seventh factor of the Eightfold Path. The Eightfold Path also is not coherent unless you understand the Four Noble Truths. The Eightfold Path is the path to the solution, the path to the end of suffering. The overarching reason for the harnessing of *sati* and *sampajañña* is for the ending of suffering, for the release from suffering. All this is going to be harnessed, so that's why you're carefully attending to your body and so forth.

All kinds of skills and capacities may develop. You will hear and experience life, reality, and relationships in a different way if you start doing these mindfulness exercises. You will start training your mind to pay attention in a systematic way. If you keep this up, you will have surprising results in other areas. You will notice things you didn't notice before. You will see other people's motives

in a new light, and you also will see other people's minds. Quite often in a so-called conversation with another person, there are two people engaging in soliloquies. Instead of a dialogue, there's just two people, each one talking to themselves. This is a characteristic particularly of our time, that people's attention spans, as many have noted, seem to be reduced. The art of conversation also seems to occur in a very primitive, unsatisfactory form. That is because we can't sustain attention long enough to hear what the other person says and then have the appropriate sense to respond to what the other person said. So, you see this fragmentation happening. Perhaps only *sati* is working and only *sati* about your own life is working, so there is no *sampajañña* in the dialogue.

It's very interesting to look at some of the perception tests that they give in cases of schizophrenia. They will show the person some letters, say a capital 'H' and a capital 'A' on a page, but the letters are made from numbers. Tiny little numbers, almost like pixels, are what give shape to these letters. Then they ask them, 'What do you see?' and they see only the numbers. They don't see the prominent shape of the letter. You can see the mind is not doing two things, it's doing only one thing. It sees the details but doesn't put them together; it doesn't see the broader picture, it doesn't see the letters. We have a well-used saying in English: 'You don't see the forest for the trees.' You see trees but you don't see the forest. The forest is the letters, and the trees are the numbers. In fact, a forest and a tree are inseparable, and they interact, and that is what's going on in life.

In order to have wisdom you need to cultivate both of these things. You need to pay more attention to be able to sustain attention on the details, but you also need a context for those details. You need a bigger picture. Why am I doing this? What is the point of this attention? Is there a difference between a person who walks on a tightrope a hundred feet above the ground and a person doing walking meditation? A tightrope walker must pay close attention. Is there a difference between that and walking meditation? Yes. The tightrope walker's attention is not at the service of something, it's not at the service of the larger picture of life. It's not at the

service of wisdom. It's not at the service of *sampajañña*. When we do our meditation exercises, they must always be in the context that these are strengthening exercises for our attention. They are directing our attention to certain vital realities that we must understand. We must not only understand them theoretically, but we must understand them to the marrow of our bones. How do you understand something to the marrow of your bones? It becomes second nature. Your relationship to these things is not merely abstract, but you're in harmony – what you say and how you feel are one. You are not capable of hypocrisy. Lots of people say things that they don't believe. Your theoretical view of life is harmonized with how you actually feel about it.

This is a general preparation, and it is often missing in the plunge into mindfulness retreats and often *vipassanā* retreats as well. The *Satipaṭṭhāna* is the foundational sutta for many *vipassanā* courses. There are various schools of *vipassanā*, but often they're deriving their teachings from the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. Quite often you just show up and are plunged into it all with explicit directions to watch the breath or something like that. Then also to watch the rising and passing of things such as feelings, or the breath, or the rise and fall of the abdomen. But the pervasive context of this is sometimes not emphasized enough. I have been through many of these kinds of courses myself and spent a lot of time with different teachers of these techniques. I have heard and read a lot about these techniques, and my sense is that we need to have a far-reaching picture of why this is happening. It's like dance lessons, like being taken into the gymnasium or studio when you're 12 years old to be shown how to dance. If you've never been to a dance, this business of moving your feet around in certain unfamiliar ways may not be very coherent to you. It's only when this sense of the dance arises that you understand the details. You understand why you were doing it and why they were instructing you this way. That is the difference between notes and music. This mindfulness is at the service of music. It is not notes. It is not to make you a better scientist or anything like that. Attention itself is not the solution to the end of suffering. It's only a tool. A tool that is at the service of

the ubiquitous truth the Buddha has shown us about how to bring the unsatisfactory qualities of life to an end.

Sometimes the story ends there, that things are impermanent. You wish to diminish the negative things. But what about the positive things? Sometimes they get herded in with the negative things as simply impermanent. That misses a huge point. The positive emotional dimension of your life is not to be observed with detachment, as something that rises and passes away. It does indeed rise and pass away. Different types of positive emotional experiences rise and pass away, but you are to remain in the field of these positive emotions night and day. In the descriptions of the arahants, it is said that even in their sleep they do not leave this exemplary emotional state.

This is the Buddha saying the mind is absolutely purified of the negative elements. What remains? Just change? No, not change. Positive mental states fluctuate and flow, but are all in the positive dimension, they remain in the positive dimension. You are to remain in that dimension. Sometimes you're joyful, sometimes you're equanimous. Sometimes you have a great heart of loving kindness, sometimes you have a great celebration of others' joy, *muditā*, and so on. You are flowing between different positive emotions.

Yes, they all rise and pass away. But you're remaining in that field and that's the point. That is the goal of this. It is for the end of lamentation, sorrow, and grief. It is for the overcoming of greed, hatred, and delusion. This is the most basic formulation of the teachings of the Buddha: greed, hatred, and delusion are the problem. Generosity, kindness, and clarity are the solution. Are you supposed to be sometimes generous, sometimes greedy, sometimes confused, or all the time generous, kind, and clear? You are to remain in that dimension. The mind is cleansed of all negative elements.

How are you supposed to do this? People like this message. They love to hear this kind of thing, but they don't know how to transform themselves. These are the exercises for transformation. The Buddha says, 'Here are some guidelines, some how-to exercises. Let's start with the body. Become aware of your body. One thing that you can become aware of is the breath itself, the fact of respiration.

Can you let the past and future go long enough to pay attention to the fact that you're breathing?' It's a strange request. It's not something that anybody else will tell you. If you go and study music, they're not going to ask you to pay attention to your breath. They're going to ask you to pay attention to the violin bow or something like that. The world is not interested in the fact that you breathe. Your breathing is a strange thing to become interested in. But there's a very deep connection between your emotional states and the breath. A lot of your structures of anxiety and fear and sorrow are very intimately connected with the experience of the breath. The Buddha is bringing you into the zone. Later, he'll ask you to pay attention in other ways: Are you sad or are you not sad? Are you angry or not? But he's going to bring you in with the breath, then later he's going to bring you into the awareness of the mindfulness of the mind.

He's going to make you an aware person. A person who is no longer walking around unconscious. A person who is no longer driven, pushed and pulled by unconscious sorts of inherited, scattered trainings. There are all kinds of patchwork habits. There are bits of information you picked up along the way, that are quite often bad habits. He's going to say, 'Well, we've got to start again. We've got to retrain you right from scratch. Out with the unskilful and in with the skilful.' He's going to take you back and start you at something as simple as, 'Let's just breathe. I want you to do nothing else. I want you to pay attention to this.' Eventually we'll move along to, 'How do you feel while you breathe? I don't want you to wander away from the breath, but how do you feel when you breathe? How are you feeling? Now I want you to find out if you can induce a sense of well-being, gladness, and ease while you breathe? I don't want just noting of random emotions while you breathe. I want you to discover that the positive emotions of joy, ease, gladness, well-being, and loving kindness are not random happenings. They don't come from the external environment. They are products of your own mind, and you can learn to create them. You can become more skilful with your emotions. You can generate the emotions

you wish to have. You can also let go of the ones that you do not wish to have.'

This is taking control of your own emotional structure. It is not the way ordinary human beings talk. They're always looking for happiness or love or something like that. They're hoping to get lucky. They're just out there hoping to get lucky, hoping that love will somehow fall on them, that joy will somehow fall on them. The Buddha says, 'Stop that. That's a very, very poor way of negotiating this domain. I want you to stay home and learn how to do this. It comes out of you. It doesn't come to you; it comes from you.'

This is the overarching aim of mindfulness practice and clear, panoramic awareness. That distills the word *sati-sampajañña* : focused attention and panoramic awareness. These are the two things that are going to be developed in the *Satipaṭṭhāna*. The body is the gateway to the absolutely beautiful monastery that you're about to enter. Yes, we're back to the body as the gateway. What is the gate embedded in? The gate is embedded in a wall. There are six roads that lead to this walled city. The six roads represent the six senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and ideas. They all lead to the walled city. What is the walled city? It is the body. Inside the walled city are four roads which lead to the center of the city. What are the four roads? They are the four elements: water, air, fire, and earth. These are the elements that the body is made from. The wall is where the external reality is separated from the body. Mindfulness is attending to the place where the external world enters the body. You must know the body; you must know the nature of the body. So, *sati*, the sentry, is right on the edge of the body and the outer world. It should know both places. What's profitable is allowed into the body because through the body it finds its way to consciousness. Consciousness is the king at the center of the four roads.

The role of *sati* is very, very, very important. It's the informed attention which discriminates, and it's the early warning detection for what must not be allowed in and what should be welcomed in. This is the function of *sati* and *satipaṭṭhāna*.

Mindfulness and Kamma

Ajahn Karuṇadhammo

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on June 15th, 2019.

I've been back from the Ajahn Sucitto retreat for two weeks and I am still reflecting on some of the effects of that. One of the things that came up is that even with all the busyness of a lot of work, and not a lot of formal retreat time, after an initial adjustment period, you realize that the work you have been doing, even though it seems to have been subterranean and clouded over by lots of engagement and activity, is still making its way into your heart, mind, *citta* and establishing itself even though formal practice sometimes takes a back seat.

Living the life of a committed Buddhist practitioner, following precepts, reaching towards simplicity, renunciation, giving and generosity, as well as periods of reflection, meditation, listening to teachings and periods of formal meditation, all work together. The firm bases of *sīla*, *dāna* and renunciation do their work even though we may not be consciously aware of it all the time. So, when the time comes that there is the opportunity to let go of the normal routine and jump into a retreat, after a transition period, the mind does settle more peacefully. This is different than it was several years ago. The work has been happening on an internal level, establishing *kusala citta*, the wholesome, skilful mind, and that *kusala citta* is accessible when the routine is allowed to settle and we can tune in to the inner practice. It was a realization I had before, coming in and out of busy periods in monastic life, and is a heartening thought to share with people who have busy lives.

With a heart dedicated towards the commitment to the Dhamma and doing those basic practices, keeping precepts and reflecting on that, and working towards wholesome action, you can see that those have their effect in the heart.

The formal practice is of course very important. But most of us have come to some realization that doing formal practice by itself, without all the other aspects of the Noble Eightfold Path, is limited. It's an unfortunate way that some teachings developed as meditation practices came to the West. It's become a kind of meditation-only practice in some areas. You start to realize that to be successful towards reaching the goal of real liberation, it must be multi-faceted and encompass the entire Eightfold Path.

So, it brought up some reflections on kamma, action. Kamma (*karma* in Sanskrit) basically just means action and the fact that it is rooted firmly in *cetanā* (intention or volition). Intentional action is what causes results from a kammic standpoint. The actions that don't have any intention one way or another will certainly have some sort of peripheral effect, but in terms of the moral effect on the mind, intention is a required factor. So kamma is actually a moral law. Action that is based in wholesome states of mind will eventually in some way have wholesome results. Actions that are based on unwholesome or unskilful states of mind, states that are clouded or deluded or angry or based on some sort of harmful, defiled state of mind, will have unwholesome effects at some point down the line. So kamma is a moral law, but the results of kamma are heavily dependent upon intentional action.

Intention, *cetanā*, how can you describe it? How can you know it? I experience it as momentum, this thrust of mind, this movement of mind that precedes any kind of action of body, speech or mind. It's the momentum that is generated prior to taking any action. And it's definitely a mental experience. You can see it happen in extreme states of wanting, desire, craving or aversion. You can feel that momentum start to arise if you have some sense of clarity in the mind at all, even if it is a tiny bit. Sometimes in strong situations, you can start to feel that rise of energy that wants to express itself in some sort of action. It's that mental momentum, that mental rising

up based on some sort of strong mind-state that gives you an idea of what intention, *cetanā*, feels like. It is usually a movement to get something or to get away from something, to negate something. It results in some sort of speech or action or thinking, mental process, often some sort of proliferative process. So, it's part and parcel of any kind of kammic-producing activity.

Kamma is also often referred to with *vipāka*, the result of intentional actions. We can see that when we have intentional actions based on positive states of mind, then the result, either now or later, is positive. Negative intentions will result in negative results, and there's also the mixture of the two.

Then there is the fourth kind of kamma: the kamma that leads to the ending of kamma, which is the action that is based in practising with all the factors of the Noble Eightfold Path. Practising with all the factors is the kamma, the intentional action, that leads to the end of the kammic process itself, which is the hallmark path towards liberation. Often, we think of kamma, in its colloquial uses, in a negative sense, 'Oh, something bad is happening to me. It's because of some negative kamma I did in the past, and I am experiencing the results of it now.' But it is important to remember and reflect on the positive results of good actions from the past. If we really reflect on it, we can see that probably all of us in this room are experiencing the results of really positive, wholesome past actions. We have abundant requisites, food, clothing, shelter, medicines, material objects that we need. Often, we have quite a bit more than we need. All of this is the result of past wholesome action coming to fruition. We are with good friends. We are surrounded, at least in this monastery, by good-hearted people who are interested in truth and interested in establishing wholesome, skilful internal states of mind. Skilful states, not only for themselves, but also looking out to the world around us and wanting to ensure that all creatures, all friends, people, animals that we meet, have that feeling of security and safety and well-being, too. And being with these like-minded people is the result of past action. We set the causes and conditions for this to come to fruition and are experiencing the results of that past good action right here and now.

We have come into contact with Dhamma, another rare result of past kamma. All of us have done something in the past to bring us here to Abhayagiri Monastery. Whether we're visiting or whether we're resident, it is a very fortunate set of circumstances from actions that we created in the past to bring us right here and now to the Dhamma. The requisites are here. Our mental capacities are intact to be able to understand it. The teachings are present. We are here with people to help us explore and experience the results of practice, and we're in a community that is committed to doing that all the time, everyday. Consider and recollect how rare that is. And remember this comes from past action.

So, it's always important not to think of kamma and view our lives in terms of where we screw up, and all of our defiled mind moments which most of us still experience. But to reflect and rejoice in the goodness that we have experienced because of past positive kamma. And with that kind of recollection, to make that determination to keep on making that kind of kamma, particularly the fourth kind of kamma that leads to the ending of kamma. This leads to a very wholesome, easeful state of mind, especially when we reflect on it. Creating good kamma and then also reflecting on it in this way leads to a real quality of *pāmojja*: ease of mind, or delight, or gladness. This is referred to in the *ānāpānasati* teachings (mindfulness of breathing). Breathing in and out, one gladdens the mind. That's referring to *pāmojja*. That's a very happy, skilful state of mind. Many of us who have picked up the practice of meditation think that what we need to do is get concentrated and then we will be happy. But we get the order reversed: what we really need to do first is establish a sense of ease and happiness in the mind. It's *that* mind that is able to settle into collectedness and concentration much more naturally. This development of *pāmojja*, gladness and a sense of well-being, is one of the most skilful ways that we can experience happiness and satisfaction, because it is based on a mental quality of skilfulness.

We, of course, can experience many pleasures of the senses: eyes, ears, nose, tongue and body, and those do in their own way bring a source of pleasure. But if we are looking for something that

is a much more secure and stable form of happiness and pleasure, then we should develop those mental qualities that lead to *pāmojja*, to that gladdening of the heart, to that easeful state of mind that reflects and feels the effect of skilful action and the development of the Eightfold Path: the recollection of the good fortune we have; the recollection of the generosity that we've provided; the recollection of keeping the precepts and the non-harming that we offer to the world. That's the kind of happiness that is much more stable and long lasting. And that's what forms the basis of *kusala citta*, the wholesome skilful mind. Even that subterranean, ongoing development of the heart that we may not be so completely aware of, is plugging away based on that development of a gladdened mind, a mind filled with *pāmojja*.

Cetanā, intention, is also a subtle mental factor that is in operation all the time. We are often not so conscious of it when it arises. We can be more aware of it in very strong mind states when we have a semblance of mindfulness. But intention is at the basis of much of our action, whether we know it or not, whether it is conscious or unconscious. So, with a confused state of mind, or a mind that has delusion in it, we are making kamma all the time, even though we may not be aware of it. And it's good to remember too that intention is different from motivation: intention often being just that inclination to perform a certain action, whether it is skilful or unskilful, and motivation being the underlying quality of what is driving that intention. The same actions, but with different motivations, will have different effects in our kammic stream.

Consider the intention to take something that is not ours. It could have a very weak motivation. You are at work, in the office, and you see something that might be useful at home, like a pen. You are not thinking very clearly with conscious intention, but just with a lack of mindfulness, you pick up something and you take something that is not yours. So, there is an intention there which is based on an unskilful motivation, but it's not very conscious, versus something that is very conscious, like the mind of a thief going to burglarize a house. Same action, taking something that is not yours, but the mind like a thief has a much stronger kammic consequence.

So, motivation has its role in terms of how we experience the effects of our actions. Our practice is not only to see intention arise but to examine the motivation behind it. And that helps make it more conscious. This is a clear way to develop mindfulness and clear comprehension as very important tools. This gives us the ability to examine what's going on underneath any kind of intention that is arising for action and to be able to make a moral choice to stop it if it is moving in the wrong direction. In terms of developing wholesome states of mind and experiencing the results of those, you need to have a good degree of *sati* and *sampajañña* – mindfulness and clear comprehension – to be able to see the intention that is arising and to make a moral determination, is this skilful or is this unskilful? And then to readjust through choosing, through intending to act in a skilful way and to refrain from doing any unskilful action.

In fact, in quiet states of mind, when you are looking at this factor of intention as it arises, you can also look at it in terms of contemplation of *anattā*, not self, because the quality of intention can sometimes have a strong infusion of self. Because the quality of intention has this element of choice related to it, it can often be seen as 'Oh, this is who I really am. I am somebody who can act in a certain way to produce certain results. I have the willpower through the use of intention to perform some sort of action.' When we look back and see that intentions arise to make a choice, there's a real sense of personal power to that and we adjust that action based on that self-perception. The perception of self enters into intention very easily. But one should realize that intention is also a mental factor that has its own causes and conditions, and only masquerades with this sense of self. Intention to act in a certain way arises from other conditions.

When there is contact and we have a certain experience, if there is greed, hatred and delusion underneath the experience, then intention arises controlled by the greed, hatred and delusion. That's what is driving the intention to get something or to get away from something; to act skilfully, or in the case of greed, hatred and delusion, to act unskilfully. That's what is driving it. But the intention to act skilfully usually comes from mindfulness and clear

comprehension as driving forces. These are mental factors that are actually at play with clear comprehension. Mindfulness is the driving force to form an intention for skilful action. So, we can see that the more we habituate ourselves and the more focus and attention we use to bring up mindfulness and clear comprehension, the more likely we are able to evaluate the moral quality of something we are about to do. With that clarity and clear comprehension, we choose the wholesome course because we know that it feels better. We develop skilful states of mind because we know it will bring us a stable sense of contentment and happiness and freedom from suffering.

So, this is just reflecting and using the teachings on kamma to realize that we actually have a choice in how we experience our lives. Sometimes kamma is thought of as a deterministic, fatalistic law, (that's how it is actually taught in some other Eastern traditions). That we are essentially under the control of kammic laws that we have absolutely no control over, i.e. that some past action has a determined effect in the present or the future. But the Buddha introduced a different concept that we not only experience the results of past kamma in the here and now, but *how* we experience it in the present moment and what moves on into the future is something that we do have this ability to modify through appropriate attention and skilful intentions. We can receive kamma from the past in a way that results in less suffering. We can then generate skilful actions, skilful kamma to ameliorate the effect in the present moment and to produce a positive effect for the future. There is this ability to understand and have some control over how we receive kamma from the past and how we generate well-being in the future. This is how it differs from that deterministic view. The more we bring in mindfulness and clear comprehension, the more we will naturally choose the skilful forms of action.

So kamma is a law to be reflected on and to realize that it's not just a theoretical statement from the Buddha. It is something that gives us the power for change, the power to redirect our lives, and the power to move beyond our usual habitual ways of attaining happiness or avoiding pain. To be able to act clearly and with good

intention to create positive effects, and also to really focus developing that kamma that leads to the disbanding of kamma and the realization of the Unconditioned.

When we reflect on all the good kamma and the good conditions we have and the opportunity to practise, that gives rise to a sense of urgency. We reflect on kammic action and the results, the sense of urgency, realizing that this is a rare opportunity with all these causes and conditions coming together. And reflecting that time is short. 'When the end of my life comes, where do I want my mind to be? What state of mind do I want to be in?'

Debbie was also bringing up a reflection that she received from Ajahn Sucitto talking about how all of us want to live our lives and how we want to spend our time. Ajahn Sucitto's very terse reflection that he uses to remind himself when he gets wrapped up in the events of the world, is to just say, 'Already dead.' It brings us back to a sense of 'OK, already dead. How would I have wished to have spent my last moments?' So, to use that as a reflection to keep on bringing up our mindfulness and clear comprehension, and choosing actions that move towards gladdening the mind, settling the mind, and choosing skilful ways of being in the world.

The Four Foundations of Mindfulness

Ajahn Sumedho

This recording was made for this project by Luang Por Sumedho, kindly supported by Ajahn Asoko at Amaravati Monastery in July, 2021.

QUESTION. We were talking about how we cannot create mindfulness because we cannot create consciousness. But the path is about cultivating and using wisdom, with the four foundations of mindfulness? How would you describe what that is all about?

AJAHN SUMEDHO. The common use of the phrase 'cultivating mindfulness' refers to a special thing that you cultivate. But mindfulness is quite natural to us. If we were never mindful, we would die. Even a newborn infant is mindful when it is hungry, when it is sleepy, when it needs its nappies changed. The newborn is consciously aware of discomfort or hunger or fatigue. So, you don't cultivate. In Buddhist terms when we talk about mindfulness, it's about using mindfulness with wisdom. And that teaching is very precise. In the teaching of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, the first foundation, mindfulness of the body, is about awareness with wisdom. Mindfulness with wisdom is when you are looking at the body not in terms of whether it's good looking, whether it's male or female, or whether it's young or old. But it is about looking at the body as it is. It's like this. The four postures are like this. Whether you are

sitting, standing, walking or lying down, you are usually not mindful of the actual reality of each of those postures, such as sitting is like this.

You are sitting but you are thinking about plans for the next month or the next year. You are thinking about problems with your friends or relatives. You are not mindful of the body as such, you are not really observing. You are not being the witness, not being aware of the body as it is sitting. The reality of sitting in the present moment is like this. The reality of standing, walking, lying down or being mindful of the breath, is like this. Who is mindful of the breath unless it is hard to breathe? Who is mindful of the breath unless you are practising a traditional kind of mindfulness of the breath practice (*ānāpānasati*). In mindfulness of breathing, you are being aware of just the exhaling or inhaling of your breath. You are mindful of it. You are not judging it. You are not wondering if you breathe well or don't breathe well. You are aware, it's like this. Mindfulness of the body is using wisdom to look at the way things are, rather than just operating from habit patterns.

When you are sitting down, you are thinking about something else. When you are eating your food, you are worried about your job or your marriage or whatever. When you are standing, you are getting bored, just standing, waiting in line. You are not just aware of standing but you are lost in your emotional reactions. If you are waiting in a long line to get a vaccination, then you can be getting bored or restless or impatient. When you follow those emotions, you are not mindful of those emotions. When you are standing, sitting, walking, lying down, you are just operating from emotional habit patterns.

The second Foundation of Mindfulness is feeling; pleasant, painful or neutral feeling. Any ordinary unenlightened person is aware when they are feeling pleasurable physical feelings or when they are having painful ones. But they don't see it with wisdom. If there is physical pain, you want to get rid of it. If there are pleasurable sensations through the senses, you want to keep them. You aren't aware of that wanting; wanting to be rid of feelings or wanting to keep feelings. You are just operating from habit patterns, and

you are not aware of those habits. You are operating from habitual conditioning. So, when you feel pain, you try to get rid of it. And that's without being aware of what you are doing. And you are not mindful of pain itself, such as physical pain when it's present. You are not mindful of sensual pleasure when it's present. You are just indulging in the pleasure of sensual delight.

The third Foundation of Mindfulness is about mental states. Somebody insults you and you get angry. You know you're angry, but you're seeing it from the perspective of personal judgement. It is someone else's fault that you are angry, or you get angry too easily. You make it into a kind of personal possession. When there is wisdom, you begin to see anger as something that arises and ceases. When you see that, you are developing mindfulness with wisdom that sees things as they are. Because anger is not personal. It is not a real person that is angry. It is a condition that arises according to other conditions, and it ceases. It is the ignorance that is personalizing anger. By blaming your anger on somebody else, you can get more and more angry even when that person isn't around.

In mindfulness of the Dhamma, you see things in terms of impermanence. You see things in terms of the conditioned realm, and that everything conditioned is impermanent. Because of its impermanence, it has no satisfactory quality to it. It changes. So even sensual pleasure, as enjoyable as it is, is not permanent. You can't sustain sensual pleasures permanently because they change according to other conditions. Seeing in this way, you are cultivating wisdom along with mindfulness.

When you're mindful crossing the street, it is because there is danger. That is obvious in crossing a busy street. If you cross the street heedlessly, you'll get hit by a car and you know that. You are mindful when you are rock climbing because you have to be aware of where your feet and hands are. The physical danger is immediate. Why do people do all these dangerous sports? Joy riding, speeding, athletics in general or even playing basketball? So in playing football or basketball, you must play the game properly. To be a team member, you must be mindful of where you are, where

the others are, where the ball is. So that's why people like to play sports. Because it's an exercise in mindfulness and it gets you out of yourself. If you are playing basketball, you are not worried about paying your electric bill. Even though that might be a problem in your daily life, when you are playing basketball or climbing a rock cliff, you give up worrying about the future and are mindful of the present conditions. But that's mindfulness that we have due to circumstances, not out of wisdom.

So, you are aware of external dangers. But you're usually not aware of internal dangers. You tend to see them in terms of personal qualities. Or you are completely unaware of what your body is up to or unaware of what your physical feelings are. How many people just suppress their feelings? Trying to suppress pain or physical discomfort, take drugs to get rid of or lessen the discomfort without realizing that pain is a condition that arises and ceases. So, with wisdom you are always reflecting on the way it is. Not just the fact that there is pain, but you are observing pain, you are witnessing. You are mindful of the reality of pain when it is present.

The fourth foundation is Mindfulness of Dhamma, the way things are. You are using the Dhamma teachings as we have them from the Buddha. Where consciousness is functional in an ordinary person's life, you don't reflect on it. You know you're conscious, but you don't understand it. If you pass out, then you're unconscious. There is a subconscious. And there is dream consciousness. And when you're dead, consciousness leaves the body.

So, we have all these perceptions of consciousness in a kind of mundane, worldly, ignorant state. But with consciousness of the reality of here and now, it takes mindfulness; being aware of itself, consciousness mindful of itself. Because consciousness isn't a condition that is born and dies. Out of ignorance we tend to be attached to conditions that begin and end. And that is lacking in wisdom. We don't have wisdom, even though we're fully conscious individuals, we don't understand it, we have no perspective on it. We just have habit patterns that we are addicted to and that we operate from. We react to conditions, we experience them through reactivity, not through wisdom. The Four Noble Truths are teachings pointing

inwards. We are not trying to find *nibbāna* externally. You don't have to go to India or to an ashram. You begin to look inward. You begin to be aware of consciousness as consciousness.

Being the One Who Knows

Ajahn Pasanno

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on January 7th, 2021.

This is the beginning day of our group practice and the first day of getting our routine and rhythm going. Here are some reflections on practice.

This is an opportunity for focusing and cultivating our meditation practice. We have three months of winter retreat, but I would be hesitant to encourage the perception that all this is only a meditation retreat. This is an opportunity for deepening our whole approach to practice. It is certainly how Ajahn Chah approached practice, and I would venture to say how the Buddha approached practice. This is a complete path of cultivation of body, speech and mind. It is a complete path of *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*; of ethical conduct, concentration and discernment. I think it helps to make that conscious. It is easy to slip into that sense of me and my meditation, and how's my meditation going? And how's your meditation going? The approach is to open up and broaden the perspective of what we are actually doing. I think it's a great theme, to be pursuing the theme of *buddhānussati*, the recollection of the Buddha, because we are putting ourselves into a larger context.

Years ago, I was very struck when Luang Por Sumedho started reflecting in that way. He said the perspective is to come back and embody or settle into the sense of the Buddha seeing the Dhamma. This is what we are really trying to do. The one who knows, seeing the way things truly are. By doing that, and including oneself in that process, is in itself, Sangha. With the three refuges, what we

are really trying to do is enter into, embody, incorporate, and make real, these refuges of the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha in our hearts.

There are many meditation techniques and methods. We will be covering some of them through this winter retreat. But I would like to make a plea for you to broaden your perspective. Hold it in a way that does not end up about me trying to get ahead in my meditation. Or me trying to feel good in my meditation, or me trying to enhance my worldly goals, of some kind of confidence or self-identity. Or, trying to prop up a 'spiritual identity'. Me, the meditator; me, the successful meditator; me, the successful monastic; me, the whatever. What it is about, and what it always comes back to, is the freedom from suffering. This is the perspective that the Buddha gave from his very first teaching through to the end of his life. It was characterised as the elephant's footprint, that encompasses all the teachings. That sense of the purpose being freedom from suffering. It manifests in different ways. It can be described in many different ways, and it has all sorts of philosophical nuances. The over-arching perspective is to recognize there is not an annihilation of self in order to get something, but it is the Buddha seeing the Dhamma.

The one who knows seeing the way things truly are. And one is relying on the different aspects of the path to facilitate that cultivation. The development of clarity around our precepts. Whether we are lay people practising, or we are monastics in training, or whether we have been monastics for some time. It is about clarifying that relationship with the precepts. People can get very worried and obsessed with precepts and rules. But that's not really the point. The point is to create a sense of 'oh wow, I'm really trying' and in terms of the human condition, this is incredibly honourable, and to take delight in that. That sense of non-remorse. To be really delighting because that is what nourishes the peaceful, clear heart.

Our development of our mindfulness practices, of clear comprehension, of applying mindfulness and awareness in our daily activities. Of having a continuity of mindfulness and clear comprehension in all the things that we do. It facilitates clarity and

well-being - that is something to be nurtured. And again, it is not something to get obsessed with or get tight about. It feels so comfortable to be clear and aware, and to be able to return to that base of awareness. As we do that in our chores, our activities, back and forth to our dwelling places, participating in the routines, the rhythm of the daily life, we can be incorporating it into the formal aspects of walking meditation and sitting meditation. We can be incorporating a continuity of awareness and knowingness. The one who knows seeing how things truly are. It's that simple: the Buddha seeing the Dhamma.

It goes from the ordinary right up to the levels of refined states of stillness. That stillness doesn't come out of wishful thinking or through fighting with the mind or trying to force it into the mold of stillness. I'd say it comes about through patience. Patience, not just blindly putting up with something or blindly waiting for the unpleasant to be over, but the patience to be the one who knows seeing the way things truly are. We need to be patient with our doubts because we can tie ourselves up in knots. How can I be the one who knows? Patience with the discomfort and physical pain, patience with our own mind that gets restless or gets agitated. Being able to be patient and to hold it within that sphere of the refuges. The one who knows seeing things as they truly are: the Buddha seeing the Dhamma. That is the opportunity as a Sangha member, one who is *supatipanno*, who practises in a good way; one who is *ujupatipanno*, who practises in a direct way; *ñāyappaṭipanno*, one who practises for knowledge and understanding; *sāmīcippaṭipanno*, one who practises with integrity.

We have this opportunity to embody and experience the flavour and the taste of the refuges. And it does take patience. To be patient with boredom. Sometimes it's just really boring to sit and watch your mind and have to put up with yourself. But to have that patience as opposed to reacting out of aversion or idealism – it's just knowing, this is what it is like. And with that patience, when it's grounded and settled, when it's established in knowing, the fruit is stillness. You can force your mind to be still for a short period of time, it is not impossible. But for the mind to truly be still, one has

to be patient with a whole lot of crap that's there. But then being able to recognize within that, the opportunity for well-being.

All through the path, the Buddha spoke of the different forms of happiness that arise. The happiness of blamelessness, with having lived with integrity. The happiness of fundamental goodness, the happiness of generosity and kindness. The happiness of mindfulness and awareness. The happiness of the mind when the heart settles. The happiness of seeing things clearly. The happiness that arises from the recognition of impermanence, of unsatisfactoriness, of not self. The happiness that comes from seeing this is the way things truly are. And the kind of release that comes from that happiness is this tremendous well-being right through to complete liberation. The Buddha describes nibbana as the highest happiness. It is not some blank nothingness. So, the whole path is based on the freedom from suffering. We are not just doing this to feel good. It is deeply satisfying to even have a glimmer of our true potential in this human existence. We are embarking on three months of winter retreat. Pick up the practice in a whole, integrative, or a multi-faceted approach, not just a one-dimensional approach.

There are always obstacles to practice. There are always difficulties. Those are the things we can learn from. Rather than seeing things as an obstacle or difficulty, recognise it as an opportunity for deeper understanding. Again, we can think of the example of the Buddha. What did the Buddha do? We can learn from facing our fears, our anxieties, and our discomforts. Think back to the sutta when the Buddha was still an unawakened bodhisattva. He was going to forests and places of solitude that were conducive to fear. Not places that he really wanted to go to. He was going to charnel grounds and being jumpy and anxious. But he was willing to face that and look at it, and he saw that it is natural to the mind. But it is also dukkha (unsatisfactoriness). How do we work with it? How do we see it? How do we be the one who knows, seeing things as they truly are? That's the Buddha seeing the Dhamma.

We have this opportunity to enter into that perspective. We can stand on the Dhamma. There is a word *dhammaṭṭhitatā*, which usually means the sense of natural or enduring. *Ṭhita* literally means,

to stand. So, it's standing on the Dhamma. But it is also referring to the orderliness of the Dhamma, the orderliness of truth. When we stand on 'this is the way things are', this is what the experience is right now. Does it have to overwhelm me? Does it have to define me? If we stay with the one who knows, it changes and there is a refuge that can be entered. It is the same with our desires, with transforming the desire energy. Desire and fear are so fundamental to the human condition. That sense of facing fears and transforming desires. That desire energy is transformed into peace, into loving kindness, into a sense of clarity and understanding. It rises up out of these refuges, that sense of being able to give oneself to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

When I first started meditating and practising there wasn't that much information available. Some of what was available were translations that could be fairly stodgy. They were translations of classical texts. But one of the things that was really striking was that the meditation instruction always started with clarifying the refuges. By bringing the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha to mind. Bringing the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha to the process of the meditation. At that point in time, I wasn't looking for a religion. That's how you think of the refuges, but it didn't really sink in until much later, and it wasn't days later, it was probably years later. That clarification of the refuges is important because it really shifts the way that we hold the practice.

The primacy of the self, the individual, the 'me' is part and parcel of the human condition, but it's very much integral to a Western culture. But when it's me meditating to get my goals achieved, it gets very frustrating. When we broaden that context, we move to a sense of embodying a principle, embodying a refuge, and embodying a liberating perspective. The Buddha seeing the Dhamma. That shifts how it is held. It shifts the approach. It shifts what we experience. And that shift is so conducive to the goal of freedom from suffering.

That view is something to be considering, reflecting on, from the beginning of the retreat. And as we go through this retreat, lifting it up as a recollection, as a reflection. Are the refuges solid?

Am I willing to give myself to the refuges? Am I willing to have a refuge other than me and my preferences, me and my ideals, me and my worries and fears? That is a worthy reflection, and it is not that anything must be taken on faith. It is holding the context in a much larger sphere so that one sees those endless proliferations of the 'I' making, the 'my' making, the underlying tendencies to conceit. That 'I' is not something that is fundamental. That 'I' has to be made, a sense of 'my' has to be made.

It is created, it is constructed and there is something beyond that. There is freedom, there is liberation. There is peace. There is well-being, a true sense of well-being. This winter retreat is an opportunity to explore our relationship to practice. Yes, one wants to put effort into the practice. Yes, one wants to be diligent, but pay attention to what ends up being measured and then starts judging. Because that's something extra. This is such a good thing to do on its own, without having to calculate the value of one's measuring mind. Paying attention to how to practise, how to be diligent in practice, how to put effort in practice, without turning it into a burden.

There is this opportunity for a continuity of three months of practice. It's like opening a door into stillness, opening a door into light. The Buddha described his own insight; *cakkhu karaṇī*, *ñāṇa karaṇī*, *upasamāya*, *abhiññāya*. This knowledge, vision and clear understanding arose. That is a possibility. We want to be giving or facilitating our efforts so that we can experience that. We have got the tools. We have got the conditions. We have got the support, and we can encourage each other to keep doing it.

The Pāramīs as Practices of Liberation

Ajahn Jayasāro

This talk was given at Amaravati Monastery on November 6th, 2021. He edited the transcript to make it more suitable for a written format.

On one occasion the Lord Buddha said that the essence of the Dhamma Vinaya – that which unites it, the common thread or theme in all the 84,000 teachings, is that of liberation. In a famous simile he compared it to the taste of the oceans. In every ocean of the world, the water has the same salty taste. Similarly, every single teaching – if it's an authentic Buddhist teaching – has the taste of liberation. I have found it useful in my own practice to apply this perspective to the teachings. Today I would like to offer a reflection on how the practice of the pāramīs are all practices of liberation, leading to liberation, characterized by liberation.

What are the pāramīs? They're usually translated as the ten perfections, and although this group of ten is not found in the sutta literature as such, it is of great antiquity, and I think a very useful group. Its particular value lies in helping us to see our Dhamma practice in wider terms: as including the cultivation of supporting factors rather than merely the application of techniques. It seems to me that these days we can easily become obsessed with content and technique, and believe that problems in our practice can always be solved by spiritual technologies or by information. The assumption is that facing some difficulty in meditation practice, all we need is some special tip or some secret key and everything will work out.

But I have never observed a clear correlation between knowledge of techniques and success in meditation. There is a hidden or unknowable factor involved in our progress on the path and that is, I would suggest, the previous accumulation of pāramīs. To put it in other words, it is a matter of spiritual maturity. You may know the means to develop stability, clarity and alertness in the mind and be familiar with the techniques of Vipassanā meditation. But if you lack the spiritual maturity, the accumulated pāramīs, to integrate those practices, the fruits will be meagre. So, I think these pāramīs are worthy of study. My belief is that they provide the foundation for long-term and profound growth in the Dhamma.

The first pāramī is a very familiar one, that of dāna. Meditators can sometimes be a bit sniffy about *dāna*. 'We're not so much into this merit-making stuff. We're into meditation. We're here for the essence of the Dhamma, not the basics.' But the development of generosity and giving is, if it is carried out correctly, a practice of liberation. Through it we seek to be liberated from stinginess and meanness, and attachment to our possessions and our wealth. When we give without expectation of any reward the mind experiences an initial form of freedom, letting go of the burden of attachment to external material things. Through giving we experience a great joy. And there are, too, many lessons that may be learned from observing the mind in the process of giving.

The Buddha says successful giving is achieved when we take care of our minds before giving the gift, at the time of giving and after giving. This is often overlooked. Let's say someone is taking food to the temple and they get up a bit later than they meant to and then everything is a rush; they're hurrying around, glancing at the clock. Worrying it's not going to be ready in time, they can get upset and scrambled. In this way they are failing in the practice of merit making and offering of *dāna* in the pre-giving phase. At the time of offering food in Thailand donors will often keep a beady eye on the Abbot to see whether or not he takes any of their food. If he doesn't, or he takes little, their mind can be clouded with disappointment or displeasure. The joy of giving is undermined, and its liberating value lost. Sometimes when people go to take

back their dish, they're feeling resentful: 'I have been up since 4.00 this morning to make that and they've hardly taken any of it.' They are not taking care of their mind after giving. Giving dana is not always such an easy practice.

It's an exercise of mindfulness in itself to care for your mind before giving, at the moment of giving and after giving. If you feel regret after giving something away, then you have also reduced the purification of mind that takes place through giving. The word merit, or *puñña*, means the purification of mind. This isn't a theory or a Buddhist concept. Merit is something which can be directly experienced very easily if you compare how your mind feels when you give something with expectation of something in return and how it feels when you give something without expectation of return. I think there is a significant difference. The cleansing, brightening effect of giving without expectation is not experienced to the same degree at all when there is a desire for some return.

I would like to share with you an example of the beauty of *dāna* that I experienced a few years ago, in India. I was walking around Maharashtra in Western India, in a kind of a loop from the city of Aurangabad through Ajanta and Ellora. I would spend the nights amongst the hills which bordered the road. There were few mosquitoes, and the weather was mild; I didn't need my umbrella or a mosquito net. I would just put down a groundsheet, cover myself with my robe and sleep just as monks did in the Buddha's time. At dusk one evening, as I climbed up a hill looking for a suitable place to spend the night, I realised that I was being watched by a goat-herder from a nearby village. I was concerned that out of curiosity he would follow me and try to engage me in conversation. But as night fell all was quiet, and I sat on a large flat rock meditating. It was perhaps around 9.00 pm that I heard something scrambling up the hillside. I was a little wary and shined my torch to see what it could be. Eventually a man appeared over the ridge. I saw that it was the goat-herder. He had climbed up the hill in the dark without a light, carrying a big bunch of bananas. He was afraid I was hungry. He'd probably worked a 10 or 12-hour day and after dark he'd walked from his village for a couple of kilometres and then climbed

up the hill in the dark. The hill was covered in boulders, quite difficult to climb. He did all this to give me a bunch of bananas.

I don't speak the Marathi language and it was quite difficult to explain to him that I don't eat in the evening and that, grateful for his kindness as I was, I couldn't accept his gift. He was understandably disappointed – I felt bad for him – and he left. Then about another hour or two later, quite late at night, I heard more scrambling, somebody climbing up this hill again. Who could it be so late at night? It was the same man, this time proudly carrying a blanket. I accepted the offering and made it clear that in the morning I would leave it for him to retrieve at the bottom of the hill. It was the kind of giving that you experience and know that you'll never forget. That man and his act of kindness will always stay with me.

We have all acted kindly in the past. And if we bring the memory of a pure act of generosity to mind even five, ten or twenty years afterwards, notice how bright and joyful it makes us feel. The Buddha referred to *ariyadhana*: Noble Treasures of the Heart, acts of generosity become noble treasures of the heart in that they never lose their value. They never become tarnished. Whenever you recall the memory of an act of generosity, your mind becomes bright and clear and happy. This uplift of the mind is what we call merit. *Dāna*, the act of giving, is the fundamental means of making merit. But it is also an act of liberation; it is our first lesson in letting go. Learning how to let go of our attachment to possessions, to wealth, to money, creates a habit of letting go. It creates a habit of abandoning attachment which we can build upon and develop internally. It comes to our aid when we come to deal with our relationship with the negative emotions which we have held onto for a very long time.

The second pāramī is *sīla*. How is *sīla* a practice of liberation? If we voluntarily undertake to observe certain boundaries for our actions and speech, and we are able to consistently govern our conduct within those boundaries – even on occasions and situations when we are very tempted to transgress them – then we become liberated from the bad kamma which we might otherwise create.

Also, very importantly, we free ourselves from the guilt and anguish and self-loathing that accompanies unskillful actions.

These first two pāramīs might be considered the Buddhist answer to the question: how do you create self-esteem? You do it by governing your conduct and speech within boundaries that you have voluntarily adopted. The voluntary part is crucial. If you are maintaining a moral standard out of fear or desire for some reward, the psychological benefit is lost. And you do it by giving. Because when you give, you are proving to yourself that you can make a positive impact on your family, on your surroundings, on your community, on the society in which you live. You are proving that you can bring happiness to others. And by constantly giving, you are strengthening this perception of yourself as someone who can make a difference in the world. It may not be a spectacular difference, but small reductions of suffering and small increases in happiness and welfare are meaningful and bring joy with them. Giving, together with the restraint of *sīla*, creates the sense of self-respect, self-esteem, which is necessary for the more profound levels of dhamma practice.

The third of these pāramīs is *nekkhamma*. *Nekkhamma* is renunciation. It is the renunciation of all that is negative, useless and harmful in our lives. That's the first level. The more refined level is the renunciation of all that is trivial and pointless. *Nekkhamma* means transcending the world of sensuality or, at least, withdrawing from it. In its advanced form *nekkhamma* may mean abandoning one's old way of life and becoming a monk or a nun. But, for most people, in everyday terms, it means gaining a perspective on sensual desires and not being manipulated by them. The five precepts provide a framework of restraint by which lay Buddhists can ensure that their natural desires for sensory pleasure will not lead to harm for themselves or others. The attitude to sensuality here is not some kind of puritan rejection of physical instincts saying, 'I enjoy it therefore it's bad or I am bad because I enjoy it'. It's a recognition of a simple psychological truth that if your only access to feelings of well-being is through the sensual world, you're putting all your eggs in one very fragile basket. You are condemning yourself to a

very unstable experience of happiness and well-being because the forms, sounds, odours and all they are based upon, lie outside of our control. The body itself and its capacity to enjoy those sensory pleasures is also unstable and unreliable.

Psychologically, the point is that if you are too caught up in the sensual realm then your mind does not incline towards, it doesn't delight in, the non-sensual realm. A very simple analogy: if you're in a tall building and you're on the ground floor you can't, at the same time, be on a higher floor. It's not to say that there's anything wrong with the ground floor but if you would like to see what the view is like from a higher floor then you have to be able to leave the ground floor, at least on certain occasions.

In the life of lay Buddhists, it's generally recommended that one takes the eight precepts on the Uposatha day, and if possible, also on the 'wan phra' day (the eighth day of the waxing and waning moon). That makes four days a month. The five precepts are a sufficient and effective standard for body and speech on a daily basis. But by undertaking eight precepts, you take on additional precepts, such as abstaining from entertainments that are not directly concerned with the avoidance of unwholesome actions per se. They are precepts of renunciation. They provide a taste, an experience, of renouncing the non-essential. It is a regular training in how to develop a perspective on our relationship with the sensual realm.

On a daily basis one of the ways that we can develop *nekkhamma* most effectively is the practice of meditation. In focusing on the breath for instance, we put our attention on an object that is not immediately attractive or stimulating, and that is precisely the point. The mind, which is addicted to thought, to memory and to imagination, feels threatened by meditation. It struggles, it feels very uncomfortable if it has to devote itself to the bare experience of an in-breath and out-breath. This reaction is something to be accepted and recognised as being as natural as the struggle of a wild animal to resist any attempt to tame it. But if we are willing to be patient, if we see the value of practising in that way, then we can eventually transcend the addiction. In the initial stages of meditation practice the mind will gallop off elsewhere. It will seek

refuge in the enjoyment of memories and imagination. Training the mind to let go of that habit, is developing the perfection of renunciation.

The sensuality that we are renouncing in meditation is not restricted to the coarser forms of delight: sexual fantasies and so on. We renounce whatever it is that we enjoy thinking about and dwelling upon. Memories and perceptions of what we like pull us away from the meditation object. Being mindful of the breath means not forgetting it, bearing it in mind. But if it does wander, recognising that it has done so means the mind is back on track. It is a moment of clear awareness, of *sampajañña*, comprehension that what you're doing now is not what you set out to do. In effect, you wake up to what's going on. Following that moment of wakefulness, the return to the meditation object is the actual practice of *nekkhamma* pāramī. It means you make the decision to reject the sensual world of indulgence and trivial enjoyments and return to the task in hand. You are voluntarily returning to the simple, non-exciting reality in the present moment.

Many people who start to meditate are discouraged when they find that their meditation practice consists primarily of bringing the mind back to the breath. It goes off and you bring it back, and then it goes again and you bring it back again. And so on. You may think, 'I'm not doing this right' or 'I can't do this properly'. But wandering and returning is the point, you're developing an ability to recognise that the mind has strayed. You're developing the strength of mind and the renunciation to say, 'Yes, even though I find this quite an enjoyable mental state, quite an enjoyable thought and memory, I'm going to put it down because I aspire to something higher and more meaningful.'

Often, the reason why thoughts, the same thoughts, return again and again is because there's still a delight in them. There's an abiding interest in the thought and the mental state. So, you bring the mind back, but if it's not done wholeheartedly, there's no real renunciation involved. There's still a lingering interest and a desire to carry on that thought to its conclusion. After the mind is back with the breath for a short time, it strays back to where it

was just now, and you become even more frustrated. The spirit of renunciation is key.

A couple of suggestions here on dealing with distracting thoughts in meditation. If the distraction is predominantly one of words rather than images, when you catch yourself thinking a particular phrase, then rather than returning to the meditation object straightaway, deliberately repeat the phrase in your mind a few times. After a few repetitions a feeling of boredom will arise, and at that point return to the breath. Now there is a wholehearted renunciation of the thought. You don't want to think that anymore. A variation on this is to carry on the train of thought in a very slow and deliberate way. Very soon you lose interest in it and can return to the breath voluntarily.

So, if your mindfulness is strong and your commitment is strong, then merely being aware that the mind has strayed, that awareness, that awakening of the mind is sufficient for the thought to fall away, to cease by itself. But in the case that the thought is more tenacious and there is more investment in it, these two techniques, counter intuitive as they may seem, can be very helpful.

Renunciation is simplification. Simplification allows us to see the way things are much more clearly and effectively. We feel lighter. We feel brighter. We feel the confidence to recognise that without attachment to enjoyments of memory, imagination and so on, we feel better. We make a profit, we don't lose out in any way.

The next pāramī is wisdom (*paññā*). Wisdom is considered to be the heart of the Buddhist path. There are different levels of wisdom. As a pāramī, the kind of wisdom emphasised is wise reflection (*yonisomanasikāra*), which may be divided into two kinds. First is the reflection, the thinking which seeks to replace a negative mental state, an afflictive emotion, with a wholesome mental state. The second is the reflection on the way things are, specifically the three characteristics of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness. This two-fold division parallels the two approaches to meditation called samatha and vipassanā. Samatha deals with craving and other unwholesome mental states, vipassanā with our ignorance of the way things are.

An example of the first kind of wise reflection is one with which you may be familiar: reflecting in ways that encourage loving kindness and forgiveness to replace persistent negativity. Similarly, when sensual thoughts, memories and perception completely obsess the mind, then we develop wise reflection on the unattractive nature of the human body. There is nobody, no matter how attractive, how beautiful, how handsome, whose body lacks non-beautiful or non-handsome features. Instead of allowing the mind to dwell unrestrainedly on the beautiful, handsome, attractive features, we simply shift the focus and dwell upon one of the unattractive features. Reducing the power that attraction and aversion exert upon our mind is an important life skill. Another key reflection is on death. Reflecting on the inevitability of death, the uncertainty as to when it will occur and how, counters heedlessness, laziness, and complacency.

The second kind of wise reflection is based upon observing the way things are: in particular looking again and again at the impermanent, uncertain nature of experience as it manifests in the five *khandhas* of body, perceptions, feelings, mental formations and consciousness. We make conscious the impermanence of every aspect of life, inner and outer. In daily life, we can use Ajahn Chah's teaching of 'mynae', continually bringing the mind back to the uncertainty and unreliability of all that occurs.

The unsatisfactoriness of unenlightened existence might seem a rather grand philosophical position to take. But in daily life we can investigate it in the simplest of ways. On public transport, for example, we may give ourselves the task of noticing the changes in posture of everybody around us. Nobody is still for more than a few seconds, and it's clear that almost every single movement that is made is an attempt to escape from discomfort. Reflecting on *anattā* means looking into causality. When we look closely, we see no owner of experience, no permanent independent entity controlling the show. What we see is this complex flow of causes and conditions.

Being able to see things in terms of causes and conditions allows us to make wise choices. We can start to discriminate between

those causes and conditions which are amenable to correction or to encouragement, and those causes and conditions which are outside of our control and which we need simply to accept. Lacking that wisdom, we may find ourselves accepting things which should be amended and trying to abandon things which should be accepted. It's through clear penetration and reflection on the causal nature of phenomena that we can respond appropriately and wisely to different situations. This is wisdom on that level of developing *anicca-saññā*, the perception of impermanence, *dukkha-saññā*, the perception of unsatisfactoriness, *anattā-saññā*, the perception of non-self. These are creating habits and creating an affinity with, a familiarity with, the three characteristics. It will stand one in very good stead as the mind becomes more peaceful through meditation and can be turned to investigating the three characteristics on a non-verbal level. This is not *vipassanā* in itself but creates a pathway for it. It's creating a way into the non-verbal recognition, cognition, of the three characteristics.

Wisdom is often divided into three categories: the wisdom that comes with listening and studying, the wisdom that comes from thinking about things we've heard and studied, and the wisdom that comes from meditation. The more we look at our minds and the more we understand ourselves, the more we understand the human condition. In meditation we are the guinea pigs, the representatives of the human race with whom we have the most immediate access. If you can develop insight into the way that greed, jealousy, hatred and so forth appear in your mind, then you know how they appear in the human mind generally, because they are universal characteristics. Similarly, the more you understand how the positive qualities arise in your own mind, then the more you understand and appreciate the goodness in other people. Empathy arises through this kind of insight. Through meditating you gain some very interesting information about the way that defilements work. There is a common idea that goodness makes you a bit gullible and liable to be outsmarted by the unscrupulous and evil. In fact, the more you look at your mind, the more you understand defilement, and the

more you understand defilement, the easier it is to recognize it and guard against it.

There are many old wisdom tales. One deals with a theft of jewels from the Emperor of China. The investigations fail to reveal the thief, but it is clear that it must be someone within the palace. The wise Emperor orders a 'magic' bell to be suspended behind a curtain in the main assembly hall. He tells all the suspects that the magic bell is sensitive to immorality and the moment the thief touches it, the bell will ring. Then everyone is commanded to form into single file and walk behind the curtain, one by one, and touch the magic bell. They do so, but no sound is heard. Everyone assumes that the plan didn't work. But then the Emperor demands to see everyone's hands. The bell has been coated with grease and all but one person – the thief – has traces of grease on his hand. He was the only one who did not dare touch the bell. The wise Emperor did not need magic to catch the thief. He relied on his understanding of human nature.

The next pāramī is *khanti*: forbearance or patient endurance, the virtue referred to by the Buddha as the 'supreme incinerator' of defilements. There's a famous folk hero in Thailand called Sri Thanonchai. At one time while Sri Thanonchai was ordained as a monk, the King announced a competition to see who could summarize the Buddha's teachings most concisely. Monks and sages came from all over Thailand. Finally, it was Sri Thanonchai's turn. He got up on the Dhamma seat, gave the Namo Tassa invocation, and then summed up the whole teaching in three terms: 'Patient endurance, patient endurance, patient endurance.' And then following the traditional ornate phrase by which Dhamma talks are ended, he descended from the Dhamma seat. Sri Thanonchai won the prize.

Most people assume that Ajahn Chah spent his days giving wise and profound teachings. The image is of him walking through the monastery with his walking stick, turning to somebody, smiling, and saying something incredible that changes their life forever. That did happen, but actually not so much. His Dhamma talks were often quite repetitive and went into great detail about things like

monastic regulations and how to use them in the development of mindfulness. When I was first in Thailand, and couldn't yet understand the Dhamma talks, there was one phrase I would hear more than any other, 'ot ton'. One day I asked a senior Western monk what it meant. He said, 'Patient endurance'. That was very much what Ajahn Chah was emphasizing – more than almost anything else. You can be mindful that something unwholesome has arisen in your mind, but if you have never developed the ability to withstand the siren call, the temptation of defilement, with patient endurance, then that moment of mindfulness is wasted. It is swept away by craving.

Khanti is, in Luang Por Sumedho's phrase, the skill of peacefully co-existing with the unpleasant. It doesn't mean gritting your teeth until something comes to an end, but to endure calmly, to be fully present with the disliked, without struggle. Practising it, you realise that you don't have to get so flustered, oppressed and depressed, because things aren't going your way or things aren't how you'd like them to be. In certain circumstances, although you can't do anything about the unpleasant event, you do have the capacity not to buy into it, not to take it so seriously. 'It's just like this, it's alright, it's bearable.' Often the critical factor is how you deal with the voice in your head saying, 'I can't take this anymore, it's too much, it's too much.' Often all you have to do is to calmly reply, 'Why? Are you sure? No, it's okay. It's alright.' Learning how to talk to yourself intelligently is another aspect of wisdom and is a great support of patient endurance. Wisdom is always needed. Patient endurance is not always the right strategy. Sometimes you shouldn't bear with something. Sometimes you should say 'no' or change what you're doing. Patient endurance always needs to be supported by wisdom, which tells us when and when not to exercise it.

The next pāramī is *viriya*. This word is derived from *vīra*, meaning hero, and refers to heroic effort. The Buddha specified four kinds of effort: firstly, the effort to protect the mind against unwholesome mental states which have not yet arisen; secondly, in the case in which unwholesome states have arisen, putting forth the effort to abandon them; thirdly, putting forth the effort to give

rise to wholesome states of mind; and fourthly, putting forth the effort to care for, nurture and bring to maturity those that have already arisen. These four kinds of effort are essential in every area of formal practice and in daily life. The key point is consistency and continuity of effort. In Ajahn Chah's words: 'when you feel diligent you put forth effort; when you feel lazy you put forth effort.'

I will tell you another story. It's about a woman and her daughter-in-law going out to collect mushrooms after a long rain. The daughter-in-law knew a particular clearing up on the hill behind the village where the mushrooms grew in great abundance. She was determined to get up to that particular spot as quickly as possible. Her mother-in-law had a different idea. As they were walking along, every time she saw a mushroom by the side of the road she'd stop and pick it. Her daughter-in-law became frustrated, 'Mum, Mum come on, we've got to get up to that field up there. There's hundreds of mushrooms there. Down here, there's just a single mushroom here, a single mushroom there, it will take hours to get enough for what we need. Let's not waste any more time.' But the old lady paid no heed. She picked a single mushroom, walked a bit further and then stooped down for another one. The young woman wanted to scream. Eventually she ran out of patience altogether and with a curt, 'I'm going on ahead,' she strode off. The young woman walked quickly but on reaching the clearing she discovered that the mushrooms had all already been picked. She wasn't the only one to know about the place. Tired and miserable, she trudged the long way back to the village. As she approached the house, her nose detected a wonderful fragrance. She went into the kitchen, 'Mum, that smells so good.' And her mother-in-law smiled kindly, 'It's single-mushroom curry. Sit down and I'll bring you a bowl.'

Many people approach meditation the way the daughter-in-law approached the mushrooming expedition. But there's much to say for the mother-in-law's approach. We need to put forth a constant, consistent effort. It may seem rather modest at times, but it steadily accumulates and bears real results. Alternating spectacular effort with periods of rest and relaxation is like trying to rub two sticks

together to create fire, but putting the sticks down whenever you feel tired.

Next is *sacca*. *Sacca* means truthfulness. We don't just have to refrain from lying. We need to cultivate a love of truth. An indication of its importance can be found in the Jatakas. The bodhisattva, over all his lifetimes of accumulating pāramīs before his final birth as Prince Siddhartha, is seen in one life or another to fail in all of the pāramīs. The one pāramī that he never betrayed, never fell away from, was *sacca* pāramī, truthfulness.

People will often say that truthfulness is obviously a good thing, but surely there's nothing wrong with an occasional white lie? But that's the point. That's why keeping precepts is a Dhamma practice in itself. Thinking you have a choice between telling the truth and hurting someone's feelings on one side and telling a lie out of concern for their feelings on the other, is a false dilemma. The challenge is: how can I avoid hurting that person's feelings without telling a lie. You have to use your intelligence. Practising the pāramī of truthfulness, you are freeing yourself, you're liberating yourself from falsity. Someone who respects the truth, and never compromises on it, is someone whose word is given great respect and has real weight. I first met Ajahn Sumedho and his Sangha in London in 1978. One of the things that inspired me the most was they all seemed to me to be practising what they preached. They seemed to me to be true to their vocation, sincere in what they were doing.

Sacca is a wonderful quality to develop. It is truly liberating. There is no need for doubt: should I tell the truth or not? Because once you allow the possibility of telling white lies, that you may under certain circumstances say something untrue if there's a good reason, you open a can of worms. Your weaselly mind soon finds a way to use that loophole to excuse lies that are not actually noble or compassionate at all. Maybe it's just that you fear the reaction of the other person, or you just don't want the complications that might arise. Your convenience before the truth and your *sacca* pāramī never grows. Caring for *sacca* is a true purification of mind.

Adhiṭṭhāna, the power of resolution or of vows, is the next pāramī. This is a very good quality to cultivate if you're a doubter. If you are often thinking, shall I do this, shall I do that? Shall I do neither? Shall I do both? Should I be asking myself so many questions? There's a story about an old Persian gentleman who had a very long beard. One day his grandson said, 'Grandad when you're asleep, is your beard outside the blanket or inside?' He couldn't answer. That night he lay down to sleep and he felt for his beard, 'It's outside, but it doesn't feel quite right.' So, he put it inside and he thought, 'No, that doesn't feel quite right either,' and he put it outside again. This went on all night, and he got no sleep at all. He ended up cutting off his beard in the morning. Excessive doubt followed by a rash decision made merely to escape from the torment of doubting is a common phenomenon.

A wiser way to be free of doubt is to make vows. But there is a skill to it. If you make a vow too difficult and you can't keep it, then you're going to feel hopeless and be discouraged. If you make a vow too easy, too easy to keep, you're not going to have any sense of accomplishment. It's like playing a sport. Say you play tennis with someone who's much better than you and you get beaten six-love, six-love. That's hopeless and you don't want to do that anymore. But if you win six-love, six-love that's not very enjoyable either. If you play with someone who's just a bit better than you, then you find you're playing better than you thought you could. Somehow their slight superiority brings forth something within you that you didn't realise you had. And this is what happens when you make intelligent vows.

Joining and leaving the monastic order is like being born and dying. It's difficult to get born. It takes a long time. It's very easy to die. It can happen at any moment, very easily. It's very difficult to become a monk and it's very easy to leave. There's no special ritual involved. All you have to do to leave the monkhood is to say words to the effect of, 'I've had enough,' and for somebody to understand what you said. That's it. You are no longer a monk. Very easy. So, you can imagine that whenever a young monk meets some kind of difficulty, one part of his mind is probably thinking, 'Ah, I'll just

throw it all in. I've had enough.' There are no lifetime vows. But that kind of doubt and irresolution can torture the minds of young monastics. So as teachers we often recommend making a private vow for five years or three years and say, 'Just forget about the possibility of leaving and doing something else and giving up on this for a certain period of time, three years or five years. Put all your doubts to one side for a certain period of time and then decide whether you're cut out for this life.' It clarifies and focuses the mind. You find that by cutting off that doubt and irresolution you access some real energy. There is liberation from doubt and irresolution and confusion.

The practice of *mettā* is a liberation from anger and aversion. It makes the mind bright and happy. I once read in a history book of an act of kindness that impressed me a lot. It occurred after a battle during a war between Sweden and Denmark. A Swedish soldier, more or less unharmed, was walking through the battlefield. All around him wounded men were moaning in pain. He passed a Danish soldier in great pain begging for water. Out of compassion he bent down to give him some water from his flask. But as he did so, the Danish soldier realising that he was a Swede reached for his knife and tried to stab him. The Swedish soldier easily caught his arm and disarmed him. Then he said, 'I only wished to help you and you repay me by trying to kill me. I was originally going to give you all of the water in this flask, but now I'm only going to give you half. I'm going to keep half for myself, because I'm pretty thirsty too.' I like the fact that he didn't walk away in disgust. Despite the ingratitude he held onto his kindness.

An essential point about *mettā* is that it doesn't discriminate. Having *mettā* for someone you love is easy. If you feel *mettā* for people who have the same beliefs as you do, the same colour skin, the same political persuasion, the same group, the same country, but not for people of other ethnicities, or religions, or countries or whatever: that's not really *mettā*. *Mettā* makes no distinctions. It is by cultivating boundless goodwill that the mind is set free in such a marvellous way.

So how do you practise *mettā* toward people who behave badly? If you think *mettā* is this kind of idealistic, 'I love you all' kind of attitude, then nasty, evil people are a real challenge. If you wish a nasty person to be happy and they're happy being nasty, won't you be complicit in their nastiness? Should there be a limit to *mettā*? No. But we need to be clear about what *mettā* means. It's not necessarily a fuzzy feeling of warmth and love. It means wishing all beings well. Sometimes it might be the wish for others to enjoy freedom from anger and enmity and hatred and the desire for revenge. It might be the wish for people to recognise that they're creating bad kamma and to abandon their unwholesome actions. We wish all beings to know the happiness of the freedom from defilement and the joy of goodness. If we use our reflective ability, we can see that there is always a way in which we can wish others well. Even if it's simply at the level of abandoning the unwholesome actions that are so obnoxious.

Sometimes there is a temptation to look to the law of kamma as some kind of righteous retribution for people who do bad things. You might comfort yourself that a certain person's evil actions may have gone unpunished in this life, but after death they will go to a hell realm and suffer terribly – and it will serve them right! If so, that's a really black, unwholesome mental state you've invited into your heart. At the moment we allow our mind to dwell in, and indulge in, anger, we're no longer on the middle path. At that moment, we're no longer disciples of the Buddha. We've turned our back on the Buddha. We've turned our back on our teachers. We've turned our back on all that we hold most noble and good.

In Buddhism, we have no concept of righteous indignation. There's absolutely no situation in which anger is considered a wise or an intelligent response, even to the most awful injustice or violence. It only ever makes things worse: an angry mind is a stupid mind. It's only when the mind has the wish for the well-being of all that we can find creative responses to the terrible things that go on in our societies and our world. We have to free ourselves and liberate ourselves from anger and negativity, and *mettā* is a wonderful way of doing this.

The last of the pāramīs is *upekkhā*. It's very easy to see in children that liking or disliking are, to them, absolute values. They can say, 'No!' and when you ask them why not, they say, 'I don't like it.' And to a child, not liking something is a completely rational and sufficient reason for not having anything to do with it. I don't think that adults are really that different, except we can disguise it a lot more. If you look very closely, I think there is this belief that having to do things we don't like is somehow wrong, and freedom is being able to do what we like. It is the freedom to follow our desires that we value.

But that's a very spurious kind of freedom. The freedom provided by equanimity, on the other hand, is the freedom from being compelled to act or not to act by feelings of liking and disliking. It is providing a balance and evenness of mind. Liking and disliking become a bit like the weather to a farmer. Some days it may be brutally hot and other days it may pour with rain, but if you're a rice farmer that's irrelevant. Whatever the weather may be, you have to go out in the fields and do your job: plough your fields or transplant your rice, or whatever. Farmers are aware whether it's hot or cold or wet, and they don't like being uncomfortable, it's just the background to their life. It doesn't determine what they do every day.

With equanimity, the liking and the disliking arise and pass away according to nature. They're no longer absolutes in our mind. We're free of their power to condition our mind. It's not a matter of striking an equanimous attitude. The idea is not simply to reject feelings of like and dislike, and to cultivate indifference. We can't achieve equanimity through willpower. But the more we see how much we limit ourselves by our likes and dislikes, the less weight we give them. The more we observe the conditioned nature of phenomena, the less we seek fulfilment in transient phenomena.

In the practice of creating the foundation for, and supporting conditions for, meditation, we cultivate these kinds of liberation:

- liberation from stinginess and selfishness, from attachment to material things, through *dāna*;

- liberation from the unskilful actions and speech which create bad kamma, and from remorse and lack of self-respect through *sīla*;
- liberation from entrapment in the sensual world through *nekkhamma*;
- liberation from prejudice and irrationality, from superficial and deluded attitudes, thoughts and perceptions through *paññā*;
- liberation from fear of pain and difficulty through *khanti*;
- liberation from complacency, stagnation and laziness through *viriya*;
- liberation from doubt and irresolution through *adhiṭṭhāna*;
- liberation from insincerity and hypocrisy through *sacca*;
- liberation from anger, aversion and resentment through *mettā*;
- liberation from addiction to feelings of liking and disliking through *upekkhā*.

By cultivating these ten pāramīs, we nurture the causes and conditions for the ultimate liberation. May these ten pāramīs flourish within you all.

Nurturing the Seeds of Dhamma

Ajahn Sundarā

This talk was given by Ajahn Sundarā on April 22nd, 2015.

This year I spent January, February and March in Thailand. It is a country where I have previously spent a few years and where I feel a deep appreciation of the practice of the Dhamma as it is taught in the Forest Tradition. I went on the trip not really planning anything, except for the first eight days. I went to the memorial gathering for Luang Por Chah at Wat Nong Pah Pong. I spent some time with a teacher who I met 18 years ago when I spent two years at his monastery. I went to one of his many monasteries located in a mountain area of central Thailand, near Khao Yai National Park. It is a very beautiful area. Ajahn Sumedho was living in a monastery about a 10-minute drive from there. I travelled to different areas, to Chiang Mai, to Chiang Rai, and I spent time in Bangkok. I knew I wanted to pay respects to my teacher, and I knew that Ajahn Gunhah was a very good teacher to be with. It was an extremely pleasant period for me, to reconnect with the sanity of the Buddha's teachings as offered in the Forest Tradition. I personally feel that it takes one back to the words of the Buddha, to the experience of the Buddha and what he meant by the Path for a monastic. I am a monastic, so this is a particular situation in which I experience my commitment to practice.

What is noticeable when you go to a Buddhist country is that you keep meeting people who are really dedicated, interested

and engaged in practising, monastics as well as householders and laypeople outside the monastery. Being in a Buddhist country, I experience being upheld, in a different way from my experience of being upheld in the West. Here, in the United Kingdom, you are upheld in a Western way, which is also a powerful way. But in Thailand, what you particularly observe is an immense devotion and immense faith in the path of practice. There is a way of using the mind which is quite different to the way Westerners use their minds. There is that aspect of faith, which is a very powerful part of our mind, and devotion is another very powerful aspect of the mind. They are aspects that are below the thinking waves of our thought patterns. When you have faith and confidence in the Path or the teachings, it touches the mind at a deeper level than just thinking about things.

I spent time at Wat Nong Pah Pong and Wat Pah Nanachat. In January Luang Por Chah's memorial gathering takes place for about 10 days. You have over 10,000 people of all ages coming from all over the world. Men, women and children living under mosquito nets on the ground. And old ladies everywhere; every type of person was there. It really brings an upsurge of energy and inspiration. You see how the mind can be so limited by perceptions. You can think that a very old woman will not sleep on the floor or will not sit for a long time in meditation, but you see all the grannies doing that. I am getting towards that granny part of life. It was very inspiring to see this lovely strength in people, this deep appreciation of the happy mind.

In my encounters in Thailand, I kept meeting happy people. Of course, people are not always happy. But I was meeting people who are the Dhamma practitioners, meeting their teachers, and meeting the place they love in their heart. I met a lot of very happy people. Even if they have difficulties in life, if they have problems and pain, they still have such a deep faith in the power of meditation, in the power of *sīla,* and in the power of insight and liberation. They really look beyond their problems. They don't hang around obsessively with a lot of negativities. It always strikes me that the power of faith is more developed there, faith seems more innate in their minds.

It is different for us here in the West. I am not here to compare anything particularly, but here we have such a powerful thinking education. That thinking training can make our minds very clunky. There are all the views and opinions that we are inculcated with. So many things that we carry at the thinking level, which have been basically brought into us. It's not that we had a choice necessarily. It may be that our parents wanted us to be educated, to go to university, to learn a lot. And the more you learn, the more expert you become. Then at some stage we end up in a monastery like Amaravati filled up with so much knowledge, an incredible amount of knowledge about things.

When I go to Thailand, I have to say that I am glad to meet those teachers that go straight to the point. They are not concerned about making you happy or softening the message of what the path of liberation is about. I quite like that myself. It's not necessarily comfortable and it's not necessarily what the ego likes. You don't get too pampered there. This is personal experience I am talking about. They will just tell you straight what the path is about. Not any long proliferation about how things should be done and how things should not be done. I like the simplicity of that message.

At the end of my visit, one of the perks of my trip was that I met a nun who was a *phra arahant*. They have a term there, *phra arahant*. *phra* means worthy in Thai. There was a Thai nun, a *maechee*, who they called a *phra arahant*. I hadn't met a *phra arahant* nun before. I had heard about an enlightened Thai *maechee*. She features in a book we have about Maechee Kaew, she was a disciple of Ajahn Maha Boowa. We heard that she was considered a fully enlightened woman, a fully liberated woman. It's good for women to hear that, it's encouraging. On this trip the *maechee* was introduced to me as a *phra arahant*. She had been given a piece of land so that she could move to the mountains. Her nunnery near Bangkok had suffered from exposure to chemical fumes from a neighbouring factory, which had affected the nun's health. This land was a wonderful place, but it was simply bare barren earth. A jungle on one side and bare earth on the other. She is slowly building a nunnery. There was nothing much there. There was a tent that just had two sides.

There were seven women there, seven little huts that were the size of a body and width of a springy Thai mosquito net, and there was the forest. It is three kilometres from Ajahn Gunhah's monastery. Ajahn Gunhah has been supporting the nunnery. He offered them a kitchen which the nuns themselves were building and a big brand-new water tank. Also, he was arranging the electricity and water supply, and had built a large dirt road between his monastery and the nunnery.

There was something very touching about this sight, seeing the seven women, and other people helping them, and the simplicity of the life there. It was very different to Chithurst Monastery in the early days, where I started in 1979. But it reminded me a little bit of the spirit – all working together to build a monastery. It was work, but when you live with somebody who is referred to as a *phra arahant*, it is not just work for the sake of work, it is really a meditation.

In the early days at Chithurst there was nothing else but meditation manifesting in doing quite a bit of work. But it was very powerful because it was not just work, then you get exhausted and then you start complaining. There's also work and if you are tired, can you work with your tiredness? And if you are grumpy, can you work with your grumpiness? Not trying to make the conditions perfect so that none of those states of mind would arise in consciousness. So, you feel that there's a very powerful teacher there. Seeing that in Thailand was very inspiring. Very inspiring for a nun to meet an enlightened nun. There are not so many of them around. It was very heart warming. I could feel the sense of deep peace and coolness in this person. It was very empowering to experience that.

The theme that interested me on my trip was something that I had heard before from the forest teachers in Thailand. They say that the Westerners have a very strong mind, they have very strong intention and determination. They have a huge amount of knowledge. But what is missing with Westerners is the power of sustaining things to the point where they can actually harvest the result of their practice. They have this impatience which wants to get things quickly, to have instant results, to have instant gratification. And

the frustration that comes into the mind when this does not happen. I think it is difficult for us to accept that the result of one's practice may have several causes or seeds. If these seeds are not growing in oneself, it is very difficult to enable them to ripen to the point of realisation. Sometimes I think this is forgotten. We don't place enough attention on that. When you plant a seed in your mind, let's say a seed of the Dhamma knowledge, it takes certain conditions to make it grow, to make it healthy, to make it mature to the point of full realisation. If we talk about the seeds of the Dhamma in the mind – this is what insight is about. Insight is when suddenly the fruit is ripe, and you know that you have let go of something. You know that something has just finished.

The conditioning of delusion, the conditioning of anger, the conditioning of greed: they are the three states of mind the Buddha said we need to be free from to come to the realisation of Nibbana. It can be a broad generalisation when we consider those three states of mind: greed, hatred and delusion. There is a whole spectrum of those mind states: the quality, the strength, the power, and the manifestation of them. At times it is very difficult to see the mind. We can understand these words, we can read a lot about those mind states. We can be very knowledgeable as a psychologist, or a psychiatrist, as a doctor or someone who studied them. But we need to bring patience, attention and powerful mindfulness to those manifestations of the mind, to the point where we can see clearly, how they arise and how they manifest and what kind of message they give. To be able to recognise fully when they arise in the mind is not always easy. *Avijjā* means the power of not knowing. *A* means without, *vijjā*, means knowledge, without knowledge. *Avijjā* has the power to make you forget, to make you ignore certain signs that are very important. Signs that are important because they support the maturation of the seeds of the Dhamma wisdom. Signs that also support the realisation of the nature of the mind states that the Buddha very clearly mapped out as being *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā*; impermanence, suffering and not self.

As I mentioned before, causes need to be put in place to be able to come to the point of letting go. One of the causes is the

capacity to sustain attention for a long time on consciousness, on the mind. By attention I mean mindfulness. While I was in Thailand, I had a deeper insight about mindfulness. I have been practising mindfulness as a nun since 1979, so by now I should know what I am talking about, shouldn't I? But mindfulness is not something that you know something about necessarily. Mindfulness is a quality of mind that enables things to die. It's nice to hear that Ajahn Chah said 'mindfulness is the graveyard of all things'. We don't like things to die, do we? We like to talk about springtime, about new growth and all the positive aspects of birth. But the language we use sometimes in the West is a very sweet language. We try to accommodate our language to the psychology that makes us feel good. It's not unskilful, otherwise people may not be interested in liberating their heart, so this is maybe the first step.

The Buddha talks about the third noble truth of *nirodha*: the cessation of attachment, the cessation of conditioning. For that we need to be able to sustain mindfulness to the point where things actually go. To come to the point where you can see something cease, you might have to look at its pattern of arising and ceasing for a long time before you come to full knowledge that something has gone. With our impatience we want things to go really fast. And our knowledge is a cause of impatience. The fact that we know so well the whole thing, but we can't do it yet. Between that and our knowledge and the goal that we have in mind, the goal that we've read about, there is a lot of impatience and frustration that can manifest emotionally. It manifests even without us knowing it sometimes.

I like to talk about another important aspect of the practice, the way we take things so personally. This sentence has been used many times in a less skilful way. When a person may be miserable and about to cry, if they are told 'Don't take it so personally', it adds another nail to the situation. It's not so easy for someone to hear that. But I'm talking about another level, a level of relief, rather than making someone feel even worse when they're upset. The level of relief is that we do not always acknowledge the fact that our mind is not ours. The mind is not us; the mind is not me. Our

thoughts are not us, are not mine, are not me. Our feelings the same, our perceptions the same. Often, because we don't know that yet, we feel that we are still in charge – of our world, of our thoughts, of our feelings, of our moods. Of course, up to a certain point we are in charge. We are decent people. We are people who want good, and we have a degree of responsibility in what we do. But this degree of responsibility that we carry around can make the mind feel very heavy. It can feel like a burden. Me, it's my problem, I can't do it, I'm hopeless. If I cannot do this, I don't think I want to continue to walk this path. We feel things are heavy because we think we are in charge to a certain point. Our kamma is in charge. That's what is in charge. Our history from we don't know how many lifetimes. The Buddha says very clearly that there are past lives, future lives and so on. It's important to see that from the Buddha's perspective we are born through our kamma, we are heir to our kamma, we are related to our kamma. Whatever kamma we do, whether it is good or bad, we are still the heir of our kamma.

With the Buddha's teaching we can lighten up our kamma. I am sure that the kamma does lighten as we walk the path of loving kindness, of wisdom, of understanding: the Noble Eight-fold path. It lightens because we are beginning to be more conscious, we are beginning to see more clearly. We have a good pair of glasses; they are called mindfulness. We have more wisdom, we have the capacity to contemplate, to see clearly, to know and to understand. That makes our mind much lighter. We experience the confidence that we have finally found a way to walk through life with good eyesight. Mindfulness is like a good pair of eyes; it sees and knows with clarity.

You may be beating yourself up, feeling that you are not capable, feeling that you're not good enough. If you don't feel confident with your practice you might want to consider some questions. What are you carrying around in your mind? What is the content of your mind right now? What are you obsessed with? What are you clinging to? Because your thoughts, moods and feelings have a lot of power. Not only the power to make your mind happy or miserable, but also your thoughts and feelings are shared within

your environment. If you are a happy person, most people like happy people. But if you are miserable, depressed, unhappy and critical, then don't be surprised if you don't have too many friends. Because it's not so easy to be with somebody who is dragging other people down all the time.

There is this idea that kamma is responsible, that you have been born through your kamma. In Buddhism we say it's very good kamma to be born as a human being because this is a place where one can see suffering and happiness clearly. The two extremes of the mind, the likes and the dislikes, and so on. We are told that if you are a deva and constantly happy, it's very hard to be objective about anything because you just absorb into the happiness. If you are a hell-being, you are so miserable you can't even think clearly.

This idea of our non-self nature, *anattā*, struck me more this time in Thailand. I think we all have some sense of this when we start practising the path. We get into this very disciplined work. We get up early, we meditate, we dedicate our life to the good etc. There's obviously a terrific confidence in something that we don't always know. Why do we become monks and nuns? We don't always know. Maybe we would say, 'I have suffered, and I wanted to understand what it is all about. This path gives me the potential to be a fairly happy human being by doing something good, both for myself and for others.' That's an inspiration to have a way of living that brings good things in this life. It makes you happier, it makes you stronger, it makes you more confident in yourself and in life in general. This aspect of *anattā* relates with the cause I addressed earlier. We think that we are responsible for what happens to us all the time, and it is the 'I' which is in charge, but what happens is the 'I' is not very strong. It is an entity in us that is often very moody. I can be depressed, I can be happy, I can be up and down, I can be confused and so on.

If you depend on 'I' which is this illusory entity in ourselves, it's disheartening because it's a very fragile reference point for us. The reference point of the ego, which doesn't even exist when you start looking more deeply at the aspects of impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self. You begin to see that you cannot

rely on the 'I' for too long. It goes up and down. One night you feel you want to meditate all night; the next night you feel you are a hopeless case, and you want to sleep all day. The next night you want to be the best person in the world and the next day you think that you cannot cope. So, relying on 'I' is very uncertain, it is very unstable and unreliable.

An aspect which the Buddha encourages us to rely upon is the wisdom of knowing that you need to put in the appropriate cause if you want something to happen. If I want to have a body that has strong muscles, then I need to do a lot of muscle training and gym work. I must put in the necessary causes to make it work. Or there is the topic of good health. These days people can be so obsessed with good health that they don't realize that their obsessive mind is destroying their health. The mind is more powerful than the body. I was one of them, I am talking from experience here. So, people get obsessed about something which is good. But they don't realise that their mind is in a state of disarray and misery. There is discontent in the mind. It is wanting to be healthy, which is a response to feeling discontented. You haven't got something that you want. So, desire is there – it is another force which confuses the mind. What do we do with that? Remember that when the Buddha talks about anatta, he is talking about the fact that what we think about as being me; my personality, myself, my ego, the person in charge in there, is not as real as we think.

You begin to look at life in such a way as to say, 'What will bring about what I need?' There are many teachings about that in our Western culture. Many philosophical teachings and great minds that have thought about that. Whether in the spiritual world, or the Christian and contemplative traditions, they have insight into the knowledge of kamma. It is not unknown in our culture. If you want something you have to really engage with what you need and what you want. This is the reason why meditation is so important. Why? Because meditation is the development of the mind. When you cultivate meditation, you enable your mind to touch into its power. Not the power to float above water or the power to go through walls, but the power to have buoyancy in the

mind. We call it awake, being awake. You don't have to have a happy mind all the time. But this buoyancy is another kind of happiness which is not dependent on being happy. I can have buoyancy and energy to look at my negativity. I can have buoyancy and energy to look at my suffering heart, to look at my miserable mind. When you look at that, you begin to have a clearer direction where you want to lead your life. That enables the wisdom to manifest to lead you towards this natural inclination - towards a happy mind, a good mind, a clear mind, a strong mind.

That is the result. It is not about obsessing with having to be happy all the time. It is about setting up causes that develop the heart mind in such a way that it can see things clearly. It can have the patience and the quality needed to look at consciousness and its contents for a long time. It's called *chanda* in Pali, to have energetic interest in what you are doing. That energetic interest can be applied to anything, whether it's the work of concentration, the work of mindfulness practice, the work of insight meditation. It can be applied to any job in your life, to any relationship you have with people, whether it's in your profession, whatever. That takes energy, which is called *viriya*. Meditation is not just about making the mind relaxed and happy. It goes much much deeper than that. In Buddhism we are reminded that the deeper purpose of the path is the transcendent aspect of the mind. The transcendent aspect, which is able to realise nibbana, the end of suffering, the end of pain, the end of greed, anger and delusion.

I seem to have met a few realised people on this trip and perhaps that's why things seem a bit clearer. They are not necessarily charismatic, enticing and illuminating people. Not illuminating in a worldly way. They are just cooled down. They are peaceful people filled with wisdom and compassion. It is a pretty good exchange from greed, hatred and delusion to a mind filled with wisdom, compassion, and clarity. I think the trade is very worthwhile. It's a good business.

Naturally the journey through the mind, through that development of the heart, is a journey that is not straightforward. It has pitfalls because it is a journey through our conditioning. Our

conditioning is made up of a lot of unskilful mind states that can lie and fool you. The ego is the most treacherous thought compound. Your conditioning can make you say things you don't want to say. It can make you react in a horrible way to things. It can make you pretend that you are this or that when you are not. It can make you feel good when you are not good; it can make you feel bad when you are not bad. It is a liar. The ego mind is filled with lies and it's vitally important to realise that, not to take it as your reference point. To know things as they really are.

I am sure the greatest creators in the world, the greatest minds in the world came always from when they let go of the known. From when they let go of their conditioning, from when they dropped everything that they knew, at that point they made some amazing discoveries. And that is a point of insight. When you let go. You let go of this deep conditioning you were totally attached to, that you were totally identified with. And after a while you realised that you survived it. Not only did you survive it, but you are freer, you are stronger, happier and lighter. Your burden lightens. What we are involved with is amazing. When you meet those great teachers, you get a deeper sense of what we are engaged with. We are engaged with a very profound path.

The responsibility we have is not to be so involved with this 'I', with thinking that it should constantly be this way or that, according to what you have accumulated, your baggage, and the history you carry with you. Our responsibility is to be in accordance with the insights we have from mindfulness. Insights that arise through seeing very clearly the nature of all our experience of the five *khandhas*, the mind and the body.

In the Forest Tradition there is a very strong emphasis on the body. Particularly in Thailand you investigate the body again and again. There is the bones meditation, the elements meditation, and then you have the visualisation of the body and so on. It is very powerful. They have a lot of very powerful contemplations for concentration. We are more involved with what Ajahn Sumedho describes as *cittānupassanā*, which has a lot to do with the content of the mind. Whereas in Thailand the great meditation teachers

focus a lot on the body, on the physical body. Because for them it seems like the most deluding aspect of the mind is to be attached to this body. For us we are very attached to our thinking.

It's very nice to be back here. To be back in this amazing place where each one of us is supported in this work. It is extraordinary that we have conditions like this and such profound teachings.

Don’t Be Selfish

Ajahn Pasanno

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on February 12th, 2021.

The other day I was thinking about an occasion years ago when I was still living in Thailand. It’s a story I’ve told from time to time, but it’s a story that’s stuck with me. It was when I went to pay respects to Ajahn Buddhadāsa. I had been to visit and pay respects quite a few times, but this happened on my last visit. He was quite old at the time. He was over 80, and his health was starting to decline. I had noticed over the years that he tended to pick up a theme and explore it for an extended period. He would speak on it from different angles. He was very skilled as a teacher. So, I asked him, ‘Now that you’re reaching the last part of your life, what theme are you teaching now?’ He just laughed and said, ‘Oh, I am not teaching much at all these days. I just keep telling people, ‘Don’t be selfish.’ That really struck me. Once you start unpacking that teaching, you start reflecting on it and implementing it, you realize that it covers everything. It covers whatever aspect of the Buddha’s teachings and whatever aspect of life that you apply it to. Don’t be selfish. Being able to make it explicit in the mind, so that one keeps reminding oneself how to live like that. If we really want to be free from suffering and to awaken to truth, then we can’t be selfish. We can’t be bringing selfish concerns, or selfish perspectives. The Dhamma goes one way and selfishness goes the other way. They go in opposite directions.

This theme is a big feature in Ajahn Chah’s training and the way that he set up his monasteries. That sense of going against the

stream of any kind of selfishness. On a practical social level in how we live as human beings, there is always an encouragement to see how one can help with everything. There is encouragement to be present at everything that the community is doing. There is that sense of stepping back from selfishness.

Selfishness plays itself out in so many ways. There is your normal assumption of selfishness which is around greed and self-concern. But there's also that self-orientation, that self-protection and self-cherishing. Living together really helps to go against that very ordinary human tendency of selfishness; by sharing community, by sharing everything in common. There is so much selfishness just on a social level amid a pandemic and in the conflicts that have been occurring in America over the past decades.

We work on the deep-seated sense, 'I want to be happy. I don't want to suffer. I don't want to experience difficulty. I want to experience security, safety and peace.' And then we keep doing the things that make us miserable. The Buddha's teachings are so skilful for giving us tools to live in a way that helps us create the conditions for safety, security, peace and well-being. But it does take a relinquishing of selfishness. Cultivating that sense of generosity, of giving and sharing – and it isn't just material things. Certainly, in terms of material things, giving and sharing what we have. But it's also the giving and sharing of time, the giving and sharing of attention. Just being willing to pay attention to how other people are doing. How they are managing, as opposed to the obsession with me. 'Those other people out there are just kind of annoying, they are smudges on my well-being.' That attitude doesn't lead to beautiful states of mind.

Ajahn Chah's training was very much about one attending to things that need to be done and everyone helping. When there are things happening, you pitch in. There isn't really a time for me and 'What about me?' So, there's that opportunity to relinquish selfishness and self-orientation. It gives a great sense of ease, well-being and freedom. A good example is when Ajahn Sumedho asked to study, and train with Ajahn Chah. Luang Por Chah thought about it for a bit, and he said, 'Yes, you can practise and train here, but

you've got to fit in here. I can't give you special privileges or special consideration. You come from a different culture and are used to different food. You have to adapt to here.' Of course, Ajahn Sumedho took that on, and the results are pretty good. With all the rest of us who went to train with Ajahn Chah, he was in a position to try to make our life easier. He could have. 'But that isn't going to help you in the end. You are going to learn how to be wise by adapting to what is here and by stepping away from your personal story, from your personal preferences and from your personal views and opinions. And that will make you wise and free.'

He was quite happy to let us flounder sometimes and to do without things. But that was to help us to learn about not being selfish. You realize there is a tremendous freedom when you can just adapt to the circumstances that you're in. You can give yourself to the circumstances you're in. You can give yourself to the people you're with. And it's that giving and that giving up of selfishness that lays a foundation.

There are simple things in the practice that are a part of the signature characteristics of Ajahn Chah's monasteries. There is a lot of bowing. You come into the hall, and you bow. You get up to leave the hall, and you bow. And you bow in a mindful, composed manner. It is not a perfunctory thing that you do. You go back to your dwelling place, and you bow. When you leave to come back to the central area, you bow. Bowing is the first thing you do when you enter shared communal places of practice and living. It wears away the kind of self that is, 'I just want it comfortable. I want it easy. I don't want to have to think about being present very much. I just want to go on automatic pilot.' You can't do that. It is a simple thing that really helps one to counter the sense of self-obsession, of self-cherishing. 'I want to do it my way for me to be comfortable, to be easy for me.' Which certainly doesn't lead to liberation and awakening.

Being able to integrate bowing and the recollection of the Triple Gem was something that Luang Por Chah learned from Luang Por Kinnaree. On one occasion Ajahn Chah said to Ajahn Jayasāro, 'If you really knew how to bow, you would be in tears every time you

bowed.' There would be this sense of gratitude and appreciation, having that opportunity to step out of the me and my obsession. To step out of my worries, my fears, my competition with others and my comparing with others. Another aspect of 'Don't be selfish' is the comparing that we have with others and the competitions we have. The images, views and opinions we have about others. It really clutters the mind. And it is all rooted in selfishness. If we let go of that selfishness and self-obsession when we are living together with other human beings, harmony is the natural result. You realize that so much of the conflict and the difficulties living with each other is when selfishness is there. And relinquishing, letting it go and being willing to go against that selfishness, the sense of harmony comes. You can live together with a lot of people, and people can still be diverse and different, but it is just learning how to live together. Learning how to be unselfish.

In Thailand, the millipedes are really big, they have a thousand legs. Ajahn Chah said, 'You'd think with that many legs, they would trip over each other, and it would really be difficult. But they don't. Those legs all work together. They move along pretty smoothly.' In the same way it is possible to live together harmoniously as a community, as a society, as a culture. On a social level in stepping back from that tendency to selfishness, a sense of harmony is facilitated.

Also, there is the commitment to keeping the five precepts, the commitment to virtue. Those are great gifts that one gives. That sense of giving the gift of security, of compassion, of safety. By being willing to refrain from harming, to refrain from taking what is not given, to refrain from sexual overtures and complications, to refrain from speech that is unskilful, to refrain from consuming intoxicants. In giving up selfishness we can offer this tremendous gift of safety, security, compassion, and care to the world. That really brightens the mind. When the Buddha speaks of precepts, speaks of virtue, firstly there is the harmlessness of it. But also, it is not stained, it is not spotted, it is not complicated. It is conducive to composure. It is conducive to settling. When we do step back from those selfish competitions, selfish views or desires, it leads to a sense of settling and composure, externally but also internally.

That view of seeing the danger, that willingness to relinquish and to let go. To have the commitment to conduct that is harmless brightens the mind.

When there is harmony among us, when we go to meditate, we are not carrying around the story of the latest conflict or the latest kind of difficult interaction that one has had. Especially when it involved some kind of selfishness. It's always somebody else's problem; it's always somebody else's fault. It's never me. By having that willingness to not be selfish, when we sit down to meditate, the mind is ready to be present. The mind is ready to be mindful, it is ready to settle. There's an ease there, even when the mind starts to proliferate with the five hindrances: sense desire, ill-will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and skeptical doubt. Those hindrances all revolve around me, the selfish obsessions, the selfish spacing out or distracting oneself in some way. So not being selfish, that settles the hindrances. It's not as if one must go around stamping them out and annihilating them. That's another selfish crusade that one goes on so one can try to get my *samādhi* and my concentration. It goes against the grain of the Dhamma. Don't be selfish. Then the mind settles. The heart becomes still, serene and composed.

And certainly, on the aspects of wisdom and insight, you realize that selfishness, the self and other program, that sense of me and the world that one has to either struggle against or be fearful of, or try to gain some advantage over, is generated by fundamental self-obsession. Even the aspects of time, what is time? There is the future that is all about me being something in the future. And then the past. It is all about me in the past with some self-program going. It is all about me. Whether it's memories of regret or memories of the fantasy of the good old days. It's all fantasies about me and movement to the future and past. That sense of self is generating the whole complicating project. This is right and that's wrong. This is good and that's bad. Those judgements that go on. What is the root of it?

There is freedom that comes from, 'Don't be selfish'. It seems so simple, but it really pervades everything. The opportunity to

just see things in their true nature. To see: this is dukkha, this is the cause of dukkha, this is the cessation of dukkha, this is the path leading to the cessation of dukkha. That is not a self-program. That is a phenomenon that one experiences, but it doesn't have to have a self. This is the causal process, cause and condition, the *idappaccayatā*. When this is, that is. When this is not, that is not. The whole this/that conditionality. It is a conditioned process. It doesn't need the whole 'me' program going into it. And tremendous ease and peace comes. This is recognizing the impermanent, unsatisfactory, non-self nature of all phenomena; internal or external, coarse or refined, near or far. It is just like this, that is all it is. And being able to take respite in seeing that, being able to take refuge in that. You can pick up something that is simple and straightforward, and experiment and reflect on it, 'How does that work?'

Ajahn Buddhadāsa taught on that theme for many, many years. He was a really great teacher. The collected teachings that he gave, along with his publications fill a huge library. Amazing. And it's all selfless giving. But if you bring it down, get a handle on it, then one can start to apply it to everything. So, 'Don't be selfish.'

Mindfulness and the Five Spiritual Faculties

Ajahn Sumedho

This recording was made for this project by Luang Por Sumedho, kindly supported by Ajahn Asoko at Amaravati Monastery in July, 2021.

QUESTION. In the teaching on the five spiritual faculties the first factor is usually translated as faith, but you relate to it more as trust or confidence, don't you?

AJAHN SUMEDHO. The five spiritual faculties are faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration and wisdom: *saddhā*, *viriya*, *sati*, *samādhi* and *paññā*.

Saddhā is generally translated as faith, but often faith in English means blind belief. And that is not what *saddhā* is in Buddha Dhamma. Faith is interest or confidence. I see my Buddhist interest started with *saddhā*, it started with an interest in the Buddhist teachings. I didn't know much about it, but I had an interest. That was the beginning of faith. Then through the investigation of those things and with meditation, wisdom could manifest. It wasn't about a kind of blind belief in the Buddha's teachings. The whole essence of Pali Buddhism is the investigation of these teachings. It is not demanding that you believe, but there is this original interest and confidence. This is interesting enough to want to pursue meditation and the practice. And then you see the emphasis in the five spiritual faculties. Mindfulness is the axis or the centre point. Mindfulness

creates the balance between the study of the Buddhist teachings which create interest, and the actual meditation practice where wisdom can manifest.

Also in the five spiritual faculties, we have effort, *viriya*, and concentration, *samādhi*. If there is too much effort, you can't concentrate. If you have too much concentration, you get dull. You have to balance effort and concentration, through mindfulness. The imbalances or the dullness come from just concentrating. The futile efforts that you put forth to concentrate can give you a headache. So, sati is an important word, because in the seven factors of enlightenment, sati is the first one. If there is no consciousness, there is no world. The world as we know it just on the physical level, what we see arises in consciousness. Often in modern parlance mindfulness is mindfulness of only objects. You can be mindful of what you're reading, you can concentrate on what you're reading. If you put forth too much effort, you can't concentrate very well. And if you just read without effort, you fall asleep. With conscious awareness, or mindfulness, you have insight. You have the wisdom to know the balance between effort and concentration, between faith and wisdom.

QUESTION. It sounds like mindfulness in the five faculties has an evaluating function, to see how the other factors are operating and the results they have, is that right?

AJAHN SUMEDHO. Yes, it is not focusing on an object anymore but on the present moment. You are aware when you are dull, or when you are putting too much effort into something. It's through that kind of reflective awareness that you begin to have the insight into balance, to have insight into equanimity. This is like bringing mindfulness not just to the objects of crossing the street or reading a book or concentrating on your iPad, but meditation is really bringing that kind of mindfulness to the present moment. Bringing mindfulness to the postures of the body; bringing mindfulness to the inhaling and exhaling of one's breath; and bringing mindfulness to the state of mind. You are aware.

When people try to meditate, they are stirred up by life. They have busy lives. They have to deal with family issues and office problems and all kinds of personal habit problems that arise. We are aware of objects, so we try to distract ourselves when we are upset, when we are depressed, or when things are going wrong. When we are bored, we go to eat or drink something, or talk to a friend on the phone, or surf the internet. We are constantly distracting our attention from the way it is.

Say you are in a depressed state, you're feeling sad, lonely, or unloved. Then you try to read an inspiring quote from a sage, or you may indulge in food, cigarettes, and booze. All these are ways of distracting yourself from suffering. But the first noble truth is about understanding suffering. Mindfulness in this sense is being aware that suffering 'is like this'. You are not trying to distract yourself from it or to get rid of it, but you are trying to understand it. This is what *bhāvanā* or meditation really amounts to.

There are a lot of concentration techniques like the *samatha* (tranquility) techniques to calm the mind. To calm the rabid, angry, conscious, thinking mind, to calm emotional excitement or problems, by concentrating on an object for a long time through *samatha* practices. But that's not understanding suffering. It can be skilful. It's like doing yoga or physical exercises or a mental exercise, but it doesn't release you from the reality of the first noble truth. It is just a temporary suspension through concentrating on something else. But with mindfulness, you are aware. The Buddha said, 'There is suffering, it should be understood.' So, we observe the suffering. It's like this. Being bored, being restless, being worried, being guilty, is like this. You're not judging it. You're not trying to get rid of it, but you are understanding that to be angry or guilt ridden is like this. In this way, there is mindfulness, you're aware of the way it is in this present moment.

QUESTION. One thing you used to mention a lot is *sati sampajañña* as mindfulness; as awareness and knowing time and place (*sampajañña* is clear comprehension, full awareness). It points out that mindfulness is not just knowing the present moment as yet another object

of meditation, but about knowing context. It is about opening up an awareness that is inclusive. Can you elaborate on that?

Ajahn Sumedho. Yes, usually what we regard as *bhāvanā* meditation is awareness of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, but also *sampajañña* is aware of time and place. So, when you are with your family, it's like this. You are not judging it, but you are aware of who you're with and you respond spontaneously to the condition of the present moment. Otherwise, we tend to carry grudges. In family life or life in general, if we don't like somebody, we don't speak to them. That is not *sati-sampajañña*. You are grasping the mood. You are not aware of your mood as an object. 'This person offended me, and I will never forgive them.' Then when you meet that person in a meeting or a family dinner, you are reacting. You are not spontaneously opening to the way it is. We've all experienced this in our lives. There is a lack of clear comprehension where we carry grudges and resentments into situations. We feel very righteous and the people who we are angry with are wrong or evil or mad. This is passing judgement. It is not mindfulness and wisdom. It is habit patterns on an ego level that we develop, but it's not *sati-sampajañña*. *Sati-sampajañña* is aware that resentment is like this. Fear is like this. Then, when we are aware, the situation that we are in, is like this.

Right now, we're in the conservatory in the Aroga kuti with these beautiful flowers. It's like this. I see the beautiful flowers. I'm not judging these flowers. They were offered yesterday on my birthday, so it's like this. When I am just mindful of it, there is *sati-sampajañña*. But I can start thinking about which are the prettiest flowers, should I rearrange them, or are flowers even necessary? I can start thinking should a Buddhist monk be looking at beautiful flowers, is that creating desire for beauty? I can create all kinds of personal problems and reactions, when I am just sitting here in the conservatory. Then I am lost in my own judgmental, righteous views.

I might start talking to Ajahn Asoko and I am full of righteous indignation over something that has happened. I am totally caught

up in my righteousness and dumping it onto him. And if he is not mindful, then he'll react to me. But if we both take our refuge in mindfulness, then we are aware. Righteous indignation is like this. And right now, the atmosphere in the conservatory is like this. This is just the way it is. So that's *sati-sampajañña*, mindfulness and clear comprehension and *sati-paññā*, mindfulness with wisdom. It's not judgmental, but it is understanding that the present moment can only be the way it is. You can be aware of all the things around you and be aware of your mind state, all in the same moment. One doesn't cancel out the other. If you are being mindful of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, you don't have to be so intensely concentrated that you lose contact with time and place. But everything is included – everything belongs.

Sampajañña has an all-inclusive connotation. When we are teaching about everything that belongs in this moment, regardless of whether you like it or don't like it, it is like this here and now. It belongs here and now. It's a way of reflecting with wisdom. It's a sunny morning at Amaravati, there is a beautiful garden, but the weather forecast is for cloud and rain in the afternoon. I don't like that. I want it to be sunny all day, to be nice and warm. And I am lost in my own conceptual proliferating habit patterns. I am complaining and making value judgements without knowing what I am doing. It is because it's habitual. The complaining mind is a habit pattern. It's not natural, but *sati* is natural. It's dhamma. You don't create mindfulness. I don't create mindfulness as some kind of gift that I have developed from being a monk for so long. Even in my most stupid and ignorant stages, there was still *sati*. I knew what was going on, but I didn't have wisdom to guide me. So, I tended to just be caught in habitual reactions to life. Somebody says something you don't like, and you feel angry and resentful.

Or you start worrying about the future.

When I was in graduate school at Berkeley, I would worry endlessly about finishing the Master's degree. I would spend many hours in the library just trying to absorb all the knowledge so I could write the necessary treatises to pass the examinations. But I would worry that the professors would not agree with me, that

they would not like what I was doing. Maybe they won't give me the degree, because the future before I got the degree was unknown. I would carry this anxiety back to my room, and I would wake up with it in the morning. It could be obsessive. I could hardly socialize with anybody because of feeling I ought to be studying.

I have this story I like to share about insight. When I was a *sāmaṇera* (a novice monk) in Nong Khai, I had a recurring dream. I was entering a coffee shop and I order a cup of coffee and a very nice pastry. I'd be sitting with the coffee and pastry and the thought would come, 'You shouldn't be here, you should be studying for the exam.'

When I went to Wat Pah Pong to stay with Luang Por Chah, this dream kept recurring. So, I'm meditating and I'm getting insight, but still this dream would come. If I was not practising meditation, not practising concentration, not studying the scriptures, then I'd start, 'You should do this 24/7, otherwise you are going to feel guilty. You might never get enlightened unless you know everything in the scriptures and develop all these concentration practices.' And so, I'd create this sense of guilt about not being completely devoted every moment of my life to meditation practice. And then this dream kept recurring. I'm really trying my hardest. I'm keeping the Vinaya rules, the monk's rules of discipline. I'm doing everything Luang Por Chah suggests, but I still have this dream. And then one morning I woke up and I had insight into this dream and what it was. There never was an exam. The examination was always in the future and enlightenment was in the future. And I was always living for the future. So, one gets insight.

Even trying to analyse the dream didn't work. I studied psychology in university. What is this dream telling me? Is it giving me some important message? Some of the dreams were bonkers, they were crazy, nonsensical things. A lot of them were about anxiety and fear. What was responsible for me having all this fear and anxiety? In the 1950s, in my generation, we were getting all these modern psychological approaches about how your mother influenced your early life and created all these endless problems for you in later life. I kept trying to think about my mother – actually she

was a very good mother. I never doubted her intentions as being right and good. But I kept trying to analyse, why do I feel this fear and anxiety? And then one realizes, it's just the way one thinks. You create these mental states out of habit. It's what you are habitually doing, creating problems about the future.

Right now, for example, what is the future? You look at the news and it's all pretty glum: climate change, pandemics, nuclear wars, droughts and floods in Europe and America. The climate is changing and it's going to get worse, so we've got to do something about it. And then I'm 87 years old and I don't have that much longer to live. So, what is death like? On the level of cultural conditioning, death is something you avoid thinking about. In our cultural and social identities, it's not polite to attend somebody's birthday party and talk about dying. You talk about the joy of living and finding happiness. You talk about finding the right partner, the right wife or husband and in the future, you will live happily ever after. When you grow older, you know that's not going to happen. Maybe momentarily, you find the right person, but you can't sustain that because they too are changing conditions. So, then it's easy to become cynical when you get older. Your youthful enthusiasm and bravado diminish, and with mindfulness, you're aware of that. You can feel disappointed with your life or guilt ridden about mistakes you've made, even when you're 87. Physical death is not that far away when you're 87. In three years, I will be 90. That's really old. In terms of the perception of age, of old age, of old men and old monks, a 90-year-old monk is a really old monk. That perception still exists even though mentally I am not 90. Physically, I am 87. It's like this.

With mindfulness, you're aware and you have insight into the fact that the body is not self. No matter how many vitamins you consume, you can't make the body young again. It's going to grow old no matter what you do. Plastic surgery might create more of an illusion of not being as old as you are. But that is not the answer to the problem. That is not understanding suffering.

Disempowering Difficult Mind-States Through Contrast

Ajahn Vīradhammo

This talk was given on September 19th, 2020 via Zoom.

This morning I was talking about the idea of cultivating with awareness, awareness with breathing.

Last night I was talking about resistance. Around that theme of resistance, it's good to always reflect that Buddhist practices of mind cultivation are always in the context of *dāna* and *sīla*. The worldly concerns we are involved with and our social responsibilities are governed by moral restraint and generous action. We do as much good and as little harm as possible in the world. That's always the context of these teachings of the mind. If you misunderstood the teachings on non-resistance, then you think I shouldn't resist the desire to yell at someone and hurt them. That isn't the idea at all. With our action and speech, we are always doing the utmost to refrain from harming ourselves and others, and to try to enact feelings of generosity and compassion.

So, there is restraint and there is activity. Restraint is governed by moral restraint, *sīla*, and activity is governed by generosity and compassion. But within that context of our social life, our inner life sometimes throws up things which we resist, things which we don't want. That's the resistance I am talking about. If an impulse of harm comes up into consciousness, I don't think in the morning,

'I think I'll do some harm today, that will be fun.' We don't think that way because we have already committed ourselves to goodness. But thoughts of harm or wanting to hurt someone or hurt myself, will come up because that's just the conditioned nature of our childhood, of our culture, whatever it might be. And then the resistance to that means it never ceases, it's never allowed to be in consciousness. It's just an object and it is allowed to cease. We resist it and we keep pushing it back, and it keeps popping up again. We can have a lot of self-identity around that.

That's what I am talking about when I refer to resistance and non-resistance. I am not saying that when we get angry, we punch someone in the face. That's obviously not what we do. You need to always get that right. The shortest form of Buddhism is to do good, to refrain from doing harm, and to purify the heart. That third part, to purify the heart, is the ability to be aware of things which are deeply unpleasant and bear witness to them as something that changes, something that arises and ceases. If you dislike your parents or dislike your kids, on the one hand you could just argue about yourself or you could make it conscious; this is the feeling of disliking my parents. It's not permanent. But it may be frightening or threatening, or you think it is real. There is the capacity to say, 'Oh, it's like that.' That's what I am referring to in terms of non-resistance. With non-resistance I'm referring to the Four Noble Truths which are talking about the discontents we are experiencing as human beings. And that the causes of those discontents are an attachment to various types of wanting. When we understand that wanting and we don't attach to it, then it isn't problematic. We don't get hooked into the discontent. Our reference is more the peace of awareness, rather than the struggle with the various contents of what we experience.

The craving for an experience to go away, *vibhava-taṇhā*, is very powerful. It comes from idealism. It comes from biology: 'I don't want this pain in my knee', or whatever it might be. That's an important aspect of our conscious experience that you have to understand *vibhava-taṇhā* (and that is the Buddha's recommendation), if you are going to be free. You need to understand this

whole operation in consciousness. You need to see it arising, and not get sucked into it and believe in it. You need to investigate what letting go really is. You need to understand what letting go is or to understand what letting it be is. That's important. It can't just be dismissed as, 'I shouldn't be like that' because that is not wisdom. That is idealism. If that's true and makes sense, then meditation should somehow serve my understanding or my increased capacity to understand that aspect of suffering. If my meditation doesn't somehow serve that, what's the point of it? It's like going to the movies, that was a nice experience. But meditation, *samādhi*, whatever you call it, should serve that very existential problem that arises for us as humans.

One of the things I like to think about in terms of meditation is contrast. That if I have social fears, have anxiety, for example, obviously I don't want them there. When they arise, I don't want them, I want to resist them. I don't want to get lost in them. That resistance exacerbates them because they are never really known as an object. So, I become the subject that is always fighting these things. It's not so much the fear that is the problem, it's the resistance to the fear. It's not the shyness that is the problem, it's the not knowing of the shyness. It's not the vulnerability that is the problem, it is the not wanting of the vulnerability. Without the resistance, the not knowing and the not wanting, I can see my own suffering.

Once I've seen that, how would meditation serve that in ordinary life? The idea of contrast is that you see, in this instance, resistance. What is the contrast to resistance? It is welcoming or acceptance. If your meditation is about welcoming rather than getting something, you are creating mind states which would then serve resistance. You could say, 'Okay, I'll meditate, being witness to the end of the out-breath with the feeling of welcoming.' How would that feel? That's another way of looking at the training of the heart. The tuning analogy is nice too. You tune into something like tuning into a radio station or the voices in a choir. As monks we tune into each other's voices while chanting. If we tune into these states of mind and sustain them, then that will serve other

parts of our life because I have this kind of attunement. It's not so much an achievement. It's intuitive, it's not very esoteric.

In meditation, if I could say to myself, 'What would welcoming feel like?' If I welcomed the in-breath, what would the tone of the mind be there? I tune into that. Then I use the end of the out-breath or the breath itself. I'll practise awareness with breathing with this quality of mind called welcoming. If I do that with the in- and out-breath, then my experience of life has a certain tone to it. That tone will help me as I resist things, as I try to repress things, or as I try to get rid of things. It will help because it has created a contrast. That kind of meditation is not absorbing into anything. It's about ordinary life and it's tremendously helpful. Meditation must serve us all the time. It can't be just a separate activity divorced from the reality of our experience.

I was explaining a way to use the breath and how you can cultivate wholesome states of mind with an out-breath. You can tune into that wholesome state of mind. One of the wholesome states of mind I recommend is stillness, to just listen and know. Just know. Then it's not so much about the sound. The sound brings you to the stillness because the stillness is what we really are concerned about. We are not concerned with the objects of our experience but that which underlies our experience. That kind of underlying peace of consciousness which we can miss when we are always distracted by our resistance and our infatuation. Then we are doing exercises that are about the quality of attention rather than the quality of our objective experience. That is a change, isn't it? Desire is about the quality of our objective experience. You like salt on your scrambled eggs. You like your garden to be nice and neat, so you make a neat garden. You like your apartment to be decorated in a way which is pleasing. Those are all the ways we use beauty and what we like in the external world. That can be helpful in your environments, but that will not liberate you.

Contemplative meditation is not so much about whether my mind is experiencing beauty or ugliness. It is about the underlying knowing, knowing from silence. Knowing that it's okay to feel greed,

hatred, and delusion if you don't believe in them. That is really liberating because it does two things. It gives you the right reference. Then the manifestations of greed, hatred and delusion go through consciousness, but because they are not identified anymore as me, they get disempowered. This is the idea of purification.

What empowers worry? It's thought, isn't it? That's what empowers worry. You think worrying thoughts. What empowers rage against someone? You think rageful thoughts. What empowers self-disparagement? You think self-disparaging thoughts. How do we disempower these energies? Not by getting rid of them, but by knowing them as phenomena in nature that arise and cease. Hence the Buddha's emphasis on the perception of change, *anicca-saññā*.

We miss that perception when we are addicted to the attachments of craving. That is one type of addiction, that idealized getting rid of 'I shouldn't be this way'. The stance of awareness is 'It is this way. It's like this, it feels like this.' And then if it's morally inappropriate to go in that direction, you don't go there. You don't harm people with speech, no matter how angry you might be. Or you don't do corrupt things because it's wrong to do that. But it's not wrong to feel that. It's not wrong to want to take a bit of money from the till. Just don't do it. It's not wrong to want to yell at someone who you are frustrated with, but don't do it. And that's hard to do. But you can see how if you don't do it, you still have the burning. Bearing with the burning is why we talk about patience, about wisdom and all those different qualities.

Ajahn Chah once said to someone in the monastery, 'When you've cried three times, you'll have some insight.' To have insight, you've just got to meditate, meditate, meditate and your head blows open. There it is. But he was suggesting it is the struggle which often brings insight. Or he would say to me, 'Wait for five years, you might have some insight.' He was saying that because my mind wasn't changing, I would have to just develop the basics. Be patient, just know the way things are. Hopefully the meditation serves that for us. It certainly does for me.

In my own meditation, I put in the suggestions of affection a lot, or of welcoming, of kindness. Then I try to flow the whole

breath with those affections, with those attitudes, with those types of mindsets. Obviously if you do that, then that's what the mind becomes to some extent, but not always.

It's beneficial for each of us to look at what kind of mind states we become preoccupied with? Is it always making lists or planning or fantasizing or resenting? What is the basic tone of mind that constantly preoccupies my attention? Because if my attention is preoccupied with the subjective world of emotions and experiences, that preoccupation precludes my realization of the unconditioned. Because I am looking in the wrong place. I'm preoccupied. The problem is the preoccupation. It's not that we are bad. We are very good people. It's not a moral problem. It's just this preoccupation all the time. Much of this preoccupation is not really that emotional. It is in the habits of thought. That's generally where we are at. Most of us have worked through our basic neuroses, in some way. We are functioning as fairly normal human beings. We know how to do most ordinary things. Usually, it's just this endless preoccupation with thinking. And the thinking always has a self-sense in it, doesn't it? Me and what I'm going to do? Me and what I should do?

What would be the ways of creating contrast to thought, whatever the thought is? What would be the ways of creating contrast to the self-thinking mind? Functional thinking is fine, it is necessary and good. But the kind of thinking we are talking about is this me and my thinking. What should I do? I shouldn't have done that and all the associated resentments. That's preoccupation and that's not functional. What kinds of meditation would help in contrasting that? Well, obviously the body. Just being aware of your heart chakra or being aware of your breathing at the hara or being aware of the end of the out-breath. Bypassing the whole self-thinking mind and just going to the body. If you did that a lot, then that's a contrast to thought. Simple, isn't it?

So, with the breath meditation, you are with the body for one out-breath. You are following the whole out-breath, you are with the whole in-breath. Then body awareness becomes very constant. When thoughts come up, you've got some place to return to. You can bypass all that proliferation in the mind and say, 'Yeah, yeah,

I hear you, but where's the body now? Where is the heart chakra now?' You need to do this a lot because the preoccupation with self-thinking is so powerful. It's not trivial. It's a very powerful force in our makeup, a powerful force in our kamma.

In these ways you make a determination in your life to create a contrast. You say, 'Okay, more and more I'll refer to the body.' My own practice is being aware of my body. I put a lot of emphasis on the heart chakra. Simple enough, there's no complexity there. It always seems to be there, either contracted or open. But then that becomes a 'go to' place, and that's not about thought. I am not thinking about it. What's it like here? What's it like here? Constantly, constantly. Then the place attention habitually inhabits is no longer thought, but it's the body. Because that's what it's been doing. That is its momentum, that is its nature. By doing that and being aware of the heart chakra when the mind produces self-thinking through worry or annoyance, you are not addicted to that. You've got the body telling you there's a lot of thinking going on now. There's a whole lot of proliferation going on now. What's that about? Then rather than try to resolve it through thought, which is endless and analyzing, you don't try to figure it out. You say, 'Oh, thought is this way and the body is this way.' So, you begin to abandon the strategies of self-thinking. You let go of that.

In terms of contrasts, the things that I find very helpful are all the aspects of the divine abidings, the *brahmavihāras*, all the aspects of the open heart. Anything that is like gratitude, devotion, compassion, appreciation of beauty, peace; all those are contrasts to their opposites. And then the opposites for me tend to be the negativities of worry, worry about the monastery. They are not so great now. But they used to be very powerful, based upon fear. If the uprising of old kamma is very emotional, then you've got this brilliant way of processing it through the body. And if it is not very emotional, if it's just habitual, then it's coming up through thoughts. It is the same thing. It works in the same way. These ideas are not very complicated, but maybe they are worthwhile considering.

In This Body

Ajahn Karuṇadhammo

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on January 27th, 2021.

The contemplation of the 32 parts of the body is a favourite of mine. It's something that I have spent a fair amount of time practising with and nurturing as a contemplative practice.

A little background of how I came to practise with it. I started meditation practice on my own as a solo endeavour, self-taught, quite young (in my late teens), just dabbling a bit, off and on. I got more seriously involved in meditation practice as I got into my twenties and my thirties. But essentially it was all self-taught from books, and without a particular foundation in Buddhism. I didn't know much about the teachings of the Buddha until the age of 30 or so. I just knew inside myself there was something I needed to do to help settle the mind: meditation felt like something to pursue, but I didn't really know what Buddhism was all about.

I stumbled my way along, knowing it had something to do with sitting quietly and watching my mind. Then I came across some of the teachings of meditation in the West: mostly meditation on breathing as a way of calming the mind, and just following the instructions that I was able to find. Most of these teachings came from Westerners who practised in Southeast Asia, particularly the Burmese style, which was often how it was introduced into the United States and Western Europe.

The meditation technique I learned was watching the breath with a very narrow focus somewhere in the body: the belly, the nose or the chest, and developing an exclusive focus on a very small

point to help settle the mind and not get distracted. That's what meditation was in my mind and that's what I doggedly pursued for many years on my own. I got some enjoyment out of it, or at least a sense that this is something I should be doing and kept pursuing it even though I found it quite challenging. I didn't really know what else to do.

But then I started to get connected with the monastic tradition in my early thirties and was introduced to the Wat Pah Pong tradition mostly through the West: Amaravati Monastery in England. Ajahn Amaro was just starting to make some regular visits to the West Coast on invitation of the Sanghapala Foundation, and I got to know the tradition in that way through gradual exposure. A whole new world started to open up. I started to really understand and explore the teachings of the Buddha as they were brought to us in the monastic tradition. This included a much wider range of teachings than just a meditation technique: the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. I was very pleased with the fullness of the practice and all of a sudden it started to make some sense. I kept plugging away with the meditation technique that I had learned on my own, but I didn't really develop a lot of competence with it. But it didn't seem to matter all that much to me because of the wider perspective that I was starting to understand.

I finally made the decision to pursue monastic training around the age of 40 and ordained at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery. Over the first six months we were here, we were so busy getting the monastery set up, and I had many duties as an anagārika. I was very occupied in that way, learning the precepts and the other fundamentals of monastic training, but still doing the same meditation technique.

After about six or seven months and with the arrival of Luang Por Pasanno, we went into a period of winter retreat for two months. We started in February and for the first time I sat down with Luang Por. He was doing interviews with a handful of us as he has done almost every year during our winter retreats. The first time I sat with him, he asked me about my meditation practice, and I had to be very honest with him. I told him that for years I had been doing

this mindfulness of breathing, with a very small, narrow focused point, with attention on the tip of the nose. It felt pretty hopeless actually. I didn't feel like my mind got very settled at all, and I talked about that to some extent with him. He was listening and finally just said, 'You should stop doing mindfulness of breathing. You've developed such a habit of negativity around it because it's not been working, and you need to take a break from it and do something else.'

I was a bit confounded: 'Well, what else is there?' He replied, 'Pick up the contemplation of the 32 parts of the body.' I was familiar with that contemplation from our chanting, but I didn't know much about it. It sounded kind of interesting and certainly seemed better than doggedly pursuing, out of some sort of loyalty, this technique that didn't seem to be working. I asked, 'How long do you think I should do that for?' and he replied, 'A year.' I was surprised: 'A year! And no mindfulness of breathing?' Luang Por replied, 'No *ānāpānasati*, just do the 32 parts.' I received some instruction from him on how to pursue that and made that my meditation practice for the next year. I memorized the chant that we do, in Pali and English, spending lots of time reciting it and developing it over a year's time.

At the end of a year, having received a lot of benefit from it, I talked with Luang Por Pasanno again. 'Okay it's been a year, should I start practicing again?' He said, 'No, too soon.' 'Okay so what should I do?' He recommended, 'Switch focus to some *mettā-bhāvanā*, working with loving kindness contemplations.' 'That sounds interesting. So how long should I do that for?' Once more he replied, 'A year.' I asked, 'A year, and no *ānāpānasati*?' His reply, 'No, no *ānāpānasati*.' So that was my next year, which was my year as a novice. After that year, I met with Luang Por again and was given permission to resume *ānāpānasati*. But this time it was with a firm practice of the 32 parts contemplation and *mettā-bhāvanā*, to act as very strong foundations for further explorations with *ānāpānasati*.

Right from the very beginning, then, the 32 parts was part of my regular contemplation and I found it so useful. I think I also had a natural proclivity for it, having been trained as a nurse; I always

enjoyed anatomy and physiology, so there was that familiarity with it as well. I found it grounding and so useful in many ways. Those three methodologies, the 32 parts contemplation, *mettā-bhāvanā* and *ānāpānasati*, are still primarily how I spend my time during walking and sitting meditation. Of course, there are many other contemplations that I now fold into my practice: death contemplation, the 3 characteristics of *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self), the peace of nibbana, and others as well. But those three are a very strong part of my practice and I have never lost interest in the 32 parts contemplation.

Where does it fit in terms of the teachings of the Buddha? The 32 parts contemplation is part of the reflections on the body found in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the Four Establishings of Mindfulness or Four Frames of Reference. The first section is mindfulness of the body. The second, third and fourth sections are contemplations of feelings, mind and *dhammas* (teachings on the hindrances, five aggregates, six sense bases, Four Noble Truths, etc.). The 32 parts contemplation is one of the contemplations focused on the body. *Ānāpānasati* is also one of them. But it's only one of them, and development of all of the bodily contemplations is very strongly emphasized in our tradition.

It might be useful here to clarify some of the terms that we use in meditation practice. The words mindfulness and concentration (*sati* and *samādhi)* are used in various different ways. A lot of the ways that the teachings have come to us have come out of the commentarial tradition. There were some perceived gaps in the suttas that the commentaries attempted to flesh out a bit more. Additionally, different teachers and traditions also add their particular slant to these terms as time goes on.

As a result, a common teaching has evolved that mindfulness and concentration are two separate practices. In one interpretation, mindfulness is what you do when you put your full attention in the present moment on just whatever is arising in the mind. You are just staying present for whatever is happening right here, right now, and that's what mindfulness is all about. Concentration is considered to be a separate activity where you establish a narrow

focus in an exclusionary way and try to develop a sense of peace and calm based on that focused, narrow beam of attention. In this approach, these are two separate practices that are both needed but, in a sense, one develops them separately.

Additionally, they have become conflated with the terms *samatha* and *vipassanā*. *Samatha* is often conflated with the term 'concentration' (one translation of the word *samādhi*) and *vipassanā* is often associated with the mindfulness practice described previously. In this scenario, you are watching whatever is arising through the lens of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anattā* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, not-self). That's called '*vipassanā* meditation' which is done separately from "*samatha* practice."

A more sutta-based approach, which is being taught, talked about and brought more into our awareness these days is one that recognizes that *Satipaṭṭhāna*, the Four Establishings of Mindfulness, are all contemplations that we do as a basis for developing *samādhi*. The four *Satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations are ways of collecting the mind around a theme, a frame of reference, that serves many purposes. It serves the purpose of developing both *samatha* and *vipassanā.* And the result, if done with diligence and clarity, is a gathering of the mind, a collecting of the mind into composure, a firm establishing of mind that we call *samādhi*. These contemplations are related very strongly in that way, dependent on each other and supportive of each other. So, in that way, the 32 parts are another subject that we can focus our attention on and develop both *samatha* and *vipassanā* as a support for developing a very strong state of composure, of collectedness of the mind, of *samādhi*, with a very broad, open, all-around kind of awareness.

Any of the contemplations of the body, whether *ānāpānasati*, the 32 parts, the four elements, the four postures, the activities of the body through clear awareness, or even the cemetery contemplations: all of these are ways that one can develop *samatha* and *vipassanā* towards that purpose of a very powerful composure of mind. This strong composure allows us to delve deeply into the nature of our experience. The 32 parts contemplation, sometimes called *asubha* or contemplation of the unattractiveness of the body,

is often seen as kind of a sideline that particularly monastics do to reduce sensual craving, sexual desire. And as such, it is just an adjunct meditation that is not suitable for the lay community who aren't pursuing a celibate lifestyle. But over the years, I have found from many of our lay practitioners a great appreciation for this. Many years ago, talking about it with a small group of people, one of the long-time lay practitioners came up later and asked me, 'Why have you been keeping this a secret? This is wonderful. This is the kind of stuff that we want to hear.' So, I was encouraged by that comment not to just give it a short shrift, not to think it would not be of use to anybody but the monastics.

It has a broad appeal in a number of different ways and can be used for a number of different purposes. It is very useful for the reduction of sensual craving. As such, it's important not only for monastics, but for anybody who is caught up in strong sense desire, particularly sexual attraction, and finds him/herself thinking, 'I'm not sure I want to do this, to be controlled by this.' Whether you are living a celibate life or trying to be more responsible in your relationships with other people, the 32 parts can be very useful to help to cool things down to a more peaceful level.

When you really look at it, is that kind of intense craving peaceful? Is that what we want? We can find certain pleasure or excitement in it, but in the end, can you say, 'This is really peaceful'? I can't say that. I found, over the years contemplating it, that it is actually very agitating. It's not to say that there isn't enjoyment. I'm not trying to be a downer for people who are still active in that realm. And it's not a moral issue at all unless you are breaking any of the five precepts. It's more just an issue of looking for a bit more peacefulness, settled-ness, coolness and clarity. In that sense, it is suitable for anybody who is looking for that settled quality of mind.

It is also good to contemplate the reason you might pick this practice up along the lines of the Buddha's teachings on the gratification, the danger and the escape in regard to sensual experience. We all know there is a certain amount of gratification in sensual experience, not just sexuality but in all experiences of the five physical sense bases. It's not to deny that there is a certain pleasure that

comes from that. But it's when craving takes over and is controlling our lives that it becomes an issue. It can become an obsession if taken to its extremes. Also, at its best, it's a temporary form of enjoyment because it is dependent on certain causes and conditions. It has its own lifespan which is usually pretty brief, and there is no long-lasting sense of fulfilment and happiness. That's what the danger is: it doesn't last, and it requires constant support to keep it going. With that in mind, one can say, 'Well maybe there is a better way, a cooler way to live by helping to settle the mind.'

So, pick up the contemplation of this very body and see what it is really all about. When sense desire is in charge, it will have us selectively see those aspects of our physical experience that support that craving. For example, if we are attracted to somebody, sense desire will cause us to see what it is that we want to see in a way that supports the desire mind. That's what desire does. It takes control over our attention and notices what helps to support it, to keep it going. So, we see what is conducive to attraction and ignore the rest. We must consciously allow ourselves to ignore that which is not so attractive. We learn to adjust our attention in a very soft-focused way so that we see things through the blur of our sensual desire rather than through clarity. The 32 parts contemplation helps us to wake up a bit and see things as they are: the body in and of itself through the lens of clarity rather than confusion or the soft haze of rose-colored glasses.

We start to attend to everything that is part of experience, not just to the parts that will kindle and keep alive the sensual desire. However, it's not meant to induce aversion. Some people think that it causes a state of disgust or aversion. If you look at the word 'disgust' etymologically, the part called 'gust' comes from 'gustatory', taste. So 'losing the taste' is not quite as strong as we usually use that word. We are looking just to help neutralize the strong craving, not develop aversion. If we develop aversion to the body in that way, then we are using it incorrectly. What we're attempting to develop is a sense of clarity and coolness: 'Is this really what I think it is?'

Investigate the 32 parts of the body: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin, and then into the internal structures and fluids. Develop a sense of coolness and clarity that ramps down craving and the delusional way we look at things through our rose-colored glasses. Having practised with that for so long, I find there is a peacefulness that comes from that cooling of the way one sees the world, which is quite wonderful, quite settling to the mind.

Additionally, I find it innately settling and calming to the mind when I keep a broad focus of attention throughout the whole body. This is done by attending to tactile experience. This contemplation is done as recitation of the body parts, developing the visual images, and also developing a tactile sensation of those parts of the body to whatever extent we can. Doing that really helps to develop *sabba-kāya paṭisaṃvedī* (experiencing the entire body), which is the third step in the *Anāpānasati Sutta*. It's the actual experience of the body, the bodily energy as a whole: full body contemplation.

I have found this reflection particularly useful on the walking path as well: developing that sense of the fullness of the body as it's walking back and forth and that sense of bodily presence, as a whole. The 32 parts is a great way to introduce that full body experience into the meditation session. Whether it's sitting or walking, or any other posture, it can develop into a very strong *samatha* practice in addition to the neutralizing effect on sensual craving.

So, the reduction of craving, the calming of the body, the development of the whole-body awareness then leads to a natural settling into *ānāpānasati*, the breathing of the body. The mind just settles into a very peaceful state of tranquility. Often settling with in- and out-breathing as a natural result, rather than something one has to pin down and focus one's attention on through effort. It comes as a natural result through developing that full sense of the body.

As the mind settles, as craving decreases and clear awareness increases, then full development of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* starts to manifest. In the section often referred to as 'the refrain', the instructions are to contemplate the body internally and externally and with reference to its arising and passing, investigating impermanence

and noticing this human body and its changing nature. One develops insight (*vipassanā*) into the body, its many parts, how the appearance changes over the years and the instability of the health of the body.

The 'refrain' continues with instructions to contemplate the body just in and of itself. There is a phrase (Bhikkhu Bodhi's translation), '*. . . mindfulness that "there is a body" is simply established in him to the extent necessary for bare knowledge and mindfulness.*' Just that one phrase, 'there is a body' sounds very simple, but it's quite profound and points to contemplation of *anattā* (not-self) in relation to the body. We can experience this body just as it is, regardless of any opinion or thoughts or ways that we might view it. It is just this body, in and of itself, without adding any judgments or values to it. It just does what it does. It has its own life; it responds a little bit to some of the things we choose to attend to by way of keeping it healthy or well fed or maintained. But essentially, we don't really have much control over it. It has its own nature and will go its own way.

So, in this way, the 32 parts contemplation is very complete, just as all of the *Satipaṭṭhāna* contemplations can be. You can develop any of them to the full extent, resulting in both *samatha* and *vipassanā*. This full development of calm and insight leads to a steady composure of the mind, collected around a particular theme: this is samādhi. This samādhi, when it becomes unwavering, acts as a basis for even deeper insight and, finally, for the relinquishment of all clinging to this body. So, the 32 parts isn't just an adjunctive type of contemplation. It can be developed fully and can be a basis for strong realization.

That is a bit of cheerleading for 32 parts contemplation. Over the years, it has remained a very important part of my practice. That, in conjunction with *mettā-bhāvanā*, *ānāpānasati*, and many of the other reflections, truly have been a blessing in my life. I have much gratitude for Luang Por's initial instruction to take that up in my very first year as an anagārika at Abhayagiri.

Breathing Intelligence

Ajahn Sucitto

This is based on a reflection offered by Ajahn Sucitto on June 19th, 2021 at Cittaviveka Monastery, UK. It is part of a series of recordings, 'At Home with the Homeless: Ajahn Sucitto Locked Down', offered as a way of connection and encouragement in the time of the global pandemic lockdown.

Summary: Cultivation of *citta* is the highest kind of learning we can undertake. The breathing body is our means for learning, for directly experiencing our kammic configurations. It provides a basis so when difficult states arise, *citta* can remain open and stable and move through them.

This cultivation – *bhāvanā*, the cultivation of *citta* or heart – is the highest kind of learning that one can undertake. This has to be remembered. Learning means you don't quite know; you will find out. You have to explore and feel your way – just like when learning anything else; but this learning is more mysterious - and deeper – than the learning that your thinking mind undertakes.

The thinking mind is often considered to offer the highest kind of learning – but it's always learning *about* things. When I think *about* something, I stand outside it and mentally 'look' at it. When I think about myself, I stand outside myself. When I think about practice, I conceive ideas about practice, I read about it in the book or on the screen, I listen to it in the talk . . . This is learning *about* practice, isn't it? It's telling us something – the way a map does. A map can be good and useful, but it's still a map. It can show you where to

go, but it can't tell you how the ground feels and how to walk on it. Yet this kind of learning – knowing your ground by walking it – is the kind of learning that supports liberation. Liberation can't occur on the map; it's a matter of direct felt experience, it's not *about* anything. It's here in the ground of your living and changing experience where the obstructions and releases occur; it's on this dynamic ground where skills have to be cultivated. But, because we normally operate through conceptual knowledge, directly knowing and working at the ground of liberation can be confusing for beginners.

Conceptual knowledge, even the conceptual knowledge of the Buddha, only goes so far. Even the Buddha can only give you the signposts because the ground you're going to cover is *yours*. It's very intimate and not like anybody else's. It's in the sensitivity of your body and mind, and this sensitivity is configured by the way life has shaped you. So, no one else can walk it. What can be taught however, is that there is a ground that you can walk, there is a way of walking it and certain principles to bear in mind – virtue, calm, clarity, honesty, persistence, resolve, goodwill, mindfulness. On a more personal level, be alert to whether you feel safe and comfortable, and what it's like to be free of pressure, obligation, comparing, and self-consciousness. This atmosphere of welcome and integrity is essential as you enter the changeable territory in this body and mind.

A supremely useful theme through which to investigate this territory is breathing. By 'breathing' I mean the flow of energy that can be felt as you breathe in and out. Everybody breathes, so it's not that difficult – it's universal, but at the same time it's never exactly the same for one person as it is for another person; it's not even the same every day for the same person. We say we breathe every day, but sometimes it's short, sometimes it's irregular, sometimes it's slightly constricted, and so on. But however it is, it moves within your body, opening it and moderating its internal form. And it regulates your emotions and energies. Breathing has an intelligence to it: it changes in response to fear, tension and trust. It's an embodied intelligence, it doesn't tell us *about* things, it directly

experiences and responds to emotional states, psychologies, and attitudes as they play out in the stirring, tension and releases of our bodies. Even more crucially, the enlightenment factors and the four establishments of mindfulness are all directly experienced in this breathing body. That is why the Buddha made mindfulness of breathing his primary meditation, the only one he gave detailed instructions on. It's what you need for liberation. It brings you great fruit and benefit precisely because it is so direct and intimate.

In the deepening process that we call 'meditation', the *citta*, the awareness associated with feeling, emotion and impulse, has to be brought in line with these enlightenment themes – of which mindfulness is the leader. This process begins to take place as with the support of steady mindfulness, the breathing becomes more fluent, complete, and easeful. As this fluent and comfortable effect spreads through the entire body, happiness arises. This is the blend of the enlightening factors of rapture and ease.

The involuntary arising of these indicates that the breathing body can lead where our personal wishes can't take us – to happiness and ease without external stimulation. These are liberating, enlightening qualities because they help to free the *citta* from the stress of its primary attachments. Attachments? We may have all kinds of preferences: we may like watching movies or going to dinners; we may be talkative, or we may prefer to be quiet and get nervous about being in crowds. When these take hold and bind the *citta*, they are attachments. Basically attachment means holding on, and that means tightness and stress. So when you experience attachments in your breathing body, you experience them in terms of constriction or tension; or in terms of the mind dozing off or running out into fantasies – to escape from letting go. At times, there is the fidgetiness of having to be busy trying to make something happen, and wondering about this or the other. At other times the energy gets pressurised. There's also attachment as stuck attitudes and compulsive behaviour – such as feeling we should be doing more, a 'do it' mental program of trying to push things along. In terms of the fundamental energies of those habits, attachments and hindrances are experienced as constrictions, agitation, forcefulness

– or stagnation and despondency when that mental program can't push any more.

Such energies can also form the basis for personal characteristics, or life messages. One 'message' for example may be the underlying sense that life is about being busy. That may be the blueprint of your energy in terms of the world around you, and it's compelling. With such a blueprint, the unsettledness of the world makes you feel unsettled. So you have to make things work, you've got to push to get things done, there's no space, and not enough time. From this pattern and program arises the view – an abstract notion – that time is a mechanism that directs you and tracks you; you feel you have no options. Attachment to this view supports any message that 'The world is fixed in this way, people are fixed in that way, the scenario is like this, there's nothing I can do about it.' That's external. Then internally we might experience a similar locked message: 'I'm like this, I have these habits . . . I can't change.' This compressed state becomes compulsive and establishes obligation: 'Be sure you do this, don't let others down, you must always be this, don't be spacious, don't pause, have something ready before it happens, get things done quickly!' In that fixed world and fixed self, we lose the freedom, agility, clarity and flexibility of the *citta*. It's unbalanced, not at ease.

This view and the energy play out in terms of the approach to mindfulness of breathing: one feels that as, 'I have to make this breathing work, I have to try to get concentrated. What are the steps I have to take to be mindful of breathing?' In this way, psychological pressure gets added onto something that's not psychological at all. Breathing is just breathing. It's embodied, and that's why we refer to it – in order to manage and get release from the psychological energies that our mind has established through personal history or social pressure. These support agitation, contraction – and seeing (and needing) more things to do. This energy gets felt and leaves its reflexes in the breathing body – and by affecting the *citta*, it affects our view of the world and ourselves.

In order to come out of such reflexes, you can't adopt their strategies. You can't adopt the strategy of 'what to do next', of

preparing for the next breath before it happens. Nor can you adopt the strategy of 'I should be this way' – because those strategies come from the same reflex that you're trying to release. Trying to meditate, to get concentrated, may be a well-intentioned *idea*, but the direct energy of it carries the same message as 'I have to get to work to get things done.' The energy that lies behind the words is not supportive for liberation. Nor did the Buddha advocate that message. He didn't teach, 'You have to be mindful for every moment.' He taught, 'Directly know you're breathing in, directly know you're breathing out.' Know what's happening, not what you *have to make happen*.

When you're tuned in to that instruction in a way that is conducive and settled, the training is to notice the length of the breathing. You don't have to stretch it or achieve a certain length, just relax so that the breathing feels unrestricted and complete. That will allow energy to quieten down. As this happens, the breathing will tend to become shorter. That is, as your breathing becomes complete and full, the breath rate slows down and breathing shortens by itself. You don't tell it to. You train to enter with a sense of openness and encouragement. There can be the wish to fully feel the long or short breathing as, 'May this be well, may this be complete,' but it's not, 'It has to be . . .' 'How can I make it this way?' You're not expecting anything but just allowing the inhalation and exhalation to change. As psychological pressure and distraction ceases, energy calms down, and breathing shortens.

Like any other learning, we start as beginners and gradually, intelligence becomes more awakened. We're awakening the *citta*, the awareness that reads things in terms of feeling, to be the leader – rather than the thinking mind. With this awareness, you begin to feel and recognize the patterns, the programs, the habitual psychologies in direct and impersonal terms – such as 'constricted', 'hasty', 'agitated', 'overdoing it', 'casual'. You're noticing these particular patterns of energy, and their stress. They are added, not natural. When the breathing body comes out of these patterns, it is at its most complete and easeful, and released from the psychological conditions that have trapped it. As the breathing body opens out

of these conditions, the *citta* begins to experience direct presence rather than ideas and notions about what I am and should be.

In fact, as we sense more directly the future doesn't occur. Or rather, if it does occur, you experience it as nervous energy associated with anxiety or expectation. You can experience your personality in the same way: when you're around other people, you might ordinarily get agitated or self-conscious: 'I'm supposed to be doing this. Am I doing it right?' That's a program, not a real person. And when the breathing body opens up, it doesn't support these programs. Instead, if these habits do occur, then just notice, 'The breathing body is constricted, has become narrow and tight.' Or, 'I've lost touch with my body.'

Keep working at it, encouraging that *citta*-based knowing. It can know what *you* don't know. A lot of the time, people don't even realize they're nervous or anxious because their busy preoccupations prevent them from seeing what's going on. This may mean that they don't feel sad or depressed, but that may be because their *citta* is held in a tightness that stops that emotion from being felt. This is common. People can live for many years or even a lifetime without realizing they have an underlying sense of guilt or inadequacy – because they've been too busy to notice. Meanwhile that busyness is constricting their breathing body into a shape whereby it doesn't experience the fullness of what's in the *citta*.

Unfortunately, even with meditation, you can do constrictive techniques where you don't have to notice the insecurities or the uncertainties, or the awkward unpleasant bits – so you don't realize you have them. The presence of internal discord isn't necessarily because you've done terrible things; some of this is because terrible things have been done to you. Because of social performance programs, it's quite common to feel insecurity or unworthiness. Then people often have a 'doing' compulsion built in because the 'doing more' energy helps to compensate for the feeling of inadequacy. *You're* the person that cleans up after everybody else has left; or prepares for everything before other people come . . . Because that's how you feel comfortable. Except it's not really comfortable: you

don't experience involuntary happiness and ease through being compulsive!

We don't notice some of these patterns because we don't get outside them. The personality is created by social contact; and the personality can't get outside of the psychologies that have created it. So we have to find a basic intelligence that's not about the person, but at the same time is more than an idea or principle; something directly felt and intimate. Well, your breathing body is more intimate than the personality. In the breathing body, you can feel those senses of insecurity and uncertainty, but if you establish the right basis, you don't tangle with or become them. Instead, they're known as energies and views. This understanding doesn't add a judgement that 'You shouldn't feel this way.' Or a reaction such as 'Stop feeling like that! Something's going wrong – what shall I do about it?' You may get bound up in all kinds of psychological activities that sound good – but the question is: Is the energy right? If the energy isn't right, the view isn't right, it's bound up with self and identity – and the *citta* tightens up. So with an inclination and a cultivation towards ease, instead of the view: 'This is a hindrance – stop it!' you directly understand, 'Now, there's a hindrance, a problem, a difficulty, which means now is the time to pause, deepen and relax that energy.'

You relax not into the hindrance, but into the body. Relax down your legs and into your feet. Relax out through your skin – so when you can feel a tightening, relax out into the space around you, relax down your back. By doing and sensing this, you counteract the normal tendency, which is when difficulties start occurring, our inherited psychologies start happening . . . and we get tight to deal with them. Identification takes over, and the person grabs hold of the practice – and creates the knot that binds the difficult energy into a personal problem. So, instead, find the reference point of the *entire* body breathing, the entire skin wrap and living presence and let that widen, soften and release the constriction.

The breathing body is called 'a body among the bodies'. (Majjihma Nikaya 118). It's not the body that you identify with as a visual thing; nor is it the physical anatomy. It doesn't have the

boundaries that the anatomical body has. The anatomical body finishes with your skin; the breathing body doesn't. The breathing body that the *citta* feels is an energy form that extends through the skin; it doesn't have a sharp boundary. But it's definitely here, it's not somewhere else. It has an innate stability that is not the stability of 'me holding it together' or pressure, but the innate stability of direct presence. Just as your anatomical body has bones, the breathing body has an energetic structure to it which is stable and open in its released state. It's not something you, the person, have to create. The person activates the *citta*, their heart, to attend to the breathing body and what the *citta* notices is the energy body. If that is constricted or agitated or imbalanced or stagnant the trained *citta* works to release these patterns by returning to the whole body. This is something that you can encourage.

Once that intelligence and reference are established, the *citta* is increasingly able to practise without somebody telling it what to do. It even becomes independent of *your* words because it's directly experiencing its openness and stability, Again, in contrast to what we might imagine, when difficulties arise, the developed *citta* doesn't move away from them, but touches and handles the difficulty rather than retracting from it. It touches its difficult feelings and emotions. It starts to soften and open through them because these difficulties are bound up in it.

Now the average person – you and I – says, 'Yes, I want that which is comfortable and true and right.' We don't want what's wrong. We don't want even the bad thoughts, the unpleasant emotions, we don't want nervous reactions. 'That's wrong, I don't want it. I want to be the comfortable, steady person.' Of course, you do! But this creates a division which doesn't resolve the difficult, unskilful states. We step outside them but don't resolve them.

To use the example of a balloon: when you blow the balloon up, the balloon is smooth, open, stable and light – then maybe something presses it and it slightly contracts. The way to get that contraction out is not to work out what's wrong but just to keep opening through the contraction. It's rather like, 'Blow the balloon up again.' Similarly, when we feel the mind starts getting agitated,

rather than saying, 'Stop being agitated, calm down!', the *citta* feels the energy and 'breathes' through that. If the awareness, that sensitivity of *citta* is kept intact, unwavering, and covers the breathing body, its balloon has no holes in it. The energy supports awareness, and if awareness stays intact its openness and stability take care of themselves. That is, we keep trusting those qualities and giving them attention and affirmation, instead of making the personality do, plan, and try to organize under the judgements of right and wrong.

Right and wrong can be useful terms – but problematic if they're merely abstract ideas. Because what directly happens when we hold the idea that 'something's wrong with me'? Things start shaking, we get busy and agitated, ashamed, flattened and lose confidence. Now, it's not as if there are no obstructions, but the attitude is to feel their energy, contact the breathing energy, extend through the entire body. The open energy will discharge the hindered energy. Of course, we want to get rid of things that are disagreeable, unskilful, and unhelpful; that's true, intellectually. But in terms of how to do it . . . Release from the unskilful doesn't occur through saying, 'Go away, stop it!' It occurs through the *citta* opening out of the grip of the unskilful.

It's rather like bringing the light into the room and the darkness disappears. You don't have to throw the darkness out or call it 'dark' or say, 'I shouldn't be dark,' you bring the light in, and the darkness disappears. This is very much what we're doing here. Once you have that sense of a stable, open presence, you bring that into those qualities, forces and energies that contradict it.

This *citta* work is supported through breathing, and if you free your breathing, you have access to a life force, an energy and sensitivity that's working through your most sensitive places in your body, your awareness, your heart.

This understanding can lead our cultivation. You have to keep practising it because if you just hold on to the open state, saying, 'I like the open state, this is when I'm really good!' – you don't stay alert. Recognize that every day, new contacts will occur that invite old habits to arise. So the open state is continually refreshed and

made wise through being brought into the world of our experience as it happens.

So bring the open state into the world of busyness, agitation and uncertainty. Through this compassionate entering into and breathing through the kammic world, you will learn what you didn't know and couldn't imagine. And you'll find that you do have options. Once you breathe through the world, you realize the world you normally get stuck in is conditioned by your own constrictions. You notice and keep giving attention to the qualities that you have not seen through – to the need to be busy, to the sense of inadequacy, to the comparing mind, 'I'm not as good as he or she is.' If you get mesmerised by these, they will keep reinforcing self-messages. Instead give attention to the view and energy of release. Then you can witness these obstructions as *āgantuka dukkha* – the *dukkha* that comes as a visitor. When the unwanted visitor arrives at your door, what you should do is open the door – in order to let them pass through.

Mindfulness and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment

Ajahn Sumedho

This recording was made for this project by Luang Por Sumedho, kindly supported by Ajahn Asoko at Amaravati Monastery in July, 2021.

QUESTION. You talk about mindfulness, consciousness as something that is not created. Understanding that, how does one use mindfulness in the context of the seven factors of enlightenment?

AJAHN SUMEDHO. The seven factors of enlightenment are: mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration and equanimity.

Well, mindfulness, *sati*, is the first factor of enlightenment. Of the seven factors, it takes precedence. Then the next factor is *dhamma-vicaya*, which is investigation. Without consciousness, there wouldn't be anything. *Sati* is just another name for conscious awareness, for conscious mindfulness. *Dhamma-vicaya* – investigation – is to look into the way things are in terms of the Dhamma. Not the way you think they are, or the way you have been told they are. And not the way you believe that they are. *Dhamma-vicaya* is investigating the reality of here and now. *Sati* is here and now. Consciousness is here and now. And the posture of the body is like this. Inhaling is like this. Exhaling is like this. You are not investigating these four foundations of mindfulness (body, feeling, mind

and *dhammas*) intellectually, but you are using mindfulness combined with wisdom. The investigation is really using wisdom with mindfulness.

The next three factors of enlightenment are energy, *viriya*; joy, *pīti*; and tranquility, *passaddhi*. These are the results of that kind of practice, the results of that kind of endeavour. Seeing the way things are leads to a sense of well-being, a sense of joy. Then *passaddhi* leads to happiness, that leads to concentration, *samādhi*, and then equanimity, *upekkhā*. With mindfulness and with investigation and the right amount of effort, you are attentive, you are not forcing anything. So, equanimity is the last one which is a kind of steadiness of *samādhi*. It is not a kind of *samādhi* you get through effort by concentration, but by investigation. These are the seven factors of enlightenment.

Notice that the word '*sati*' is translated as mindfulness, as awareness; but what is aware? If there is no consciousness, there is no awareness. If there was no consciousness, there would be no space, there would be no forms. It is consciousness that allows things to manifest in consciousness. And then there are the forms that we have as human beings: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching and thinking. We see things in a personal way. That is not *dhamma-vicaya*, that is just conditioning. What you've been told you are and what you think you should be, your attachment to memories of the past or your hopes, and your attachment to fears and expectations about the future.

There is a lot of fear in people's minds because the future is uncertain. We were just discussing the predictions for planet earth by 2030, which isn't that far off. When you think about that, it is worrying. Worrying is the habit of thinking about the possibilities of disaster or of death. You frighten yourself with these imagined scenarios that you can create in your mind while you're sitting here thinking about the future. Or when we talk about the past, about memories of your childhood, about how you were brought up, about your relationship to your parents. That's all memory. Is that a person? With investigation, memory is a mental formation, *saṅkhāra*. It comes and goes. It has no soul, no essence, no core,

no heart. But we can live a life with regret, guilt and resentment because of the memories that we tend to be obsessed with. We can live just dwelling on the memories of miserable things that we resent. But with investigation, we are aware that it is just memory. It is not a person. It is not any reality in itself. It is compared to a soap bubble, or to foam on the sea that has nothing integral, no heart, no essence, no core to it. It just comes and goes according to conditions.

And with concentration and equanimity there is trusting awareness. You get to a place with mindfulness and investigation, where there is nothing left. There is no past, there is no future. There is only the present awareness that is like this. In Thailand, they call it *chit wan* or empty mind or apperception or equanimity. Because when there are no mental factors operating, you are not attached to mental factors like memories or future hopes and fears. What is left is the here and now, which is always like this, peaceful and happy.

These factors are not conditioned through concentration practices, but through investigation, through looking into the nature of the Dhamma. How do you do that? What is the Dhamma? How do you look into it? Well, the Dhamma is apparent here and now, it is timeless. Memories are all about time. Your conditioned belief at that time is your reality. In Buddhist circles they say the only certain thing that we have is death. Well in terms of the body, that's a truism. These bodies just get old. Every year they get older. By 2030, I will be ninety-six or I will be dead and that's the body. But the here and now is timeless because you don't create it. It is not a mental formation, and through investigation, you begin to see it in terms of Dhamma rather than in terms of your personal, religious or cultural conditioning.

Returning the Light

Ajahn Ahiṃsako

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on May 1st, 2015. Ajahn Ahiṃsako kindly edited it to be more suitable for reading.

Within our Buddhist tradition, it is believed that the Buddha offered his first discourse on the full moon of July. This teaching is referred to as the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the teaching on the Four Noble Truths. In this teaching it says that there is *dukkha*, and one of the most common translations of *dukkha* is 'suffering'. I found it to be very difficult to come to terms with this translation because, to me at least, suffering is an intense level of pain. For myself, I tend to use other English words for *dukkha*, for example 'stress', which is a word commonly used in society. I also find 'unsatisfactoriness' to be very helpful, especially when you hear someone say that 'even getting everything you want is *dukkha*'. How does that work; how is getting everything you want stressful? But on reflection, when we use the word stress or unsatisfactoriness, it can start to make sense.

The traditional formulation of the Four Noble Truths is as follows:

The First Noble Truth: there is *dukkha*, suffering, dissatisfaction, dis-ease, stress.

The Second Noble Truth: there is a cause, an origin of *dukkha*. It doesn't just manifest out of nowhere; there is actually a cause.

The Third Noble Truth: there is a cessation, an ending to *dukkha*. It's not a permanent experience. It can and does cease.

The Fourth Noble Truth is laying out the path leading to the cessation of *dukkha*.

You could possibly spend a lifetime reflecting on this simple formulation. But there's another formulation in a lovely book called *Gifts He Left Behind*, which contains short teachings by Luang Por Dune, a Thai monk who died in 1983, living to the ripe old age of 95. There's one particular reflection that he offered to another monk, in which he summarized the Four Noble Truths. Over the years I've heard many references made to this short teaching, and it has always stood out for me.

> The mind sent outside is the origination of suffering.
> The result of the mind sent outside is suffering.
> The mind seeing the mind is the path.
> The result of the mind seeing the mind is the cessation of suffering.

You can see that Luang Por Dune changed the traditional order, with the Second Noble Truth first, then the first, fourth and lastly the third.

As we were sitting in meditation this evening, a phrase arose in my mind from Master Hua, who was the founder and Abbot of the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas, or CTTB, a Chinese Buddhist monastery near here. Just before he died, he gifted half of the land which is now Abhayagiri Monastery. It was a great gift, and we have a very close relationship with CTTB. A phrase that I've been told Master Hua used, and is sometimes used by his disciples, is to 'return the light'. Recently I've been reflecting on those two phrases, 'the mind sent outside is the origin of suffering' and then this other phrase that I just mentioned, 'return the light'.

So, what does that mean, the mind sent outside? Using those words as a reflective tool, I ask myself, where is my mind going and why is it doing that? What came up for me is that when my mind loses its centre, when my mind goes outside of its peaceful stillness, when it starts to inhabit the things that I see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think – perceptions relating to the six sense bases – then my mind has been 'sent outside'.

I'll give an example. Less than a month ago we finished our Winter Retreat. Just 36 hours after the retreat ended, I found myself

sitting in an airport ready to fly off to another country to lead a retreat. Apart from going on alms round, it was the first time I'd been out of the monastery, and I felt wide open from three months of meditation. However, I could really feel the mind wanting to engage with what I was seeing, that energy of the mind wanting to drink it in, to keep it. I think this was especially the case because I was going to Latvia, a country I had never been to. I'd never been anywhere in that part of the world before, and I could feel a great interest.

I arrived there early enough in the day to go out and walk around the city of Riga. But right away I could feel the mind wanting to grab on. My mind was going outside of its centre. Fortunately, I had three months of meditative momentum, and was able to spot what I was doing right away. For instance, if I jump forward to further down in this formulation of the Four Noble Truths, 'the mind seeing the mind', my mind saw the mind that was reaching out. It was all harmless stuff. I was simply walking around this very old and beautiful city. But I was quite affected. I see in myself this effect of going to places that are very beautiful. I asked the question, 'What's wrong with being in a beautiful place?' Essentially, I don't think anything is wrong, but I could feel the seeds of suffering, of trying to capture it. With the momentum from the recent retreat, I was able to catch myself, and decided to create a simple mantra for that day: 'Restrain yourself Ahiṃsako'.

Last year somebody gave me a camera, which I had taken with me on that trip. I didn't want to be 'monk with camera' going around taking pictures, but I noticed myself looking around and thinking, 'There aren't too many people nearby . . . click'. I had two reasons for wanting to take photos. One is that I make online photo albums for my mother, and she really appreciates them. She can't travel anymore because she's quite old. But if I'm totally honest, on that occasion I was mostly trying to capture the image for myself as a memento. But, more importantly, I caught myself trying to capture that experience, to cling to it in some way.

In the afternoon it started to rain. There was still a lot of daylight left and I thought I could go out again and do some more

sightseeing, still capture some more moments. But I could feel that energy of wanting to get as much as possible out of the experience of having a free afternoon in a foreign city. And in that energy, there was a degree of stress, the mind thinking, 'It's starting to rain, why don't I go back to the lovely apartment where they put me? Why don't I just let go?' I could see what I was doing quite clearly. I recognized the First Noble Truth; trying to get as much as you can out of an experience is *dukkha*. It was harmless; nobody was getting hurt. I wasn't causing any disruption in the city of Riga, just walking around and everyone seemed quite nice and friendly. But I saw that experience of my mind going outside.

I can easily see why Luang Por Dune used that way of reflecting on the Noble Truths. If we're always trying to get sense experiences to create happiness, for example, we want to listen to really good music, it's harmless so long as we're not hurting anybody to get that experience. But if we're living life just for experiences, just to gratify all the six senses – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind – is that peaceful? Using my example of going to Latvia, if I need to try and wrangle getting invited to some place that I've never been to, so that I can be a 'tourist monk', amongst other things this is a wrong use of monastic life. This is not why we become a monk or a nun, and it's suffering. This is stressful, this is unsatisfactory. However, we can use those experiences to observe what we're doing, to see the mind getting 'sent out', and what Luang Por Dune was saying is that the result of that is suffering. If I hadn't seen what I was doing, then that way of relating to experiences could have been perpetuated. This brings us to Luang Por Dune saying, 'The mind seeing the mind is the path', the Noble Eightfold Path, the path to liberation.

Here in this hall we have photos of Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah. Ajahn Mun is commonly considered to be Ajahn Chah's teacher. If I remember correctly, Ajahn Chah only spent a few days with Ajahn Mun. But apparently that short time had a profound effect upon Ajahn Chah. The way the story goes, Ajahn Chah spent a long time seeking out Ajahn Mun, many months walking through Thailand

just to find him. Remember that this was pre-Twitter, pre-Facebook, pre-Google. You couldn't just google, 'Where is Ajahn Mun?'

I gather there weren't so many roads in those parts of Thailand at that time. So, Ajahn Chah was often walking through the jungle, looking, asking, seeking this great teacher. Then Ajahn Chah finally finds Ajahn Mun, who says, 'You can stay for three days.' Can you imagine spending that long seeking a teacher, and he gives you three days to be with him?

From what's been handed down to us, Ajahn Chah came away with a key teaching from Ajahn Mun, which was, if you can see the difference between mind and mind objects, then there's not much more to do. I understand it as meaning that the mind or quality of knowing that recognizes things that enter your conscious experience is seeing things clearly. Whether it's a sight, sound, smell, or taste, whatever perception comes into our field of awareness – an emotion or thought, pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral – it's the mind that knows it, that quality of knowing that sees it. And the mind that knows 'that' is not 'that'. The quality of knowing that sees stress, sees *dukkha*, sees joy or sorrow, sees whatever is entering your conscious experience is not that experience. This quality of mind can also see oneself creating a sense of identity around something. But what is it that knows? It's that overall and overarching quality of awareness that can see things arising and ceasing. Because if you can see it, how can whatever sees 'it' be 'it'?

With Luang Por Dune's expression, 'The mind seeing the mind is the path', the way I reflect on it seems to me to be in line with what Ajahn Mun and so many of the great Forest Masters of the past and present are pointing to, that knowing quality of mind. In Thai there's an often-used phrase, *poo-roo*, which is generally translated as 'the one who knows', that knowing quality. So how do we develop that? All this meditation we're doing, all the Dhamma practice, all the sitting quietly, quieting the mind so that we can get to the point where we start to see, to taste that quality of knowing, to get familiar with it and also learn how to use it as our refuge.

We have the Three Refuges, Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. When we talk of Buddha as a refuge, it's that very quality of know-

ing. Yes, there is the Buddha as a historical figure. But I don't take refuge in Buddha so much as an entity. It's more his teachings and his example. But it's also the experience of that awakened quality of knowing that I find most useful in my own practice. All this practice, learning how to notice it, how to turn to it, and how it can be our refuge; for it to be our base programme that is running in the background, and the other stuff is arising and ceasing within that. Now, I can say these things. I can talk about it. But can I do it all the time? It's a work in progress. This is why I'm practising.

Now, going back to that phrase, 'the mind seeing the mind'. It's that quality of awakeness, knowing what's coming into the mind.

Then there's the fourth phrase from Luang Por Dune, 'The result of the mind seeing the mind is the cessation of suffering.' Last year I spent the winter retreat here at Abhayagiri, and we were having Dhamma readings nearly every day; going down the line we would all do Dhamma readings from different books. The boundary that was set out was that it needed to be Thai disciples from the Thai Forest tradition, not Western disciples.

Many times, it struck me how the different practitioners that we were reading from had this same or similar phrase of 'the mind seeing the mind': Ajahn Chah, Ajahn Mun and other various teachers. In my own experience, I first heard it years ago during a Dhamma talk at Amaravati, and it really jumped out at me, the idea that there's the mind that sees the contents of the mind. So, taking something like *dukkha*: that which sees suffering, is not suffering. I remember very clearly how it stood out for me as a concept. And I know for myself that when I'm mindful, like that day in Latvia when I noticed that energy of trying to get as much as possible out of an experience, the stress drops away immediately. Seeing it is a bit like shining a light on a shy animal. In the forest here, when we're walking at night with our flashlights, some animals are more shy than others. It's like shining a light on an animal that's quite shy. It just disappears. But then, when my mindfulness is weak, then it comes back. So that's why I say it's a work in progress for me because it's not steady. And when I'm not mindful, I get caught.

My mind is sent out and it engages and gets lost in that object, whatever it is.

Going back to that other phrase, 'return the light', I asked our good friend Reverend Heng Sure about this phrase. He's one of the most senior disciples of Master Hua, who I mentioned a few minutes ago. There's a lovely book about Reverend Heng Sure's bowing pilgrimage. In the 1970s he and another monk did a bowing pilgrimage from Los Angeles to Ukiah. It took two and a half to three years. Three steps and one bow, three steps and one bow, all the way up the California coast. They put together a book of letters of written correspondence between them and their teacher Master Hua. In the book, many times the phrase 'return the light' appeared. I kept pondering and reflecting on that outward energy that I've been speaking about this evening. I've read the book a few times and find it very inspiring. For years I'd been meaning to ask Reverend Heng Sure, 'What does "return the light" actually mean?' In June last year, I was in Berkeley. Reverend Heng Sure was there and I asked, 'What does it mean, "return the light"?' I told him what I thought it meant, to reflect inwards. He said I was right, but that there are three main ways that their communities use that phrase. One is more ordinary. For instance, maybe you're having a conversation with somebody who says something difficult to you, or criticises you, and you say, 'return the light', almost like, 'look at yourself', or, 'check yourself out before you come and complain to me'. That use of 'return the light' has a pejorative, negative sense, like 'watch your own mind'. Another meaning is the one that I offered up, to reflect or look inward; the Dhamma practice of using our meditative tools to look at how experience affects us, and for us to develop that ability to let go of the things that bind us, that obstruct us, that create suffering.

But Reverend Heng Sure went on to say that the third way to use this phrase has a more esoteric or hidden meaning, and it's the one that they use the most. He and his companion used it a lot on their bowing pilgrimage because of having so much sense contact. There they are, out on the side of the highway. They weren't bowing through the forest. They were bowing through Los Angeles, they

were bowing up Highway 1, through Santa Monica, through all these towns, through San Francisco. A lot went on. They were doing this for many hours a day and then they would rest in the evening.

He said they would use that phrase 'return the light' because of the energy of going out, and for me it relates to Luang Por Dune talking about the mind sent outside. That mind getting drawn outwards, going outside, and grabbing. Reverend Heng Sure said that in the evenings they would meditate, chant, and translate sūtras – they would return the light. Using mindfulness practices, they would bring that energy back in. It appeared to me to be a key part of their practice.

For all of us, whether we're living in a monastery or elsewhere in the broader community, we experience many things, and can get 'busy' externally, or experiences can affect us internally only. For instance, as mentioned earlier, some members of the monastic community travel, and things will affect us. Like my example of a recent trip: thirty-six hours after the winter retreat I was sitting in an airport. There was a lot of sensory input, and it definitely had an effect.

So, sitting down at the end of your day. Maybe you've experienced a lot of activity during the day. As meditators we try to keep a regular meditation practice, sitting down at different times of the day if we can, even if it's just for a few minutes. We check in, 'What's the experience right now? Have I picked up anything during the day? Have I sent my mind out?' Is my mind inhabiting something outside of that centre, that peaceful stillness, that stability, that ability to remain steady that we hopefully develop in our lives; the quality of knowing, that can see all things arising and ceasing in consciousness? Sit down, and if we are a bit spun out, 'return the light'. What got sent out? Where can it come back to? Can we cut that quality of mind that's been sent out, that's grabbing, trying to keep or get? Can I return that energy? These are ways of using language to reflect on the Buddha's teachings.

For about four months last autumn, I found myself overstretched in terms of duties and projects. And for a couple of weeks in the monastery there weren't any morning or evening pujas. Most

people said, 'Oh, good, no morning *pūjā*, no evening *pūjā*. Everyone can practise on their own.' That's understandable, and it can be an incredibly useful time. But because I had such a long to-do list, my mind said, 'Oh, more time to finish my to-do list.' That was a mistake; it was not wise.

For the first week I would do a morning meditation in my dwelling. But I could see this inner stress being created, me creating deadlines around my to-do list. Nobody was telling me when to finish things. It was me creating a deadline, me creating a situation where I felt that I had to finish things. Then I stopped meditating in the morning, and in the evening I was working through until late at night and then going back to my dwelling exhausted. I didn't have the mindfulness to see what I was doing. After one or two weeks, the result was of not returning the light. I didn't see it. Deep down I knew that this was probably not a good move, but I did it anyway. It was a mistake and there was a result, a result of the mind going out into publishing the newsletter and working on a website, and doing all these things. They were all worthy things, helping to make the Dhamma available, but I wasn't using the Dhamma tools that I have developed. I wasn't remembering. I don't regret it because fortunately I eventually saw it. And I think it's something I'm still trying to learn from. If I reflect on it wisely, I can learn from that experience.

So, when I'm working on a newsletter, where is the suffering? The suffering is what I create. And this is the mind going out, the mind sent out. My mind was inhabiting the idea that I had to finish this on time. I had a good reason because I wanted to finish it in time for the winter retreat, so I wouldn't be working during those quiet months. But still, the suffering was self-created. Other people weren't creating the suffering. Suffering is something that we do, we're creating it, which is both good news and bad news. It's good news because, if we're creating it, we can stop creating it. The bad news is we can't blame somebody else, which is actually not bad news because it's not nice to blame other people.

I'm using these experiences, using these Dhamma teachings that were offered by the Buddha and his disciples and passed down

to us for over 2500 years. We can use them as our tools for reflection, for instance taking one of the phrases I've offered tonight and reflecting on it; to use these tools so that we can develop a peaceful heart.

It's so important to remember the goal. Why are we doing this? Why are we meditating? Why do we learn the Buddha's teachings? It's not about information. Yes, we need the information to have a certain intellectual grasp. But then we need to pick it up and use it for reflection. Maybe a phrase jumps out at you. For instance, from Ajahn Chah, the phrase that I keep hearing is, 'Everything is teaching us.' Every experience, whether it's going to an airport after a three-month retreat or travelling to California, we can use every experience in our life, every situation. We can use the tools that the Buddha offered and were passed down to us.

One last point I wish to mention is about developing the willingness and ability to be totally honest. Like with the First Noble Truth, to be honest: this is suffering. An example of this comes to mind. In my first year here as an anagārika, one day I was getting a bit spun out over something and was criticizing one of the other anagārikas. He responded by saying, 'Are you suffering?' I immediately replied, 'No, I'm not suffering!' It wasn't until about eight hours later, when I was back in my dwelling, that I realized that, actually, 'Yes, I am suffering'. Fortunately, it was only after eight hours of denial. But how often do we deny it? In order to walk this path, we need to have that inner honesty to grow from experiences. If there is stress, or if we catch ourselves shining the light out – the light that's always looking for something with which to gratify ourselves, or to make our situation better – and we're never turning the light around to reflect, we need to learn to ask ourselves, 'What am I doing? Is there suffering?'

We can use these images and teachings to look inwardly. Then with awareness there's the opportunity to use 'the light of Dhamma' to look at ourselves and really see what we're doing. And by seeing *dukkha*, much of the time it just drops away. The painful things in life come and hit you, but like non-stick pans, they just drop away. The more we have that experience of dropping things – of

letting go – then we can have peace. This is our path, our way to non-suffering, our way to liberation.

When the Last Breath Comes

Ajahn Amaro

This talk was given at Abhayagiri Monastery on November 6th, 2021. He kindly edited it to be more suitable for reading.

On November 5th, 2022, Luang Por Liem was 80 years old. The main ceremonies were at Khok Chan which he has been developing in his Thai home village for many years. At Abhayagiri we were also celebrating him reaching 80 years. Ajahn Ñāṇiko read a piece about gratitude that Luang Por Liem wrote during a stay at Abhayagiri in 2009. In English, *kataññu* is gratitude. *Katavedī* is the natural response of wanting to do something in return. It's not so much a debt, but a response to having received some blessing or some wonderful gifts or being grateful for how things have been. It is the natural outflow of the heart to do something in response to that. Not quite a debt, but a natural responsivity.

So, in thinking about gratitude, a part of gratitude is forgiveness. Many Thai people gathered here today have been coming to the monastery for many years. When the name Abhayagiri is written in Thai, *abhay* in Thai means forgiveness. So right from the get-go when Luang Por Pasanno and I were here, sometimes when Thai people came to visit, they would ask, 'Why is it called Forgiveness Mountain? What needs forgiving?' And we would reply, 'No, it means fearless.' *Abhaya* means fearless, we would tell them the name is Fearless Mountain. As can be the way of things, being

misunderstood to mean forgiveness is a good misunderstanding. It's not the intended meaning, but it's a good meaning.

I feel that gratitude and forgiveness go together. Gratitude is a natural response to receiving blessings and good fortune and being blessed with opportunities. And forgiveness is needed, when you've been carrying around a grudge. You may have a negative feeling or a resentment or you have been hurt by somebody in your family or when you were growing up. You may have been hurt in your workplace or by what the government has been doing, or by some other beings in the world. Forgiveness is as much a part of our tradition as the gratitude which Luang Por Liem wrote about. So, forgiveness is very much a way of life. When we practice, we often think about keeping the precepts, *sīla*, and we think about generosity, being one who offers gifts for others. But forgiveness is very important. It is a quiet member of the important Buddhist qualities.

This morning a layman left the monastery to return home to care for his mother. He had been here for two years. We had a little ceremony of asking for forgiveness of Luang Por Pasanno and the Saṅgha. That is how we part company. So, when I am leaving to return to England, I will be asking for forgiveness from Luang Por Pasanno and the Saṅgha here. They will probably ask forgiveness from me. It's a little ceremony that we do to clear the slate, to let go of any kind of grudge. And I feel that this is a really important part of our practice. It's so easy for us to carry people around who have hurt our feelings, ten years ago, thirty, forty, fifty, sixty, or seventy years ago. We carry people around for decades. Somebody who was cruel to us, somebody who hurt us, somebody who took advantage of us. And by the time we get to being fifty, sixty, seventy years old, we can be carrying a lot of people. To forgive is to let go, to recognize that as human beings we make mistakes. You might have been hurt or damaged by someone or some institution, emotionally or even physically. It doesn't mean that you're glad that injury happened, but you're ready to not carry it around. You are ready to let go of that injury, that hurt, that ill-will in your heart. This is a practice that the Buddha encouraged very strongly; to not nurture hatred.

'Hatred is never conquered by hatred. Hatred is only ever conquered by love; this is a law ancient and inexhaustible.' *Dhammapada*, Verse 5.

So, this monastery is called Abhayagiri which means Fearless Mountain, but also Forgiveness Mountain. That is a good reminder for us to notice when we are carrying other people around. When we are carrying those negative feelings. 'May all beings be happy except for him. Never! Never forgive.' That's what we can do. Sometimes when you are teaching loving kindness meditation, 'May all beings be happy except that one and that one.' And we carry these people around like a stone in our shoe. It is a painful presence. The Buddha's encouragement is to recognize that painful feeling and to forgive, to let go.

This is also called *abhaya-dāna*. The other day I was saying that keeping the five precepts is a way of practising *abhaya-dāna*, a giving of fearlessness. So similarly, *abhaya*, the giving of fearlessness is a way of offering forgiveness. The word 'give' is there in the middle of 'forgiveness'. That's not an accident. The English word 'forgive' is a kind of giving. You are giving space for people to be imperfect. People are not all arahants; they are not all enlightened. They are not always guided by *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā*. They are not always guided by kindness and generosity. People are often guided by greed, hatred, delusion - they are guided by the force of habit. Sometimes they are doing things out of a sense of duty. They feel it's their duty. They are doing the right thing, but it's harmful to you anyway. 'I'm doing this for your own good. Whack!' When I was a child, often the teachers would say, 'this is hurting me more than it's hurting you,' just before they hit you. I don't know if any of you have been schoolteachers, but sometimes out of a sense of duty people do things that have harmed us. They do things that have hurt us, and we can carry that around.

I feel it's very helpful to notice who we are carrying around who have hurt our feelings, have wounded us, or have done things that are hurtful to those that we love. And again, we are not trying to pretend that we like that or think it's good, but this is the way the world is, and more hatred will not make things better. More

negativity will not make things better. So, we include those who may do harm when we chant the sharing of blessings. 'May all beings who are friendly, indifferent or hostile. May the highest gods and evil forces. May all beings receive the blessings of my life.' You share your good kamma with those who wish you harm. Not because you are glad that they do that, but because more hatred is only going to make things worse.

The capacity to forgive is a wonderful ability that we have as human beings. We don't have to carry each other around. We don't have to nurse that negativity, to nurse that wrath. In a famous Scottish poem, a woman is waiting for her drunk husband to come home. She is standing by the door with a rolling pin. 'Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.' Looking after her wrath, waiting for him to come home. 'I am not going to cool down, I am going to stay angry and wait until he comes in.' Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

When we carry out these ceremonies of asking for forgiveness, by body, speech and mind, through those three doors, we say, 'If I have said or done anything that has been hurtful to you, I ask you to forgive me.' And then the elder says, 'I forgive you, please forgive me also'. Even if you are a senior person, or a teacher or a parent or a grandparent, or the elder Ajahn, you still do not assume that you can't do anything wrong. Even with the best of intentions, we've said something or done something that was annoying or difficult for the people around us. We might not know that, but as a senior Ajahn, we ask, 'Please forgive me also'.

We might not be aware that the way we've spoken or acted was painful for them. Or we've asked the person to do some job that was difficult for them. So, we say, 'Please forgive me also.' And the person who is taking leave says, 'I forgive you.' We can take the refuges and precepts in a mindless way. And we can go through the asking of forgiveness ceremony in a mindless way, in an inattentive way. These ceremonies have power and value if we are paying attention - if we mean it. If we don't mean it, then they won't work. It's like a tool. If you want to chop the carrots, you have to pick up the knife and apply the knife to the carrots, otherwise the carrots won't get chopped. So, we apply the tool. And when

we apply it, we say, 'That was painful. My sister or my father, they hurt my feelings. Or my boss, my schoolteacher, my partner, my wife, my husband, they caused this hurt, they caused this pain. I acknowledge that it's painful, but I forgive them. I am not going to carry that person around. I'm not glad that it happened. Maybe I've still got the scars, but I am not going to carry that around. I am not going to nurse that wrath, that hatred, that aversion. Then we find a peacefulness, an ease within us.

I teach retreats on dying and death. I think the Covid pandemic has made the contemplation on death, *maraṇa-sati*, much more alive, no pun intended. The pandemic has made death much more real. People here are sitting outside in the breezeway, instead of being inside together because of the danger of the Covid illness. So that has been a stronger presence in our life. We don't know when we are going to die. We don't know if we are going to catch the illness. None of us knows. But I feel in this situation, the Buddha's teaching is even more important than usual because it gives us perfect tools to deal with that. To recollect that death is not somewhere over the hill. But it is close by, it is near, so pay attention.

One of the practices I like to teach when I am leading retreats on dying and death is what I call a death rehearsal. It's a kind of death contemplation. It only works if you are not the one ringing the bell. I would say to everyone, 'Okay, we will sit together for an hour and when the bell goes, that is the last hour of your life. We all have one hour left to live.' So, I set that as the picture. Often, I have people lying down on mats in the hall so they can more easily imitate lying on a deathbed. You've just got that last hour of life and you've got the time it takes for the bell to fade out to be ready.

There are four things I encourage people to contemplate that I thought I would share with everyone today, because they involve both gratitude and forgiveness. The first one is the recollection of the people you are grateful for, recollecting those who have helped you. Your parents, your teachers or even the difficult situations that we learn from and are grateful for. So first we recollect the people and the events in your life you feel gratitude for. The first recollection is the cultivation of that quality of gratitude. How

much your parents helped you. How your mother was always there to lend a hand. How there were people who did so much for you. That one schoolteacher who really looked out for you, and you say, 'Yes, she was so good. She was so helpful. She saved my life.' To consciously recollect the people and particular events that you have gratitude for. One is consciously cultivating gratitude.

The second one is looking through the people you are still carrying around. The people with whom you've still got the grudges, the grudge list, the grudge report. The people you are still carrying around, 'May all beings be happy except for her and her, and him.' So, recollecting those people you still have resentment and aversion for. To bring those people to mind. You've only got half an hour to live; do you still want to be carrying them around when your last breath comes? So, to bring those people to mind. To consciously recollect the painful things that have come from them and then to let go. To relax and say, 'They did that, it was very stupid of them. I don't know what they were thinking when they did that, but I don't need to carry it around anymore.' Let go, people make mistakes. The mind can be guided by greed, hatred and delusion. That's what happens. Even arahants make mistakes and do things that can be hurtful to other people. That's the second of these practices, to let go of those resentments.

The third practice is to look at your own life and the things that you regret about yourself. All the mistakes you made. The things you said that were hurtful. The times when you were dishonest or unkind. The way you caused hurt to other people. This is forgiving yourself; it is a bit more challenging. Westerners find this very, very difficult. It is easier to forgive other people than to forgive yourself. Go through your memories to consider, 'Well I was seventeen at the time. All seventeen-year-olds are a bit crazy. I definitely was not an arahant at the time, so of course, foolish things were done, and people got hurt. Damage was done. There are scars.' Even things that have been quite significant and important in your own life and in other people's lives, the hurt that you have given to others, recollect all of that in the heart. And say, 'Well I am not glad that I did that. It's painful when I remember it, but I don't have to see

it personally. I don't have to see this as me and mine, I don't have to see it as this is what I am.' The mind was taken over by lust or by fear or by aversion. It was carried away trying to impress my friends and damage got done. That was the cause. That was the effect. And then to forgive yourself. Again, we are not pretending that it didn't happen. This is something that can be known. It can be understood and let go of.

And the fourth one is very challenging indeed. This is remembering your own goodness. Often when we think about our lives, we can remember the painful or embarrassing things we have done, but to recollect your own goodness, not to be proud about it. 'Oh, I made a huge donation there, starting a monastery, that's really good kamma. I must have piled up a huge mountain of merit; what a lot I've got.' It's not to be proud or stupid or inflated, but in Pali, this is called *cāgānussati* and it is one of the recollections the Buddha encouraged us to make. To recollect your own goodness. To acknowledge the merit that has come through your actions, through your speech, through your efforts in life.

This can be difficult to do. Particularly as Westerners, with our Judeo-Christian upbringing in this environment, you should never be proud or pleased with yourself. That's conceited, that's inflated. That's harmful, it is obstructive, you shouldn't think that way. But the Buddha encouraged us to recollect that goodness. Not to build up a sense of *attā*, a sense of self; not to build up I, me and mine around it. But to recognize it was a beautiful thing that you did. It was noble. It was helpful. Real beings were really helped by you having done that. Yes! Good! Sādhu! As I said, this is going to be a difficult practice to carry out. Sometimes it's easier if I was Ajahn Ñāṇiko and I was trying to recollect my goodness. I would imagine Ajan Ñāṇiko as my friend, and I would be very happy to praise him. If he was my friend, it would be very easy to praise him. How wonderful, how helpful. But if it is ourselves, 'Oh no, it's nothing, it wasn't anything special. It was a small thing.' We put ourselves down very easily. But if it was our friend who had helped in that way, being kind, being generous, and being always available to help others. Then we would say, 'Sādhu, how good, how marvellous.' So,

to recollect your own goodness. To bring that to mind and to not build a self around it - to let go. This is good, this is beautiful, let go of that as well.

So that is a practice of death rehearsal: recollecting things we feel grateful for and glad about, recollecting things we feel bad about, things that are painful, that need forgiveness. And whether it has to do with gratitude or forgiveness, we let go without building a self around that.

The Buddha gave some advice to his relative, Mahānāma. Mahānāma was the ruler of the Sakyans and he was sometimes called to the bedside of people who were dying. He asked the Buddha, 'Sometimes when I am called to the deathbed of people, I am asked to give advice, what should I say to them?' And the Buddha gave a series of pieces of advice saying, 'Ask someone, as they are dying, are they still attached to their home, or family or business? If they are, encourage them to let go of that anxiety about home, family, business.' Then he went on, 'If they let go of their attachment to home, to family and to business, then aim the attention to being born into one of the heavenly realms: the realms of the Four Great Kings, the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, the Devas of the Thirty-Three; the Tusita Heaven, the Devas of Delight; even the Brahma world. But why settle for the Tāvatiṃsa Heaven, why not aim for the Tusita Heaven? Why settle for the Tusita Heaven, why not aim for the Brahmā world?' And then he says an interesting thing. 'Instead of aiming for the Brahma world, why not let go of the impulse to be born at all? Better instead to focus the attention on the cessation of identity, *sakkāya-nirodha*. Focus attention on letting go of everything, on letting go of the intent to being born again at all.' The Buddha makes the comment that if someone let's go of everything in that way, if they fix their mind on that cessation of identity, then there is no difference in the mind of that person as they die, between their state of liberation and that of a monk who has been an arahant for 100 years. It is one of the very few places where the Buddha speaks about a layperson being an arahant.

But I feel this is very good advice for us. We have the Kaṭhina day, a festival day which is a joyful time. And I don't expect any

of us are going to die today. But just in case we do because none of us know what the future holds, I would encourage us to take these four recollections to heart. Forgiving the wrongs of others, feeling grateful for the blessings from others. Forgiving our own wrongdoings and celebrating the good things we have done. And then letting go of it all. And when that last breath comes, if this is our last day, to not be carrying anything around. To not be owning anything. To be ready to establish the heart in complete peacefulness. The Buddha said that nibbāna is a place of no thingness. A place of non-possession where the heart does not own anything. It is not lacking anything. It is unburdened, it is unlimited.

When the heart is unburdened, unlimited in this way, there is the recognition that the *citta*, the heart, the mind is not a person. We tend to identify with our body, our personality, our name and our story. But when there is that letting go of everything in this way, then the mind knows the person, knows the feelings and the thoughts that are passing away; but that which knows the person, is not a person. The *citta* is the Dhamma, it is not a person. It knows the awake heart; it knows that quality of awareness. It knows the personal, the thoughts, the feelings and the sensations. It knows the world around us that is arising and passing away. But it is not limited by that; it is not identified with that. It knows the world, but it is not limited by the world. This is the quality of the awake heart. We can take that away from this day, along with the merit (*boon*), from the offering of the Kaṭhina cloth. That Kaṭhina offering which, as Ajahn Ñāṇiko said, is the most superlative merit that comes from any material offering. Along with that we can take away these reflections. To consider the qualities of gratitude and the qualities of forgiveness. To consider how when the heart lets go of everything, it is free of identification with all things. That is where the great peace of nibbāna is something that can be realized. That quality of freedom, of ease and peace is the most precious thing that you can take away from this great six-day long festive occasion.

Contributors

Luang Por Sumedho

Luang Por Sumedho (Ajahn Sumedho) was born in Seattle, Washington in 1934. After serving four years in the US Navy as a medic, he completed a BA in Far Eastern Studies and a MA in South Asian Studies. In 1966, he went to Thailand to practise meditation at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok. Not long afterwards he went forth as a novice monk in a remote part of the country, Nong Khai, and a year of solitary practice followed; he received full admission into the Sangha in 1967.

Although fruitful, the solitary practice showed him the need for a teacher who could more actively guide him. A fortuitous encounter with a visiting monk led him to Ubon province to practise with Venerable Ajahn Chah. He took dependence from Ajahn Chah and remained under his close guidance for ten years. In 1975, Luang Por Sumedho established Wat Pah Nanachat (International Forest Monastery) where Westerners could be trained in English. In 1977, he accompanied Ajahn Chah to England and took up residence at the Hampstead Vihāra with three other monks.

Luang Por Sumedho has inspired more than a hundred aspirants of many nationalities to go forth into the *samaṇa* life, and has established four monasteries in England, as well as branch monasteries overseas. In late 2010 he retired as abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire and took residence in Thailand. Luang Por returned to Amaravati in January 2021 and has been offering regular Dhamma talks on the moon days.

Ajahn Pasanno

Ajahn Pasanno took ordination in Thailand in 1974 with Venerable Phra Khru Ñāṇasirivatana as preceptor. During his first year as a monk, he was taken by his teacher to meet Ajahn Chah, with whom he asked to be allowed to stay and train. One of the early residents of Wat Pah Nanachat, Ajahn Pasanno became its abbot in his ninth year. During his incumbency, Wat Pah Nanachat developed considerably, both in physical size and reputation. Spending 24 years living in Thailand, Ajahn Pasanno became a well-known and highly respected monk and Dhamma teacher.

He moved to California on New Year's Eve of 1997 to share the abbotship of Abhayagiri with Ajahn Amaro. In 2010 Ajahn Amaro accepted an invitation to serve as abbot of Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in England, leaving Ajahn Pasanno to serve as sole abbot of Abhayagiri for the next eight years. In spring of 2018, Ajahn Pasanno stepped back from the role of abbot, leaving the monastery for a year-long retreat abroad. After returning from his sabbatical, Ajahn Pasanno now serves as an anchor of wisdom and guidance for the community. The monastery is now under the active leadership of Ajahn Ñāṇiko, who Ajahn Pasanno requested to serve as abbot.

Ajahn Vīradhammo

Ajahn Vīradhammo was born in Germany, 1947, to Latvian refugee parents. They moved to Toronto when he was four years old. Around 1969, while living in India, he encountered Buddhism, meeting the late Sāmanera Bodhesako, who introduced him to the teachings of the Buddha. He eventually travelled to Thailand to become a novice at Wat Mahathat in 1973 and took bhikkhu ordination the following year at Wat Pah Pong with Ajahn Chah. He was one of the first residents at Wat Pah Nanachat, the international monastery in north-east Thailand. Having spent four years in Thailand, he went back to Canada to visit his family in 1977. Instead of returning to Thailand, he was asked by Ajahn Chah to join Ajahn Sumedho at the Hampstead Vihāra in London.

Later, he was involved in the establishment of both the Chithurst and Harnham monasteries in the UK. In 1985, invited by the Wellington Theravāda Buddhist Association, he moved to New Zealand, accompanied by Venerable Thanavaro, where he lived for 10 years, setting up Bodhinyānārāma monastery. In 1995 he came to the UK to assist Ajahn Sumedho at Amarāvati and stayed for four years before returning to New Zealand, where he lived until 2002. He was living in Ottawa caring for his mother for nine years and is now resident full time at Tisarana.

Ajahn Sucitto

Ajahn Sucitto was the abbot of Cittaviveka – Chithurst Buddhist Monastery from 1992 until 2014. He was born in London and went forth as a bhikkhu in Thailand in March 1976. Luang Por Sucitto returned to Britain in 1978 and took up training under Luang Por Sumedho at the Hampstead Buddhist Vihāra. In 1979 he was one of the small group of monks, led by Luang Por Sumedho, who established Cittaviveka – Chithurst Buddhist Monastery. In 1981 he was sent up to Northumberland to set up a small monastery in Harnham, which subsequently became Aruna Ratanagiri Monastery. In 1984 he accompanied Luang Por Sumedho in establishing Amaravati Buddhist Monastery in Hertfordshire. In 1992 he was appointed abbot of Cittaviveka. On October 26, 2014, he resigned the post, but has continued teaching as before.

Ajahn Sucitto's main work has been in teaching, editing and writing, although he was also largely responsible for the creation of the protocols and standards that flesh out the Ten Precept training of the Sīladharā (nuns) Order.

Ajahn Jayasāro

Ajahn Jayasaro (Shaun Michael Chiverton) was born on the Isle of Wight, England in 1958. He joined Ajahn Sumedho's community for the Rains Retreat as an anagarika in 1978 and in November

he left for Wat Pa Pong in Northeast Thailand where he ordained as a novice in the following year. In 1978 he became a disciple of Ajahn Chah, one of Thailand's most renowned Buddhist monks and meditation masters, at Wat Pa Pong forest monastery in Northeast Thailand. He took full ordination, with Ajahn Chah as his preceptor, in 1980.

After his initial five year monastic training Ajahn Jayasāro went on extended solitary retreat before taking on teaching and administrative duties. Over the next several years he alternated between periods of retreat and service to his monastic lineage. During this time he was entrusted by the elders of his order with writing the official biography of his teacher, Ajahn Chah. In 1997 he assumed the position of abbot of Wat Pa Nanachat, the international monastery of Ajahn Chah's lineage, where he remained until the end of 2002.

Since early 2003 Ajahn Jayasāro has been living in a hermitage at the foot of Khao Yai Mountain National Park. The Dhamma teachings and meditation retreats he gives at regular intervals at a nearby retreat centre offer inspiration to both lay Buddhists and monastics. He is also a key figure in the movement to integrate Buddhist developmental principles into the Thai education system. Many of his Dhamma talks are broadcast on radio and television.

Ajahn Amaro

Ajahn Amaro was born in England in 1956, Ven. Amaro Bhikkhu received a BSc. in Psychology and Physiology from the University of London. Spiritual searching led him to Thailand, where he went to Wat Pah Nanachat, a Forest Tradition monastery established for Western disciples of Thai meditation master Ajahn Chah, who ordained him as a bhikkhu in 1979. Soon afterwards he returned to England and joined Ajahn Sumedho at the newly established Chithurst Monastery. He resided for many years at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, making trips to California every year during the 1990s.

In June 1996 he established Abhayagiri Monastery in Redwood Valley, California, where he was co-Abbot with Ajahn Pasanno until

2010. He then returned to Amaravati to become Abbot of this large monastic community.

Ajahn Amaro has written a number of books, including an account of an 830-mile trek from Chithurst to Harnham Vihāra called *Tudong - the Long Road North*, republished in the expanded book *Silent Rain*. His other publications include *Small Boat, Great Mountain* (2003); *Rain on the Nile* (2009) and *The Island: An Anthology of the Buddha's Teachings on Nibbana* (2009) co-written with Ajahn Pasanno; a guide to meditation called *Finding the Missing Peace* and other works dealing with various aspects of Buddhism.

In December 2015, along with Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Amaro was honoured by the King of Thailand with the ecclesiastical title 'Chao Khun'. Together with this honour he was given the name 'Videsabuddhiguna'. In July 2019, again with Ajahn Pasanno, he was honoured with the title 'Chao Khun Rāja' and received the name 'Rājabuddhivaraguṇa'.

Ajahn Sundarā

Ajahn Sundarā was born in France in 1946. She studied dance in England and France. After working for a few years as a dancer and teacher of contemporary dance, she had the opportunity while living and studying in England to attend a talk and later a retreat led by Ajahn Sumedho. His teachings and experience of the monastic way of life in the Forest tradition impressed her deeply. Before long this led her to visit to Chithurst Monastery, where in 1979 she asked to join the monastic community as one of the first four women novices. In 1983 she received ordination as a sīladhāra, with Ajahn Sumedho as her preceptor. After spending five years at Chithurst Monastery she went to live at Amaravati Monastery, where she took part in establishing the nuns' community.

Ajahn Sundarā spent the three years from 1995 until 1998 deepening her practice, mostly in forest monasteries in Thailand. In 2000, after spending a year as the senior incumbent of the nuns' community at the Devon vihāra, she went to live for some years

at Abhayagiri Monastery in California. She returned to Amaravati in 2004 and has been senior nun here since then. Ajahn Sundarā is interested in exploring ways of practising, sustaining and integrating Buddhist teachings in Western culture. Since the late eighties, she has taught and led meditation retreats worldwide.

Ajahn Soṇa

Ajahn Soṇa is a first-wave Western Theravada ordained monk and the Abbot of Birken Forest Buddhist Monastery ('Birken'). With over thirty years in the robes, he is now referred to as 'Luang Por' ('Venerable Father') by his closest disciples – a traditional honorific for senior monks of the Thai Forest Tradition.

After several years of practice as a lay hermit, the young Bhikkhu Sona took full monastic ordination in 1989 with Bhante Henepola Guṇaratana Mahathera at the first Theravada forest monastery in the United States (The Bhavana Society, West Virginia). He later switched to the Thai Forest Tradition and trained at Ajahn Chah's monasteries in northeastern Thailand for several years. Ajahn Soṇa now draws on both the Sri Lankan and Thai scholastic and meditative traditions in his teachings, in addition to his modern western sensibilities. His pre-monastic education in philosophy, humanities, and classical Western music have aided him in understanding the Western psyche and in establishing paradigm bridges between East and West.

Ajahn Soṇa is also deeply interested in the ecological movements of this environmentally critical time, both at the practical and philosophical levels. The off-grid monastery, which he has carefully curated over the last two decades, employs the latest in green design technologies and principles.

Ajahn Karuṇadhammo

Ajahn Karuṇadhammo was born in North Carolina in 1955. He was trained as a nurse and moved to Seattle in his early twenties

where he came in contact with the Theravada tradition. In 1992, he helped out with a monastic visit to the Bay Area and spent two months serving a winter retreat at Amarāvati Monastery in England. Ajahn Karuṇadhammo made the decision to ordain while visiting Thailand in 1995. He asked if he could be part of the prospective California monastery (the then unnamed Abhayagiri) and was part of the original group that arrived at Abhayagiri on June 1, 1996.

After training for two years as an Anagārika and Sāmaṇera, he took full Bhikkhu ordination in May, 1998 with Ajahn Pasanno as his preceptor. Since Ajahn Pasanno stepped back from his leadership role in 2018, Ajahn Karuṇadhammo and Ajahn Ñāṇiko guided the Abhayagiri community as co-abbots for two years. In June 2020, Ajahn Karuṇadhammo stepped back from his administrative duties at Abhayagiri.

Ajahn Ahiṃsako

Ajahn Ahiṃsako was born near San Francisco, California in 1959, and spent nearly thirty years living in various countries pursuing a career in classical ballet as a dancer, teacher, and educator. While living in England he travelled to Sri Lanka, where his interest in Buddhism prompted him to begin visiting Amaravati Buddhist Monastery and the London Buddhist Vihāra. He began his monastic life in 2002 at Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in California, and was accepted into the Bhikkhu Sangha there in 2004 with Luang Por Pasanno as preceptor.

Since 2009, Ajahn Ahiṃsako has spent eight years living at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery under the guidance of both Luang Por Sumedho and Ajahn Amaro. More recently Ajahn Ahiṃsako spent one year living at Wat Ratanawan in Thailand. He joined the Chithurst community in the autumn of 2018, and was appointed as the abbot in November 2019.